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# A Country for Old Men: *Unforgiven*, *The Shootist*, and the Post-Heyday Western

by JEAN-CHRISTOPHE CLOUTIER

**Abstract:** This article introduces the concept of the post-heyday Western, a narrative mode featuring epic yet elderly protagonists. Focusing on Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992), and Don Siegel's *The Shootist* (1976), it explores the old gunslinger's struggle to come to terms with the trauma of aging and his violent past.

We are left alone with our day, and the time is short, and  
History to the defeated  
May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon. —W. H. Auden<sup>1</sup>

Grant me an old man's frenzy.  
Myself I must remake —W. B. Yeats<sup>2</sup>

In the end, it seems, Clint Eastwood is the man who brought a lighter to a gunfight. *Gran Torino* (Clint Eastwood, 2008), though set in contemporary times, is in many ways Eastwood's last Western, evoking moments from quintessential examples of the genre while also conjuring the tough personae of his own filmography. For instance, when Thao (Bee Vang)—the young man he befriends in the film—struggles with a tree stump in the yard, Eastwood visually alludes to a similar scene in *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) in which a bare-chested Alan Ladd and Van Heflin collaborate to tame the land. But it is *Gran Torino*'s uncanny correspondences to *The Shootist* (Don Siegel, 1976), John Wayne's last film, that truly stand out: both films' protagonists are old men dying of cancer who reluctantly establish a bond with a fatherless young man; both Wayne and Eastwood go to the barber one last time once they've resigned themselves to the inevitable final showdown; and both

1 W. H. Auden, "Spain," in *Selected Poems: Expanded Edition*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 57.

2 W. B. Yeats, "An Acre of Grass," in *The Yeats Reader: A Portable Compendium of Poetry, Drama and Prose*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2002), 134.

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films conclude in an ultimate gunfight in which the hero dies through a noble sacrifice. The two films also represent the last starring roles of both performers; Wayne became too ill to continue acting until his death from stomach cancer in 1979, Eastwood has claimed that this was his last time in front of the camera. The most striking difference in both films is their resolutions; because Wayne's J. B. Books brings his pistol to the gunfight, he is forced to tell the boy not to follow in his violent footsteps, whereas Eastwood's Walt Kowalski makes two important decisions: first, he locks the boy up to prevent him from witnessing the murderous violence to come, and second, he leaves his gun at home. The latter film's triumph, especially in terms of genre, lies in proving that the "somebody" you come across "once in a while" whom "you shouldn't have fucked with" can be a man who renounces violence. Eastwood thus both exhausts and exalts what I call the post-heyday narrative mode.<sup>3</sup> But how did we, and how did Eastwood, get here? How was this earned?

The Western genre has often adopted the mode of elegy, celebrating what is really dead and gone, yet its chief agents are usually men (with guns) in the prime of their lives, seamlessly imposing the mighty frontier-settling talents and civilizing righteousness that defines the genre's heyday. In *Shane*, for instance, although Alan Ladd gracefully rides over the cemetery of America's past into the setting sun of the gunslinger, his beatific face shows no hint of a wrinkle. To meet Shane years after he's disappeared into the horizon, to meet him wearing dentures, wincing as he saddles his horse, rubbing his arthritic hands before turning in early in his stained long johns—this would go against the audience's expectations and even the demands of the genre. "That is no country for old men," the Yeatsian wanderer says of this world, a lesson Cormac McCarthy and the Coen brothers appropriate in their own contemporary Westerns. Yet this kind of ill-fitting, almost parodic union of genre and age is precisely what the post-heyday Western achieves.<sup>4</sup>

Over the past fifty years or so, the Western genre has seen its fair share of generic transformations—shifts in gender, race, epoch, nation—in an effort to remain fresh for audiences who have grown used to the same story lines. Such transformations, as John Cawelti puts it, reflect the feeling that "not only the traditional genres but the cultural myths they once embodied are no longer fully adequate to the imaginative needs of our time."<sup>5</sup> I'm interested in analyzing the use of the aged hero rather than the traditionally young to middle-aged protagonist. The post-heyday Western does more than simply intensify the genre's elegiac tone: it takes over where elegy cannot go, partly because it offers a meditation on the phenomenology of aging—an indication that

3 By "narrative mode" I mean a distinct storytelling technique that combines style and substance. While post-heyday could be considered its own distinct genre—following a set of conventions or formulas that come with elderly protagonists—it is really a mode that any genre can adopt, albeit with a varying degree of revisionist success.

4 I am using parody here in "its emphatic sense," as Theodor Adorno defines it: "Parody means the use of forms in the era of their impossibility. It demonstrates their impossibility and by doing so alters the forms." *Notes to Literature* vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 259. Adorno further theorizes the "use of forms in the era of their impossibility" through his concept of late style or lateness, which holds a conceptual affinity with post-heyday. See Stathis Gourouris, "Transformation, Not Transcendence," *boundary 2* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 78.

5 John G. Cawelti, "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films," in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 260.

perhaps “the imaginative needs of our time” are those of an aging population that, thanks to advances in medical science in the wake of World War II, is living longer. As we, and our heroes, take an increasingly longer time to finally die, there is a reticence to begin the mourning process—“not just yet,” as Shane says after the final showdown. Although this article ultimately focuses on Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1992), I also address other Westerns in defining the characteristics of the post-heyday storytelling mode, key films such as Sam Peckinpah’s *Ride the High Country* (1962) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and importantly, *The Shootist*, a film based on Glendon Swarthout’s novel of the same name, the book that inspired screenwriter David Webb Peoples to write *Unforgiven*.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, all these texts eventually came to haunt *Gran Torino*.

**The Frail “Gods” of the Post-Heyday Western.** The Western genre is itself in its post-heyday; almost any contemporary example of the genre feels like a kind of sequel to the tradition. Thus, a fluid relationship emerges between the aged status of the Western genre and the aged state of the post-heyday protagonist. Consider the additional correspondence between the mightiness of the physical landscape and the usually imposing physique of the cowboy in traditional Westerns—a relation that tends to have moral significance. In diminishing the physical stature of the hero, post-heyday Westerns alter the very moral foundation of the genre.<sup>7</sup> The depiction of post-heyday greatness relies on a “network of assumptions,” as Cawelti would say, already held by the audience; it thereby ironically rejuvenates the genre as it forces us to rethink our notions of heroism and the genre itself.<sup>8</sup> The immediate attention brought to the vulnerability of the protagonists alters the process of identification and humanizes these mythic “heroes.” The post-heyday protagonist has to face a world that has become even more ruthless than that of his heyday, as he must now struggle with a betraying body and anxiety about his own irrelevance. In one of his many great insights, Robert Warshaw suggests that “the true theme of the Western movie is not the freedom and expansiveness of frontier life, but its limitations,” a theme that is intensified by the limitations of the elderly.<sup>9</sup> In fact, being old means being in the way in the Western, as the opening of Peckinpah’s *Ride the High Country* symbolically dramatizes. Riding into town, a white-haired Joel McCrea sees the townsfolk cheering, and believes the adulation is for him, but this fantasy is cut short when a man yells at him, “Get outta the way, old man, can’t you hear? Can’t you see you’re in the way? Get outta here.” What the man calls into question are the gunfighter’s crucial senses of sight and hearing, and McCrea is thus forced to recede into the crowd. The old cowboy is caught between encountering the necessary conventions of the genre and being unable to live up to

6 Eastwood dedicated *Unforgiven* to his two directorial mentors, Sergio Leone and Don Siegel.

7 On the role of landscape in Westerns, see Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992), 69–87.

8 John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 32. Cawelti borrows this expression from Raymond Durnat’s “Spies and Ideologies,” *Cinema*, no. 2 (March 1969): 5–13.

9 Robert Warshaw, “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner,” in *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 114.

these conventions. Warshow also points to the importance of the westerner surviving the film with “the purity of his image” intact, yet the post-heyday narrative deconstructs this mythic purity until its very history is incontrovertibly obliterated, reduced to “a pack of lies,” as Books states in *The Shootist*.<sup>10</sup>

Still, although the post-heyday mode may alter the essence of the westerner’s purity, it also affirms the myth these figures embody as a “reflection of authentic human aspirations and needs.”<sup>11</sup> Consider, for example, the famous walking scene in *The Wild Bunch* or the final showdown in *Unforgiven*. The “authentic human aspirations and needs” of post-heyday Westerns tap into our need, as we fear impending death, to be reassured that we have not become useless with age. Warshow had already pointed to the fact, when alluding to Gary Cooper in *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952), that an old cowboy is “a way of violating the Western form.”<sup>12</sup> Aged westerners violate the genre because their bodies are ill fitted for the job, plagued by frailty, ineptitude, and illness: Pike Bishop (William Holden) in *The Wild Bunch* grunts and winces whenever he sits down, and he can’t properly mount his horse because of his badly scarred leg; J. B. Books (Wayne) in *The Shootist* carries a fancy red pillow around (obtained, we learn, from a whorehouse in Creede) for sitting on hard surfaces, he needs medicine to kill the searing pain in his back, and he’s dying of cancer; and Steve Judd (Joel McCrea) needs glasses to read his contract, his boots are full of holes, and his shirt cuffs are frayed (Figures 1–3).

William Munny (Clint Eastwood) in *Unforgiven* keeps falling off his horse. He is beaten to a pulp without retaliating, almost dies from a fever, and his aim with a six-gun is gone. These signs of human frailty are incongruous with the protagonist’s mythic status; for the first time he is revealed to be subject to the “same canons of



Figure 1. Pike (William Holden) massages his scarred thigh in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (Warner Bros., 1969).



Figure 2. J. B. Books (John Wayne) with his portable cushion stands next to Doc Hostetler (James Stewart) in Don Siegel's *The Shootist* (Paramount, 1976).



Figure 3. Steve Judd (Joel McCrea) secretly reads his contract with the aid of spectacles in Sam Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country* (Warner Bros., 1962).

10 Ibid., 110.

11 Cawelti, “*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation,” 258.

12 Warshow, “Movie Chronicle,” 119.

probability we find in our own lives” and our favorable disposition toward him inspires our empathy.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, part of the appeal of even mythic figures like Achilles is that they have at least one weakness, but the post-heyday Western brings into relief the hero’s vulnerability to the ravages of age, thus fostering audience identification through the recognition of a shared mortality. Part of the audience’s empathy is also generated by viewers’ awareness of the hero’s own realization of his fall from grace. He *knows* that his time is running out and that things just aren’t what they used to be. By having survived long enough to be “old,” these heroes become victims of their own superb survival skills. Only ever-increasing difficulty lies ahead as other, younger nameless hordes seek to gain fame by killing them.<sup>14</sup> Because their legend is built on violence, the possibility of redemptive peace is circumscribed. There is no exit from the hostile world they themselves helped build, and their body, that which had hitherto enabled their fabulous escapes and exploits, now entraps them within its “constantly diminishing world,” as Elaine Scarry says of the aging body.<sup>15</sup>

Post-heyday films are not merely movies that feature old people, nor do they glorify never-will-bes, transforming them into heroes for the first time, but, rather, they depict individuals (or groups) who obviously once had a glorious day, a heyday worthy of note (normally, we’d expect the movie to represent these years of glory), and who have now fallen into a kind of desuetude due to aging. Post-heyday films exploit character the way the Hollywood star system exploits celebrity; studios bank on and take advantage of the public’s knowledge of a given star—her style, her past, her attitude, what she represents, the kinds of roles she plays—in short, what Cawelti means by referencing a shared network of assumptions. Siegel’s *The Shootist*, for instance, openly conflates fictional character and real-life Hollywood star: the film opens with a clever montage of clips culled from John Wayne’s vast Western filmography, presenting these as actual moments in John Bernard Books’s biography. The clips are chronological, which allows the audience to witness Wayne aging and letting us remember his “greatness” by citing his entire body of work. The films themselves and the protagonists depicted in them are examples of what Richard Slotkin calls “the self-conscious reflection on the nature and meaning of ‘the star’ as an element in both cinematic form and public life.”<sup>16</sup> Relying on the audience’s awareness of the star’s heyday, the films contrast this idealized past to the brutal reality of the fallen present. We are drawn to this type of story because we like to see whether old Wild Bill, who used to be a man to be reckoned with, can still shoot straight. Learning that he now has glaucoma, migraines, and stiffness makes him endearing, thereby offering a point of identification with a

13 Douglas Pye, “The Western (Genre and Movies),” in Grant, ed., *Film Genre Reader*, 204.

14 This is precisely the plot of *The Gunfighter* (Henry King, 1950), starring Gregory Peck as Jimmy Ringo. Sadly, it is also what happened to Wild Bill Hickok. In the case of Westerns released in the years immediately following World War II, the trope of aging should also be understood as a reflection of the challenges faced by surviving veterans.

15 Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 33.

16 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 385.

mythologized hero. The fallibility of his body also entices the audience by adding a poignant element of dramatic tension to the tale; should Wild Bill's eyes fail him, he may miss his opponent. But in the world of the Western itself, to reach the age of retirement is clearly not experienced as a blessing. Looking back on the history of remarkable violence forming his "legend," the old man's very deeds—reemerging as trauma—conspire to prevent the possibility of redemptive peace.

**The Gray Zone of the Aged Westerner.** In "The Western (Genre and Movies)," Douglas Pye uses the five fictional modes defined by Northrop Frye in his seminal *Anatomy of Criticism* as a way to describe the different kinds of protagonists appearing in the Western. Of course, "the modes are not mutually exclusive" and "can occur in various combinations in individual works."<sup>17</sup> Consequently, Frye's framework (via Pye) is useful in understanding how the post-heyday cowboy is positioned in regard to both the social world he inhabits and how he relates to the audience. In his heyday, it is granted that the hero fits into the romance mode, where he is "superior in degree to other men and his environment." He is "mortal, but his actions are marvelous and the laws of nature tend to be to some extent suspended."<sup>18</sup> In their heydays, both Books-Wayne in *The Shootist* and Munny-Eastwood in *Unforgiven* appear to have been embodiments of such romance heroes. However, as time goes on and "marvelous" actions become legend—thanks to word of mouth, exaggerated accounts in dime novels (Wild Bill Hickok is a real example of this), and so on—their reputation grows uncontrollably. In fact, their legend grows so much that—thanks to the star power supplied by the actors portraying these characters—they have slipped into myth, where "the hero is in fact a god."<sup>19</sup> It is this same mythic status that makes them targets for young opportunists seeking to establish their reputation by gunning down one of these "gods." Enter the trope of aging, which brings the final dramatizing touch to this alteration of the Western genre. The romance protagonist, having survived long enough to become mythologized in his own lifetime, is too old to perform the "marvelous" actions that were the staple of his heyday. A victim of both romance and myth, the post-heyday protagonist comes to us on the screen as a pathetic blend of high and low mimetic modes; he goes from being "superior in degree to other men but not to his environment," to being "superior neither to other men nor to the natural world."<sup>20</sup> But what is on the screen is perceived through the ubiquitous lens of what was, thereby unpredictably destabilizing the hero's trajectory and symbolic import.

This troubling of narrative mode has two major consequences for the audience's viewing experience, and both consequences find their reverse correlation in the other characters that populate the film. Although knowledge of the hero's vulnerable body might foster empathy on the spectator's part, it inspires a strange mélange of resentment and disappointment, followed by sudden feelings of superiority, in those who

17 Pye, "The Western," 204.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

populate the hero's world. For instance, take the scene in *The Shootist* when the marshal (Harry Morgan) comes into Books's room once he has learned of the legendary gunslinger's presence in town. The marshal enters, absolutely frightened of Books, asking him to please leave town, as he doesn't want any trouble. The moment Books reveals to the marshal that he is dying of cancer, the latter laughs in utter relief and begins to treat Books without any shred of respect. The mighty hero has become a mere dying carcass—nothing to be scared of here. For the young Gillom Rogers (Ron Howard), the news has a different effect. As someone who grew up idolizing Books, the news of the latter's cancer at first brings disbelief, then that bitter resentment reserved for fallen idols. As the narrative unfolds, it will be Books's task to show both Gillom and the audience—representing the social body—that he is still worthy of admiration. This is important, because post-heyday cinema hinges on the notion that the deeds of the old can still be as meaningful (if not more so) than the deeds of the young. In other words, mere survival into senior citizenship cannot be an end in itself but only a means to a possible greater transcendence. These men seek to resuscitate any shred of remaining social value they might possess. This proving that you can still cut the mustard despite your age and decrepit state is demanded both by genre and by audience.



Figure 4. The fallen Pike (William Holden) holds his bad leg as the others mock him in Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (Warner Bros., 1969).

A particular scene from *The Wild Bunch* serves as a telling example of the gray zone in which the aged westerner finds himself. As the Bunch sets out into the desert the morning after the botched robbery that opens the film, Sykes (Edmond O'Brien), the oldest member, has trouble steering his horse and causes all the men and horses to stumble over one another and fall down, rolling down to the bottom of the dune, with cries of "Watch out old man!" Pike stands up for old Sykes when the younger guys consider "getting rid" of him. But immediately thereafter, Pike's own status as a useful member of the gang is made precarious when he suddenly shows vulnerable signs of age. As Pike is about to mount his horse, the stirrup breaks (as if it is an extension of his worn body), and he falls hard to the ground with a barely muffled cry of pain (Figure 4).

The moment is marked with severity by the sudden intrusion of dramatic musical notes haunting the scene. The Gorch brothers tease Pike as he struggles to his feet: "How in the hell are you gonna side with anybody when you can't even get on your horse?" (The camera zooms in on Pike as he hears the insulting attack.) Pike

overcomes the pain by mounting his horse without a stirrup, in a Herculean grunting effort, and this time the music comes to his aid, glorifying the heroic move. The others watch, impressed and rebuffed, each reaction shot showing speechless men absorbed in their reassessment of the old westerner. They, and the camera, maintain a respectful distance from Pike, who rides ahead, now again the mystical silhouetted cowboy on a horse, in a lingering stationary shot that allows Pike to reinsert himself into the archetype he had just threatened to abandon. This kind of back-and-forth slippage between romantic and low-mimetic modes (dis)locates the aged westerner in a gray zone demanding ceaseless reassessment.<sup>21</sup>

In *Unforgiven*, not only does Clint Eastwood keep falling off his horse, but he also disappoints the Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett), who, having idolized the legend of William Munny, cannot believe that his hero would let himself be severely beaten by Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman). The only rationalization the Kid can think of for the lack of retaliation on Munny's part—in a way that recalls Gillom Rogers's disbelief regarding Books's cancer—is that “his pistol must've jammed.” At the time of the beating, Munny was already suffering from the effects of a fever contracted during a severe rainstorm, and the pounding aggravates his condition.

The Kid, disgusted by this flagrant display of frailty on the westerner's part, can't even stand to look or hear him moan: “Don't it make you sick hearing him like that?” he asks Munny's old partner, Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman). Soon after, the Kid writes Munny off as a useless “broken-down pig farmer” who can no longer be counted on to do the killing and riding that needs to be done, echoing the jeers of the Wild Bunch when Pike's stirrup breaks. If our legends get sick, then what chance do we have? Moreover, the hero's sickness is marked as potentially contagious; if he is allowed to remain in our community, he could infect us all. The frail old man must therefore find a way to contribute to the community, and soon, or else he must be abandoned or eliminated. In the case of the westerner, contribution means enacting his particular brand of murderous violence. But more than simply having the westerner play his prescribed part, *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.

This last sentiment, suggested by most post-heyday Westerns, is made especially explicit in Eastwood's films, and it is precisely the message at the heart of *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, 2007). In that film, the “young man” figure is ironically an aging lawman named Sheriff Bell (Tommy Lee Jones) who has “always liked to hear about the old-timers,” “never miss[ing] a chance to do so,” and who in the end finds himself unable to face the challenges before him and decides to retire. To use the symbolism of the dreams that conclude the film, Bell cannot “carry the torch” as far as his father and other “old-timers” have done before him; he is “overmatched.” The younger generation learns the same lesson in *Unforgiven*; after Munny has demonstrated by killing again that he still fulfils the requirements of the genre, the Kid, who has just performed his own first murder—an act that breaks the young man—finally understands what the audience has known all along: “I ain't like you, Will,” he tells the

21 My use of the term “gray zone” is informed by my work with Alan Blum on the Grey Zone of Health and Illness project, spearheaded by the Culture of Cities Center in Toronto.

old-timer. At bottom it is the westerner, as Warshow famously put it, who is the real “killer of men.”

Yet as these satellite characters swarm the old protagonists, casting doubts on their abilities, the audience’s allegiance never falters. We are always on the side of McCrea, Holden, Wayne, and Eastwood, and the abuse they endure at the hands of these unbelievers who are duped by their apparent frailty merely adds to our acute empathic connection with the isolated old men. In fact, as a drunken William Munny returns to Big Whiskey in the film’s climax, the shot is from his perspective, putting him “back in the saddle” and thus in control. As the camera becomes the westerner’s eyes, we see an empty bottle being thrown into the road. The camera then tilts up as we continue traveling forward, accompanied by the slight shakes of horse riding. Through such directorial techniques, Eastwood forces the viewer into Munny’s position; we are invited not only to empathize with the hero but also to be him. When Munny enters the saloon, we see a long barrel being lifted in the center of the frame. Only as the sound of thunder strikes do we finally see Eastwood’s menacing shotgun-holding frame inside the door, this time from the perspective of the saloon’s clientele. The ensuing scene, a dramatic gunfight punctuated by Eastwood’s special brand of laconic dialogue—and this despite the film’s partial indictment of violence and murder—is exactly what the genre insists on providing and what the audience has been waiting to see. Although in *Unforgiven* this violence can validate our unflinching loyalty to this old man and this old genre, the post-heyday Western nevertheless simultaneously exposes this “catharsis” as an ideological trap.<sup>22</sup> Eastwood’s insistence on rendering Hackman’s final breath as that moment’s only audible sound, followed by Munny’s unwavering eyes as he blows Little Bill’s brains out, indelibly mark this climax with an uncomfortable viciousness.

After the carnage, a drunken and possessed Munny warns the remaining townspeople, “All right, I’m comin’ out! Any man I see out there, I’m gonna kill him! Any son of a bitch takes a shot at me. . . . I’m not only gonna kill him, I’m gonna kill his wife . . . and all his friends . . . and burn his damn house down!” Clearly, like Paul Newman at the end of *The Color of Money* (Martin Scorsese, 1986), Clint is back.<sup>23</sup> But Eastwood the director abuses the feelings of elation that the audience usually undergoes during such climactic conclusions in order to once again complicate this kind of “heroism.” Before the triumphant and solitary gunfighter rides out of town, he barks his orders: “You better bury Ned right! You better not cut up nor otherwise harm no whores. Or I’ll come back and kill every one of you sons of bitches.” As these words are spoken, in Eastwood’s calm drawl, the camera pans with Munny’s turning gaze

22 This echoes Carl Plantinga’s warning that despite its “worthwhile examination of the consequences of violence . . . the fantasy of regenerative violence” is “still manifestly at work” in the film. “Spectacles of Death: Clint Eastwood and Violence in *Unforgiven*,” *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 80. On the concept of catharsis in violent films—especially Peckinpah’s evolving relation to it—see Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).

23 The sports film is another genre whose dramatic poignancy is often enhanced through the use of a post-heyday protagonist. In recent years, Sylvester Stallone’s *Rocky Balboa* (2006) and Darren Aronofsky’s *The Wrestler* (2008) are perhaps the best examples. The singular pleasure associated with *The Color of Money* stems from knowledge of Fast Eddie Felson’s (Paul Newman) tragic heyday depicted in *The Hustler* (Robert Rossen, 1961).



Figure 5. The victorious American gunslinger barks his orders in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (Warner Bros., 1992).

over the town in a powerful hero shot, revealing the American flag in the background (Figure 5).

The oppressed and disenfranchised prostitutes, here representing the community benefiting from the gunslinger's brand of American justice, come out to look at him in fear and admiration. Writer David Webb Peoples and director Eastwood have deliberately chosen to make a "man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition" protect the "purity" of the westerner's image, which, combined with the framing of the flag, puts the audience into an uneasy position; if this is American justice, then America stands on the precarious ethics of a drunken, bitter old widower who will kill anyone who messes with him or his friends. Of course, Eastwood revisits this exact problem, and he offers the diametrically opposed solution, in his later *Gran Torino*.

**The Issue of Posterity.** The ambivalence of the westerner's persona, which inspires admiration and disgust, myth and revision, is underscored in both *The Shootist* and *Unforgiven* through the crucial figure of the journalist, the pseudohistorian who seeks to document the deeds of great gunslingers. This interest in narrativizing the story of the gunslinger betrays a concern for posterity, an inevitable feature of the post-heyday narrative's preoccupation with death. Both *The Shootist* and *Unforgiven* suggest that the "true" gunslinger would have no interest whatsoever in having his actions dramatized into exaggerated stories.<sup>24</sup> The two writers, Dobkins (Rick Lenz) in *The Shootist* and W. W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek) in *Unforgiven*, seem keenly aware that gunfighters are a dying breed and thus seize the opportunity to extract stories from them before it's too late—indeed, Beauchamp goes from one senior citizen to the next in Richard Harris, Hackman, and Eastwood (all three actors were born in 1930). Dobkins does not have Beauchamp's luxury of choice, as he tells Books: "You are the most celebrated

24 A similar impetus to rectify the lies upon which his reputation is founded drives James Stewart's aged Ransom Stoddard to come clean to the journalists in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962). In fact, by demanding a story from Stoddard, the journalists cause the telling of Stoddard's and Tom Doniphon's (John Wayne) heyday, and thus allow the possibility of recording truthful history, only to renounce it in favor of legend over fact.

shootist extant.” “Extant?” Books asks uncertainly. “Uh, still existing, alive,” explains the writer. Whereas Beauchamp seems prone to poetic exaggeration in his accounts, Dobkins claims to seek the truth:

There’s been so much cheap fiction about gunmen. I want to get down to the true story for once, while you’re available, before anything happens to you. [Books rolls his eyes] I want to cover your story factually. The statistics you might say. Then I’d delve into the psychological aspects. . . . What turned you to violence in the first place? Are you by nature bloodthirsty? Uh, do you, uh, brood after the deed is done [reaction shot of Books’s expression showing unpleasant disbelief] or have you lived so long with death that you’re used to it? [Dobkins is entranced by his own words, eyes closed] The death of others? The prospect of your own?

The journalist’s fanciful reverie is suddenly cut short as, from the left side of the frame, Books’s pistol appears and is cocked by a swift, liver-spotted hand, the barrel poised at the journalist’s mouth. “Make like that’s a nipple,” orders Books. Later in the film, a woman with whom Books seems to have had a romantic liaison in the distant past, asks him to sell his story to Dobkins. Books reiterates his position and shouts, “I’ll not be remembered for a pack of lies!”

In the case of *Unforgiven*, two important moments highlight the need to correct the pack of lies that history seems to have inherited. Little Bill recounts the real events depicted falsely in Beauchamp’s book about English Bob (Richard Harris), the “Duke (Duck) of Death.” The historical corrective that Little Bill brings to English Bob’s story deflates the Duck and makes him look ridiculous—it turns out he shot a wounded, unarmed man, not a mighty opponent with two guns—whereas Munny’s partner Ned’s revisionism, that Munny has in fact single-handedly killed three men and not two as the Kid heard from hearsay, reveals that Munny was even more lethal than history has remembered. In short, whether the heyday’s historical truth is exaggerated or understated, public memory is always a receptacle of lies, a point John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) adopts as its central concern.

The problem of posterity—here being the problem of recuperating violent deeds into codes that should help civil polity—is not only tackled by the journalists. Along with the audience, the young-boy figure, unequivocal symbol of the next generation, ceaselessly attempts to interpret the meaning of the post-heyday hero’s life. In making a point of depicting the protagonist’s aging body—often represented in pain—to the young men who idolize gunslingers, the post-heyday Western is caught in a precarious balancing act between keeping the “purity” of the gunslinger’s legacy intact and revealing how this legacy is now inadequately embodied in a vulnerable, diseased man haunted by the carnage he has caused. Those who will act as witnesses to this duality, namely the young men like Gillom Rogers and the Schofield Kid—along with the young and not-so-young audience itself—bear the responsibility of determining how the gunslinger’s legacy is to be remembered.

Numerous scenes from *The Shootist* aim to prove that Books—referred to as Methuselah when he first arrives in Carson City—is still a man to be reckoned with, all for

the seeming benefit of young Gil-  
lom Rogers.<sup>25</sup> The scene in which  
two assassins try to kill Books in  
his sleep, only to end up dead  
because of Books's vigilance,  
impresses Gillom and restores  
his faith in the gunslinger. But  
the film also shows the viewer—  
and the widow Rogers (Lauren  
Bacall)—that these violent acts  
are getting harder to pull off for  
Books.<sup>26</sup> After killing the two

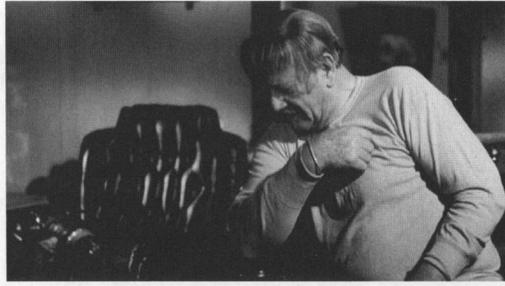


Figure 6. An exhausted and weak J. B. Books (John Wayne) leans on the bedpost for support wearing his bloodstained long johns in *The Shootist* (Paramount, 1976).

men, Books is forced to put out the small fire in his room that was caused by the shoot-out. This last exertion forces him to stagger to the edge of the mattress, hugging the bedpost for support and panting loudly in his loose long johns, thus creating a powerful image of pathos (Figure 6). Later, Books slips in the bathtub and needs Mrs. Rogers's help to get back up (of course, we only hear him fall; no audience is ready to actually see John Wayne slip in the tub).

The severity of Books's condition is established through the film's dedication to a certain stark realism when it comes to age and illness, a decision that troubles the viewer's enjoyment of the film's violent content.<sup>27</sup> Even though the doctor is reluctant to discuss the specifics of the changes the cancer will cause in Books's body, Books insists on hearing the truth. Doc Hostetler (James Stewart) tells him: "There will be an increase in the severity of pain in your lower spine, your hips, your groin. . . . The pain will become *unbearable*. No drug will moderate it. If you're lucky you'll lose consciousness and until then, you'll scream." (Stewart pronounces *scream* in that special way of his, with a near snarl that wrinkles his face and lifts it up in one fluid motion.) Hearing this, Books silently stands, pushing himself up with his arm. Doc Hostetler looks at him, realizes how this information is affecting his friend—and the audience, some of whom may have been aware that Wayne himself had already lost a lung to cancer—and warmly puts his hands on Books's forearms with an apology. Having strayed perhaps a little too far from the limits of the genre, the doctor then reminds Books of the image he has to protect, letting him know that if he had Books's "courage," as he

25 It is interesting to note that *The Shootist* was released in 1976, the same year *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) appeared. In *The Shootist*, John Wayne's character also asks the famous question, "Are you talking to me?" at the beginning of the film, when he is called Methuselah by a man he will eventually kill. Scorsese himself has also stated that *Taxi Driver* is a kind of remake of John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956). See Ian Christie and David Thomson, eds., *Scorsese on Scorsese*, rev. ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 66.

26 The casting of Bacall as the widow who tends to Wayne's needs as he slowly dies of cancer is important, as it was well known that she had cared for her late husband, Humphrey Bogart, during his own bout with cancer. For audience members aware of this correspondence, the scenes between the two veteran actors may take on an added poignancy and resonance.

27 As Stephen Prince has underscored, "visible or audible signs of a victim's suffering tend to depress, or inhibit, aggressive responses and may also diminish a viewer's enjoyment of the film violence depending on the amplitude of the expressions of pain." *Savage Cinema*, 115.

puts it, he “would not die a death like [he] has just described.” That is, to die of cancer is for cowards and not a shootist’s death. Hostetler’s rhetoric of courage is clearly old school, tied as it is to actual physical combat, and thus runs counter to our modern tendency to automatically label patients afflicted by a mortal illness as “courageous.” Reflecting on the doctor’s words, Books sees that he is being coerced into going down fighting and, resolute, decides to organize a “meeting” with the three men in town who want him harmed.<sup>28</sup> In a rather inelegant self-referential moment, Books implicitly shares his reasoning for choosing a violent death with the widow Rogers: “I was reading about old Queen Vic. Maybe she outlived her time, maybe she was a museum piece, but she never lost her dignity nor sold her guns. She hung on to her pride and went out in style,” this last delivered through Wayne’s still-charming smile.

Although his body is clearly breaking down, Books also proves that he is still an expert marksman when he gives Gillom a shooting lesson and some words of wisdom, echoing a similar scene from *Shane*. This scene takes up the notion of a “code of laws to live by” that life on the frontier requires. Unlike *The Wild Bunch*, which seems at pains to show how this “code” was mostly improvised to fit the context, with no ties to any kind of categorical imperatives, *The Shootist* relies on Wayne’s image of unimpeachable righteousness. Books reveals his personal credo: “I won’t be wronged. I won’t be insulted. I won’t be laid a hand on. I don’t do these things to other people; I require the same from them.”<sup>29</sup> Yet despite Wayne’s earnest performance, the more advice he gives the boy, the more the old westerner’s approach to life begins to sound like the wisdom of nothing but a predatory killer. As he tries to convey to Gillom that it takes more than skill to survive as long as he has, Books stresses how one must never be reluctant; “you have to be *willing*,” that is, willing to kill. “Those who aren’t willing,” Books casually states, “blink an eye or draw a breath before shooting. I won’t,” he adds proudly. His years, and his “third eye,” have taught him that it’s usually a “dumb-ass amateur” who finally manages to kill a master gunslinger. “Some six-fingered bastard that couldn’t hit a cow in the tit with a tin cup” usually does you in, he explains. Of course, that is exactly what happens at the film’s conclusion.

After Books kills all three of his opponents, thereby fulfilling the post-heyday promise, he is shot in the back by the bartender, who returns unannounced. Pike, in *The Wild Bunch*, suffers a similar fate. During the final carnage, not only does Pike get shot in the

28 Importantly, Wayne’s three opponents are portrayed by actors who were closely associated with the Western: the drunken murderer Mike Sweeney is played by Richard Boone of *Have Gun Will Travel* fame (CBS, 1957–1963); the unprincipled gambler Jack Pulford is Hugh O’Brian, who held the title role in *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (ABC, 1955–1961); and Jay Cobb is played by Bill McKinney, who had already appeared in *Alias Smith and Jones* (ABC, 1971–1973) and John Huston’s *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972). McKinney starred in multiple Eastwood films, including *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), released just a few months prior to *The Shootist*. In addition, Rick Lenz (journalist Dobkins) and Harry Morgan (Marshall Thibido), had all repeatedly appeared on the series *Hec Ramsey* (NBC, 1972–1974), which starred Boone and was set, like *The Shootist*, in the waning years of the “Old West.” In refiguring these Western heroes as villains, Siegel casts a revisionist shadow that besmirches their legacy, calling into question the virtue of their violent deeds. I’d like to thank an anonymous *Cinema Journal* reader for alerting me to these casting choices.

29 Here, Books explicitly enacts what Warshow has identified as the westerner’s main concern, namely the defense of his own image and honor. For Warshow, this imperfect moral code is precisely how the westerner—the “killer of men”—“comes into the field of serious art,” for his “moral ambiguity . . . darkens his image” yet also “saves him from absurdity.” “Movie Chronicle,” 110–112.

back by a “bitch” he had spared, but also the final mortal wound is delivered by a child with a rifle. In *The Shootist*, Gillom follows Books’s earlier urging to be “willing” to kill when he unhesitatingly picks up Books’s pistol and guns down the cowardly bartender, avenging the old man. Yet suddenly, in an unsteady handheld shot backed by loud, somber music, Gillom looks down at the gun in disgust and throws it away as far as he can; the dying Books nods and smiles approvingly at Gillom’s renunciation of the shootist’s lifestyle. Has the young man, along with the old, finally understood that the real pack of lies is the gunslinger’s code of problem solving through murder? It is the further absence of any code held by those who shoot the protagonists in the back (or those who kill an unarmed one, like Kowalski in *Gran Torino*) that makes these men martyrs rather than victims, thereby keeping their anachronistic image intact and their legacy meaningful. What is often stressed, however, is that the old killer’s blood must be spilled for the community to attain peaceful posterity, and the young man must renounce the gun.<sup>30</sup>

**Trauma and the Impossibility of Reform.** In an effort to counterbalance the frail bodies of their protagonists, post-heyday Westerns make room for a display of experience, as that which could compensate for the loss of swiftness and beauty. In considering the hostile world of the Western, it pays to note that the “per” in *experience* is etymologically related to “peril”. But experience also means history—a lived past charged with intensity and regret out of whose gateway ghosts emerge to haunt the old man’s present. In a way, traditional Westerns are depictions of the very acts that will later become trauma, and as such the post-heyday narrative does nothing but relate the return of the repressed. In *The Wild Bunch*, for example, the audience catches the first glimpse of the shared history between Thornton (Robert Ryan) and Pike when the two share the “look” during the opening escape scene. This narrative move, in which characters from the protagonists’ past return—a motif employed by most post-heyday films—is impossible with younger characters. Experience has taught them the necessary nihilistic wisdom to survive that, as Books surmises, basically amounts to a willingness to kill, and knowing when to kill, a kind of frontier murder etiquette. For instance, Pike shoots a member of his own gang because the wounded man would slow them down, an act that tells the audience what outlaws like Pike and Dutch (Ernest Borgnine) need to do to live this long.

But aging is also teaching them that new strategies must be devised to keep surviving in a world requiring physical prowess. When the Bunch realize that they’ve stolen steel washers instead of gold coins, it’s clear that a change in method is required. Sykes laughingly reminds the men that, “You boys ain’t getting younger neither.” Pike wisely responds, “We’ve gotta start thinking beyond our guns. Those days are closing fast.” Dutch silently lets this truth wash over his face as his gaze drops to the earth, and Pike takes a swig of liquor. A “learn from your mistakes” rhetoric emerges, but to no avail. “You reckon we learned by being wrong today?” asks Dutch. “I sure hope to God we

30 In that sense, *Unforgiven* only goes halfway; after their single act of murder, both Gillom and the Schofield Kid decide to forsake the westerner’s path, but unlike Books, Judd, or Pike, Munny survives the film. In the original Swarthout novel, Gillom does not renounce the gun but kills Books instead. Although it is a mercy killing, it is nevertheless jovially undertaken by Gillom, who then proceeds to proudly stride into town, the gun “still warm in his hand.” *The Shootist* (New York: Berkley Books, 1975), 214.

did,” Pike replies, implying that they may not have learned anything at all. J. B. Books may have reluctantly “learned to accept the help of others,” but generally, as with most of the parts John Wayne has played, he is not a character who must be shown the error of his ways; in fact, the genre merely asks that he prove himself to still be a master of those ways.

Therefore, in that rather cruel twist of fate particular to the Western, the post-heyday hero is denied the wisdom of change. Therein lies the pathos associated with these misfits: they are denied the change they sorely desire (*Gran Torino*, thanks to its contemporary setting, is spared this generic impasse). As Peckinpah’s frequent writing partner Jim Silke stated, in *The Wild Bunch* “you have a story of men wanting to change but in the end refusing to.”<sup>31</sup> The Bunch’s refusal to change is given mythic treatment in the film in the famous scene in which they stubbornly walk to their deaths. These men have become disgusted with themselves and their legacy, a sentiment that is palpable in the silence of the scene immediately prior to the march. Pike, after having had his obligatory whore, sorrowfully gazes at the baby on the floor, poverty and squalor surrounding him. A dead bird lies motionless on the sheets. This is a world that kills delicate creatures. Pike, Books, and Munny all acquiesce to the demands of the genre by reaching for their pistols: they cannot change; they are too old to change.

The nonviability of change and reform and the futility of attempts at self-transformation are precisely what drive the narrative arc of *Unforgiven*. At first, the film presents us with a man who seems to have indeed been able to traverse the fantasy of genre; William Munny, now a farmer, seems reformed, has children of his own, and is reluctant to kill again. Yet this reluctance is precisely what is wrong with him and not, as one might imagine, the solution to the westerner’s problem of posterity. This hesitation to kill is intimately bound up with the fear of death, something the post-heyday Western intensifies. *The Shootist* keeps death so close that Books even orders his tombstone and tells the undertaker—played by none other than John Carradine—what he wants inscribed on it. The fearless veneer usually associated with the heyday gunslinger has cracked with the wrinkles of age. In a moment of honesty with Mrs. Rogers, Books tells her, “I’m a dying man scared of the dark,” just as Munny tells his friend Ned, “I’m scared of dying.” Yet the pervasive reminders of death provide the post-heyday Western with one of its most compelling features; just like Walter Benjamin’s storyteller, the post-heyday protagonist “borrow[s] his authority from death,” and consequently, “in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges.”<sup>32</sup>

Through this authorial power, *Unforgiven*’s revisionism introduces the additional challenge of inventing a protagonist built not necessarily on the Shane archetype, but rather on Shane’s quick-drawing rival, the sadistic Wilson (Jack Palance). William Munny, we learn from a scroll over the film’s opening shot, is “a known thief and

31 *The Wild Bunch: An Album in Montage* (Nick Redman), disc 2. *The Wild Bunch: The Original Director’s Cut*, special ed. DVD (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 2006). In regard to *Unforgiven*, John C. Tibbetts quotes Eastwood on the issue of change: “‘We all hope we change for the good,’ he says, ‘and we hope Will Munny at last has changed for the good. But sometimes you wonder if we aren’t really just going in circles, chasing our tails. And Munny does at the end revert back to what he’s been, doesn’t he? Maybe he hasn’t really learned anything.’” “Clint Eastwood and the Machinery of Violence,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1993): 17.

32 Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 94.

murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition.” Or rather, we are led to believe, he *was* that man. We are introduced to a grayed and seemingly inept Clint Eastwood struggling to control unruly hogs.

He falls to the ground, panting in the excrement and dirt. As he gets up, we hear the Schofield Kid giving voice to what the audience is thinking: “You don’t look like no rootin’-tootin’ son-of-a-bitchin’ cold-blooded assassin.” Even though the film is giving him the opposite of the heroic treatment, the mere fact that he is played by Clint Eastwood gives us confidence that there is more to Munny than meets the eye (in fact, the fulfillment of this promise is a major part of our viewing pleasure).

Munny thinks that the Kid has “come to kill me for something I’d done in the old days,” that is, the heyday that has given him his wicked reputation. It appears that, despite his derelict look, Munny was once “the meanest goddamn son of a bitch alive” and had “no weak nerve nor fear.” The Kid wants Munny to help him kill two cowboys who cut up a prostitute named Delilah, a deed that would bring a thousand-dollar reward. Having fallen on hard times, the offer is tempting for the destitute Munny, but not so tempting from a moral standpoint. He seems more virtuous than his reputation would have us believe, going so far as to tell his boy to “watch [his] cussing.” The old killer turned farmer claims that whiskey was to blame for much of his past vileness and that he has been sober for more than a decade. “My wife,” he says, “cured me of that, cured me of drink and wickedness.”

In terms of genre transformations, the teasing presence of a wife in the westerner’s past is of particular interest. In a typical Western, although the lone gunslinger often engages in trysts, he is hardly ever married; part of the price to pay for his lifestyle is the entrapment of solitude. The allusion to Munny’s wife bears the promise of reform, but her actual absence from the film undermines the permanence of the westerner’s transformation. Although he turns the offer down at first, we are led to believe that material necessity makes Munny change his mind. A series of silent shots follow Munny as he looks for his gun in an old trunk. He comes upon a framed picture of his wife, and a mournful exhalation escapes him. The great weight of his violent past—which the viewer can imagine by remembering the films of a younger Clint Eastwood—looms over the troubled man, as this decision to kill again will undo his absent wife’s reforming work. But the old boy is as rusty as the can he tries to hit in the following scene, in which Eastwood tests what’s left of his aim with a pistol. This is a rare treat for the audience, and one tailor made for the post-heyday Western. Eastwood’s facial expression of surprise at the decrepitude of his skill comically reveals the disgust he has for himself. When Munny opts to try the shotgun, however, his aim is still dead on. Until then, like the Schofield Kid, we had been disappointed in Eastwood, but now our loyalty to the hero and our hopes of success are rekindled. In other words, the promise that Munny will be able to kill again brings us pleasure, an early sign that the genre is working to shatter the possibility of reform.

The scene of Munny’s departure from the farm highlights how he is utterly past his prime. Like Don Quixote’s Rocinante, Munny’s horse is no longer used to being saddled, and Munny has trouble even putting his foot in the stirrup; a vaudevillian moment of pathos ensues. Falling to the ground, Munny explains to his children that “this horse is getting even with me for the sins of my youth. In my youth, before I met your

dear departed ma. . . I used to be weak and given to mistreating animals.” As animal cruelty is never associated with any kind of heroism—especially in the Western—the film is undercutting our assumptions regarding this man’s virtue. At the same time, in only meeting Munny in his post-heyday phase, the audience is deceived into thinking that reform and redemption are possible—a notion the title, *Unforgiven*, again authoritatively belies.

The spiritual journey backward—which creates the necessary contrast providing the post-heyday narrative with its emotional impact—continues as Munny goes to find his old partner, Ned, who puts the situation in perspective quite pithily: “Hell, Will, we ain’t bad men no more. Shit, we’re farmers.” Their dialogue brings a realistic weight to the acts of violence involved in obtaining the thousand-dollar reward. In response to Will’s comment that the killing should be easy, Ned reminds him, “Hell, I don’t know that it was all that easy even back then. And we was young and full of beans.” Killing has always been difficult, and Ned’s reminder of age implies that killing now would be even harder; there are both physical and moral undertones here. The fact that this is a contract killing with no personal involvement seems wrong to Ned. Munny reminds him that they’ve “done stuff for money before” and justifies the killing further by exaggerating what was done to the woman. This exaggeration acts as a poorly disguised self-motivated justification for retribution. Hearing this, Ned declares, “Well, I guess they got it comin’” (the ambiguity of “guessing” is a trope used throughout the film), but he reminds Will that if his wife were alive he wouldn’t be doing this. Munny gives him a fierce look, puts down his mug, and heads out. During their remaining dialogue, which will eventually see Ned agreeing to go with Will, Eastwood’s direction is masterfully suggestive. After he puts on his hat, Will turns his head back toward the camera, and the sunlight hits one of his eaglelike eyes, revealing a face of meanness and determination. This shot is followed by one that travels back a step as Ned moves forward; the angle being low, what appears in the field of vision above Ned’s head, mounted on the wall, is his Spencer rifle. Everything spells impending violence. Having thus given perhaps too much power to his hero, the fresh authority attributed to Munny is immediately undercut by a shot, from under the horse’s legs, of Eastwood falling to the ground once more.

Sleeping in the outdoors and lamenting the comfort of a real bed (as would an old man or an amateur), Will’s inner struggles come to the fore. He unconvincingly complains that he “ain’t the same” villain he used to be, and he insists that “this killing don’t mean that I’m gonna go back to being the way I was. I just need the money.” Ned remains silent, but Munny’s demons emerge as he reminisces: “Ned, you remember that rover I shot through the mouth and his teeth came out the back of his head?” Ned, clearly uncomfortable, nods. “I think about him, now and again.” As it turns out, “that rover” is one of the many men Munny has killed while in a drunken haze, for no apparent reason. He laments pathetically, “No one liked me”; members of his old gang feared that he would shoot them “out of pure meanness.” While he desperately wants to believe that he’s “just a fellow now,” Munny’s devolution into the man he used to be reaches a new low when, during the ensuing rainstorm, he whips his horse and curses for the first time, calling the animal a “stupid, goddamn pig-fucking whore.” After a pause, he apologizes to the beast, but Ned gives him a knowing look.

Once Munny kills again for the first time, after having faced his demons in a feverish haze, any trace of his reformed morality begins to quickly fall by the wayside. Ned, in contrast, realizes that he can no longer commit murder and decides to head back to Kansas. Munny tells Ned to wait while they go finish the job and promises to bring him his share, adding that “the Kid’s full of shit.” Munny is now cussing regularly and gratuitously; that he does so after having killed again is no coincidence. While the Kid and Munny go execute the other cowboy responsible for cutting Delilah, Ned is captured by Little Bill’s men and subsequently tortured and killed. In thus reminding the audience of the viciousness of its world, the genre seals Munny’s fate and the impossibility of reform.

Waiting outside of town for the reward with Munny, the Kid is distraught by the murder he has just committed and drinks whiskey through his tears. The young man asks if it was like that back in the old days. Munny gives his usual noncommittal answer, “I guess so,” the same answer he had given Delilah when she asked, “Are you really gonna kill them cowboys?” Similarly, when the Kid asked if they had just killed Davey, Munny replied, “Yeah, I guess we did.” The “guessing” part indicates his unwillingness to settle violent history into concrete fact; the unforgiven man preserving ambiguity to live with himself. The Kid tries to justify their actions by stating, “I guess they had it comin’.” But at these words the camera stays firmly on Eastwood in medium close-up, drawing our focus to the ragged cracks of age on Eastwood’s bloody and piercing face, cracks that seem engaged in a reckless race toward the grave of his sunken skull eyes (Figure 7). He looks down for just a split second before summing up the truth of life in this Hobbesian world: “We all have it comin’, Kid.” The guessing is gone.

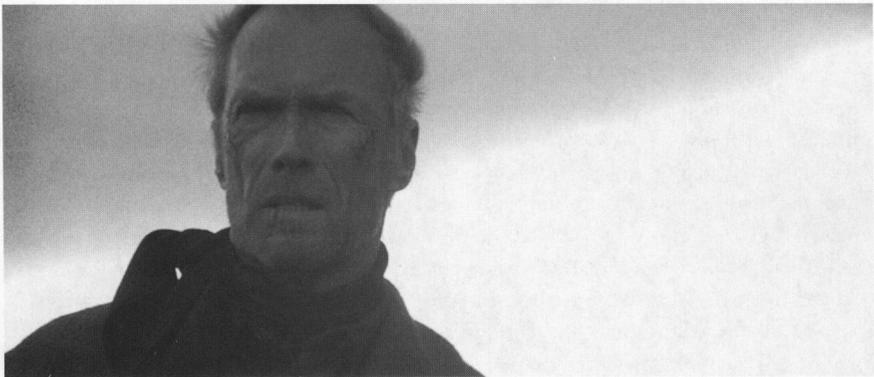


Figure 7. Munny's (Clint Eastwood) piercing, skeletal face prophesizes the death of every man in *Unforgiven* (Warner Bros., 1992).

The prostitute who had been riding toward them during this dialogue finally arrives and informs the bounty hunters that Little Bill has tortured Ned to death. Munny silently wrenches the bottle from the Kid's hand and, for the first time in the film, takes a swig of whiskey. This moment has been set up from the beginning and completes Munny's psychological return to his authentic self. In fact, the whore's recounting of what Ned said to Little Bill, namely that Eastwood's character “was really William Munny out of Missouri,” coincides exactly with Munny taking his first gulp of alcohol. Eastwood's voice is filled with quiet anger as he interrogates the girl and forces her to

repeat the horrors of his past, as revealed by Ned under torture: the audience must face the truth of his legacy with all its brutality and multiple murders; he has killed not only a US marshal but also women and children (and even done “a lot worse than that”). As his vile heyday is recounted, Munny continues to take regular swigs of whiskey, almost as if he were channeling who he was, lubricating his dark passage back into the demands of the Western. William Munny is now a man who has “judged his own failure and has already assimilated it,” as Warshow puts it.<sup>33</sup> Warshow further states that “since the westerner is not a murderer but (most of the time) a man of virtue, and since he is always prepared for defeat, he retains his inner invulnerability and his story need not end with his death (and usually does not); but what we finally respond to is not his victory but his defeat.”<sup>34</sup> However, Warshow’s observations are doubly reversed in *Unforgiven*: first, Munny is not a man of virtue but is explicitly described as “a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition,” and second, we respond to his victory over Little Bill and his henchmen—a victory crowned, as stated earlier, by a flowing American flag—not his defeat.<sup>35</sup>

**Fate, Character, and Exhaustion.** Such is how *Unforgiven*, as a post-heyday Western, transforms generic conventions. Cawelti similarly suggests that Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* also transforms the genre, both destroying and reaffirming the myth of the West. The film leaves us, he states, “with a sense that through their hopeless action these coarse and vicious outlaws have somehow transcended themselves and become embodiments of a myth of heroism that people need in spite of the realities of their world.”<sup>36</sup> Pye adds that when the hero of the Western dies, as he does in *Ride the High Country*, *The Wild Bunch*, and *The Shootist*, “it creates the sense of a spirit passing out of nature, coupled with a melancholy sense of the passing of time, the old order changing and giving way to the new.”<sup>37</sup> The post-heyday Western sustains the tension of the passing of time longer, maintaining the “melancholy sense” throughout the film, rather than simply having it come as a catharsis through the hero’s death. If Warshow is correct in asserting, in his essay’s conclusion, that the “Western hero is necessarily an archaic figure,” then to see him looking archaic is to behold him having come into his own, where everything he is “about” is questioned, put to the test, destroyed, and reaffirmed.<sup>38</sup> This is the crux of the post-heyday genre: if the Western hero was always archaic, then the Western genre becomes most authentic when the protagonist is himself old: that is, when form and content are synchronized. As such, the post-heyday Western offers an occasion for thinking about the evolution of genre more generally; in other words, the character of the genre, like that of the hero, is its very fate.

33 Warshow, “Movie Chronicle,” 116.

34 *Ibid.*, 113.

35 Whether this represents a Pyrrhic victory is a matter of interpretation. What is clear, however, is that Munny has rid Big Whiskey of its corrupt lawman and pimp, thereby avenging Delilah—who smiles admiringly at Munny’s receding silhouette as he rides out of town—and that Munny is said to have subsequently “prospered in dry goods” in San Francisco.

36 Cawelti, “*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation,” 259.

37 Pye, “The Western,” 207.

38 Warshow, “Movie Chronicle,” 124.

We could say that these films document not the hero's unwillingness or inability to change, but rather the way in which his world won't let him change. He seems trapped in his circumstances, world, legend, in a way that makes his very successes a kind of prison. This is in a sense a metareflection on the determinism of genre—the way in which the conventions of storytelling limit the kinds of stories that can be told and how they are relayed. Yet this sense of entrapment, as Richard Slotkin calls it, is also related to the old Greek adage, “Character is fate,” the notion that drives most epics. Post-heyday films negotiate between our nostalgia for the seeming naiveté of past heroic archetypes and our frustrations regarding the tendency of genre to always churn out more of the same. Post-heyday Westerns also suggest our refusal to truly believe that the gunfighter profession really becomes obsolete, even when it is outdated. Slotkin suggests that the gunfighters' story “will have to reach its climax in a fast-draw shoot-out, in which their calling will reach its pinnacle of achievement—followed by its exhaustion.”<sup>39</sup> Post-heyday films allow this very exhaustion to allegorically become the genre's central theme, and they argue that within this moment of moral and physical—that is, all-too-human—exhaustion, there is still time for one more moment in the setting sun. \*

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39 Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 401.