



"It's a Hell of a Thing to Kill a Man": Western Manhood in Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*

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Upon my first viewing of Clint Eastwood's 1992 western *Unforgiven*, I was drawn to its aging, reluctant protagonist, William Munny (Clint Eastwood), because he seemed so different from traditional western and action heroes. Tired and remorseful, years removed from a bloody career as an outlaw, Munny appeared to be the opposite of the youthful and exuberant "hero" of traditional gunslinger movies who reveled in violence. I envisioned the film as a complex subversion of devices traditionally associated with the Western, such as the glorification of violence, the salvation of a helpless heroine, and stock heroes and villains. I was not alone in this belief: Sara Anson Vaux asserts that the film calls "into question any legendmaking that would glamorize or valorize violence" (445), and Michael Kimmel notes that as the film concludes with Munny killing his antagonists and thereby "reclaim[ing] his manhood," "we realize that it is a manhood that no one in his right mind would want" (325). This belief that *Unforgiven* approaches the familiar touchstones of the Western genre in an unfamiliar and somewhat subversive way was undoubtedly shared by many of the voters who vaulted it to the Academy Award for Best Picture.

After considering the film carefully, I have come to realize that *Unforgiven*, while retaining the complexity I suspected it of having, has none of the subversive elements. In fact, the elements of the film often noted as critiquing traditional notions of Western manhood—such as Eastwood's portrayal of the aging killer-turned-unimpressive "pig farmer" William Munny—actually are the mechanics enabling the attainment of a manhood predicated on Slotkin's redemptive violence and manly aggression. The bulk of the film appears to subvert our conception of Western manhood only to allow for the vindication of Munny's manhood during the climactic ending. The audience is shown that when manhood is challenged, it is that very challenge which allows it to emerge triumphant, a fact particularly comforting for a contemporary male audience.

“Real Life” and Domestication

The primary reason *Unforgiven* is often considered subversive to traditional forms of Western manhood is because it portrays a fairly mundane picture of the usually mythologized West. It is not rare for reviewers to comment on the film's exceedingly “realistic” portrayal of its subject matter. Typically, when we describe something as “realistic,” we are attributing to it the quotidian qualities and relative uneventfulness of our daily lives: it is something we can relate to in our average experiences rather than something fantastic. *Unforgiven* earns the appellation “realistic” through its unglamorous view of Western life when compared to most movies of the genre. For example, the once-wild gunfighters, Will Munny and Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), have married and become farmers. The typical frontier town, in this case Big Whisky, Wyoming, doesn't allow guns anymore; current gunfighters, like English Bob (Richard Harris), are so scarce that they have hack writers following them around to distort the mundane truths of their lives into mythic fodder for an Eastern reading audience. The next generation of gunfighter, represented by The Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett), is a braggart who balks when violence becomes actualized. And when cowboys are gunned down, like the man Munny is hired to kill, it is while defenseless on the toilet rather than during a duel on Main Street.

We are witnessing in *Unforgiven*, then, a version of the West that conforms much more closely to our own subdued, unheroic modern lives than most Westerns do. It is a West that has lost its wildness and is modernized to the point of reconcilability. On the surface, these changes seem to challenge the mythic manhood of the Western hero who typically proves his manhood violently in a glamorous and exotic setting. To this point, Jane Tompkins asserts that the feminized “feelings of triviality, secondariness, [and] meaningless activity” are “everything that readers of Westerns are trying to get away from” (14). Some critics assume *Unforgiven* subverts traditional Western manhood because so many of the markers of that manhood are missing or undermined. In actuality, the film invites us to identify with a world where heroic manhood has vanished—to see it as “realistic” and much like our own — so the audience's identification with the realized manhood of William Munny at the end of the story is all the stronger. The audience is not to view William Munny's progression from pig farmer to Western hero as something isolated and fantastic, but rather we are invited to see Munny's attainment of manhood in a “realistic” world as what is possible for all men when their manhood is challenged.

Little Bill

This theme, the challenge to manhood, is presented in the first seconds of the film when the prostitute Delilah (Anna Levine) giggles at a cowboy's “teensy little pecker” and has her face cut up for it. Mirroring the Biblical Delilah's theft of Samson's power, the prostitute Delilah damages the cowboy's manhood by suggesting his virility is comical and inadequate. The cowboy lashes out at

Delilah with his knife to redeem his injured manhood, establishing the pattern in which manhood is achieved through violence. Significantly, however, the cowboy is ultimately stopped and punished by the sheriff of Big Whisky, Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman). Little Bill, though unequivocally manly himself, is paradoxically the primary domesticating agent in the film. He is always stopping the development of manhood in others and is ultimately Munny's nemesis in his own quest for manly redemption.

Little Bill, in his role as sheriff, does not allow guns in the town of Big Whisky, and when people do come to town to for violent purposes, like English Bob and William Munny, they are quickly subdued and sent away from the town's peaceful confines. When the cowboy who disfigures Delilah is restrained, Little Bill refuses the prostitutes' calls for his whipping by asking, "Haven't you seen enough blood for one night?" Little Bill does use, on occasion, violence to control violent characters, but it is clear he prefers placid domestic life as he builds his new house, so he "can sit of an evening, drink [his] coffee, and watch the sun set." Therefore, an ideal Big Whisky for Little Bill would be a domesticated, civilized town: one with no violence, no guns, no outlaws, and one in which everyone stays at home watching the sun set (or at least allowing him to do so).

While it may seem paradoxical that Little Bill is both manly and the film's primary inhibitor of manhood, Bill's function is clear when we consider that Munny must eventually defeat a man to be a man. As Jane Tompkins notes, "Men prove their courage to themselves and to the world by facing their own annihilation" (31). Munny cannot achieve his manhood by besting Little Bill's scared and inept deputies. Instead, Munny must defeat his manly counterpart to fully regain his manhood. Little Bill dominates all other candidates for manhood in the story: Delilah's attacker, English Bob, and Ned Logan; he even gives William Munny a profound beating upon their first meeting. In other words, for the protagonist to fulfill his goal of reclaiming his manhood, he must not only thwart the source of domestication in the story, but he must also stand up to and surpass the only other viable man present: Little Bill represents both.

The Kid and Ned

William Munny's partners, The Schofield Kid and Ned Logan, also serve important roles in the redemption of his manhood, but unlike Little Bill, it is their failure to achieve manhood that is significant. Lee Clark Mitchell observes that in Westerns "the failed man offers a foil against which the true man. . . can be measured" (167). The Schofield Kid taunts Munny and his seeming lack of manhood when he sees Munny on his pig farm, declaring, "You don't look like no rootin' tootin' son of a bitchin' cold blooded assassin." And when Munny is convalescing after his beating at the hands of Little Bill, The Kid declares, "I told you I'm a damn killer. I done it before. I'm more of a killer than he [Munny] is anyhow." However, we soon learn that The Kid's boasts of previously killing five men are false when he breaks down after shooting his first person, an unarmed

man on a toilet. The Kid's change in attitude is complete when afterwards he gives his gun to Munny, declaring, "You go on and keep it. I'm never going to use it again. I don't kill nobody no more. I ain't like you, Will." What we are supposed to understand that The Kid is not, is a man. With The Kid's relinquished gun, so much a symbol of manly virility and violence in Westerns, Munny will, mere moments later, kill Little Bill and fulfill his own manly redemption. The Schofield Kid's disillusionment with violence is often noted as an important moment in the film's subversion of traditional Western manhood; in actuality, his lying, verbosity, bragging, ineptness, and ultimate refusal to partake in violence, only highlights Munny's bedrock manhood.

Ned Logan's failed attempt at manhood stands even more starkly in relief to Munny's successful bid. Ned closely resembles Munny in that they were partners in their wild, violent youths; like Munny, Ned married and became a farmer, and, with Munny, Ned embarks on the mission to kill the cowboys and collect the prostitutes' gold. However, when Ned is presented the chance to finish off one of the men he has rode all the way from Kansas to kill, he balks. Significantly, Munny picks up Ned's rifle and kills the cowboy without any qualms while Ned can only stare at the ground. Thus, the failed men in the film reveal that manhood is very difficult to attain, and thus precious.

Munny

Of course, the most important character in *Unforgiven's* portrayal of Western manhood is William Munny himself. For much of the film, Munny is depicted as a hollow shell of the typical Western hero. We see him, clearly aged, ineptly wallowing in the mud trying to separate pigs; later, he repeatedly misses when trying to shoot a can off a stump, humorously resorting to using a shotgun. Even though his wife died years before, he is still under her domestic influence, as he declares to his children, "Your ma showed me the errors of my ways." And most tellingly, Munny repeatedly has trouble mounting his horse, frequently being tossed to the ground after feebly attempting to mount. As John Cawelti notes, the Western hero "is a man with a horse and the horse is his direct tie to the freedom of the wilderness, for it embodies his ability to move freely across it and to dominate and control its spirit" (57). Thus, Munny's clumsiness with his horse, and indeed with most actions we see him attempting, reveals a person clearly contradicting traditional modes of Western manhood.

Most critics of the film take Munny's difficulty with such manly markers as firearms and horses to be unequivocal evidence of the film's subversion of manly ideals. However, Munny's difficulties only set the stage for his future redemption. As Mitchell explains:

The frequency with which the body is celebrated, then physically punished, only to convalesce suggests something of the paradox involved in making true men out of biological men, taking their male bodies and distorting them beyond any apparent power of self-control, so that in the course of recuperating, an

achieved masculinity that is at once physical and based on performance can be revealed. (155)

Thus, for manhood in Westerns to be achieved, the male body must be challenged, beaten, convalesce, and recuperate to ultimately earn the mantle of manhood. It is the ability to persevere and triumph over hardship that is the mark of a man in the Western.

And so it is with William Munny. The trials and tribulations that distinguish him as unmanly only set up the necessary hurdles he must conquer to be a true man. He can't ride a horse; he can't shoot straight; he is beaten nearly to death by Little Bill in Greeley's tavern. At this point, the discrepancy between Munny and ideal Western manhood is at its height, as the Schofield Kid is too happy to point out when remarking to Ned, "He ain't nuthin' but a broken down old pig farmer." Not only has Munny been badly beaten without even throwing a punch, but he has been bested by the sole masculine force in the story to that point, Little Bill. After the beating, Munny hovers near death as he convalesces in the tomb-like darkness of a shed for three days. At the height of this struggle with death, he even envisions his dead wife, with "her face. . .all covered in worms." Munny, however, emerges from this deathbed, reborn, into the bright morning air, with a fresh blanket of snow on the ground, now ready to assume his manhood. Soon, Munny does reclaim that mythic manhood as he kills five men nearly simultaneously at Greeley's—including Little Bill—but it is his long convalescence starting from the first time we see him as a pig farmer—and played out most dramatically after his beating by Little Bill—that makes his manly redemption possible.

The Ending

The climactic shootout in Greeley's tavern is the full renaissance of western manhood in Munny and in the movie. Munny kills Little Bill, the one true man in town and its primary domesticator, along with four of his deputies. Notably, he does so in the same place where Delilah first laughed at the cowboy's manhood, in the very place where the movie's original threat to manhood was unleashed. Similarly, the final shootout is the only scene in the movie that conforms to what we recognize as typically Western action: men shooting armed men in a public setting, such as a saloon. Although the movie may have shown us nearly two hours of manhood failing, we are left with the image of Munny's singular, triumphant figure riding out of Big Whisky on his horse, declaring to the people cowering in the darkness, "Any son of a bitch that takes a shot at me, not only am I going to kill him, but I'm going to kill his wife, and all his friends, and burn his damn house down!" This is the image of manhood *Unforgiven* ultimately leaves us with; Munny's previous tribulations only serve as a pedestal for him to mount to reach the crowning moment of his realized masculinity.

Importantly, during the shootout at Greeley's, Eastwood as director employs first-person camera angles that put the viewer in the perspective of Munny. We

see the world through Munny's eyes as he rides into town past the sign proclaiming no guns in Big Whisky; we see the empty whiskey bottle being tossed to the ground, and we see a barrel of a rifle push the saloon doors open as Munny enters the scene of the killing. These camera angles, used only during the final scene, suggest that we, the viewers, are to identify with Munny during his reclamation of his manhood. The audience, at least the male members of it, is invited to believe that the reclamation of this manhood is not just Munny's, but all of ours.

This reading of the film is supported by Munny's actions after the shootout at Greeley's. We are told through a postscript that Munny settled back into his domestic life, but this time in the burgeoning town of San Francisco—the symbol of the urbanizing West—as he becomes a business man. This plot turn mirrors how we, the audience, will return to our domestic (sub)urban lives after the movie ends. But the film has left us with the reassurance that manhood is essential, and though a domesticated veneer may cover it, it can be summoned if needed.

This lesson that, even in the mundane routine of modern life, a virile manhood is waiting to be reclaimed seems particularly appealing to a contemporary male audience. As Mitchell points out, "We should recall that the emergence of the Western coincides with the advent of America's second feminist movement, and that the genre's recurrent rise and fall coincides more generally with interest aroused by feminist issues, moments when men have invariably had difficulty knowing how manhood should be achieved" (152). *Unforgiven's* popularity in the 1990s coincided with widespread male discomfort at a Clintonian American in which many men felt marginalized. Press accounts trumpeted tales of the "angry white male," who was lashing out due to a perceived loss of power. Affirmative Action, gays in the military, increased attention to sexual harassment suits, and women further pushing new social boundaries, all pointed towards a defensive feeling pervasive in a group of American men who usually are the audience for Westerns. As Kimmel reminds us, "The breadwinner role left men feeling like cogs in the corporate machine, and conspicuous consumption in sprawling suburban shopping malls was hardly a compensation" (265).

Thus, *Unforgiven's* mix of the mundane and the manly, the "realistic" and the fantastic, stepped into this cultural moment, assuring its male audience that when manhood is cornered, threatened, it is only an opportunity, a stage, for it to emerge triumphant.

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