

PROSTITUTES AND SCHOOLMAMS:

An Essay on Women in Western Films

by

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Like other film genres, the western has through the years undergone changes which reflect shifting moods and attitudes in the viewing public. In 1950, when the nation was weary of military conflict, it was appropriate for Henry King to have made The Gunfighter, that intense study of an aging legend who is tired of showdowns. During the McCarthy era, it was understandable that social and moral values be dramatized within such a traditional form, as they were in Fred Zinnemann's High Noon and Delmer Davies' 3:10 to Yuma. And later, it was fitting that Sam Peckinpah made the first and most disturbingly violent western, The Wild Bunch, at a time (the late sixties) when blood was being shed on city streets and college campuses across the country. One thing that has remained fairly constant, however, is the way directors and screenwriters have deployed female characters in the familiar stories that unfold on the western landscape. For whatever reason, western filmmakers have generally rejected strong, assertive women, even though women have been crucially important in almost every picture since the late thirties. Female characters have been, and continue to be, physically or emotionally outside the moral/ethical main event. From Claire Trevor in John Ford's Stagecoach to Jane Fonda in the recent ersatz-western, The Electric Horseman, they have passively acquiesced to the code that "a man's gonna be what he's gotta be." Technology and the times change the look of the western, and some male characters (Billy the Kid in Arthur Penn's The Left-Handed Gun) even become somewhat androgynous, but the women who people the land stay the same.

A reconsideration of four very different classic westerns -- the aforementioned High Noon and Stagecoach, plus George Roy Hill's Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and Robert Altman's McCabe and Mrs. Miller -- will show that even special or strong female characters have been at best peripheral to the central dramatic resolution that climaxes this kind of film. Ultimately excluded are prostitutes as well as schoolmams, prairie-wise dames in denim as well as patrician ladies from the East, arrayed in silk and lace.

The contrast between virtuous and fallen women was first noted by Robert Warshow in his rightfully celebrated essay, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner." While educated, cultured women offer the hero affection and values rooted in genteel Christianity, Warshow observed, the prostitute or barroom entertainer is a quasi-masculine confidante who understands exactly what the hero must do.¹ This dichotomy is accurate or descriptive only up to a point, however, for Warshow seems to have ignored the emotional similarities of one kind of woman to the other. Under certain conditions, neither prostitute nor schoolmarm will resist "standing by her man" anywhere, regardless of understanding or misunderstanding.

A good starting point for this discussion is Stagecoach, a curious variation to Warshow's generalization. There are two particularly important female characters in the film: Dallas (Claire Trevor), a melancholy whore who has been run out of Tonto by a group of austere moralists; and Lucy Mallory (Louise Platt), a caricature of Southern maidenhood who is actually one of the dullest women John Ford ever invented. Along with an assortment of others, including a fugitive called Ringo (John Wayne), the women are unlikely fellow travelers on a long and arduous trip to Lordsburg, near the Mexican border.

The facets of characterization are predictable enough: Dallas and the god-natured outlaw hit it off quickly; Lucy is a desperate, pregnant woman in search of her soldier-husband somewhere in the wild. But Dallas is neither floozy nor temptress. She isn't even hard-hearted. Like Tennessee Williams' Blanche DuBois, she depends on the kindness of strangers, doing poorly at that until Ringo shows up. Lucy, on the other hand, is quietly hypocritical, showing disdain for all the rest except the oily Hatfield (John Carradine), because he is ostentatiously well-mannered and reminds her of home.

Within the temporal boundaries of the film, we see no evidence whatsoever of the kind of behavior by Dallas which apparently had incensed Tonto's purity league. Instead, she seems gentle and tired, perhaps a little ashamed. Her conversations with Ringo are packed with all the cliches of ordinary courtship and domesticity; each of them wants to settle down on an isolated plot of land, raise horses and kids, and grow old inconspicuously. In a way, Dallas is a spinster who sees Ringo as her last chance. Thus she grows emotionally frantic when he persists in his plan for a showdown in Lordsburg with Luke Plummer, the murderer of his brother and father.

Like Dallas, the elegant Lucy longs to subordinate her individuality to male companionship and domination. She thoroughly enjoys the attentiveness of the scoundrel Hatfield, for through it she is reminded not only of her own beauty, but also of her traditional role according to the ante-bellum code of honor: she should be pursued, and she should encourage the pursuit with coquettish glances.

During the long trip, Lucy's identity is discernible mostly through the husband whom we never see, and the Southern gambler who acts as her protector. Dallas is similarly identifiable by way of Ringo. Even her unselfish attention to Lucy during the latter's childbirth is less important in itself than the way it serves to impress Ringo that here truly is the woman who should bear his sons.

Released thirteen years after Stagecoach, High Noon is another picture with a strong social theme. But while Ford's collection of types eventually unify toward a common goal (survival), Zinnemann's Hadleyville is occupied by prideless, fearful people who ultimately scatter and hide, leaving the strong but confused Will Kane (Gary Cooper) to fight alone against a vengeful, crazed killer who has just been released from prison.

High Noon exemplifies Warshow's dichotomy of female characters better than most westerns, especially since Helen Ramirez (Katy Jurado) has in the past been mistress to both Kane and Frank Miller (Ian McDonald), Kane's nemesis, whose arrival at the end literally triggers the violent resolution of the town's conflict. Despite the ethnic prejudices against her which are occasionally alluded to in the dialogue, Mrs. Ramirez is nonetheless a woman of property, certainly one of experience. Had the film been made fifteen years later, her hotel would probably have been a whorehouse.

Amy Kane (Grace Kelly), Will's new bride, seems virtually the exact opposite of Mrs. Ramirez. Amy is a fair, delicate, schoolmarmish blond Quaker who cannot understand why her husband must stay in town when he has already given up his marshal's badge. Like Dallas in the Ford film, she wonders what possible good it will do for her man to risk their future in a shoot-out. She opts to leave town, with or without him, even before he tries -- and fails -- to enlist help from the townsmen in the coming battle. This would be a potentially strong assertion of self-determination by her were it not, of course, for developments in the climactic sequence of the picture.

Among the most interesting scenes in High Noon is a wordless one near the end, in which both women sit rigidly in a horse-and-buggy and slowly advance to the depot, where they will board the train which ironically is to drop off the vengeful Miller. Kane watches them as they ride by, living manifestations of his past and present, while he stands in the middle of the dirt street in sunlight, preparing to create his future.

However, Amy returns immediately after hearing the first shot, her purposefulness shattered by the possibility that Will is dead or injured. In fact, she herself kills one of the four men, blasting him from behind, and is an inadvertent accessory to her husband's slaying of the last one, Miller himself. Her involvement can be seen as the triumph of love and commitment, the jeopardizing of her own life to help her beloved. But she is a Quaker, and from another view, her return demonstrates that non-violent principles are comparatively unimportant in the face of marital, or at least romantic, instinct.

But there is nothing really surprising about Amy's return. It is, moreover, her delayed way of following a suggestion by Mrs. Ramirez that she "stand by her man" -- inexpensive advice inasmuch as Mrs. Ramirez herself is out of the running for that man.

Clearly, Amy's identity is inextricably attached to Will's. But, oddly enough, Mrs. Ramirez is also dependent on the marshal. True, she does not stay and help him; nor does she direct any of her employees to help him. But she does preface her remarks to Amy with "if I were his woman . . ." There should be no question in our minds that she would do anything for Will Kane if Amy were not around.

Noteworthy also is the fact that Mrs. Ramirez does sell her holdings and leave town. She like everyone else presumes that Kane will be killed by Miller and his cohorts. In that likelihood, there is no future for her at Hadleyville -- with the malicious Miller, and certainly not with Harvey (Lloyd Bridges), Kane's arrogant but cowardly deputy. Although it is tempting to guess at her background, and to theorize Mrs. Ramirez as a strong-willed sort who will name her own game wherever she goes, we are nonetheless compelled to interpret her pained feelings about Kane's marriage and impending death as definite evidence of her continued emotional attachment to him.

In the end, she is gone, Miller and his gang are dead, and the fearful townspeople are left to live with their own shame. But a marriage has been saved and -- like Ringo and Dallas at the end of Stagecoach -- the Kanes ride away to raise kids and cattle.

George Roy Hill's Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, released at the very end of the sixties, fascinated casual viewers if not western aficionados through the ways it incorporated slapstick and vaudeville-style dialogue into historical adventure, while still retaining some traditional elements of the western formula (e.g. doomed thieves being chased everywhere). It also featured two glamorous actors (Paul Newman and Robert Redford), and plucked Katherine Ross from the Berkeley and Malibu sets of The Graduate to play the Kid's "teacher-woman" girlfriend, Etta Place.

Perhaps the humor and carefree adventure of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid were enough to make viewers ignore other things in the film. But the fact remains that director Hill and scriptwriter William Goldman drastically adjust the realities of days gone by in order to appeal to modern audiences, yet feel no similar compulsion to alter past sexual codes and stereotypes. The result is a story about two funny, inseparable outlaws and their cute, submissive mascot.

Notwithstanding a charmingly irrelevant interlude -- Butch taking Etta for a bicycle ride to the tune of "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head" -- this is definitely not a love triangle on the order of Francois Truffaut's Jules and Jim. The real, demonstrable affection is that which exists between the title characters; the woman is there when they rest and recreate. In From Reverence to Rape, Molly Haskell writes, "it is the rapport between Newman and Redford . . . rather than between either one of them and Katherine Ross, that has all the staples -- the love and loyalty, the yearning and spirituality, the eroticism sublimated in action and banter, the futility and fatalism, the willingness to die for someone . . ."2

For Etta, the two men -- especially Sundance -- are her ticket to anywhere, her chance to be treated well, as long as she behaves herself and stays out of the way. During an argument between Butch and the Kid over the slim prospects for robbery in desolate Bolivia, Etta tries to settle them down with reason and logic. But Sundance cuts her off in mid-sentence, reminding her that she would be nothing without him,

that her only role is to back him up in everything he does. She responds with obedient silence.

Etta's self-image is compatible with the way she is perceived by her male companions. As an unmarried schoolteacher in her late twenties, she confesses that she is the lowest of the low. Haskell points out that Etta and other movie schoolteachers "all flee at the first opportunity, and with the first man that gives them a nod, an occupation that by society's lights is a fate worse than death."³ Thus her choice to accompany the fugitives to Bolivia, where they are unknown, is for her not really a choice but rather an opportunity to escape the doldrums of the classroom. Butch and Sundance become her sole reason for living, and she is even useful to them -- teaching them practical Spanish for bank robbers. All she wants in return is the privilege of sharing their fun.

Interestingly enough, this film also presents a variation on the cultured woman/femme fatale opposition that Warshaw explained fifteen years earlier. Although Etta is a willing participant in the dangerous life (actually a frontier fore-runner of Bonnie Parker, sans weapon), she is also a prim Easterner, a smooth-skinned maiden who might have majored in English at Radcliffe. Her counterpart in the film is a qiddy, benevolent prostitute named Agnes (Cloris Leachman), who gladly accepts the responsibility of easing Butch's escape-anxiety, no questions asked.

Although Agnes' role is brief, she, like Etta, is featured in a scene of coitus interruptus that shows their underlying kinship. While the two outlaws are hiding in the brothel where Agnes is employed, their six pursuers ride into the street below and are given erroneous directions by a friend of the thieves. Sundance then prepares a nap, and Butch climbs onto the mattress with Agnes who, while undressing, recites an affectionate litany of all the wonderful ways through which Butch has satisfied her sexually. But just as they are about to couple blissfully once again, the posse returns and the two men are forced to run.

Much later, in Bolivia, Etta is about to fulfill her sexual role, lying quietly as Sundance becomes aroused. Suddenly there is a knock on the wall; she and Butch run through a few Spanish verb-conjugations and vocabulary drills, effectively annoying Etta's bed partner and momentarily destroying the amorous spell. This interruption of course lacks the drama of that in the brothel, but it serves, even so, to stress that the two women are occasional commodities or objects who attain human purpose only in conjunction with a man.

Etta does voluntarily separate from the two outlaws eventually. But she does so when it is apparent to her that they have reached the end of the line. As she had promised earlier, she will do anything they wish, but she will not watch them die. Beneath the simple strength of this choice lies an obvious alternate-perspective: if they have no life, she can have none, either. She then disappears from the film.

Robert Altman's McCabe and Mrs. Miller (1971) still seems a fairly unusual western in that the focus of its conflict is capitalism or, more specifically, the small businessman's on-going struggle against remote corporate power. An argument can be made that this struggle is merely sodbusters vs. cattlemen, rearranged in different clothing and brought to town. That view is reasonable, but it fails to consider the whole picture. It is the town itself that the distant mining company wants to buy, steal, or invade, largely because of the title characters' successful, relatively opulent whorehouse.

John McCabe (Warren Beatty) is a pseudo-gunfighter who gambles for a living and refreshes himself with raw eggs and whiskey. Running a house of prostitution in Presbyterian Church, in the rural Northwest, is his idea of settling down. Before long Constance Miller (Julie Christie) arrives with her own stable of chippies, making McCabe an offer he can refuse but decides not to. They become partners, a fortuitous agreement for McCabe, since Mrs. Miller (like Helen Ramirez, she is referred to as "Mrs.") quickly demonstrates that she is an extremely efficient madam with a far better business sense than his.

McCabe and Mrs. Miller is one of the few westerns in which the female lead character is allowed emotional dominance over the male -- to a degree, at least. Because Altman allows us to listen in on McCabe's private babblings to himself, we learn early that he is smitten by her, and is boyishly angered by her insistence that he pay her for sex -- the same price, in fact, that she gets from her other customers.

Everything is business, however, with Mrs. Miller, a strange, self-fulfilling Englishwoman who reveals in privacy nothing more than her wicked need for opium. Indirectly, though, we can surmise that, despite her foreign background, she is wise to the ways of American mining towns. For when McCabe tells her he has been approached with an offer by representatives of the corporation, but has turned it down, she immediately launches a tirade on his stupidity. What they can't buy, she says, they take, and kill anyone in their way.

After about 60 minutes of screen time as an unshakable, calculating, determined woman whose chances for survival in the turn of the century wilderness are high, she suddenly is transformed into a rattled, nervous wench who fears for the safety of her partner, despite the fact that she herself will survive, and probably do well regardless of who runs the town.

"Don't do it!" she cries out, in effect, as time draws near to the snowy showdown. With that plea, she joins Dallas, Amy Kane, and countless other western women of more acceptable occupation. Altman even adds a final, cynical touch. As McCabe advances alone into the cold white of day, looking like Will Kane in silhouette and shadow, Constance Miller retreats to an Oriental parlor, her pipeful of opium creating wistful buzzes of escape. McCabe dies. The look on Constance Miller's face at the end suggests that nothing matters any longer.

These four productions span several decades -- from the tail-end of the Great Depression to the eve of Watergate. In

them we can follow the development of technical virtuosity, maturation in theme and story, and ongoing evolution of personal directorial style. The western film continues to change even as it retains its classic appeal through strong conflict and adventurous intensity. Heroes have become anti-heroes, have become thoughtful, melancholy, even weak. But female characters continue to be presented in essential western stereotype: mothers, fiancées, mistresses, suppressing the need for self-discovery because they are essentially too busy hoping against hope that he will come out alive.

The same cannot be said of other film categories and genres, where women of independence, perseverance, resourcefulness, and ambition have often been portrayed without any necessary attachment to strong male figures: biography (The Miracle Worker); musical comedy/drama (Cabaret, The Turning Point); romantic comedy (Annie Hall); historical drama (Julia); gangster/mystery (Gloria); satire (Network); even horror (Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?, Dressed to Kill.) Just about any picture in the past ten years which has featured Glenda Jackson, Diane Keaton, Jane Fonda, Anne Bancroft, Ellen Burstyn, and Jill Clayburgh has been a story of special women who can make it alone if they must.

Not so with the western. Perhaps the frontier was indeed so wild for anyone but the manly or brutish; at any rate, filmmakers seem highly reluctant to show it otherwise.

NOTES

¹"Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," included in The Immediate Experience (New York: Atheneum, 1970), p. 138.

²From Reverence to Rape (Baltimore: Penguin Books), p. 187.

³Ibid., p. 338.