



# The lawyer in popular film

Mark Pawlowski takes a close look at *The Verdict*, a classic film portraying the lawyer hero in popular culture

The Verdict: Keeping faith in the notion of justice

**T**he *Verdict*, released in 1982, revolves around the redemption of a hack lawyer, Frank Galvin (played by Paul Newman), whose life is eventually turned around by a personal injury action in which he represents a young woman who is permanently comatose because a doctor gave her the wrong anaesthesia. Essentially, the film delivers an answer, a verdict to the question, who is Frank Galvin?

Frank has fallen on bad times, divorced by his wife, middle-aged and a heavy drinker, he resorts to finding cases by going to funeral parlours and wakes to tout for business. He has had only four cases in the last three years—all of which he has lost. His last chance at salvation is the medical practice case which has fortuitously come his way. The case is significant because it contains a strong moral element—the paralysis of a patient by a negligent doctor. At first, Frank is tempted to accept the out of court settlement since this will automatically earn him a 33% contingency fee. Ultimately, however, he is persuaded to reject the settlement and instead take the case to trial: ‘If I take the money, I’m lost. I’ll be a rich ambulance-chaser. I can win this case.’ In Frank’s eyes, accepting the money would put him back in a professional and personal wilderness. Only by winning the

case and achieving justice can he put his own past behind him and rekindle his faith in the legal system. Ultimately, however, it is not him but another character in the film, Laura (played by Charlotte Rampling), who resurrects him and secures his eventual redemption.

## Individual redemption as a theme

A similar theme of individual redemption is to be found in *A Civil Action*, (1998), based on the book by Jonathan Harr, which tells the story of a dispute over a poisoned river in New England between local residents and several companies. The main character (played by John Travolta) is a personal injury lawyer who abandons his lucrative practice to take on the case on behalf of the residents.

The film is interesting on a number of different levels, not least its portrayal of American trial tactics and the limitations of an adversarial system in environmental civil actions. But, like *The Verdict*, the film is also very much about personal transformation and development in the Travolta character. He is transformed from an arrogant and heartless personal injury negotiator only interested in making money for himself and his practice to a thoughtful lawyer concerned only for the well-being of his clients.

Having strayed from the values of compassion, he has by the end of the film achieved personal success and redemption.

## A new type of hero lawyer

What we also see in *The Verdict* is a new type of hero lawyer compared to the inspirational role model portrayed by Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, (1962), and earlier films, notably, *Young Mr Lincoln*, (1939), which show the male lawyer as an honourable man of firm beliefs standing up for human values and natural law. In *The Verdict* and *A Civil Action*, on the other hand, the male lawyer is shown as a lone warrior fighting the forces of greed and power. Frank ultimately delivers justice, but his character has obvious personal deficiencies. It is interesting, for example, to compare Atticus’s stately gait and demeanour in the 1962 film with that of Frank’s anguished posture in *The Verdict*.

## Delivering justice

Another related issue raised in *The Verdict* is how our screen lawyer delivers justice in the case. Interestingly, Frank ignores professional ethics and legal procedures in order to secure the truth. In Frank’s world, the legal rules are secondary to justice. In the courtroom scenes, in particular, it is apparent that the rules of evidence seek to destroy his case (the vital testimony of the nurse is ruled by the judge to be inadmissible); instead, he has to appeal to the jury’s sense of justice to win the day for his client. The moral of the film is that we should place our faith in the notion of justice and not necessarily in the system of law itself. Frank can achieve justice despite the legal processes which conspire against him throughout the trial.

## What is good lawyering?

Another interesting aspect of the film is its portrayal of the large corporate American law firm. Frank’s adversary, Ed Concannon (played by James Mason), provides us with a very dark vision of the corporate lawyer. Ed’s young associates both respect and fear him. We soon see why as he outlines his plans to use every possible legal technique to win the case for his client. In Ed’s world, good lawyering is all about winning and winning is all about money. After all, it is winning which pays for the sumptuous offices, the stylish suits and the privileged lifestyle. But clients do not want the law to be just about money. Films like *The Verdict* show us that gaining trust and confidence with clients is key to good lawyering, just as fighting a cause and achieving eventual justice. **NLJ**

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