

**BFI Future Film member Freddie Taylor recommends
Johnny Guitar (1954, dir. Nicholas Ray)**



The titular character of Nicholas Ray's 1954 western romance is something of an unconventional male western hero. Played by a smooth-talking Sterling Hayden, he seems a perfect match for Joan Crawford's matriarchal Vienna, the unconventional female hero of the story. Armed only with a guitar and silky confidence, his arrival at Vienna's saloon begs us to question what his involvement in the rest of the action will be. Where is his gun? When we discover the answer, we are cast back to his gun-slinging days as Johnny Logan, an identity he cannot cast aside just yet if he is to protect Vienna and their future together. Back in those days, there was a presumably passionate and dangerous romance between Vienna and our male hero. Too caught up in his ways, Johnny couldn't settle for the comfort of a family home. Five years on and it seems Johnny has changed his tune, but Vienna now owns her own saloon that she had to build herself, "every board, plank and beam". Unlike Johnny's nomadic existence, Vienna's self-made reality is geographically stationary and soon to be improved by the benefits of the 20th century. Her business success will be pushed further by the soon-to-be passing railroad that will bring "tens, hundreds and thousands" Vienna's way, where she also plans to build a town of her own.

What makes Vienna's situation more problematic than Johnny's seemingly unconflicted life, however, is the insidious presence of Emma Small and John McIvers, two envious and grumbling ranchers who lead a posse of servile townsfolk. They assert authority upon the whole town, despite the presence of Marshal Williams, and own most of the surrounding land and cattle. They possess what they righteously think is precedence over Vienna and her land. In an attempt to prevent Vienna's success, Emma and McIvers lead their posse to her saloon. With them, they bring the body of Emma's brother, shot in a stagecoach hold up outside town. They try to pin the murder on Vienna and her most frequent patrons, 'The Dancin' Kid' and his gang. Johnny Guitar's cool intervention in this feud serves as some kind of mediation between the posse and alleged criminals; he even plays a tune that inspires the 'Kid' to force a dance upon Emma, which exposes complex emotional tension. The 'Kid' is

aware of the implications, but spurred on by the presence of Johnny, the exotic outsider, he throws all caution to the wind. The 'Kid' is in love with Vienna, Emma with the 'Kid' and part of Emma's envy for Vienna is due to this romantic entanglement. Johnny serves to represent the lone gunman just passing through town, but at this point in the film his fate is sealed: he must stay to resolve the tensions he's stirred up and secure the heart of Vienna, the woman he loves.

Johnny is the first character we see in the film, astride his horse, guitar slung over his shoulder like the shadow of a rifle. He witnesses the stage coach hold up and the shooting that follows. He appears heroic in a low-angled shot, but does nothing to intervene. McIvers later asks him why, to which Johnny playfully replies 'with this?', as he strums down on his guitar. This gag neatly contradicts and worsens the conflict between Vienna and the ranchers by turning McIvers and Emma's hold up of the saloon into a mockery. The substitution of gun for guitar also comically alludes to his transformation from gunslinger to musician. Ultimately, his purpose is to protect Vienna, but also to marry and start a family with her, to begin a life absent of violence. His two identities seem to clash clumsily in his off-hand proposal: "A man's gotta stop somewhere, this seems as good a spot as any." The awkward nature of his proposal feels clichéd in the nonchalant way it is put forward: he's surely got to work harder for someone like Vienna, who worked hand and foot to get where she is. His laid back approach feels like a product of his gun slinging days when perhaps he could have got away with 'smooth' lines, but now that he wants to truly leave behind his old identity he'd better prove himself worthy. He does this by saving Vienna's life, not in an explosive gunfight, but by preventing her hanging at the hands of the lynch mob. The way he quietly executes his heroic manoeuvre is in direct contrast with Emma and McIvers' twisted attempt at misguided revenge. Having played a part and aggravated the problems in Vienna's life, he means to rectify his mistakes and save their future from destruction.

In essence, the eponymous hero's transformation, which must necessarily be delayed if the central romance is to be protected, echoes Vienna's movement into the 20th century. The idea that Vienna's business venture shows her willingness to take advantage of modern times. Emma and McIvers' denial of this fact shows in their backward, unlawful attempt to ruin and kill Vienna's future. Emma even burns down Vienna's saloon as her own selfish and symbolic retribution before the lynching is to take place. Young viewers, familiar with conventional westerns, may find this is an excellent exception to the rule. Johnny Guitar shares the theme of problematic romance with two of Nicholas Ray's other films, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *In a Lonely Place* (1950), but this film is played out against the backdrop of a western. The hostility between the two female leads also plays a major role in what makes this film unconventional: it is their matriarchal dominance that creates the most intriguing tension. But in the character of Johnny, Ray neatly symbolises the divide or rather the transition from the uncivilised to the civilised.