

Clint Eastwood's
Unforgiven.

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2. The Western

A voice of one calling:
 "In the desert prepare
 the way for the LORD;
 make straight in the wilderness
 a highway for our God.
 Every valley shall be raised up,
 every mountain and hill made low;
 the rough ground shall become level,
 the rugged places a plain.
 And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
 and all mankind together will see it.
 For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
 -- Isaiah 40:3-5

2.1 The Western as Idea

The film genre we call "the Western" has a rich cultural heritage. A genre is the "category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content."

¹ These qualities of content, purpose, and structure establish the generic qualities of a medium. They include rhetoric, style, explicit and implicit goals, images, sound, the character, and behavior of the subjects. ²

A clear typology of characters, action, setting, and motifs distinguish the Western as a film genre. The cultural meaning of these types in contemporary society and the limited artistic means of many Western films long rendered the genre a form of popular culture that critics and the public rejected as low culture rather than high culture. I will argue that the Western genre is neither high nor low in its essential qualities, and I will demonstrate that the genre of the Western precedes the birth of film by several centuries. To examine the cultural heritage and artistic meaning of the genre, I must first explore the nature of the Western as idea.

To speak of the Western as an idea involves a specific concept of the West as a promised land. This is not "the West" of Western Civilization. It is the West as the empty land of the new world. The empty land of this West is both a wilderness and a promised land.

In this sense, the Western genre predates Western movies, and it predates and the 19th century dime novels that served as popular entertainment in their time. The genre even precedes the United States of America, established in 1776. As a genre, the Western dates to seventeenth century Europe where it built on a rich and complex tradition in European thought.

¹ Merriam-Webster, Inc. 1990. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, Massachusetts, p. 511.

² Bhatia, Vijay K. 1993. *Analyzing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*. London and New York: Longman; Bhatia, Vijay K. 2004. *Worlds of Written Discourse*. London: Continuum International.

The ancient Greeks knew that land lay West of the Mediterranean. They believed that it was close to the Straits of Gibraltar, and many thought that India was a short distance across the sea beyond the straits. One Greek explorer, Pytheas, traveled beyond Gibraltar to reach what is now Great Britain, before going further to the Baltic.³

In the Viking era, travelers went west to discover Iceland and later Greenland. Western journeys and the western lands were the setting for many history sagas, including such western lands as England, Ireland, and the Orkneys.⁴ They also created a western setting for the Icelandic family sagas, a series of dramatic medieval tales.⁵

These stories established conventions that would become standard fare in later Westerns. Rugged, empty land was the backdrop of high adventure. In this open landscape, heroic settlers struggled to build a new civilization far from the old. Strong, willful men fought each other and the elements in an attempt to create or to fulfill destiny. This was a man's world, but strong women were often central to the action of the men. They also served as pivotal figures in narrative sagas centered on their fate and character. The open land intensified a rich mix of human emotions from love, loyalty, and honor to betrayal, vengeance, and frontier justice. The land seemed to magnify human beings rather than diminish them as they act out their lives on the great stage of the earth.

Several centuries after the Vikings went west, Christopher Columbus followed their trail. He bumped into the Americas while trying to sail westward to India, and Columbus was convinced that he reached his goal. Instead of finding India, however, Columbus brought Europeans to the Americas, introducing them to a new world. He also introduced this new world to the European imagination, with different cultures seeing and imagining this new world in very different ways.⁶

The British settlers who began to colonize the new world in the 1580s only managed to establish the first permanent settlement in 1607, at Jamestown, Virginia. The Bermuda shipwreck of English colonists headed for Virginia was part of Shakespeare's inspiration for *The Tempest*, written in 1611. When European men are shipwrecked on Prospero's island, Miranda exclaims: "O, wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world that has such people in it!"⁷ Europeans said the same thing of the new world they encountered in the west. This was a new land, fertile and rich beyond imagining:

³ Cunliffe, Barry. 2001. *The Extraordinary Voyage of Pytheas the Greek. The Man Who Discovered Britain*. London: Allen Lane.

⁴ See, for example: *Eirik the Red and Other Icelandic Sagas*. 1999. Translated with an Introduction by Gwyn Jones. Oxford: Oxford University Press; *Egil's Saga*. 2004. Translated by Bernard Scudder. London: Penguin Books; Sturluson, Snorri. 1976. *King Harald's Saga: Harald Hardradi of Norway: from Snorri Sturluson's Heimskringla*. Translated by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson. London: Penguin Books; *Orkneyinga Saga: The History of the Earls of Orkney*. 1981. Translated by Hermann Palsson and Paul Edward. London: Penguin Books; *Eyrbyggja Saga*. 1989. Translated by Hermann Palsson and Paul Edward. London: Penguin Books.

⁵ See, for example: *Laxdæla Saga*. 1975. Translated by Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson. London: Penguin Books; *Njal's Saga*. 2001. Translated by Robert Cook. London: Penguin Books.

⁶ The European imagination seemed to operate in different ways for differing cultures. It worked one way for the Spanish and Portuguese who followed Columbus to conquer Central and South America. It worked another way for the British, Dutch and French who settled North America.

⁷ Shakespeare, William. 1611. *The Tempest*, Act 5, Scene 1, lines 184-187.

In 1614, soon after Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*, Captain John Smith gave New England its name while exploring for the Virginia Company.⁸ By the 1620s, religious dissidents sought to build a New Jerusalem. Failing to restore virtue to England itself, they sought a new world far from Europe. They chose New England as the site of their righteous community.

In 1630, the Puritan minister John Winthrop⁹ delivered a sermon titled *A Model of Christian Charity* on the sea journey to New England. Winthrop, who was repeatedly elected Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony by his Puritan brothers, offered three religious doctrines that came to characterize British North American culture. These themes lived on in the national policies of the new United States, and they became conventions of the Western genre.

The three doctrines were: the idea of a civilization in the wilderness; God's blessing for a new chosen people; and special relationship between God and his chosen people leading to unique destiny.

Winthrop drew on Matthew 5:14¹⁰ to describe the new world:

“The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, ‘may the Lord make it like that of New England.’ For we must consider that, we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us.”¹¹

Winthrop's three themes became the basis of the Western genre. Winthrop believed that the pilgrims and their westward-traveling successors would build a civilization in the wilderness. He asserted that God would govern this civilization through a new chosen people whom he would bless, ordaining British North Americans as the creators of a New Zion. Winthrop also stated an idea that would, in time, lead to the theory of American exceptionalism by claiming that the New Zion – Europeans in America – would fulfill the destiny abandoned by the Old Zion and relinquished by Europe itself. For Winthrop, the blessings of this New Zion included a special relationship with God. This special relationship is the theological and political justification for the doctrine that others will label “manifest destiny.”

⁸ Smith, John. 1616. *A Description of New England. The Observations and Discoveries of Captain John Smith*. London: Humphrey Lownes for Robert Clerke. Smith himself featured in an early proto-Western adventure when Pocahontas, the daughter of Chief Powhatan, befriended him and saved his life. Though the execution and reprieve may have actually been part of a ceremonial ritual, the story takes on many of the legendary qualities of encounters between westward-bound Europeans and noble Native Americans. For more on the relationship between Smith, Pocahontas, and the Algonquin nation, see: Woodward, Grace Steele. 1969. *Pocahontas*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press; Barbour, Philip L. 1970. *Pocahontas and Her World*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. In 2005, Terrence Malick released his rendering of the Pocahontas legend in his movie, *The New World*. The Pocahontas story was also the basis of Walt Disney Company's first animated film with an historical foundation, the 1997 *Pocahontas*.

⁹ John Winthrop was a Puritan dissenter. Trained as a lawyer and justice in England, he became a minister and preacher among the New England Congregationalists, as well as chief founder and leader of the first settlements in Massachusetts Bay Colony. Winthrop's career typifies the life of the pioneer and town father who will represent the forces of civilization in Western novels and movies. For more information, see: Morgan, Edmund S. 1998. *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop*. Second edition. New York: Longman.

¹⁰ “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden.” See also: Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, Book XIII: 13. URL: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/140613.htm> Date accessed: 2007 February 15.

¹¹ Winthrop, John. 1630. Sermon delivered on board the Arbella. URL: <http://forerunner.com/winthrop/winthrop2.html> Date accessed: 2007 February 18.

The notion of America as a New Zion, a righteous presence in the wilderness, was as important as the notion of a city on a hill.¹² The wilderness was more than a new land. It was a place of isolation and redemption.¹³

In political terms, the politics of isolation began soon after the British colonies become an independent nation with a national government the first president, George Washington, summarized this policy in his Farewell Address. He advised Americans to engage in open and honest commerce, but to avoid “interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe.” Why, Washington asked, “entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice?”¹⁴

In his 1823 State of Union Address, James Monroe defined the New World as a purely American sphere of interest, asserting an exceptional claim to hemispheric leadership. No nation had attempted to exercise such a vast hegemony since the days of the Roman Empire.¹⁵

The Monroe Doctrine established “three main concepts ... separate spheres of influence for the Americas and Europe, non-colonization, and non-intervention.”¹⁶ Monroe intended to signal a clear difference between the fledgling democracy of the United States, a nation where the people governed their own destiny as citizens, in contrast with European monarchies where autarchs, aristocrats, and oligarchs governed subjects.

Two centuries after Winthrop proclaimed the New Zion, Andrew Jackson's populist wing of the Democratic Party echoed his claim to demand ownership of the entire continent. The idea of a single nation divinely ordained to span the North American continent blossomed as an overt ideology during the Jackson administration (1829-1837).

¹² Cf: Isaiah 40:3-5.

¹³ Even today, the notion of a “new England” summons the idea of change and transformation. This theme even makes an appearance in rock lyrics. For example, the English social activist and rock musician Billy Bragg once used the theme in an ironic love song, singing:

“I don't want to change the world
I'm not looking for a new England
I'm just looking for another girl.”

Bragg, Billy. 2006. “A New England.” *Life's a Riot with Spy vs. Spy*. London: Cooking Vinyl.

¹⁴ Washington, George. 1796. *Farewell Address*. The Avalon Project. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Law School. URL: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/washing.htm> Date accessed 2007 August 3.

¹⁵ Monroe, James. *Monroe Doctrine; December 2, 1823*. New Haven, Connecticut: The Avalon Project at Yale Law School. URL: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/monroe.htm> Date Accessed 2007 February 18.

¹⁶ U. S. Department of State Office of the Historian. 2007. “Monroe Doctrine, 1823.” Washington, DC: United States Department of State. URL: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/jd/16321.htm> Date Accessed 2007 August 3.

The notion of a divine mandate would come to be called manifest destiny. By the late 1830s, the doctrine of manifest destiny emerged to provide an ideological foundation for the great era of Western expansion. Newspaper editor John L. O'Sullivan coined the term in an 1845 newspaper editorial, writing of "... the right of our manifest destiny to over spread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative development of self government entrusted to us. It is right such as that of the tree to the space of air and the earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny of growth."¹⁷ While the term was born in 1845, O'Sullivan and others like him had long proclaimed the idea of America's "great futurity," writing of America's destiny as manifest and given.¹⁸

This appeal to destiny justified the wars and belligerent policies that annexed Texas into the United States along with other formerly Mexican possessions in 1848. This land comprises much of what became the Western United States, including California, Nevada, and Utah, as well as parts of what would become Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming.

The United States began with a spirit of self-reliance and disengagement from foreign political affairs, especially European affairs. The first great Western addition to the original thirteen states and the original Northwest Territory¹⁹ took place in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase. In contrast to the spirit of manifest destiny propelling the actions of the 1830s and 1840s, the purchase of the Louisiana Territory was a nearly reluctant effort to protect growing American commerce on the Mississippi River while guaranteeing access to the port city of New Orleans. In addition to Louisiana, this territory would ultimately become the first states that later generations would identify with the Western genre: Missouri, Arkansas, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Oklahoma; in addition, the area included most of the land in Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and Minnesota.

While deep cultural forces were at work, popular culture also played a part in the way that the young nation understood itself. The dime novel first blossomed in this era, beginning as a form of popular entertainment. It soon became the first great medium for the typically commercial Western.²⁰ The themes linked to the New Zion and to manifest destiny are larger still, and these themes have echoed in American politics, fiction, and film from the colonial era to the present day.

¹⁷ Brinkley, Alan. 1995. *American History, A Survey*. Volume I. 9th edition. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 352.

¹⁸ See, for example, O'Sullivan, John. L. 1839. "The Great Nation of Futurity." *The United States Democratic Review*. Vol. 6, No. 23, Nov. 1839, J. & H.G. Langley, New York. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Library, Making of America Project, URL <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa.cgi?notisid=AGD1642-0006-46>

¹⁹ The Northwest Territory included some parts of what would be seen as "the West," including part of the future states of Minnesota and Illinois, but this would be the West of farmers and stockyards, not the West of cowboys, cattlemen and miners. All this land had originally been Indian Territory in British North America. See: Kinder, Hermann, and Werner Hilgemann. 1978. *The Penguin Atlas of World History. Vol. II: From the French Revolution to the Present*. Translated by Ernest A. Menze, with maps designed by Harald and Ruth Bukor. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, pp. 12-15.

²⁰ According to anthropologist Leon E. Stover, the dime novel was the first commercially successful form of genre fiction. From its beginnings in the 1840s, the dime novel was both a central medium for the Western genre and a medium in its own right, known for "Western stories, pirate stories, sea stories, stories about high life and low life in the city, bandit stories, and stories of exploration, adventure, and romance. They sold in the millions, and the publishing industry hired hundreds of hack writers who specialized in writing one genre or another." Stover, Leon E. 1973. "Anthropology and Science Fiction." *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 14, No. 4. (Oct., 1973), pp. 471-474. See also: Anderson, Vicki. 2005. *The Dime Novel in Children's Literature*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland.

After the Louisiana Purchase and the war with Mexico, one further development established the physical boundaries of the United States in the era just before the American Civil War. This was the annexation of the Oregon Territory in 1846. Until the 1840s, both American and British citizens could settle and trade in the Oregon territory. Then, following a tense negotiation that might have become a war, Britain ceded Oregon and what is now Washington to the United States. These three developments between 1803 and 1848 created the West of Western films.

2.2 A New World Genre Begins

In the 1600s, the theological themes of the Western imagination were European themes and European emigrants acted them out. The first American-born representative of this tradition appeared in the first great “Western” novels, James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* of the early 1800s. Of these, *The Last of the Mohicans* from 1826 is now the best known.²¹ Cooper’s novels feature Natty Bumppo, also known as Hawkeye as the first mythical frontiersman of Western fiction. Bumppo is an orphan of European pioneers adopted and raised by the leader of an Indian tribe. In novels depicting several slightly varied lives of hero Bumppo, Cooper begins to define America’s vision of its Western frontier.²² The complex relations of character and context in these novels hark back to the dualistic view of Puritan New England with its Calvinist theology.

The Puritans divided the world into factions, and each was generally at war with the other: civilized or uncivilized, wilderness or settled land, the riches of the forest or the fruits of agriculture, hunter-gatherers or settler-farmers, country or city, grace or sin, good or evil, white or dark, chosen or unredeemed, saved or savage.

Daily life –work and family life – were the platform of Puritan spirituality, and the Puritans sought to integrate religion in every aspect of their living. They sought a sense of wholeness and authenticity at the same time that they divided the world between the saved and the damned. We recognize this dialectical energy in most Westerns.

Natty Bumppo – Hawkeye – represented a complicated, subtle clash of contradictions. He valued the culture of his Indian family because it was civilized and valued the honorable qualities that Natty admired in the British class structure. At the same time, he disagreed with many European ideas, especially in Michael Mann’s film rendition:

“Cora: And what were the consequentialities of European culture you didn’t bother with?

“Hawkeye: The Bible. Monarchy. Many wrong ideas about the government of men. My father’s people already know each man is his own nation. And only he can have dominion over himself. Not kings. No man is better than any other man.”²³

While Hawkeye lived the free life of the forest, he appreciated the freedom of pioneer agricultural settlement. After finding the bodies of his friends on the small wilderness farm where marauding Hurons had slaughtered them, Hawkeye spoke of them in terms close to the idea of the small freeholder democracy that Jefferson would later proclaim:

²¹ Cooper, James Fenimore. 1998. *The Last of the Mohicans*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Film version: Mann, Michael. 1992. *The Last of the Mohicans*. Century City, California: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

²² Cooper, James Fenimore. 1985. *Leatherstocking Tales*. Volume 1 [The Pioneers, Last of the Mohicans, The Prairies]. New York: (Library of America; Cooper, James Fenimore. 1985. *Leatherstocking Tales*. Volume 2 [*The Pathfinder, The Deerslayer*]. New York: Library of America.

²³ Mann, Michael, and Christopher Crowe. 1992. *The Last of the Mohicans. A Screenplay Based on the Novel by James Fenimore Cooper*. URL: <http://www.awesomefilm.com/script/lastmohi.txt> Date Accessed: 2007 August 3.

“Cora: Why were those people living in this defenseless place ...?”

Hawkeye: ‘Cos frontier land’s the only land affordable to poor people. So after seven years indentured service in Virginia, they headed out here where they are beholden to none and not livin’ by another’s leave”²⁴

One of Cooper’s characters did not appear in Mann’s movie, and the omission was significant. It was the character of David Gamut, a Calvinist missionary and psalmodist who set forth to convert the Indians through the power of song.

In many ways, the Western genre is subtler and more complex than the Puritan vision. Puritan Calvinism uniformly favored civilized values and the Calvinist doctrine. The Puritans believed in human depravity, unconditional election of the saved, particular redemption, the doctrine known as “the perseverance of saints,” meaning that anyone chosen by God for salvation will be saved.

Cooper’s novels embodied a paradoxical difference to this harsh doctrine. The difference would come to influence all future forms of the Western genre.

Cooper’s vision enunciates a subtle and complex relationship between civilization and the uncivilized. Wilderness and freedom signify God’s grace and blessing rather than their absence. The native savage embodies natural dignity and unvarnished nobility where civilization embodies the fall from grace. Cities and towns represent humankind at work, repeatedly choosing human goals over and against divine law. Churches and schools represent man’s ways. God speaks in the open, wild places. Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman followed Cooper’s line of thought, as did much of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s philosophy of the individual.²⁵ Emerson argued that the individual was greater than tradition. He argued that overturning tradition is the duty of true men. “Wherever a man comes,” he wrote, “there comes revolution. The old is for slaves. When a man comes, all books are legible, all things transparent, all religions are forms. He is religious. Man is the wonderworker. He is seen amid miracles.”²⁶

²⁴ Mann, Michael, and Christopher Crowe. 1992. *The Last of the Mohicans. A Screenplay Based on the Novel by James Fenimore Cooper*.

URL: <http://www.awesomefilm.com/script/lastmohi.txt> Date Accessed: 2007 August 3.

²⁵ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1985. “Self-Reliance.” [1841] *Selected Essays*. Edited with an Introduction by Larzer Ziff. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Classics, pp. -175-203. Emerson, “The American Scholar,” [1837], *Selected Essays*, pp. 83-105. See also: Sacks, Kenneth H. 2003. *Understanding Emerson: The American Scholar and His Struggle for Self-reliance*. Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

²⁶ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Divinity School Address*. Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College [Harvard Divinity School], Cambridge, Massachusetts, Sunday Evening, July 15, 1838. URL: <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>. Date Accessed 2007 February 24.

This rhetoric begins a subtle shift from the Calvinist rhetoric of the New Zion to the rhetoric of the Western genre. This shift is anchored more deeply in American religious polity than may be visible on the surface. Puritan Calvinism established what would be known as the Congregationalist church. The first churches of New England were Congregationalist. In the late 1700s and early 1800s, Congregational churches began to separate into two camps. One was the traditional Trinitarian camp, with its roots in the classical Christendom of European established religion. The other was the Unitarian camp, a group that argued that there is no Biblical evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity. This then-radical position had been persecuted and repeatedly eradicated in Europe. It took root among the proponents of individual liberty and personal conscience who shaped the United States as a nation where church and state were separate. Along with the missionary cause and the repeated waves of revival and awakening that swept North America since the first Great Awakening of the 1740s, this theology would influence the idea of the West.²⁷

The debate between Unitarians and Trinitarians simmered quietly for nearly a quarter century until 1819. In that year, William Ellery Channing delivered a sermon titled Unitarian Christianity, articulating the doctrine of Unitarianism clearly.²⁸ By 1825, the Unitarians had formed a separate denomination. Because each congregation was free to decide its own theology, many of the earliest Pilgrim churches became Unitarian churches as the two denominations split. One branch of Unitarianism led to the Transcendentalist movement, a philosophy that saw the spiritual in everything, and saw the material world as the evanescent facade of a deep and often-unknown reality, arguing for intuition as a guide to that which is true and declaring the worth and equality of all human beings.²⁹ They saw Channing as their spiritual father, and many of his doctrines foreshadowed the work of Emerson, Thoreau, Theodore Parker, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, Louisa May Alcott, and other leading lights of the Transcendentalist upsurge known as the American renaissance.³⁰

As early as 1805, Harvard Divinity School was a center of the liberal theology. Ralph Waldo Emerson studied there, becoming a Unitarian minister in 1826. Despite a reasonably successful career in parish ministry, Emerson resigned his pulpit in 1832 to earn his living as a thinker, writer, and lecturer. Ralph Waldo Emerson descended from John Winthrop in a line of theologians beginning in Calvinism. Emerson moved through conservative Unitarianism to Transcendentalism to shape a doctrine as important to the Western genre as Winthrop's call to the New Zion.

²⁷ Unitarianism was the declared religion of presidents John Adams and John Quincy Adams, related to the Deism of Thomas Jefferson. The location of the Unitarians and the closely related Universalists in the United States meant that these denominations would be free from interference by an established church. With the foundation of the American Unitarian Association, Unitarians established a durable denomination that still survives as the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

²⁸ Channing, William Ellery. 1819. *Unitarian Christianity*. Delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Jared Sparks in The First Independent Church of Baltimore on May 5, 1819. URL: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/DETOC/religion/unitarian.html> Date accessed 2007 May 21.

²⁹ Graham, Stephen. 2001. "The Protestant Tradition in America." *The Story of Christian Spirituality. Two Thousand Years, from East to West*. Gordon Munsell, editor. Oxford: Lion Publishing.

³⁰ Theodore Parker was a Unitarian minister and a noted abolitionist, Margaret Fuller an editor and early feminist, Bronson Alcott an educator, and Louisa May Alcott a novelist renowned as the author of *Little Women*. Louisa May Alcott was also distinguished as an abolitionist and an early feminist.

Emerson spoke about natural religion rather than revealed religion. He captured the sense of nature as a church in his *Divinity School Address*, “The test of the true faith, certainly, should be its power to charm and command the soul, as the laws of nature control the activity of the hands, so commanding that we find pleasure and honor in obeying. The faith should blend with the light of rising and of setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers.”³¹ Combined with the philosophy of the individual, Emerson’s natural religion creates a theology of the West. For Emerson, as for Cooper, Melville, and Thoreau, God revealed truth through nature while men obscured it in cities and the patterns of civilized society.

The early themes of what would become the Western genre took on political importance when they joined the doctrine of American exceptionalism in American politics. They appear in George Washington’s farewell address, in the Monroe Doctrine of the New World as a purely American sphere of interest, and – even more to the point – in Abraham Lincoln’s 1862 State of the Union Address, describing the United States as “the last best hope of earth.”³²

In 1885, Theodore Roosevelt articulated the idea of an American destiny linked to the evolving Western frontier in a seven-volume history book.³³ Roosevelt, who became president of the United States from 1901 to 1909, developed the concept that Frederick Jackson Turner would make his own as the “frontier hypothesis” of American history.³⁴ Turner became the leading American historian of his generation, positing an American national character defined by the ever-moving westward frontier. In doing so, Turner established the myth of the West as the central metaphor in American iconography and gave the Western genre a central position in American arts and letters.³⁵

2.3 The Western as Genre

A genre reflects its audience as a community. At the same time, each genre evokes or shapes a response by speaking to a sense of self and community. It is this sense that enables an audience to approach the genre knowingly.

³¹ Emerson, *Divinity School Address*, unpagged. See also: Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 2004. *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings by Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Edited by David Robinson. Boston: Beacon Press; Parke, David. 1985. *The Epic of Unitarianism*. Boston, Massachusetts: Skinner House Books.

³² Lincoln, Abraham. “Annual Message to Congress. December 1, 1862.” *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Edited by Roy P. Basler. Volume 5, p. 537. See also:
URL: <http://www.hti.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=lincoln;cc=lincoln;type=proximity;rgn=div1;q1=last;op2=followed%20by;q2=best;amt2=40;op3=followed%20by;q3=hope;amt3=40;singlegenre=All;view=text;subview=detail;sort=occur;idno=lincoln5;node=lincoln5%3A1126>

³³ Roosevelt, Theodore. 1907 [1885-1894]. *The Winning of the West*. Seven volumes. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons.

³⁴ Slotkin, Richard. 1998. *Gunfighter Nation. The Myth of the Frontier in twentieth-Century America*. Middletown: Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 29-62. See also: Slotkin, Richard. 1973. *Regeneration through Violence. The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Middletown: Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

³⁵ These issue involved far more than geography. They involved a psychology of abundance and mobility, and the ever-renewable resources of land that permitted both. This became the theme of David M. Potter’s classic historical reflection on American national character, *People of Plenty*, first published by University of Chicago Press in 1954 and still in print. Turner himself wondered what would happen to the American character when the West disappeared. (See Potter, p. 10.)

Genre performance encodes or embodies a set of meanings built on self-awareness and social life as much as artistic style and convention. In this sense, genre performance is a form of ritual enactment. Genre has several roles in artistic communication. It is a conventional framing device for the work of art as art, establishing its patterns and norms. Genre establishes the codes that give emotional and cognitive meaning to an artwork that becomes a significant symbol for its community. Significant symbols function in intellectual and emotional terms, carrying an explicit meaning while eliciting an emotional charge that the meaning holds for those to whom it has a meaning. Significant symbols are significant because they convey and carry meaning for the communities within which they communicate while binding those communities together in some form of emotional solidarity.³⁶

By inhabiting the context of an established artistic genre, the Western adopts, evokes, and recreates key meanings of the genre through the significant symbols that viewers understand intellectually while experiencing them in emotional terms. In the case of the Western, the earlier incarnations of the genre are layered one atop the next, like the walls of Troy. These layers create a layered series of meanings as they advance into the foreground and recede from consciousness with each film. The critical neglect of the Western movie may have much to do with an ignorance of just how rich the archeology of the genre is.

The narrative conventions of the Western follow patterns common to the dramatic and literary arts, as well as to myth and folk tradition. It was the popular quality and common, artless touch of folk tradition that made many early Westerns inexplicable to critics. Westerns gained a reputation as B and C films. While these were rarely seen in European cinemas, they played an immense role in the huge North American market. Theaters booked them as cheap second features for adult "double feature" tickets and as the main attraction of Saturday children's matinee performances. Westerns retained a shabby reputation even when great directors created serious, mythic enactments. Despite low critical esteem, Westerns were popular. Audiences loved them when critics did not. Western movies shared the artless quality of a common culture that made mystery plays meaningful to the 14th century peasant and helped Punch and Judy retain their appeal long after the commedia dell'arte vanished as a popular medium.

The Western drew on two streams. One was popular entertainment. The dime novel narrative of impossible deeds and magnified heroism was a key factor in the popularity of many Western movies. The other was the national epic of the United States. The Western evoked the idea of an America born in the search for individual freedom on an endlessly expanding horizon. Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis was the academic version of this creed. It remains active in America's national ideology and politics.³⁷

³⁶ In earlier papers, I wrote at length about significant symbols. Friedman, Ditte. 2003. *Symbolic Interactionism as Philosophical Orientation and Research Method in Ecclesial Science*. Lund: Lund University Center for Theology and Religious Studies, Ecclesial Science; Friedman, Ditte. 2002. *Can Social Research Illuminate the World of the Early Church?* Lund: Lund University Center for Theology and Religious Studies, Ecclesial Science.

³⁷ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, pp. 29-62.

The Western genre gains its energy from the clash of dialectical opposites. These opposites play out in most Western movies, with wilderness and civilization summarizing the contest between the individual and the community.³⁸ The play of opposites in the genre informs the unfolding drama as the specifics of each movie climb the narrative ladder of tradition and variation. The Western narrative tradition draws on the intuitive repertoire of common themes that Georges Polti describes in his taxonomy of thirty-six dramatic situations.³⁹ While Polti reduced all drama to thirty-six basic plots, Westerns typically use some situations to a greater degree than others. Vengeance, pursuit, rivalry, and daring enterprise are typical. Nevertheless, all thirty-six situations appear in Western movies at one time or another. The play of recognizable characters in dialectical opposition shapes the overall tone of the genre while specific stories allow the ritual action to unfold.

In this sense, the Western is the site of energies similar to those that animate folk tales and myths. Just as Polti analyzed dramatic narrative, Vladimir Propp analyzed the morphology of folk tales using structuralist techniques to generate analytical tables to identify 151 elements in the folk tale.⁴⁰ While Propp's elements do not apply to the narrative sequence of every Western, the elements appear with such regularity that we can describe the Western genre in terms of a folk tradition. This is understandable, because the Western genre draws on and echoes myths and folk traditions of the different regions through which the advancing frontier moved.

The westward motion of the frontier ended in the 1950s when The United States completed the first stages of its Interstate Highway System. The last two states of 50 joined USA in 1959. The popular Western began to end its durable reign in B and C movies just around that time. As the United States shifted its focus to the new frontiers of science and technology in space, the Western genre began shifting focus to find a new voice.

Film studies became a significant academic discipline during the 1950s and early 1960s. Unfortunately, the childhood experience of most film scholars in those years seems to mean that they associated Westerns with B and C movies or with weekly television "horse operas." This made Westerns far less appealing to serious scholars than British drama, French comedy, European art films, or even mainstream Hollywood movies.

Film criticism also became a widespread literary form in the late 1950s, and film critics were even more concerned about their claim to serious literary standing than academic film scholars. Established scholars felt free to reflect on popular culture. Film critics who worked in popular culture often felt an obligation to distinguish between high culture and low. With such rare exceptions as Andre Bazin⁴¹ and Robert Warshow⁴², film criticism neglected Westerns even more than film studies did.

³⁸ Kitzes, Jim. 1970. *Horizons West. Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship within the Western*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, p. 11.

³⁹ Polti, Georges. 1991 [1921]. *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*. Translated by Lucille Ray. Boston: The Writer.

⁴⁰ Propp, V. 2000. *Morphology of the Folktale*. First edition translated by Laurence Scott with an introduction by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson. Second edition revised and edited with a preface by Louis A. Wagner and a new introduction by Alan Dundee. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 120-127.

⁴¹ Bazin, Andre. 2005. "The Western, or the American Film *par excellence*." *What is Cinema?* Vol. II. Essays selected and translated by Hugh Gray. With a foreword by Francois Truffaut and a new foreword by Dudley Andrew. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, pp. 140-48; Bazin, "The Evolution of the Western," *What is Cinema?*, pp. 149-157.

⁴² Warshow, Robert. 2001. "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner." *The Immediate Experience. Movies, Comics, Theater, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture*. Enlarged Edition. With "Robert Warshow: Life and Works" by David Denby, "Epilogue: After Half a Century" Stanley Cavell. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, pp. 105-124.

Scholars and critics alike neglected a central genre of Hollywood film production at a time that the Western began to undergo a new birth. While the work of such directors as Sergio Leone,⁴³ Sam Peckinpah,⁴⁴ and – later – Clint Eastwood⁴⁵ would transform the meaning of the genre, critical and scholarly neglect would continue until 1990. In 1990, Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* won seven Oscars. Three years later, Eastwood's *Unforgiven* won four.

The Western cannot return to become a mainstream genre. Times have changed, the world has changed, and the mythic meanings of the Western are open to too many subtle shifts of meaning to permit the univocal appeal that made the Western subject to frequent and sometimes deserved neglect. Nevertheless, the Western has become an epic genre that speaks to large audiences with a voice as potentially resonant as that of any other genre.

2.4 A Genre Finds a Voice

In examining the genre of the Western movie, I have developed a genre typology dividing Western films into three broad categories. These types are linked in great part to the periods in which they were made.

The three major types are

- 1) The “classical Western,”
- 2) The “transitional Western,”
- 3) The “new Western.”

The first period is the era of the classical Western. The classical Western is clear and straightforward. Plot is the driving force in classical Westerns and character is secondary. Characters are iconic representations of simple, straightforward ideal character types. Viewers can respond to these ideals, identifying with them to shape their own understanding of ideal personalities.

⁴³ *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968).

⁴⁴ *Major Dundee* (1965), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970), *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973).

⁴⁵ *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *The Outlaw Josie Wales* (1976), *Bronco Billy* (1980), *Honky-Tonk Man* (1982), *Pale Rider* (1985), *Unforgiven* (1992), *A Perfect World* (1993). In addition to his work as a director, Eastwood helped to define the Western genre as actor in several Westerns that are now defined as classics,

The classical Western was a popular entertainment. Growing out of the dime novel and the Wild West show, it shared both their often-vulgar means and their popular appeal.⁴⁶ While some classical Westerns were works of art, studios ground most Western movies out by the hundreds to fill a niche as cheap films for low-price theaters, as second films on double-feature bills, and children's movies. Experts estimate that over 20,000 Westerns were produced since the first Western film of 1903.⁴⁷ Most were forgettable. At a time when archival preservation was uncommon even for great films, many were lost or purposely destroyed.

There were many sub-genres of classical Western, and we can recognize them by plot types. These include: shoot-'em-ups, trail movies, feud movies, vengeance Westerns, land claim movies featuring cattlemen against farmers, land claim movies featuring land barons against other settlers, land claim movies featuring mining barons against small claim miners, range war movies featuring open range cattlemen against barbed-wire cattlemen, range war movies featuring cattle men against sheep men, saddle tramp movies, pioneer movies, Civil war movies, cavalry movies featuring soldiers against Indians, bank robber movies, train robber movies, outlaw gang movies, lawman against outlaw gang movies, and many more. Western movies featured nearly every one of Polti's dramatic scenarios and many of Propp's morphological structures.

Most Westerns were B and C grade films, and the overwhelming low quality of most Westerns gave the entire genre a poor reputation. Nevertheless, some directors chose the Western genre for artistic purposes. John Ford is the best known among the directors for whom the classical Western was an art form. For many, Ford's cavalry trilogy – *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950) – defined the great era of black and white Western movies and many consider his *Stagecoach* (1939) to be the “the most famous Western ever made.”⁴⁸ *Stagecoach* was the first movie in Ford's long collaboration with John Wayne, and it transformed Wayne from an ordinary studio actor to an archetypal Western hero. Wayne went on to play iconic heroes for nearly four decades. By then, however, Clint Eastwood had given the archetypal hero a new face, collaborating with Sergio Leone to create the Man with No Name.

⁴⁶ Dime novels were a massive industry during the last half of the 1800s. Dime novel publishers produced thousands of titles in press runs that totaled millions of copies per year. While dime novels featured several themes, the dime novel Western was a standard genre. Authors such as Ned Buntline wrote about such Western heroes as Buffalo Bill, Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickock, and others who would later become standard film heroes. Daryl Jones offers an extensive history and discussion of the dime novel Western and its role in popular culture, see: Jones, Daryl E. 1978. *The Dime Novel Western*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press. Bill Brown has collected an anthology of actual dime novel Westerns, together with an excellent introduction and a chronology of the medium, see: Brown, Bill. 1997. *Reading the West: An Anthology of Dime Westerns*. New York: St. Martin's Press. Stanford University Library maintains a collection of over 8,000 historic dime novels, with titles and some contents available on the Web. See: Brooks, Connie, Project Manager. 2007. Dime Novels and Penny Dreadfuls. Stanford University Library Dime Novel and Story Paper Collection. Stanford University Library. URL: <http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/dp/pennies/home.html> Date accessed 2007 August 10. Northern Illinois University Press is digitizing the complete production of the most important and best-known dime novel publisher, Beadle and Adams. Linda Thomas, Curator. 2007. Beadle and Adams Dime Novel Digitization Project. Northern Illinois University Libraries. URL: <http://www.niulib.niu.edu/badndp/> Date accessed 2007 August 10.

⁴⁷ Yoggy, Gary, editor. 1998. *Back in the Saddle. Essays on Western Film and Television Actors*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, p. v.

⁴⁸ Buscombe, Edward. 1996. *Stagecoach*. London: British Film Institute, p. 10.

Along with *Stagecoach* and the cavalry trilogy, other films have often been named as “the greatest Western.” Fred Zinneman’s *High Noon* (1952) is one of them. The film starred Gary Cooper as a dedicated sheriff retiring from the law to marry a pacifist Quaker schoolteacher played by Grace Kelly. Minutes before he is about to hang up his badge, Cooper learns that he must confront a gunman whom he once arrested and sent to prison. Jane Tompkins discusses this film extensively throughout *West of Everything*, implicitly assigning it to the role of an exemplary classical Western.⁴⁹ She also discusses another Western cult favorite, *Shane* (1953), directed by George Stevens.⁵⁰ *Shane* stars Alan Ladd as a gunfighter with a past who is willing to be considered a coward rather than fight until circumstances force him to do so. Tompkins describes *High Noon* and *Shane* as “part of the permanent repertoire of American culture.”⁵¹ Many Americans have seen the Ford and Wayne films remembering their iconic quality rather than any detail of plot or dramatic action. In contrast, as Tompkins notes, every American of a certain age remembers the theme song of *High Noon* (“Do not forsake me, oh my darling”)⁵² or the closing line of *Shane* (“Come back, Shane!”).

If Cooper matches Wayne as an epic hero, Glenn Ford equals Ladd as an “ordinary hero.” In a career that spanned half a century and dozens of Westerns, many of them excellent, Ford played common men struggling to survive as cowboys or workaday sheriffs, wagon masters or saddle tramps, all trying to live a decent life in trying times. Playing in classical Westerns, Ford often imbued his roles with psychological depth. His characters were cowboys and loners who tried to deal with a difficult past, overcoming shame, bad reputation, or a series of mistakes. These roles foreshadowed the characters of the transitional era that would begin in the 1960s.⁵³

The B Western movie found its counterpart in the early days of television. This was a time when the stars of “kiddy matinee” Westerns moved from the cinema screen to the television screen, and many stations started their children’s programming by broadcasting recycled movie Westerns and cinema serials.⁵⁴ The first made-for-television Westerns and Western shows for children came soon after the era of recycled movies, and Western shows were popular in the first decade of television. Most shows resembled B Westerns in the simplicity of their horse opera plots and thin characters. Famous children’s Western shows included *Hopalong Cassidy* (1952-1954), *The Lone Ranger* (1949-1957), and *The Roy Rogers Show* (1951-1957), all featuring the heroes of earlier children’s movies or radio show Westerns.

⁴⁹ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, pp. 5, 8, 19, 35, 41, 50, 105, 143, 219, 225, 227, 233.

⁵⁰ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, pp. 5, 8, 51-52, 61-62, 127-128, 143, 220, 225, 227-228.

⁵¹ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, p. 5.

⁵² *Do Not Forsake Me* won an Oscar for Best Song in 1952. Sung by former singing cowboy star and B Western actor Tex Ritter, it was heard on the first televised Oscar awards program. Gary Cooper won his second Oscar for the role of Sheriff Will Kane, only the second best actor Oscar for a role in a Western.

⁵³ Well known Glenn Ford roles included *Cowboy* (1958), *Day of the Evil Gun* (1968), *Heaven with a Gun* (1969), *Jubal* (1956), *The Last Challenge* (1967), *The Man from the Alamo* (1953), *The Man from Colorado* (1948), *The Rounders* (1965), *The Sacketts* (1979), *Santee* (1973), *Texas* (1941), *3:10 to Yuma* (1957), *A Time for Killing* (1967), *The Violent Men* (1955),

⁵⁴ This included the films of an entire generation of B-Movie stars including Tex Ritter, Hoot Gibson, and Hopalong Cassidy, as well as “singing cowboy” stars Roy Rogers, Gene Autry. It is interesting to note that John Wayne actually launched an important Western sub-genre for which he is no longer remembered. He played the first “singing cowboy” hero role in *Riders of Destiny*, a role that would be developed by Autry, Rogers, Tex Ritter, and others.

Children's Westerns helped to launch television programming. Adult Westerns helped to define it. By the late 1950s, nearly thirty adult Westerns occupied "prime time" slots in the best mid-evening broadcast hours. These were classical Westerns. Among the best known were shows featuring historical Western heroes who had long featured in movies, such as *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (1955-1961) or *Bat Masterson* (1958-1961). Other shows featured fictional role archetypes: the sheriff of *Guns Smoke* (1955-1975), the gambler of *Maverick* (1957-1962), and particularly cowhand Rowdy Yates on *Rawhide* (1959-1966), the first major role for a young actor named Clint Eastwood.

While adult Westerns were slightly more sophisticated than children's Westerns, they remained violent and thin, resembling the classical Westerns of adult B movies. The need to create a new plot every week while meeting formula expectations did not lead to depth and subtlety. Despite this, the need to produce a weekly episode often meant that strong actors and serious directors might occasionally team up with excellent writers to produce an interesting episode. Given the poverty of the genre as a whole and the changing culture, television Westerns began to dwindle in the 1960s. After flourishing from the late 1940s to the late 1960s, they began to fade. After the 1970s, television became a wilderness for Western series. Few were launched, and few of those succeeded.

The important role of television in public life makes the television Western an important part of the evolving genre, especially in North America. The television Western shaped public awareness and expectation of the Western genre much as the dime novel once did. There were few important series among television Westerns and few memorable episodes, but the regular weekly spectacle shaped the way the contemporary audiences would see and understand the Western genre. The decline and eventual disappearance of the Western from television helped to reinforce the idea that the Western had died as an art form and a film genre.⁵⁵

While many took this view, it is nevertheless inaccurate. At the same time that Western series vanished on television, the Western film entered second great era of Western movies, the time of the transitional Western.

Sergio Leone ushered in the transitional era with *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), the movie that introduced the Man with No Name as an existential, psychological hero of few words. Actor Clint Eastwood played the part, creating a role that surpassed the strong, silent heroes that John Wayne played in roles that typified the classic Western film. Leone's movie was a turning point for reasons beyond Eastwood's spare, silent character. What made it significant was the way in which several themes came together in a single film that helped to signal the new era. Leone's "dollars trilogy" was a major transition in the Western genre.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of television Westerns and a careful analysis of over 150 television Western shows, see: Yogy, Gary. 1995. *Riding the Video Range: the Rise and Fall of the Western on Television*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company. See also the essays in: Yogy, Gary, editor. 1998. *Back in the Saddle. Essays on Western Film and Television Actors*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company. Two books shed added light on the television Western. One is an appreciative consideration of the great era of the medium: West, Richard. 1987. *Television Westerns: Major and Minor Series, 1946-1978*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company. The other is a skeptical view of the medium, explaining it as a response to social and economic developments while examining what the author sees as the reasons for the collapse of the genre: MacDonald, J. Fred. 1987. *Who Shot the Sheriff? The Rise and Fall of the Television Western*. New York: Praeger. Several valuable essays appear in: Buscombe, Edward. 1998. *Back in the Saddle Again. New Essays on the Western*. London: British Film Institute. Finally, for a general overview article, see: Reeves, Jimmie L. 2007. "Westerns." *Encyclopedia of Television*. Online Edition. Chicago, Illinois: The Museum of Broadcast Communications. URL: <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/W/htmlW/westerns/westerns.htm> Date Accessed 2007 August 11.

⁵⁶ In addition to *A Fistful of Dollars*, the trilogy included *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly* (1966). Leone would follow these with *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), and *My Name is Nobody* (1973), a philosophical comedy that reviewed and poked gentle fun at the traditions and clichés of the entire Western genre.

At the same time that the transitional Western genre explored the interior dimensions of characters in implicit and explicit ways, the transitional Western examined the Western genre from multiple perspectives. The transitional Western questioned the traditions and stereotypes of earlier Westerns, examining and invigorating old plots and old heroes with new dramatic approaches.

The sub-genres and themes of the transitional Western are similar to those of the classical Western but the perspectives are different. The rough but obedient outlaw gangs of *Blue Steel* (1934), *Sagebrush Trail* (1933), and *Rio Bravo* (1959) gave way to the individualistic outlaws of *Red Sun* (1971), *The Missouri Breaks* (1976), or *The Long Riders* (1980). The malign villains of *The Plainsman* (1936), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), became the ambiguous and occasionally charming anti-heroes of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), or Steve McQueen's portrayal of *Tom Horn* (1980). Transitional Westerns also featured lovable outlaws, such as Paul Newman and Robert Redford in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), or Harrison Ford as Tommy Lillard in *The Frisco Kid* (1979).

Black and Indian heroes appeared in transitional Westerns. Blacks appeared in comic Westerns such as *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and in serious Westerns such as *Silverado* (1985). Indians became central figures in such major films as *Buffalo Bill and the Indians* (1976), or *Little Big Man* (1970), or *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976). More important, Indian actors played major roles as Indian characters in some of these movies.

Transitional Westerns examined such deep and difficult issues as violence and its consequences in new and painful ways in such films as *Major Dundee* (1965), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), or *The Professionals* (1966). They also examined the relationship between justice and violence linked to the use and misuse of the law in films such as *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *Joe Kidd* (1972), or *Silverado* (1985).

Because these films challenged earlier conventions, some critics described these as "revisionist" Westerns. They were called revisionist because they invited viewers to revise their understanding and expectations of the Western genre, to revise their views of the Western movie as a cinematic medium, and to revise the stereotyped history of the American West as earlier Westerns portrayed it. These movies were not revisionist at all. The term "revisionism" is politically charged, suggesting a step backwards. Transitional Westerns moved forward by challenging the stereotyped orthodoxy of B Westerns. The transitional Western called for a reasonable representation of history, in contrast to the inaccurate history and thin characters of the B Western. Most important, transitional Westerns challenged a stereotype that suited films made for children, rather than classical Westerns made for adults.

Classical Westerns responded to and fulfilled genre types. Most works of art do this, and the best Westerns were works of art rather than stereotypical mass productions. When new forms of the novel replace older forms, literary critics do not describe them as revisionist novels. No one describes the transition from nineteenth century popular poetry to the muscular, intellectual poetry of the twentieth century as revisionist. We speak of evolving and developing art forms, and the transitional Western is an important stage in the development of the Western movie.

These transitions began to influence central figures in the genre, and John Wayne took a transitional role in his final movie, *The Shootist*, a 1976 classic by Don Siegel. Wayne plays the role of John Bernard Books, an aging gunfighter dying of cancer. The movie opens with a voice-over narrating incidents from Books's fictional life, illustrating the narration with footage from Wayne's own earlier movies. In *The Shootist*, Books looks back on his life and the choices he faced in a growing and often-violent land. He discusses these issues with Lauren Bacall in the role of Bond Rogers, a widow and the proprietor of his boarding house. Books acts as a mentor to the widow's son Gillom, played by Ron Howard. Books faces death with dignity, neither celebrating his history nor denying the hard realities of his life as a lawman and gunfighter.

Positioned as a realistic gunman, Books despises false heroics. When Gillom asks Books for a shooting lesson, he explains that successful gunplay requires keeping a cool head to seek accuracy rather than speed. Most important, he says, "A man's got to be willing," adding in response to Gillom's questions, "Most men aren't willing."

Another transitional Western emphasized the difference between a cool head and speed. *Lawman* (1971) stars Burt Lancaster as Marshal Jerrod Maddox and Robert Ryan as Marshal Cotton Ryan. Ryan stops a fast young gunman who tries to provoke Maddox into a fight. When Ryan tells the youngster that he stopped him to save his life, the gunman says, "But I'm faster than he is." "You may be faster," Ryan answers, "but as sure as I stand here he'll kill you."

These lessons appear in *Unforgiven* when Little Bill Dagget talks about gun play with W. W. Beauchamp.

Transitional Westerns also appeared on television. Three Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s can be classified as transitional. One explored the themes of the gunfighter's life. This was *The Guns of Will Sonnet* (1967-1969).⁵⁷

Two other transitional Westerns represented a broad range of values. *Bonanza* (1959-1973) was a family drama. It featured conflicts and occasional gunfights, but the most significant aspect of this long-lasting television series was family interaction and interpersonal communication. *Bonanza* began just at the dawn of the transitional Western, making the transition to achieve unique stature among western programs. After the show ended its astonishing run, *Bonanza* co-star Michael Landon created a show of his own, the pioneer Western, *Little House on the Prairie* (1974-1984). Based on the actual memoirs of Laura Ingalls Wilder, the show depicted pioneer life on the prairies in the 1870s and 1880s. Violence and gunplay were nearly non-existent in a show that focused on struggles with farm life and nosy neighbors, making bank payments and earning an extra bit of egg money for a special birthday present.

The transitional Western examined old themes and developed new themes that would look at the Western frontier in a deeper way than earlier Westerns had done. Some of these themes appeared in classical Westerns, much like plots and characters. These themes, plots, and characters would return yet again in the new Western, deeper and richer after working through the challenge and resistance of the transitional Western.

⁵⁷ The show was a quirky family drama with Walter Brennan playing grandfather Will Sonnet and Dack Rambo playing his grandson Jeff. Together, they rode through the West, seeking renowned gunman James Sonnet, son to Will son and father to Jeff. Despite his age, Will is the finest gunman alive, he avoids gunplay whenever possible – using the shrewd intelligence of a retired Army scout to work around trouble or to win without fighting. When he does fight, he is smooth and thoughtful rather than fast. He fights as Maddox or Daggett do, avoiding the quick-draw dramatics of earlier Westerns.

One form of resistance was the difficulty of making Western movies when many had declared the genre dead. Another was the skeptical quality of transitional Westerns. Few transitional Westerns were revisionist – a stereotyped and overused term. Nevertheless, transitional Westerns did challenge the genre in surprising and effective ways. This would make a return to the Western genre both difficult and significant.

The classical Western era lasted roughly 60 years, from the first Western of 1903 to the first film of Leone's *Dollars* trilogy in 1964. It lasted 70 years, counting from the 1894 film in which Buffalo Bill Cody plays himself. The transitional Western era lasted roughly half as long, from the 1960s to *Unforgiven* in 1992.

The dividing line between the transitional Western and the new Western involves both a moment in time and a cinematic approach. While some see Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) as the turning point to a new Western, I believe it to be a Western of the transitional era. Despite the fact that this movie addresses important themes of war and love, justice and genocide, the treatment is romantic rather than realistic. In a sense, this movie borders on kitsch as Milan Kundera defines the term, a mental retreat from the sometimes brutal and meaningless nature of reality into the sweet and harmless grandeur of our own dreamy interpretation of the world.⁵⁸

The new Western begins with *Unforgiven*. This movie addresses many central themes of the Western film with a new eye. More radical still, *Unforgiven* seems to observe rather than editorialize. A second factor makes *Unforgiven* the turning point in the development of the new Western. It is director Clint Eastwood's ability to bring so many themes into play, allowing the viewer to examine the West, society, the characters and their world from multiple and even from conflicting viewpoints. It reveals a vision of the West in all its complexity and ambiguity, a vision of human nature with its mutable and problematic qualities.

Unforgiven also opens an era of ambiguous and mutable heroes. In a sense, *Unforgiven* has three – possibly even four – lead roles, each played by a character actor of lead stature. Between them, they create a world of unparalleled dramatic depth and complexity. A deep perspective made *Unforgiven* a radical new kind of Western, not a "Western movie," but a drama that took the form of a Western. This could only be a Western story, yet it is primarily a drama. In much the same sense, Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* could only be set in ancient Greece, but *Oedipus* is a tragic play first and only a classical Greek drama second.

The role and relationship of lead characters is an important change that appears in the new Western. Where classical Westerns had heroes and sidekicks, new Westerns often have two, even three heroes, and the heroes may be female, black, or Indian.

The Doc Holliday character played by Val Kilmer in *Tombstone* (1993) and the Doc Holliday played by Dennis Quaid in *Wyatt Earp* (1994) function this way. So do the estranged and reunited father and daughter of *The Missing* (2003), with Tommy Lee Jones as Indian scout and adopted tribesman Samuel Jones and Cate Blanchett as frontier medicine woman Maggie Gilkeson. In many films, characters reveal and speak about their emotions and their feelings, openly stating inner truths and insecurities in ways that would not have been possible in earlier Westerns, including most Westerns in the transitional era.

⁵⁸ See Rolness, Kjetil. 2007. "På kitschens vinger fra Slottet til Ekeberg." *Dagbladet*, lørdag 4 august 2007, p. 4.

Strong female heroes become increasingly typical. *Bad Girls* (1994) features four female leads, Madeleine Stowe, Mary Stuart Masterson, Andie MacDowell, and Drew Barrymore. *The Quick and the Dead* (1995) features Sharon Stone against three strong male leads, Gene Hackman, Russell Crowe, and Leonardo DiCaprio. One could argue here that Hackman and Crowe are more central to the plot than DiCaprio is, but the difference is minor and the attention to developing multiple lead roles is clear.

The Last of the Mohicans (1992) appeared right at the juncture between transitional Westerns and new Westerns, and it showed attributes of the new Western with Indian heroes played by Indian actors, a strong lead actress in Madeleine Stowe, and a robust Indian villain played by Wes Studi. Studi would return to play the title role in the 1993 *Geronimo*, the first Western to star an Indian in the lead role of an Indian hero.

It is difficult to point to one single quality that defines the shift to new Western, but the new Western takes on a key dimension. It is now possible to make a movie in the Western genre without shaping adverse expectations among audience or critics.

Justice, friendship, and motion return in the new Western, along with such themes as open land and the struggle to build communities in the wilderness, all set against the background of love, identity, and fate. These themes animate James Fenimore Cooper's Western novels. These themes return as stereotype in dime novels and as performance in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. They appear in classic Westerns and in the era of transition. They appear again in the new Western.

2.5 The New Western: the Development of Character

As a film genre, Westerns date back to the earliest days of the film industry. The first true Western was *The Great Train Robbery*, released in 1903.⁵⁹ From the first, films repeated the twinned oppositions of such earlier Western genres as the sermon, the novel, the dime novel, and the Wild West Show.

Susan Hayward describes these paired opposites as a contrast between two factors, civilization on one side, and open range or untouched wilderness on the other. Addressing the ethical dimension of the contrast, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson describe "the central theme of the genre ... [as] ... the conflict between civilized order and the lawless frontier."⁶⁰

These differing descriptions capture two aspects of the dialectal dimension of the Western genre. While civilization represents growth and progress, it also represents captivity and limits. The west represents lawlessness and danger and the one hand, and it represents freedom and open possibilities on the other.

The West occupies a doubled symbolism in the Western genre. The West is the stage on which the paired opposites play out these dialectical contrasts. Moreover, the West itself serves as a symbol for the spirit of wilderness and natural law that stands over against the East as the symbol of cultivated land and refined culture.

⁵⁹ Hayward, Susan. 2006. *Cinema Studies. The Key Concepts*. ("Westerns.") London and New York: Routledge, p. 497.

⁶⁰ Hayward. *Cinema Studies*, p. 498; Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson. 2001. *Film Art. An Introduction*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Over the century that separates *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) from *Open Range* (2003), the Western genre developed and relied on key themes and oppositions that play against each other in dialectical encounters. This dialectical energy extends to genre-crossing Westerns. Two recent examples are *Shanghai Noon* (2000) and *Shanghai Knights* (2003), Western action martial arts comedies starring Owen Wilson and Jackie Chan. Another genre-crossing Western is Ang Lee's Academy Award-winning drama, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), a homosexual love story set against the vast landscape of the West and the narrow social frame of contemporary Western America.

Whether crossing genres or working in a direct Western tradition, the changing nature and role of the lead actors reveal key facets of the new Western. A selection of contemporary heroes and anti-heroes demonstrates an enduring pattern through western movies. It also clarifies the changes that distinguish the contemporary Western from two kinds of older Westerns.

Sergio Leone's spaghetti Western genre seemed to divide the first two eras of Western movies by shaping the complex, existential character of the Man with No Name. Clint Eastwood made the role his own by bringing a revolutionary mix of psychological depth and surface realism to the Western genre.

While earlier classical Westerns occasionally probed issues of personal pain and individual psychology, Eastwood brought the power of individual psychology to a new level. He uses his nameless hero as an everyman who speaks for all men much as the Everyman of Medieval mystery plays spoke for all men.⁶¹

In the genre labeled the spaghetti Western, Leone's continental approach released the existential power of the Western as an arena of psychological drama, giving free rein to anxiety. He developed the bad characters in his films as well as the good ones. In doing so, Leone created a complex series of layered personality dimensions, transforming the anti-hero into a new kind of Western hero suited to the modern sensibility, deeper and more complex than the simple, direct heroes of the classical Western. This new hero and his character define the transitional Western, separating it from the classical Western of earlier films.

Some classical Westerns hinted at the possibility of character and depth. Consider, for example, the psychological and cultural forces in John Sturges's *Magnificent Seven* (1960). The heroic character of Chris (played by Yul Brynner), and the reflective, ironic character of Vin (Steve McQueen) examine existential problems in a running series of conversations that deepens character while advancing the plot. The long conversation punctuates the action and pushes the movie forward as Chris and Vin talk with each other, with their friends, with the peasants, with The Old Man (Vladimir Sokoloff) and even with bandit chief Calvera (Eli Wallach).

⁶¹ See: A. C. Cawley. 1993. *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*. London: Phoenix. For an overview of the role of mystery plays in the life of the ordinary man or woman of the Middle Ages, see Rosemary Woolf's 1972 book, *English Mystery Plays*, London: Routledge. This project is not the place for a comparative analysis of the Western and the Mystery Play in the respective life worlds of their viewers, but the rich potential for parallels invites further inquiry.

Other characters demonstrate human depth and fallibility through struggles with self and identity uncommon to the laconic, unreflective heroes of earlier Westerns. Lee (Robert Vaughan) is a gunfighter struggling to overcome what he believes to be his own cowardice. Harry Luck (Brad Dexter) is a good man who cannot accept his own altruism, hiding behind a mask of cynical intentions. Bernardo O'Reilly (Charles Bronson) is a half-Mexican, half-Irish gunfighter who is down on his luck. Britt (James Coburn) is a skilled fighter who joins the heroes simply for the challenge of a good fight.

The Magnificent Seven crosses genres in several explicit and implicit ways. As a Western remake of Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954), it is implicitly an immigrant culture Western. This is a story of American gunmen hired to work in Mexico, a Western about emigrants who work in a culture both immigrant and foreign, depending on how one understands the culture of the US-Mexico border region. The samurai remake has an interesting parallel in Leone's archetypal *Dollars* trilogy. The first film in the trilogy, *Fistful of Dollars*, is a remake of Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* (1961).⁶²

Comparing the heroes of *The Magnificent Seven* to earlier troubled heroes suggests significant differences. The first, and most important, difference is that they talk about their inner world of experiences and feelings. Even though we meet conflicted or troubled heroes in earlier movies, their inner conflicts remain hidden behind the stoic image of the classic western. The strong, silent hero is the typical role that John Wayne embodies in John Ford's Westerns. This is especially notable in Ford's cavalry trilogy: *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950). The John Wayne heroes in later Ford Westerns were more open about their repressed conflicts, including the roles of Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1959), John Marlowe in *The Horse Soldiers* (1959), and especially Tom Doniphon in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962).

⁶² The plot of *Yojimbo* returns again in Walter Hill's 1996 remake titled *Last Man Standing*. Bruce Willis stars as John Smith, another kind of Man with No Name. John Smith is the archetypal anonymous name that criminals on the run supposedly use when they sign hotel registers. *Last Man Standing* is set in the West, but this setting is a prohibition era ghost town controlled by rival Irish and Italian mobs.

Victor Mature was the earliest of Ford's visibly troubled heroes, developing a new kind of Western personality well before John Wayne's heroes began to suggest an inner life. Mature played Doc Holliday⁶³ in *My Darling Clementine* (1956) opposite Henry Fonda's straightforward Wyatt Earp.⁶⁴

The gradual transformation of the Doc Holliday character demonstrates the visible difference between the old Western heroes and those of the newer Western and today's Western. Perhaps the fact that Holliday suffered from tuberculosis permitted Ford to depict him as a Romantic, quasi-Byronic figure, but neither Mature nor Kirk Douglas in John Sturges's *Gunfight at the O K Corral* (1957) explored the psychological potential of the character they played.

⁶³ Doc Holliday (1852-1887) was an historical figure who became a Western legend through his relationships with such famous lawmen as Wyatt Earp and Bat Masterson, his life in Dodge City and Tombstone, and his participation in the gunfight at the OK Corral. As commonly happens with legends, the Holliday legend began with historical facts, while different authors changed and embellished them to suit the interests and purposes of each tale. Born in Georgia, Holliday studied dentistry in Pennsylvania, practicing briefly before taking up his career as a gambler and gunman. For a serious biography of Doc Holliday, read: Myers, John Myers. 1973. *Doc Holliday*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. For a discussion of how Holliday has been represented and misrepresented on film, read: Farragher, John Mack. 1995. "The Tale of Wyatt Earp." *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. Mark C. Carnes, editor. New York: Owl Books, pp. 154-161. There have been several dozen films in which the Holliday character plays a central role, including: *Doc*, 1971, directed by Frank Perry; *Frontier Marshal*, 1939, Allan Dwan; *Hour of the Gun*, 1967, directed by John Sturges; *Law for Tombstone*, 1937, directed by W. B. Eason and Buck Jones; *The Gunfight at the O K Corral*, 1957, directed by John Sturges; *Masterson of Kansas*, 1954, directed by William Castle; *My Darling Clementine*, 1946, directed by John Ford; *The Outlaw*, 1943, directed by Howard Hughes; *Stagecoach*, 1986, directed by Ted Post; *Tombstone*, 1993, directed by George Cosmatos; *Tombstone: the Town to Tough to Die*, 1942, directed by William C. McGann; *Wyatt Earp*, 1994, directed by Lawrence Kasdan; *Wyatt Earp: Return to Tombstone*, 1994, directed by Paul Landres and Frank McDonald. In addition, the Holliday character appears in hundreds of television episodes and in the Western fantasy film, *Purgatory*, 1999, directed by Uri Edel.

⁶⁴ Much like his friend Doc Holliday, Wyatt Earp lived a real life of successes and failures along with his life of legend. The legend has been built and rebuilt to suit the purposes of authors and directors needing a character that could plausibly represent the symbolic values attached to a man who variously worked as a constable, sheriff and marshal, bounty hunter, buffalo hunter, miner and mine owner, hotel proprietor, bartender, and an eponymous Western hero. Earp's central role in the gunfight at the O. K. Corral, and his party in cleaning up Dodge City invested his name with the grandest attributes of the dime novel era. An interesting scholarly book tells the story of the historical Wyatt Earp: Tefertiller, Casey. 1997. *Wyatt Earp: the Life Behind the Legend*. New York: Wiley. An equally interesting book recounts the myths and legends: Barra, Allan. 1999. *Inventing Wyatt Earp. His Life and Many Legends*. New York: Carroll and Graf. A useful essay examines the ways in which films have used and abused Earp and his history: Farragher, John Mack. 1995. "The Tale of Wyatt Earp." *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. Mark C. Carnes, editor. New York: Owl Books, pp. 154-161. The Earp character appears in numerous films, including: *Alias Jesse James*, 1959, directed by Norman Z. McLeod; *Badman's Country*, 1958, directed by Fred F. Sears; *Doc*, 1971, directed by Frank Perry; *Frontier Marshal*, 1939, directed by Allan Dwan; *Gun Belt*, 1953, directed by Ray Nazarro; *The Gunfight at the O K Corral*, 1957, directed by John Sturges; *Hour of the Gun*, 1967, directed by John Sturges; *I Married Wyatt Earp*, 1983, directed by Michael O'Herlihy; *Law for Tombstone*, 1937, directed by W. B. Eason and Buck Jones; *Masterson of Kansas*, 1954, directed by William Castle; *My Darling Clementine*, 1946, directed by John Ford; *Horse Opera*, 1993, directed by Bob Baldwin; *Outlaws is Coming*, 1963, directed by Norman Maurer; *Sunset*, 1988, directed by Blake Edwards; *Tombstone*, 1993, directed by George Cosmatos; *Tombstone: the Town to Tough to Die*, 1942, directed by William C. McGann; *Wichita*, 1955, directed by Jacques Tourneur; *Winchester '73*, 1950, directed by Anthony Mann; *Wyatt Earp*, 1994, directed by Lawrence Kasdan; *Wyatt Earp: Return to Tombstone*, 1994, directed by Paul Landres and Frank McDonald. Some of these films do not pretend the slightest connection to the actual Wyatt Earp. Instead, they use his name for its symbolic or talismanic value. It is in this sense that Earp appears as a marshal and marksmanship competition judge in Anthon Mann's (1950) *Winchester '73*, or similar cameo appearances. While many movies attempt a loose representation of Earp based vaguely on the facts of his life, others simply use Earp's name to represent the figure of a legendary lawman and gunfighter in plots that have nothing to do with anything he did. For example, *Gun Belt* (1953) is a tacky melodrama in which Earp helps a reformed young gunfighter trying to go straight. *Badman's Country* (1958) features an implausible story in which Pat Garrett summons Bat Masterson and Wyatt Earp to Abilene, Kansas, to head off a bank robbery by Butch Cassidy's gang. Other movies do not even pretend to reality. These include such comedies as *Alias Jesse James* (1959), *Horse Opera* (1993), and *Outlaws is Coming* (1963). The high point in this strange progression must surely be *Sunset*, a 1988 multi-genre film. *Sunset* was an action-comedy-crime-thriller-Western movie, starring action hero Bruce Willis as Hollywood Western star Tom Mix, and the durable Western star James Garner as Wyatt Earp. The plot of the movie has the two heroes teaming up to solve a murder. Willis plays Tom Mix, the legendary star of many early Westerns and a friend of the real Wyatt Earp. Garner, in addition to many lively Western roles, also played Bret Maverick, the hero of the famous television Western series, *Maverick* (1957-1962). In the 1994 movie remake of *Maverick*, Garner played Maverick's father while Mel Gibson played Bret Maverick. Jodie Foster starred as the female love interest in a genre-blending Western action comedy.

In the “new Western” era, Holliday finally emerged as a full character with Val Kilmer’s portrayal of Doc Holliday in John Cosmatos’s *Tombstone* (1993). Dennis Quaid’s Doc Holliday in Lawrence Kasdan’s *Wyatt Earp* (1994) was equally rich.

The Doc Holliday roles of the 1990s are so powerful that it is possible to see either Doc Holliday as a more important role than the lead role of Wyatt Earp played by Kurt Russell or Kevin Costner. This is especially the case for *Tombstone*. Limiting the action of this movie to Wyatt Earp’s life in *Tombstone* emphasizes his relationship with Holliday and the meaning of Holliday’s support in contrast with the broader biographical scope of *Wyatt Earp*.

The evolution of a character across several relatively similar films shows the differences between older, straightforward heroes of the classical Western, and the more ambiguous, complex heroes of the transitional Western and the new Western. The same kind of progression is visible in the differences between the Jesse James figures of early Westerns and the more recent representation of the Jesse James character.

Tyrone Powers’s lead role in *Jesse James* (1939) by Henry King, or Robert Wagner’s role in *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957) by Nichols Ray is the kind of role, typical of the classical Western. The difference can be seen clearly against the deeper Jesse James of James Keach in Walter Hill’s transitional Western, *The Long Riders* (1980). The role takes on nearly tragic dimensions in the new Western with Rob Lowe’s deeply troubled character in *Frank and Jesse* (1994) by Robert Boris.

By the new Western of 1994, Jesse James is no longer the young, hell-for-leather bandit of earlier movies. He is now the conflicted veteran of the American Civil War. Lowe portrays a Jesse James emotionally and physically scarred by history. When the historical Jesse James was sixteen, Union troops raided his family’s farm, beating him brutally and attempting to hang his stepfather. At seventeen, he joined a troop of border raiders under Bloody Bill Anderson.⁶⁵ In the 1994 *Frank and Jesse*, Bill Paxton portrays Jesse’s brother, Frank. In one crucial scene, Frank offers a psychological explanation for Jesse’s violent heroism, rooting it in the trauma of a war that he was old enough to fight but too young to understand. In Frank’s view, participating in the dark deeds of Anderson’s raiders emotionally crippled Jesse, making him as much an anti-hero as a hero.⁶⁶

We meet equally troubled heroes in Clint Eastwood’s three epic Westerns, *The Outlaw Josie Wales* (1976), *Pale Rider* (1985) and *Unforgiven* (1992). The first two are transitional Westerns.

⁶⁵ Anderson was an officer in William Clark Quantrill’s infamous guerrilla troop. Ang Lee used the deeds of this unit in his 1999 movie, *Ride with the Devil*

⁶⁶ For a careful biography of Jesse James and the myths surrounding his career, see: Settle, William A., Jr. 1977. *Jesse James Was His Name; or, Fact and Fiction concerning the Careers of the Notorious James Brothers of Missouri*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. For a discussion of the social bandit legend of the American West, see: White, Richard. 1981. “Outlaw Gangs of the Middle Border: American Social Bandits.” *The Western Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Oct., 1981), pp. 387-408. Historical context accounted for the popular reception of the Jesse James legend. Following the war, the political situation in Missouri made it difficult for former confederates to live peacefully. Carpetbaggers and railroad interests subjected Confederate veterans and their families to the unlawful confiscation of the farms and property. By robbing railroads and banks, Jesse James became an outlaw that sympathetic newspapers described as an American Robin Hood, and a folk hero for many.

The fictional Josie Wales begins his career as a confederate soldier seeking revenge on Union cavalry irregulars who kill his wife and son while raiding his Missouri farm, the kind of raid that launched Jesse James's violent career. In *Pale Rider*, Eastwood plays The Preacher, a nameless hero who saves an innocent mining community from a predatory mining magnate who hires a mercenary marshal to clear independent miners off their legal claims. In this movie, The Preacher seems to be the returned spirit of a decent sheriff murdered by the gunman-marshal, but the movie never discloses this by more than implication.⁶⁷

The hero of Eastwood's *Unforgiven* is Will Munny. Munny reveals every scar and dilemma possible to a gunfighter and criminal who has revised his life to become an "ordinary fellow." Eastwood portrays the fictional character of Munny as a real person, and the emotional and psychological realism of the character represents a decisive shift.

Eastwood's early portrayals of The Man with No Name suggested psychological depth and conflict in laconic silence. Actor Donald Sutherland compared Eastwood's acting style with the lean, spare sculpture of Alberto Giacometti, a sculptor whose work represented the existential themes of post-War European art.⁶⁸ He maintained this pared-down, laconic style in the heroes of his own Malpaso films, *Hang 'Em High* (1968), *High Plains Drifter* (1973), and *Joe Kidd* (1972), as well as in *Josey Wales* and *Pale Rider*. Nevertheless, the laconic style gave way to hints of emotional depth in *Josey Wales*. He demonstrates a deep sense of human understanding in the role of *Pale Rider*'s Preacher. Here, he portrayed a man of psychological and social insight. While preaching solidarity to the miners and giving pastoral counseling to a young girl and an earnest miner, he still knew how to shoot when the situation required action.

Pale Rider foreshadowed the new Western era in much the same way that *The Magnificent Seven* ushered in the change that Leone's Westerns symbolized. In *Pale Rider*, Eastwood reached toward a vision of the West that he developed in *Unforgiven*. The era of the new Western begins with *Unforgiven*.

If we look at the changing nature of how films represent heroism and villainy, *Unforgiven* was a turning point. Complex themes and heroes appeared before *Unforgiven*, but they appeared in a slowly evolving series of nuances and shades. Before *Unforgiven*, the shifting and implicit growth toward psychological depth and realism merged with the iconic form of the Western to shape a hybrid art.

The complex heroes and villains of *Unforgiven* changed this. The screen portrayals of Eastwood's Will Munny, Morgan Freeman's Ned Logan, Richard Harris's English Bob, and Gene Hackman's astonishing Little Bill Daggett meant that Western heroes and villains could never be what they had been before. In giving new life to the Western genre with *Unforgiven*, Eastwood made it impossible to make the older type of Western without falling into pastiche, cliché, or comedy.

⁶⁷ The conflict between a marshal who saves his town and cowardly townsmen who refuse to stand by him is the theme of *High Noon* (1952), starring Gary Cooper as Marshal Will Kane. This theme appears yet again in *Gunfighter's Moon*, a 1995 Western by Larry Ferguson. The movie stars Lance Henriksen as Frank Morgan, a legendary shootist who rescues the storekeeper and temporary sheriff of a small town about to be attacked by bandits bent on revenge. A decade before *Pale Rider*, Eastwood played the returned spirit of another murdered sheriff in the classical Western, *High Plains Drifter* (1973). Returning to the town that allowed his murder, yet another Man with No Name brings a cynical reign of terror with him to show the townsmen for the cowards and scoundrels that they are. The drifter takes vengeance on an entire small-town society as much as on the murderers

⁶⁸ Donald Sutherland describes Eastwood's acting in the documentary film *Clint Eastwood: Out of the Shadows* (2000).

Unforgiven raised the Western to the level of an art form, an art form of realism and symbolism. The realistic art form is anchored in nature; the symbolic art form portrays human beings against the larger background of the land.

This is different to the art of the European art film. The European art film takes place against the background of social reality, framed by the societies and cultures that human beings build. The Western takes place against the background of nature. This reality existed before the first human beings crossed the Siberian land bridge to the new world, and long before the arrival of European settlers. Towns usually appear as small towns or cow towns in a natural setting. If cities appear, they are usually the starting point or ending point of an adventure or a cattle drive, or else they appear in deliberate counterpoint to the West, as when William Cody visits Washington and New York in *Buffalo Bill* (1944).⁶⁹

The new Western offers rich, complex heroes. This form of heroism began with Kurosawa's samurai warriors, reaching the West via Leone's films and Eastwood's own *Man with No Name*. This art form has a deeper level based on invoking the psychological realism in characters deeper and more complex than the stylized icons of earlier Western films.

⁶⁹ Like many Western movie heroes, the character of Buffalo Bill is based on the historical figure of a well-known Western hero, William F. Cody. Unlike many movie heroes, however, Cody was nearly as large as the legend assigned to him. He was by turns frontier scout, winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor, and participant in the Civil War, Pony Express rider, and buffalo hunter. After he died, he lost his Medal of Honor on a technicality, but the Army later restored it posthumously. He was, at different times, both a friend and an opponent of the Indians. He was an early hero of the first dime novels, and he created the first world-famous Wild West Show. According to Larry McMurtry, Cody personified and virtually created the legend of the West as we know it today. Cody's Wild West show played a central role in the way we understand cowboys and cavalry, settlers and Indians, how they lived and what they meant to the world. (McMurtry is himself a well known author and historian of the West. He is also a best-selling novelist and screenwriter. His novel *Lonesome Dove* (1985) won the 1986 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, and the 1989 movie *Lonesome Dove* starring Robert Duvall and Tommy Lee Jones was acclaimed by many as one of the best Western movies ever made.) Cody's world travels meant that his representation of the American West shaped the way the world saw the American West as much as it shaped how Americans saw it. A recent biography examines the full scope of Cody's life and deeds and the legends they inspired: Carter, Robert A. 2000. *Buffalo Bill Cody: The Man Behind the Legend*. New York: John Wiley and Sons. For a discussion of what the Cody legend means to the Western genre, see: Tompkins, Jane. 1992. *West of Everything. The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 179-204. Tompkins discusses the real Cody and the symbolic value of his legendary life. See also: McMurtry, Larry. 2005. *The Colonel and Little Missie: Buffalo Bill, Annie Oakley and the Beginnings of Superstardom in America*. New York: Simon and Schuster. The Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming, preserves the memory and the memorabilia of a long, adventurous life. See URL: <http://www.bbhc.org/home/index.cfm> and <http://www.buffalobill.org/history.htm> The character of William F. Cody appears in dozens of movies. Some attempt to tell the story of Cody's life and times, including *Buffalo Bill*, 1944, directed by William A. Wellman; and *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson*, 1976, directed by Robert Altman. Some movies recount specific incidents or adventures in the life of Buffalo Bill, including such movies as *Pony Express*, 1953, directed by Jerry Hopper. Episodes in Buffalo Bill's life appear in many films. Cody was a friend and associate of many Western legends, including Wild Bill Hickock, Calamity Jane, Annie Oakley, Cheyenne War Chief Yellow Hand, Sioux Chief Sitting Bull, and more. This gives him an important role in movies about them and their lives. Some of these movies are reasonable attempts at historical accuracy, while other films are loosely based on history. See: *Annie Oakley*, 1935, directed by George Stevens; *Buffalo Girls*, 1995, directed by Rod Hardy; *Calamity Jane*, 1984, directed by James Goldstone; *The Plainsman*, 1936, directed by Cecil B. DeMille; *The Plainsman*, 1966, David Lowell Rich; and *Wild Bill*, 1995, directed by George Hill. The legendary quality of Cody and his friends made them the stars of dramatic adventures and even musical comedies. Best-known among these is the Broadway musical and three-time movie musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*, filmed in 1950 by director George Sidney, in 1957 by Vincent J. Donehue, and in 1967 by Clark Jones. As with all Western legends, Cody often appears as a character in implausible movies that have nothing to do with the historical reality of his life. These include: *Badman's Country*, 1958, directed by Fred F. Sears; *Flaming Frontiers*, 1938, directed by Alan James and Ray Taylor; *Law of the Golden West*, 1949, directed by Philip Ford; and *The Raiders*, 1963, directed by Herschel Daugherty. Cody's fame was such that many people claimed to be his colleague, partner, or friend. Today, the best known such claimant is the horseman Frank Hopkins, whose exploits gave rise to the 2004 film *Hidalgo*, directed by Joe Johnston and starring Viggo Mortensen. There is no record of Hopkins's involvement with Buffalo Bill, with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, or even with endurance racing. For the fabulous version of Hopkins's exploits, see: URL: <http://www.frankhopkins.com/biography.html> For an historical analysis by the Curator of Western American History at the Buffalo Bill Museum, see: Winchester, Judi A. 2007. "Weaving a Cinematic Web: Hidalgo and the Search for Frank Hopkins." Buffalo Bill Historical Center. Cody, Wyoming: Buffalo Bill Historical Center. URL: <http://www.bbhc.org/bbm/HidalgoInfo.cfm> Altogether, the Cody character appeared in more than forty films. These included several of the very first films recorded by Thomas Edison, as well as two early feature films of the silent era in which Cody played himself, *The Life of Buffalo Bill*, 1912, and *The Indian Wars*, 1913.

Western heroes have always been ambiguous, much as Winthrop's Calvinist New Zion and Emerson's revolutionary individual both figure in the theology of the West. The Western hero may be a cowboy drifter or a sheriff, an outlaw or a schoolteacher, a small farmer staking his claim or a self-made land baron. While Westerns often represent good and evil in stark contrast, the line between heroes and villains may be permeable. Outlaws cross back and forth between the sides of the law to move from bank robber to sheriff – and sometimes back. Today's settler is tomorrow's guerrilla raider, the retired soldier and warrior becomes a farmer or a railroad engineer. In the open spaces of the West, it was possible to find and forge a self, often at the cost of leaving an older self – or selves – behind.

Western heroes often regret the orderly progress of a civilization that consumes the free space of existential action in the open land. This regret reveals the double nature of the hero who brings the law and breaks it at the same time. Many heroes played both roles: lawbreaker and law bringer, both marshal and outlaw. These heroes experienced what Doc Holliday described in Lawrence Kasdan's *Wyatt Earp* (1994) as “the best of both worlds.” In this sense, the West became a perfect liminal zone between worlds.

The energy of the Western thrives in the space of conflict and reversal. The essential qualities of this genre began in the literature of the Puritan dissenters and their New England descendents. However, Western movies took three turns, one after the next. If the Western movie began as a continuation of dime novels and Wild West shows, it became something new and miraculous. It constitutes an authentic genre, generic in the way that Mystery Plays and miracle plays were generic. The new Western is as deep and resonant at its best as the tragic drama linking human greatness to the weakness that makes human greatness visible. Much as Prospero's Western land foreshadowed the first Western genre, the rough, silent heroes of the classical Western paved the way for the women and men of today's genre:

“Nothing ... that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.”

-- *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2, Lines 402-4

3 Background and Synopsis

Unforgiven began as the first film script of David Webb Peoples. Originally written in 1976, Clint Eastwood acquired the rights from Francis Ford Coppola in 1983. Eastwood held on to the script for several years. He waited until he felt ready to produce and direct it, speaking of it as a reward for his older years: "It was something I could sit on and bank on and I kind of hung on to it like a nice little gold watch. It was a nice feeling to know that I had it back there."⁷⁰

Bird and *White Hunter, Black Heart* – Eastwood's two films before *Unforgiven* – 'failed to find an audience.'⁷¹ He made *Unforgiven* at a risky time in his career. Despite his recent low points, *Unforgiven* became a huge commercial success. Then, it won four Academy Awards, for Gene Hackman as Best Actor in a Supporting Role, Clint Eastwood as Best Director, Joel Cox for Best Film Editing, and Clint Eastwood for Best Picture. It was also nominated for five more awards, including Eastwood again as Best Actor in a Leading Role, and for Best Art Direction-Set Decoration, Best Cinematography, Best Sound, and Best Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen. It also won numerous awards around the world.

To bring the era to life, Eastwood built the town of Big Whiskey in a remote location on a ranch in Alberta, Canada, sixty miles from the nearest major city. Unlike many films, no one was permitted to bring his or her family, and members of cast and crew stayed in rural motels near the ranch. To create and maintain a feeling of authenticity on the set, crewmembers had to walk or ride in on horseback.⁷²

The movie focuses on three central issues: a plot, a conflict between characters, and the world in which they meet.

Eastwood builds two trajectories. The first begins in Big Whiskey, Wyoming, when a cowboy mutilates a prostitute in a terrible act of unwarranted violence. The sheriff, Little Bill Daggett, refuses to punish the cowboy and his innocent friend, treating the crime as a property violation against the owner of the whorehouse rather than a crime against the person of the prostitute. Her fellow prostitutes announce a bounty as reward for anyone who will shoot the cowboys down in vengeance. Thus begins the film.

The second trajectory begins on the farm of William Munny, once a feared outlaw and gunman. Munny has changed his ways, becoming a sober, virtuous farmer under the influence of his late wife. The Scholefield Kid, the nephew of a former member of Munny's old gang, asks Munny to join an effort to kill the cowboys and collect the reward. At first, Munny refuses, but with his sick hogs dying and his poverty deepening, he decides that the bounty will give him and his children a new chance in life. This decision is fraught with conflict, since Munny does not want to return to his old lifestyle, speaking constantly of his past to add, "I'm not like that any more." Nevertheless, he asks his old partner Ned Logan to join him, and they set off to seek the bounty.

⁷⁰ Clint Eastwood, quoted in Richard Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood. A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 452.

⁷¹ Gallafent, Edward, 1994. *Clint Eastwood. Actor and Director*. London: Studio Vista.

⁷² Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*, p. 453-454.

The initial trajectory is dark, difficult, and tense. It begins with the violent deeds of the cowboy, and it builds on and embraces the repressed and explosive violence of sheriff Little Bill Daggett. The film is fraught with violence throughout, punctuated by a rough kind of frontier humor that builds its laughter on an ironic perception of the violence it relieves. Daggett uses this violence to shape the community of Big Whiskey as much as he directs it toward strangers and criminals, creating and preserving order with the same violent means.

The second trajectory begins slowly, developing and growing as Munny, Ned, and the Kid ride across the prairies while Munny wrestles with his past and his perception of himself. These trajectories meet when Munny and his companions reach Big Whiskey.

Throughout the movie, the two narratives raise questions about guilt, honor, and dignity, change, forgiveness and redemption. The fatal convergence of these twin trajectories challenges the meaning of life and death.

When the meeting takes place, it is colored by uncontrolled violence and torture. The theme of this encounter is dialectic between civilization and nature, the cruel deeds of civilized human beings and the harsh but spiritual peace of the natural world. The encounter is framed in space as well as in time. Big Whiskey sits in the large, pristine landscape of modern Alberta, envisioned as 19th century Wyoming. Will Munny's meeting with Little Bill Daggett is framed on one side by Munny's ride across the plains with Ned and the Kid, and framed on the other by a poignant farewell visit to his wife's grave on the Nebraska plains.

4. Reading *Unforgiven*

4.1 The Critics

When Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* appeared in 1992, critics and writers hailed it as a "revisionist Western." According to Bernard Weinraub of the *New York Times*, even Eastwood himself saw it this way.⁷³

On first reading, many reviewers saw *Unforgiven* as Eastwood's critical reflection on his earlier Westerns and a condemnation of the genre as a whole. They described it as "a Western without good guys"⁷⁴ Another wrote, "Every single male in the movie is bad, with one exception," and ended his review by writing, "The classic western ... knew that there was good and there was bad and that good should be the winner. *Unforgiven* is the perfect modern cultural artifact. It recognizes every newly perceived evil without recognizing any good, new or old."⁷⁵ One great virtue of the movie, wrote Richard Grenier, was that it revealed famous Western heroes – outlaws and lawmen alike – as "very, very bad men."⁷⁶

Even *Time Magazine*'s Richard Corliss saw it as a "majestic, misanthropic western," labeling Eastwood's William Munny the "King Lear of cowboys."⁷⁷

They were partly right, but in great part wrong. This includes those few critics who disagreed with the others, seeing *Unforgiven* as a violent, flawed film that maintained the tradition of the Western rather than criticizing or revising it,⁷⁸ and even as a confused film that tries to do everything while achieving nearly nothing.⁷⁹ Most reviews read the surface of *Unforgiven* as a rejection of Westerns and of much that came before in Eastwood's work.⁸⁰ What was true was that with this movie, Eastwood achieved new standing in the film industry as an actor and director who could "redefine himself and his genre."⁸¹

⁷³ Weinraub, Bernard. 1992. "Eastwood In Another Change Of Pace." *New York Times*, August 6, 1992. New York Times Archive Story. URL: <http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=F10613FE39580C758CDDA10894DA494D81> Date accessed 2007 March 23.

⁷⁴ Canby, Vincent. 1992. "Review/Film: *Unforgiven*; A Western Without Good Guys." *New York Times*, August 7, 1992. New York Times Archive Story. URL: <http://movies2.nytimes.com/mem/movies/review.html?res=9E0CE7DB103EF934A3575BC0A964958260> Date accessed 2007 March 23.

⁷⁵ Curtis, Gregory. 1992. "Why *Unforgiven*?" *Texas Monthly*, September.

⁷⁶ Grenier, Richard. 1994. "Clint Eastwood Goes PC." *Commentary*. March 1994.

⁷⁷ Corliss, Richard. 1992. "The Last Roundup" *Time*, August 10.

⁷⁸ Kauffmann, Stanley. 1992. "Stanley Kauffmann on Films: Clint and Gore." *The New Republic*, October 1992.

⁷⁹ Simon, John. 1992. "*Unforgiven*? For What? By Whom?" *National Review*, September 14, 1992.

⁸⁰ Blake, Richard. 1992. "Absolved. *Unforgiven* directed and produced by Clint Eastwood." *America. The National Catholic Weekly*. September 12, 1992, p. 144; Bromwich, David. 1993. "Predators and Pretenders." *The New Leader*, June 14-28, 1993.

⁸¹ Witteman, Paul A. 1993. "Go Ahead, Make My Career." *Time*, April 5.

Many reviewers predictably linked the repentant killer William Munny with Eastwood's iconic portrayal of The Man Without a Name in Sergio Leone's trilogy, describing *Unforgiven* as a movie that returned to the past to demonstrate its failings. David Breskin saw beyond the idea of revisionism to see *Unforgiven* in continuity with Eastwood's own classic Westerns from Malpasio Productions.

"*High Plains Drifter* (1973), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) and *Pale Rider* (1985)," Breskin writes, "are Eastwood's grand triptych of westerns; *Unforgiven* is the frame that changes how we view them. A polished piece of rawhide revisionism, it's antiromantic, antiheroic, and antiviolent. It's Eastwood's first dance with myth where the music's not cartoonish: It's mature, and now, at sixty-two, so is he. If *Unforgiven* is not his last western, it should be; if it's not recognized right away as a classic, it will be."⁸²

Stuart Klawans also saw the continuity linking Eastwood's earlier Westerns with *Unforgiven*, examining the movie in relation to the deep themes of sin and salvation that date back to Genesis. He compares *Unforgiven* with Genesis, Judaism and Christianity, contrasting the heroic Western genre with this troubled vision, and witnessing the role of strong women in the action, from Will Munny's dead wife to Strawberry Alice and even to the mutilated prostitute Delilah: "To sum up with a reductive but handy opposition: John Ford made Hellenic westerns, and Eastwood makes Hebraic ones. Come to think of it, maybe that's why women matter so much in Eastwood's pictures, why in *Unforgiven* he goes so far as to identify with the slashed-up prostitute. Though it's true that the patriarchs in Genesis have the power, the matriarchs all have wills and voices of their own."⁸³

Attention to women's voices in *Unforgiven* also brought forward a side to Eastwood's work that had been important to the director himself, but partly hidden to those who read the surface machismo of his roles as sexism. In fact, Eastwood had explored feminist issues in several movies produced by his own Malpasio Productions Company, including several Westerns⁸⁴ and two Dirty Harry films.⁸⁵

⁸² Breskin, David. "Clint Eastwood: The Rolling Stone Interview."

⁸³ Klawans, Stuart. 1992. "*Unforgiven*." *Nation*, September 14, 1992, unpagged.

⁸⁴ *Hang 'Em High* (1968) and *High Plains Drifter* (1973) incorporated significant feminist themes. *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) and *Pale Rider* (1985) did so to an even greater degree. Other Westerns, notably *Joe Kidd* (1972) and *Bronco Billy* (1980) featured strong female actors in lead roles.

⁸⁵ *The Enforcer* (1976) and *Sudden Impact* (1983).

In a 1988 interview, Eastwood described himself as “a feminist director.”⁸⁶ Some have given this position a serious role in their readings of *Unforgiven*.⁸⁷ Others have criticized Eastwood for his feminism.⁸⁸ After *Unforgiven*, however, many began to recognize Eastwood’s feminist perspective. After *Unforgiven*, in fact, Eastwood made the issue of women in traditional male jobs a central theme in two movies. One starred Laura Dern as a female FBI agent.⁸⁹ The other starred Hillary Swank as a female boxing champion.⁹⁰ While critics began to change their view of Eastwood’s subtle relationship to gender roles, gender relations, and feminism in their reviews of *Unforgiven*, it was several years before a deeper understanding began to emerge.

In the end, *Unforgiven* played a pivotal role in transforming the way that many people saw Eastwood’s work. In the aftermath of this movie, people were able to see the entire body of Eastwood’s work in a new light. *Unforgiven* also transformed the way that people saw the possibilities of the Western movie as an art form, generating a spirit of renewal as much as a sense of revisionism.

Finally, and most significant, *Unforgiven* opened a space of dialogue that would allow people to address central social and cultural issues in new ways. This dialogue established *Unforgiven* as far more than a great Western movie. It became a classic. More than the film that many consider Eastwood’s greatest, a work of art and literature that would lead to inquiry and reflection for years to come.

“It is a western,” wrote Stuart Klawans, “one that is so rich in its themes, so brooding and intense in its manner, that I suspect it will outlast us all. *Unforgiven* may turn out to be a classic.”⁹¹

4.2 Deeper Readings and Thematic Analysis

In the decade and a half since Eastwood released *Unforgiven*, it has engendered inquiry and scholarship in such fields as law, literature, and history. Much of the work has been deeper and more probing than parallel work in film studies. One reason for this is that these fields treat *Unforgiven* for its narrative and intellectual substance rather than for its qualities as a film, and scholars in other fields study *Unforgiven* for the way Eastwood addresses large social and cultural themes as much as for his artistry.

⁸⁶ Tibbetts, John C. 1993. “Clint Eastwood and the Machinery of Violence.” *Literature Film Quarterly*, January 1993.

⁸⁷ See, for example, Kamir, Orit. 2006. “Honor and Dignity in the Film *Unforgiven*: Implications for Sociological Theory.” *Law and Society Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 193-234, esp. p. 218.

⁸⁸ Grenier, Richard. 1994. “Eastwood Goes PC.” *Commentary*, March 1994; Simon, John. 1992. “*Unforgiven*? For What? By Whom?” *National Review*, September 14, 1992.

⁸⁹ *A Perfect World* (1993).

⁹⁰ *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), a film that won four Oscars, including best director and best picture for Eastwood, with best actress for Hillary Swank, and best supporting actor for Morgan Freeman – who also played in *Unforgiven*.

⁹¹ Klawans, Stuart. 1992. “*Unforgiven*.” *Nation*, Vol. 255, No. 7, September 14, 1992, pp. 258-261.

Reading this literature, I have identified eight particularly deep and reflective analyses of *Unforgiven*. One is Leighton Grist's article on *Unforgiven* in *The Book of Westerns*.⁹² One is Edward Gallafent's analysis of *Unforgiven* in his book on Clint Eastwood as actor and director.⁹³ One appears in Richard Schickel's definitive Eastwood biography.⁹⁴ Two are scholarly articles, neither written by a film scholar. The first is a feminist study on international law by Ruth Buchanan and Rebecca Johnson.⁹⁵ The other is an article comparing *Unforgiven* to the Iliad by classicists Mary Whitlock Blundell and Kirk Ormand.⁹⁶ Carl Plantinga, Allen Redmon, and John Tibbetts write three deep film articles, all taking violence as their title topic.⁹⁷

To establish an overall understanding of key issues, I analyzed all eight articles and books, distilling concepts to develop a model of key themes. Altogether, the eight articles and books covered twenty-one major themes. A thematic analysis grouped the twenty-one major themes into five broad areas of inquiry. Finally, I prepared an inventory, noting which themes appeared in each article or book. As well as drawing on other articles for additional reflection, I contribute my own thoughts and analysis to this section.

The five broad thematic areas are:

- 1) Socio-cultural inquiry,
- 2) History,
- 3) Social issues,
- 4) Film, and
- 5) Spiritual dimensions.

These five broad areas include twenty-one specific major themes.

The broadest frame of socio-cultural inquiry includes four themes:

- 1) The American West as nomos,
- 2) The Western as nomos,
- 3) Law, and
- 4) Justice.

⁹² Grist, Leighton. 1996. "Unforgiven." *The Book of Westerns*. Ian Cameron and Douglas Pye, eds. New York: Continuum, pp. 294-301.

⁹³ Gallafent, Edward, 1994. "The Idea of Order at Big Whiskey." *Clint Eastwood. Actor and Director*. London: Studio Vista, pp. 217-228.

⁹⁴ Schickel, Richard. 1996. "Lucky in the Order." *Clint Eastwood. A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 452-469.

⁹⁵ Buchanan, Ruth, and Rebecca Johnson. 2005. "The 'Unforgiven' Source of International Law: Nation-Building, Violence, and Gender in the West(ern)." *International Law: Modern Feminist Approaches*. Doris Buss and Ambreena Maji, editors. Oxford, UK: Hart Publishing, pp. 131-158.

⁹⁶ Blundell, Mary Whitlock, and Kirk Ormand. 1997. "Western Values, or the Peoples Homer: "Unforgiven" as a reading of the "Iliad." *Poetics Today*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Winter, 1997), pp. 533-569.

⁹⁷ Plantinga, Carl. 1998. "Spectacles of Death: Clint Eastwood and Violence in 'Unforgiven'." *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Winter, 1998), pp. 65-83; Redmon, Allen. 2004. "Mechanisms of Violence in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* and *Mystic River*." *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 27, No. 3, September 2004, pp. 315-328; Tibbetts, John C. 1993. "Clint Eastwood and the Machinery of Violence." *Literature Film Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 1, January 1993, pp. 10-18. [Unpagged text from the Lund University ELIN database. Date accessed: 2007 January 18.]

The more specific historical frame covers five themes:

- 5) The evolving democratic polity,
- 6) Community,
- 7) Nation building,
- 8) The American West as history, and
- 9) An inquiry into how we understand history.

The social issues involve four themes:

- 10) Gender relations,
- 11) Property rights,
- 12) Feminism, and
- 13) Violence.

The film-specific commentary covers:

- 14) Western movies,
- 15) Revisionism in Western movies,
- 16) Genre reconstruction, and – to a lesser degree –
- 17) The general nature of film.

Finally, several themes occur that have a larger, general quality that frames the human and spiritual dimensions of the film:

- 18) Myth and iconography,
- 19) Transcendence,
- 20) Motion, and
- 21) The land.

Examining the work of these eight authors allows me to open a dialectical frame of inquiry that I deepen with my own contributions here and in the analysis of *Unforgiven* as a film.

4.2.1 Socio-Cultural Inquiry

The American West as Nomos

While this topic never appears by name, it is the largest and most important theme because it establishes the frame for everything that follows – and for all the many viewpoints.

Buchanan and Johnson introduce the term “nomos” to establish the meaning of a “complex normative world – a ‘nomos’ – a world of language and myth. Because precept and narrative operate together to ground meaning, one cannot truly inhabit any given nomos without a rich understanding of its narratives.”⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Buchanan and Johnson, 2005, “*Unforgiven*,” pp. 131-132.

In an article titled “The ‘*Unforgiven*’ Source of International Law: Nation-Building, Violence, and Gender in the West(ern),” Buchanan and Johnson frame *Unforgiven* in four explicit forms of inquiry: legal studies, social studies, psychology, and feminism. In the development of their inquiry, they reveal *Unforgiven* to be a great film, great because it addresses the epic themes of its time, opening a discourse that allows us to respond in many ways. The changing nature of the times always shapes and reshapes the possibility of response, and the way that a way opens itself to renewed interpretation is a measure of its stature as a work of art. It is this grandeur that makes *Unforgiven* an important work today, three decades after David Webb Peoples completed the first draft of the film script, and fifteen years after Clint Eastwood released his film. These qualities make it a classic film with the durable qualities of a great work that may “outlast us all.”⁹⁹

It is the large engagement with a nomos – indeed, the ability to enter and shape a nomos – that embeds *Unforgiven* in a world of human experience that draws on and transcends the Western as a genre.

The Western as Nomos

The Western as nomos defines the cultural conventions through which Americans and others have used the Western movie – and earlier Western genres – to define themselves and their world.

Jane Tompkins paved the way with her comprehensive yet detailed vision of the different Western genres.¹⁰⁰ First, she describes the elements that form the Western: death, women and men’s language, the landscape, horses, cattle, and the moment of heroic reckoning. Then she considers specific cases, including several creators of the Western as myth and nomos, Buffalo Bill, Owen Wister, Zane Grey, and Louis L’Amour.

Blundell and Ormand grasp the epic, mythical quality of the Western, reading *Unforgiven* in parallel with the Iliad. “The classic Western,” they write, “addresses many of the same ethical and ideological questions as Greek epic, especially the justice of revenge, and the interrelationship of violence, law, and persuasion at the hearty of the social order.”¹⁰¹ The epic dimensions involve worlds “governed by a code of honor providing only minimal constraints on persuasive violence,” and “like Homeric epic, the Western does not so much recreate for its audience a historical moment as create for them a mythic past.”¹⁰²

This act of continual and renewed creation constitutes the Western as a nomos. This is the focal point of the living community within which the genre is embedded. The Western helps to create this community.

⁹⁹ Klawans, Stuart. 1992. “*Unforgiven*.” *Nation*, Vol. 255, No. 7, September 14, 1992, pp. 258-261.

¹⁰⁰ Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*.

¹⁰¹ Blundell and Ormand, 1997, “Western Values” p. 536.

¹⁰² Blundell and Ormand, 1997, “Western Values” p. 537.

In recognizing the epic quality of the Western, it is interesting to compare Blundell and Ormand's treatment of a fictional event with historian Charles Roland's comparison of the Civil War – America's great Western war – with the Iliad. For many, the Civil War was a formative American experience in a way that surpassed even the War of Independence, because it was the first war to be fought among Americans in all regions of what would become the modern United States.¹⁰³

In different articles and reviews, many critics acknowledge the Western as the locus of a vital nomos, a “complex normative world ... of language and myth”¹⁰⁴ that builds a shared narrative of common values and cultural meaning. The nomothetic genre of the Western frames *Unforgiven* to establish a hermeneutical horizon of ideas and expectations. Against this horizon, Eastwood shapes a movie that both fulfills our expectations and shatters them.¹⁰⁵ The genre of the Western also forms the background to articles that question whether Eastwood creates a major film or merely recycles cliché in an unsuccessful outing.¹⁰⁶

Quoting Jean Renoir on the virtues of the Western: “The marvelous thing about Westerns is that they're all the same movie. This gives the director unlimited freedom,” Richard Blake adds, “That says it all. Westerns present a predictable plot and characters, sheriff against outlaws, ranchers against homesteaders or cowboys against Indians, but work infinite variations within that framework to provide an invaluable comment on the human condition in general and America in particular.”¹⁰⁷

Law

The issue of law and the issue of justice form central threads in *Unforgiven*. Some of the best and most thoughtful writing on this movie emerges in the new millennium as scholars in law and film focus on the way this movie exemplifies deep problems in the conflict of law and society.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ Roland, Charles P. 1991. *An American Iliad: The Story of the Civil War*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.

¹⁰⁴ Buchanan and Johnson, 2005, “*Unforgiven*,” pp. 131-132. See also: Cover, Robert M. 1983. “The Supreme Court 1982 Term. Foreword: *Nomos* and Narrative.” *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 97, pp. 4-68; Lukinsky, Joseph. 1987. “Law in Education. A Reminiscence with Some Footnotes to Robert Cover's *Nomos and Narrative*.” *Yale Law Journal*, Vol. 96, pp. 1836-1859.

¹⁰⁵ Blake, 1992, “Absolved”; Blundell and Ormand, 1997, “Western Values”; Buchanan and Johnson, 2005 “*Unforgiven*”; Curtis, 1992, “Why *Unforgiven*?”; Deloria, 1995, “America”; Ingrassia, 1998, “Writing the West” pp. 53-60; Kamir, 2006, “Honor and Dignity”; Klawans, 1992, “*Unforgiven*”; Plantinga, 1998, “Spectacles of Death”; “ See also: Gorbman 2001, p. 190; Hayward, 2006, *Cinema Studies*, p. 18; For a broader view of the Western as nomos, see: Faludi, 2003, “An American Myth”; Fitch, 2005, “Archetypes”; Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*; Zoglin, 1993, “Back from Boot Hill.”

¹⁰⁶ Simon, 1992, “*Unforgiven*?”

¹⁰⁷ Blake, 1992, “Absolved,” unpagued.

¹⁰⁸ Buchanan and Johnson, 2005 “*Unforgiven*”; Kamir, 2006, “Honor and Dignity”; See also: Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*.

While the incident that triggers the action occurs when a cowboy maims a prostitute, the central legal conflict is really the conflict between women who seek justice and the sheriff who treats a crime as a case in property law. While several stories form the human narrative in *Unforgiven*, the story of the law revolves around the rough and unconscionable way that sheriff Little Bill Daggett creates and abuses the law in Big Whiskey, Wyoming. This is a story about the larger and smaller problems of law in many movies, and in many settings.¹⁰⁹

Because so many of Clint Eastwood's characters have been police officers, marshals, or lawmen, the theme of the law appears often in discussions of Eastwood's career as an actor and director.¹¹⁰

Justice

Unforgiven is an uncomfortable movie. One reason for our discomfort is the fact that this story brutally forces us to question the uneasy relationship between law and justice. For Tompkins,¹¹¹ this constitutes a central problem of the Western genre, and it is a major issue in Blomley's discussion of the frontier.¹¹²

On an abstract level, the crucial conflict in this movie resolves to the conflict between law and justice, a theme that many critics and scholars discuss.¹¹³ This theme is as old as the classics, and the conflict between law and justice appears from *The Furies* and *Antigone* to the films of Clint Eastwood. Like the theme of law, it appears at the heart of such Eastwood Westerns as *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), and *Pale Rider* (1985), as well as in *Unforgiven*.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values"; Bromwich, 1993, "Of Predators and Pretenders"; Grenier, 1994, "Eastwood Goes PC"; Ingrassia, 1998, "Writing the West"; Klawans, 1992, "*Unforgiven*"; Luhr, 1996, "The scarred woman"; McReynolds, 1998, "Alive and Well"; Pawelczak, 1992, "*Unforgiven*"; Simon, 1992, "*Unforgiven?*"; Tibbetts, 1993, "Machinery of Violence"; Travers, 1992, "An outlaw at twilight"; Witteman, 1993, "Go Ahead, Make My Career"; Zoglin, 1993, "Back from Boot Hill. See also: Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood"; Ansen and Leerhsen, 1992, "Bloody good and bloody awful"; Blake, 1992, "Absolved"; Grist, 1996, "*Unforgiven*"; Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*;

¹¹⁰ Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood"; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*.

¹¹¹ Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*;

¹¹² Blomley, 2003, "Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence."

¹¹³ Blake, 1992, "Absolved"; Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values"; Buchanan and Johnson, 2005, "*Unforgiven*"; Kamir, 2006, "Honor and Dignity"; Bromwich, 1993, "Of Predators and Pretenders"; Grenier, 1994, "Eastwood Goes PC"; Klawans, 1992, "*Unforgiven*"; Luhr, 1996, "The scarred woman"; Simon, 1992, "*Unforgiven?*"; Tibbetts, 1993, "Machinery of Violence"; Travers, 1992, "An outlaw at twilight"; See also: Ansen and Leerhsen, 1992, "Bloody good and bloody awful"; Grist, 1996, *Unforgiven*"; Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*.

¹¹⁴ See discussions in: Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood"; Breskin, 1992, *Clint Eastwood*; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*.

4.2.2 Historical Frame

Evolving democratic polity

The evolving nature of democracy in America and especially in the West forms a background to the movie in several ways. On a large scale, this constitutes a broad, general theme of Western movies. Here, the broad theme echoes in the traces of other Westerns. *Unforgiven* offers a sly variation on the theme in the narrative of English Bob's entrance. We first meet Bob chattering on about the then-recent assassination of President James A. Garfield. He explains that one can well imagine shooting a president while one hesitates to shoot a king or queen. He attributes the assassination to the American climate and to the intemperate nature of a self-governing and in his view nearly ungovernable people.¹¹⁵ He also speaks of a national character formed by huge, open spaces and great geographical distance.

Bob, a gunman employed by the railroad to "shoot Chinamen," is on his way to Big Whiskey where sheriff Little Bill Daggett will contrast Bob's monarchist speech with good-natured American virtue before dragging him into the street for a merciless beating.

Evolving themes of democracy and freedom form a rhythm against which *Unforgiven* plays out, with women, Indians, and Chinese railway workers playing background roles while men – all but one white – occupy the center stage.¹¹⁶

This theme appears in many Eastwood Westerns, notably *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) and *Joe Kidd* (1972), as well as in other Eastwood movies such as *Dirty Harry* (1971), *The Enforcer* (1976), *In the Line of Fire* (1993) and *Absolute Power* (1997).

In different ways, Eastwood's main commentators and biographers examine the nature of democracy as a recurring theme in Eastwood's film work, as well as in his short life as an elected politics and mayor of Carmel, California.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ English Bob's lofty patrician tirade against what he deems to be the lesser people of America is reminiscent of the tone that Shakespeare's French lords take toward the English in 1415:

"... where have they this mettle?
Is not their climate foggy, raw and dull,
On whom, as in despite, the sun looks pale,
Killing their fruit with frowns? Can sodden water,
A drench for sur-rein'd jades, their barley-broth,
Decoct their cold blood to such valiant heat?
And shall our quick blood, spirited with wine,
Seem frosty? O, for honour of our land,
Let us not hang like roping icicles
Upon our houses' thatch, whiles a more frosty people
Sweat drops of gallant youth in our rich fields!
Poor we may call them in their native lords" (Henry V, Act 3, Scene 5).

¹¹⁶ Buchanan and Johnson, 2005 "*Unforgiven*"; Grenier, 1994, "Eastwood Goes PC"; Grist, 1996, "*Unforgiven*," pp. 295-296; Klawans, 1992, "*Unforgiven*"; Pawelczak, 1992, "*Unforgiven*"; See also: Blake, 1992, "Absolved";

¹¹⁷ Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood"; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*.

Community

The theme of community is central to *Unforgiven* as it is to many Westerns. Not only does the community serve as a ground against which to pose the tension of individual will, but it serves to highlight the dimensions that define inside and outside status.¹¹⁸ In essence, community creates the boundary outside which each film defines the other, and the hero comes as other from outside to inside before leaving again.

Susan Hayward describes the archetypal relationship of hero to community in Westerns as “the restless, drifting hero coming into town, and then leaving, having solved a problem of a community in crisis,” noting that “these are all hallmarks of Eastwood’s performance as exemplified in two films also directed by him, *Pale Rider* (1985) and *Unforgiven* (1992).”¹¹⁹

In a sense, the Western hero echoes one dimension of the ancient Greek tragedy by establishing the hero as a man apart, a man of larger-than-life will and virtue. Where the ancient Greeks – and Shakespeare – found a tragic flaw in their grand dimensions of their heroes, the Western hero avoids his doom by riding away at the height of his powers.

Oedipus made the mistake of hanging around after his triumph. Becoming king, “he rose to power, a man beyond all power.”¹²⁰ In contrast, Western heroes nearly never stay on in town to wear the sheriff’s badge or take up the mayor’s office. There are exceptions, such as Paden in *Silverado* (1989), Ransom Stoddard in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962), or Orrin Sackett in *The Sacketts* (1979).¹²¹

Most heroes move on. Even heroes who wear a badge move on, as Sheriff Will Kane did in *High Noon* (1952) and as Marshal Wyatt Earp did in *Tombstone* (1993), and in *Wyatt Earp* (1994).

¹¹⁸ Kitzes, Jim. 1970. *Horizons West. Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship within the Western*. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, pp. 10-12; Tompkins, Jane. 1992. *West of Everything. The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press; Wright, Will. 1975. *Six-guns and Society. A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley: University of California Press;

¹¹⁹ Hayward, Susan. 2006. “Westerns.” *Cinema Studies. The Key Concepts*. London and New York: Routledge, p 506.

¹²⁰ Sophocles. 1982. *The Three Theban Plays. Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*. Translated by Robert Fagles. Introduction and notes by Bernard Knox. New York: The Viking Press, p. 232.

¹²¹ In *Silverado*, a team of four heroes vanquishes the villains, and three leave town. In *Liberty Valence*, hero Ransom Stoddard goes on to become governor of Arizona territory and then United States Senator for the state. Nevertheless, the plots turns on the fact that Stoddard wins his reputation for a deed that he actually does not commit. Stoddard does, indeed, stand up to Valence in a showdown, firing his gun in an act that everyone believes leads to Valence’s death. While Stoddard is nominated for public office on the strength of his gunfight renown, he wanted to defeat Valence with the law. As a lawyer, he represents civilization, feeling such remorse for winning a gunfight that he prepares to leave public life rather than gain election for gunning man down. At this moment, Tom Doniphon reveals to Stoddard that it was he, Doniphon, who actually shot Liberty Valence from an alley to ensure that Stoddard would win the fight. Doniphon is the other hero of the movie, and he leaves town symbolically, losing the girl, rather than rising to office and public responsibility. While Orrin Sackett becomes sheriff and then mayor of Santa Fe, he is one of three brothers. While Orrin’s younger brother Tyrell becomes a deputy sheriff, his older brother Tell is a mountain man and pioneer who never settles long in one place.

Will Munny began as an outlaw and a champion of injustice. He left his life of crime to be a law-abiding farmer, an ordinary fellow. In *Unforgiven*, he returns to a life outside the law. However, Munny does not return to his old ways. He is no ordinary outlaw. Rather, he is a champion of justice, and the act of unjust law that returns him to his outlaw role poses all the questions of law against justice and community and the people that make the film so complex and rewarding. At the end, Munny once again puts his life of crime aside. Becoming a citizen and a prosperous merchant in San Francisco, he rides away twice. He rides away the first time by departing after his deeds of vengeance as a typical western hero. We imagine that W. W. Beauchamp will soon memorialize Munny as the wrathful hero-demon of Big Whiskey, but he will no longer be in the hero business or the outlaw game. He rides away the second time by departing the life of outsider hero, riding into a new life as an ordinary citizen.

The literature of *Unforgiven* necessarily addresses relation between community and everything that community is and is not.¹²²

Nation Building

The issue of nation building forms one part of a triple set of themes in the Western genre, linked closely with democracy and community.

Many classical Westerns explicitly address the problem of building a nation. Many films seem to adopt Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis, offering a filmed apologetic for the doctrine of manifest destiny. John Ford's renowned cavalry trilogy – *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950) – was a classical cinematic statement of this viewpoint. Ford's movies examined and justified the push west, even though he stated his regret at the price the native peoples paid for America's growth. *How the West was Won* (1962) took a panoramic, historical view, starting in the early 1800s with fictional mountain man Linus Rawlings, it followed the Rawlings family Westward into the era after the Civil War. Taking its title from a reworked version of Theodore Roosevelt's seven-volume history, *How the West was Won* opened with these words:

“This land has a name today
and is marked on maps.
But the names and the marks and the land
all had to be won.
Won from nature and from primitive man.”¹²³

¹²² Blake, 1992, “Absolved”; Buchanan and Johnson, 2005, “*Unforgiven*”; Grenier, 1994, “Eastwood Goes PC”; Kamir, 2006, “Honor and Dignity”; Redmon, 2004, “Mechanisms of Violence”; Klawans, 1992, “*Unforgiven*”; Luhr, 1996, “The scarred woman”; Simon, John. 1992. “*Unforgiven*?” unpagued; See also: Bromwich, 1993, “Of Predators and Pretenders”; Pawelczak, 1992, “*Unforgiven*,” unpagued; Zoglin, 1993, “Back from Boot Hill,” unpagued; As a general theme in Eastwood films, see: Allison 2003, unpagued; Breskin, 1992, “Clint Eastwood,” unpagued; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*; As well, see: Blomley, 2003, “Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence”; Faludi, 2003, “American Myth,” McReynolds, 1998. “Alive and Well.”

¹²³ *How the West was Won* (1962).

Since then, every Western movie has had to deal with the legacy of nation building. To a great degree, this is so because most directors set their Westerns in an era when the issues of nation building were still alive along the expanding frontier. No matter what position a Western movie took on nation building and the western expansion, however, the issue forms a background to every Western. With the brief exception of English Bob's tirades and a few comments on Ned Logan's Indian wife Sally Two Trees, *Unforgiven* never addresses the issue of nation-building directly. It nevertheless remains alive in the background.¹²⁴

The American West as History

In a similar way, we see the problem of the West as history as a partially hidden theme in *Unforgiven*. The movie focuses on the tight narrative of a single story that the 1976 draft of the script identified as "The William Munny Killings."¹²⁵ As a result, some deeper themes in the movie are visible only through the partially open window of the narrative action.

In this case, the theme of the American West as history is a dim shadow, visible in its false counterpart, the dime novel journalism of W. W. Beauchamp. This theme hides a subtle joke that none of the critics or scholars has noticed. *Unforgiven* is dedicated in part to Don Siegel, Eastwood's friend and mentor in the director's art. Siegel addressed this issue in his 1976 film, *The Shootist*, a film that would be John Wayne's last movie. The film – released in the same year that Peoples completed his script – was a reflective film about the last days of John Bernard Books, a renowned gunfighter and sometime lawman dying of cancer. The film looked back from the year 1901 on his life in the changing American West. In a humorous yet critical sequence, a local journalist, Dan Dobkins, approaches Books hoping to write the story of his life. The journalist is more interested in a sensational account of bloody deeds and gory events than in a serious account. Books kicks him out. The journalist appears again twice. In one scene, Dobkins is the moving force behind the appearance of Books's former girlfriend. At his urging, she hopes to marry Books to use his name on an equally sensational biography told by his widow and written by the journalist. In the last moments of the movie, the journalist tries to reframe the story from the perspective of local authorities, even as Books's last gunfight is in progress.¹²⁶

Whether or not Dobkins suggested the character of W. W. Beauchamp to screenwriter Peoples, Eastwood exploited the role for humor and for a serious point about the West.

¹²⁴ Blake, 1992, "Absolved"; Buchanan and Johnson, 2005 "*Unforgiven*"; Bromwich, 1993, "Of Predators and Pretenders,"; Grist, 1996, "*Unforgiven*"; Kamir, 2006, "Honor and Dignity"; Grist, 1996, "*Unforgiven*"; Redmon, 2004, "Mechanisms of Violence"; See also: Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood,"; Faludi, 2003, "American Myth"; Grenier, 1994, "Eastwood Goes PC"; Klawans, 1992, "*Unforgiven*" Luhr, 1996, "The scarred woman"; McReynolds, 1998. "Alive and Well"; Pawelczak, 1992, "*Unforgiven*"; Simon, John. 1992. "*Unforgiven?*"; Zoglin, 1993, "Back from Boot Hill,"; This theme also appears in: Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood,"; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*; Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood"; Useful related discussions occur in: Blomley, 2003, "Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: The Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid"; Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*.

¹²⁵ Peoples, David Webb. 1976. *The William Munny Killings*. An original screenplay by David Webb Peoples.
URL:
www.screentalk.biz/moviescripts/Unforgiven.pdf
Date Accessed: 2005 February 12.

¹²⁶ *The Shootist*. 1976. Director: Don Siegel.

The history of the American West plays some part in every Western great or small, because every Western retells that history in a greater or lesser way, sometimes truthfully, more often as myth. This attitude often affected the real press as much as it affected the dime novel, an idea captured memorably in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*. At the time of the movie, Ransom Stoddard is the United States Senator from Arizona. He returns home to Shinbone, Arizona, for the funeral of his old friend Tom Doniphon. At the wake, curious journalists ask him why he is there, and he tells the true story of Doniphon, the man who actually shot Liberty Valence, the deed attributed to Stoddard, bringing him fame and winning his first election. After hearing the full story, a journalist explained why his newspaper would never publish it: "This is the west, sir," he said. "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."¹²⁷

Some Westerns, such as *How the West was Won*, purport to represent history. Others set themselves against the background of history. This is a typical stratagem of movies set against the background of the Civil War, such as Ang Lee's (1999) *Ride With the Devil*. Because the era of the great westward expansion came in the years just following the Civil War, many Westerns are set in the years just after the war, including John Ford's Cavalry trilogy or, more recently, Kevin Costner's (2003) *Open Range*. All the many films that recount version of the Jesse James story are set in that period, including *Jesse James* (1939), *The Return of Frank James* (1940), *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957), *The Long Riders* (1980), and *Frank and Jesse* (1994). While most of these movies attempt to follow the outline of history to some degree, some legendary stories depart considerably from the facts. Here, writers and directors effectively "print the legend," something that has generally been the case with movies about Billy the Kid, ranging from a movie that at least touches on the facts such as *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) to movies where Billy the Kid is simply used for the "star value" of his name such as *Chisum* (1970). In some movies, the historical story becomes nearly irrelevant, with movies serving as a vehicle for contemporary film stars, notably the "Brat Pack Westerns," *Young Guns* (1988) and *Young Guns II* (1990), with Emilio Estevez, Kiefer Sutherland, Lou Diamond Phillips, Charlie Sheen, Dermot Mulroney, and Casey Siemaszko. Interestingly, several of these actors have gone on to act in good western movies, including Estevez in *Dollar for the Dead* (1998), Mulroney in *Bad Girls* (1994) and Phillips as a modern Indian detective in *The Dark Wind* (1991).

While *Unforgiven* explicitly examines the role of myth and iconography in understanding and telling the West, it does not address the West in a larger historical context.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ *The Man who Shot Liberty Valence*. 1962. Director: John Ford.

¹²⁸ Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values"; Creekmur, "Buffalo Bill (Himself)," p. 143; Grist, 1996, "Unforgiven" p. 297; Ingrassia, 1998, "Writing the West," pp. 53-60. This theme also appears in: Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood"; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*; Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood"; Useful related discussion in: Blomley, 2003, "Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence"; Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*;

An Inquiry into How We Understand History

Just as few scholars examine the way in which *Unforgiven* requires us to reflect on the American West as history, so they do not examine the nature of this film as an inquiry into how we understand history. Even so, critics and scholars consider the theme in different ways.¹²⁹

Much of the cultural work of the Western genre involves framing history. In many movies, this takes place explicitly. In others, it constitutes a background issue. In both foreground and background, the issue sets a boundary of context and concerns.

4.2.3 Social Issues

Gender Relations

Gender relations form a key part of the explicit narrative in *Unforgiven* from the first moment, an opening sequence in which William Munny buries his wife. This forms a background to the movie, and we come to learn that the relationship between Munny and his late wife was the reason for Munny's transformation from violent outlaw to sober citizen and hard-working farmer.

The action in *Unforgiven* also begins with gender relations: the relation between a prostitute and a customer, between the group of prostitutes and their pimp, and between the prostitutes and the community where they live and work.

While nearly every review of *Unforgiven* commented on these facts, relatively few framed this in terms of gender relations as an issue. This has mostly been the work of scholars, particularly feminist scholars.¹³⁰

Nearly no one in the movie specifically speaks of the relations between men and women beyond one key scene in which Strawberry Alice speaks about how the cowboys treat the prostitutes, arguing that even though they may only be whores, they are not chattel property.

Elsewhere, Will Munny frequently refers to his dead wife and her influence on him, but he never explicitly discusses their relations.

¹²⁹ Blake, 1992, "Absolved"; Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values"; Buchanan and Johnson, 2005, "*Unforgiven*"; Canby, 1992, "Review"; Curtis, 1992, "Why *Unforgiven*?"; Ingrassia, 1998, "Writing the West"; Kamir, 2006, "Honor and Dignity"; Klawans, 1992, "*Unforgiven*"; Luhr, 1996, "The scarred woman"; Redmon, 2004, "Mechanisms of Violence"; Simon, John, 1992, "*Unforgiven*?"; Tibbetts, 1993, "Machinery of Violence"; Zoglin, 1993, "Back from Boot Hill"; See also: Creekmur, p. 143; Faludi 2003 American Myth; Grist, 1996, "*Unforgiven*," p. 297.; This theme also appears in: Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood"; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*; Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood"; See also: Blomley, 2003, "Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence."

¹³⁰ Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values"; Buchanan and Johnson, 2005 "*Unforgiven*"; Ingrassia, 1998, "Writing the West"; Kamir, 2006, "Honor and Dignity"; Luhr, 1996, "The scarred woman"; See also: Grist, 1996, "*Unforgiven*"; This theme also appears in: Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood,."; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*; Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood"; Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*.

As a result, the critical and scholarly discussion of gender relations is based on the interpretation of key acts and events. In this, Buchanan and Johnson,¹³¹ and Kamir¹³² offer the deepest analyses.

Property Rights

While the issue of property rights frequently appears in Western movies, the issue generally features typical concerns. Cattle and cattle rustling is one. Horse theft appears frequently as a property rights theme. Land rights are another common form of property rights problems in the Western genre. This often includes the right to travel across land or to use the range. It also involves the right to take and transform the land itself, concerting it from its original use by native peoples to the territorial uses of the new settlers, and finally into the land of settled states within the expanding nation. Within the settler community, it may also appear in the form of efforts by large landholders to acquire or expropriate the land of small homesteaders or small ranchers. Water rights appear frequently, generally linked to water for livestock or agriculture. Mineral rights and mining also appear. These broad issues shaped a range of core concerns on the expanding Western frontier.¹³³

Unforgiven is unusual, perhaps unique, in focusing on an obscure issue of property rights, the use of persons as bonded property. Since all property rights ultimately involve human concerns, this establishes a direct equivalence between people and property that changes the tone of the movie in remarkable and unpredictable ways. While most of the commentators on this movie have discussed the importance of the way that sheriff Little Bill Daggett treats the violence against Delilah Fitzgerald as a matter of law and justice, no one has observed Little Bill's relation to property rights in general. Most Westerns show a sheriff defending property rights issues in relation to others, either as a corrupt servant of the propertied class or as a righteous defender of the settler or small landholder. The protagonists are at the heart of the action, and the sheriff plays a secondary role, albeit an important one.

In *Unforgiven*, Little Bill Daggett represents the community and the idea of law and property. There are no large moneyed interests at work in *Unforgiven*.

Despite neglecting that key issue, commentators are clear about the relationship between law and property in *Unforgiven*. Little Bill is the voice and representative of the law, and *Unforgiven* equates the law with the concept of property rights over human rights.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Buchanan and Johnson, 2005 "*Unforgiven*."

¹³² Kamir, 2006, "Honor and Dignity."

¹³³ Blomley, 2003, "Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: The Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid."

¹³⁴ Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values"; Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood," Bromwich, 1993, "Of Predators and Pretenders"; Buchanan and Johnson, 2005 "*Unforgiven*"; Curtis, 1992, "Why *Unforgiven*?"; Kamir, 2006, "Honor and Dignity"; Luhr, 1996, "The scarred woman"; See also: Grist, 1996, "*Unforgiven*," p. 294. For additional relevant comments, see: Blomley, 2003, "Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: The Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid."

Feminism

Because of the subject matter and the fact that Eastwood's film addresses the subject of injustice to women, scholars interpret this film as a feminist film. Despite this fact, only a few commentators have specifically discussed it in terms of feminist issues, and those issues have paralleled the discussions of law and justice, and of violence. Eastwood sees himself as a feminist director, and such feminist themes as rape, violence to women, and models of female independence have been important in several Eastwood films, including *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, *Pale Rider*, and *Bronco Billy* among his Westerns, as well as *The Enforcer* and *Sudden Impact* in the Dirty Harry series.

Explicit feminist discussion of *Unforgiven* appears primarily in the work of the feminist legal scholars, but others take these issues up in part.¹³⁵ At least one critic explicitly condemns Eastwood's feminism in *Unforgiven* as a misplaced politically correct concern.¹³⁶

We can also interpret feminism in a broader sense than the scholars use to interpret *Unforgiven*. None of the scholars considers the fact that a film can deal with feminist themes by showing their reverse. In *Unforgiven*, Eastwood examines feminist ideals and justice for women by describing a world that demonstrates neither.

Violence

Unforgiven was notable among Westerns and among action films in general for its harsh, unsparing look at violence. This was a central issue in nearly every review, and in all scholarly discussions. Eastwood's treatment of violence was one reason that the film was labeled revisionist. Where other films treat violence as a minor part of the action, looking away, overlooking the serious effects of a fight, or treating gunshot wounds as minor inconveniences, *Unforgiven* shows the results of violence as they are in life off the screen. The raw, naked approach to violence made *Unforgiven* a new kind of Western, as direct and dramatic in its genre as Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* trilogy (1972, 1974, 1990) was in its unsparing depiction of mafia life.

The critics and scholars examined violence in great length to shape their understanding of *Unforgiven*.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood"; Buchanan and Johnson, 2005, "*Unforgiven*"; Kamir, 2006, "Honor and Dignity"; Luhr, 1996, "The scarred woman"; Sharrett, 1993, "Clint Eastwood's triumphs"; Simon, John. 1992. "*Unforgiven?*"; Tibbetts, 1993, "Machinery of Violence"; This theme also appears in: Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood,"; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*; Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood".

¹³⁶ Grenier, 1994, "Eastwood Goes PC";

¹³⁷ Ansen and Leerhsen, 1992, "Bloody good and bloody awful"; Blake, 1992, "Absolved"; Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values"; Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood"; Bromwich, 1993, "Of Predators and Pretenders"; Buchanan and Johnson, 2005 "*Unforgiven*"; Canby, 1992, "Review"; Corliss, 1992 "The Last Roundup"; Ingrassia, 1998, "Writing the West"; Kamir, 2006, "Honor and Dignity," pp. 193-234; Kauffmann, 1992, "Clint and Gore"; Klawans, 1992, "*Unforgiven*"; Luhr, 1996, "The scarred woman"; McReynolds, 1998, "Alive and Well"; Plantinga, 1998, "Spectacles of Death"; Redmon, 2004, "Mechanisms of Violence"; Simon, John. 1992, "*Unforgiven?*"; Tibbetts, 1993, "Machinery of Violence"; Travers, 1992, "An outlaw at twilight"; Weinraub, 1992, "Eastwood"; Zoglin, 1993, "Back from Boot Hill." See also: Ansen and Leerhsen, 1992; Braudy, 1998, "The Genre of Nature," pp. 289-290; Grist, 1996, "*Unforgiven*"; p. 294; Handley, 2002. *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation*, p. 19; Stone, 1999, "Religion and Violence"; As a general theme in Eastwood films, see: Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood"; Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood"; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*. Also see: Blomley, 2003, "Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence"; Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*; and Faludi, 2003, "American Myth."

In his book on marriage and nation building in the literary Western, William Handley labeled *Unforgiven* “an unredemptive Western.”¹³⁸ Since this is his only reference to the movie, and one of the few references to film in a book on literature, it is not clear what he intends to argue. Perhaps he opposes the idea of *Unforgiven* as a revisionist Western by saying that Eastwood fails to revise the Western cult. Alternatively, he may suggest that Eastwood actually does revise the cult of heroic violence in Western movies by showing that they lack true redeeming value. This may well be his point; he draws on René Girard to distinguish between the possibility of redeeming, purifying violence in the context of ritual sacrifice as contrasted with the loss of redeeming value that emerges when cultures fail to distinguish between purifying violence and impure violence.¹³⁹

One can argue that traditional Western movies gave violence a legitimate role in the psychic economy of the audience. Tompkins points to this in her discussion of “the legitimization of physical violence.”¹⁴⁰ She also addresses the deeper role of psychic violence, and the role it plays for an audience seeking excuses for the redemption that violence – including violent words – seems to afford.¹⁴¹

4.2.4 Film-specific Commentary

Western Movies

The startling aspect of much commentary on *Unforgiven* is the general lack of reflection on the Western movie itself as a genre. Much of the critical reception describes *Unforgiven* as a revisionist Western. Some of the criticism discusses *Unforgiven* in terms of genre reconstruction, describing it as a movie that helped to revive or transform the Western. What is interesting, however, is the fact that so few articles actually examined the nature of the Western movie itself.

In great part, there is an assumption that all Westerns are alike. To paraphrase a comment on redwood trees by Ronald Reagan, the late president and former Western movie star “if you’ve seen one Western, you’ve seen ‘em all.” Nevertheless, French film director Jean Renoir already said it, and in his view, it gave the Western a magnificent open quality, making each of these same movies a fresh blank canvas on which each director was free to make a new work.

¹³⁸ Handley, William R. 2002. *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 19.

¹³⁹ Girard, René. 1977. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 49.

¹⁴⁰ Tompkins, Jane. 1992. *West of Everything. The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 174.

¹⁴¹ Tompkins, Jane. 1992. *West of Everything. The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 227-233.

This is not entirely wrong. In a structural analysis of the Western movie, Will Wright¹⁴² asserts that there are only four plots: the classical Western, the vengeance variation, the transition theme, and the professional theme. In both stage theater and folklore, such scholars as Polti and Propp observed a limited number of plots and possibilities, giving to each genre a fairly tight structural range.¹⁴³

To the degree that a genre creates a ritual enactment that attracts and binds together a community of participants, all genres necessarily recreate themselves. If they stray too far from the common, they abandon their community. Thus, many commentators seem to assume that we know most of what there is to know about the Western as an art form, and they see little to add. For them, the Western is a simple collection of common themes and standard plots, with generic sequences and backgrounds linking them.

Susan Hayward typifies this perspective where she writes, “in the Western, the hero is mostly moving across vast plains or desert land, arriving in small towns, tying his horse up to the inevitable cross-bar in front of the saloon (or wherever else he is headed). What differentiates these genres primarily is that the Western almost ‘never changes’ – the iconography remains the same...” She is so convinced that all Westerns are the same that she believes this to be the case “even in Clint Eastwood’s late films, despite their challenge to the ideological message of Westerns (as in *Pale Rider*, 1985; *Unforgiven*, 1992 – both directed by and starring Eastwood).”¹⁴⁴

In contrast, Jane Tompkins sees the potential depth of the Western genre. This is how I read the multivocal generosity of Tompkins’s message.¹⁴⁵ However, this is the nature of art, and the Western is an art form. Just as there are a thousand mediocre paintings for every good one, a thousand hood paintings for every masterpiece, Hollywood produced far many ordinary Westerns for each good one. The boring matinee oater and horse operas were the standard fare, cranked out by the thousands – literally thousands if this total includes Western B features for young audiences and weekly Western serials for television. Occasional competent feature Westerns were already out of the ordinary. There were few great Westerns. Only a handful of the best Westerns were classic films – not classic Westerns, but classic films.

Despite the fact that classics in Western form are rare, they exist. It takes thousands of works in a genre to pave the way for the depth and differentiation of great works. The iconic style of a Byzantine altarpiece or the standard narrative of a religious fresco may open into differentiated depth. In much the same way, the Western genre may open into multiple messages and plural configurations, and some of these find greatness.

¹⁴² Wright, Will. 1975. *Six-guns and Society. A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁴³ Polti, Georges. 1991 [1921]. *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*. Translated by Lucille Ray. Boston: The Writer; Propp, V. 2000. *Morphology of the Folktale*. First edition translated by Laurence Scott with an introduction by Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson. Second edition revised and edited with a preface by Louis A. Wagner and a new introduction by Alan Dundee. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 120-127.

¹⁴⁴ Hayward, 2006, *Cinema Studies*, p. 214, also p. 506.

¹⁴⁵ Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*.

Much of the commentary on *Unforgiven* assumes the nature of the Western genre without reflecting on its dimension and possibility. The articles on *Unforgiven* generally trace a line from Eastwood's work for Sergio Leone through his own Malpaso Westerns. Relatively few comment on *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) as a great film, most see *Pale Rider* (1985) as the predecessors of *Unforgiven*. In relation to the genre, they generally describe *Unforgiven* as "revisionist," seeing it a repudiation of the medium and Eastwood's own past in the dark and violent plot.¹⁴⁶

Nevertheless, some critics recognize the potential depth of the Western, and they see in *Unforgiven* both a rich mastery of the film medium and a conversation across the genre into the deeper issues and themes that I describe here.

Revisionism in Western Movies

Most of the early writing on *Unforgiven* emphasized the idea that it was a revisionist Western. Revisionism, in this sense, seemed to mean any Western that violated the traditional expectations of the genre. As an actor and director, Clint Eastwood was an iconic figure in the Western genre, the very archetype of the Western hero and the director of archetypal Western movies.

When Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* questioned the values of the stereotypical Western movie, critics were bound to label it revisionist. The question of revisionism, however, is deeper and more problematic. Revising stereotyped expectations involves regenerating the medium rather than revising it, and this is the core issue in *Unforgiven*. While most commentators describe *Unforgiven* as a revisionist Western, the notion of revisionism in relation to this movie is ambiguous and problematic. This is not a revision of the West as it was, but an unsparing look at life in a Western cow town of the 1880s that revises the myths of earlier Western movies, while examining what it meant to be a lawman, a regulator, or an outlaw in the invented but plausible characters of Little Bill Daggett, English Bob, Ned Logan, and Will Munny.¹⁴⁷

Genre Reconstruction, Transformation, and Revival

A great work of art that inhabits and fulfills its generic form establishes or regenerates the class of works to which it belongs. Merriam-Webster's defines the term, "classic" as setting the standard of excellence with recognized values that are historically memorable.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values"; See also: Ansen and Leerhsen, 1992, "Bloody good and bloody awful"; Gorbman, 2001, "Drums along the L. A. River," p. 190; Hayward, 2006, *Cinema Studies*, p. 18. For a discussion of the Western movie genre as a general theme in Eastwood films, see: Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood"; Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood"; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*.

¹⁴⁷ Corliss, 1992, "The Last Roundup"; Ingrassia, 1998, "Writing the West"; Luhr, 1996, "The scarred woman"; Pawelczak, 1992, "Unforgiven"; Sharrett, 1993, "Clint Eastwood's triumphs"; Simon, 1992, "Unforgiven?"; Weinraub, 1992, "Eastwood"; Zoglin, 1993, "Back from Boot Hill." See also: Ansen and Leerhsen, 1992, "Bloody good and bloody awful"; Braudy, 1998, "The Genre of Nature" pp. 289-290; Creekmur, 2001, "Buffalo Bill (Himself)" p. 143; Gorbman, 2001, "Drums along the L. A. River," p. 190; Grist, 1996, "Unforgiven"; Handley, 2002, *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation*, p. 19; Hayward, 2006, *Cinema Studies*, p. 214; This theme also appears in: Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood"; Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood"; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*.

¹⁴⁸ Merriam-Webster, Inc. 1990. *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, Massachusetts, p. 211.

Unforgiven is a classic Western in all these senses, yet it brings depth and greatness to the medium as few Westerns have done before.

Breskin writes that *Unforgiven* reframes the way we should see Eastwood's own great Westerns, making a classic. He praises what he sees as "rawhide revisionism ... antiromantic, antiheroic, and antiviolent," in its ideological tone.¹⁴⁹ Nevertheless, he does not describe the way this movie reframes the romantic by reflecting on love and gender relations, becomes heroic by reflecting on heroism, and reframes violence as a somber and sometimes tragic part of lived experience. *Unforgiven* rebuilds the Western, leaving open the possibility of new Westerns where there seemed to be none before.

In the years after *Unforgiven*, scholars, rather than movie critics, examined these possibilities.¹⁵⁰

Even at the time, however, some critics, such as Richard Blake, saw neither revisionism nor rebirth, but rather the last glimmer of a faded tradition,¹⁵¹ while Handley seemed to see continuity in Western movies anchored in the very fact of violence common to nearly all Westerns.¹⁵²

Even though some believe that Westerns took on new potential in the wake of *Unforgiven*, others declare the genre dead. James Monaco, for example, writes nearly nothing about Western movies in the third edition of his massive overview of film. He argues that the genre has little or no role in an increasingly urban world. He describes "Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) ... and Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992)," as "revisionist homages [that] serve as elegies to the genre."¹⁵³

David Bordwell takes a more nuanced position, describing the challenge of creating a movie in a genre where earlier directors have tried everything possible, making all the great movies in the process. "When we ask why virtually no great Westerns or musicals or domestic melodramas are made anymore," he writes, "one reason may be that our directors and writers can't find anything to add to the classic statements in those genres. All the best possibilities seem to have been mined."¹⁵⁴

Bordwell cited *Unforgiven* as exceptional, adding that most Westerns of the era "were misfires." Despite audiences that are not interested in Westerns, however, he notes that directors continue to make new Westerns in a struggle "to revive the genre."¹⁵⁵ He names Kevin Costner's *Open Range* (2003) as an example, or *The Missing* (2003), starring durable box office figures such as Costner, Robert Duvall, and Annette Bening, or Tommy Lee Jones and Cate Blanchett.

¹⁴⁹ Breskin, David. "Clint Eastwood: The Rolling Stone Interview."

¹⁵⁰ Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values,"; Braudy, 1998, "The Genre of Nature," p. 289; Gorbman, p. 190; Buchanan and Johnson, 2005 "*Unforgiven*,"; Grist, 1996, "*Unforgiven*";, p. 294, Keller, p. 30. This point is also implicit in Deborah Allison's discussion of Clint Eastwood's work as a director and producer producer. See Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood," .

¹⁵¹ Blake, 1992, "Absolved."

¹⁵² Handley, 2002, *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation*, p. 19.

¹⁵³ Monaco, James. 2000. *How to Read a Film. The World of Movies, Media, and Multimedia. Language, History, Theory*. Third edition completely revised and expanded. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 306.

¹⁵⁴ Bordwell, David. 2006. *The Way Hollywood Tells It. Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 56.

¹⁵⁵ Bordwell, David. 2006. *The Way Hollywood Tells It. Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 56.

Rather than reconstruction or regeneration, Susan Hayward argues that Eastwood repositions the genre. "Clint Eastwood's later Westerns are exemplary because he uses character ambiguity to question the genre itself," she writes, adding "The hero's own self-doubt or questioning leads to the genre itself being ambiguously positioned."¹⁵⁶ This position effectively pushes the Western into a liminal space, even perhaps into what Bordwell might label a new "genre ecology,"¹⁵⁷ relocating the Western at a new frontier where it may, perhaps, be reborn.

The General Nature of Film

Just as few commentators on *Unforgiven* examined the Western as a *genre*, few considered the general nature of film as a medium. This issue primarily appears where writer consider *Unforgiven* in the overall context of Eastwood's work as an actor or director.¹⁵⁸

Despite the lack of attention, we must measure *Unforgiven* as a work of art in terms of the general nature of film as a medium. *Unforgiven* won its awards in competition against all films in every category and genre, with four Oscars and another twenty-nine major honors. These honors had as much to do with the way that *Unforgiven* fulfilled the highest expectations of film as an art form as we the specific challenges and questions it raised within its genre.

It is notable to me that none of the critics or scholars comments on the nature of film as moving pictures or motion. Perhaps this is because we are so used by now to seeing film as an independent medium that we are no longer surprised that these images move and speak, but this is a conditioning factor of film and how we understand it. The director and the cinematographer use a vocabulary of technique to underline this fact. By cutting and editing, by framing image and choosing angles, by moving the camera and adopting points of view, the makers of a film underline and reinforce the fact of motion and movability. This, in turn, helps the film to become a liminal space. Interestingly, the films that explore these issues explicitly tend to be philosophical comedies such as *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) or *The Last Action Hero* (1993). Characters leave the screen world for the real world and real people move into the film in a way that explores the liminal space. But all films build on the nature of the liminal space, pouring out into the world of the viewer while inviting the viewer to enter the world of the film.

¹⁵⁶ Hayward, 2006, *Cinema Studies*, p. 18, also see p. 214.

¹⁵⁷ Bordwell, David. 2006. *The Way Hollywood Tells It. Story and Style in Modern Movies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 56.

¹⁵⁸ As a general theme in Eastwood films, see: Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood"; Ingrassia, 1998, "Writing the West"; This theme also appears in: Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood"; Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*.

4.2.5 Nomothetic Issues

Myth and Iconography

Myth and iconography are everywhere in this movie. As the literature demonstrates, *Unforgiven* brings forward each issue that is central to the legend of the West and the Western, examining and adding to legend at one point, deconstructing and questioning the Western iconography at another.

According to Blundell and Ormand, we can read *Unforgiven* in relation to the Iliad,¹⁵⁹ while Klawans compares it with Genesis.¹⁶⁰

Beneath the mythic surface of a Western iconography, *Unforgiven* involves a spiritual mythology. Spiritual works do not always seem to be about spiritual issues in a direct way. For example, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* is a deep, spiritual novel, even though it speaks of directly spiritual matters at only a few points. The most notable is a sermon that a former sailor turned preacher delivers on the book of Jonah, a book containing only "four chapters – four yarns – ... one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures."¹⁶¹ In this book from a book within another book, Melville brings several kinds of reading into play, much as *Unforgiven* brings the idea of book and myth into play when Little Bill reads aloud from *The Duke of Death*, WW Beauchamp's dime novel biography of English Bob. In *Moby Dick*, the book is from the Bible, and Melville uses it to draw a parallel between the New England vision of eternal truth and the fictional account he will present as Ishmael's history. In *Unforgiven*, scriptwriter David Webb Peoples uses the dime novel as a tactical parallel to challenge the myth of the West by repeating iconographic clichés as Little Bill takes them apart, one by one.

The second overtly spiritual moment in *Moby Dick* occurs in a whalers' communion when Captain Ahab asks his harpooners and his crew to toast and pledge the death of the white whale.¹⁶² This, too, has its parallel in *Unforgiven*, when Will Munny takes his first drink in over a decade. He is getting ready to kill Little Bill to avenge Ned's death, and we know without words that he is pledging the sheriff's death.

The mythic iconography of *Jonah* is an encounter with divine power when God commands the unwilling prophet directly. In the *Book of Job* or the tragedies of Sophocles, mythic iconography involves the human encounter with fate as much as it involves encountering divine power. *Unforgiven* is an encounter with fate. Nevertheless, all great Westerns involve the double theologies that date back to New England's Congregational and Unitarian churches. One face of this theology is the harsh, Puritan God of Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. The other is the loving, natural God of William Ellery Channing and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

¹⁵⁹ Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values."

¹⁶⁰ Klawans, 1992, "*Unforgiven*," *Nation*.

¹⁶¹ Melville, Herman. 1983. *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*. New York: Library of America, p. 838.

¹⁶² Melville, Herman. 1983. *Redburn, White-Jacket, Moby-Dick*. New York: Library of America, pp. 968-970.

Relatively few commentators discuss *Unforgiven* as a spiritual movie.¹⁶³ Nevertheless, it is rich in mythology and it is rich in the iconography that allows us to read and understand the myth. Through its artistic parallels and strategies, *Unforgiven* comes to resemble an archeological dig, an excavation into the midden of Western myth that opens layers of history and imagined history.

Transcendence

The theme of transcendence occurs in different ways throughout the literature on *Unforgiven*. It mostly involves two efforts to transcend a past: Will Munny's effort to transcend his past as an outlaw, and Clint Eastwood's effort to transcend his past career as a creator of Western movies. Most of the literature focuses on transcendence in terms of individual human nature: Will Munny's or Clint Eastwood's.

A subtler vision of transcendence occurs in articles that examine the nature of the film in a deeper way, asking how the themes of violence and community play out against each other in a situation when law and justice fail to meet.¹⁶⁴ For sociologists, humans are open to the world. They are not limited to a particular environment to which they react by instinct. Reality as a whole shapes the human environment. By their very nature, humans are born without a specific home or orientation in the world. Each individual must create his own environment. This happens when culture and context teach young humans how to be and who they are. The process continues through individual choice. As an attribute of humanity, transcendence is closely related to freedom. If freedom is the original open quality of human beings, transcendence is the continuing process of creativity and development.

To transcend means crossing boundaries and going beyond limits, and in this sense, transcendence is a dynamic idea. It involves becoming more and expanding. This expansion is an expansion of quality rather than quantity, deepening and enriching life. This larger vision means involvement in the world, relation with others, and commitment to community, politics, or religion. These are all modes of transcendence. *Unforgiven* also address the large vision of human transcendence, social as well as individual.

Motion

Motion is one of the topics notable by its effective absence from the literature on *Unforgiven*. While Hayward mentions the general tendency of Western heroes to move "across vast plains or desert land, arriving in small towns,"¹⁶⁵ nearly no one describes the journeys that play a role in the narrative or the role that motion plays in this film.

¹⁶³ Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values"; Ingrassia, 1998, "Writing the West"; Kamir, 2006, "Honor," p. 226, note 42; The implied theme of spirituality also occurs in the discussion of purgative violence in Plantinga, 1998, "Spectacles of Death," pp. 71-74. See also: Grist, 1996, "*Unforgiven*" p. 300. Issues in several more articles touch on the question of spirituality. See, for example, Grenier, 1994, "Eastwood Goes PC"; Klawans, 1992, "*Unforgiven*"; Luhr, 1996, "The scarred woman"; Zoglin, 1993, "Back from Boot Hill"; See also: Handley, 2002. *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation*, p. 19; Hayward, 2006, *Cinema Studies*, p. 214. As well, see relevant passages in: Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*.

¹⁶⁴ Blundell and Ormand, 1997, "Western Values"; Kamir 2006, "Honor," p. 226, note 42; Redmon, 2004, "Mechanisms of Violence," pp. 315-328; Sharrett, 1993, "Clint Eastwood's triumphs"; Wittman, 1993, "Go Ahead, Make My Career"; See also: Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*.

¹⁶⁵ Hayward, 2006, *Cinema Studies*, p. 214.

Motion plays an essential role in establishing the feeling of *Unforgiven* by creating a rhythm of natural time against human action, and by setting a stage that poses the open space of nature against the closed space of human action. This use of motion is common in Western movies, and Eastwood employs this kind of counterpoint with skill in *Unforgiven*.

Eastwood also uses motion to create a different sense of time and pacing in the two halves of the movie. In the first half, slow journeys are punctuated by human action as two trajectories move toward the murders and the showdown in Big Whiskey. In the second half, relentless action is punctuated by one slow ride across the landscape as a woman brings Will Munny the news of Ned's death just before the explosive conclusion. The motion in time and space is linked to another kind of motion, an inward motion as characters change and grow, some toward self-realization and transcendence, others toward a natural end that compounds their inner state.

The Land

Like motion, the land plays a central role in *Unforgiven*. Like the passage of motion, few writers comment on the land. From the first scene to the last, the huge, empty space of western prairies and mountains establish the context of in which the action takes place.

Writers often describe the Western land as unforgiving, but – with the exception of Will Munny's hard dirt farm – the land here seems to be rich and welcoming. It is the town rather than the land that seems harsh, with mud streets and bleached-out storefronts forming a contrast to the warm tones of the ranch-land and prairies. Even the snow-covered fields outside the barn where Munny, Logan, and the Kid hide from the sheriff seem peaceful and benign.

At the same time, land is a problem and a challenge in most Westerns, and conflict, land, and ownership are generally tangled up in the quarrels that define most Westerns. Here, those quarrels, and the issue of property and justice, do not involve land but the human beings who attempt to live on it. The land itself remains in the background, a hardly noticed theme.¹⁶⁶

This is odd. Nothing is clearer in Western movies than the presence of nature. Western heroes and travelers seek to escape the cities and even the tightly populated farmlands. As Burt Lancaster's character of Eli Wakefield says in *The Kentuckian* (1955), men go West to breath "air that ain't been breathed before," seeking a place where "a man don't bump up against his neighbors." In the mythology of the West, nature embraces man in a way that cities and towns do not. Emerson's transcendental philosophy is closely bound to nature as well. "In the woods," he writes, "we return to reason and faith."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ Buchanan and Johnson, 2005 "*Unforgiven*"; Hayward, 2006, *Cinema Studies*, p. 214; Some notice the land in passing, for example: Blake, 1992, "Absolved"; See also: Blomley, 2003, "Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence." This theme also appears in the discussions of Eastwood's broad career as an actor and director in: Breskin, 1992, "Clint Eastwood,," Gallafent, 1994, *Clint Eastwood*; Schickel, 1996, *Clint Eastwood*; Allison, 2003, "Clint Eastwood." See also: Tompkins, 1992, *West of Everything*.

¹⁶⁷ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. 1983. *Essays and Lectures*. New York: The Library of America, p. 11.

5. Analysis: Reflections on a Western

In the opening scene of *Unforgiven*, we see a man digging underneath an oak tree and we hear the sound of the shovel in dry earth. The tree, set against a deep, red sunset, suggests fertility and life. This scene of the tree and the sound of a grave being dug states two of the great parallel themes of *Unforgiven*, life and death, beginnings and ends.

The script crawl tells us who has died. It is William Munny's wife:

"She was a comely young woman and not without prospects. Therefore it was heartbreaking to her mother that she would enter into marriage with William Munny, a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition. When she died, it was not at his hands as her mother might have expected, but of smallpox. That was 1878."

The movie shifts abruptly to a panoramic view of a Western town nestled on the plains below a range of snowy mountains. It is night. This is Big Whiskey, Wyoming, in the year 1880. Despite the night scene and the stormy weather, everything is peaceful. Nothing hints at the violence to come. The camera brings us into the dark, rain swept streets of the town. We hear thunder, rain, plunking banjo music, and an indistinct woman's voice.

Suddenly, we are inside, in a dark room. Despite the motion through town, the vast landscape of the sunset and the mountain panorama make this an abrupt transition, moving from the open world of nature to the narrow world of men.

The sound of bedsprings and murmuring, until angry shouts explode. A man jumps out of bed naked, running to the next room. Chaos and shouting ensue. We can hardly see the action in the dark, but the screams and pleading tell us that terrible violence is under way, that a woman is suffering as a man attacks her.

As the action increases, we hear the click of a pistol cocking. The room goes silent and the camera pulls back to reveal a cold, angry man holding a gun to a man's head as the room goes silent.

We are outside again as someone brings the sheriff. The sheriff enters, walking through the hall to the room, looking in as a group of women tend another woman in bloody bandages.

The sheriff moves on to the saloon where two half-naked cowboys sit on the floor, tied back to back. One is Quick Mike, the cowboy who cut the woman. The other is his friend, Davey Bunting.

Sheriff Little Bill Daggett plans to whip Mike and Davey in punishment. Strawberry Alice, the leader among the women, demands that Bill hang them, but he says, "Whippin' ain't no little thing, Alice." Then brothel owner Skinny Dubois claims financial compensation for the loss of his investment in the injured prostitute, Delilah Fitzgerald. Little Bill agrees, telling the cowboys that they must pay Skinny in ponies come spring. Alice is outraged, asking Little Bill why he isn't even going to whip them. He asks, "Ain't you seen enough blood for one night?"

The scene turns to daytime, with a brief view of the mountain panorama and the sound of a hawk screaming. Then it cuts to the interior of a room, where the women sit tending their cut friend, the camera moving back and forth among them as they talk. Alice argues that there has been no punishment for the attack on Delilah that acknowledges Delilah's human rights rather than Skinny's property rights. Alice raises the issue of human rights versus property rights, comparing the way that Skinny and Bill treated Delilah to an argument over a horse: "Just because we let them smelly fools ride us like horses don't mean we got to let 'em brand us like we're horses. Maybe we ain't nothin' but whores, but we ... by God, we ain't horses."

At the same time that Alice is outraged for Delilah, she is outraged for the way that Little Bill and Skinny have implicitly treated all the women. While the ostensible claim involves justice for Delilah, the real focus shifts from Delilah to the group, from the individual to the collectivity of all the women who work at Greely's.

The culture of the West is a violent culture, and Alice represents this culture. The law recognizes payment in kind: violence calls for violence and justice demands blood. While Little Bill's solution avoided violence, transcending the cycle of retribution, Bill granted justice to Skinny and none to the victim. Delilah's value is entirely invested in her role as a prostitute, while society places little value in her as a human being. The women believe that Bill does not exact a fair punishment, so they require an avenger. The only kind of bounty that will attract an avenger is a reward for killing the cowboys. The demand for justice arouses our sympathy, but the demand for blood leaves us uncomfortable. The women demand revenge rather than justice.

Just as Alice represents the culture by demanding retribution, the women are embedded in their culture in ways that must have been more common in the historical west than in western movies. The way the women dress is an example. The women in this movie are simply dressed as women. These prostitutes look like most women do. They dress like the housewives, teenage girls, and maiden aunts in other westerns, without the thick makeup and sexy costumes that would distinguish them as prostitutes or saloon girls. We never see them in the bar. We meet them in their own rooms. They have a social group among themselves, talking, playing cards, helping each other. We don't think of them as prostitutes until we hear people speak of them as prostitutes. The movie does not present these women as "the other woman," compared with housewives and shopkeepers. There are no "fancy women" in *Unforgiven*. Despite working in the sex trade, the movie does not present these women as sexual objects, but as human beings with character of their own, as flawed and yet as genuine as the sheriff, the deputies, or the cowboys.

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The next scene shows a girl running across the screen like Laura Ingalls in *The Little House on the Prairie*. But she is not a healthy farm girl running from one part of a prosperous farm to another. She looks pale and undernourished, just as her brother does. She runs to a man working in a muddy hog pen with a rickety fence on a run-down farm.

The man stumbles, sprawling out in mud and pig shit. Suddenly, he hears a youthful voice say, "You don't look like no rootin', tootin' sonofabitchin' cold-blooded assassin." The man looks up from the mud to see a man on horseback outlined against the sky. The man in the hog pen is Will Munny, a thief and murderer now turned farmer. The man on horseback is the Schofield Kid.

Will and the Kid walk into a sod farmhouse to talk. The interior of the house is dark, and the world outside bright with a light that is so strong that it almost seems to bleach the view against the showed interior. The opening crawl told us a little about Will Munny's dark past: the interior shots suggest what we will come to recognize as Munny's inner world. It is spare, poorly furnished, impoverished and dirty. Munny is haunted by a past that he cannot yet leave behind. The outside world shines through the window and the open door, almost too bright for an isolated life that somehow holds him to the past. At one point, he says to the Kid, "We don't never see no one out here," a comment on his isolation in the wilderness, a New England in the West where Will and his wife Claudia sought to redeem his outlaw past in a radically different life of work and family.

The Kid wants Will to be his partner in killing two cowboys. Will asks why. "For cutting up a lady," the Kid tells him, describing the cutting as a far worse and more elaborate event than took place. Declining the invitation, Will says, "I ain't like that any more, Kid. It's whiskey done it as much as anything else." The Kid addresses Will as a hero-outlaw. Will responds by claiming no credit – he counts his deeds as the result of drinking rather than personal courage, and says that he hasn't had a drink in the ten years since his wife cured him "of drinking and wickedness."

As the movie develops, we learn that Will was drunk and more or less unconscious of his actions during most of his crimes. He does not even remember some of the most violent deeds. Alcohol abuse seems to have triggered his violent behavior, with killings, memory loss, and new cycles of drinking taking place in a vicious cycle. The Kid idolizes Munny for his deeds, treating him with the respect due an honored elder. For Will, honor has nothing to do with it. Will tells the Kid that he's left that life behind. The Kid accepts his decision, but tells him that he is still welcome if he should change his mind. When the Kid leaves, Will returns to the hogs. As he does, he looks out to see the Kid outlined against the wide horizon. The look in his eye reveals a sense of longing.

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Unforgiven builds a visual narrative to support the narrative of action and rhetorical claims. The visual narrative includes five key elements: transition between inner and outer spaces; motion between those spaces; framed views to contrast the difference between inside and outside by using light and darkness to deepen the narrative; shifting points of view to establish dialogue, continuity, and conversation; portraiture to reveal and illustrate character. Framing and the contrasting use of light and darkness build a rhythm to emphasize the pace and timing of *Unforgiven* through a different use of light against darkness in the first half of the film from the opening to Will's recovery in a barn outside Big Whiskey as compared with the use of light against darkness in the second half of the film from the murders to the end. The visual narrative shows us how to understand the action, helping us to interpret the movie and relate the actors to the space they inhabit. This narrative reveals the inner dimensions of characters whose faces and bodies show us what their voices may not say. The outdoor sequences reveal a beautiful landscape out of keeping with the shabbiness and squalor of human action. We see the two worlds that meet in every Western, the clean world of the wilderness, the shabby world of men.

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The women are hanging laundry in Big Whiskey when Quick Mike and Davey Bunting enter town leading the ponies they must pay Skinny as the penalty for the attack. They ride up to Skinny, handing him all the ponies but one. Skinny reaches for the last pony but Davey pulls back, saying it is not for him. Suddenly, the women begin to pelt the cowboys with mud. As they do, Davey dismounts to offer the pony to Delilah.

"This here pony," Davey says in a voice filled with emotion and close to tears, "I brung it for the lady, the one my partner cut."

We see a close-up of Delilah's face, with scars beneath her eyes. Delilah looks at Davey as the women grow silent. They are puzzled by Davey's regret, by his remorse and his willingness to make amends directly with Delilah. Suddenly, breaking the silence, Alice and then the other women pelt Davey with mud and he retreats, riding out of town.

At this moment, we see that some of the women seem to be filled with remorse at their own actions, but driven on by Alice, they do not accept the opportunity to forgive. Delilah looks down as Davey rides away, trapped by the hatred of the moment, apparently not wishing to hate Davey, but not daring to leave the solidarity of her group, especially not when they believe that they are acting to support her.

This scene is pivotal to the movie. Davey seeks to transcend the boundaries of the social structure, acknowledging Delilah's humanity to ask forgiveness and seek justice outside the bounds of requirement. He also transcends the limits of expected male behavior, showing respect to a woman and demonstrating empathy, separating himself from the cult of macho pride by attempting to make a voluntary sacrifice. When this situation occurs, Alice and the women are trapped by the system they claim to reject. Even as they demand justice and ask to be treated as human being, they cannot accept the dignity and human respect that Davey offers them.

When faced with an act of sincere apology and an effort to achieve reconciliation, the women remain trapped by the limits of a violent culture, just as they were trapped when Little Bill denied Delilah justice by treating her as property. The violent culture in which they live demands vengeance as the atonement for every crime, and they cannot see beyond it, a lack of vision that keeps them in their place as much as Skinny and Little Bill do. This becomes a question about the relation between human beings and community. Can we step outside our culture? This question runs through the movie, involving more than the women. It involves the key figures of Will Munny and Little Bill Daggett. Both men struggle with violence. Little Bill's authority rests on implied violence. Will seeks to escape a violent past. Yet both live in a violent culture they cannot truly leave.

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At this point, *Unforgiven* returns to the Munny farm and Will is inside the house. He reaches into a chest, finding a picture of a woman – presumably his dead wife – and a pistol. He takes the gun, walking outside to shoot at a target. He misses the target, leaving to return with a shotgun that blasts the target away. He has changed his mind about the bounty.

Even though he changes his mind, he remains ambivalent. His wife would not have wanted him to return to his old life as a killer, and we see him looking from the inside of the house out to the grave. He visits the grave, and rides away, attempting to mount his horse unsuccessfully on several tries before finally succeeding. His children watch him ride off.

Will rides to a well-kept, prosperous farm where an Indian woman and a black man are at work. The Indian woman is Sally Two Trees. The black man is her husband, Ned Logan, Will's old partner. Sally takes Will's horse as he and Ned enter the house.

This house is neat and well kept, with a well-stocked garden and fields of ripening corn. The two men's houses reveal different lives. Will's walls were bare wood. The one room we saw in Will's sod shack was dark. Ned's walls are painted. We can see several rooms, and the rooms are light and cheery. Ned is at ease with who he has become, building a comfortable life for himself and his wife. He offers Will coffee, serving it in clean ceramic mugs. At home, Will drinks from the same kind of tin cup he uses on the trail.

Will asks Ned to come on the killing to collect the reward. Ned refuses, saying, "We ain't bad men no more. ... We're farmers." Will goes on, telling Ned an increasingly exaggerated story of the cutting, discussing the reward and his hope to get a new start for his kids. As he hears about the story, Ned nods, saying, "I guess they got it coming." Ned has been thinking during the conversation, and as Will gets up to leave, Ned decides to join Will after all. Leaving the house, they mount horses, riding away as Sally watches them.

Will and Ned ride casually across the open landscape. The scene is beautiful. The land is warm, inviting, and friendly. Later, Ned and Will sit by a campfire. They talk about the past while Will insistently refers to the way he has changed. "I'm just a fella now," he says, "I ain't no different from anyone else no more."

These scenes tell three stories. One story compares Ned's settled prosperity against Will's tenuous struggle with a worn-out farm. The second story shows two friends in easy companionship, riding across the land in the warm haze summer. The third story reveals two ways to reconcile the present with the past. Ned has come to accept himself for good and for bad, enjoying his new life and the pleasures it affords. Will struggles with inner demons and dark deeds, trying too hard to live up to the idealized self Claudia helped him to create while rejecting the self he fears he still may be.

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We see a train moving through the landscape before we shift to the interior of the railroad coach. A man with a lordly English accent reads the newspaper aloud, talking with grandiloquent gestures as he describes the shooting of President James Garfield. Other passengers listen uncomfortably. This is English Bob, a gunman who works as a regulator for the railroads, a man paid to kill or threaten others at the railroad's behest. Next to him sits WW Beauchamp, a writer of dime novels. We later learn that Beauchamp is traveling the west as Bob's biographer, writing lurid booklets about Bob's adventures as "the Duke of Death." Beauchamp wears an urban hat, glasses, and a brown suit. He carries a briefcase filled with pens and paper, looking like an accountant or a schoolteacher. When the train stops, Bob and WW dismount to ride a jouncing wagon from the station into town. As they pass a sign, the camera lingers significantly on the text: "No Firearms in Big Whiskey."

In town, the men stand outside a barbershop talking with a deputy who informs them of the firearms law. Bob denies carrying firearms, while the camera lingers on Bob's visible guns before they enter the shop. As they leave the barbershop several scenes later, Bob asks how to find Strawberry Alice. In this way, we learn that he has come to kill the cowboys for the bounty. When Bob walks out the door, he and WW find themselves surrounded by a circle of deputies pointing rifles and shotguns at them. Bob looks up to see Little Bill Daggett, the sheriff. Bob knew Bill in the old days, and from their conversation, it is clear that Bill has also been a gunman as well as a sheriff. Bill moves to the porch, talking with Bob and taking his visible guns before demanding a hidden pistol that Bob hands over with evident anger. Suddenly, Bill punches Bob, knocking him off the porch into the street. Then, Bill kicks Bob brutally as he crawls up the street until he collapses near a wagon.

All the main characters are now on stage. Two pivotal characters represents opposites, Little Bill Daggett and Will Munny. They also represent parallel paths. Each man has a violent past. Will was an outlaw. Bill has been a frontier sheriff, but like many frontier sheriffs, he has walked both sides of the law. Both have dark and violent sides to their nature. On the surface, Little Bill is a jovial citizen, building a house. Nevertheless, when others challenge his sense of order, he flies into an uncontrolled, sadistic rage. Will regrets his outlaw past, controlling his violence with the internalized, pious vision of his dead wife, Claudia. But his piety is merely internalized, not integrated. Both Will Munny and Little Bill Daggett have a dual nature in this film. Each is a hero and a villain. *Unforgiven* drags each of them into a violence he seeks to transcend: Munny into the violence of his former outlaw life as he goes on the bounty hunt, Daggett into the uncontrolled violence that lurks beneath his action for the law.

Ned Logan is Will's old partner, friendly, honest, generous and open. But Ned's friendship proves misguided in a sense. In allowing Will to persuade him to go on the killing, he returns in part to his old ways, setting in motion a chain of events that will bring his life to an end.

English Bob is a gunman and regulator, just on the other side of the law, where Little Bill once stood. On the one hand, Bob is a quasi-criminal entrepreneur of violence. On the other, he dresses as a gentleman, behaving with an aristocratic grandeur that set him apart from his surroundings and his trade. He pretends to be the voice of ancient Europe, preaching genuine civilization to the rude folk of America. In reality, he is a sociopath with no consideration for the law or for his fellow men.

WW Beauchamp is Bob's amanuensis and biographer, idolizing his deeds while transforming him into a legend. WW represents the easterner, viewing the west through imaginary deeds while he is blind to the realities of the culture he attempts to examine and report. Appearing at key moments in the action, he serves as a chorus to the tragedy that follows. But WW is not the knowing chorus of Greek tragedy. He idolizes violence, but he loses control of his bladder when a gun points his way and he cannot even touch the trigger when Little Bill hands him a gun. WW does not play the chorus as the open eye of history. He uses Bob and Little Bill as vicarious substitutes for violent acts he dreams about but cannot perform.

The Scholefield Kid is an aspiring gunfighter. He aspires to be what Will once was, not yet understanding what it is that he wants to become. While the Kid brags about killing five men, he has never killed anyone, and he is as blind to the realities of the gunfighter's life as WW Beauchamp. In the movie, WW wears glasses and the Kid needs them. Neither sees reality as it is. By the end of the movie, however, the Kid will see the truth. His moment of conversion takes place after he actually kills a man, and the pain of realizing what he has done leads him from his wish for outlaw glory to prefer an ordinary life. If WW is an inadvertent chorus stumbling to describe the West, the Kid takes on the deeper role of chorus where he understands and voices the horror that we experience.

These characters form two intersecting triangles. Bob, Bill, and Will represent a triangle of violence as they play their complex, ambiguous roles. Bill is the law, but he bends the law to achieve his goals. Will is an outlaw, but he has left the outlaw life, returning this once to earn enough money for a new start while serving the claim of justice to do so. Bob is an outlaw who comes on the same errand, but he steps on the wrong side of the law to become a clown. Failing to fulfill his mission, he loses his role as an avatar of the gunfighter spirit. Bob's biographer leaves him for Little Bill and a new interpretation of the west, while Bill throws Bob out of town with bent guns.

The other triangle is a more complex group of intersecting societies gathered around three causes: justice, vengeance, and understanding. The ambiguous intersections of these causes – and their very meaning – provide the ambiguity and force that drives the movie forward. The triggering event, the cutting, calls for justice. But justice in the Western takes two faces, human rights and property rights. Little Bill acknowledges property rights while neglecting human rights. This brings vengeance into play, forming a second constellation of causes. The women demand vengeance. While vengeance is a call for human justice, it opposes a second kind of justice, the justice of the law. By offering a reward, the women release a new chain of violence, bringing two groups of actors to Big Whiskey. The first group is the odd couple of English Bob and WW Beauchamp. The second group is the trio, Will Munny, Ned Logan, and the Scholefield Kid. But this trio is also a paired couple: Will and Ned are retired outlaws, bad men who turned to farming, while the Kid is a farm boy who aspires to the outlaw life. The odd men of these two groups – WW and the Scholefield Kid – serve the cause of understanding. They are witnesses, chorus to our thoughts. Each of them deals in myth and idolatry. WW is a dime novelist playing bargain basement Homer to English Bob's cheap Achilles. The Kid has grown up on outlaw legends, feeding on tales of Will Munny at the family dinner table while hoping to carve his name in a Western *Iliad*. Both are outsiders: WW as an Eastern dude stumbling through the West, the Kid as an ordinary youngster who wants to be an outlaw and gunman. In a sense, they serve as witness because they are outsiders. they try to integrate and understand what they see in a series of running comments that reports what they see to the audience. Both choruses, however, are blind to reality, metaphorically and literally, but the Kid will learn to see while WW will move from English Bob's cheap Achilles to Little Bill's Agamemnon and briefly to Will Munny, the man who repudiates the myth to walk away as an "ordinary fellow."

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The next round of violence starts in an almost comic way with WW and Bill sitting in the house that Bill has built. The roof leaks, and rain pours in, filling an assortment of pots and pans. Bill leaps and hops among the pans, emptying them as he tells WW about the real West of bad men and gunfighters who more often tend to be cowards than brave men, "tramps an' drunk teamsters an' crazy miners ... sportin' their pistols an' acting like they was bad men, but without and nor character ... not even any bad character." As they talk, deputy Charlie Hecker arrives to tell Little Bill that armed strangers have come to town.

The next scene shifts to Greely's saloon, where Will and Ned sit talking. Will has a fever and he hallucinates about Eagle Hendershot, a dead comrade. Ned offers Will some whiskey, but Will refuses. Then Ned goes upstairs to find the Kid and spend time with the women.

As Will sits quietly at the table, Little Bill suddenly appears behind him. Little Bill asks if he is armed, allowing that he might have missed the sign at the town limits owing to bad weather, but Will – feverish and not understanding – denies that he has a gun. When Little Bill asks Will's name, he answers "William ... uh ... Hendershot." Then Little Bill pushes the conversation forward, establishing that Will has a gun and demonstrating that it is loaded before he takes Will's gun away. Once Will is disarmed, the sheriff knocks him down with the pistol before beating him mercilessly. As Will crawls along the floor, Bill says to WW, "This here is the sort of trash I was speaking of. You will find these kind in the saloons of your prosperous communities ... Wichita ... over in Cheyenne ... Abilene ... but you won't find them in the town of Big Whiskey." Half conscious, Will crawls out of the saloon, covered with blood, as the sheriff says with false joviality, "Let the man out, WW. He is desiring to leave the hospitality of Big Whiskey behind him."

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The next few scenes form a pivotal point in the movie. Both take place in a barn where Ned and the Kid take Will to nurse him back to health. Set in a dark, nighttime, Ned stitches Will's cuts by candlelight while the Kid proclaims that Will must have been beaten because his pistol jammed. When the women bring food and supplies, however, the Kid learns that Will was beaten after handing his gun over to the sheriff. Her cannot reconcile the ideal gunman and killer with someone the sheriff could disarm and beat, losing respect for Will without allowing for circumstances.

Later, we hear Will call out to Ned as he hallucinates. He sees the dead face of his wife in her grave, and then he sees the angel of death. "Oh, Ned," he says, "I'm scared of dyin'. Don't tell nobody. Don't tell the kids none of the things I done." Over the next three days, Will sleeps and recovers from the beating.

When he returns to health, we see him sitting with the cut woman, Delilah, talking, then eating as he sits quietly outside the barn with the land covered in a late, light snow. Here, we emerge from a dark interior to a light exterior one last time. This is the last peaceful conversation we hear in *Unforgiven* before a sequence of uninterrupted violence. The peacefulness of this scene becomes all the more poignant set against the action that comes next.

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The second, climactic half of the movie begins with cowboys branding cattle in a canyon. Ned, Will, and the Kid assassinate Davey Bunting from a hiding place above the canyon. Ned shoots at Davey, but he misses, hitting Davey's horse. The horse falls, breaking Davey's leg and pinning him down. Ned takes two more shots, missing both as Davey pulls his leg free and begins to crawl away. The slow, almost unhurried pace of the action underscores the violence of the murder as the three killers shoot while the cowboy tries to reach safety. Ned cannot shoot again, however, and Will takes the rifle. He hits Davey with the bullet that will kill him just as Davey reaches the shelter of a rock. Now we watch as they wait for Davey to die. We see their faces as they listen to Davey's voice crying out like a child, "I'm dyin' ... I don't want to die ... I don't want to die."

After Davey dies, the three ride off. As Will talks about tracking Quick Mike down, Ned announces that he will no longer participate in the killings. They part company, and Ned rides away.

The next scene takes place at night in Big Whiskey, but we will see no more dramatic shifts from dark to light. Night scenes take place at night, day scenes in the day. The tone of each scene is consistently dark or consistently light. The earlier contrasts that give the first half of the movie its dramatic chiaroscuro effect are gone. The second half of *Unforgiven* also has none of the visible motion between interiors and exteriors that typify the early scenes.

In changing the use of dark against light, the second half of *Unforgiven* is distinctly different to the first half. In the beginning of the movie, shifts between dark and light seem to announce a conflict within men. At the end, day and night are simply conditions against which the drama takes place.

There is a second shift between the two halves of the movie. After the first confused explosion of violence, everything in the first half is slow and studied. We see the land and we watch people move against the landscape. Riders lope across the plains. A train rolls past greenery filled with birds. Friends camp out, talking in the firelight against the dark night. Up to the moment that Will recovers from his beating, the pace is slow and reflective. Active sequences are separated with time for contemplation. The audience has time to look, to take the content in, to digest it, and to integrate the rich complex of causes and themes. Events move forward swiftly in the second half of the movie. Action causes action in an unrelenting pace. From the murder of Davey Bunting to the end of the movie, there is only one pause for reflection. The pace of the first half of the movie allowed the audience to witness and reflect. The pace in the second half pulls the audience forward, shifting viewers into a more active role by robbing them of distance from the action.

As the action moves forward, a group of cowboys brings Ned into Big Whiskey, captive and sitting on his horse.

At the same time, Will and the Kid wait to kill Quick Mike. They squat in the bushes outside a bunkhouse. Repeatedly asking whether Mike has emerged from the bunkhouse, the Kid makes Will promise to let him do the killing.

It is day while Little Bill whips Ned to make him confess. The light is as bright in the sheriff's office as on the street as we see the sheriff's raw brutality at first hand. Out into the street, we see the women's horrified faces as they listen to the sound of the whip. While the women cannot know that Ned is innocent of the killing, they must nevertheless feel remorse at the violence they have unleashed.

In bunkhouse at the ranch, men play cards while the Kid and Will wait outside. Quick Mike goes out to use the outhouse. The Kid rushes up to the outhouse, throwing open the door to kill Mike as he sits. After the killing, the two men make their escape. Will and the Kid have completed the contract to murder two cowboys in vengeance for the violent and unprovoked attack on Delilah.

There will be one more slow, open scene before the final showdown. One of the women approaches slowly from the distance as Will and the Kid stand talking while they wait for their pay. The Kid feels deep remorse for shooting Quick Mike, the first man he ever killed. At last, he understands what gunplay means. He breaks down crying, "Oh Jesus Christ," he weeps, "it don't seem real ... how he ain't gonna breathe again never. Now he's dead. An' the other one, too. All on account of just pullin' a trigger."

"It's a hell of thing, killin' a man," Munny replies. "You take away all he's got an' all he's ever gonna have."

The paradox of this scene is that it is Quick Mike and not Davey who triggers this outpouring of remorse. Mike was arrogant and brutal. He showed no regret for cutting Delilah, and he delivered the ponies with poorly disguised anger over losing his property. But it is Quick Mike and not the friendly, easy-going Davey who triggers the Kid's conversion.

Then the rider reaches them, and when she does, Will learns what has happened to Ned. A change comes over Will. He sets aside Claudia's moral influence as he picks up the whiskey bottle to begin drinking. "So Little Bill killed Ned for what we done," he says. At this moment, the movie shifts from the realistic world of ambiguous causes and effects in networks of relations to the mythic world of clear cause and effect, a world where what we do and what we deserve are measured one against the other. At this moment, the reluctant former outlaw takes on the face of an enraged killer as the woman and Kid shrink in fear. Will asks for the Kid's gun, and the Kid hands it over. "Keep it," the Kid tells Will, "I won't kill nobody no more ... I ain't like you, Will." *Unforgiven* changes character as we begin to anticipate what will happen next as Will seeks vengeance for killing Ned and displaying his body instead of burying him.

Will and the Kid ride toward Big Whiskey. Will bids farewell to the Kid, riding into town to find Ned's body propped upright in a coffin outside Greely's saloon with a sign on his chest. Will enters the saloon. The scene is boisterous, but everyone grows silent. What happens next fulfills our expectations of the western genre.

Asking who owns the saloon, Skinny steps forward and Will kills him. When Little Bill calls him a coward for shooting an unarmed man, Will says, "...he should have armed himself if he was gonna decorate his saloon with my friend." "You'd be William Munny out of Missouri," replies Little Bill, "killer of women and children."

Until this point in the movie, Will has always answered statements about his past by saying that he is no longer like that, that he has changed. Now, however, he acknowledges his past and this aspect of his personality, saying, "That's right. I've killed women and children ... killed just about everything that walked or crawls at one time or another an' I'm here to kill you, Little Bill, for what you did to Ned."

Then, Will fires at Little Bill, and when his gun misfires, a blur of action erupts as Little Bill and the deputies attempt to shoot Will. The action is fast and nothing is clear. When the action stops, Will is unharmed and five men lie dead or dying.

Will stands as everyone who has been watching runs for the rear exit. When WW crawls out from beneath the body of a deputy, he approaches Will with questions. Will has replaced English Bob and Little Bill as the new top gun in Beauchamp's pantheon. Will's terse rebuttal scares Beauchamp away, and Will stands alone in the saloon when Little Bill regains consciousness, struggling to aim his gun at Will. Will hears the sound of a gun cocking and walks to Bill, standing on his wrist as the pistol fires to the side.

Now we hear the final exchange between Little Bill and Will Munny. Little Bill says, "I don't deserve to die like this. I was building a house." Will answers, "deserve's got nothing to do with it" before shooting him point blank.

Will leaves the saloon, riding out of town into the night. We do not see him again.

The violence in this final scene is a sharp contrast to the violence of earlier scenes. In earlier scenes, we understand the violence from the victim's perspective, whether it is Quick Mike cutting Delilah, Little Bill kicking English Bob, or Will Munny shooting Davey Bunting. We see realistic violence, and *Unforgiven* confronts us repeatedly with the ugliness and pain of these deeds. In this scene, we no longer see the complexity and ambivalence of the earlier scenes. The gunfight is heroic. At the end, we do not see Little Bill die. We only see Will Munny's angry face as he pulls the trigger.

Will's heroism extends beyond the gunfight. It involves the conceptual climax of the movie, where Will kills Little Bill. Until now, we have empathized with Will's reluctance. Our sympathies have been with the victims. Here, we sympathize with Will. We want him to seek vengeance for his friend. Will becomes an archetypal Western hero, collapsing vengeance and justice into the uneasy amalgam that has driven the plot of Western movies from the earliest days of the century to the days of the new Western. We replace our repugnance over violence and our sympathy for Will's effort to reject his past as we shift into the powerful culture of the traditional Western nomos. As we do, we experience a complex catharsis.

Will Munny disguised his name to deny his past. In the final showdown, Will accepts his name, accepting his past at the same time. In doing so, Will Munny becomes more than a character in a movie. He engages us in the action as knowing witnesses. We take on the role of active chorus because we know what no one in *Big Whiskey* knows: we know that the actor who brings Will Munny to life on the screen is also *The Man With No Name*. At the moment he accepts his name, he brings name and namelessness together, becoming a man and entering the myth at the same time.

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In the closing scene, we see the grave beneath the oak tree. A text crawls by, telling us,

"Some years later, Mrs. Ansonia Feathers made the arduous journey to Hodgeman County to visit the last resting place of her only daughter. William Munny had long since sold the place and disappeared with the children ... some said to San Francisco where it was rumored he prospered as a dry goods merchant under a different name. And there was nothing on the stone to explain to Mrs. Feathers why her only daughter had married a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition."

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Unforgiven positions each viewer as chorus and as witness to the action. Eastwood puts us in this position through his mastery of film technique: camera, lighting, staging, and the direction of the drama. The portrayal of violence in the beginning of the movie is realistic. It confronts us with pain, suffering, and death. The movie portrays complicated characters that struggle with the past, with feelings, and with inner conflicts. The characters in this movie are real: they are genuine human beings, round, full, and complicated. They are like most people, mixed and difficult. We do not sympathize with all of them, but we do not condemn them.

At the climax of the movie, Eastwood changes levels, leaving the realistic mirror of life to achieve a mythic narration. The shift takes place when Will Munny begins to drink. This explicit reference to Munny's alcoholic past contains an unstated reference to mythic shaman-warriors who drink and take drugs to enter the spirit world. Munny saw the angel of death in the three days that he lay close to death. Here, he takes the role of death.

During his close to death experience, he said that the angel of death "has snake eyes." The snake brings knowledge and mortality to men, but we do not learn what Munny discovers in the eyes of death.

In his realistic assessment of the gunfighter's trade, Will reflects – "It's a hell of a thing, killin' a man." In the next moment, he prepares to take vengeance for Ned, turning inward and silent as mythic heroes do, rather than reaching for articulate understanding.

The first part of the movie functions to destabilize us, challenging our expectations, taking us out of the Western nomos by showing us the West as it must have actually been. This is as troubling as it is genuine. We go to the movies to leave reality behind as much as we do to witness reality. We are relieved when Eastwood offers us the opportunity to enter the mythic world. When Will begins to drink, the narrative leaves the real world with its ambiguities discomforts, and pain. The narrative draws us into the myth when Eastwood the actor becomes the man we have always known him to be.

6 Conclusion

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