

THE UNFORGIVEN [1992]

by

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Unforgiven - Directed and produced by Clint Eastwood. Written by David Webb Peoples. Released 1992 by Warner Bros.

Will Munny (Clint Eastwood), an apparently reformed alcoholic and psychotic mass murderer, is now an unsuccessful pig farmer in 1870s Kansas. After eleven years of retirement and marriage, he again goes bounty hunting with his former partner and now successful farmer, Ned Roundtree (Morgan Freeman) and a new firebrand partner, The Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett), a naive boy intent on establishing his reputation as a killer. Their goal is to collect a thousand dollar bounty, offered by the prostitutes of Big Whisky for killing two cowboys who disfigured one of them. Protecting the town from lawlessness is a sadistic sheriff, Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman), who demonstrates his style of law enforcement by almost beating to death an unarmed bounty hunter, English Bob (Richard Harris). Will, Ned and The Kid kill the cowboys, but Ned is captured, tortured and killed by Little Bill. The Kid, after his first killing, loses all taste for violence and returns home. Will, now alone, confronts and kills Little Bill in an orgy of violence.

Unforgiven's success took everyone by surprise. Westerns have ebbed in recent decades, and revivals, neo-Westerns, if you will, not completely ignored by audiences had little to do with the Western myth itself. These endeavors relied on comedic personalities like *Three Amigos!* [1986] (Steve Martin, Chevy Chase and Martin Short), or parody, like *Rustler's Rhapsody* [1985], or the attraction of young, "box-office" stars as in *Young Guns* [1988].

Hollywood, of course, judges a film by the proceeds and *Unforgiven* scored impressively: a \$15 million opening weekend and \$33.8 million by its second week. Pundits account for this success in various ways: a strong trailer; timing (an August opening after a summer that didn't live up to anyone's income expectations).

But look at what the film, in Hollywood terms, had going *against* it: Westerns are supposed to be dead, Clint Eastwood is supposed to be in semi-retirement as the mayor of Carmel, and roles for actors "of a certain age" (Eastwood is 62, Gene Hackman is 61, and Morgan Freeman, the youngster of the group, is 55) are scarce.

But what most of these writers have forgotten is the obvious: beyond curiosity and star appeal, people respond to what a film has to say, and *Unforgiven* says some very interesting things. Its gritty revisionism is fairly obvious (Eastwood is introduced at the

dirty end of a pig); on closer inspection, it points criticisms at some of the audience's important economic and psychological assumptions.

Westerns are about "The Frontier," a thin, ever-moving line that physically, sociologically, and psychologically separates savagery and civilization. Before "The Frontier" is wilderness; behind it, established American society. Westerns fall easily into three categories: adventures of the early 19th century before "The Frontier," in the zone of savagery (Daniel Boone, Lewis and Clark, and Indian fighters like Buffalo Bill or George Custer are all examples), adventures of "The Frontier" in the mid- to late-19th century (Roy Roger, Hopalong Cassidy, and their fellows), and threats to an already established civilization in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The first are primarily stories of heroism, adventure, and conquest (and often genocide). The second are frequently simple parables demonstrating American economic or social values, or justifying the current version of American history. The third category contains the most thought provoking films of the genre: *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* [1962], *The Wild Bunch* [1969], *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* [1971], *High Noon* [1952], and *Shane* [1953] are typical. Since *Unforgiven* falls into this latter category, let's take a closer look at it.

Signaling the frontier's passing on its Westward journey into the wilderness are several icons: the arrival of organized banking (*Stagecoach* [1939]), law (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*), more than a single religion (*High Noon*), farming (*Shane*), and businesses not founded by their owners (*Unforgiven*).

In these newly-civilized towns, threats come from two directions: East or West. The Western threat is the reemergence of barbarism, typically (and embarrassingly) symbolized or actualized by the Indians. Eastern threats are usually miniaturized versions of big city troubles, those very ills many were trying to escape by going West. (Ironically, Will Munny went East, not West, to avoid the violence and alcoholism he found in the Western town.) Typical of these Eastern woes are the greedy cattle baron infringing on the rights of the farmers, railroads buying up worthless land only to establish profitable cities, and so on. The ills portrayed in *Unforgiven* – the same as in most other Westerns, but now treated at a less exaggerated, more existential level – are capitalism and materialism.

Unforgiven's materialism is everywhere, even in the hero's name – Will Munny – whose last name is an obvious pun on "money." But so is his first name: Will = William = Bill = Bank Note. His children are named Will and Penny. The ambiguous role of money is central to the film: the whores work overtime to make money to hire killers; when they don't raise enough money, they substitute their own bodies, thus merchandising themselves no less than when the sheriff equates their value with horses (another pun, whores = horses); English Bob and the other assassins, riding high on reputations of honor and heroism, are interested only in the bounty on the cowboy's heads; Skinny, the owner of Greeley's saloon and brothel, insists that the establishment uphold his legal contracts and assure him a profitable business.

On the other side of the coin (sorry, bad pun) is Munny's desire to start a new life for his children. More symbolically, Will gives The Kid money to end his nearsightedness. Money, and what it commonly symbolizes – energy or driving force – can be either a means for good or for evil, depending on the maturity of the consciousness that controls it. And it is Will Munny who will have the opportunity to break the connections between money, power, and violence, if only he can rise above his past.

Surrounding and amplifying this central question of the quality of the consciousness are the characters surrounding Munny: his wife, Ned, The Kid, English Bob, Little Bill, Beauchamp, and the whores. Since Eastwood's film characters are often men with intense inner lives but with little ability to communicate, we must look to these other characters in the film for extensions and elaborations of specific aspects of his psychology.

The film opens with a stunningly beautiful sunset and Will Munny burying his wife! This rather unusual, even shocking, opening scene goes against our expectations: Westerns, according to the cliché, end with the wedding of the heroic yet reluctant gunfighter/cowboy and some representative of future civilization, like a schoolteacher. *Unforgiven's* burial scene haunts the film, insisting that we inquire about the symbolic nature of Claudia's demise. Death symbolizes repression, that is, pushing something back into the unconscious, out of sight of consciousness, where it will inevitably exert its power in destructive and uncontrollable ways. Or it may represent integration, where the issue has been brought to consciousness and dealt with, where this recognition reduces its destructive powers, and it is now ready to return to its rightful place in the unconscious. Thus, the question is: Is Munny's eleven-year encounter with the feminine now repressed or integrated? What happens when William Munny "buries" his feminine?

Absence of the feminine is necessary for the cowboy to fulfill his duty and his destiny. Only after the cowboy's work is done can the feminine enter (the cliché wedding at the end of the film), or, if the film takes a tragic turn, be rejected (a la *Shane*). In *Unforgiven*, the wedding took place eleven years ago, and we assume that whatever influence the feminine might have on Munny has been fully accomplished. And, as the cliché Western would have it, Munny sees his wife as pure, perfect, forgiving, rescuing, and healing – a combination of mother and Madonna. Both these assumptions, which the audience is asked to share with him, are the root of his psychological problems.

The Madonna corresponds to one of four Female Types found in the unconscious according to analytical psychologist Toni Wolff. Because Munny's "not like that anymore," it looks like the Madonna has been thoroughly integrated into Munny's Ego. Or has she? Asked about his past, his eyes glaze over, and he drops into a chant-like recitation of, "I'm not like that any more, my wife showed me the way." It is almost as if someone else, inside him and beyond his control, is speaking.

I am struck by the similarity between Munny's almost hypnotic recitational tone of voice and that used by the brainwashed soldiers in *The Manchurian Candidate* [1962]. To refresh your memory, *The Manchurian Candidate* is the ultimate paranoia film, yet its ultimate political stance is ambiguous: the far right is really run by Communists while the far left, accused of being Communist, is really harmless. Yet the Communists run everything. More germane to *Unforgiven* is the idea of brainwashing. When Frank Sinatra and the rest of the platoon are asked about Lawrence Harvey, whom they previously despised, they all recite the same words, "He is the most lovable, courageous, and caring human being I have ever known." Since they believe this, it is obvious they have been taken over by something foreign planted in their unconscious. So too is Will Munny – he is possessed by an out-of-control Madonna figure.

But what does it mean when we propose that one has been brainwashed by the feminine, or that the feminine is a "foreign element" artificially planted in the unconscious? Here is the most interesting revisionist aspect of *Unforgiven's* dealing with the Western genre. The feminine is inevitably equated with the Madonna figure – the role that the patriarchy finds most comfortable to press women into. This role is, according to *Unforgiven*, limiting, false, and ignores other equally important and equally powerful aspects of the feminine. By forcing the feminine into this single role, one risks the danger of being possessed by it. Munny's task, then, is to break the stranglehold the Madonna has on his unconscious and discover other aspects of his feminine to balance her power.

The Madonna is oriented toward the culture: homemaking, sheltering, and protection (thus Munny's unsuccessful pig-farming and the sick pigs – ancient symbols of the Mother Goddess – are part of her possession). Polar to the Madonna, according to Wolff, is the Hetaira, the eternal daughter or sister, who is oriented toward the personal rather than public or social concerns. If the Hetaira is unadapted she will appear as a destructive siren, a seductress, a nymph, energizing the darker, shadow aspects of the personality (the Madonna prefers to avoid these). All this points clearly to the disfigured prostitute, Delilah (the Biblical seducer and destroyer of Samson).

While she is the opposite of Munny's wife, she is as much a part of Munny's unconscious. Drawn toward each other as inexorably as the opposite poles of a magnet, their meeting is the turning point for Munny: she literally guides him from unconsciousness to consciousness, he recognizes her within himself ("we both have scars" – which I presume are more than physical), and her misfortune ultimately allows Munny to approach his destiny, to be a father to his children. Delilah frees Munny from the stranglehold of the Madonna. And, like her Biblical namesake, she ultimately causes Samson/Munny to bring the temple of the West crashing down – physically and ideologically.

In the past, Munny didn't remember what he had done – the eruptions from his unconscious were so strong that consciousness was swamped. But now there is hope, the Madonna's stranglehold on his psyche is broken, balanced by the Hetaira. This makes him no less a man, nor does it "cure" the violence and brutality that seem to be his nature. The now integrated feminine modulates the eruptions of his homicidal tendencies – he is conscious of what he is doing and can direct it toward some goal. Being conscious that he

is “still that way,” he can now honestly connect with his children and become a father to them. Now the Madonna power has found a proper home in his psyche.

Surrounding Munny are a number of characters that elaborate on these themes. For instance, the three assassins, like a group of Male Norns, are the past, the present, and the future of the Western myth. Will is the past, the killer without memory. The Kid is the future, the young and nearsighted, he cannot see very far either physically or psychologically. He wants to be a killer, but once he can *see* the realities of it, he abandons both his guns and his quest for a hyper-inflated ego. Ned is the present. Middle-aged, he comes to the realization that he is no longer a killer. Perhaps his Native American wife and his farming (both connections with the feminine principle) have diluted his internal killer.

This, of course, goes against the grain of Western mythology. The realization that internal growth is better than being an external destroyer – and risk being an internal one as well – cost Ned dearly. Immediately after this self-realization, when we least expect it, he is captured by the sadistic sheriff. We last see Ned upholding the brotherhood myth of the West – don’t rat on your friends. Yet we later find out he told all. So, along with Ned dies another onerous macho myth of the West. Ned represents the realities of the present – the need to restructure our myths.

Sheriff Little Bill is a miniature version of Will Munny. The relation is brought out by their names: Bill = William = Will. When he goes into a sadistic fit, Little Bill chants about all the bad people in various cities throughout the West. It sounds very much like the routine Will goes into about his wife and the fact that he’s “not that way anymore.”

While Will is possessed by the Madonna, Bill has repressed all aspects of the feminine and without any modulating influence, becomes a sadist. What is frightening is that we see repression of the feminine around us every day, and it’s often portrayed positively. After all, Little Bill’s “law-and-order” policy of no firearms in town makes the town a better place to live. (Little Bill is, to me, an unavoidable reference to Los Angeles’ own ex-police chief Darryl Gates.) Bill’s inept carpentry, like his means of bringing law and order to the town, are askew and leak badly when faced with any sort of inclemency. His house, like his psyche, cannot resist the inevitable onslaught of “mother” nature – the primal feminine forces.

W. W. Beauchamp, English Bob’s private biographer, serves several functions. Textually, he’s a comment on the current state of the media. I can see him brought up to date in a TV newsroom deciding whether to air a clip about the war in Bosnia or famine in Somalia, depending on how many and how ghastly the bodies are. Beauchamp, too, is an existential figure forcing us to question the nature of the truths we encounter. But the cleverest use of Beauchamp is when he stops correcting Little Bill’s misreading of “duke” as “duck” and joins him in degrading English Bob.

The transition from duke to duck is not a random play on words as the film implies in its cavalier treatment of the interchange. Not at all. English Bob's praise of royalty and his denigration of elected officials reflects his own psychology. One cannot, according to Bob, assassinate royalty, but presidents are easy targets. He himself aspires to royalty by hungering for the name given him by Beauchamp – The Duke. By implication, this provides him with the psychological bulletproofing he needs to protect himself from his own cowardice. As happens all too often to people with little self-awareness, when faced with shocking aspects of their own unconscious, they get engulfed by what is there and cannot escape it or its consequences. While a duck can fly, it can also dive and enter into the watery unconscious. Faced with his own cowardice, the Duke becomes the Duck (Coward the Duck?), dives into his unconscious and, stripped of his royal armor, drowns in what he finds there. We can finally see materialized what has dwelled within all along – the coward.

Returning to the opening scene, Munny has indeed buried his wife – the Madonna. Her iron grip has not been on his unconscious alone, for we must realize that she also possesses a large portion of our society. Thus, Munny has been crippled by society's view of what women should be in the outside world as well as the inside world of his psyche. While he can attempt to repress the Madonna aspect of his own feminine, he cannot hold down the more powerful, more disruptive aspects which connects to all the darker energies of his psyche – the wild aspects of the Hetaira. By allowing this aspect of the feminine to have its say, he achieves his ultimate goal, to become a good father. Yet his means, an orgy of violence and death, need to be questioned. Is this the only way to achieve an internal balance and peace, to destroy the external world?

It is interesting to compare this film to Gary Cooper in *The Man of the West* [1958], with a bad man gone good, presumably under the influence of a woman, and through circumstances is forced to join up with his old gang and be bad again. Like *Unforgiven*, the final violence against his former gang is the violence of good to be clearly distinguished from his previous use of violence which was bad. And like Will Munny, Gary Cooper used to rob and kill.

One of the problems of *The Unforgiven* is the split between the morality the film preaches and the morality it manipulates the audience into. The text leads us to consider that the violence Munny displays at the end of the film is inevitable, fate-bound, and at least partially caused by a society that can only use violence to control violence. We are invited to see Munny as a tragic figure. Yet because of the structure of the film, we have experienced all that Munny has – the torture and killing of his friend, for instance – and have ample reason to cheer his return to the same cold-blooded, shoot-'em-up routine Eastwood has been doing on screen for over two decades. Perhaps the film is as schizophrenic as its hero.

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