

Unforgiven: a revisionist shane



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Within any genre the individual gears and cogs of a film may vary in degrees, but the film still ascribes to a set of rules preordained by the genre's progenitors. Like a meme, genre films such as the Western will warp and intentionally borrow from themselves to apply a deeper discussion of ideology within the frame of the genre and thus by proxy discuss its discourse with the prior and future films of its genre. Furthermore being a space of pseudo-history the Western protagonist like Unforgiven's Will Munny must be a response to the genre's prior protagonists. Clint Eastwood's Unforgiven is a Western that contains multiple instances of characters inhabiting false personae in order to represent a symptom of the genre, and within that subtext the characters are forced into catharsis by the inevitable conclusion of the film.

Eastwood's Unforgiven is a Western that contains multiple instances of characters perpetuating false personae to themselves based on the meta-lore of the evolving frontier. According to literary historian Richard Slotkin the "genre space" but more particularly the Western/frontier film is a "Pseudo-historical setting that is powerfully associated with stories and concerns rooted in the culture's myth/ideological tradition" (Slotkin). So within living memory of the origins of the Western, the Western becomes a meta-adaptation of real history, and real history is influenced by the Western. Unforgiven contains reference to the genre as a whole when it invents characters like the Schofield Kid who attributes his persona to his signature weapon, thus perpetuating the genre's desire to create that of him. He cannot comply with the demands of the lifestyle by killing again, and thus demonstrates that his constructed self is a collection of attributes

desired among his ideal counterparts. By using Schofield and Beauchamp to establish a literary fantasy that is desired by the character, the audience can witness the perspectives of both Will and Schofield as they shift alignments so drastically in the closing act. It is a drastic realization by Schofield that the persona he envisioned for himself and assumed of Will is a façade facilitated by the genre. Schofield can no longer compel himself to pursue that identity because it is mythical, and in a way this suggests that the film desires to be perceived as oppositional to the violence that Schofield undertakes in the outhouse. Schofield's violence is perceived as negative because it is not entirely him committing to the violence. It is because of his metacognitive knowledge of the performative frontiersman that he attempts to imitate the grandiose Western hero, but that is settled with the harsh reality that violence is a lifestyle and not a singular choice. Will says at the beginning of the film that he figured that Schofield had come to kill him for something he had "done in the old days" because Schofield aesthetically matches the "young gun" archetype we see repeatedly throughout Western history such as the Sundance Kid or even Casey Affleck's Robert Ford (Eastwood).

Schofield desires to be perceived as the suave and likeable killer archetype such as Johnny Guitar's Dancing Kid, but ultimately he is received as Turkey from the same film. Unforgiven gives Schofield the ability to perform as a character because he is in the second generation of the frontiersman. He can remediate the violence inherent in the film's genre by distancing himself from Will's past, and thus criticizes the anti-heroic approach to the western mythos in that Schofield must live with his decision rather than die a climactic and glorious death. Unforgiven is focused on teaching the Schofield

Kid the hardships of anti-heroism and vigilantism, and this is indicative that it targets the impressionable. This brings to question what audience Eastwood seeks with the film, because his protagonist Will Munny is in many ways reminiscent of George Stevens' Shane in that he is a killer, and he does revert to a lifestyle that is a source of shame for him. They both ride off into the distance after killing a room full of men and influencing the youth not to follow suit.

Young people love Tarantino, Scorsese, and Tim Miller because they deliver unapologetic violence, and furthermore they deliver humor with the violence that treats the youth with respect in regards to their understanding of death as an irreversible action. Filmmakers like Tarantino can joke about the genre from a place of deep respect and thus treats his audience as an intelligent and curious youth that are tired of a preached method. Doctor of comparative literature Jean-Christophe Cloutier says that "Unforgiven hints that the sick, old men we were so eager to get rid of may in fact be the only ones who can do the job the way it needs to be done," and this is indicative of film's approach to villainizing this violence as a thing that the younger generation should be thankful that they do not have to perpetuate.

Unforgiven makes violence a continual burden that the perpetrator cannot be forgiven for; the frontiersman has the capability to kill and thus he must kill because resolution is inherently dependent on the protagonist shouldering the entirety of the resolution's weight. That is why Will Munny kills Little Bill and Skinny Dubois, and Schofield Kid has to leave before that scene. Schofield Kid is being shown by Will Munny first hand that he is not

capable of this lifestyle because it is a conservative lifestyle that Schofield is being purposefully sheltered from.

Will Munny validates older generations by giving them a protagonist that is relatable to how they perceive themselves in relation to the youth, and he is representative of Eastwood's value of wisdom over idealistic convention.

Director Clint Eastwood once said in a BBC interview with Stella Papamichael

“ I've always been fascinated with the stealing of innocence. It's the most heinous crime, and certainly a capital crime if there ever was one.” So the strategy of this film is primarily to demonstrate the conservation of the classic anti-hero character that Clint Eastwood was made to play, and in a sense forgiving Schofield for his wanton idealization of the “ Damn Killer” (Eastwood). When Davey is murdered by Will, it is purposefully mentioned that Schofield cannot see, and after the harsh reality of murder is revealed to Schofield, Will spares him of witnessing further violence by sending him away. This departure is not new to the Western as earlier mentioned Unforgiven is in many ways the revisionists Shane, and in many ways it is about an internal conflict in both the Schofield Kid and Will Munny that they are trying to be Shane and run from that identity respectively. Schofield is representative of the eagerness in Joey to become Shane, and Will Munny is the revisionist Shane because Eastwood wants to enforce wisdom as more valuable than conventional knowledge.

When Joey makes it very clear that he desires Shane's identity, Shane attempts to quell his curiosity by essentially telling him not to idealize him.

Will however let's Schofield Kid make his own mistake, and thus demonstrates his change to the Shane archetype as a guide rather than a

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teacher. This Laissez-Faire approach to apprenticeship actually displays a respect for human growth through experience, as well as the development of individuality within young audiences through personal experience rather than attributing personality to culture. The Schofield Kid and Will Munny create a dynamic in which the younger man cannot understand the elder fully until he achieves this experience of ending a life, and Eastwood delivers a very weird and poignant coming of age story via an instance of trauma. Eastwood implies by this that innocence taken is inherently evil because it disallows the experience to be gained on its own. Will Munny's allowance of Schofield to obtain this experience within the context of the film is simply Eastwood's attempt to revise character on a generational level by advocating a personal connection to violence rather than a dissonant glorification of it like in *Shane*. By then taking Schofield's Schofield, Will removes any connection that the Kid has to the archetype. He has obtained experience and now has the wherewithal and resources to reinvent himself based on his newfound knowledge. Will Munny wants him to kill because he will understand that it isn't an aspiration that good men have. He believes that if this lifestyle were pursued by Schofield in a situation where it was a fair fight in a glorious setting that Schofield would be killed or indulgent in the very mythos that Will himself had created. It reveals the cynicism inherent in Will Munny's character and attempts to draw a clear line in the sand of where innocence should end and where experience begins.

Unforgiven is steeped in the realm of experiential discussion with itself, it wants its audience to desire the experience and restraint of Ned (Morgan Freeman), but it also indicates that this is dangerous because of its

indecisiveness. By essentially turning himself into a bystander, Ned reveals that the middle ground between Will and Schofield may be unattainable, and this is a tell of Eastwood's inherent cynicism about growth. To gain experience is to eventually become as jaded as Will, and while the gap between Will's murderous phases is large, by killing again he regresses to the point in his life in which he was gaining experience. Ned is not willing to grow anymore at this point, and in the genre that is associated with expansion of both the nation and the individual this is a death sentence. Unforgiven rewards the character with initiative and purges those who are caught off guard. By killing Ned, Eastwood is saying that the mythos of the Western calls for the initiative, and Ned is a symptom of the domestic frontier rather than the wild. By domesticating Ned, and making him seemingly at peace with his marriage and life there is a pseudo-elitism implicated that targets those with attachment. Those that fight for material betterment are inherently weaker than those who protect their ideals. Unforgiven plays around with the idea that an individual becomes irrelevant the moment of their stagnancy.

To stand still is to accept death, and in Western's this is a popular legend. There is always a competition to see who can be the fastest to draw in a standoff. In Jim Jarmusch's *Deadman*, Charlie Dickinson becomes static after murdering his ex-lover, and then is dispatched by William Blake (Johnny Depp). Both films deal with stasis in a manner that depicts it as having no place in the frontier, but *Deadman* depicts the Western as a sandbox for the blank slate. William Blake is discouraged with monotonous life outside of the frontier so he attempts to do the same thing within the frontier only to

realize that he is destined to adapt to the environment. It is a return to nature in that his disposition to the frontier lifestyle is not one of reverence it is one of indifference. The indifference to action or morality allows him to experience in a manner that doesn't root from cynicism, but is rather an enlightened experience that is relevant to the trials that he must undergo. Furthermore Unforgiven is a film that teeters back and forward between domesticity and wilderness. Unforgiven has multiple instances of violence in a domestic space, but only one death in wilderness. The death in wilderness is depicted as excruciating, but it is also dealt with in a way that respects death as an experience from all perspectives. Whether death happens to a friend or enemy, Eastwood portrays it from a perspective that inhibits the ability to sympathize with all parties and thus ascertain clarity of an unfortunate situation rather than a hyperbolically idealized bias on the side of the hero. As a postmodern Western Will Munny becomes sympathetic to the viewer because of his intrinsic connection to the African-American. Eastwood uses post-racial ideology in Unforgiven as something that is developed through personal experience. To Will and Schofield, Ned is a partner, but to Little Bill he is an object that contains something to be desired. The film disregards race in many ways because it is intent on not soliciting bias for either innocence or experience within Schofield Kid and Will Munny, respectively.

Little Bill's murder is left until the end of the film because he is in the eyes of the audience unforgivable at this point. He cannot solicit bias because he represents institution in a world that is inherently antithetical to institution. Richard Slotkin says that " the difference between lawman and outlaw is

obscured by their kindred gift for violence.” and this is especially important in Unforgiven because it grants authority to a reprehensible man like Will Munny by having his opposition be more reprehensible than him. Eastwood’s philosophy of disregarding color impacts his audience in that they all recognize the implications of color whereas if Eastwood disregards race, we pay more attention to it. Eastwood designs his heroes to normalize racial difference, but acknowledges the history of racism by using it to villainize Little Bill. By having Schofield appear as antagonistic towards Ned upon their meeting, but not use a slur towards him is indicative of Eastwood’s ability to immediately establish the development of Schofield and essentially buttress his character against criticism in the future. By developing Schofield so rapidly, Eastwood also gives his audience insight into his perspective on development as a whole. Experience is defined in Unforgiven as something acquired not through time, but rather through action. If domesticity is the desire of the character then experience is not in life, but in stasis. Little Bill is similar to Will Munny in many ways; predominantly he is a gunfighter past his prime as well as a lawman, but he exists in a realm of domesticity that disallows experience. Thus Little Bill becomes both a terrible carpenter and disconnected from the desire of those that he governs. The dissonance between the lawman and his community resembles the inability to domesticate the frontier, and from a perspective that attempts to do so we see the holes in the roof.

Domesticity cannot survive the frontier in a state that is dependent on violence to protect, otherwise it is not domesticity. Little Bill desires to be performative of both the outlaw and the lawman simultaneously, and doing

so exceeds his limitations temporarily preceding his death. His experience is demonstrative of the continued idealization of the western hero, and the zealous defense of corporate interests. By attempting to domesticate the frontier his defense of his own ideals becomes the reversal of Will Munny's cynical experience as he expects more than he is capable of taking.

Unforgiven also gives us Clint Eastwood's perspective of extreme liberalism in the character Mr. Beauchamp who idealizes the Western hero to the point of worship. He is depicted as cowardly as he urinates when a gun is pointed at him, and he is also depicted as inconsequential as he is largely analytical towards the idea of the genre. He is writing the stories that make this film a metafiction, thus he is creating the glorified version of the Western that both Schofield Kid and Little Bill are swindled by. Beauchamp's character is antithetical to experience because the experiences he desires is someone else's. Will Munny says, " It's a hell of a thing killing a man. You take away all he's got and all he is ever going to have," and this is indicative of the respect that Eastwood has for death. He treats Beauchamp with such a distance to that respect that it discredits a lifestyle that is purely analytical, and with that distance criticizes academia for perpetuating narratives that idealize the very violence that Eastwood's film is opposed to.

Eastwood's film Unforgiven is a remedy for storytelling that rewards violence, and glorifies it. By taking one of his own favorite movies in Shane and semantically opposing its ideas of the glorification of the Western hero, Eastwood makes himself vulnerable by admitting that not all experience can be gained by talking. It must be acquired personally because that removes dissonance from frontier decision making. Within the mythos of the American

Western this film argues that the Western hero exists solely for the purpose of the youth's preservation, and while the Western continues to grow in a manner that glorifies violence, they become increasingly more resistant to the idea of violence as a means to experience.