

HIGH NOON

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(Received on October 14, 2003)

The ideological implications implicit in the approach to the *The Gunfighter* Western (which we addressed in another paper) were developed with more striking clarity in Stanley Kramer's production of *High Noon*, directed by Fred Zinneman and written by the blacklisted screenwriter Carl Foreman. The film was both a critical and a commercial success. Academy Award nominations went to the film (as Best Picture) and to both Zinneman and Foreman; Gary Cooper won an Oscar as Best Actor. The film editors and Dmitri Tiomkin's score received Oscars as well. It was also an extremely influential film, spawning many imitations (including) the TV series *Gunsmoke*) and one major "rebuttal": Howard Hawk's *Rio Bravo* (1959). Although nominally a "town-tamer" Western, its hero is envisioned in ways that link him to King's Ringo, and the formal structure of the film mirrors and exaggerates *The Gunfighter's* clock-driven narrative.

The hero of *High Noon* is Will Kane (Cooper), who is about to marry and then retire as Marshall of Hadleyville. Kane is a lean, dour, iron-gray man who wears the lawman's costume of white shirt and gray vest like a set of vestments. His wife (Grace Kelly) is a good deal younger and is a Quaker; it is because of her religion that he is giving up his gun and his badge. As the two are about to leave, they learn that Frank Miller is out of prison and will return on the noon train. Miller had ruled Hadleyville from his saloon and had terrorized the town with his penchant for insane cruelty until Kane decided to put on the badge and clean up. Now Miller is returning to kill Kane and the others who had a hand in his overthrow. The townspeople

insist that Kane not change his plans, assuring him that they can take care of themselves and that Kane's callow deputy Harvey (Lloyd Bridges) can protect them till the new marshall arrives. But after starting off on his journey, Kane turns back, despite his wife's passionate objections and her insistence that she will leave him if he decides to fight.

From this moment the film begins a dramatic countdown in pace with the real passage of time — one minute on screen equals one minute closer to "high noon." As Kane tries to rally his old deputies to oppose Miller's return and to talk his wife out of leaving on the train that will bring Miller back, the camera continually refers us to the clock, to the narrowing time/space within which Kane's heroism (like Ringo's fame) has entrapped him.

Like Ringo, Kane is isolated from society by the very qualities that have given him honor. The difference is that Ringo is alone from the moment we meet him; Kane does not discover his alienation until, through the action of the narrative, he tries to engage his community's sense of solidarity and decency in defeating Miller. One by one, everyone he approaches refuses to take up arms against Miller's return. (The series of encounters parallels the narrative plan of *Gunfighter* and even engages the hero with some of the same conventional types.) Kane's mentor and predecessor is too old and arthritic; most people (like the judge who sentenced Miller) are simply too frightened. Some cover their fear by professing to believe that Miller may have grown soft in prison. The young deputy is jealous of Kane. The minister is in a snit because Kane was not married in his church.

The crisis arrives when Kane addresses the townspeople in the church and reminds them of what life was like under Miller's rule — asking, in effect, if they have learned the lesson of their history. What follows is a parody of democracy. At first the townspeople are all for helping Kane;

then "cooler heads" prevail, particularly the major (Thomas Mitchell). The defeat of Miller (he says) meant progress for the town, and that progress is about to culminate in a wave of new investment — important people in the state capital have heard about Hadleyville! But if a gunfight takes place in the streets, Hadleyville will seem like "just another wide open town." Thus the traditional sanctions of "progress" becomes motives for cowardice rather than incitements to heroism. The community, in a virtual town meeting, declares that it does not want Will Kane to fight its battles a second time.

But just as he rejects the moral authority of his wife's religion, Kane rejects the "will of the people" and prepares to face Miller and his henchmen alone. At this moment, he has been deprived of the classic sanctions that authorized the town-tamer's use of violence. He has no official entitlement to the badge he has re-assumed after retiring that morning; the majors has defined his actions as anti-progressive; and the town meeting has made it clear that it no longer wants him to act as its agent.¹⁾ He is, in effect, a vigilante: a private man assuming the power of the law without submitting himself to the democratic process. In these circumstances, what principles can justify his decision to face Miller?

There is a personal element in his decision, which at first predominates. Kane knows that Miller will pursue him wherever he goes and prefers to face him now rather than spend a lifetime looking over his shoulder. But other feelings and ideas move him as well. He is a professional: his badge was his calling, the expression of his pride and honor, and Miller's expulsion was his most meaningful victory. He can't leave the job unfinished, and Miller's return will undo the work of his life. There is also a social

1) Note the parallel with Brittles in *Yellow Ribbon*, who stretches the terms of his retirement and violates his orders when he assumes his last command.

component among Kane's motives. His work was meaningful because it transformed Hadleyville into a "progressive" little town where it is safe for women and children to walk the streets. He cannot permit society to revert to the savage regime of Miller, even if the people who constitute that society are willing to permit it. In effect, the principle on which he acts is the same as that to which Wister's and Dixon's vigilante heroes and Fords's cavalrymen appealed: that the defense of "civilization" is more important than the procedures of "democracy."

But Kane's ultimate appeal is to the authority of his "character" and his "manhood" — the same "red-blooded" principles to which Judge Henry and *The Virginian* appealed in justifying the lynching of rustlers. Kane is the only man with knowledge, skill, and power enough to defeat Miller; and his conscience, like that of Generals Sheridan and Yorke, holds that (in cases like this) possession of the power to act entails an absolute responsibility to act, whether or not the action is legal or acceptable to the public. But Foreman and Zinneman do not provide an excuse like the capture of the children to cover his action. Kane forthrightly asserts the need for preemptive violence to prevent atrocities which he (apparently alone) believes are certain to follow Miller's return.

Kane understands Miller's savage character, because, like "the man who knows Indians," there is a side of Kane's nature that is akin to Miller's. The hint is there in the name "Will Kane," which combines the suggestion of "will" as the drive to power with a homonym of the Bible's first murderer. When Kane talks to the old marshall who first persuaded him to put on the badge, their conversation confirms that Kane might have gone "bad" if the marshall hadn't turned him around. But the dark potential in Kane is most vividly defined by Helen Ramirez (Katy Jurado), who owns the town's saloon (and presumably its attendant gambling and

prostitution). Helen was originally Frank Miller's moll and is presently the mistress of Kane's deputy Harvey. But she was once the lover of Will Kane, who freed her from Miller's sadistic control and may have enabled her to replace Miller as owner of the saloon, become a wealthy woman, and repay the town's scorn of her being a "Mexican woman." Helen is therefore to be believed when she tells Harvey that the difference between him and Kane is that Kane "is a man." The emphasis and context of the remark identify Kane's manliness as a lover with his power to confront and overcome Miller.

There are precedents in earlier Westerns for the sharing of a woman between hero and villain, and if we are aware of these (as an audience) Helen's suggestions will carry a bit more resonance. A similar quartet of figures — gunfighters, gambler, Mexican woman, Christian woman from the East — set the terms of the moral drama in Hart's *Hell's Hinges* (1915); but Hart's turn-of-the-century morality insists on the (racial) purity of Blaze Tracey's sexual inclinations. The foursome of marshal, gambler, Mexican woman, and virginal Anglo maiden also forms the central group of the Wyatt Earp/O. K. Corral story, most recently remade by John Ford in *My Darling Clementine* (1946).²⁾ In that film Wyatt (Henry Fonda) becomes marshal of Tombstone in order to avenge the killing of his brother and the rustling of his cattle. Far from "cleaning up" Tombstone, Wyatt forms a close friendship with the murderous gambler Doc Holliday (Victor Mature), who owns a saloon and keeps as mistress the Mexican singer Chihuahua. Although Ford's movie ultimately reaffirms an essentially "progressive"

2) Earlier versions of the Earp story include *Law and Order* (1931), and *Frontier Marshal* and *Dodge City* (1939). Ford's film was officially a remake of *Law and Order*; another remake with the same title appeared in 1953. See also *Gunfight at the OK Corral* (1957), *Warlock* (1959), and *Hour of the Gun* (1967). On *High Noon*, see Lenihan, *Showdown*, pp. 22–24, 117–222.

view of the town-tamer, the Earp/Holliday relationship suggests an element of darkness and violence in Earp that belongs to an earlier stage of civilization. Earp, however, is moving toward a more civilized way of life, a direction indicated by his falling in love with Clementine, an aristocratic easterner who is virtually the reincarnation of *The Virginian's* Molly Stark. But Clementine was once Doc Holliday's fiancée, and his abandonment of her indicates that his path will be the reverse of Wyatt's toward atavism and death.

Foreman and Zinneman use the same group of characters but alters their relationship to emphasize the "dark" and "Miller-like" aspects of Kane's past. The sympathetic Holliday becomes the vicious Miller (whose name is the same as that of the villain in *Hell's Hinges*), and the woman they share is not the pure Anglo maiden but the "dark" Mexican woman. The capacity for "dark" sex and "dark" violence is the key to Kane's power, the definition of the virility Helen praises. Kane can defeat Miller because he could have been Miller. He too is willing to impose his will on the citizens. The difference between them is Kane's latent instinct for goodness, which shows in his jilting of Helen and his love for a Quaker woman. Like *The Virginian*, the "essential" goodness and manliness of his character provide the only "authority" to which he can appeal in justification of his actions. And the movie says it is enough.

The gunfight is the center of the film's formal structure, the iconic moment toward which the clock-driven narrative inexorably drives and its moral resolution as well. Only the gunfight can prove that Kane really does "know Indians" and is therefore morally entitled to set his will against that of the townspeople. The gunfight itself has a ritual quality. Kane's preparations and his solitary walk up the empty street tell us not only that he must fight Miller but that he has to do it in a certain way, playing by cer-

tain rules. Even Miller and his henchmen move in formal order and make symbolic gestures, the most significant of which is a gunman's shattering a shop window to steal a woman's bonnet — an act that validates Kane's prediction that if Miller wins neither women nor property will be safe, and that coincidentally warns Kane of the gang's presence. The ritual proceeds through passages of quick-draw confrontation, chases, and ambushes (which visually echo similar passages in earlier Westerns).³⁾ At the end, Kane's moral vindication is perfected, first by the "conversion" of his Quaker wife — who grabs a gun and shoots one of Miller's men in the back — then by a "captivity/rescue" in which Kane kills Miller while Miller is holding Mrs. Kane as a shield.

In the classic town-tamer Western, Kane's personal redemption would have been mirrored in the triumph of the community. But the social implications of Kane's victory are anti-canonical. Instead of vindicating Kane discredits the community, which proves itself unworthy of the sacrifices he has made for it. At the end, Kane contemptuously drops his badge in the dust at the mayor's feet and rides out of town. The people have been saved, but they have less value than the man who saved them.

High Noon is usually interpreted as an allegory, from a leftist perspective, of Hollywood's surrender to McCarthyism. From this perspective Miller's return is a metaphorical way of identifying McCarthyism with Fascism: the same people who in an earlier and less prosperous time had risen up to defeat the enemy have now grown too comfortable or complacent to risk their lives and fortunes for the public good. This reading is true to Foreman's intentions, and makes sense; but it does not exhaust the film's ideological utility. The same reading works equally well from a rightist or

3) The barn scenes and the escape using stampeding horses are similar to scenes in *Gunfighter*, *My Darling Clementine*, and *Law and Order* (1931).

Cold War perspective: the new aggression of totalitarian Communism represent a "return" of totalitarian Fascism, and the fatuous self-interestedness of Hadleyville's citizens makes concrete those fears about the American public's will to fight that darkened the thoughts of Truman/Acheson and Sheridan/Yorke.

The popular impact of *High Noon* was undoubtedly helped by the fact that its political suggestion incorporated both ends of the ideological spectrum. But it is important to note that the film does not resort to ambiguity to resolve its ideological dilemma. It forthrightly adopts a solution that emphasizes the moral privilege and entitlement to power of the man of superior knowledge, courage, and capability, and it denigrates the moral and historical claims of popular democracy. Beneath the "left" perspective of the gunfighter film and the "right" perspective of the cavalry film is a common ideological structure that devalues "democracy" as an instrument of progress and declares that the only effective instrument for constructive historical action is a gun in the hands of the right man.