



Movie Club

Unforgiven (1992)

1. Eastwood was not only the ideal director, but also the ideal star for the film:

Eastwood chose this period for "Unforgiven," I suspect, because it mirrored his own stage in life. He began as a young gunslinger on TV and in the early Sergio Leone films "A Fistful of Dollars" and "For a Few Dollars More," and he matured in "Coogan's Bluff" and "Two Mules for Sister Sara," under the guidance of Don Siegel, the director he often cited as his mentor. Now Eastwood was in his 60s, and had long been a director himself. (Ebert, Roger, "[Unforgiven \[Review\]](#)").

This parallel has also been noted by Richard Corliss, who noted that the film was "Eastwood's meditation on age, repute, courage, heroism – on all those burdens he has been carrying with such grace for decades." (Cited in: Gilligan, Patrick (1999). *Clint: The Life and Legend*. London: Harper Collins, p.473) His evolution as a western star and director mirrors the developments of the western genre. How does this impact our viewing of the film? Does it provide insights that may otherwise have been missing both in the making of the film but also in our reception as an audience?

2. The West has become commodified in *Unforgiven*. The railroad has come and is making everybody with the right gumption prosperous. This is even the case with gunslingers. They have either inverted their trade, like "Little" Bill Daggett using his violence now as a tool as sheriff. Others, like English Bob, have taken to spreading their mythos by way of sensationalised pulp publications. And others, a younger breed, see themselves as the inheritors of this 'tradition', like the Schofield Kid, who names himself (where before a fitting nickname would have been bestowed by others—eg. "Two-Gun Corcoran") in aid of spreading the legend he hopes to foster. Even the names of the characters play into commerce with the old gunslingers named after currency (William Munny, "Little" Bill Daggett; English Bob—Ned Logan is interestingly absent from this) and the new blood christening themselves after the products they utilise (Schofield model Smith & Wesson revolver). After Delilah is cut up it is the grievance of damaged property and loss of income to Skinny Dubois that leads Bill to really evaluate the need for some kind of compensation in place of retribution. Even when Will and Ned discuss whether they should go after the bounty, they are shocked by the violence against Delilah but they are ultimately swayed by the incentive of money, shrugging it as "we've done things for money before." Even we as an audience are partaking in this commodification of the West, and have for most of our lives (through watching films and reading stories that have spread about "the West"), and like the Old West turning into the New West in the film, tastes have changed and the genre no

longer commands the audiences it once did. How has this shift altered the society in the film? How has it shifted the image of the West, and those affiliated with it? How has this continued to evolve? How has audience expectations been led by this change, or led this change?

3. The West is filled with colourful stories, from the death of “Two-Gun Corcoran” (or for that matter, the origin of his name), to the Schofield Kid’s first five kills, all with varying grains of truth and generous helpings of fabrication, with each teller adding their own embellishments. In fact, exaggeration rather than truth seems to be the stock-in-trade of many of these storytellers. These are both to aid reputation (Munny is as “cold as snow and don't have no weak nerve, nor fear”; “You'd be William Munny out of Missouri. Killer of women and children”; “The Duke of Death”), but also to embroider the severity of actions (“They cut up her face, cut her eyes out, cut her ears off, hell, they even cut her teats.”). There is a degree of self-awareness with this like when English Bob meets up with Little Bill:

English Bob: Well, actually, what I heard was that you fell off your horse, drunk of course, and that you broke your bloody neck.

Little Bill Daggett: I heard that one myself, Bob. Hell, I even thought I was dead 'til I found out it was just that I was in Nebraska.

The informal nature of this is contrasted with W. W. Beauchamp, the biographer who first follows English Bob and then Little Bill and who, after the bloody climax, still wants to extract as much of a story as possible from Munny. These aural legends are becoming written accounts that spread the tales near and far, fostering the legends that will one day fill the screens. This is seen in the film with the use of the title cards at the beginning and end, which also renders the film just another one of these stories, another legend told and retold, leading one to wonder, as in the death of Two-Gun Corcoran as told by Beauchamp, what is real and what is fabrication. How does this prevalence of stories alter our perception of the West and the western genre? Has this shifted over the history of the genre (i.e. are we more sceptical of these tales, or elements of these tales)? Is there a function to this fabricating and mythologising beyond cementing reputation or providing sensational entertainment? Munny says that is it wrong to buy people (in that way) when talking of prostitutes, yet the stories (reputations, legends, invented personalities) are being bought and sold. Are there any parallels?

4. Violence has a theatrical flair, such as Little Bill beating both English Bob and Ned Logan, with the savagery contrasted with the serenity of him building a house on the river. At the end of the film Will likewise takes on this approach, attacking Skinny and Bill in front of a saloon full of people, with the act of vengeance needing an audience as much as a transgressor. This does not stop people becoming contemplative on the nature of violence, such as when the myths surrounding the classic ‘showdown’ are debunked (Little Bill: “It ain't so easy to shoot a man anyhow, especially if the son-of-a-bitch is shootin' back at you.”; “Well, old Bob wasn't goin' to wait for Corky to grow a new hand. No, he just walked over there real slow - 'cause he was drunk - and shot him right through the liver. Pop!”) And in fact, at no point does the film provide a classic showdown, with rivals being caught off guard

(the cowboys killed by Will and co.) or being out numbered (like English Bob). Will, who throughout the film has been reasserting he “ain’t like that no more”, reflects “it’s a hell of a thing, killin’ a man. Take away all he’s got, and all he’s ever gonna have.” But despite the ruminations, in the end the film even denies the use of violence as cathartic or redemptive, relegating it instead to mere inevitability or at best reciprocity: “We all got it coming, kid”; “Deserve’s got nothin’ to do with it.” And yet, despite all this philosophising, the ‘problems’ of the film are not only started with violence (the attack on Delilah) but are resolved (for want of a better expression) with the ‘hero’ Will exacting revenge on those who ‘deserved’ it (not only those who cut up Delilah, but also those ‘responsible’ for Ned’s death). It seems that violence, for all the noble talk, is all that there is to the West. How do the grand statements of violence, the theatre of violence, play into or subvert the expectations of the western? How does the film (if indeed it tries) reconcile its ideas of the horror of violence and killing with the seeming necessity of those acts? Does anyone ‘deserve’ to die?

5. Perception of the film has shifted. Where before “it was called a ‘revisionist’ western” it “now it seems like a return to classicism—a bad man who thinks he has reformed returns to his old ways in order to revenge the death of his best friend.” (Schickel, Richard, [Jan 15, 2010] [Unforgiven](#). *Time Magazine*.) Some have even gone so far as to classify it as “the finest classical western to come along since perhaps John Ford’s 1956 *The Searchers*.” (Jack Mathews, Cited in Gilligan, *Clint*, p.322) Where does the demarcation of ‘classic’ and ‘revisionist’ western lie? Can *Unforgiven* be both, a film done with all the trappings of a ‘classic’ western that in fact gives it the subversive edge? The ending is especially provocative with this. Where a classic western (like *Shane* or [The Searchers](#)) would end with the protagonist leaving the town or homestead to ride off into the distance to his next heroic adventure with the admiration of those he just helped, *Unforgiven* ends with Munny, having just murdered the sheriff and his posse, riding away “some said to San Francisco where it was rumoured he prospered in dry goods”, but not before threatening all the other inhabitants with equally brutal deaths if his pronouncements are not followed. Which do you think it is?