

Modernizing the Greek Tragedy: Clint Eastwood's Impact on the Western

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Dedication

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Introduction

Many scholars have noticed the striking similarities between ancient Greek literature and the American Western. Among these scholars are Mary Whitlock Blundell, Kirk Orman, Kimberly Hurd, Sally McEwen, William McClain, and Martin M. Winkler. Many of them write about the violence in the films, particularly the recurring themes of justice and revenge in both Greek mythology and Hollywood Westerns. Although they recognize that elements of Greek tragedy are found in Westerns, they do not explore the degree to which Clint Eastwood, in particular, changed the Western by unconsciously incorporating themes straight out of ancient Greek literature. Although Eastwood is not on record as stating that he modeled his heroes, Westerns, or directorial style on Greek heroes or playwrights, his style has certainly reinvented the spirit of Greek storytelling. Eastwood this did in several ways: by reviving the Greek hero type; by continuing in the Greek tradition of blood justice; by casting his stories in modern social contexts in the manner of Euripides; and by relying on Aristotelian elements of character, reversal, suffering, catharsis, and recognition. Although Eastwood perfected the Western with *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) through his use of Greek dynamics and Aristotelian ideals, he also contributed to the decline of the Western with his film *Unforgiven* (1992). This essay argues that the Western, exemplified in Eastwood's Westerns, is a reflection of the Greek story as a regenerative cultural tale, and is thus an enduring tale itself.

In this thesis I set out to answer four research questions:

- What did Eastwood change about the Western hero?
- What other elements did Eastwood either introduce to or perfect in the Western?
- Did Clint Eastwood really contribute to the decline of the Western?
- Is the Western truly dead?

I have employed several methods to address these questions. I analyze appropriate texts and scholarly articles. I focus on content analysis and critique of three Westerns that Clint Eastwood directed and starred in: *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), and *Unforgiven* (1992). I analyze the central characters in Eastwood's films, as well as the heroes of several Greek tales. Finally, Eastwood made changes to the Western which are best examined through a Greek lens, and thus I hold these three Eastwood Westerns in juxtaposition to Aristotle's *Poetics* to justify many of my claims.

In Section I, I examine the anti-hero model with regard to the ancient Greek hero and Eastwood's hero. In Section II, I argue that Eastwood's Westerns are violent, but no more so than Greek tragedy—and that the violence serves a particular purpose. Section III compares the Greek hero Theseus and Eastwood's hero from *High Plains Drifter*. I argue that if Theseus can function as a hero, then any Eastwood character

can. In Section IV, I analyze Eastwood's film, *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, and claim that it is the epitome of a contemporary Greek tale. Section V relates to Eastwood's style, and compares him to the Greek playwright Euripides. In Section VI, I write of the importance of our myths. And in Section VII, I acknowledge that according to many scholars the Western is dead, but I argue that it endures in much the same manner as Greek tragedy.

Section I

The Anti-Hero: Newborn or Reborn Hero?

*“That's right. I've killed women and children. I've killed just about everything that walks or crawled at one time or another.” ~William Munny, in *Unforgiven*.*

Much has been written about heroes, and a plethora of definitions of what a hero is and isn't confuses anyone who wishes to investigate the subject. The definition of the hero is problematic in part because of narrations in cultural myths of the hero, the particular genre the tales emerge from, and especially what an author views to be heroic—a myriad of definitions. When considering the heroes of Clint Eastwood's films, many critics refer to them as anti-heroes. It isn't always clear what these scholars mean by the term anti-hero, but in a traditional sense, it can be considered a critique of the hero's actions as unheroic. For example, Richard Thompson and Tim Hunter (1999) write that Eastwood's “cutthroat” anti-hero persona emerged under directors Sergio Leone and Don Siegel, and that the hero “tread[s] the line between hero and devil” (p. 53). This “in-between” status characterizes every hero Eastwood portrayed in his Westerns—positioned between good and evil, between law and outlaw.

Two critics provide helpful perspectives regarding this morally ambiguous hero type. Kent Ladd Steckmesser (1965) writes that the “good badman” must be seen as performing a colossal good for the community, especially when facing unjust entities (p. 141). Graham Seal (2009) adds that one criterion of this type of character

is that “the outlaw hero is forced to defy the law.” This is particularly true if the law is viewed as corrupt (p. 74)—and this is exactly what we see in all three of the Eastwood films considered in this essay. All three of their heroes defy the law, but more importantly, emerge from corrupt societies; in this context they emerge as heroes, even if flawed. In *High Plains Drifter* (1973), “the Stranger” is above the law in his actions as he avenges the death of the former town marshal. At one point, he even takes the badge from the acting sheriff, whose lack of courage makes him unworthy of the station, and gives the symbol of authority to another. In *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), the hero must defy the authority of the Union Red Leg soldiers who have abused their power and pillaged the countryside, including slaying Wales’ own family. The protagonist also defies authority in *Unforgiven* (1992), as William Munny confronts sheriff Little Bill Daggett, a quick-tempered man who is extremely violent in his pursuit of justice. After Little Bill has murdered Munny’s close friend, Munny avenges the death by purging the town of its law enforcement.

There are some scholars who do not see Eastwood’s heroes as heroic at all, but view them simply as villains. But a hero can be flawed and still be more virtuous than a villain. When considering this type of anti-hero, certainly present in Sergio Leone’s Westerns but developed further in Eastwood’s acting and directing, William McClain (2010) writes that the character is “not even a true anti-hero as critics understood them; he was just a man with a talent for killing, and the opportunity to do so” (p. 59). Labeling this character an anti-hero tells us that he works outside of the rules of what has become the standard for Western heroes; for many critics, this is exactly what

makes him an anti-hero. From the outset of *Unforgiven*, William Munny is presented as a former outlaw of the most vicious and infamous sort. Allen Redmon (2004) notes that the film's hero, William Munny, and villain, Little Bill Daggett, mirror each other (p. 320). While both Little Bill and Munny have shady pasts, and both have a taste for violence, Munny is identifiable as the hero for one distinct reason: he is the lesser of two evils. Douglas J. McReynolds (1998) tells us that it is unimportant that Little Bill is wearing a badge; Munny is justified in shooting him because throughout the film Little Bill proves to be a corrupt man (p. 50). The outlaw hero functions in this manner; he emerges from a society more corrupt than he is. William Indick (2008) similarly writes that this type of hero succeeds "because his criminal acts are directed against a greater evil" (p. 38). For David Denby, heroes like Munny are "angry enforcers of order defined not by law but by primal notions of justice and revenge" (p. 52). This is what we see in the heroes of Eastwood; they are men with heroic instincts living in an unheroic society.

In this paper, the term anti-hero will refer to a hero as defined by two authors in particular, John Belton and Rosette Lamont. Belton (1994) writes that anti-heroes live by a different set of morals than the typical hero (p. 221). Eastwood's heroes operate outside what are considered socially accepted norms; their actions are not always admirable or righteous in nature. Going above the law or combating a greater evil renders these characters anti-heroic because they act outside the socially accepted code of conduct. Lamont (1976) notes that the anti-hero is not a contemporary concept—it actually dates back to ancient Greece (p. 20); and she points to the hero

Odysseus as “the first anti-hero,” operating outside of the norm: “Thus Odysseus who escapes from the dangers of war by craft, and above all, a belief in survival, is the first anti-hero, a hero reborn without dying” (p. 13). Unlike other heroes of ancient Greece, Odysseus was always concerned with living, Lamont argues (p. 13). In fact, he was one of very few heroes to survive the Trojan War through his ingenuity, and eventually return home—another way in which he operates outside of the normal constraints of a Greek hero. Thus, an anti-hero is not a villain; he is a hero who defies some of the codes of society, but with whom we identify because he is morally right in his actions. In saving the community from outside threats, the hero does what many lack the courage to attempt and what others merely cannot do.

The anti-hero is a hero who is not expected to be purely virtuous, only more virtuous in his actions than his adversaries—and this is the type of hero we see in Eastwood films. Karen Rosenberg (2010) recognizes that “the ancient Greeks did not require perfection from their heroes, only greatness” (p. 23). The same can be said to be reflected in the trends in heroes in Revisionist Westerns of the 1960s. Robert Sickels (2003) notes that movies reflect the social problems and values of their times (p. 227). And Anne Thompson (1992) attributes many of the changes in the Western during those years to the destruction of American social traditions; it was from the concepts of the countercultural movements of the 1960s that this new Western hero began to emerge (p. 53). The 1960s countercultural movements (for civil rights, women’s rights, and broadened sexual preference and freedoms, and against the war in Vietnam) are where the idea of operating outside of societal norms stems from and

why this concept began to be evidenced in Westerns around this time—especially in Eastwood's.

This new Western hero is no longer the Arthurian hero; he is no longer that chivalrous, socially moral John Wayne persona of the classical Western. The rising new hero of the Western is an individual who might be selfish, cynical, gruff, dirty, or distinctly unchivalrous, yet he remains the savior of the community; he is the Theseus type who thinks and acts with the end of his sword. The 1960s also gave rise to individualist thinking and alienation through the search for and establishment of self-identity. Joseph Campbell (2008) writes that the problem of contemporary society is that there is very little significance placed upon the group, everything revolves around the self (p. 334), and we see this trend strongly reflected in Eastwood's films. His heroes are rugged individualists with their own desires and alternate views of how societal justice should work. Eastwood films suggest that society can no longer save itself; rather, it is up to the individual to save society. Campbell (2008) sums it up best: "The modern hero, the modern individual who dares to heed the call and seek the mansion of that presence with whom it is our whole destiny to be atoned, cannot, indeed must not, wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, fear, rationalized avarice, and sanctified misunderstanding" (p. 337). In other words, the modern hero must act when it is necessary; he must not wait for society's blessings. Eastwood's heroes are today's heroes, because they take initiative and act outside of accepted social constraints. Lamont (1976) confirms this notion when she states that "Ours is the age of the anti-hero" (p. 22). We can see social outcasts as heroes in all

forms of entertainment, from Rambo in *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982) to the MacManus brothers in *Boondock Saints* (Troy Duffy, 1999) in cinema, or from Batman (Bob Kane, 1939) to The Punisher (Gerry Conway and John Romita Sr., 1974) in comics. This obsession with anti-heroes has become an American tradition.

As anti-heroes, Eastwood's protagonists operate through their own set of principles which sometimes call for them to defy social law and etiquette. In *High Plains Drifter* (1973), *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), and *Unforgiven* (1992), the hero is successful in saving society, and that alone is heroic. As Belton (1994) relates, heroes cleanse the community of wickedness (p. 211). "The Stranger" in *High Plains Drifter* rids the town of Lago of its corrupt authority and citizens—nearly destroying the town in a near Biblical manner akin to what happens to the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah. Josey Wales purges society of the criminal Red Leg faction of Union soldiers. And William Munny kills the sadistic sheriff Little Bill and his men. These heroes may not operate by the legal standards of a collective society, but they save the community through their heroic actions.

The anti-hero's feats, while not always correct in the eyes of society, are nonetheless necessary and contribute to saving society. Eastwood's heroes are rebellious and walk that fine line between good and evil, between law and outlaw. If the law or the society is corrupt, then it is often left to the anti-hero to defy them to right wrong. To say that a character is not a hero because he does not act in a particular manner, or because he commits an act that goes against societal views, is to acknowledge only a narrow view of what it means to be heroic. To hold dramatic,

literary, and cinematic heroes from all cultures to the same standards would be to say that only one culture's heroes are the right kind of heroes, and that all other societies' heroes are not. When asked by Bill Moyers (1988) why there is such an abundance of hero tales, Campbell replied, "Because that's what's worth writing about. Even in popular novels, the main character is a hero or heroine who has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience. A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself" (p. 151). Eastwood's heroes all accomplish tasks of considerable measure and commit themselves to something greater than themselves. In the end, an anti-hero is still a hero—albeit a rough and decidedly human one. Although Eastwood did not create the prototype, he did revive it. He revived the Greek anti-hero in much the same way that he revived the Greeks' taste for extreme violence.

Section II

A Greek Tradition: Violence as Catharsis

Clint Eastwood has become increasingly recognized for the extreme violence in his films over the years. Eastwood's heroes mirror the Greek hero, more so than they do the classical Western hero, but not all of his heroes embody the single-minded vengeance seeking vigilante that his heroes have become known for—for example, Josey Wales does not. Of course, earlier directors of the Westerns escalated violence in their films, especially starting in the 1960s with the dissolution of the Hays Code interdictions of explicit violence and sexuality. Harvey and Poppy (1999) write that after Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), the Western hero, who had formerly displayed a resigned indignation toward violence, now used it excessively (p. 9). In fact, many point to Peckinpah's film as a turning point in ratcheting up the violence in the Western. Others point of course to Sergio Leone's earlier work, the "Dollars" trilogy [*A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For A Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966)], which all starred Clint Eastwood in his first three movie roles. Those who argue that this vengeful type of ultra-violence was around before Eastwood are certainly correct, but it didn't begin in the 1960s; it could also be seen in much earlier Westerns. A very early, pre-Code example of vigilante justice through violence is found in *Hell's Hinges* (1916). The hero, played by William S. Hart, slays the corrupt men in town, and even burns down half the town in a frenzy of righteous, Old Testament-style violence—much as we see in *High Plains Drifter*

when “the Stranger” all but destroys the town of Lago. While many earlier films did possess themes of revenge and violence, however, Eastwood took the two concepts to new levels in his Westerns. We can clearly see this distinction between the degrees of violence and revenge by contrasting a classical Western, John Ford’s *Stagecoach* (1939), with Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* (1992).

The two films, five decades apart, portray violence and revenge quite differently. For starters, in *Stagecoach* we do not see the original offense that plants the seeds of revenge in the Ringo Kid. The death of Ringo’s brother is *told* by Sheriff Curly and the Kid himself, not shown. In contrast, Eastwood is always sure to show the incident that generates the hero’s thirst for vengeance. In the opening scenes of *Unforgiven*, we witness on the screen the crimes of Quick Mike which cause many men to wish to avenge the prostitute Delilah and collect the reward money offered. The hottest fires of revenge are sparked in William Munny when Little Bill brutally whips his friend Ned Logan to death. While Ford leaves the Ringo Kid’s reasons for vengeance for us to fill in through imagination, Eastwood is graphically upfront with his violence, and thereby aids our own passions as we identify with the hero’s outrageous desire for vengeance.

Another difference lies in the two directors’ actual depictions of revenge itself. In *Stagecoach*, when Ringo finally meets up with the three Plummer brothers in the darkened street, Ford hides the actual moment of the violent shootout. The camera shows Ringo leap toward the camera and begin firing his rifle, then cuts back to a worried Dallas in another part of town calling out for him. Then we see Luke

Plummer walking into the bar—allowing us to think for a moment that Ringo has died in the shootout—but Luke turns out to be mortally wounded and finally collapses. There is no blood or realism apparent in Luke’s death. (That Ford avoids showing Ringo gun down the three brothers in the street is ironic, because the film shows Ringo happily gunning down Apache Indians from the roof of the stagecoach earlier—although again, no blood is evident). By contrast, Eastwood does not hesitate to relate in graphic detail the consequences of revenge—which is very Greek in nature. When Munny learns of Ned’s death, he walks into the saloon, where he is vastly outnumbered by Little Bill’s men, and wreaks vengeance without prejudice. Munny stoically shoots the unarmed owner of the saloon, Skinny, and then proceeds to gun down anyone who gets in his way or draws on him—including Sheriff Little Bill and the rest of the lawmen present; blood spatters and bullets fly. Then Eastwood reveals the truth of violence and revenge apparent in the words of Munny from an earlier scene in the film: “It’s a hell of a thing, killin’ a man... you take away all he’s got, and all he’s ever gonna have.” As Little Bill lies dying, he realizes that all he has, including the house he was building, has just been taken from him.

As we can see, the classical Western and the Eastwood Western differ in many ways in regard to violence and revenge. In *Stagecoach*, the avenging hero’s use of violence is restrained, even elided—we don’t see the consequence of pulling the trigger in the final shootout. The revenge in *Unforgiven* is automatic, predetermined, and not unlike the ancient Greek concept of the Furies (the personifications of vengeance in Greek mythology, who hunt and slay anyone who has committed

especially atrocious crimes, yet lack mortal foes to punish them). Eastwood's heroes are swift, relentless, and unprejudiced in doling out punishment. In contrast with the classical Western, Eastwood's films revive the ancient Greek appreciation for graphic violence, vengeance, and the consequences that both carry with them.

Several scholars claim that Eastwood's Westerns are in fact *too* violent, and even that their violence contributed to the decline of the Western. For instance, Adam Bloch (2006) calls *High Plains Drifter* (1973) "a film so dark and cruel that its release practically heralded the death of the genre" (p. 114). Douglas McReynolds (1998) notes that many critics saw the release of *Unforgiven* (1992) as confirmation that the Western "was dead and buried" (p. 46).

Although Eastwood's Westerns are bloody and violent, they aren't made that way in an effort to contradict the classical Western, but instead are indeliberately created through a tradition of a much older style of storytelling. Anyone familiar with Greek mythology, and particularly tragedy, knows how truly bloody and gory the ancient Greek poets could be in their descriptions of violence. For example, it doesn't get more disturbing or violent than killing the sons of one's rival, cooking them, and then serving them to that rival to feast upon, as Atreus did. And there is also Medea, who slew her own children, knowing that it was the best way to hurt the husband who wronged her. These are just two examples of Greek violence that are extreme, yet do not blemish the genre of tragedy.

In Western film and Greek tragedy, the violence serves an important purpose. We may not be aware of this purpose while watching a film, but it has an effect on us

nonetheless. In this regard, Eastwood unconsciously took a page out of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle underlined the importance of affecting the audience "through pity and fear and the catharsis (purging or purification) of such emotions" (p. 50). Many will argue that catharsis is a recurring theme not just in Eastwood's Westerns, but in nearly every Western film; however, Eastwood foregrounded this concept. Martin M. Winkler (1985) writes in his essay, "Classical Mythology and the Western Film," of the relationship of the two genres and about the importance of catharsis in each: "if no purging like this occurred, the high-pitched emotions of pity and fear would have no outlet and would remain inside the spectator as harmful forces" (p.522).

Eastwood carries out this cathartic violence in his Westerns. In all three films, Eastwood builds up pity and fear, and then releases the emotions through the catharsis of revenge. In *High Plains Drifter* (1973), "the Stranger" comes to the town of Lago in response to the townspeople's murder of their former marshal. The violent scenes of the marshal's demise come to us through flashbacks during scenes in which "the Stranger" reaps vengeance on the townspeople for their sins. In *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), the hero seeks vengeance on the men who murdered his wife and son, tracking them down and killing them; Wales' catharsis comes most distinctly in the final scenes (which will be elaborated on in Section IV). And in *Unforgiven* (1992), William Munny sets out to avenge the crimes against a prostitute who was assaulted, but ends up exacting bloody revenge for the heinous murder of his closest friend. In all three instances, without this vindictive violence, according to Aristotle, the audience would be left with remnants of lingering pity and fear over the original

violent offenses. Catharsis aside, the audience wants vengeance for the hero; whether through violence or not, the viewers want retribution of some kind for the character they empathize with, and punishment for the offenders.

Scholars are divided when it comes to the violence of Eastwood's Westerns. While some scholars argue that Eastwood's films are too violent, other scholars argue that the violence in his films is overwhelming. Kimberly Hurd (2008) essentially writes that Eastwood's heroes' "desire for revenge overwhelms all reason and moderation..." (p. 26). Although Hurd does refer to the *Oresteia* and Aeschylus' notion that "one must understand both vengeance and reason to understand justice" (p.22), she does not address the possibility that Eastwood's heroes may operate strictly within the pre-Oresteian framework of old-fashioned Greek blood justice. She does state in connection with *The Outlaw Josey Wales* that the Furies pursue Josey (p. 19). However, Hurd has it backwards. Her support for this claim is the fact that Wales acknowledges that the men hunting him doggedly will never forget what he's done, as if the men who murdered Wales' family represent the Furies; however, she ignores the possibility that Josey is justified in his vengeance and that perhaps the gods are backing him in his actions. Josey is not responsible for the deaths of his family, which started the whole cycle of vengeance; the Red Leg soldiers are. Thus it is Josey who represents the Furies and is doing the pursuing. Eastwood's films are motivated by revenge, enact this vengeful sort of justice, and are righteous in their actions—a concept found throughout Greek mythology. Consider the words of the Furies in Aeschylus' play, *The Libation Bearers*:

It is but law that when the red drops have been spilled
 upon the ground they cry aloud for fresh
 blood. For the death act calls out on Fury
 to bring out of those who were slain before
 new ruin on ruin accomplished.

(Aeschylus, 1953, lines 400-404)

Such a call for retributive bloodshed is a recurring theme in all of Eastwood's Westerns, as if this ensuing revenge is unavoidable—not unlike the Furies themselves.

Hurd is correct in writing that *High Plains Drifter* is purely a tale of vengeance, but I would argue that the account of the hero Josey Wales is a slightly different story. In a sense, Josey is a break from ancient Greek tradition. While Josey is hell-bent on avenging the murder of his wife and child, he is not the single-minded, stone-cold killer that Hurd (2008) claims he is: “Josey has no purpose in life except his pursuit of revenge” (p. 19). She ignores the fact that Josey finds purpose in helping others throughout the film. The best example of Josey's concerns other than revenge comes after the Union soldiers have slaughtered Josey's fellow Confederates after tricking them into surrendering. Wales commandeers one of the Union's Gatlin guns and begins gunning down every Union soldier he sees. His young friend Jamie rides up behind him and shouts, “You can't get em' all, Josey!”

“That's a fact,” Wales icily replies.

“Well then how come yer doin’ this then?”

“‘Cause I’ve got nothing better to do.”

While this moment seems to back up Hurd’s claim that Wales has no purpose but revenge, what happens next does not. Wales sees that Jamie is mortally wounded and escapes with him. He spends the next several days tending the boy’s wounds and trying to get him to the Indian Nations, where safety awaits. Not until Jamie succumbs to his wounds does Josey Wales return to his quest of vengeance.

In another instant, Wales meets Chief Lone Watie and Little Moonlight. Lone Watie is without food or horse, and Josey generously provides the Cherokee elder with both. And upon seeing Little Moonlight about to be raped, Wales kills the men assaulting her. He also saves Grandma Sarah and Laura Lee, among others, from the marauding banditos. In such scenes, Josey gives up his personal pursuit of vengeance, if only briefly, to find purpose through helping others. In the film’s most significant moment at the end, Wales also lets go of his vengeful feelings once it is clear that the time for violence and vengeance is past. He is given hope for a new life on the farmstead he and his friends have begun to settle, and he seems to realize that he has a future there with Laura Lee. This is exemplified when Captain Fletcher reminds Wales that the war is over, and Josey is finally ready to accept it.

Furthermore, as is the case with most Western heroes—but not necessarily all of Eastwood’s heroes—Wales shows restraint in his killing. A prime example of Josey’s restraint comes during a scene in the town of Santa Rio when a bounty hunter has caught up to the outlaw. Rather than instantly shooting his pursuer, Josey offers

the bounty hunter an alternative.

“You a bounty hunter?” inquires Wales.

“A man’s got to do something for a living these days,” replies the man.

“Dyin’ ain’t much of a livin’, boy,” Wales comments. He then suggests that the man could ride away. The man leaves the saloon, appearing to take the advice, but then abruptly charges back through the swinging saloon doors—like a Greek facing his destiny—and is subsequently gunned down by Wales. The bounty hunter’s name may not grace the list of men Wales means to reap vengeance upon, but the bounty hunter clearly intends to kill Wales and collect the bounty. Josey attempts to defuse the situation, which clearly goes against Hurd’s claim about his lack of reason. As William Indick (2008) explains, this is the difference between “a hero’s vengeance quest” and “a psychopath’s killing” (p. 46).

The endings of Eastwood’s Westerns provide further evidence that his heroes are not merely cold-blooded killers. After the hero achieves his justice and completes his quest, he rides away. This reveals Josey Wales as more akin to the hero Orestes, who contemplates his options, and assesses a situation before taking action. After the Furies acquit Orestes of the murder of his mother, like Josey Wales, he is allowed to go back to a normal life. Indick (2008) suggests that the hero’s “thirst for blood is quenched forever”; but “the psychopath’s killing sickness, on the other hand, is incurable” (p. 46). Wales metes justice with restraint, and shows the rationality that Hurd considers absent in Eastwood’s heroes. In *Unforgiven*, William Munny also kills Little Bill to avenge the death of Ned, and the film’s closing titles tell us that he has

taken his family and moved to California. The revenge is complete and the hero returns to a normal life. The hero's controversial use of violence is best exemplified in *High Plains Drifter* by "the Stranger"—easily Eastwood's most criticized hero. This same concept is epitomized in Greek mythology by the hero Theseus. Both heroes use excessive violence, and both use it in similar fashion.

Section III

The Theseus Theory

The anti-hero has a lengthy history; Robin Hood is a popular and primary example. However, Sally McEwen (1997) points out that there are no Robin Hoods in ancient Greek mythology, “because there was no ideal of an unsocialized individual who knows what is best” (p. 103). In other words, there was no mortal man who knew what was best for a society; no one individual had greater perception than the gods from an ancient Greek perspective—and if by chance he did, he was punished for it. Despite this, there have always been heroes who work outside socially accepted methods to pursue justice. For instance, there are ancient Greek heroes that function as anti-heroes in the manner established in this essay. They are flawed heroes with selfish desires and their own agendas, yet still end up saving their communities from corruptive elements. They may not rob from the rich and give to the poor, nor abide by the codes of society, but these heroes do rid society of threatening forces.

The anti-hero is new in comparison to the classical Western hero, as far as cinema goes, but is he truly novel at all? The answer is no; he is older even than the legends of Robin Hood—he is the reborn anti-hero of Greek mythology. The Athenian Theseus epitomizes this type of ancient hero, not only does he embody the anti-hero persona already established here, but his use of violence is similar to that of Eastwood’s Western heroes.

Few scholars or historians would likely label Theseus as an anti-hero; yet he

clearly is one. Anne Ward (1970) calls Theseus “the most famous and revered of all the heroes of ancient Athens” (p. 7), which is likely the scholarly consensus. Theseus is known for his many feats of strength, such as defeating the Minotaur and the Bull of Marathon. According to Robert Graves (1955), Theseus is also credited by several ancient sources with accomplishing other epic feats, including founding the first democracy, minting the first coins, creating the first commonwealth, and establishing the first Olympic Games (pp. 349-352). Be this as it may, Theseus is just as fallible as the hero from *High Plains Drifter*. “The Stranger” mirrors the actions of the Greek hero.

Before we get into the character traits of the two heroes, it is important to note that Eastwood’s hero is significant from another perspective pertaining to ancient Greek literary style: being viewed as otherworldly. Robert Fagles (1984) writes that it was typical in Greek hero cults for a hero to gain in power and significance after death—a guardian spirit—and that the hero was “thought of simply as an angry spirit whose wrath had to be appeased by sacrifice” (p. 257). We can see this type of vengeful spirit hero in the characters of Agamemnon and Oedipus. In Aeschylus’ *The Libation Bearers*, Clytemnestra so fears the vengeful spirit of Agamemnon, the husband she murdered, that she attempts to appease the dead man by sending servants to offer libations at the murdered man’s grave (Aeschylus, 1962, p. 103). And in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus*, we can see the same fear harbored by the two sons that betray Oedipus; both Eteocles and Polynices desperately try to keep Oedipus from dying on Athenian soil. Having already cursed his sons, Oedipus will become a

guardian spirit against the enemies of Thebes—the leaders of which are his own sons—if he is buried in Athenian land. Fagles (1984) explains that this angry spirit concept of the Greek hero cults followed many heroes after their deaths (p. 257). Aside from Agamemnon and Oedipus, others include Achilles, Ajax, Hector, Heracles, and Theseus.

We can see this vengeful, angry spirit in *High Plains Drifter*, as Eastwood unconsciously revives this Greek entity in the character of “the Stranger.” As the hero of the film, “the Stranger” has been argued to be the spirit of the slain Marshal Duncan or an avenging angel. It is a spirit that cannot rest until it has been avenged or appeased, and the citizens of Lago make only feeble attempts to appease it. The angry spirit is a recurring figure that has spanned the centuries between the Greek tragedy and the American Western—much like the anti-hero persona we see in both Theseus and “the Stranger.”

These two heroes have much in common: for starters, both Theseus and “the Stranger” kill the wicked without remorse or even much thought. In the first few minutes of *High Plains Drifter*, “the Stranger” kills three men and rapes a woman. Some see this violence as marking the decline of the Western, but this type of violence is nothing new. At age sixteen, Theseus—on his way from Troezen to Athens—kills several bandits and rapes two of their daughters. Eastwood’s hero thus mirrors the ancient hero, and both types of heroes commit acts not considered virtuous by society.

Both heroes also mete punishments that fit the crimes. Similar to the way “the

Stranger” in *High Plains Drifter* operates, Theseus kills bandits long known to have plagued the road to Athens by preying on helpless travelers. “The Stranger” punishes the men of Lago in an eye-for-an-eye type manner—whipping them as they had whipped Marshal Duncan. The bandit Periphetes, for instance, ambushes travelers with a large club; Theseus overpowers him, takes his club, and beats the thief to death (Graves, 1955, p. 327). The bandit Sinis ties his victims’ legs to two different pine trees then lets go, literally ripping them limb from limb; Theseus again turns the tables on the criminal (p. 328). The bandit Sciron makes his victims wash his feet with their backs to a cliff, and then kicks them over to their deaths; Theseus kicks the bandit over the cliff (p. 329). The bandit Cercyon challenges passersby to a wrestling match and then kills them with his powerful vice-like grip; Theseus dispatches the bandit by crushing him in turn (p. 329). And the bandit Polypemon lays his victims on his bed—if the bed is too long for them, he racks and stretches them to fit the bed; if the bed is too short for them, he cuts portions of their legs off to make them fit the bed (p. 330). Again, Theseus does to Polypemon what the bandit had done to so many victims. Both heroes use vigilante justice to dispatch the wicked from society. Neither has the authority to do so (for Theseus was not yet king, nor had any type of authority at this point in his life—just as “The Stranger” is not an official of the law), yet both heroes do what they think is right in the heat of the moment, and thus operate outside of normal societal constraints.

Both heroes are also womanizers. Theseus “ravishes” the daughters of Sinis and Cercyon (Graves, 1955, pp. 328-9; Ward, 1970, p. 20) just as “the Stranger” rapes

Callie in *High Plains Drifter*. Daniel O'Brien maintains that Eastwood in fact meant for the rape scene in *High Plains Drifter* to be a message about "public apathy and group responsibility," and that the scene relates to an incident in New York in 1964 in which a woman was raped while neighbors watched and did nothing (Qtd. McVeigh, 2007, p. 139). While this might well be the case, the actions of both heroes may have more to do with inflicting punishment for this indifference and lack of compassion. Although both rapes are heinous acts, it could be argued that the purpose of these scenes is to convey that people who stand idly by are just as guilty as those that commit the crimes, and should be punished. For that is exactly what Callie and the daughters of the bandits do: they passively watch the criminals performing sinister deeds.

Furthermore, Theseus's selfish desires, especially the carnal sort, drive him to betray many women. His promiscuity and unfaithfulness affect more than just the daughters of Sinis and Cercyon. According to Ward (1970), Theseus marries and abandons Ariadne, the daughter of King Minos of Crete, who helps him with knowledge to defeat the Minotaur (p. 20). Theseus is so enamored of the opposite sex that even kidnapping is not beyond him. Graves and Ward both note that Theseus kidnaps Helen of Troy when she is twelve years old (Graves, 1955, p. 363; Ward, 1970, p. 20). Both Graves and Ward go on to inform us that because of this act by Theseus, his own mother is forced to endure a life of slavery as Helen's servant (Graves, 1955, p. 363; Ward, 1970, p. 20). These acts prove that the ancient Greek playwrights recognized that humans are flawed, even heroes.

A third shortcoming in Theseus is the fact that he attempts to carry off Persephone, Queen of the Underworld and wife of Hades, as a bride for his boon companion, Peirithous (Graves, p. 363; Ward, p. 20). Defying the gods has never been an admirable trait of a hero in either Greek tragedy or Western film. In Eastwood, we can see this same defiance in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Wales has the bad habit of spitting on everything under the sun: dogs, beetles, scorpions, sidewalks, men who insult him, men who annoy him, and most notably, the corpses of his victims. Hurd notes the spitting, and Josey's refusal to bury the bodies of the men he takes vengeance upon: "Anyone with even a basic familiarity with Greek tragedy understands that these actions would ordinarily be met with a lightning bolt. Yet Josey suffers no retribution from the gods. He disrespects the dead with impunity" (p 20). There are exceptions to this rule when the hero is deemed justified in his disrespectful actions. For example, Achilles is not punished by the gods for the lack of respect he shows to Hector's corpse after killing him in the *Iliad*:

He spoke, and now thought of shameful treatment for glorious Hektor.

In both of his feet at the back he made holes by the tendons

in the space between ankle and heel, and drew thongs of ox-hide through them,

and fastened them to the chariot so as to let the head drag,

and mounted the chariot, and lifted the glorious armour inside it,

then whipped the horses to a run, and they winged their way reluctant.

A cloud of dust rose where Hektor was dragged, his dark hair was falling

about him, and all that head that was once so handsome was tumbled
in the dust; since by this time Zeus had given him over
to his enemies, to be defiled in the land of his fathers.

(Homer, 1951, lines 395-404)

Similarly, in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, the gods favor Wales in sympathy for the tragedy that the Red Legs have bestowed upon him, and have delivered to him the enemies he wishes to punish. As Achilles seeks vengeance on the man responsible for the death of Patroclus, Josey Wales seeks vengeance on those who murdered his wife and child. On another note, Josey doesn't bury his good friend, Jamie, either; he doesn't have the time, and explains to the corpse that the Union soldiers can provide a better burial than he. The film shows Wales to be a god-fearing man. He prays when he buries his wife and son, and again when Jamie passes away. When he spits on the corpses of the men he kills, he doesn't intend sacrilege; rather, he is showing contempt for the men who murdered his wife and child.

Theseus also has another fault: an abundant capacity for rage. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Phaedra—who lusts after her husband Theseus's son from a previous marriage, Hippolytus—tricks Theseus into believing that it was Hippolytus who in fact made incestuous advances on her. Theseus uses his favored status under the god Poseidon to place a curse upon his own son:

Father Poseidon,
god of the ocean,

you who once gave me
 curses to utter—
 three—and you'd do them;
 now, for the first one:
 kill him!—my dear son,
 not to escape you,
 now, before sunset,
 do it! You promised!

(Euripides, 1998, lines 882-893)

Soon after, Theseus's curse on his son is fulfilled by Poseidon, and Hippolytus lies dying. Theseus soon realizes his folly through his son's favored deity, the goddess Artemis, who chastises him:

Theseus, hear your summation of evils;
 make yourself miserable; I can't help you.
 First I shall speak of your innocent son, who
 now in his death should be properly honored,
 then of your wife, who, though maddened with passion,
 kept, in a manner of speaking, her honor.
 She was afflicted by that great goddess
 who by us all who delight in our pure thoughts
 most is detested and, fixed on your young son,

languished. She struggled to conquer this. Cypris
 entered her nurse who, hoping to help her,
 plunged her in ruin: confessed to your son all;
 drew him first, with an oath, into silence.
 He, as was proper, rejected this vileness,
 yet, being pious, he clung to his silence.
 Phaedra, afraid of inquiries looming,
 shored up her honor with lies. You believed them;
 and you permitted deceit to destroy him.

(Euripides, 1998, lines 1319-1336)

For Ward (1970), Theseus's passions are the shortcomings that truly reveal the hero as an average man; they lay bare his immense love for Phaedra and his vulnerability to jealousy and wrath (p. 44). Theseus values Phaedra's affection so greatly that when confronted with its loss he is overcome with rage and willing to curse his own son to death. Theseus is prone to temptation, jealousy, love, lust, pride, sorrow, and wrath—the same emotions to which all men are susceptible. Ultimately, his capacity for rage becomes his most tragic flaw, because it leads to the death of his son.

Just as Theseus can murder, rape, kidnap, lust, and contribute to his mother's enslavement and his son's death—yet remain a hero—Eastwood's heroes are also fallible. Just because a hero commits an unsavory act does not mean that he is defined by that act, nor does it remove the mantle of hero from him. Theseus's flaws only

contribute to making him a more interesting hero, more human than divine. The Greek poets always made sure to give their heroes flaws, because it gives them character and keeps them above average men yet below the gods. Greek heroes, along with Eastwood's, are tied to power more than virtue; they are bigger than life and excel in combat, yet succumb to the same vices as average men.

Section IV

A Modern Greek Tale: *The Outlaw Josey Wales*

While *High Plains Drifter* (1973) and *Unforgiven* (1992) have received far more critical attention, Eastwood's less written-about film, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), conforms most strikingly to the Aristotelian standards of a perfect Greek tale. This Eastwood film unconsciously borrows many Greek traditions, yet lacks a typical Greek ending.

In the heroes of his Westerns, Clint Eastwood adapts Aristotle's four criteria of character. According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the first requirement of the hero is that he must be good (p. 60). In *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, the hero is good in several ways. He pursues evil—in the form of the men who murdered his wife, his child, and his fellow Confederate soldiers. He is tolerant of the differences in others: he becomes boon companions with Chief Lone Watie and Little Moonlight, both Native Americans that he rescues from harm; he befriends Grandma Sarah, a very vocal Republican and Union Jayhawker who holds ill will toward all Missourians, yet accepts Josey as one of their group; and he becomes friends with Comancheros, and even a blood brother to the Comanche leader, Ten Bears.

The second of Aristotle's requirements is that the character must be appropriate. For example, "it is possible to portray any character as manly, but inappropriate for a female character to be manly or formidable in the way I mean" (p. 60). Regardless of gender, one can interpret this as the notion that a hero must be

appropriately strong and able—and this applies to Josey Wales. He is good with fists or a pistol—so good in fact that even when Wales is severely outnumbered, he still guns down all opponents and remains unscathed. In one such scene he saves Little Moonlight; two fur traders have their guns drawn on him, having figured out his true identity and drooling over the reward money that his capture will bring, but Josey succeeds in killing both before they can do him any harm. He is also tall and handsome: both Little Moonlight and Laura Lee are attracted to him. He is above average in comeliness and in his competence with guns; he is “appropriate” in all aspects.

Thirdly, Aristotle states that the character must also be “lifelike” and better than average (p. 60). In other words, the character must be all but ideal. Aside from Wales’ looks and gun skills, he has better-than-average intelligence. There are several instances in which the hero outwits his opponents, which according to Steckmesser (1965) and Seal (2009), is essential in an outlaw hero (p. 171-73; p. 74). A prime example of Wales outwitting his adversaries comes when he, Jamie, and a carpetbagger cross a river on a ferry together. Captains Fletcher and Terril and a contingent of soldiers catch up to the outlaw, but not before Josey has reached the opposite side of the river. To Jamie’s surprise, Josey waits patiently as the pursuing soldiers board the ferry and prepare to cross behind him. The carpetbagger assumes that the outlaw plans merely to shoot a few men off the ferry before they reach shore.

“Do you really think you can shoot all those men down before they shoot you?” asks the charlatan, “Uh, uh, no, no, Mr. Josey Wales. There is such a thing in

this country called justice!”

Taking aim with his rifle, Josey calmly replies, “Well Mr. Carpetbagger, we got something in this territory called a Missouri boat ride.” Rather than shoot any men on the ferry, Josey shoots the rope securing it to the riverbanks; the boat then breaks free and floats aimlessly down the river, while chaos erupts and men and horses panic.

Another example of Josey’s wit comes when the Comancheros hold his traveling companions hostage. There are a dozen Comancheros, but this doesn’t deter Josey; he rides in to speak with the banditos under a white flag. But the flag he waves is tied to a shotgun that is ready to fire. Josey quickly guns down the four men who ride out to speak with him. He has no intention of peace negotiations with the men, especially after witnessing the carnage that they had previously left in their wake, and instead tricks them into riding into an ambush.

Aristotle’s final requirement is that the character must be “consistent” in his actions and moral choices (p. 60). Wales is consistent in the way he treats others with tolerance and without prejudice, in the way that he pursues his vengeance against those who have wronged him or his fellow soldiers, and in his restraint in killing people. Josey is consistent in that he always allows his opponents to draw first, whether the fur traders at the trading post or the many bounty hunters who pursue him. Unless it is one of the men he seeks vengeance against, Josey often gives a man a chance to change his mind—as he does in the town of Santa Rio when he advises the bounty hunter to move on and stay alive.

Although Eastwood abides by Aristotle’s ideals for a perfect character, it is far

from the only classical concept that he unconsciously borrows. A second element Eastwood inherits from the Greeks is the dramatic reversal. Aristotle writes that “[r]eversal is...a change from one state of affairs to its exact opposite” (p. 56). This trait of Greek drama is best exemplified in Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* through the character of Oedipus. Oedipus experiences reversal when he realizes that it was he who killed his father and married his mother, fulfilling an ominous prophecy and instantly reducing himself from king to criminal:

Now I am godless and child of impurity,
 begetter in the same seed that created my wretched self.
 Is there any ill worse than ill,
 That is the lot of Oedipus.

(Sophocles, 1942, lines 1360-1364)

Reversal also characterizes *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Wales is shown to be a law-abiding citizen and tranquil farmer in the opening scenes. His reversal comes when everything he loves is taken from him in one violent event. One minute he has a loving wife, a healthy child, and a homestead to work; in an instant, he loses everything and is forced into the life of an outlaw through his desire for revenge. This reversal is what allows the audience to relate to the losses of Wales and the pain that he endures.

According to Aristotle, an element that often accompanies reversal is suffering

(pathos), painful events or visible deaths that cause the audience to empathize for the character (p. 56). Such suffering is a third Greek dynamic Eastwood incorporates into his Westerns. This concept is commonly associated with all types of heroes; it is part of what drives the hero into action. In Westerns, the hero's suffering is normally tied to a change in his status and the path of revenge that he subsequently takes. In *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, the source of the hero's suffering, the deaths of Josey's wife and son, are graphically shown in the manner of which Aristotle writes—creating empathy from the viewer. Wales' wife is pulled away by several men who are clearly intent on raping her. Wales' son is trapped upstairs in their house that is engulfed in flames, and it is clear that Wales is helpless to do anything to save either. The scene in which Josey buries his wife and son evokes further suffering and empathy. This is the fear and pity that Aristotle claims must be purged from the audience at some point (p. 50). Eastwood wants the viewer to remember these initial atrocities until it is time for cathartic revenge.

As discussed earlier, Eastwood's revenge is truly old-fashioned Greek blood justice; this revenge is presented in a cathartic manner in order to address the audience's feelings of fear and pity, and cleanse them. The cathartic effect is a fourth Aristotelian criterion; it is evidenced in action with each man Josey kills to either avenge his family, to avenge the deaths of his fellow Confederates against the Red Leg Union soldiers who slaughtered them, or to protect those who cannot protect themselves. Each death of a Red Leg is justified, in the sense that it resolves the murders from which the rest originated: the deaths of Josey's wife and child. The

deaths of the Red Legs allow the audience this cathartic release and mimics the effect intended by the Greek playwrights of releasing the fear and pity invoked in the opening scenes. This revenge allows the viewer to mentally move on from the horrific deaths viewed in the earlier scenes. As previously established, and as Martin M. Winkler (1985) once again reminds us, catharsis is an important outlet for the dangerous emotions of pity and fear trapped inside the spectator: if this purging does not take place, then those emotions would remain in the viewer (p. 522). The pivotal cathartic scene in *The Outlaw Josey Wales* comes when Josey finally catches up to Captain Terril; it is the scene in which all of the pent up fear and pity the audience has been harboring is finally released. Josey raises his pistols and begins to fire in rapid succession at Captain Terril, with empty chambers. As the hero fires each shot, flashbacks remind us of the horrors that Wales' family endured at the hands of Terril's men in the film's opening scenes. Each metallic hammering of Josey's empty pistols, accompanied by the flashbacks, slowly brings the fear and pity of the film to a climax. Then as Terril draws his sabre, Josey forces the blade back on its wielder; the catharsis is complete.

A fifth classical element Eastwood incorporates is recognition, which Aristotle defines as "a change from ignorance to knowledge" (p. 56). The most notable instance of recognition in Greek drama is once again epitomized in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, when Oedipus realizes that he himself is the murderer he has hunted all along. Aristotle explains that it is the best sort of recognition that occurs in conjunction with reversal (p. 56). He goes on to explain that there are other forms of recognition, one of

which is gained through the use of reasoning, the exact kind that we see in Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales*.

Josey's recognition comes in two distinct scenes. The first is when he realizes that his vengeful actions against the Red Legs have changed his life forever; he comes to realize that no matter how justified his actions may have been, his remaining enemies will surely seek vengeance themselves. Chief Lone Watie, trying to convince Josey to settle down and forget about his past with the Union soldiers, says, "Maybe they will forget you..." Wales then replies, "You know there ain't no forgettin'." He has come to accept that his actions produce consequences and that he must deal with them—he must finish the job of enacting furious revenge upon the men who have wronged him. Wales' second moment of recognition comes after he has killed Terril, and Captain Fletcher tells him that the war is over. Wales recognizes that his vengeance has been fulfilled and that he has the opportunity to start a new life among his friends back at the homestead alongside Laura Lee. To pursue vengeance any further would be a mistake. But that mistake may actually better fit Greek mythology and the tragic hero, because it would likely lead to the hero's tragic death.

Although *The Outlaw Josey Wales* possesses many qualities of a Greek tale, the film is not quite tragedy, since the hero does not die tragically. But we can see Wales as indeed dying, in the context of Western film mythology. Lamont (1976) informs us that even if a hero manages to survive his feats of strength, he can still be destroyed by aging, or by the fact that the hero outlasts his historical necessity (p. 21). By killing Captain Terril, who represents the last of the men who committed the

killing rampage, Wales has served his historical purpose and is no longer necessary. John Belton (1994) agrees: “In slaying the enemies of society, who often resemble him in appearance or character, the western hero symbolically destroys himself” (p. 211). It may be that Eastwood means for Wales to symbolically destroy his “old self” when his revenge against the Red Legs has concluded.

Some scholars claim that Wales does ride off and indeed die, since he is bleeding profusely in the final scenes of the film. Hurd (2008) believes this is exactly what Eastwood intended: Wales “is at peace, he satisfied his need for revenge, but the effort cost him his life” (p. 21). But contrary to Hurd’s interpretation of the final scenes, this is likely not what Eastwood intended—there is one more alternative to be considered.

It is possible that the hero does survive and starts a new life. Seal (2009) writes of this alternate possibility: “The outlaw hero may be said to have escaped...and to have lived on elsewhere in secure obscurity” (p. 75). Josey perhaps goes back to a life of peace among his friends on the ranch, settling down with Laura Lee at the end of his quest for vengeance. Thus, like Lamont’s (1976) *Odysseus*, Wales is “reborn without dying” (p. 13). In this regard, Eastwood claims that “[the audience is] willing him to go back there. [They are] taking him back there” (Qtd. Sickels, 2003, p. 227). We want Wales to go back to a normal life and pursue happiness rather than seek further revenge. Winkler (1985) reminds us that, especially in Greek mythology, “the hero’s highest achievement is his conquest of death” (p. 527), and of course some Greek heroes, such as Heracles, attain immortality after death. Be that as it may, in

the Western, and especially in the case of Eastwood's film, Josey Wales conquers death by living on.

Section V

The Euripides Effect: Bringing the Audience on Stage

Both Aristotle and Nietzsche revered Euripides as one of the premiere Greek poets. Aristotle calls Euripides “the most tragic of the poets” (p. 58). Nietzsche claims that Euripides changed tragedy forever and effectively brought about the death of tragedy and the birth of new genres (2000, p. 62). Both of these renowned writers would regard Eastwood in much the same manner, because Eastwood incorporates Greek elements and, like Euripides, adds modern social concerns to the themes of his Westerns. Some may argue that John Ford is the true poet of the Western. Ford might arguably be the Homer of the Western film, having created the Western version of the epic tale through his movies. But Clint Eastwood is definitively the Western’s Euripides—the “most tragic” of the directors—because he causes the audience to question the status quo, and even question themselves, the way that Euripides does.

The Eastwood Western borrows one final element of Greek origin: the tradition of incorporating contemporary social issues into a story. Euripides is known for incorporating social issues of ancient Greece into his plays, themes such as gender issues, war, violence, cruelty, and human temptations. We see the same concerns for modern social issues in Eastwood’s directing. For example, Hurd (2008) recognizes Euripides’ and Eastwood’s shared concern for themes of revenge (p. 2). What Hurd and other scholars fail to realize is that the similarities in authorial thematics between Euripides and Eastwood do not stop at their concerns with revenge; both artists also

critique the futility of violence and war. Euripides does this most prominently in *The Trojan Women*, where he questions the horrors and senselessness of war through the death of young Astyanax in the words of the child's grandmother, Hecuba:

O darling child, how wretched was this death. You might
have fallen fighting for your city, grown to man's
age, and married, and with the king's power like a god's,
and died happy, if there is any happiness here.
But no. You grew to where you could see and learn, my child,
yet your mind was not old enough to win advantage
of fortune. How wickedly, poor boy, your father's walls,
Apollo's handiwork, have crushed your pitiful head
tended and trimmed to ringlets by your mother's hand,
and the face she kissed once, where the brightness now is blood
shining through the torn bones—too horrible to say more.
O little hands, sweet likeness of Hector's once,
now you lie broken at the wrists before my feet;
and mouth beloved whose words were once so confident,
you are dead; and all was false, when you would lean across
my bed, and say: "Mother, when you die I will cut
my long hair in your memory, and at your grave
bring companies of boys my age, to sing farewell."
It did not happen; now I, a homeless, childless, old

woman must bury your poor corpse, which is so young.

Alas for all the tenderness, my nursing care,

and all your slumbers gone. What shall the poet say,

what words will he inscribe upon your monument?

Here lies a little child the Argives killed, because

they were afraid of him. That? The epitaph of Greek shame.

You will not win your father's heritage, except

for this, which is our coffin now: the brazen shield.

(Euripides, 1958, lines 1167-1193)

With Hecuba's words, Euripides questions the very idea of war and sending a country's children off to die. The play highlights the absurdity of a grandparent burying a grandchild for the sake of warfare. It vividly evokes wasted life, pulling at our hearts with remembrances of lost kisses and embraces. Paul Roche (1998) writes that Euripides "underscores the monumental folly of war, which wrecks and demoralizes both victors and vanquished" (p. ix).

Although Eastwood tackles issues like equality, tolerance, and the horrors of war in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, his film *Unforgiven* (1992) is most successful in questioning violence in American society to the degree that Euripides critiques war. Violence is a common theme of all Eastwood Westerns; however, *Unforgiven* provides a new standpoint from which to examine the violence. Allen Redmon (2004) tells us that *Unforgiven* is successful in critiquing violence because it is shown

through the eyes of the victims rather than the eyes of the victors (p. 320-321). This victims' perspective predominates when Quick Mike attacks the prostitute Delilah with a knife, when English Bob is beaten by Little Bill, when Munny is stricken with fever and endures the same type of beating, and when Davey Boy is murdered. And Redmon notes of the whipping of Ned: "Eastwood scans the rooms in which the whores stand, listening with horrified expressions to the sound of Little Bill's whip" (p. 321). The final scene between William Munny and Little Bill is chilling in this respect: the viewer actually looks up the barrel of Munny's rifle from the perspective of Little Bill as Munny fires the fatal bullet. *Unforgiven* turns on the motifs of violence and revenge that have become such a large part of the Western, especially like those we see in earlier Eastwood performances—such as in Sergio Leone's "Dollars" trilogy. In Carl Plantinga's (1998) view, the film "withholds an easy justification of violence" to the extent that it questions the violence (p. 65). Furthermore, Plantinga and Redmon both acknowledge that the film reveals the endless cycle of revenge that is born through retributive justice (1998, p 71; 2004, p. 315). In this sense, *Unforgiven* is a modern take on Aeschylus' exposure of the consequences of the use of violence in the pursuit of vengeance.

Both Euripides and Eastwood are also concerned with the way women are viewed in society. Euripides shows this concern for the status of Greek women most effectively in the character Iphigenia. In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Iphigenia's willingness to sacrifice herself for the greater good, and allow her father Agamemnon to sacrifice her to the gods, proves her to be the most virtuous member of the House of Atreus. In

Iphigenia Among the Taurians, the fact that she rises to the status of High Priestess of Artemis shows that Euripides views women as capable of holding important positions in society and performing equally as well as men.

From the outset, *Unforgiven* focuses on the social standing of women (the prostitutes): they have few if any rights in the community. When Quick Mike assaults Delilah, sheriff Little Bill first decides that Quick Mike and his partner, Davey Boy, should be whipped; after a few moments of contemplation, however, the lawman decides that the two offenders should merely return in the spring with ponies to pay Skinny, the man for whom the prostitutes work. According to Hurd (2008), Little Bill is “entirely reasonable in his assessment of the crime and calculation of the cowboys’ punishment” (p. 22). However, Eastwood likely wants us to understand that the women are viewed as property—essentially no different from the ponies that Little Bill proposes as payment—and that a man can “cut up” a woman as long as he has property to exchange in payment for his crimes. Carl Plantinga (1998) explains that this is no more than valuing “private property at the expense of human rights” (p. 68). The film questions American justice and the concept of escaping justice through wealth, a theme common to American media around the time of the film’s release, and epitomized in the O.J. Simpson trial. Little Bill’s “reasoning” is equivalent to the Germanic medieval judicial system, the *wergeld* (man price), in which every crime—particularly murder—was assigned a debt that must be paid to the victim or victim’s family.

As previously mentioned, Euripides also shows men to be prone to temptations

of every type, especially in *Hippolytus*: men are blasphemous, and full of rage and desire. Irene Papas (2001) writes that Euripides “was deeply concerned with the corrosion of human values in Athens during the Peloponnesian War” (p. 74). In *Hippolytus*, for example, Theseus is a prime example of this type of human condition through his vulnerability to extreme ranges of emotion—being prone to human vices.

Unforgiven evidences this same concern for portraying men as flawed and prone to a full range of emotions, as well as a modern concern for the corrosion of human values in American society. Hurd (2008) acknowledges that both Euripides and Eastwood show “human beings as they are, not as they should be” (p. 26). The hero of *Unforgiven*, William Munny, has a shady past filled with sinister criminal acts that include the killing of women and children. Although he is older and wiser than he once was, Munny is less than the heroic standard. Plantinga (1998) observes that Munny lacks the traits of a Western hero: “he shoots badly, dislikes camping outdoors, and has trouble mounting his nervous horse” (p. 71).

Despite his flaws, Munny, like Theseus, has heroic traits. First of all, he is caring and loyal to his friends and family. Munny is true to his late wife and graciously turns down the advances of Delilah. He also shows passion in his concern to avenge Delilah of the cruelty that Quick Mike inflicted. And when Munny finds out his closest friend has been murdered by Little Bill, he seeks vengeance for Ned even though he is vastly outnumbered. Munny is also prone to rage, in much the same way as Theseus, and allows it to consume him. With the help of whiskey, Munny becomes so enraged at the news of Ned’s death that he takes indiscriminate vengeance in the

final scenes—no one is safe. He not only kills Little Bill and his deputies, but also Skinny, the saloon owner. Accused of being cowardly and shooting an unarmed man, Munny replies, “Well, he should have armed himself if he was gonna decorate his saloon with my friend.” His violence sometimes engulfs all—much as Theseus’s own rage sometimes engulfs him and eventually contributes to the death of his son. Both artists portray their heroes as capable of love, rage, and everything between. Like Theseus, William Munny is not virtuous; he is simply human—capable of base emotions like anyone else. This is precisely what the anti-hero is, after all.

Section VI

The Importance of the Western Myth

“We wouldn’t recognize a community as human if it had no stories, if its people had no narrative imagination.”

~ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 2006, p. 29

Many scholars write that Western film provides Americans with a mythic past in the way that the *Iliad* did for the ancient Greeks (Belton, 1994, p. 224; Blundell & Ormand, 1997, p.537; Winkler, 1985, p. 535). The Western is, as Bazin (1971) said, “the American film par excellence” (p. 141). Eastwood himself once commented that other than Jazz, the Western is the only authentic American art form (Qtd. Frayling, 1999, p. 134). Cheryl Miller (2007) builds on this notion when she writes that “no other genre has more effectively captured what it means to be American” as much as the Western has (p. 88). The Western is rooted in the early American frontier ideology of Manifest Destiny—the American desire to endlessly expand and conquer.

While the 1960s were a time of rebellion against societal norms, they also signaled a period of creating personal identity and individuality—which is also an important theme of the Western (the rugged, capable, self-reliant, and independent hero). Myths are significant for any culture; they often reflect what is important in the society from which they emerge, and inform others about the society. This is what Joseph Campbell (1988) means when he informs us that myths provide us with

meaning and inspire us to better ourselves (p. 5). These myths give us a sense of social connection; they bond us culturally.

The Western has become American mythology. The myth of the West is a nostalgic past for Americans. Sickels (2003) reminds us that, like all movies, Westerns inform us about the social issues of the times in which they were created (p.227). In this context, Western movies are akin to Greek tales, because they inform an audience about the civilization that produced them. Modern scholars still study Greek mythology to better understand the ancient Greeks, their beliefs, and their values. Winkler (1985) writes that the works of Western directors “deserve to be placed alongside those of classical Greek and Roman epic and dramatic poets” (p 535). People may be viewing 20th century American mythology two thousand years from now through our popular culture; we cannot know whether they will view Eastwood’s films as catastrophic or colossal. But one thing is for certain: Clint Eastwood’s films will endure the test of time in the same manner as the plays of Euripides; because Eastwood perfected American mythology by reviving the Greek hero type, by continuing the Greek tradition of blood justice, by casting his stories in modern social contexts like Euripides, and by relying on Greek elements of character, reversal, suffering, catharsis, and recognition. It is because of this that the Western will endure, for as Catherine Ingrassia (1998) informs us, “we can never stop writing the West, we can only start reading it differently” (p. 58).

Section VII

Conclusion: The Immortality of the Western

It's been frequently proclaimed that the Western is either dead or dying. As early as 1973, Pauline Kael argued that "the Western, after a long and vigorous life, had died" (Qtd. McClain, 2010, p. 58)—coincidentally, this is the same year in which *High Plains Drifter* was released. Bloch's (2006) description of *High Plains Drifter* as "a film so dark and cruel that its release practically heralded the death of the genre" (p. 114) is another example of the diminishing view of the Western. Nearly twenty years later, with the release of *Unforgiven* (1992), some critics felt little different in their views of Eastwood's Western films. For McReynolds (1998), Eastwood's 1992 film was "proof positive that the mythic West was dead and buried" (p. 46). If Eastwood contributed to the death of the Western, then he did so in a very distinct manner—that is, in the style of Euripides.

Nietzsche credits Euripides with bringing about the death of Greek tragedy (2000, p. 61), essentially by introducing the man of average status to the Greek stage (a place previously strictly preserved for heroes, gods, and the chorus), and allowing spectators to see themselves reflected on stage (p. 63). In much the same way, Eastwood turned the Western convention of violence onto the viewer in *Unforgiven* and forced us to contemplate it through the eyes of the film's victims (Redmon, 2004, p. 321). This new positioning was a radical change in the Western, as radical in comparison to Euripides' adding the common man to the stage; both artists turned the

genres on themselves. So if Eastwood “killed” the Western, then he did so in the same manner that Euripides “killed” tragedy. And Nietzsche claimed that Euripides killed Greek tragedy by leaving the genre nowhere to go (p. 62).

Nietzsche indirectly gives hope that the Western will endure, however, when he explains that the death of tragedy gave birth to new genres—like the New Attic Comedy—and that the elements of tragedy bled into other genres (p. 62). We see the Western merging into science fiction, drama, and even comedy. Belton (1994) and Winkler (1985) agree that we can see the Western hero migrate most distinctly into the character Han Solo in the *Star Wars* trilogy (George Lucas, 1977, 1980, and 1983) (p. 228; p. 535). Han Solo moves to the boundless expanses of space, as similarly endless as the Western frontier, and totes a pistol as his weapon of choice. We also see elements of the Western and its hero in films like *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979), *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, 2003), *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 2007), and *Cowboys and Aliens* (Jon Favreau, 2011). Even *Lightning Jack* (Simon Wincer, 1994), a comedic Western, proves that the genre retains life in eccentric ways. Even if the Western is dead, its hero “simply dons a new outfit and survives” (Winkler, 1985, p. 535).

The Western shows signs of life in other ways too. Take the “anti-Westerns,” such as *Dances with Wolves* (Kevin Costner, 1990), *Dead Man* (Jim Jarmusch, 1995), and Eastwood’s own *Unforgiven* (1992). All three of these films question the myths of the Western and show new perspectives on those myths through the eyes of others such as Native Americans or women. The Western also thrives in all the remakes that

Hollywood endlessly reproduces; numerous examples include *Young Guns* (Christopher Cain, 1988), *Young Guns II* (Geoff Murphy, 1990), *Tombstone* (George Cosmatos, 1993), *Wyatt Earp* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1994), *3:10 to Yuma* (James Mangold, 2007), and *True Grit* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 2010). All have the elements of the Westerns that preceded them, however Hollywood is doing little but putting new faces into old roles and hyping up the action scenes with new technology; they are not original Westerns. Some may argue that very few “true,” original Westerns have appeared in recent years. This may be true, perhaps with the exception of *Open Range* (Kevin Costner, 2003) and *Appaloosa* (Ed Harris, 2007), which are as “classical” as contemporary Westerns can be.

All these movies—whether as movies in other genres sporting Western themes, as anti-Westerns, or even as Hollywood remakes—prove one thing: the Western is far from dead and buried. Whether one considers the Western dead, or even attributes its demise to Clint Eastwood, these films testify that the Western has become an American tradition as immortal as the Greek epics and tragedies.

Some may claim that the Western will truly die only when Clint Eastwood, the last Western icon, finally passes from this world. However, as Andrew Sarris (1982) wrote, many viewed the death of John Wayne as the death of the Western (p. 40), and that clearly did not turn out to be the case. Eastwood kept the Western hero alive and well; even the death of “the Duke” could not end a genre with such a history in American culture. Belton states that even if the Western were to completely vanish, the myth of the West would endure in our society through things like the country

lifestyle, country music, Western-themed clothing, and folktales (1994, p. 206).

The Western will endure through its very myth. Just when you think the Western is dead, it rises like a phoenix from the ashes and shows new vitality. The Western is the risen spirit of Marshal Duncan, “the Stranger,” come back to set the audience straight; it is the vengeful, angry, Greek spirit that refuses to die; it is that regenerative cultural tale, started by the Greeks and continued in contemporary times, that continues to haunt both our literature and our imaginations.

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