

Shane

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One of the most successful Westerns of the 1950s, if not at any time, was George Stevens' *Shane*. *Shane*'s success ratified the prominent position of the gunfighter in the Western movie pantheon, and Westerns featuring figures modeled on Johnny Ringo, Will Kane, and *Shane* proliferated over the next decade. And the *Shane* plot-formula of a gunfighter from outside aiding a helpless community was perhaps the most frequently used. But as a heroic type, the gunfighter was both apt as a representative of contemporary moods and conflicts and adaptable enough to serve a wide range of plot-types situations, historical periods, and geographical settings.

In response to the "redemptive woman's wish that all guns and violence be banished from the valley, *Shane* replies:" A gun is just a tool, Marian. It's as good or bad as the man that uses it." The underlying message of the narrative is even stronger: a "good man with a gun" is in every sense the best of men — an armed redeemer who is the sole vindicator of the "liberties of the people," the "indispensable man" in the quest for progress.

The narrative of *Shane* takes off from what appears at first to be a conventionally "progressive" premise. The homesteaders in "the valley" are fighting for their land against Ryker, an old-fashioned cattle baron. Ryker's wealth depends on the "wasteful" system of open-range grazing, and all the law he has ever needed was made with his guns. The homesteaders represent both economic advancement and political democracy. Their farms prosper through the intensive use of irrigation and scientific cattle-breeding, and their society is based on cooperation and is directed by democratic community meetings. The farmers are led by Joe Starrett (Van Heflin), father of little Joey (Brandon DeWilde) and husband of Marian (Jean Arthur). Starrett is headstrong and willful, a natural leader who through most of the narrative leads by persuasion and consent. Ryker, on the other hand, rules by pure intimidation. He is so used to living by the gun that he congratulates himself that up till now he has never had anyone murdered; but the pressure to fill a big government beef contract has him over a barrel, and he must win at all costs.

This is the situation into which the lonely figure of *Shane* (Alan Ladd) comes riding.

Seen from the first through the worshipping eyes of the boy Joey, he is instantly recognizable as a special man, a hero. He wears neat buckskins and a gunbelt that is quietly (but noticeably) elegant. The impression of latent gentility is confirmed by the quiet courtesy of his speech, the moothness of his manners. The Starretts treat him with a deference that is as much due to his air of refinement as to his generosity and steely courage in aiding them against Ryker.

Shane incarnates the suggestion of “nobility” that invests all such characters, beginning with Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*. Suggestions of his aristocratic nature were part of the characterization in the Jack Schaefer novel on which the film was based. But Schaefer’s Shane wears the fine clothes associated with high-toned gamblers like Doc Holliday in *My Darling Clementine*. Stevens preserves the distinction of class but gives it a different inflection by dressing Shane in buckskins, which make him seem a figure from America’s buffalo-hunting frontier past, rather than a refugee from the urban future. Nor is there any clear indication (as with Ringo) that he has ever been an outlaw. Ryker calls him “gunfighter,” and the abstract purity of that identification is not compromised by association with any specific kind of work¹.

Thus quite early in the narrative, the historicist and naturalistic references are offset by a perspective (identified with Joey’s point of view) that insists on abstracting and stylizing every person and action and looking through history to find a mythic archetype. This tendency is given force by Stevens’ alternation of naturalistic and folkloristic scenes (the July 4th dance, the funeral of Stonewall) with scenes whose elements are exaggerated and distorted to achieve an “epic” effect. When the principal males in the story are in troubled thought, the skies darken; when they fight, the animals in the corral go crazy, leaping over the fences as lightning flashes in the sky — as if they were Homeric demigods and Nature itself were responsive to their power. So too with Wilson (Jack Palance) — the huge, cold-eyed, evil gunfighter whom Ryker has hired. As he enters Grafton’s saloon, a dog gets up and slinks away. Wilson’s slow passage into the room is viewed from a low angle that makes him look gigantic. His movement is broken by a “wipe,” a formal device that usually suggests an extended passage of time, as if time itself were deformed by Wilson’s weight and menace.

In *Shane*, stylization of dress, movement, and behavior is the visual sigh that identifies both the powerful and the professional. And the value that is vested in the men who have

1) Shane can also be seen as an enlarged version of the conventional “lone cowboy” of the “B” Western who wanders from film to film like a chivalric knight-errant.

these attributes is apart from and perhaps higher than the “progressive” and “democratic” values the film nominally espouses. This principle is visualized in the first meeting between Shane and Wilson. Ryker has come to give Starrett one last chance to “be reasonable” — that is, to sell his land on extremely favorable terms and to become an employee of Ryker. All Starrett will have to sacrifice is his personal independence and his democratic principles — none of the other farmers will get the same deal. Ryker’s paternalist intentions are revealed by his addressing his speech to little Joey. Starrett replies that he is a grown man, proud enough to work for himself, and too honorable to betray his community. Their argument degenerates into polemics about “rights” and “progress.” Ryker reminds Starrett it was men like him who cleared the Indians off the land; Starrett answers that Ryker is a primitive himself, that farmers use the land more efficiently...

And while this palaver is going on — raising matters that would be at the heart of any “progressive epic” — the camera is watching Shane and Wilson size each other up. They say nothing; they merely look and smile a little smile. They know that the talk of rights and wrongs has become meaningless. Pride and economics make it certain that neither Ryker nor Starrett can back down. Violent force alone will settle the issue, and the gunfighters are the ones who best understand that truth. Ryker and Starrett and their original objectives are reduced to the mere premises from which the action will arise, but the action itself will be entrusted to professionals.

The connection between stylization, professionalism, and power is emphasized in the gunfight between Wilson and Stonewall (Elisha Cook, Jr.). Stonewall is a gamecock ex-Confederate who believes that words matter and is therefore vulnerable to Wilson’s provocation. The exchanged insults (“Southern trash,” “Low-down Yankee liar”) mean nothing to Wilson: words (like guns) are merely tools for accomplishing his task. As they move toward the moment of drawing pistols, Stonewall picks his way through the slop but Wilson moves gracefully across an elevated “stage” (the sidewalk). His stylishness is the sign of his power. The evil inherent in his beautiful display is not fully manifest till the end. Wilson is so much faster that he can hold the gun on Stonewall for a long second, savoring the little man’s horrible amazement before he blows him into the muck with one shot. Shane has the same elegance, but he lacks Wilson’s self-indulgent sadism.

The politics of “saving the valley” now become “stylized” as well — reduced to the formally necessary confrontation of two professionals who belong to neither of the contending classes. Wilson has now taken Ryker’s place as the farmers’ most significant enemy.

Although he is nominally Ryker's "tool," he is in fact the objectification of Ryker's power, which has always been based on force. But only Shane is "equal" to Wilson in professionalism. It follows that Starrett too must abdicate his role as leader and political hero in favor of his "hired man," Shane. Those who have the power to act have the responsibility to act, perhaps in the name of community but if need be against the will of the community. Starrett himself acts on that principle when he puts himself ahead of the community and insists on going alone to confront Wilson. But Shane, knowing that Starrett cannot hope to beat Wilson, substitutes his own will for Starrett's and tries to stop him. Once again the hero breaks the law (the code of fair play) and risks his standing with the community or family (Joey) in order to meet the responsibilities of the pre-eminent powerful man.

Shane's confrontation with Wilson confirms the validity of his knowledge and his principles. He and Wilson face each other in the bar. Though there is talk with Ryker, the camera tells us that the sole point of the take is to create the proper occasion for the final shootout. The exchange between Shane and Wilson is formal and stylized, and both men appear conscious that they are going through a familiar, predictable, and even, trite, but nonetheless essential, ritual. Shane says he's heard of Wilson; Wilson asks what he has heard. Shane smiles and deliberately repeats Stonewall's phrase: "I heard that you're a low-down Yankee liar." Wilson smiles back: "Prove it." The exchange of smiles establishes their equality as professionals, and that equation remains valid despite the moral difference between them. All that will count now is action, and action follows in a rapid series of cuts as Wilson draws and Shane kills him. Shane then spins and cuts down Ryker and his foreman.

These killings are sanctioned as acts of sacrifice, because Shane does not stay to enjoy the fruits of triumph. He rides off alone, with Joey crying after him, begging him to "Come back!" Shane's words to Joey declare that the value of his action lies in its saving Joey's parents, their farm, and (implicitly) the progressive and domestic order they represent. But Joey doesn't seem to accept the sacrifice as given, because Shane means something to him that weighs equal with his love of his parents. And Joey's feeling is echoed by Marian's. We understand from the beginning that though she is committed to husband and child, she has fallen in love with Shane, and he with her. Joey's naive final cry, "Mother wants you!" reminds us of this and emphasizes this aspect of Shane's sacrifice. Their sublimated romance reproduces the exact Western equivalent of chivalric love, with Shane as a stainless Lancelot and Marian a chaste Guinevere — a suggestion that reinforces the impression of Shane's nobility. Even Joe Starrett understands this, in his paternal fashion. Contemplating the

likelihood of his own death in the gunfight with Ryker and Wilson, he tells Marian that he understands her feelings for Shane and that if he dies Shane will take better care of her than he ever could. Indeed, Shane's nobility, his perfection of style and manner and *virtu*, are so much beyond the human scale of Starrett that we (like Joey) tend to value him equal to (if not above) the nominal objectives for whose sake he makes his murderous sacrifice²⁾.

Like the populist outlaw, Shane acts as the farm community's surrogate in its confrontation with propertied evil. But the pseudo-history and politics of heroic surrogacy in the gunfighter movie are very different from those in the outlaw Western. *Jesse James* spends most of its narrative describing and analyzing the outlaw's response to oppression and injustice and relates those concerns to the life of the outlaw's community, showing how Jesse emerges from the heart of that community, serves it, then goes too far and is cast out it. The hero of *Shane* is also a skilled fighter who assists small farmers against a tyrannical proprietor. But Shane arrives from outside, and his past is concealed. His motives for helping the farmers are chivalric and romantic. He is the only character in the movie who never acts (or hesitates to act) from self-interested motives. But because Shane's motives for helping the farmers are unique and arise from no visible history or social background, they appear to be expressions of his nature, signs of a nobility which is independent of history, like the attributes of a "higher race."³⁾ Shane is never part of the community, and his superior values are not seen as belonging to the community. He is an aristocrat of violence, an alien from a more glamorous world, who is better than those he helps and is finally not accountable to those for whom he sacrifices himself.

2) It is possible to see *Shane* as a Christ-figure who miraculously appears to save the farmers, sacrifices for them, is wounded in the side, and disappears — while his truest suggestion was intended, Clint Eastwood gives the story a distinctly Christological cast in *Pale Rider*, his own interpretation of the *Shane* story.

3) This was consistent with the novel on which the film was based; "He was the man who rode into our valley out of the heart of the great glowing West and when his work was done rode back whence he had come and he was Shane." Jack Schaefer, *Shane: The Critical Edition*, p. 274.