Unforgiven: Anatomy of a Murderer

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Clint Eastwood is culturally important in a double sense. First, and most obviously, his screen persona has been a considerable force as an icon of heroic masculinity in Hollywood cinema for a quarter-century. Second, the peculiar nature of the Eastwood icon and its construction especially in the hands of another Clint Eastwood—the director—is problematic in ways which reveal some of the contradictions in the culture’s notions of heroic activity and the laws governing it. From its inception in Sergio Leone’s “Spaghetti Westerns” in the mid-1960s, the heroism of the Eastwood persona has been a kind of hyper-heroism, whose marks of transcendence have been so extreme as to become more than usually visible. The project of the persona has been not to naturalize but to denaturalize the heroic, to place it clearly above or apart from the “ordinary” human domain (this operation may be contrasted with the much more naturalizing activity of traditional heroic personae such as John Wayne or Gary Cooper). The tendency of Eastwood’s hyper-heroism is at least in some measure to emphasize the artificial, the extra-natural, even the impossible, in the heroic activity, and thus to develop a degree of self-consciousness and even auto-analysis which notably exceeds the Hollywood cultural norm. The process of exaggeration and italicization through which this extra-natural behaviour is realized involves Eastwood logically in the sphere of “action” cinema (chiefly Westerns and cop movies) as the most thoroughly crystallized of available genres for the expression of heroic masculinity. The same principle assures an emphatic engagement with the spectacle of victory over all others and especially the medium of that victory, violence. Here, the dual qualities of invulnerability and mastery in the dispensation of killing-power virtually constitute the essence of the Eastwood persona’s heroic activity.

The corpus of Eastwood’s work both as actor and director is a rich mine of contradictions. There is in it a kind of constant game of the monolithic versus the self-conscious where transcendental heroism coexists with deconstruction and reflexivity. Film after film has demonstrated these qualities, and taken collectively they represent an almost obsessive refocusing, extension and revision of the topic of the heroic in American culture. A full and proper examination of this phenomenon is beyond the reach of this study. Instead I wish to
look at one particular film text, Eastwood’s 1991 film *Unforgiven*, which I feel to be of special interest in two ways. First, it is a Western, a genre in which the role of the hero has structurally been presented in a stance of separation and with an extra symbolic profile of visibility; moreover Eastwood’s have been by consensus amongst the most significant Westerns of the past thirty years, doubtless in part because of the affinity between the exaggerations of his persona and the hospitality of the Western genre to such stylizations. And second, this film seems to me to have raised the problematization of the hero, his constitution and his field of action to a new height of self-knowledge and articulacy in Eastwood’s work. Reflexivity, a feature of Eastwood’s films since the Leone Westerns, has never presented itself with so persistent, systematic and unflinching a project of analysis as here.

The narrative of *Unforgiven* passes back and forth, back and forth, over the process of hero-creation and hero-destruction, transcendent invincibility and vulnerable humanity, legend and experience. It incorporates in the most reflexive way the mechanisms of myth-formation and the artistic discourses of transcendent heroic action. It explicitly dissects a number of conflicting moral imperatives more or less innate to the Western and allows them to proliferate into contradiction in a manner characteristic of very few of the species. It examines the notion of “justice,” a notion central to both the Western and the history of the Eastwood persona, and finds it to be impossible even to see clearly, let alone to institute through heroic and violent means as the genre and the persona require. And it attacks head-on the problem of violence itself in the genre and the heroic action-narrative in general—and in particular the necessity of violence to the proper constitution of the Eastwood persona as it has existed in this context and is understood by its devotees in the audience. It also includes some features very specifically recalling earlier Eastwood Westerns and thus turns itself into a commentary on those films and an act of visible reflexivity. Seen in this way, it is the most disturbing of all Eastwood’s films in the trouble it creates for those who would read the heroic activity of the genre as a whole or the Eastwood persona specifically in an ideologically or morally comfortable way.

The film begins in the realm of literary narrative, as a rolling title describes the marriage of a young woman to William Munny, a “known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition,” and her subsequent death from smallpox. The widower has two children, and raises pigs for a living. As *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) traced Eastwood’s career from peace-loving sodbuster to man of violence and back to peaceful community leader, so *Unforgiven* traces a similar trajectory—but in an inverted and ironic way. In the time prior to the narrative, Munny was a terrible and arbitrary killer. Then he was tamed and called to sobriety and virtue as a husband and father and homesteader. Then, a widower and frustrated hog-farmer, he consciously decides to return to violence for one occasion, as a mercenary, to provide a more secure base for his own enterprise and his children’s wellbeing. Then he undergoes a further metamorphosis from a hired assassin to a maddened figure of elemental demonic destruction. And at last—after the end of the narrative—he returns to the role of ordinary citizen: the final title tells us he is said to have moved to San Francisco and prospered in the dry goods trade. The pattern of inversion is even clearer if we compare *Unforgiven* to Eastwood’s 1980 film *Bronco Billy*. In that film, Billy consciously moves from his prosaic life as a New Jersey shoe salesman into the transcendental realm he has always aspired to by becoming a Western hero; William Munny reveals the transcendental realm of Western heroism to be a place of horror and escapes from it to find a distinctly unheroic apotheosis in becoming, as it were, a shoe salesman.

The Eastwood persona similarly undergoes a transformation. At first, and for a considerable time, Munny is depicted in antiheroic terms. Stumbling face-first into the mud
trying to catch disease-ridden pigs, unable to hit anything with his pistol at target-practise, incapable of mounting or riding his horse without a struggle or a fall, complaining of missing his bed as he tries to sleep under the stars, later shaken with ague and fever, looking irresolute and submitting almost without a struggle to the brutal beating administered by the town sheriff, Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman)—Munny through most of the film is the antithesis of the contemptuous master of homicidal violence of Eastwood’s prime persona. Particularly telling is his failure to control the two most important tokens of individual power in the Western, the gun and the horse. But it is also understood that however short the Eastwood protagonist may fall initially or incidentally from his most powerful archetype, in the end he will turn and become himself. One can almost feel audiences waiting for this moment to arrive in Unforgiven. And it does finally come, as Munny, propelled into drunken ferocity by the death of his friend Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), unleashes his towering anger on a saloon full of cowboys. The scene is heavily inflected visually through its staging in murky torchlit darkness, amidst a thunderstorm, with the menacing figure of Eastwood often merely a frightening silhouette, his face reduced to a pool of shadow in which is visible only a murderous glint in the eye. Here he once more becomes the figure of superhuman deathdealing vengeance, as in High Plains Drifter (1971) and again in Pale Rider (1985). The dark and boiling landscape, the portents in the heavens, add a supernal quality to the persona’s intervention, mark it as above ordinary experience and comprehension. But now the action is more unambiguously hellish and demonic than ever before. Little Bill’s agonized last words, before Munny executes him with a shot directly to the face, are “I’ll see you in hell, William Munny,” and Munny signifies his agreement. He is avenging the death of his friend—a good man—and also perhaps punishing a system which allows violence against women. But that sense of righting a wrong and restoring a “correct” hierarchy, so important to the achievement of moral balance and the validation of individual power in both the general sphere of the action hero and in the Western in particular, is absent in this scene of carnage. The heroic Eastwood persona’s virtually contractual requirement to exact a vengeance which also has the alibi of justice is mimed in Unforgiven—but in such a way as to expose it as an act of regurgitative bloodlust born out of despair and not the godlike anger of a transcendental personage acting from some realm above or beyond normal humanity.

Eastwood’s presence in the film thus departs from his archetypal persona in two separate ways: first, through its status as an antitype in the person of the “good” Munny; and second, as an exaggeration and specifically a monstrosification in the “bad” Munny. In her overview of the Western in film and literature, Jane Tompkins has argued that cowboy heroes take silence and action as absolute goods, and that they and the genre are at war with women’s words and especially an historically female articulation of inner feeling. The taciturnity of the Western hero, his repressive unwillingness to admit to an inner emotional life which might include anything “soft,” his attempt (as Tompkins puts it) to turn into something as hard and eternal as the landscape itself, his crystallization into a potent agent, are more starkly visible in the Eastwood persona than in any previous important Western hero. Indeed it might be argued that the persona’s special quality of enclosedness and unknowability, his air of being almost constituted through superhuman violent action or the everpresent anticipation of such action, is a kind of final distillation of these pervasive characteristics of the Western protagonist. In its presentation of the dual William Munny, Unforgiven makes a significant commentary on both the Western’s traditional war of men’s silence and women’s words, and on Eastwood’s own history as a silent hero. It does this by widening the gap between the two aspects of the protagonist to such an extent that they become virtual caricatures of traditionally antithetical
character types, and certainly caricatured inversions of each other. (It might be noted in passing that exaggeration of persona traits or anti-traits to the point of caricature has been perhaps the most consistent tool of selfconsciousness throughout Eastwood’s career as a filmmaker—High Plains Drifter, The Gauntlet, Bronco Billy, Sudden Impact and Pale Rider furnishing the clearest examples.) The “good” Munny is not merely an example of the “civilized” frontier male (nonviolent agrarian paterfamilias), but is marked as a specifically and particularly feminized one: he piously repeats the Temperance-and-decency creed of his dead wife as a series of homiletic principles learned by rote, and constantly refers to her intervention in his life as a powerfully transforming moment. He is an uxorious widower, in fact. His difference from the Eastwood of the earlier Westerns is sometimes so extreme as to be comic, although the character’s moral regeneration—or rather its invention from scratch—is also genuine.

But if the “good” Munny represents an occasionally amusing effacement of familiar Eastwood persona characteristics, the “bad” Munny is formed rather by an exaggeration of those same traits of powerful violence which are absent in the pig-farmer. A brief comparison with the two most obvious earlier parallels, High Plains Drifter and Pale Rider, will illustrate this point. In High Plains Drifter the protagonist is (it ultimately transpires) an avenging spirit returned from the dead to exact a fearful penalty upon his murderers and the community which collaborated in his death. Playing on the townspeople’s fears of the return of the criminals who killed him, he assumes a capricious and despotic control over the town, literally painting it red, posting a sign reading “Welcome to Hell” on main street, and then abandoning it to be burned down at night by the enraged murderers before killing them one by one. The rather amazing selfconsciousness of this scenario, and in particular its elevation of the Eastwood character literally to a supernatural plane and his vengeance to a kind of Old-Testament hellfire judgement day, serves to underline the omnipotent violence of the Eastwood persona and to ground any discomfort attaching to his violence in a principle of divine justice, albeit of the most vengeful variety. Something similar happens in Pale Rider, where the protagonist, named only “The Preacher,” bears the scars of multiple bullet-wounds which must surely have been fatal, and is specifically identified (via the Book of Revelations) as Death riding on a pale horse, with Hell following after him. Before the film is over he has presented a gratifying spectacle of omnipotent violence; but his homicidal qualities are to some degree masked by his project of saving the good community. It is remarkable that the violence of his very constitution should be marked even to the extent that it is by his unreadable suspension between demonic punishment and divine justice. But the latter, prosocial, element of his character is clearly present, and a way is at least available for viewers to cloak their desire for the spectacle of violence under a moral sanction.

One might say that in Unforgiven these two sides of The Preacher’s character have been reified, in deconstructed form, into the two sides of William Munny. Where The Preacher saves the virtuous community from predators, the “good” Munny weakly covers his mercenary project in the transparent veil of a response to the victimization of women. Meanwhile, in contrast to The Preacher’s display of demonic power, the practise and spectacle of the “bad” Munny’s violence is demystified. Similarly the motive to repay in kind violence inflicted upon himself by the villains (a feature of High Plains Drifter as well) becomes in Unforgiven a terrible desire to revenge a friend whose death can most fitly be traced to Munny’s own initiative in involving the friend in the first place and to the difference between Munny’s willingness and Ned’s unwillingness to kill. Munny’s anger, in other words, is more truly directed at himself than at his victims. Deprived of cloudy supernatural origins, and bearing a history of truly monstrous crimes, he can no longer be interpreted as perhaps good, perhaps bad—or actually an
impenetrable combination of the two. Here, the implications and consequences of the persona’s murderous violence are troubling in a way that is never seen in the earlier films. As for masculine taciturnity, the earlier Eastwood Western heroes, from Leone to *Pale Rider*, possess this quality in abundance: when Eastwood speaks—briefly—it is harsh, hoarse, and highly compressed. But in *Unforgiven* words have retreated even further, into a lost unfathomable pit of pre-verbal, pre-conceptual experience. Munny is quizzed several times about his earlier deeds of violence, and his answer is typically, “I don’t remember, mostly I was drunk.” This is disconcerting, for however mysterious the acts of the persona must necessarily appear to the rest of us, it is essential that the hero himself have some knowledge of them. Here the persona’s silence does not signify hidden depths, or (as Tompkins has it) a desire to be solid, complete and safe from change, but only a swirling unconscious abyss of murderous compulsions, in which the subject is seized and controlled as much as the victims and in which silence proceeds from incomprehension and oblivion rather than any transcendence of the affective world. This is certainly auto-critique.

The doubling or splitting of the protagonist into human/superhuman, antiheroic/heroic, or “good”/”bad” facets has, then, the effect of laying the Eastwood persona open to a deconstruction which is at once anti-mythic and—despite the elements of caricature—humanizing. Endowing the transcendent-destructive hero with a history and a personality, a mind and a conscience, making him a creature who not only acts omnipotently but feels and is acted upon, puts large cracks into the previously rocklike imperviousness of the Eastwood Western persona. Munny, in his doubled state, is both unfeeling ego-projection and feeling subject. The inferno of violence he is capable of bringing into the world is ugly and abhorrent, and without redeeming characteristics. In a handful of scattered scenes he confides to Ned that he is haunted by the horror of his earlier deeds; these memories are surreally imprinted in his mind as the details of a series of terrible atrocities—atrocities committed by himself. In the delirium brought on by the fever and his beating, he cries aloud that he is afraid of dying, and that he saw in a dream the face of his beloved wife covered with worms. This quality of human anguish is never even suggested in *High Plains Drifter* or *Pale Rider*, or any of Eastwood’s other transcendental-heroic films. Images such as those tormenting Munny will not be purged from his mind by any feat of heroic action; indeed the opposite is the case as he finds himself re-performing just those past deeds which have created this agony. Whatever satisfaction is to be gained in killing Little Bill, or merely in automatically performing an act of terrible violence in response to personal pain, has been demonstrated to be ultimately useless and self-destructive even while that revenge is enacted. The emotional rewards of vengeance—for the protagonist and above all for the viewer—have never been more clearly indicated as ugly and horrifying, at least not within the vengeance-filled world of Eastwood’s films.

But even before the frightening concluding scenes of the film, this Eastwood character has been morally compromised. This is not just a matter of Munny’s earlier inhumaness, that earlier devilish self which we have never seen, which he himself cannot even remember, and whose difference from his present self he and Ned keep superstitiously asserting. It is perhaps even more crucially a matter of what can only be described as the criminality of the reformed Munny: the criminality, that is, of engaging in assassination for hire. We may recall that Eastwood’s earliest movie Western protagonists were mercenary killers and bounty hunters, and that in those roles the occupation did not constitute a moral difficulty for viewers. The Leone universe was morally arid, and cynical self-interest was as high a value as any available. But in *Unforgiven*, the essential moral structure of the classical Western is once more present. Like
so many Westerns before it, the film debates the values of community versus individual, justified versus unjustified violence, and the place of heroic transcendence in a frontier environment balanced between institutional rigidity and unsocial anarchy. In presenting these terms in all their potential contradictoriness, it interrogates the genre as a whole—but it does so from within, it is not an anti-Western. The moral and ideological status of William Munny’s career, past and present, is a question of real importance, not a post-ethical dead end or nihilistic gesture of style as in Leone’s and other truly “decadent” Westerns (including perhaps High Plains Drifter). Munny’s polarisation between the extremes of prosaic-virtuous pig-farmer and family man and poetic-satanic legendary killer is a demonstration, stylized but genuine, of just this question of moral status. But perhaps the greatest difficulty is created by the decision of the “good” Munny to undertake, in a kind of rational Lockean fashion, a single considered expedition into the murderous territory of the “bad” Munny—a territory which has been defined as belonging exclusively to the drunken irrational savagery of the damned soul. This is, in fact, to dabble in the practise of satanic evil for sound commercial reasons: an insupportable contradiction. And the contradiction is brought home once the killing starts, beginning indelibly with the murder of the young cowboy Davey by botched long-range rifle shot. No one can doubt the intense moral discomfort created by this scene. It is a touchstone of the film’s desire to create “difficulty” that the painfulness and moral compromise of Munny’s actions are not in any way flinched from or covered over. The rationale that this murder is punishment for the attack on the prostitute is feeble, and understood to be feeble. Ned Logan, the designated marksman, refuses to shoot the cowboy; and this is presented as the decent and human thing to do. Later the would-be desperado the Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett), after shooting the second cowboy in an outhouse, renounces violence and declares for a peaceful unheroic life; this too is presented sympathetically. Only William Munny will cool-headedly go ahead with the shooting of Davey; only he can accept the moral burden of the killing expedition even in the face of its ugly consequences. He is going to kill two strangers strictly for money. Of course the money is to be devoted to his children, to providing a solid material basis for his attempts to preserve the values of family and honest toil. But is this sufficient reason for premeditated murder? No, clearly no. In this way, even the “good” Munny is presented as a criminal. This criminality remains a “difficulty” right through to the end of the film, and in burying it together with his horrifying reversion to evil under a future of prosperous respectability, the rather smug concluding title only emphasizes the scandal of his actions. Like the Martin Landau character in Woody Allen’s Crimes and Misdemeanors, William Munny simply gets away with murder.

That he should get away with killing while Ned dies horribly for not killing creates the moral abyss into which Munny plunges in forsaking his “good” self and embracing again his “bad” one. Here lies a way to an interpretation of the film’s cryptic title. Munny’s wife Claudia, in attempting his regeneration, in pulling him out of the maelstrom of nihilistic compulsive violence and drunken self-obliteration into a world of principle and language and family and human self-recognition, forgives him. The act of forgiveness produces the (feminine) redemptive result of self-forgiveness. In addressing at last the buried consciousness of horror and guilt, the fiery cycle of repression and violence whose first victim is the perpetrator is broken, and the functional person William Munny (the “good”) is dredged up into view. Once established in the social world of human relationships, gainful occupation, the code of civility and “decency,” Munny is happier than before. Even after the death of his wife, and despite the rather naive and rudimentary nature of the precepts upon which he leans, he continues forthrightly in the same path. The process which pushes him back off that path begins with a condition of economic
hardship and the unfulfilling nature of his labour. Pig-farming is dirty, frustrating, humiliating, and profitless. The temptation to move into another form of paid work—killing for hire—is very strong, when that work suffers none of the drawbacks just enumerated. In drawing Ned Logan into the business, Munny wishes not only to provide himself with a dependable co-worker, but to give himself a degree of orientation in this strange endeavour. Ned, like Munny (and like the Eastwood persona too), is a former hellraiser, now a respectable freeholding family man. As the film proceeds Ned develops into Munny’s anchor to the world, his reassurance that he has forsaken the old ways (which Ned also witnessed), and his guarantee that his actions have some foothold in a worthwhile life-pattern, in decency and fellow-feeling. But Munny makes the mistake first of returning to killing (however different his motives this time) and second of pulling Ned with him. When this happens the results are different from what was anticipated (this too is morally instructive). It is Ned who is punished for the transgression, a transgression he did not truly commit; Munny does everything and goes free, and gets paid to boot. It is not just that any notion of a higher system of justice and moral equilibrium is derisively contradicted by this development. The death of Ned is also Munny’s personal loss of his “good” self, his loss of Claudia’s forgiveness and his own self-forgiveness. When he walks into Greely’s to kill Skinny and Little Bill he is a creature who has lost salvation, a damned soul, “unforgiven.”

Previously I said that Unforgiven was not an anti-Western. It might be described instead as a peculiar late flowering of the kind of complex Western which arose as the famous “moral clarity” of the genre began to be cast into doubt and the entire system to be undermined. I am thinking here of such films of thirty or forty years ago as John Ford’s The Searchers (1956) and The Man Who Shot Liberty Va lance (1962), of Anthony Mann’s Westerns of the same period—especially Bend of the River (1952) and Man of the West (1958)—or of the early Sam Peckinpah film Ride the High Country (1962). These films, amongst many others, formed a final stage in the development of the classical Western, a last historical outpost of the antonimic moral and social dualities over which the genre was suspended before the onset of complete alienation, pastiche, and open deconstruction as practised by the “Spaghetti Westerns” and Hollywood anti-Westerns like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969), Little Big Man (1970), and McCabe and Mrs Miller (1971). Eastwood’s own Westerns have, in a way, progressed back from the Leone anti-Western abyss (most clearly represented in High Plains Drifter) and towards some reconstitution of the terms of the classical Western. Josey Wales in effect reinvents the positive cowboy hero out of the ashes of the criminal which that figure had virtually become by the 1970s, while Pale Rider’s gestures towards the canonical Western Shane (1953) are unmistakeable if not always coherent and signal a wish to draw upon the moral resonance of the classical genre. Then Unforgiven unfolds a systematic restaging, and reproblematising, of archetypal Western issues and narrative and character configurations, with the extra inclusion of the Eastwood persona itself—definitely a very late if not a “decadent” arrival on the Western stage and indicative of boundary-destroying forces of violence and cynicism which threaten the stability and even the existence of the genre. A broad pattern of generic social context and narrative and character alignments is very much to the fore in the film, so that, more than in any previous Eastwood film (and to an extent rare in any Western of the past 25 years), Unforgiven represents a very self-conscious intervention into and commentary upon the history of the genre. The presence, to greater or lesser degree, of such topics as agrarian economy, capitalist enterprise and commodity ownership, law and law enforcement and their relation to moral order in the world, the place and value of women in a “man’s” environment,
and of course the nature and constitution of heroism on the frontier, mark the film as a deliberately large and systematic contribution to the Western genre.

Let us turn our attention, then, to the social environment in which Munny acts. No justification is offered for his earlier atrocities; none is possible. His subsequent crimes, however, both the mercenary and the passionate, occur within a context of mores and institutions, not legend. The cause of the immediate action is the assault by two cowboys upon Delilah (Anna Thompson), a prostitute working in a brothel run by the saloonkeeper Skinny Dubois in the town of Big Whiskey, Wyoming. A cowboy named Thirsty Thurston cuts up the face of the young and inexperienced Delilah for giggling at the small size of his penis; his younger friend Davey holds her while the attack takes place. The sheriff Little Bill first proposes to settle accounts by bullwhipping the perpetrators. Skinny objects that this will do nothing to compensate him for his damaged property: Delilah is now permanently scarred and will have trouble attracting customers, Skinny’s investment of capital will be lost. Little Bill sees the justice of this argument, and imposes a fine instead of corporal punishment: in the spring Skinny will get five ponies from Thirsty, two from Davey. The senior and most vocal of the brothel women, Strawberry Alice (Frances Fisher), is very angry about this arrangement. Delilah is cut up, Skinny receives horses in compensation; there is no justice for Delilah. Little Bill defends his decision by saying that the cowboys were just carried away, they are not “given to wickedness in a general way.” “You mean like whores?” Alice asks bitterly. It is clear that Alice is angry not merely on behalf of Delilah, but also because this crime exemplifies the abject status of all the prostitutes including herself, who are treated as commodities pure and simple, and are not defended in their own right as citizens by the law. The truth of her arguments is plain to the viewer. These women have a legal status greatly inferior to that of men such as Skinny; they are disposed of by the law as property; and the law stands revealed as a guarantor of (male) property rights rather than of moral justice for all citizens. At this moment the film actually becomes virtually Marxist and feminist. Alice’s response is to organize a property-driven reparation, or rather revenge, on behalf of the women, to compensate for the law’s unwillingness to provide one. A bounty of $1000, collected from the women’s savings, is put upon the heads of the two cowboys; news of the contract is spread through the institutional structure of the brothel itself, as the women quietly convey it to their customers. In a strategy of considerable ironic equity, the material incentives of property (i.e., money) are thus employed to invert the actions of the materialist system of law.

But despite its satisfying element of justice, Alice’s plan also errs. If ponies for Skinny or a bullwhipping are insufficient counterbalance for the lasting injury to Delilah, then death for the perpetrators swings the balance too far the other way. Of course the symbolic dimension of the crime and its unsatisfactory punishment, the suffering and subjection of all the women and their lack of redress before the law, need to be considered. In this light the contract is nothing less than a political act—a terrorist symbolic protest against oppression. But again, does it really answer to the crime (rather than to the sentence)? The answer must be: only symbolically. Neither Delilah’s scars nor her memory of violence will disappear, nor will her condition of powerlessness improve (though that of the other women might, conceivably). She herself is conspicuously quiet when voices are raised for vengeance on her behalf, and the film gives no indication that she takes any satisfaction from the project—if anything the reverse is faintly suggested. The cowboys, too, present complexities. Though Thirsty’s actions were ugly and uncondoneable, Davey scarcely knew what he was doing and is certainly less guilty (their respective physical iconography confirms this distinction: Thirsty is ugly and mean-looking,
Davey is sweet and innocent-looking). Moreover, Davey later makes a gesture of repentance and reconciliation when he brings an especially fine extra pony, not for Skinny but for Delilah. Alice leads the prostitutes in a mud-throwing rejection of this offer, again without consulting Delilah. Then of course it is Davey who suffers the most agonizing death, gutshot by Munny at long distance. The two purest victims of the film, Delilah and Davey, are exactly those who are not consulted or paid attention to: they are merely props in a movement of larger forces. Clearly the attempt to balance the first injustice has resulted in a second one. (The same configuration is repeated when, in attempting to right this injustice—the murders of Davey and Thirsty—Little Bill whips Ned to death. The wrong person dies at the hands of “justice,” the “eye for an eye” system of response to crime is shown to be all too fallible. This liberal attitude is the same as that which argues for Claudia’s feminine Christian forgiveness and against the “bad” Munny’s masculine Old-Testament vengefulness as seen in the final scenes.) Yet Alice’s initial arguments are never answered; the institutional prejudices of the law remain. Alice’s remedy, which is to punish violent aggression with even more violent counter-aggression and not stop to make nice distinctions or worry about the rights of the perpetrators, strikingly resembles the rationale employed by so many Eastwood protagonists in earlier films. Many of these earlier Eastwood films even foreground the same initial crime: a brutal male attack on a woman in the sexual arena. But when the Eastwood persona of Unforgiven comes nominally to the rescue of a woman with an act of revenging violence, that action has been qualified and undermined beyond recognition.

There is another discourse of law and power in the film: namely that which revolves around Little Bill Daggett. This character is advanced across the template of a generic archetype in a fashion parallel to that of the Eastwood persona. But whereas William Munny is a twisted avatar of the lone hero who comes from outside the community to rescue it from bullying force, Little Bill more recognizably represents the “duly constituted authority” whose mission it is to render the community safe from arbitrary authority, that is, the individual self-interested exercise of violence in an as-yet-unstable frontier society. Unforgiven complicates and enriches its already intricate balance of thematic elements by making Little Bill a figure just as contradictory, and virtually as charismatic, as the Eastwood persona himself. As we have seen, Little Bill, and the law he stands for, are morally compromised in the film by their commitment to the clearly-marked excesses of patriarchal capitalism. The alignment of Little Bill with the employer/proprietor Skinny and against the employee/chattel Alice reveals not the corruption of Little Bill but an underlying problem in the constitution of the community. This problem is not merely the old charge of greedy materialism traditionally levelled by those Westerns which criticise the community for engaging in commerce rather than settlement. Greedy materialism it is, and of a noxious oppressive kind; but it is also depicted as perfectly in keeping with the regular practise of capitalist values and the law which must protect them. The film does not suggest for a moment that capitalist practise as such is evil and ought to be abolished. Nor does it advocate a return to values associated with Nature, the wilderness or the free individual, as most Westerns which condemn the materialism of the community do. It merely reveals an ethical fissure in a community which operates according to laws of property and exchange, claims to be constituted justly, and yet discriminates against certain classes of citizens (in this case, women). That the community’s excluded class should be female is another of the film’s meaningful complications, when traditionally in the Western women have served to embody the community’s stability, its collectivity of mutual support and nurture, and some of its most crucial nascent institutions such as schools, churches and families. And that these women should turn for
redress to hired guns is yet another twist, when women in the Western are famous for
denouncing guns and killing. Of course these women are prostitutes, and thus clearly related to
the female sub-species of individualist-oriented “dance-hall girls” rather than to the dominant
species of communitarian schoolmarms and pioneer wives and mothers; but their collective
solidarity and concern for rights reconnects them to the predominant community-directed
type.

In this context Little Bill has an “impossible” task: to enforce the laws of the community
in an ideologically unconflicted way, when the construction of the community is such as to
reveal the unremovable conflicts in ideology. This impossibility is revealed in perhaps the film’s
most elegant metaphor—the sheriff’s own house, which he is building himself. This edifice is its
owner’s pride and joy, and yet its construction is comically inept, all crooked angles and leaky
surfaces. The house is clearly a symbol of community values and the community project, and
the fact that Bill is proudly building it himself signifies his leadership in the undertaking and his
idealistic commitment to it. But the project and the leadership are both flawed, full of holes. As
Skinny comes to tell him of the prostitutes’ contract, Bill bangs his thumb with a hammer; the
torrential downpour that accompanies the arrival of Munny, Ned and the Kid in town leaks in
buckets through Bill’s roof. Bill is not good at building. What he is good at is violence. The
beatings he administers first to English Bob (Richard Harris), then to Munny, and finally, fatally,
to Ned Logan, are all attempts to enforce the law of the community. But they are excessive, the
violence is accompanied by too much sadistic zest. Moreover, they do not have a sound basis of
justification: the law in whose name they are carried out is not what it is supposed to be. These
brutal examples of law enforcement resemble too much the offences they are supposed to
prevent, just as the judgement which punishes the two cowboys in commodity terms merely
reaffirms Delilah’s commodity status.

This system of law is linked to another configuration of topics in the film: those of
masculine violence as such, and the range of mythicizing discourses about that violence, together
with their means of formation and distribution. The character who focuses this set of topics is the
travelling writer, W.W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek), an Eastern author of penny dreadfuls
glorifying the violent legends of the Old West. He arrives as the Boswell of English Bob, then
moves along to become the chronicler of Little Bill when the sheriff proves to be the stronger
“hero,” and in the end is making inquiries of the strongest of all, William Munny, after the
slaughter in the saloon. His iconic features—bowler hat, waistcoat, spectacles and
sidewhiskers—signify civilization and education, as does his nervous bumbling when faced with
any indication that his subject might actually involve him directly rather than remaining as
passive narrative material. Beauchamp is fascinated with murderous violence and its structuring
codes in a manner disguised as scholarly but suggesting rather a passionate inner compulsion: in
fact he is riveted upon the display of power with the thirst of a fascist acolyte. This
characterization may be said to replicate popular culture’s scorn for book-learning and
intellectuals, particularly when juxtaposed with men of action; and here Beauchamp not only
embodies all the usual sins of his kind but adds the extra one of a sneaking desire to feast upon
the charismatic acts of violence performed by these authentic men without incurring any of the
attendant danger. But our contempt as viewers for this character ought not to be too gleeful, for
Beauchamp, however ignominious he may appear, acts as the representative agent of the
Western genre as a narrative project, Unforgiven itself as a story framed by a teller, and us in the
audience who consume the tale with avidity. When Beauchamp, fueled by an appetite for scenes
of bloodletting and displays of violent mastery, narrativizes the actual events of Western history
for the pleasure of his readers, he is an emblem of the activity of the Western genre. And more specifically when he will tell the story of William Munny’s homicidal rampage in Greely’s Saloon, he will be an emblem of the very film we are watching. For how is our appetite for the spectacle of Eastwood killing people different from Beauchamp’s appetite and that of his readers? And how is any film which mythicizes or pleasingly distorts the exercise of violence different from Beauchamp’s stories? In plain terms, the Western is criticised as a distortion of history and experience, and its consumption is equated with the corrupt craving of viewers for the spectacle of triumphalist power and violence. And no Westerns have been more dependent on this craving than Eastwood’s.

This is the “bottom line,” so to speak, but the articulation of the question is complex and meticulous. Beauchamp’s journey from English Bob to Little Bill itself involves the mapping of an entire sub-discourse. The imperial blowhard English Bob, who gives himself civilized airs, is quite prepared to encourage Beauchamp in the idealist clichés of melodrama which he brings from the literary world of the cities. In these terms Bob becomes “the Duke of Death” and engages in six-gun duels with villains to preserve the honour of women. This style of narrative is, like the power of English Bob himself, destroyed by Little Bill. At first amiably and then with a certain fatuous enthusiasm, Bill takes it upon himself to deflate “the Duke of Death” and all the assumptions that go with him. The violent altercations of the frontier have nothing to do with honour and striking picturesque attitudes; they have nothing to do even with being quick on the draw or a dead shot. Bill’s revisionist account of the night English Bob shot Two-Gun Corcoran in the Bluebottle Saloon is an extended debunking of idealist attitudes. It depicts a world of falling-down drunkenness, guns going off by accident or misfiring, and an absolute disregard on all sides for principles of fair play. Bill goes on to offer his own systemic analysis: the most important quality in a gunfight is coolheadedness, the absence of disabling fear; a simple innate quality of character—“sand” or “grit”—replaces the elaborately-acquired rituals of the showdown. Life is a shambles of accident and ugliness rather than possessing the orderliness of idealist narrative. This perspective is demythicizing, a substitution of Realpolitik for ideology. It is true that Bill then wishes to attach a certain moral schema to this quality, which he himself possesses to a high degree. The average miscreant whom he pulverizes is described as lacking in backbone and conviction; a handy example is provided by the prevaricating, fever-wracked William Munny, whom Bill kicks all around Greely’s Saloon while orating to Beauchamp about his victim’s deficiencies of character. And of course Little Bill is a sheriff—a professional with a nominally prosocial job to do.

In the context of the genre, and to employ Robert Warshow’s terms, the movement from English Bob’s discourse to Little Bill’s pushes the Western from the sphere of the honourable hero who must shoot only under certain stringent conditions, towards the Western’s antitype, the gangster film, presided over by a protagonist whose distinction resides merely in his willingness to shoot, a quality of daring. It also reproduces a movement from the naive classical movie Western to a late stage of the genre’s evolution in which more problematic and antiheroic qualities assume predominance. In Unforgiven that stage gives way to a yet further evolution: namely to the hellish and oblivious all-consuming force of destruction embodied in the person of William Munny, a force which Little Bill is quite unable to comprehend. Indeed no one can comprehend it, not even Munny himself. Beauchamp does not comprehend it either, but he recognizes it instantly as an escalation in the scale and intensity of violence, and he is magnetically drawn to it. Munny represents a more potent concentration of force than Little Bill; Eastwood trumps all precedessors in his command of the sources of violence and its
dispensation. Here in fact we have a complete recapitulation of the development of the Western as a genre, up to and including the present film. Beachamp’s narrative subject progresses from naive through decadent and into a last stage of distilled meaningless violence. These stages correspond respectively to the early and classical Western; to the later Western in both its “complex” Hollywood and “decadent” Italian forms; and finally to Eastwood’s own quasi-demonic Westerns, where the protagonist’s power of violence exceeds any kind of explanation. The genre’s history is thus presented as an ever-growing appetite for pure violence increasingly detached from any moral context or justification. Its logical end lies in the Eastwood persona as a figure of occult, uncontrollable violence—in an unexamined way the Eastwood of *High Plains Drifter* or *Pale Rider*, and in a now fully conscious and sickened way the “bad” William Munny. The Eastwood persona’s killing spree in the saloon, his barefaced executions of Skinny and Little Bill and of the wounded deputies—and also his earlier legendary deeds of dynamiting trains full of women and children, blowing some poor man’s teeth out the back of his neck, and so on—are presented as insupportably awful. They remain charismatic for the viewer, as Beauchamp’s attitude demonstrates, but they are insupportable. Again, the terms in which the final scene recapitulates the scenes of vengeful devastation in *High Plains Drifter* and *Pale Rider* (torchlight and darkness, silhouettes, Eastwood’s basilisk stare of death) constitute a powerful critique of the principle of violence in Eastwood’s work. And of course *Unforgiven* repeatedly lays bare its own contradictions.

The violent actions of the Eastwood persona, then, are framed and commented upon through their juxtaposition with Beauchamp’s project of narrativization. But they are also illuminated from another angle, namely the perspective provided by the Schofield Kid. The nature of the transcendental Western hero is one of Beauchamp’s subjects: English Bob, Little Bill and Munny represent its three evolutionary stages. The Schofield Kid, too, has a preconception of heroic action, and equally for him it takes place within the arena of violence. But the Kid’s homicidal models are unburdened with either the moral code of English Bob’s discourse of violence or the institutional justification of Little Bill’s. The Kid is impressed by the legend of William Munny, whom the Kid understands to be a “meaner-than-hell cold-blooded damn killer” and “the meanest god-damned son of a bitch alive.” In this heroic model it is purely the brutal act of killing successfully which constitutes the appeal; the absence of moral or legal rationalisations is an additional enticement rather than a handicap. The Kid, as his name implies, is very young, and his a attitude is seen at once to be very immature. The very naivety of the Kid’s attraction to the purest and least-encumbered manifestation of violence does seem to go right to the heart of the matter, however, in its rejection of any form of disguise or adulteration of instinctive appetite: here he simply mirrors the naked, unillusioned or “decadent” tastes of late- or post-Western viewers. But just as Little Bill’s compromised status is exemplified in his house, so the ignorance of the Kid’s views is demonstrated in the metaphor of his comic shortsightedness. He is literally blind to what the world is really like. His ambition to be a killer exists in a vacuum of knowledge. When he finally experiences killing closely enough to see it—that is, when he shoots Thirsty at point-blank range in the outhouse—all glamour vanishes and he is properly appalled. Munny’s earlier shooting of Davey, though it is happening at too great a range for the Kid to see it, arguably acts as just this kind of eye-opener for the viewer. But the Munny who shoots Davey is not yet the legendary killer. That character—the transcendental hero—has yet to be presented to us, and his final arrival in the film is postponed until the viewer is properly equipped to interpret him. As a matter of fact the “bad” William Munny is exactly as the Kid has described him; but the actual presence of that character is far more troubling than his
legend consumed imaginatively at a distance. Reading all this in a reflexive context, we may see that the Kid’s gushing admiration for the idea of killing is the equivalent of the viewer’s admiration for the Eastwood persona as killer. Eastwood is a hero to at least a certain class of viewers merely by reason of his violent potency, not at all by virtue of any moral or prosocial alibis which might attach to his persona. At the end of *Unforgiven* Eastwood once again provides viewers with the spectacle of homicidal mastery: he is a “meaner-than-hell coldblooded damn killer.” And once again the spectacle has the power to thrill the viewer. Of course it is only a representation of killing, not real killing. But the viewer who will enjoy the spectacle without second thoughts, or without an accompanying twinge of horror in the knowledge of everything the film has shown as accompanying this kind of action, is another naive Schofield Kid. The film critiques the charisma of pure violence just as it critiques the attractions of violence masquerading as honour or justice.

Thus *Unforgiven* deconstructs the Eastwood persona and the Eastwood fan. But it does so in the curious two-handed way that is characteristic of Eastwood films. Munny is shown striding into the saloon, uttering the hoarse Eastwood warnings and brutal gnomic pronouncements with which we are all familiar, killing five men, and riding out of town amidst hellfire, rain and thunderbolts. His action has been elaborately qualified well before its enactment: in the haunted memories of earlier violence Munny has expressed to Ned by the foreshadowing light of their campfires, in the anguish of his dream of the angel of death and his desperate desire that his children never know of his deeds, and in the abyss of drink-sodden oblivion in which the crimes were committed and sealed off from conscious knowledge. But the film does not make the character pay with his life, or the lives of his children, or even with the failure of his mission of revenge. Such outcomes would counter the violence even more strongly, would completely cancel any pleasure in the spectacle for the viewer. The last contradiction of *Unforgiven* is that it too is an example of what it is questioning. Even the most deconstructive Eastwood film (and *Unforgiven* probably is that) retains what is deconstructed: the transcendental-heroic Eastwood persona. The films do not supplant a heroic discourse with an anti-heroic one. Rather they present both, contradictory, discourses side by side. They problematise and do not resolve. If they are something less than wholesale recantations of the charismatic masculine hero, neither are they seamless affirmations of it.

*Unforgiven* asks us to look at the Eastwood persona in a new way—and not just the persona of this film, but that of all the others in which it is a conduit for violence. In his lethal Eastwood-whisper during the final scene, Munny acknowledges himself as “killer of women and children”: “I guess I’ve killed just about everything that walked or crawled at one time or another.” When Beauchamp asks him—in a piece of dialogue that virtually repeats a scene from *Josey Wales*—what his strategy was in shooting down his opponents, Munny denies any strategy whatever: “I was lucky in the order. But then I’ve always been lucky when it comes to killing folks.” This blank statement is a chilling judgement on every Eastwood character who ever shot a man down. Here there is no personal martyrdom to revenge upon evil men and a cowardly community, as in *High Plains Drifter*; and no crusade to lead on behalf of defenceless victims, as in *Pale Rider*. Nor is the protagonist untouchable and unknowable in his personal makeup, above the mere humanity of his surroundings, as in the Leone Westerns and many of the subsequent films. In *Unforgiven* the earlier persona’s transcendental qualities, its ego-invincibility, and its mysterious unreadable positioning between justice and damnation, are all resituated in an updated moral discourse where each remains recognizable but where all the most basic constitutive traits are brought into question. The film calls upon the viewing ego to unfree
itself and recognize its place in the world; it calls upon the savage oblivious instinct for violence to remember that it cannot inflict punishment without putting itself too into hell; it calls upon the ideological action of the genre itself to unmask itself and renounce its disavowal of contradiction. More than any other Eastwood film, *Unforgiven* represents a confession on the part of the filmmaker and the persona of their doubts and uncertainty, of the spectre of bad conscience haunting them, and of their basis in a moral dilemma whose conflicting terms cannot be reconciled.