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MDS 298

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### Masculinities in *High Noon* and *Unforgiven*

In discussing the subject of masculinity and its depictions in film one must necessarily consider the genre of Westerns. R.W. Connell, in “The History of Masculinity,” notes that during the conquering of the American frontier, frontiersmen “were being promoted as exemplars of masculinity” (251), which “led eventually to the Western as a film genre and its self-conscious cult of inarticulate masculine heroism” (252). In “Men Have Tears in Them: The Other Cowboy Hero,” Hubert Cohen, citing Edward Buscombe, outlines the standard formula of a film Western: “the Western 'makes an absolute and value-laden division between the masculine and feminine spheres,' linking masculinity with such things as 'activity, mobility, adventure, [and] emotional restraint'.... Most people accept the description of the Western hero as taciturn, macho, and generally aloof.” Generally then it could be assumed that the same generally could be said for American notions of masculinity at large, “real” men being thought of as the kind described by Cohen above. When Western films are released that challenge their genre's paradigm or masculinity, it could thus be seen as a questioning of broader notions of masculinity. Two films which do just this are Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992). Each of the films' male protagonists, Will Kane and Will Munny respectively, represents a differing challenge to the standard Western hero, and by extension the standard American male. Each depicts “the connection of masculinity and violence at a personal level” (Connell 255), and represents marriage and domesticity as a challenge to that aspect of masculinity. But in neither case is this challenge seen as restrictive or ultimately undesirable: in *High Noon*, though participation in violent ritual is seen as a moral imperative, it is also met with reluctance and fear by the

hero Will Kane; in the case of *Unforgiven* violence itself is depicted as a brutal and despicable thing, thus subverting the idea of masculinity inexorably attached to it.

*High Noon* focuses on Will Kane (Gary Cooper), marshal of the town of Hadleyville. The story takes place on Kane's wedding day; marrying the young Quaker Amy (Grace Kelley), Kane relinquishes his badge immediately after the ceremony and awaits his replacement, set to come the next day. Kane's wedding ceremony is the first time we see the character, and given the standard representation of marriage in Westerns the significance of this is striking. By giving up the badge and the violence associated with it, Kane is in essence relinquishing his manhood in favor of the domesticity marriage provides. Immediately the film's hero is one which goes against the traditional depiction of a Western hero, the happy ending instead an introduction, with standard masculine exploits left only to be assumed. A wrench is thrown into the works, however, when word comes to town that Frank Miller, a vicious killer that Kane sent to prison years before, has been released from prison and is coming on the noon train to get revenge on Kane. Kane takes his new bride and leaves town at the urging of the townspeople, but bound by his sense of honor and against the insistence of Amy he turns back to assemble a posse and confront Miller. Kane then rejects the domesticity he only minutes before took up, opting instead to fulfill his masculine duty to confront Kane. But he is unable to find even a single other man to stand by his side, the men of Hadleyville being either too cowardly or selfish to join him. Significantly, the mayor encourages the townspeople not to fight, out of fear that a gunfight in the streets would scare away potential investors from putting money into the development of the town. In his essay "Rewriting *High Noon*," writes that the film, "offered a vision of American society in which progressive middle class interests had lost the willingness and nerve to defend themselves against a threat to their very existence," with "Amy [representing] the temptations of middle class domesticity that have undermined the moral fiber of the town" (32). The same emasculating agent in two different forms – from the town and from Amy – threatens to undermine Kane's masculine need to participate in

the violent ritual of the gunfight at noon. More broadly speaking, the same kind of domesticity that initially tempted Kane away from his masculine tendencies has also done the same to the town as a whole (the citizens hope to attract shops and businesses, and Amy's plan for the couple is to run a general store. Peter Wilshire's "Revenge, Honor, and Betrayal in *High Noon*" hits on a similar point, noting that Amy is "a symbol of the town's rejection of Kane" (141). But while Kane's desperate attempt to recapture the masculine bravado he gave up at the altar is threatened by external forces, it is threatened just as powerfully from within: he is scared. Wilshire writes that "Cooper's great ability as an actor lies in his ability... to convey the fear, anguish, and self-doubt that Will Kane is experiencing" (137). A far cry from the emotionally repressed hero of the traditional Western, Kane even admits his fear and doubt to his deputy, Harvey.

Whereas *High Noon* opens with a wedding, the first scene in *Unforgiven* is a long and haunting shot of Will Munny (Eastwood) burying his dead wife. The docile and emasculating domestic sphere which pervades *High Noon* is gone before the narrative of *Unforgiven* even begins. This fact is illustrated immediately and graphically: we are taken immediately to a brothel in the town of Big Whiskey, where a prostitute named Delilah is brutally mutilated, her face slashed repeatedly with a bowie knife, for giggling at the small penis of a customer. Joseph H. Kupfer writes in his essay, "The Seductive and Subversive Meta-Narrative of *Unforgiven*," "[the camera takes] the girl's perspective, [presenting] us with an upward -angled, tilted close-up of Mike [the customer]'s face" (107). Violence in the film is immediately unromanticised, shown as a gross and disgusting act, a portrayal which carries itself throughout the movie. Continues Kupfer, "violence and manhood are joined in a way that is disturbing" (107). That the attack is prompted by a perceived attack on Quick Mike's physical manhood by a woman named Delilah (Biblically speaking, the name of the woman who robbed Samson of his strength) is no accident. The film creates a grotesque caricature of traditional gender dynamics, viscerally inviting a more intellectual questioning of their validity. While this is the incident

which precipitates the events of the film, *Unforgiven* centers on Will Munny. The prostitutes offer pool their money and offer a thousand dollar reward for the lives of Quick Mike and his accomplice, whose only punishment for Delilah's mutilation is payment to the brothel owner for damaged property. Munny, at one time a cold-blooded thief and murderer, but now a domesticated pig farmer due to his late wife's influence, hears of the bounty from the nephew of a former accomplice who is eager to make his mark as an outlaw under the name of the Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett). The two strike out to gather the bounty, picking up Munny's old partner Ned (Morgan Freeman) along the way. Whereas Munny and Ned are veterans no longer thrilled by the business of murder, the Kid is brash and impetuous, aspiring to become the embodiment of traditional Western masculinity – adventurous, murderous, and macho; he is constantly bragging about having killed five men and his other (obviously fabricated) exploits as a gunslinger, always seeking the validation of his two older cohorts. While the graphic depiction of violence in the brothel scene calls into question traditional Western masculinity through direct association, the Schofield Kid as a character does so more directly. Possessing the air of a child trying to impress his older brother's friends, the Kid makes conventional Western machismo sound childish and stupid. This implication is validated by none other than the Kid himself upon killing his very first man – one unarmed and defecating. “Full of bravado when we met him, he is now disillusioned, as we in the audience are meant to be.... For the first time, the Kid sees the truth” (Kupfer 111).

In both *High Noon* and *Unforgiven* we are shown unconventional depictions of men in the most traditionally of masculine roles, the Western frontiersman. And if the Western represents American ideals of masculinity, then by extension shifts in the one must represent shifts in the other. *High Noon*, which calls into question the comfort of domesticity as it relates to masculine morality, could be said to represent a looming malaise over post-World War II shift in hegemonic masculinity from the rugged individual to the domestic breadwinner, and Kane's fear of violence the combination of shell-shock

after the World War combined with a sense of unease over the conflict in Korea. The brutal depiction of violence towards women in *Unforgiven* and its exaggerated demonization of traditional gender roles is likely a result of the influence of the feminist movement and its entrance into the mainstream; its depiction of all violence as brutal and pointless a result of the Vietnam War's impact on the public consciousness.

#### Work Cited

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