BOOKS' END: THE MODERN WESTERN HERO AND GLENDON SWARTHOUT'S THE SHOOTIST

by

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When John Wayne died, I was almost glad. Glad because his life was so whole and complete, and glad because "The Shootist" was his last film. In it he beat cancer to the draw. In life he could not. The film was a fitting final statement for a triumphant career. The Shootist by Glendon Swarthout will be the subject of what follows but from that limited focus we will expand our view to comprehend the western film since World War Two. The Shootist exemplifies fundamental changes in the genre and those changes reflect, like a mirror, how we ourselves have changed.

The major theme in The Shootist is the passing of time, aging. El Paso itself, the setting for the story, is no longer a simple frontier town. Books notices this as he enters the town: "He could scarcely identify the town. Most of the hospitable old adobes had been replaced by two-story buildings with brick fronts and false cornices."[1] There were now churches, railroads, "a smart of banks," a library, symphony orchestra, lumberyard, even "a Republican or two."[2] President McKinley visits El Paso during the course of the story and Books even has his suit laundered by the new "dry process cleaning" in preparation for the final shootout.

The most obvious symbol of the aging of El Paso, its modernization, is the street car. Our hero is at first puzzled by its sounds, the steel wheels on steel rails, and its periodic bells. By the end of the story, he has accepted the innovation to the point of riding it to his final shoot-out. Books, the symbol of an age gone by, is conveyed to his end by the symbol of the new urban industrial age. Swarthout's irony cuts most sharply here.

The point is made explicit by the overbearing town marshal, Thibido, who has come to confront Books, although fearing the loss of his own life, but grows bold upon learning that the shootist is himself dying.

> You haven't looked at a calendar lately, Books. This is nineteen-ought-one. The old days are dead and gone and you don't even know it. You think this town's just another place to raise hell. Hell it is. Sure, we've still got the saloons and the girls and the tables, but we've also got a waterworks and a gashouse and telephones and lights and an opera house. We'll have our streetcars electrified by next year, and there's talk about paving the streets. They killed the last rattler on El Paso Street two years ago, in a vacant lot. First National Bank's there now. We had the President of the United States in the Plaza yesterday. Why you can have ice delivered right to your door! ... Which leaves you, J. B. Books. Where do you fit into the progress? You don't. You belong in a museum. To put it in a nutshell, Books, you've plain, plumb outlived your time.[3]

Throughout the book Swarthout has our hero carry on a private monologue with Queen Victoria. He has read in the last newspaper he will ever buy, dated January 22, 1901, of the queen's death. As he is about to leave for the final gunfight Books addresses Victoria and makes it plain that he too is aware that times have changed. "You were the last of your kind, and they say ... that I am the last of mine, so we have a hell of a lot in common."[4] This literary device, then, reinforces the idea that Books no longer belongs. It doesn't seem to bother him, overly, and that does not surprise us. After all, we know this John Bernard Books pretty well.

This "shootist," as Swarthout likes to call him, is our traditional western hero. A man of indefinite past, drifting from occupation to occupation, place to place. "I have earned a living several ways," he tells Bond Rogers, his land-lady and confidant. "I speculated in cotton, down in Louisiana. I bought and sold cattle once, at the railhead in Kansas. I struck a little gold. I have made a good deal at cards over the years, and lost a deal, too." A speculator, cattleman, businessman, miner, gambler, he is Everyman on the frontier, without roots, without family. "I have always herded alone." But for such a man, unlike us, life is no burden. "In general, I have had a damned good time."[5]

And then there is the violence. Books kills seven men within the compass of this story. How many more has he killed over the years? Yet he is a man of principle. When accused by Bond Rogers of being an assassin, Books matter-of-factly replies, "Depends which end of the gun you're on ... they were in the process of trying to kill me."[6] And later, "I defended myself, that was all. As any man worth his salt would do."[7] The shootist has a code by which he lives. "Everybody has laws he lives by, I expect. I have mine as well." ... "I will not be laid a hand on. I will not be wronged. I will not stand for an insult. I don't do these things to others. I require the same from them."[8] The gunman's Golden Rule, a mirror image of the original.

Books is a professional at what he does, a master at his craft, indeed the last one left. When Mrs. Bond's unruly teenage son, Gillom, asks in awe, "How could you get into so many fights and always come out on top?," Books replies, "I had to...It isn't being fast, it is whether or not you're willing. The difference is, when it comes down to it, most men are not willing. I found that out early. They will blink an eye, or take a breath, before they pull a trigger. I won't." The symbols of his professionalism are his specially made guns. Even the marshall, Thibido, who has come with trepidation to hurry Books out of town is anxious to get a look at those infamous weapons. "Jesus." He (Thibido) inspected them professionally. "Just like I heard. Made to order."

"They were."

"Double-action?"

"Faster."

"But less accurate."

"Not if you know how."

"Modified, I suppose."

"A special mainspring, tempered. I had the factory file down the bents on the hammer too. You get an easier letoff when you put pressure on the trigger."

"Five-and-a-half-inch barrels."

"Greased lighting."

"I'll stick to my colt's."

"You do that."

"I could take them, you know. Now."

"But you wouldn't."

"Wouldn't I?"

"No." Books spoke evenly. "Because if you did, I'd go out and buy a gun, any gun. I can still get around. Then I'd come for you. Your deputies would swim the river. You'd be alone. You and I know how it would turn out. It would snow the day they buried you. So put my guns away."[9]

There is no emotion in Books voice to give Thibido pause. And that very lack of emotion is what frightens the marshall into compliance. For he knows, and Books knows of the terrible skill of the professional gunman and his willingness to use it. We know it too and it thrills us. Underneath it is his attitude toward killing. "But the best times of all were afterward, just afterward, with the gun warm in my hand, the bite of smoke in my nose, the taste of death on my tongue, my heart high in my gullet, the danger past, and then the sweat, suddenly, and the nothingness, and the sweet clean feel of being born." These are the thoughts of a killer, and it is this final step that removes him irrevocably from us, from our identity with him. For we can feel his aloneness, we are all of us alone in the final analysis; we can feel his pride in his professionalism, if only from the perspective of our envy of it; but we can not feel that thrill of killing. Not the righteous administration of justice by striking down evil, but the sheer joy of blood lust. This is what justifies our calling Books a killer. This is no Shane who fights reluctantly and always on the side of right. This man, Books, is kin to the maniacal villain he faced, played so brilliantly by Jack Palance. A man who feels this blood lust must forever be separated from us, the good common folk.

Pride is central to our western hero; and it is so with John Bernard Books. "He thought: I will not break. I won't tell anybody what a tight spot I am in. I will keep my pride. And my guns loaded to the last."[10] Swarthout dissects Books in a series of assaults upon the hero's pride. Each of a group of western stereotypes comes to Books with a proposition to sell-out part of himself in the face of death. A secondhand man wants to buy his personal possessions and resell them for a profit, momentos

of the great man. Books bargains with him and sells his few unimportant things--but not his guns. Things mean nothing to such a man. A barber wants to sell his hair clippings. Books takes the money. An undertaker would display his dead body for gain. Books bargains for a tombstone. Even his body is not central to the hero's pride. But when a newspaperman proposes to write a series of articles for national circulation based on interviews with Books and probing into his bloody past and his feelings, the Shootist marches him out the door and kicks him down the front steps.[11] When a former girlfriend, down on her luck, wants to marry him for the use of his name after his death, he rejects her in disgust: "I may not have much else, woman, but I still have my pride."[12] And again, his pride dictates that he send packing a self-righteous minister with his prepared and bogus confession of guilt before God. "I will not sign anything I do not believe in."[13] In all of these incidents, Books core of belief, his inner being was under assault, and he would not yield that up.

Books' pride animates the several places in the story where Swarthout has our hero address, as though on equal footing, those who might at first glance be considered his social superiors, Queen Victoria, and God. As he prepares for the death in which she has preceded him, Books muses, "I have never read what a man is supposed to do when he is presented to you. Kiss your hand, I imagine. But you will know a gent when you meet him. You will recognize blood as blue in a way as yours. I will show you my guns, if you like, and we will drink tea and talk ... Maybe we did outlive our time, maybe the both of us did belong in a museum--but we hung onto our pride, we never sold our guns, and they will tell of the two of us that we went out in style. So today, old girl, a hair after four o'clock, at the palace. You be dressed in your best bib and tucker, Vickie, and so will I."[14] Books challenges God as the cancer in his guts tortures him, "God. Face me! Be a man and face me now if you have the guts--stand and draw or back off! God damn you, God, throw down on me and kill me now or let me live!"[15]

It is pride which causes him to choose suicide over a helpless death, screaming in pain, and finally, coma. And then, from suicide, his pride seizes on the idea of a final gunfight which will rid the town of three of its worst men while bringing Books himself final violent release from agony. He will control his death just as he has controlled his life. In the end he is, of course, invincible. Not that he survives the fight, having defeated and killed all his enemies fairly, Books is blasted from behind by the disinterested bartender, wielding a shotgun, the coward's weapon. He had to die; he wanted to die; we wanted him to die. But our western heroes can not be defeated by evil, even near death, the shootist's professional skills are too great, his cause is too just. He is killed by chance, by the bartender, a "dumb-ass amateur."[16]

John Bernard Books is the classical western hero of books and film, but with significant changes. The one-dimentional hero of literature and films of the 1930's and 40's was a handsome young man. Books is old and no longer the beau ideal. The classical hero was courageous and a man of reluctant violence. Books still has the deadly courage but there is little reluctance to use violence. At the end, of course, he invites it and the thrill he gets makes us a little uncomfortable. This is not the man on horseback in the 1870's when the west was at its peak, but a man, out of place, in a city in 1901 when the west is almost dead, and he is dying, too.

The romantic image of the west and the cowboy grew up in the period between the World Wars. An age of cities, factories, and fascinating technology. In a sense this romantic image emerged from the technology itself. It was motion pictures, movies, which gave this hero his range to ride. And the crowds of factory workers in the cities who saw and believed. It was an innocent age, one which sought simple answers and clearly defined ideals. And John Wayne fit the role best. The Great Depression and the years surrounding World War II saw Wayne's rise to stardom playing this frontier hero. He did it well in a hundred films until we could hardly tell the difference between the celluloid image and the man himself. When The Shootist became a film, John Wayne became the shootist.

Wayne brought to the part that great weight of heroic experience that he and we had accumulated together over forty years. He was the essence of the classic hero distilled from all those films and now, himself, grown old. We didn't have to be told the history of John Bernard Books: we knew the film history of John Wayne. The shootist was all those earlier heroes grown old. The film was somewhat different than the novel. The terrible agony of the cancer was softened in the film. One of the peripheral characters, the boy Gillom, had his personality rehabilitated to fit the actor playing the part, Ron Howard. But, in broad outline, and in considerable detail, the novel became the film. The book's major theme, the passing of time, aging, remained the focus of the film. In this it conformed with most of the major western films since the late 1940's.[17] The classic hero had become a cliche by the post-war period, more adept with a guitar than a six-gun. More significant, was the change that had come over America itself. The early exhilaration of war and the violent defeat of an evil enemy had yielded to the ambiguity and frustration of a world that was not much better for all the dying. The looming presence of a new enemy, the Soviet Union, was all the more confusing because it had so recently been a friend and ally. The solving of the problem of the depression by wartime prosperity had by the 1950's brought not utopia but new problems of class and race. The mass society of the Eisenhower era was vaguely unsatisfying. A loss of community and identity in the supermarket and on the freeway was mirrored in a like loss of pride in one's work on an assembly line or in an office filled with faceless people. Overarching all this was a loss of control by the individual of his own destiny. And then came the upheavals of the 60's, social change, war, demonstration, riot, and assassination. It was a world of anxiety and uncertainty that no amount of hairdryers and T.V.'s could assuage.

The classic hero of an earlier age made little sense now. He was too simple, too innocent. David Brion Davis, at the beginning of this period, described that hero as the hero of an immature adolescent.[18] What good to us was a hero who punched out or shot a villain while we faced a boss with the strength of a corporation behind him and the sure retribution of the police on call? What good was a hero who loved his horse more than a woman to a man with a family or a youth in the midst of sexual liberation? What good was the hero of an adolescent to an adult America no longer protected by a paternal Britain, but now thrust into the role of a mature child who must look after its own parents in their declining old age? No use at all, except perhaps as a nostalgic reminder of our former innocence. That is why the western hero changed after WWII

and it is why the Shootist is old.

Beginning with "The Outlaw" in 1949 western films have more and more emphasized the aging hero and the aging west. Gregory Peck played a gun-fighter, now middle-aged and tired of the game, in that film. The lawman of "High Noon" (1952) was an aging Gary Cooper. Shane was no longer young in a frontier changing from cattle to farmers and families. The poignancy of "The Magnificent Seven" (1960), "The Professionals" (1966), and "The Wild Bunch" (1969), comes from the fact that these men were once great, even masterful, but are now fallen on hard times in a west which no longer needs them. There is no place for the aging heroes in "Valdez is Coming" (1971), "Will Penny" (1968), or "Lonely are the Brave" (1962). Even a film such as "Hud" (1963) which seems to concentrate on a young man, though not what we could call a hero, is on close examination, as much a film about passing time and change. The real hero of the film is Hud's aged father, Homer, played by Melvyn Douglas.

These films test the theme of age and the passing of the frontier because for us in this post-WWII world, there is more to be learned from maturity than from adolescence. It is a sign of our own maturity that John Bernard Books of The Shootist, novel and film, is the kind of hero we understand. He helps us understand ourselves as America enters mature middle age.

NOTES

[1] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 4.

[2] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 3.

[3] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 71.

[4] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 126.

[5] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 58.

[6] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 30.

[7] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 73.

[8] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 60.

[9] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 23.

[10] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 14.

[11] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 34-36.

[12] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 100-102.

[13] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 116-121.

[14] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 126.

[15] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 96.

[16] Swarthout, Shootist, p. 44.

[17] The form proved to fit perfectly some of the major concerns of Americans in an age of affluence, war and reform. A bare listing of just some of the major Western films since that period is truly impressive. Starting with "The Gunfighter" (1949) our list must include "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon" (1949), "Wagon Master" (1950), "High Noon" (1952), "Shane" (1953), "Bad Day at Black Rock" (1954), "The Searchers" (1956), "The Big Country" (1958), "The Left-Handed Gun" (1958), "Rio Bravo" (1959), "The Magnificent Seven" (1960), "The Misfits" (1961), "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" (1962), "Ride the High Country" (1962), "Lonely Are the Brave" (1962), "Hud" (1963), "Cat Ballou" (1965), "The Professionals" (1966), "Will Penny" (1968), "The Wild Bunch" (1969), "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" (1969), "True Grit" (1969), "Monte Walsh" (1970) "Valdez is Coming" (1971), "Junior Bonner" (1972), "The Great Northfield Raid" (1972), "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" (1973), "Posse" (1975), "Buffalo Bill and the Indians or Sitting Bull's History Lesson" (1976), "The Missouri Breaks" (1976), "The Shootist" (1976), and, finally, "Comes a Horseman" (1978).

[18] David Brion Davis, "Ten-Gallon Hero," American Quarterly, Vol. VI, (Summer, 1954), pp. 111-125.

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