

# Once upon a time in the west: a critical response



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Once upon a Time in the West, directed by Sergio Leone, is a story of evil and vengeance (with a dose of mystery) set in the American West. As the story develops, characters are introduced who are essential to an understanding of the plots. Since there are two simultaneously developed story lines, the maturation of each character provides the viewer with insight as to why certain events occur as they do. But an analysis of the four levels of characterization (physical, social, psychological, and moral) of the two main characters will afford the viewer a greater understanding of the subliminal message of this story set in the Wild West during construction of the transcontinental railroad. That not-so-apparent theme is the triumph of morality over amorality.

The antagonist of Once upon a Time in the West is a character wielding a sorrowful harmonica and a quick gun, portrayed by Charles Bronson. This character is appropriately named Harmonica. Harmonica's physical appearance is convincing of a stereotypical cowboy, being a rough, gun slinging nomad. However, when more closely examined, a more sophisticated and mysterious character is revealed. Harmonica, of medium stature with a stone face, possesses a focused, purposeful personality.

We are quickly convinced he can defend himself when he survives the three-against-one gun fight in the opening scene. When compared to other men in the movie, Harmonica is dressed in the lighter colors of red and light tan, as opposed to dark brown and black. This is symbolic of his social, psychological, and moral attributes-although he is far from the typical "white hat" cowboy hero. Harmonica has his flaws, and in the film's early stages, we are forced to debate whether he is really going to be the

personification of good. We want to give him the benefit of the doubt, but he seems to have a dark side.

Harmonica's social aspect is very shallow, as he tends to keep to himself. Always appearing randomly to the sound of his harmonica's sorrowful tune, you always feel like something unexpected is about to happen. That sorrowful and unexplained tune is used as a repeated foreshadowing of his true identity and hidden motive. Yet Harmonica can be friendly in traditionally unfriendly ways. For example, he submits the high bid at the distress auction of Sweetwater-the strategically located land Jill McBain inherits from her murdered husband-and pays for it with the reward he receives from turning his friend and outlaw, Cheyenne, over to the sheriff.

But he redeems himself with us when he later turns the deed to Sweetwater over to Jill. Readshame by Gregory questions and answersThere is a central reason why Harmonica acts the way he does. This psychological trait is kept a mystery for much longer than those of the other characters in order to not reveal Harmonica's real motivation. While Harmonica is, on the surface, portrayed as a very puzzling character, the storyteller methodically adds depth to this mystery man, eventually forcing us to conclude that Harmonica is driven by some deep-seated, but unspecified, emotion. Harmonica's true identity is also kept secret in order to not reveal, until the very end, the reason for the origin of that underlying, but all-consuming, emotion. The only clues given as to Harmonica's true identity come when he rattles off different names whenever Frank, the protagonist, asks him his name.

No matter what names Harmonica gives in response, Frank always replies by noting that the names given are those of dead men (murdered by Frank). Harmonica's sense of morality is intentionally hidden from us at first, but later revealed as the story develops. Early on, Harmonica kills several men, letting viewers suppose that Harmonica is without morals. Yet there comes a time when he saves Frank from being shot by Frank's own men. But even that is perplexing because Frank is totally without morals, so he is not really worth saving. In another scene, Harmonica seems to abuse Jill McBain, but even then, we overlook that because of the greater good he provided when he gave Jill the deed to Sweetwater.

In the climax, the storyteller gives us all we need to conclude that Harmonica espouses morality after all. Through an enlightening flashback we are taught that Harmonica has merely been seeking retribution for his older brother's death (murdered by Frank when Harmonica was a youth), and we are relieved to learn that Harmonica is really a justice-seeking hero, having prolonged Frank's life earlier so that Harmonica could himself avenge his brother's death. The protagonist in *Once upon a Time in the West* is a deceiving cold-blooded killer played by a surprising choice of actor, Henry Fonda. Fonda is a bright blue-eyed, pleasant faced man who portrays a ruthless murderer. Sergio Leone used Fonda in order to depict a real life character who develops just the opposite of Harmonica-seemingly quite amiable at first, but who, it is later revealed, is really quite the epitome of evil.

Frank's black clothing, combined with a chilling glare, illustrate him as being fiercer and more ominous than the other characters, including Harmonica.

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Frank is a social man, but in a twisted way-he surrounds himself with criminals and plotters. His character has all the flaws needed to exude a total lack of morality. He is an assassin hired by a corrupt railroad magnate, who murders Mr.

McBain and his children (just after McBain's secret marriage in New Orleans to Jill). Frank's penchant for deceit is in full evidence when we are shown how Frank tries to fool the local citizens by leaving behind a piece of Cheyenne's trademark overcoat at the scene of the massacre. Once Frank's boss discovers that, as a result of the New Orleans wedding, Jill has inherited Sweetwater, he orders Frank to scare off the widow in the hope of acquiring Sweetwater-and thereby acquiring the rights to develop a boom town and station on the fast-approaching railroad. Frank and his boss are unsuccessful because of Harmonica's and Cheyenne's intervention-which is how the storyteller sets up Frank as the protagonist and Harmonica as his antagonist.

Psychologically, Frank's quest for money is his only motive. He desires to become a legitimate businessman, but lacks the intelligence to do so, and he knows it. At first, Frank's attempts to kill and drive off the McBains are aimed at obtaining Sweetwater for his employer and compensation for Frank, but Frank's greed overtakes him and he later gets an inflated view of his capabilities, trying to acquire Sweetwater all for himself. Once loyal to his employer, Frank turns his back on him. Ironically, Frank's own men turn against him for the same reason-money (this time, paid them by Frank's employer to kill Frank).

We then get a double dose of irony when Harmonica enables Frank to survive the murder plot. Even still, Frank, lacking any sense of morality, quickly realizes he must kill his savior in order to acquire the riches that Sweetwater would bring him. However, Frank is intrigued by the mystery Harmonica presents. He simply must satisfy his urge to know Harmonica's true identity before eliminating him.

To reinforce Frank's sinister personality, Frank's appearances on screen are almost always accompanied by an ominous style of guitar. It is evil's fanfare- just as Harmonica's appearances on-screen are announced by the sorrowful moan of a harmonica. In many other Westerns, there is a decided difference in style and tempo between the music of the "good guy" and "bad guy," but in this one, the identifying music is eerily more alike than strikingly different. That's because the director believes that no one person is entirely good or entirely bad. Yet Frank's morals seem clearly to be non-existent.

Slaughtering a family, slyly smiling while shooting a young boy, extortion, and seduction are all the proof we need to label Frank as one devoid of any morals. The only possible aspect of morality exhibited by Frank is his observance of etiquette in not shooting a man in the back, a possibility that is underscored by having Frank, in the movie's climax, participate in a fair duel with Harmonica (instead of ambushing him or having Harmonica killed by Frank's henchmen). In light of all Frank has done in the past, we find ourselves asking why not this time as well. Momentarily at least, we wonder whether Frank actually possessed a pinch of morality-only to conclude that such was not the case.

Harmonica and Frank are two very interesting and complex characters, and without the juxtaposition of them, Once upon a Time in the West would not be such a captivating movie. Sergio Leone's intricate design for Once upon a Time in the West provides a superb environment in which to situate these characters, and allows them to be a foundation on which all other characters, themes, settings and plot elements could build.