

The Western Hero Grows Narcissistic

by
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The development of the Western film hero parallels the general development of heroic figures. From the seemingly perfect exalted hero he has moved to a position of questionable reputation. This change is the result of a change in the hero's thought process while his behavior has remained much the same.

The hero's thought process has undergone the same change as has our interpretation of the Myth of Narcissus. First interpretation of the myth would tell us that Narcissus fell in love with his reflection; current psychological interpretation is that intensive self-study is more likely to result in a critical discovery of flaws than in admiration of supposed perfection. The early Western hero was not in love with himself but his character is marked by his egocentric view. As the hero begins to think more, to actually study the image reflected, he finds that he is not the center of the world that, in fact, he would be a poor center for the changing world around him.

Through a chronological study of Western films we can see how subtly this change in attitude occurred. At first, the hero is so sure that his is the only way that he does not even question it; when the first doubts appear he stoutly declares that correctness of his position; then when society begins to question, he begins to justify. Justification gives way to despair, to renunciation of his profession as a way of life.

In John Ford's early classic *Stagecoach* we see John Wayne as the prototype Western hero. Although some deny his acting ability, John Wayne has acted the part of the Western hero in a variety of the stages of development. While I do not want to examine him *per se*, it is most interesting that in a profession where youth and good looks are a premium Wayne has remained long after age has taken its toll on both looks and health.

The hero of *Stagecoach* is the Ringo Kid. The plot, like that of many other Westerns, is based on a revenge motif—members of the Kid's family have been killed and he was falsely convicted of a

crime. The hero of this young art form has none of Hamlet's indecision. Neither does he question the "rotten" state of the West. The youth of the art form, of the West itself as depicted in the film, and of the character work together to produce a credible optimism. The Kid believes that good will triumph and that the natural harmony will be restored.

The Plummer gang has violated the Code of the West: the Kid will mete out punishment in traditional Western form. Killing the Plummers is no more a moral question to him than would be the shooting of a coyote attacking his livestock. It is "right" to take revenge not because some logical process has led him to that decision but because it never occurs to the Kid not to hunt down and at least attempt to kill these men.

Other things which might seem moral "questions" to some also elude the Ringo Kid. The question of how to react to the forced company of a prostitute might bother a lady like Mrs. Mallory or a gentlemen like Hatfield but not the Kid. The fact that he may not be aware of Dallas's occupation does not belittle the Kid's treatment of her. He accepts Dallas as she presents herself, warm, human, and kind. Even if he was imprisoned at an early age, it is hard to believe that the Western genre with its obvious treatment of prostitution would deny the Kid knowledge of the infamous profession.

The ones who deny the code which is innate for the Kid are the villains of the film. The unseen Plummers and embezzling banker are perhaps the worst for they have actively violated the code. However, the fact that the other violations are less obvious makes it more difficult to punish those violations. The snub of Dallas by the "respectable" people is wrong, but the kid seems oblivious to this and even if he had noticed and understood their behavior there is no action he can take to protect her. This covert denial of the code has the more lasting effect; this was the inroad of civilization which changed the wild West into the civilized state.

Doc Boone represents a third position in *Stagecoach*. Doc is very much aware of both Eastern civilized attitudes and the innate code which motivates the Kid. The dilemma of choosing between the two has produced in him a drunken state of indecision. A middle road reconciling these diverse attitudes is nonexistent.

The Kid rides out of the film as he rode into it. He does not question the effect of his release on the sheriff any more than he questioned the necessity of killing the Plummers. Nor does he worry about the effect of Dallas's past on their future. As an innocent man it is right that he be free, as guilty men it is right that the Plummers

be killed, as man and woman respecting and accepting each other is right that he and Dallas be happy. There are no moral questions for the Ringo Kid and no shades of gray between right and wrong.

Stagecoach presents no serious questioning of the Kid's moral position; because he is accepted as right, the Kid makes no determined effort to convince us that he is. Henry Fonda's Wyatt Earp in another Ford film, *My Darlin' Clementine*, is in a slightly different situation and indicates the first change in the Western hero. Here we see Earp using the law to attain his own ends and his belief in the position he has *chosen* must be stated. Earp does make a choice based on his belief and logic rather than acting on innate knowledge of good and evil as does the Ringo Kid.

Some elements remain unchanged. The hero is still a man of action and he is still accepted as being "right". The problem of the thinking man is still much the same. Doc Holliday, like Doc Boone, resorts to the bottle when he cannot choose between Eastern civilization and the Western code.

The changes in characterization and presentation are more important. Chihuahua as the prostitute may be "Doc's woman" but she is actively involved in her profession and, unlike Dallas, is definitely connected to the villains of the film. She is also part of a scheme to cheat Earp in a poker game at the beginning of the film. Earp's treatment of her may not be overly harsh considering her behavior, but he does not have the Ringo Kid's ability to help her be better than her reputation. Neither she nor the Clantons accept Earp; instead they test him in a way that other characters did not really consider doing to the Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach*.

The audience is not asked to accept Earp either. The crime is indicated, the dead body shown, and evidence is produced to connect the Clantons with the theft of the cattle and the killing of Earp's kid brother. We are given what should be an emotional scene of Earp over brother James's grave and we hear his vow to avenge the murder. In *Stagecoach* the Kid's word was enough for all of this. In order to carry out that vow he made, Earp enlists the social protection of the marshal's office and the aid of his two other brothers.

That the town is "cleaned up" in the process of gaining personal revenge gives the gunman added respectability. But we should not be misled by those who defend Earp by making this added benefit his primary goal. He refused the job of marshal earlier in the film and abandons it as soon as the real objective is obtained. The people who stole *his* cattle and killed *his* brother are dead. He is no more interested in civic responsibility than was that convicted criminal the

Ringo Kid. And he achieved the same goals only with much more aid and with physical evidence to support the Western code which is no longer innate but an external, learned law of the land.

The step from being unaware of the possibility of living his life any other way to the need for support from family and society indicates a greater loss of self-confidence than we might at first realize. When the innate has been externalized the hero can cling only so long. Shane grasped at the code and tried to associate it again with the internal.

Alan Ladd's Shane was hailed by many as the last of the great Western heroes. Certainly, Shane is the beginning of the end. Shane himself often removes his gun belt and even leaves it hidden in the barn. He seems to be telling us that the day of the gun fighter is over, but he does not believe that himself, and, consequently, he does not convince us of it. From the first shot between the horns of a deer of Shane riding up to the Starrett homestead, we know that the overpowering "horn" of the dilemma will be a return to the gun.

Joey, with a naive reliance on the lingering remains of the innate, sees the gun as the power to establish and protect what is his. No matter how well hidden the gun might have been, Joey zeros in on it. And he delights in using it, despite the reactions of his civilized and socialized mother.

That mother and the society which agrees with her cause Shane much anguish. For the first time society will not automatically grant the Western hero the privilege of being right. The homesteaders are adamantly opposed to the use of violence to gain their ends. That they must be correct becomes obvious in moments of sanity when we are not caught up in the romanticism of *Shane* and the myth of the Western gunman. Surely there was not a Shane to ride into every community of homesteaders to protect them from ranchers. One would expect that the wealthier ranchers would have many more professional gun fighters than would the farmers. Nevertheless, homesteaders did outlive the open range ranchers.

Shane is not tested as was Earp; he is simply rejected. In order to defend Joe Starrett Shane must first physically overcome him. Joe and the other homesteaders have brought with them to the West a civilized Eastern view which will not accept the Western code as even an external law. Their goals are civilized and civilizing and the means to achieve them will also be civilized.

The defense of his gun and way of life Shane addresses significantly to Joey who is quite willing to agree with him. A gun he tells Joey and us is amoral; in and of itself a gun makes no moral

judgement nor is it subject to moral judgement. The morality, Shane says, is in the man. A good man makes good use of a gun, a bad man, bad use. Shane, we know, is a good man and he puts a gun to good use—killing, we assume, bad men. Jaek Palance's Wilson is, of course, bad.

This spoken defense or justification is a tremendous step for our hero. He has abandoned his usual speechlessness for a philosophical statement involving moral judgement, not only of himself but of others. How unlike the Ringo Kid. A little more thinking, more reasoning, and less rationalization will cause the hero to forsake his gun and to discourage others from following the example of his life.

Thinking often requires solitude; in *The Searchers* hero Ethan Edwards, again portrayed by John Wayne, gets plenty of solitude. Here the hero is beyond defending his position as an endangered species. Cast out by society, Edwards approaches the psychotic in his self-righteous effort to purge the West of the demonic Indian.

This hero is quite different from others. No longer tagged as "the kid," Edwards is recognized as old enough to have fathered a child who would now be as old as the Kid was in *Stagecoach*. Edwards may not be much older than Fonda's Earp or Ladd's Shane—the difference is that he is recognized as being older. Society is stabilized to the extent that the community expects Edwards "to settle down."

Different too is his bigoted hatred of the Indian. The Indians the Ringo Kid killed had attacked him; the Plummer gang had killed his family. Earp is interested only in avenging his brother's death. Edwards' desire for destruction extends to *all* Indians, not just those guilty of the crimes against his family. In his rage he would mutilate the dead bodies of his enemies. In a striking scene Edwards kneels in the snow firing as rapidly as possible into a herd of buffalo; if he cannot catch the enemy, he will starve them to death.

When Edwards and two young men first start to track the Indian band that killed his brother's family and kidnapped his niece, the community accepts the need to return the girl to her own people. In the course of a five year search for the girl, one of the young men is killed. During this time even others who have lost members of their families in Indian raids are urging Edwards to quit the hunt and return to rational life.

The rational life of home and family are foreign to Edwards. He cannot explain and does not try. Smugly sure of himself, he battles all obstacles. He feels alone and abandoned. The community has no use for a man of such single-minded purpose. Ethan Edwards is

not only rejected but pitied. As the film closes with a perfect antithesis of its beginning the door closes (not in Edward's face for he has turned away) on any hope of a "normal" life for the gunman. Edwards at this point is a middle-aged gunman, but it is not just Edwards/Wayne who is aging. The West is older, more settled, and the possibility of life as a gunman is growing more and more unlikely. To overcome the feeling of aloneness the hero will have to give up his self-righteousness.

To give up his self-righteousness is not necessarily to give up his self-respect or to negate himself as a man. The last stage of the Western hero, this time fully aware of his own imperfections, is again portrayed by John Wayne. J. B. Books in *The Shootist* has come a long way from the Ringo Kid.

The dying Books is surrounded by the society which has served as the mirror which reflects the imperfections of violence and destruction of a gunman's life. Carefully director Don Siegel shows us the end of an era in American history. Carson City is a thriving town with shaded avenues and established churches. Ironically, Books rides a street car to his last shoot out.

Books is concerned, as the Western hero has always been, with dying properly. but, for the first time, he is concerned, too, about the effect his example will have on those left behind. He tells Gillom that the gunman possesses no special skill. The ability to kill another rests not in speedy draw or precise marksmanship but in not hesitating. Books holds off the moment of death until he can see Gillom toss the gun away. Books nods approval that the gun is at last forsaken.

Finally the Western hero is aware that not only is another lifestyle available but that the individual has some choice in the style he lives. Books is not ashamed of his code, but he can now see the shades of compliance between his own right or wrong judgments. The hero recognizes the value of moral questions, even of questioning himself. The Western hero might still be dissatisfied without answers, but now he can ask the question.

The move from egocentric to moral questioner has been a tremendous one for the Western hero. That the move could be made so quickly, in such a young art form as film, is staggering.

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FILMS USED

My Darling Clementine 1946

Director—John Ford

With—Henry Fonda, Linda Darnell, Ward Bond, Walter Brennan, Victor Mature, Tim Holt, John Ireland, Jane Darwell

The Searchers 1956

Director—John Ford

With—John Wayne, Vera Miles, Natalie Wood

Shane 1953

Director—George Stevens

With—Alan Ladd, Jean Arthur, Van Heflin, Brandon de Wilde, Jack Palance

The Shootist 1976

Director—Don Siegel

With—John Wayne, Lauren Bacall, James Stewart, Ron Howard, Richard Boone, Bill McKinney, John Carradine, Seatman Crothers, Harry Morgan, Hugh O'Brien, Sherree North

Stagecoach 1939

Director—John Ford

With—John Wayne, Thomas Mitchell, Claire Trevor, Andy Devine, John Carradine, Tim Holt