

Pagan Victory

The Wicker Man

In this cult classic erotic paganism triumphs over Puritan Christianity

THE WICKER MAN was made in 1973 but was drastically cut by its original distributors and shown in only a few cinemas. It has subsequently developed a cult status, especially in America, and while it may not be a masterpiece it is nevertheless an original and fascinating product of British cinema. It was shown in April on *FilmFour* and is available on video.

The protagonist of this marvellous Gothic horror is Sergeant Neil Howie, played by Edward Woodward. Howie is a devoutly Christian policeman and lay preacher who is an unmarried virgin though approaching middle age. It is just before May-day when he arrives in Summerisle, a remote (and fictional) Scottish island, to investigate the disappearance of a young girl. During his stay he becomes increasingly unnerved by the inhabitants' devotion to pre-Christian gods, which manifests itself in all kinds of licentiousness, including erotic pub singalongs, naked bedroom dancing and a very liberal attitude to sex education. In the last case young girls are being instructed in the phallic significance of the Maypole!

Howie eventually unearths a fertility cult led by the island's laird, Lord Summerisle (Christopher Lee, sporting an amazing wig). His followers are just as interesting and include Lindsay Kemp, Diane Cilento and Britt Ekland, whose nude dance drives the frustrated cop wild in the next room. These pagans certainly know how to set the hormones racing.

Howie finally gets to the bottom of the mystery but - alas! - too late and his Christianity affords him no protection from this devious heathen harem. His faith receives the ultimate test in a striking climax, one of the best in gothic cinema. In the closing scene of the film we are dramatically confronted with the apparent contrast between the

pagan view of periodic sacrifice to appease the gods and the Christian view, which is that God himself made the sacrifice. In this sense, Christianity presents itself as an advance on paganism: no more sacrifices, it seems to say: Jesus did it for all of us. Unfortunately, when Christianity gained the upper hand, it ignored its own message and sacrificed thousands by torture, burning and executions.

Howie sneers at the 'superstitious' paganism of the islanders, but he fails to recognise Christianity's debt to its predecessors. The Virgin Mary is incorporated from pagan Greek Diana worship, and the fertility festival at the film's climax is the precursor of Easter. Death and resurrection in the Christian faith are grafted from ancient pagan cults, such as Isis and Zoroaster. The death sacrifice is a preliminary to renewed life in both pagan and Christianity mythology.

Santanaya wrote that "men become superstitious not because they have too much imagination, but because they are not aware that they have any". By focusing on the similarities beneath the surface between the islanders' faith and that of the policeman, *The Wicker Man* exposes the shortcomings of Christianity as well as paganism. It reveals them both as primitive systems of belief whose roots lie in the infancy of our species. The Christian faith is thus shown to be nothing more than a way of keeping dim superstitions alive but taming them down to a dull and sexless Jesus worship. The pagans may have been more primitive than Christians, but on the evidence of *The Wicker Man*, they certainly had more fun. □