

Review #23 : *The Glass Key* (1942)

Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake

REVIEW

In this tale of dubious alliances and loyalty, Alan Ladd plays Ed Beaumont – right-hand man to Paul Madvig, a boorish, ambitious player with political aspirations. When the murder of a reckless playboy casts suspicion on his boss, Ed works to protect Madvig. Matters are further complicated when Madvig falls for the daughter of a wealthy industrialist (Veronica Lake) – whom Ed is already in love with. It's a labyrinthine plot, typical of the genre. Given the right running time (90 min), the script distills Hammett's usual complexities adequately – but sometimes it's still hard to follow...



1) Faithful to Hammett's Hardboiled Style

Hammett popularised the kind of story-telling that threw the reader into morally murky waters. In *The Glass Key*, there aren't any good guys as such – just the less corrupt, and the more corrupt. The movie skips along with snappy dialogue and flashy smiles. But unlike other *Noir* movies – *Casablanca*, for example (released in the same year), there are no noble heroes: characters are motivated by self-serving agendas, acting to protect their own interests.

The Glass Key is celebrated as one of the earliest pairings between Ladd and Lake, who went on to make a total of seven movies together. Although Lake shares top billing here, she's actually in only a handful of scenes, but when the pair first meet in this, the scene crackles with energy. Veronica Lake glides gracefully through her brief scenes, her distinctive voice punctuating the dialogue with effortless style. Ladd is perfectly cast, his face seeming to barely mask a sardonic smile. Another standout performance comes from Ladd's counterpart : a thug called Jeff, played by William Bendix.



2) Standout Action Scenes

In perhaps the most startling and memorable scene, Ed is held captive by Jeff and repeatedly beaten. The ferocity and intensity on display is shocking for a film almost seven

decades old. Bendix relishes the role, giving a creepy homo-erotic spin to his psychopathic and brutal punishments, wooing Ed with pet names. Continually, he ironically refers to his quarry as '*sweetheart*' and '*baby*'.

Ed's flight from danger is an audacious, physically punishing scene that has him fall three storeys, through a glass roof and onto a dinner table. Unlike action heroes of today, he spends the next few days in hospital and never completely recovers...

3) Summing Up

Held alongside other movies of the genre, *The Glass Key* is a slighter example of Film Noir. In terms of plot, however, it was hugely influential: Akira Kurosawa acknowledged it as the chief inspiration for *Yojimbo* (1961), a film that in turn influenced many subsequent Hollywood movies, most notably *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). The Coen brothers' *Miller's Crossing* (1990) also rewrites *The Glass Key* for a modern audience.



An undisputed classic of the era, *The Glass Key* is essential viewing for any self-respecting fan of the genre. The plot is harder to follow than in the *Blue Dahlia*, but this is nonetheless a high standard movie. The acting, the dialogues and the directing are all good and playful. The chemistry between Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake is explosive. Veronica Lake is absolutely beautiful in this movie : her looks are very classy and her husky voice is the sweetest. Highly recommended 7/10 ++