

Remarks on the Climactic Sequence in *Unforgiven*

J. S. Bernstein, 8-02-09

The climactic sequence that concludes Eastwood's *Unforgiven* is remarkable—in the fundamental sense of “worth noting or commenting on”.

The ten-minute sequence is composed of two scenes: first (1) an interior, the tavern; and then (2) an exterior, the main street of the frontier town. This two-part sequence, taking place during a rainy night to the sound of thunder, serves as the end of the narrative of the film, save for a short coda of one shot of Eastwood's abandoned homestead that supports superimposed end credits.

The exposition of the scene inside the tavern is simple to sketch: Gene Hackman, the sheriff, is presiding genially over a company of townsmen, offering drinks for all and preparing for the following day's pursuit of two mercenaries with blood on their hands, Eastwood and Eastwood's young partner. And then, surprising everyone, Eastwood appears: the double barrels of his shotgun enter the frame in the foreground of a wide shot. Silence falls; the warm atmosphere curdles into icy tension and a mounting threat of death.

The climactic scene in the tavern is certainly cinematic in the sense of heightened reality—it does not seem particularly believable. (Eastwood dispatches of five men although more than a dozen men, many holding guns, are facing him from mere feet away, and yet Eastwood survives the gunfight without a scratch.)

In what follows I approach this climactic sequence from the standpoint of classic Hollywood cinema and its traditional b&w moral universe. There is (a) GOOD (guy) and there is (a) BAD (guy). (One of narrative art's thrills is that it allows the audience, who in the ordinary light of day are upholders of the civic peace, to experience vicariously [and to consider] the phenomenon of the concepts of GOOD and BAD not as polar opposites but fused together as one ambiguous entity. In Hollywood practice and parlance, this experience is often manifested as *rooting for the anti-hero.*)

The audience is rooting for Eastwood because, well, he's Clint Eastwood. Moreover, since the two bad guys (who have already been killed) and Hackman seem to have it coming to them, the audience can morally accept Eastwood's personal mission to eliminate the bad men from the earth. (Yes, Eastwood takes the assignment as a gun-toting mercenary for hard cash, but he evinced distaste at the two bad guys' handiwork—they slashed up a prostitute's face with a knife. Eastwood's revulsion over the knife attack is a "heroic" aspect of his character; Eastwood is a surrogate for the morality of the audience: the symbol, myth, desire of the Power of the Right and the Power to Set Things Right.)

But in the climactic scene in the tavern we hear Eastwood admit that, in the past, he killed not only men but women and children (and we have already heard that he once killed a U.S. Marshall [emblem of righteous, law-abiding America]). Standing before the assembly of men and women, Eastwood declares that he has killed "most everything that's walked or crawled on this earth". Perhaps at this point the ground shifts under the audience's feet. The audience consciously or unconsciously may wonder: "Can we root for a man who has just admitted to killing women and children?"

Eastwood shoots dead the proprietor of the tavern who is unarmed. (Kills him in cold-blood because, as Eastwood says, he “decorates his saloon with my friend.” [The corpse of Morgan Freeman is displayed in an open coffin propped up against the exterior of the tavern.] *Is this an extreme reaction on Eastwood’s part? Or, even if extreme, honourable?*) Eastwood shoots a man in the back (which, of course, recalls Hackman doing the same in *The French Connection*). And in a grim final punctuation to the gunfight, Eastwood shoots dead a wounded man in a most offhand fashion (walking past his victim, he pulls the trigger without particular attention—think of Indiana Jones dispatching of the showy Scimitar dude in the crowd-pleasing *Raiders* moment; and yet *Unforgiven* is no comedy).

The audience has heard Eastwood admit to heinous acts of murder, and then, before the end of the tavern scene, it is faced with the suspenseful business of a wounded Hackman becoming animated again, potentially with the strength to shoot Eastwood (who is standing at the bar, drinking the alcohol that he had shunned for years, an act which conveys his return to the state of mind of his youth and which at the same time is a repudiation of the “healing” influence of his dear wife). As Hackman is coming around and preparing his pistol, *might the audience root for Eastwood?* Might the audience think, “oh, no! Watch out! Hackman is still alive!” Might the audience still be rooting for Eastwood, who has turned before the audience’s eyes into a psycho-killer?

Eastwood *does* stop Hackman from shooting his pistol successfully (apparently or presumably not because Hackman is incompetent but because Hackman is an older man who has lost the speed of a young gunslinger; Eastwood, however, who looks just as old, *has* conjured up the speed that had kept him alive when he was a young killer; and apparently Eastwood has always been better with a gun).

“I don’t deserve to die like this,” Hackman says. *And even though Hackman does*, insofar as he killed Eastwood’s friend Morgan Freeman (and avenging Freeman’s death was the reason Eastwood returned to town in the first place), Eastwood rejoins, surprisingly, “*Deserve has nothing to do with it.*” This is a hard-boiled, bleak line: even though Hackman *does* deserve his death, in Eastwood’s logic *there doesn’t have to be a reason for killing him*. Eastwood can kill Hackman as revenge for a friend’s death, but Eastwood can also kill Hackman for the sheer hell of it. Eastwood is in the manner of a *psychotic* here. (“I’ll see you in Hell,” Hackman says, and Eastwood responds with “Yeah” ingenuously, then witnesses the momentary last breath of fright in Hackman’s face before the trigger is pulled [which recalls the fear that Eastwood experienced reels earlier when in a fever-dream he was visited with a vision of his dead wife riddled with worms (hence Eastwood identifies with Hackman here, identifies with both the fear of death and the fate of an awaiting Hell; the killer identifies with his victim)].)

There are further shades to the moral bearing of the narrative of the climactic scene in the tavern. Eastwood admits to killing women and children in his youth, and now at this point in the latter years of his life he has recaptured the blood-lust and killing-talent that racked up for him a large number of deaths way back when: *this is the exhilaration of the archetypal hero regaining the strength required to overcome the major obstacle of a film*. It recalls the last, exhilarating line of *The Color of Money*: “I’m back!” Here, at this violent moment in the tavern, Eastwood the cold-blooded killer is back. *A cold-blooded killer*, and yet this is a *triumph* for his character—a triumph in the manner of the myth of the hero regaining an essential strength once lost or as yet untapped or exercised (this rejuvenescence or [re]birth being one of the fundamental narrative busyness of movies: think, for example, of “time for a montage” in *Team America*; or any character training for an athletic event or battlefield experience).

Eastwood, although he is a *psychotic killer* in this scene, is also *heroic*, and in a double sense: for not only is he exacting revenge on the murderers of his friend, but he is also recapturing the vitality of his youth when he stalked the world “like a jolly green giant” (*Full Metal Jacket*). He recaptures a crucial control required to deal effectively in the moment when right choices matter most: this is “heroic”, a “triumph” for his character who seemed to be (in the estimation of the neophyte gunslinger, for example) “long past it”. Eastwood heroically regains the eye of the tiger and heroically destroys the dishonourers and killers of his friend.

And yet something else, *anti-heroic*, is taking place here. For what does Eastwood regain? Eastwood regains the psychotic blood-lust of his youth that in “real life” would earn for him everlasting opprobrium and revulsion from a tabloid-reading general public. Eastwood is the bloodthirsty killer who kills not only U.S. marshals but women and children; he was once—and is now once more, before the eyes of the audience—an icy deliverer of death like the Dick and Perry of *In Cold Blood*, or Gary Gilmore of *The Executioner’s Song*, or whichever murderer is in the headlines at the moment.

(Eastwood becomes the “avenging angel” or the “vengeful fiend”, or simply, *the avenger*—he returns to the tavern not for earn further remuneration for his killing deeds, but in a single-minded pursuit of bloody acts of revenge. Whether revenge is or can ever be heroic is left to the audience to wonder about and debate.)

There are further essential points to be noted regarding this climactic transformative moment in Eastwood. For Eastwood to regain the vitality of his youth, he has to violate—consciously ignore and discard, at least momentarily—the hitherto powerful

influence of his dear wife who had changed him for the “good” by helping him to quit boozing [which by so doing simultaneously eroded Eastwood’s desire for killing as a vocation and/or pastime].) We in the audience “celebrate” Eastwood’s return to his past vitality so that he can eradicate “evil” from the present day and survive the ordeal, and yet to carry out his “heroic efforts” he is required to repudiate what he has been extolling for the entire film up to this time—the healing power of his dearly departed loving wife who had endowed her husband, at least for a time, with a conscience. Eastwood repudiates this influence of his *angelic* wife and in the process becomes in the manner of someone *satanic*, and yet . . . the audience *is still* on his side?

Eastwood intensifies this moral ambiguity in his last two close-ups of the film. In his second-to-last close-up, Eastwood, sitting astride his horse out in the rainy night of the muddy frontier town, utters loudly his final phrase of the film: “. . . or I’ll come back and kill every one of you sons-of-bitches.” This proclamation is *heroic* in the sense of the powerful American hero who has fought the enemy and won and in the process defended a “moral” way of life. It is *heroic* also in the sense that Eastwood has regained the passion and vitality of his youth. But Eastwood here is also akin to the *psychotic*, the Michael Myers or Jaws the Shark who kills without conscience. (Moments earlier, Eastwood, crouching at the door of the tavern and preparing to flee after his killing spree, announced that if anyone in the streets shoots at him, he will not only shoot back, *but shoot the man’s wife and shoot his friends and burn his house down*. [This is Biblical Justice, recalling, for example, the sons of Jacob pillaging Sechem].) Visible in the dim background of the last two close-up shots of Eastwood on horseback (his final words and then his final surveying of the town) is a *prominent American flag*. Eastwood’s character is a celebration of the stern might of America who faces her enemies with single-minded force and supremacy; but this climactic sequence has also portrayed Eastwood *as a*

psychotic killer. Before our eyes a cold-blooded Eastwood shoots unarmed men, shoots men in the back, and shoots a man in passing as if insouciantly tossing something into a waste basket; moreover he publicly admits that he has killed women and children; and yet Eastwood's impassive killing frenzy defends a moral approach of treating women with proper respect (*and this particular moral dimension of the film is allied to the characters of the whores*) and serves to protect the women and all of the innocent citizens of the frontier town from "bad guys". ("You better not cut up nor otherwise harm no whores!" he commands during his final lines in the street.) Eastwood is a "bad guy" who has come to eliminate other "bad guys" and the audience chooses *this* bad guy over the other bad guys.

The reaction shots from the supporting players—the band of prostitutes and the bespectacled writer—as Eastwood leaves the town on horseback convey that *they admire him*. In their various faces is a suggestion of beholding something unusually striking, if not unforgettable. The full power of cinematic technique infuses a sort of *awe* onto Eastwood as he withdraws for all time from the eyes of this world. Eastwood's departure from the dark and dismal rain-swept town is a memorable cinematic exit.

The climactic sequence of *Unforgiven* shows us the exhilaration of the psychotic with a moral right in his favour, so that the audience accepts what in the ordinary light of day would be repulsive behaviour of killing in cold blood. Eastwood is a murderer, but the audience can respect him. When the film comes to an end and we shift forward more than a hundred years into our present day, the audience might reflect that someone *significant* has passed from our world.

Postscript. Another noteworthy component of the climactic scene inside the tavern is the character of the writer who witnesses the bloody events and desires to get the facts straight (by confirming the make of Eastwood's rifle, for example). The pulp writer of westerns is capricious regarding human relations (he abandons English Bob [Richard Harris] and takes in stride the death of Little Bill [Hackman]) and is focused primarily on finding good stories for his commercial novels, and by the end of the climactic sequence he apparently admires Eastwood, admires him for being perhaps the most noteworthy exemplar of the brutal, self-sufficient frontier man. In the universe of the film, if it weren't for this writer who could perhaps one day in the future put down on paper what he saw of Eastwood, the character of Eastwood, who vanishes from sight into the darkness, might be lost to history.