

Political heroism as depicted in the man who shot liberty valance

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Political Heroism as depicted in The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance John Ford directed the movie, The Man Who Killed Liberty Valance. The film has played a great role in dissemination of the American West. Throughout the movie, social had political immoralities unfold. Moreover, the film explores various themes, which include political power, law, and heroism. The film ironically depicts heroism, which is associated with the power to use a gun and kill. The film depicts the realities of political power in United States in the 19th century. Following a successful political career, Ramson Stoddard returns to his hometown where he had previously shot a dreaded lawbreaker Liberty Valance. This essay explores the characters, actions, and controversies of the three characters; Valance, Stoddard, and Doniphon, in John Ford's film The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance as a critique of political heroism and an examination of the value, relevance, scope, and limitations of the written law.

In the contemporary society, heroism is quite fragile and can be easily destroyed by the media. However, the dialogues between most actors in Ford's film portray heroism as relative to the level of arrogance an individual can portray. The Man who Shot Liberty Valance sensationalizes the challenges associated with establishing political order in accordance with the rule of law. For example, Stoddard is given credit for killing Liberty Valance who had caused a lot of instability in the town through his violent actions. The wrongful credit enables Stoddard attain great political favors and he ends up marrying Hallie, a woman who was also loved by Doniphon. Therefore, Stoddard gets fame out of an action done by Doniphon and end up taking away the woman he loved. He even ends up dying unrecognized.

Therefore, the man who removed the hindrance to the developments in the town ends up unrecognized. Moreover, Stoddard confesses to a newspaper editor about the true story, the editor ignores the true story and publishes the untruthful one (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web).

The political aspect of the film focuses on Ransom Stoddard who is considered a hero since people assume he managed to kill the dreaded Liberty Valance. However, the actual hero in the shadows of political reality is Tom Doniphon since he was responsible for the killing under question. The reality of political heroism is evident when shooting of evil Liberty Valance by a civilian is considered a depiction of heroism even in the eyes of law (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web). The film addresses the issue of how law shapes the political arena. The film was produced in black and white to provide the uncertainty surrounding Stoddard memories, which he is narrating to the newspaper editor.

The ineffectiveness of law in the society is depicted by the way Liberty Valance treats Stoddard, who is an officer of the law. He even appears amused when threatened of criminal prosecution. He views the attorney as pitiful and powerless creature. However, after being elevated into a political figure, following the supposed killing of Valance, Stoddard becomes respected in the society. This depicts negativity towards the true power of written law since assuming someone is guilty and killing him is against the rule of law (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web).

The society loathes the law as depicted when Valance scorns Stoddard after beating him up by saying, " Lawyer, huh? I'll teach you law. Western law!" (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web). This depicts the unlawfulness that

characterizes the western society during that period. Moreover, the dialogue between Stoddard and Doniphon, which ends with the former giving the latter a gun with the argument that book law meant nothing in Shinbone, depicts illegitimacy in the society. Additionally, when Stoddard tries to reject the gun and explain what use of law entails he collapses. This happening could be a depiction of the power of unlawfulness over the law. Moreover, the society appears to be assuming that possessing and being able to use the gun as symbolic of heroism as opposed to following justice (Stewart, Wayne and Miles Web). Stoddard tries to assert himself as a source of authority and power after being beaten by Valance and he repeatedly claims he will challenge him in court. However, the power of the gun, which symbolizes arrogance, is over that of the law since even the town Marshall fails to help Stoddard. The film thus depicts Stoddard who symbolizes law as powerless. Stoddard even ends up working in a restaurant in the initial stages irrespective of his credentials (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web).

Another episode where the validity of law as a symbol of power is questioned is during the confrontation between Valance and Stoddard in the restaurant. Valance makes fun of Stoddard who was a waiter in the restaurant. However, Doniphon intervenes. The three men symbolize different kinds of power and authority. Valance represents uncontrolled kind of power that prevents effectiveness of the rule of law. Doniphon's power is also linked to use of gun and violence though he practices it privately. However, he Doniphon executes his power with some integrity. He appears to be the link between the power of the rule of law and primitive power of the gun. Stoddard is a symbol of written law, which is yet to be realized in Shinbone. This is

depicted in the different conversations amongst the three characters where Doniphon and Valance question the power of written law (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web).

While directing the Film, Ford ensures that there is demonstration of progress in the way town handles things. Stoddard is used as the symbol of the progress and he eventually stops his job as a waiter and becomes a schoolteacher. A teacher, Stoddard tries to instill the kind of power he believes in into his students, which emphasize on civics and democracy. The confidence with which Stoddard teaches demonstrates the awaiting progress in perceptions towards the power associated with written or book law. He even attempts to convince the students that “ Education is the basis of law and order” (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web).

Another episode that demonstrates the opposition towards law is the opposition of introduction of statehood by the ranchers in Shinbone. They even hire Valance to kill the farmers to prevent them from voting for statehood. This depicts the power of the gun over that of written law since the people appear to believe in the former kind of power. When Doniphon learns of the happenings, he decides to mount retaliation against Valance. However, Doniphon is still opposed to the power of the law, which is depicted when he argues that it was not law that scared Valance away (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web).

However, the newspaper editor appears to be realizing the increasing power of the written law since he somehow believes that Valance had been scared by the spectacle of law that was rising up in the region. Doniphon power is more dependent on his relative lawlessness, which appears to be the only

thing scaring Valance. However, as depicted from his later speech, Stoddard believes that the only power that was capable of transforming Shinbone was that of written law since it was capable of bringing statehood, which would protect all and enhance progress in Shinbone (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web).

For most part of the movie, the characters battle over concepts of power and law their effectiveness in collective governance. However, it is unclear what Stoddard intention could have been when he nominated Doniphon as delegate to statehood convention while he knew that he was opposed to written law. Even his opposition towards Valance was based on Valance's lawless actions. However, Standoff considers Doniphon a true leader. This is ironic and makes viewers question the validity of the power of law and the definition of heroism (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web). However, Doniphon shows his opposition towards law when he rejects the offer giving unconvincing reasons. His actions show the rejection was based on his ambivalence to statehood. This was because he also knew that accepting written law would put him in a similar position with Valance since they both believed in the power of the gun. He knows that his roles will be replaced by the lawyers who will use written law to fight for the rights of people.

When Stoddard is elected to be the delegate, the confrontation that arises demonstrates the existing conflict between the power of law and that of the gun. Valance believes that it was the power of the gun that is symbolized by Doniphon that was protecting Stoddard and not that of law. In their dialogue, Valance challenges Stafford believe in the power of the law when he tells him " Now you stay out of this Doniphon, he's been hiding behind your gun

long enough" (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web).

The actions that follow such as beating up of Peabody was somehow supportive of law make us question the power associated with law. Even Stoddard appears to have bowed to the power of the gun when he accepts to carry the gun given to him by Doniphon. The duel that follows symbolizes the peak of conflict of the three types of power represented by Stoddard, Doniphon, and Valance. Eventually Valance is killed by Doniphon but Stoddard is given credit for the action. This depicts a political system where heroism is wrongly defined (Stewart, Wayne and Miles Web).

First, it is assumed that Doniphon's action of killing makes one the hero. However, the man represents the written law, Stoddard, gets credit.

Therefore, it is assumed that the power of the law triumphs over that of the gun, which is not the case. Eventually, Stoddard is nominated as delegate to congress. This action depicts wrongful definition of heroism since Stoddard becomes a champion of law through an unlawful action. Moreover, law and order is being restored in Shinbone by the lawless act.

The film Who Killed Liberty Valance depicts existing conflict between power of the law and that of the gun. Throughout the film, the dialogues between Stoddard, Valance, and Doniphon characterize the existing conflict and the great preference of the power of the gun over that of law. Eventually, the power of written law is established but it results from an unlawful action. Moreover, the nomination of Stoddard to the congress following his assumed unlawful action of killing depicts the erroneous definition of heroism. It is clear that the writer of the film wants us to question the definition of heroism and the power of written law in Shinbone (Stewart, Wayne, and Miles Web).

From another perspective, the film could be considered as a critique of formal justice and legal frameworks. It challenges the primacy of the law in ways that illustrate the grey areas, inconsistencies, and problematic interpretations of the law in the human societies. The spirit and letter of the law appears to connect strangely with some actions that appear unlawful. These problematic aspects are particularly manifest in the attitudes of the three characters Doniphon, Valence, and Stoddard. The character of Stoddard is particularly held up for criticism in the manner in which the world of perfection based on the rule of the law appears essentially impossible. Stoddard does not want to accept the possibilities of the existence of other alternatives other than those founded on strict legal frameworks. This rigidity of character collapses when confronted by the internal weaknesses of the law. The character of Valence awakens Stoddard to the essential weaknesses of the law.

The interpretation of the law does not seem to address certain pertinent issues that concern the role and level of application of laws in human societies. In this regard, the film appears to challenge the possibility of the existence of a world of perfection founded on the ideals of law. The complex nature of society and the multiple aspects of personalities cannot be controlled by a strict adherence to law (Ashton Web). Valence, on the other hand represents the world of lawlessness. He also conceptualizes the world as a system that can be conquered and brought under control through force of violence. This would imply that he is the opposite number to Stoddard. Both of them are misguided by the illusions of perfection from opposite ends of perspectives. In essence, it becomes important to consider the fact that

some of the issues that connect to the aspect of reality have to be represented in terms of sum of the influences that set the two worlds apart. Valence seeks to control the world through disorder. His intention is to defeat the foundation of society as established on moral and legal foundations. His goal, just like that of Stoddard is defeatist and impossible. Radical psychological states of mind are usually defeated by their own internal weaknesses and contradictions (Russell Web). The film appears to assert that there cannot be perfect conditions in world riddled by multiple imperfections. The contradictions evident in the character of the Valence and Stoddard cannot create conditions necessary for the existence of normalcy within the society. For instance, Stoddard contradicts his firm belief in the law when he enjoins Doniphon in the plot to kill Valence.

It would appear that Stoddard confronts the reality of the imperfection of the law. Many works of art that critique the nature of law present the falling apart of delusory worlds in imaginations to represent the affirmation of the weaknesses and limitations of the law in controlling human societies (Kellner Web). Equally, the eventual killing of the lawless Valence shows the futility and temporary nature of lawlessness. The film portrays the character and actions of Doniphon as the mean distance between the two extremes. Doniphon appears to have developed insights into the state of the law and nature of lawlessness. He is balanced and moderate in his perspectives and serves as the ultimate answer to the utopia imagined by Stoddard and the lunacy represented by Valence.

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