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"Exposed to Evolution: The Western Hero in *The Searchers* (1956) and *Unforgiven* (1992)"

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1. Introduction

The Western is one of the most influential film genres (Elkin 77; Munaretto 86). Its prominence is unquestioned, which can be attested by the abundance of dime novels, Wild West shows and Western films produced in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Carter 1). The Western genre is deeply rooted in American values, drawing inspiration from legends of the American Frontier, such as Daniel Boone and Buffalo Bill, whose exploits are set in the post-Civil War era in the southwest of America (Slotkin 473). But the American Frontier has been observed to rely on the glorification of American identity and this has had an inherent impact on the Western, which has assumed the mythical nature of the frontier narrative and the idea of Manifest Destiny. Western film has established a connection between its landscape and its protagonist, enabling him to become the powerful Western hero that he is known for today. However, the genre has undergone many changes due to its subjection to a socio-politically turbulent climate. Western plot structures have reflected the economic, political and cultural developments of what constituted American manhood and national identity at particular historical periods (Kimmel et al. 43; Wright, *Guns* 130-131). In order to maintain its prominence, the Western has been forced to adapt to the changes of the very American identity it aims to portray on screen. Because of this, the Western hero has also had to face its own romanticized image and adapt. Observing the shift from earlier Westerns to the Revisionist Westerns of the late twentieth century can point to how a genre, as prominent as the Western, can in time critically reflect upon itself and therefore the values that it promotes.

The Western films *The Searchers* (1956) and *Unforgiven* (1992) were chosen for analysis because of their outstanding precedence, which sparked criticisms among generations of filmmakers, film critics, and scholars (Eckstein 34; Langford 57). The genre has contributed to shaping how modern filmmaking deals with the importance of accurate thematic depiction. In a Western, for example, the hero and villain are easily recognizable because of the genre conventions (White, *Westerns* 5-6). Each genre has its distinctive individual characteristics and conventions, and possesses its own iconography. Iconography refers to "characteristic features of a genre, the things you expect to see and sounds you expect to hear that taken together collectively tell you the type of film, or genre, you are watching" (Benyahia, Gaffney, and White 256). The film scholars explain that for horror films, for example, there "will be typical elements of mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and sound which when packaged together become recognizable as denoting this genre" (209). The same can be said about all other film genres. The genre of

a film can be identified through content, color, the style or design of the film as well as costume, dialogue, sets, props, and the soundtrack (Stafford 113). On a more basic level, when putting these elements into categories, it can be said that three main levels of analysis help to define the genre: the characters, the setting, and the props (Stafford 114). These elements act as visual signifiers, but also sound signifiers can indicate the genre. These can be musical signifiers, which are characteristic features of the soundtrack, and verbal signifiers, which are characteristic dialogue features (Benyahia, Gaffney, and White 256). They will also form the basis for the film analysis conducted in the present thesis.

The rules and conventions of genres can be described as both a code by which filmmakers construct film as well as a code by which the audiences read them (Benyahia, Gaffney, and White 260). Knowing about the genre of a film and characteristics of this genre as well as specific foreknowledge of the film creates a certain set of expectations for the viewing. John Ellis terms this narrative image (Ellis qtd. in Baker and Toland 42). It is important to note that genres are not purely homogeneous. Nowadays, the norm is the creation of hybrid or crossed genres, which combine a variety of them (Benyahia, Gaffney, and White 262). The mixing of genres is not a new phenomenon and Benyahia, Gaffney and White stress that it has always taken place (262). As an example, they name the *noir films* produced in the 1940s and 1950s; these were often thrillers as well as detective films (263). However, they contend that the current trend is not a hybrid mix of two or more genres, but rather the existence of a sudden moment when a film moves from belonging to one genre to belonging to the other (263). One effect of this is creating a surprise for the audience, which "can be at least as pleasurable as fulfilling expectations" (Benyahia, Gaffney, and White 260). Interestingly, this procedure can create new genre expectations, since the viewers might look out for the subversion in subsequent films (259). Stefan Munaretto stresses that what at first may seem like a violation of the genre may soon become the new norm (87). This holds true for the straddling of the Western genre which developed its formal and thematic features in various ways, thereby widening the genre's potential target market. The Western became such a popular genre because it was established by groups within which people interact as relatively reliable guides to the truth or factuality of messages. It has been developed out of the central values, beliefs, and social needs of that group.

I chose to compare and contrast those films not only because of their reputation and recognition, but also because they were shaped by socio-cultural interests and purposes of institutions. *The Searchers* challenges the traditional notions of gender, race and sexuality,

thereby subverting the audience expectation. It does so, for example, by changing the character types, narrative structures, and themes and values of the film. The amount of attention both films have received is telling of both Hollywood's target themes and the films' social impacts. Comparing aspects of *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven* comes the possibility to also observe how advances in social reform have impacted a genre so deeply rooted in a glorified American identity. *The Searchers* offers the audience Ethan Edwards, the classic Western hero. He embodies the impassive but diligent classic hero, who would do anything to protect his community and his morals. *Unforgiven*, in contrast, presents a former Western hero in his retired stage, struggling to identify himself because he is stuck between his past as a legendary outlaw and his will to atone by never becoming that same outlaw again. In comparing these two films, one can already note the progression of the Western as a genre, as they both provide entirely different storylines, with entirely different characters. However, their protagonists are both iconic, and the films both pay very close attention to their characterization as a reflection of the genre as a whole.

I will apply Roland Barthes' theory on myths in order to show how symbolic messages embedded in the images and in the narrative of the films express the values and beliefs of American society. I will examine how the protagonists deal with the rapid progress and inherent contradictions in the economic and social structures of postwar America[1]. The film analysis aims to illustrate the pervasiveness of American Puritanism, which contributes to a myth that the U.S. sees themselves as exceptional and powerful. I will also analyze the films from a feminist perspective by drawing on Deborah Tannen's theory of the different communicative styles and their effects on conversations and relationships. Furthermore, I will explore the conflict between good and evil, the psychological effects of shame and guilt, and the madness of the human mind, a concept developed by Michel Foucault. I will argue that madness provides a way of dealing with the protagonists' inner conflicts. Challenging the conventions of the classical Western, *Unforgiven*'s storyline is turned into a question about the reality status of Western myths in general. Thus, I will claim that the film unmasks the workings of myths which brazenly gloss over the asymmetric nature of gender and race relations, patriarchal attitudes, and endemic violence in American culture.

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[1] Throughout the thesis, "America" is used to refer to the entire American continent, whereas "U.S." is used to refer to the North American country.

2. Cultural and Historical Context of *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven*

2.1 Puritanism and Manifest Destiny

The ideology of American exceptionalism can be traced back to the religious dissidents and pioneers of the New World who saw themselves as a chosen people (Beveridge 708; Cotton 6). The idea of America's special mission has been part of American political culture from the outset (Newlin 73-79; Paulding 094). The text *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville, a French historian and theorist of modern democracy, was one of the earliest attempts to describe American democracy in exceptional terms as seen from an American point of view (Paul 14-16). The founding fathers of the United States were deeply influenced by the spirit of the Enlightenment, a time when people wanted to explain religion with their reason (Newlin 5). Thomas Jefferson and J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur envisioned America as the asylum for Europeans searching for religious freedom, economic prosperity, and political liberty (Gamble 5; Newlin 80; Paul 142). They combined the missionary ideas of the Christian-Puritan settlers in New England with the idea of an inner-worldly mission from America. For the Puritans, God had a predetermined plan and humans could not make God change his mind, but only fulfill his plan with the implication that people had to live their belief in an authentic way and according to the Bible (Bercovitch 13-16, 78-81; Engler and Scheiding 64-66). It was this conflation of Christianity and politics that gave rise to the civil religion so typical of America (Paul 16-17, 198). This mixture of Christian republicanism and democratic belief created a nation based on the well-being of large and small communities. It is also reflected in the classical Western hero who combines egalitarian and individualist values with the preference of untutored man and simple heart. In accordance with the transvaluation of all values regarding American family and human relations, the Western increasingly redefined its values by foregrounding dishonesty and loss of moral values.

The objectives of the American mission varied at different times. They emerged from the tendencies of the spirit of the age, for example from the belief in progress in the industrial age or the racist theories in the age of imperialism (Engler and Scheiding 359-361; Joy 16). The American sense of mission, the Manifest Destiny, was firstly named by John L. O'Sullivan, a Democratic journalist and expansionist (Newlin 85; Paul 322). His pamphlet "Annexation" is about the Texas-annexation problem which ended in the Mexican-American War, whereby Texas became part of the U.S. (Boyer et al. 520). He justified the Texas' annexation by simply saying that it was "the most natural, right and proper thing in the world" (7-8). In reference to Thomas Paine's "common sense" (Conway

84), he argues that Spain can never subdue the southern states because of the distance from each other, and that it is obvious that the southern states will separate from Spain (5, 9). Moreover, he lists all the advantages of the railroad and the magnetic telegraph in that they erase the distance and enable transport and communication over long distances (9). It is thus possible for Americans to go from the East to the West coast, and move on to other countries and get rich, which is in consonance with the American Dream. He states that Americans bring civilization to Texas (10). Thus, he alludes to the image of patriotism that Americans will hold together whatever comes.

Another proponent of Manifest Destiny was the senator Albert J. Beveridge from Indiana who held his speech in January 1900 on the issue of taking the Philippines. The island is referred to as the door to the Eastern expansion enabling trade with Asia. Beveridge argues that it is America's manifest duty to expand into Asia (704-705). Moreover, he makes clear distinctions between the races, marking the Americans as the superior and the natives as the inferior race who are degraded to children and therefore cannot govern themselves (710). His recurrent argument is that God has chosen the American people as the "world's police" to regenerate the world (709). In the beginning, there was the Puritan mission to complete the work of the Reformation, which had an impact on the American way of life, such as the American work ethic and religious tradition of thought and behavior (Newlin 79; Winn 7). This eventually became the political mission to bring freedom and democracy to the world. Accordingly, the missionary goals of the United States changed from the aim of devising America as a new country that serves as a model for the world to their duty of raising backward nations to the American level and create a new world order, redeem the world and bring about the millennium (Engler and Scheiding 160-162). This missionary zeal is based on a conception of history which relies on conflicting principles and values as well as a manifestation of evil that must be put down in order to make progress possible and accomplish the mission. On the whole, it tends to promote a radical dualism by dividing the world into good and bad.

The most scrutinized theme in *The Searchers* is the way the film handles the image of Native Americans in the West. Very early in the movie, Ethan Edwards makes it clear that he has no sympathy for the native tribes. His attitude towards anyone with Native American blood borders on loathing, as is apparent in his attitude towards Martin, the family's adopted son who is part Comanche. Through Ethan's character, John Ford emphasizes the problematic history of America's race relations. Ethan's view of Native Americans is in line with the myth of the West, which creates the binary opposite narrative of good

against bad. This narrative is also employed in Eastwood's film *Unforgiven*, when Little Bill violently enforces gun prohibition in his community to protect it from the alleged bad guys. The dominant ideology of American exceptionalism was also central in justifying imperial practices during the Cold War (Paul 18). It provides a framework from which *The Searchers* will be analyzed in this thesis. In particular, I will argue that the racial and social tensions depicted in the film symbolize the confrontation between the major nuclear powers of the Cold War period. In the revisionist tradition, *Unforgiven* questions the military discourse of the classical Western by showing the devastating consequences of arms and armed conflicts on individuals and the community.

2.2 The American Frontier and Myth

In July 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner presented his paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" during the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. He is considered to have been the most influential scholar in the interpretation of America's history and achieved nationwide recognition with what he defined as the "true point of view in the history" of the United States (2). With his reading, Turner revealed the beginnings of what was to become the Frontier Thesis, or Turner Thesis. His theory stated that the Frontier is largely responsible for the essence of American identity, and what is referred to as Western civilization. The American Frontier is characterized by the westward expansion of European settlements. The motivation behind this westbound movement was the claim to new land, new opportunities, and new wealth: "This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character" (Turner 2). Turner considers the frontier to have symbolically been the transition from European identity to American identity, "a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines" (3). He makes a point that it was the frontier movement which gave birth to American democracy, "strong in selfishness and individualism" (6).

The creation and expansion of America is, however, closely tied to a sense of entitlement. The sole essence of the settlements is that of British colonies claiming the land from Native Americans, inherently for their own gain. There are numerous biased accounts of the settler movement, including Turner's above-mentioned paper, which refer to the native territory as "free land," and to those who inhabited it as "savages" (6-7). When the

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United States acquired French Louisiana in the Louisiana Purchase, increasing their territory by what are fifteen states today, many people set off to claim those "free lands" (Boyer et al. 227-228). Unfortunately, many of those who chose to move away from the original settlements were also choosing to trespass territories that never truly belonged to the French in the first place. The American Frontier was principally the separation of European settlers from the Native Americans, shaped to prevent clashes of values which had previously resulted in bloodshed. When westward migration began occurring, the Native American tribes encountered along the trail were forcefully relocated further west. Eventually, in the mid-1800s, people known as "squatters" began moving even further west, onto Mexican and British territory (Boyer et al. 215; Powell 12). The minorities whose lands were being invaded had only two choices: assimilate or leave, often leading to tragic consequences, such as the many deaths and sufferings that Native Americans endured during the infamous Trail of Tears in 1838 (Boyer et al. 256).

It is only in the last century that scholars began to question accounts of the Western Frontier such as Turner's. In a 1958 issue of American Heritage, Ray Allen Billington explores the inaccuracies of Frederick Jackson Turner's theses. While Billington supports Turner's implication of nationalism and individualism in the westward migration movement, he also maintains that it was not necessarily freedom and self-sufficiency that drove settlers west, but that the magnet was "hoped-for-gain" ("Frontier"). Richard W. Slatta, in his paper on the myths of the American frontier, quotes Wilshire, Nelson and Hazlett's *The American West at Risk: Science, Myths, and Politics of Land Abuse and Recovery* (2008), stating that "the romantic myths of 'winning' the West tend to obscure both its basic objective of resource exploitation and the huge public expenditures that supported every aspect, bestowing fortunes on the few" (86). Westward migration and its outcome appear to have been viewed through rose-tinted glasses by both the settlers themselves, and by many who wrote and interpreted historical accounts of the movement. Noteworthy achievements and events have been handpicked, and the stories chosen have often been told with the purpose of depicting an idealized American history.

Observing the concept of the frontier as myth helps to contextualize theses such as Turner's and historical accounts such as Theodore Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West* (1889-1896) or *The Strenuous Life* (1901). It is not that such accounts are false, but rather they portray a distorted vision of American values in a positive, eager, and pioneering light. In this process, the truth of the dispossession of and violence towards indigenous people accompanied by the destruction of the natural environment (McVeigh 2-3), which also

shaped the expansion of America, remain unarticulated, justified as defensive, or even praised as acts of civilizing savagery (Roosevelt, *Strenuous* 32-36). As Timothy B. Powell maintains, the Native Americans living east of the Mississippi were standing in the way of progress and were thus forced by the government of Andrew Jackson to leave their land in the "Indian Removal Act" of 1830 (13). Throughout this period there was a cultural inclusion as different nationalities came together, and a racial and cultural exclusion in the form of slavery and the removal of Native Americans (17). In her book, Margaret Walsh points to the movement of scholars which revised the frontier concept: "The New Western Historians not only established the failures and disappointments of a colonized and exploited west with a continuous past which stretched prehistoric times to the present; they also helped change its demographic face. Turner's western vision was white and masculine" (8). But Walsh also notes that this new Western theory movement was not positively received. As she extensively examines, the frontier had become such a prominent characteristic of American identity that any attempts at dismantling old-school theses were met with criticism and accusations of political correctness: "So ingrained in the popular psyche has such imagery become that it appealed not only as escapism, but also as genuine source of cultural values and a true portrayal of the historical past" (12). It is so that the frontier myth continued to expand and grow, just like the frontier itself.

It had already begun to embed itself in increasingly diverse domains, from the original historical and literary accounts to advertisements of tobacco and liquor and, eventually, through the glorification of Western tropes such as rugged cowboys and the "wild, wild West," it succeeded in penetrating popular culture (Rollins and O'Connor 17; Wright, *West* 8-11). The Western film and its numerous tropes, including horses, guns, hats, boots, the saloon and showdown, account for the spread of the Western myth in popular culture. It has been recently transposed to the action, war and science-fiction genres, and has also become a part of popular music and political discourse (Carter 2-3; Wright, *West* 2-10). These images and narratives often aim to depict an idealized American history and identity (Carter 44). Usually, the narrative is built around violent actions that incite conflicts with villains or Native Americans. The hero tries to defeat them in order to protect a woman or defend the American nation against the enemies of democracy and liberty.

2.3 The Language of Myths

Some semiotic approaches view systematic meanings beyond semiotic alignment and connotations of cultural artefacts, inter alia newspaper articles, photography, and films. They deal with the meanings and functions of myths mediated by these verbal and visual representations (Barthes 107-109). In the antiquity, in particular Greek mythology, myths are referred to as classical tales about gods and heroes, while the popular use of myths refers to the beliefs which are false (Paul 26). The primary purpose of myth is to provide consumers of objects, which have been intentionally made or produced, with a means of overcoming contradictions (Barthes 142-143). That way, mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution. In other words, myths consist of elements that oppose or contradict each other and other elements that mediate or resolve those oppositions. Barthes considers myth as a higher order of signification, which goes beyond connotation, and expounds in his book *Mythologies* what myths are claimed to achieve (113-114). According to him, myths provide ways of comprehending our experiences within a culture and making sense of what goes on around us. In fact, they give order to our lives and may serve to conceptualize something in a culture (139-140). In addition, they are socially cued and one criterion of a political, social or cultural myth is that it must have explanatory power (Barthes 127-130). Myths also exist in the modern world where they are ideological narratives that reflect major concepts underpinning particular worldviews and the dominant ideologies of their times.

Barthes and Lévi-Strauss analyzed some of the tacit myths of popular culture. They argued that myths serve the ideological function of naturalizing the cultural by turning the dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs into something entirely natural, normal, self-evident, timeless, common sense, and thus objective (Barthes 128; Lévi-Strauss 429). Barthes sees myths as serving the ideological interests of the bourgeoisie since myths can be used to hide the ideological function of signs (147). Thus, the power of myths is that they go without saying and need not be interpreted or demystified (143). Westerns are often characterized by sets of oppositions in which the main opposition between the wilderness and civilization is negotiated in various, and often conflicting, ways (Lusted 21; Mitchell 138; Slotkin 14-15; Tompkins 48). Myths contain these oppositions as one characteristic of myths is that they are often contradictory. These contradictory views or myths are in competition with each other (Slotkin 24). In the Western films analyzed in this thesis, two competing myths can be identified. One myth involves seeing the racial, ethnic and gendered minorities as responsible for their own plight, the minorities being defined as

the social groups "who don't share the same power or prestige or social standing that other groups do" (Skinner 300). In this case, the authorities are regarded as helping while protecting the rest of society against irresponsible and dangerous people. The social structure is basically sound because it assumes that the minorities do not take advantage of the opportunities the society makes available to all. An alternative myth sees the minority groups as the victims of elites who benefit from their deprivations. In that case, the authorities are regarded as helping elites to maintain privileges and deprivations. The social structure is considered to be exploitative because it assumes that the minority groups are the victims of economic, social, ethnic, racial, or other injustice.

The Searchers deconstructs the myths of US American ideology as well as the Western discourse of freedom, equality and social justice ingrained in American culture. It expresses widely accepted beliefs that give meaning to events, as women are cast in the role of caretakers and Native Americans in the role of savages. At the same time, it challenges these assumptions by foregrounding the personal and social constraints on the characters, which result in moral ambiguities and contradictory actions. As Carter remarks, "[…] claims to provide definitive explanations of character motivation, or, indeed, of aspects of the plot or of the film as a whole are always only partial explanations, accompanied, inevitably, by significant and debilitating caveats, deviations, misreading and conjecture" (91). As such, the film contains different levels of signification, given that the explicit or surface meaning is overlaid with additional meanings.

Taking a vastly different approach in the presentation of its characters, themes and settings, *Unforgiven* uncovers the truth about violence in Western culture, while highlighting the decline of the aging Western hero who disapproves of violence as a moral necessity and instead promotes the equal treatment of people (Carter 37). The protagonist's appeal to solidarity for the prostitutes at the end of the film reaffirms the original American values and rights of the individual, as established in the American constitution, including justice, liberty, and self-fulfillment. According to Orit Kamir, "[t]his contemporary, widely familiar, and immensely popular Western exposes the ugly face of the honor-based value system at the heart of the Western film genre; further, it subversively undermines this value system, replacing it with a dignity-based one" (195). The Western hero thus restores peace and a civil religion in the frontier community after defeating its sheriff who had manipulated others for his own ends (Kamir 221). Therefore, the racist, misogynistic and warlike attitudes underlying classical Western films are contested by neatly integrating a pseudo-criticism and making them innocuous.

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2.4 The Language of Individualism

The era in which Western films are set was one that saw the ever-stronger emphasis in the minds of the American population on the individual human being as the center and focal point of all human reality (Engler and Scheiding 422-425; Wagner 194). Similarly, in the post-WWII era, American consumer society was concerned with questions of identity and the self. At this time, Western films became more relevant as they were a reaction and reflection of men's unemployment, failed relationships, and social and political unrest (Barker 305; Cuordileone 98; Tompkins 4). Philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau had perceived society as irrelevant if not hampering to the fulfillment of the human being's life. Emerson was certainly the most extreme in his rejection of any inherent meaning for society, which thus became a mere plane on which the individual could assert him- or herself (Engler and Scheiding 423-425). Concomitantly, the Self now filled all the space between the human being and God, nothing intervened, and man himself at times seemed to acquire godlike features, as in Emerson's image of the "transparent eyeball" (Emerson 9; Wagner 219-220). Others, such as William Ellery Channing, were less radical. They still regarded society as potentially threatening to the individual, whose prime task was to "culture" himself in order to achieve self-projected standards, a notion revealing Franklinesque traits (Newlin 5-6; Paul 371). The use of the pronoun "him" is deliberate because it privileges the white male as representative of American nationality.

However, the transactions between the Self and its surrounding were not a priori denied their meaning (Channing 240-244). The weakening of interpersonal bonds contributed to the disintegration of the systems of belief that before had provided a distinct place in the universe for the human being. These systems had found their reflection in a strong communal order. In addition, the breaking-up of organically grown communities through changes in economic structures, and the rapidly increasing mobility, resulted in a shift of the perceived center of authority from the whole community, and especially its religious functionaries, to the conscience of the individual. First New England, then other parts of the United States, underwent a change from shame to guilt or from honor- to dignity-based values as the mechanism that assured the desired moral behavior (Kamir 195-224). This shift in values can already be traced through the hero's character development in *The Searchers*. Ethan's contradictory and ambivalent behavior throughout the film evidences that he is motivated by his guilt feelings and perceived shortcomings. In *Unforgiven*, the protagonist internalizes patterns of hidden guilt that precipitate

unaccountable thought and action, leaving him uncertain about the nature and the purpose of white male heroism perpetuated by Western myths.

As the influence of the fathers, or figures of authority in general, waned, a new vocabulary was beginning to be evolved for the description of the perceived reality. Using the term "language" in this sense, Robert Bellah, in an attempt to find some of the origins and traces of contemporary American social behavior in the preceding centuries, states that gradually the religious and republican systems of belief which made up a primary language came under pressure from terms expressing the supremacy of the individual over social bonds, thus making these traditions a secondary language in American culture to this day – the primary now being utilitarian and expressive individualism (Bellah et al. 333-334; Paul 368). As a result, Bellah explains, American society has reached a stage in which

> [n]o binding obligations and no wider social understanding justify a relationship. It exists only as the expression of choices of the free selves who make it up. And should it no longer meet their needs, it must end. […] Clearly, the meaning of one's life for most Americans is to become one's own person, almost to give birth to oneself. […] [b]ut what the ever freer and more autonomous self is free *for* only grows more obscure. (107, 82)

This correlates with the economic changes in American society, which mark the transition from an agrarian to an industrial and market-based and, eventually, to a profit-oriented economy (Paul 384). The Western hero is reflective of these shifts as he withdraws from the hostile social reality in order to preserve subjectivity and individual goals as opposed to those of the mass.

According to the classical Western, the hero rides into a farming community threatened by scrupulous villains, such as ranchers (Wright, *West* 15). Initially, the hero has a low profile, but the community soon detects that he has exceptional qualities (Wright, *Guns* 147-149). As he is an ace gunfighter, they accept him, though they still mistrust him a little. As the conflict between the community and the villains reaches a crisis, the hero intervenes and defeats the villains. Although the community fully accepts him, he leaves the community and rides into the mountains (Wright 41-48). This storyline may be fictional, but it nevertheless represents something of the real world as the "mythical" nature allows to represent key themes of relevant social practices (Wright 187). As Matthew Carter puts it, "[…] the attempt to justify the project of Manifest Destiny and to promote the myth of the domestication of the wilderness, regeneration through violence and American exceptionalism" (107). In classical Westerns, farmers represent progress and communal values, while ranchers represent greed and selfishness (Wright 23-24). The Western hero

possesses both qualities: he is a fierce individualist and gunfighter, independent of the community, but at the same time he respects and protects community values. The story argues that (American) society needs community values, but communities are also weak and vulnerable. Society therefore needs men who possess individuality, independence and enterprise, but who also respect community values. In his structural study of the Western, Will Wright classifies *The Searchers* as a vengeance variation on the classical plot, in which the hero is more detached from the values of society (59). Ethan Edwards endorses the primary language of individualism, as he attempts to leave behind the community in order to retain his alleged total independence. The revenge plot then evolved into the transitional and professional plot, in which the hero rejects community values and fights against society (Wright 74). The most important common aspect of the last two categories is that, in both cases, the hero shows patterns of behavior that are almost irreconcilable with the values of society.

3. Constructions of Femininity and Masculinity

The widely held belief that women are subordinate to men and less competent is grounded in an ideology that promotes the values of the dominant group in society (Connell 80-83). According to Chris Barker, masculinity is constituted by characteristics such as strength, power and action, stoicism and control, independence, self-sufficiency, male camaraderie, and work (301). By contrast, the character traits attributed to femininity are overwhelmingly devalued, such as relationships, verbal ability and communication skills, domestic life, wife and children, the display of emotions, and tenderness (Barker 301). The male/female dichotomy is frequently played out in Western films, with the traditional feminine roles serving as a foil to measure men's strength and prove their manhood. The notion of "true womanhood" in the nineteenth century implied that middle-class women were meant to care for the household, husband, and children (Engler and Scheiding 475-477; Welter 48-49). Moreover, women were not allowed to engage in the public sphere in order to pursue a career or have access to higher education and politics, which was only reserved for men (Dew 495-496; Stearns 9). Thus, women were rendered legally powerless and economically marginal. They were expected to be submissive to men, pure or innocent, domestic and religious, as they naturally convey the Christian belief and hold the American society together with their morality and piety (Stearns 20-23; Welter 49-56; Wright, *West* 143-151). This ideology placed great importance on women's role in providing society with

civilization and morality, but it also justified the separation of the sexes into two distinct spheres.

The "Seneca Falls Declaration" in 1848, modeled after Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" in 1776, was a milestone in the women's struggle for gender equality. The women's major reproaches concerned the man who closed all colleges and assigned her only a subordinate position in the church as well as in society (Stanton, Anthony, and Gage 71). They demanded that women be involved in all spheres (73). However, it took them seventy-two years to achieve their aims, specifically the right to vote, because only small steps were taken and feminism as well as abolitionism were not popular at that time (Welter 71). Women from all walks of life still continue fighting for their political, social, and legal rights. Not only do *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven* focus on masculinity, but they also envisage women's issues analogous to the gender norms of their production time. The women in *The Searchers* mainly serve as backdrop to the main action advanced by male characters, and are held responsible for their decline as they pose a threat to the innocence of men (Howe 12). The film comments on the contradictory gender role expectations in American society so as to invite the viewers to decipher their ambiguity. In contrast, the female characters in *Unforgiven* institute the film's action by claiming their rights and asserting themselves in a male-dominated community.

Although the hero in classical Westerns is typically masculine and white, Ethan's sidekick relation to Martin, who is one-eighth Comanche, explores the intersection of gender, class, race and nation in the construction of masculine identities. It highlights the hybrid nature of gender and intercultural relations, as Martin represents both the Anglo-American and Native American culture. His likeable, somewhat naïve central character facilitates learning about gender, race and ethnicity in American culture. Furthermore, the film represents and treats Native American women and white female captives as childlike, irrational, and sexually unstable. They are contrasted with the white women settlers represented by Martha Edwards, Mrs. Jorgensen and their elder daughters who are characterized as gentle, refined, and loving. They are bearers of religion and morality whose "task [is to guide] the more worldly and more frequently tempted male past the maelstroms of atheism and uncontrolled sexuality" (Smith-Rosenberg 104-105). The hearth and nursery are considered as the women's sphere, where women are to bestow care, love, and peace (105). Middle-class women in the nineteenth century were taught "that aggression, independence, self-assertion and curiosity were male traits," and being dependent on men they are "to reward [their] male protectors with affection and submission" (Smith-

Rosenberg 105). In other words, the social roles and identities have a lot to do with the way a particular culture understands these roles and identities (Barker 11; Skinner 310). Being a woman or man can mean very different things in different cultures and at different times in history.

In the time after the Civil War, an increasing number of women decided to abandon their submissive role, move to cities, and pursue a career. The clash between traditional marital roles and modern developments generated anxiety in women who broke away from traditions or found themselves ill-prepared for matrimony (Smith-Rosenberg 107). As a result, these women were denounced as "spinsters, widows, actresses, or other social oddities" (Newlin 37). It is no wonder that women became increasingly dissatisfied with the demands of housekeeping and childbearing in a time of social, economic, and demographic changes. For Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "hysteria may have served as one option or tactic offering particular women otherwise unable to respond to changes a chance to redefine or restructure their place within the family" (108). In *The Searchers*, this becomes evident in Laurie's attempts to keep Martin at home, which causes her to be hysterical and seems to be the means for her to break out of her depression.

The aim of using gender theory in analyzing *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven* is to show that constructions of femininity and masculinity are not given objectively, but are socially conditioned through social expectations, representations, and individual performances. Thus, Kathleen Starck argues that "gender is socially constructed, not fixed, and not binary" (87). Merle Tönnies and Claus-Ulrich Viol also claim that "sexual identities are culturally constructed" (189). However, it is debatable whether gender is founded in biological or cultural essentialism, or is a combination of both as summarized in the "nature and nurture" framework (Barker 297; Connell 45-46). *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven* question the idea that gender is determined by biological factors rather than social and cultural conventions. In the case of *The Searchers*, Kelly MacPhail states that "[b]y shedding light on the majority culture's fears of the cross-cultural assimilation, miscegenation, and contamination of women, these Westerns challenge such essentialist presuppositions about gender, cultural identity, and notions of power based in racial superiority" (142). While Laurie and Ethan represent the dominant gender ideology of the nineteenth and mid-twentieth century that framed women as subordinate to men, they also demonstrate that people's identities are not predetermined and unchanging. At the end of the film, Ethan realizes the harmful impact of repressing his feelings and avoiding to appear vulnerable. Laurie, too, is frustrated about her situation and adopts masculine traits to

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accomplish her goal of marrying Martin. Conversely, William Munny willingly embraces feminine values, as indicated by his physical disabilities and indirect way of speaking, which reveals that appearance as well as language or speech reflect one's social state and power.

4. The Western Hero

The genre's most characteristic element, the component which makes the film a Western, is undeniably the protagonist – the Western hero, who is identified as masculine, white, and heterosexual (Abel 152; Langford 34; Paul 369). The essence of the Western genre revolves around the hero, whether the story is indeed constructed as heroic or not. The protagonist of the Western film is a very distinct character, the romanticized embodiment of rugged individualism (Elkin 82). The Western male hero is popularly referred to as a cowboy; however, the character is merely inspired by the real figure of the frontier cowboy. The legendary cowboy is not an American concept, but is rooted in the Spanish vaquero, a horse-riding herder of livestock (McVeigh 34). The real cowboy's life centered on ranching, which begs the question of why a character such as the Western hero, whose essence is that of adventure and the good and the bad, is based on a character whose life was presumably not so spectacular. But Lee Clark Mitchell makes the connection and claims that the lines between work and play were blurred, the cowboy's life consisting of "long periods of monotony […] punctuated unexpectedly by moments of excitement […]. The additional fact that cowboys wore guns – the only laborers to do so for non-policing duties – lent them an independent, even sovereign air of self-confidence" (26). Mitchell argues that the image of the cowboy offered relief from the same monotony of middle-class normativity. As Mitchell comments, he is "a character so perfectly posed against modern culture that if he had not existed, he would have been invented" (27). Furthermore, the cowboy evoked "the promise of freedom and equality, […] the original frontier vision of individualism as America in fact became industrial" (Wright, *West* 7). The cowboy in the Western film is, then, solely through its creation, an idealized version of the cowboy of the real American frontier, which is why it is sensible to scrutinize its role and development through time.

Emma Hamilton emphasizes the important role that gender has played in the genre's hyper-linearity, a term she uses to describe the continuity of the historical past Western films are set in and the contemporary time in which they were produced (5). Her thesis is

based on similarities spotted between the post-Civil War era and the Civil Rights Movement, crediting C. Vann Woodward for coining the term 'Second Reconstruction' in the 1950s to refer to these very similarities (Hamilton 33). Her argument here is that "these Western films of the 1950s and 1960s used the persona and gender performance of the central male protagonist as a medium through which to engage with these transformative historical conditions" (18). The specific focus of her analysis is masculinity, and how its role in war is reflected in the Western film genre. She even points out that the Civil War essentially "pitted two distinct ways of 'doing' white American masculinity against each other […]" (19). Additionally, she argues that it is the "white homosocial competition" caused by urbanization and industrialization which helped shape the image of masculinity in that period (28). Hamilton relates the years of fighting for Civil Rights to the post-Civil War period due to the mayhem which resulted from World War II and the Cold War (71). Trouble reintegrating into society, followed by a period of more political turmoil which encouraged hegemonic masculinity for the sake of the display of national power, meant that increased attention was being paid to gender roles and expectations.

Hamilton quotes Michael Kimmel's *The History of Men*: "everywhere, cultural critics observed masculinity to be in crisis" (30). According to her, the Westerns experienced a soar in popularity due to the public's wish to return to the simplicity of earlier times. She argues, however, that the films were also a way for "masculinities and the relationship between changing gender norms and history" to be explored (35). Therefore, these films explore the cultural discourses of gender in relation to the time in which they are set as well as in relation to the post-World War II period. Barker defines discourses as socially constructed knowledges of some aspect of reality, which means that they have been created in specific social contexts, in ways which are appropriate to the interests of social actors, such as multinational corporations, the press, or the family (80-83). There is an obvious link between knowledge and power, with power being executed via social discourses (Barker 85-86). Discourses are often seen as tools used by the dominant groups to make oppressive social systems seem natural, and mask the causes of oppression and exploitation (76-78). Accordingly, they constitute myths that serve the interests of the bourgeoisie, naturalize culture, and as such become part of general beliefs and opinions.

"The Western has the theme of manhood at heart" is how Irina Chirica begins her paper on masculinity in the Western genre (55). It is not just that the genre is a product of the male gaze and created for the consumption of the male gaze, but its center is also allegorically connected to manhood. The landscape, the very substance of the Western

film, represents the masculine by serving as a backdrop for the male hero's escape from the feminine, which in Chirica's argument is rendered by civilization (57). She identifies this as the reversal of the typically encountered symbolism of popular narratives in the previous century, which associated femininity with nature. The theory that the landscape is a place of masculinity while civilization is a place of femininity also serves as an argument to explain the lack of female representation in Western films, since their intention is to satisfy a nostalgia for a simpler time (Hanan 95; McVeigh 13). The Western female character is actually an unstated desire, metaphorically and literally, who "threaten[s] to entrap the hero in the very things the genre most wishes to avoid: intimacy, mutual dependence, a network of social and emotional responsibilities" (Tompkins 86). If the woman represents civilization, she inherently represents an object of guilty pleasure.

While the West highlights the wish to conquer the wilderness and gain power by becoming one with nature, the constant return to society serves as an emblem that men still seek the comfort of community and shared experience (White, *Contemporary* 22-23). Chirica points out that Western female characters typically occur in the contexts of saloons – spaces provided for men to wind down and take a break from their masculine, untamed world (59). The Western woman, then, is an escape from the escape, also portrayed through the lens of male desire. Chirica also underlines, with the help of Tompkins' definition, that this connection to the landscape is the reason for the Western hero's need to prove himself by showing dominance, durability, and diligence (Chirica 58; Tompkins 71). These are attributes often encountered in the study of hegemonic masculinity. They represent the foundation of what is known as masculine strength and power. But the strength and power that comes with the flawed system of male hegemony is also accompanied by the very characteristics that make it oppressive and unstable. The creation of the strong, powerful Western hero comes with the pressure of maintaining that image of strength and power.

Chirica names a couple of reasons to explain the Western male's disconnectedness with language, such as his potential illiteracy and his distrust of the literate, the civilized (Chirica 59-60; Tompkins 49-51). Yet the avoidance of expression through language falls in line with the male hero's quest to gain strength and power. The danger in expression is that of revealing too much and risking to unveil vulnerabilities which might not only damage a maintained image of dominance, but also place him in peril. One of the Western hero's most admired qualities is his steadily cool nature, unbothered by trifles, and underplaying the extent to which something affects him (Homans 139; Tompkins 55-60). When something does affect him, he escapes, as Chirica explains: "Men run away in Westerns from the

cluttered Victorian interior, from the domestic dramas that go on in that setting, and from the emotional entanglements that cannot be dealt with" (61). Nevertheless, these qualities are not solely reserved for the Western man. They are perhaps a big part of the reason why the Western cowboy is so attractive to his audience, but they fit into a bigger concept which is much more closely tied to American identity as a whole.

Dominance, durability and diligence are also attributes that lure its victims to a life which promises to reward stoicism with success, and underlie the dream motivating the first settlers of America. Nowadays, the image of the American Dream differs to that of the rugged cowboy, who mirrors the characteristics of the wilderness and the Western frontier. The hard-working American man has taken many various shapes which have evolved in time. When in the early days of the republic the dream meant moral and economic fulfilment, the focus has now shifted towards financial and material success (Newlin 3-4, 61). It is the post-World War II head of the nuclear household that is most often associated with the male American Dream, a concept which further developed into the twentieth century to mean the attainment of assets (Newlin 16). But the American Dream only means that everyone, regardless of their origin, has the access to achieve their highest aspirations and goals (Newlin vii-xii, Winn 1-7). It, therefore, has space to change and shift with time, as it does not have a fixed definition of what success is supposed to look like.

Hard work and its reward have looked differently across centuries of American identity. Jefferson, for example, defined the American Dream in the eighteenth century in terms of the absence of degeneracy if people own and work on their land (*Notes* 174-175). He criticized the mercantilism and the "corruption of morals" in a consumer culture, and claimed that Americans should concentrate on farming, since a farmer is independent and possesses virtue and industry. The original dream was marked by the adherence to the old ways and by particular personality traits related to the agrarian ideal. By contrast, the 1982 *Texas Monthly* issue contains the classic statement "Only *now* you don't have to hide your ambition. Society has decided that it's OK to be frank about the drive for success," which refers to the arrogance and superciliousness of success-driven business people in modern times (Sharpe 63). The evolution of the American Dream thus indicates a shift of the United States from a former society of individuals and their beliefs in self-realization to a functional society based on mechanical and materialistic values.

In the West, however, the American Dream ironically took shape through the concept of Manifest Destiny, the feeling of entitlement for more than one already has (Newlin 58-61). It is thus that, through its protagonist, the Western manages to further

strengthen the glorified image of American identity. Mitchell observes this and, in part, credits the success of the Western genre to the "self-made men (mostly men) [who] find the Western appealing for their accent on masculine self-construction" (15). Hamilton explains this in her second chapter "'He's not a Man! He's a Sack of Money!': Corporatism and the Male Breadwinner," in which she associates "the crisis in masculinity […] with industrialization in the late nineteenth century" (44). She uses *The Naked Spur* (Anthony Mann, 1953) to exemplify the relationship between male characters and economic mechanisms: "Indeed, in this film men are not only alienated from a sense of identity distinct from their economic purposes but acknowledge that they have no masculinity outside of it" (47). With these explorations of what role masculinity plays in Western films and what it represents, I can move on to study how contemporary interpretations of the Western hero challenge this hegemonic archetype.

As previously mentioned, the Western underwent certain changes in execution as it was subjected to temporal and social challenges. Due to the turbulent socio-political climate of the mid-1900s many cultural aspects underwent changes, including the Western film. The 1960s especially was a decade that experienced a boost in counterculture, an increase in activists of the Civil Rights Movement and a rejection of traditional values, such as family, marriage, morality, and religion (Carter 31; Cuordileone 98; McVeigh 117). The political and economic progresses of the time did not allay a sense of frustration, but rather exacerbated the problems of individuals who found themselves confronted with urban life and leisure society (Hamilton 46). In search for meaning and unity, Americans began to question the values which had shaped their identity and the Western was at the time, as observed, one of the most influential genres in keeping up the outdated narratives of the frontier myth. It is in this period that the Revisionist Western was born, a subgenre that continues to prevail today, becoming the modern day Western. The Revisionist era was part of the counterculture. Its aim was to recreate a Western which kept its elements, but actively rejected the problematic values of its classic, early equivalent. The male hero is one of the characteristics which encountered the most changes. In Revisionist Westerns, the hero was often turned into an antihero – a male protagonist with similar demeanor to its early counterpart, but whose principles differ.

Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns were one of the first Revisionist films, and the protagonist appeared to have been influenced by Leone's own experience of American culture which opposed the fantasy he had created based on the mythical narrative of American identity (Foster 36-38). The world of a Spaghetti Western is often characterized

by binary opposites: the good vs. the bad, the inside vs. the outside, the strong vs. the weak (Fridlund 16). The revised Western hero is often morally ambiguous, displaying cynical and narcissistic behavior, while simultaneously maintaining some obscure sense of what is right and wrong (Fridlund 8-9). Like Sergio Corbucci's (in)famous character Django, played by Italian actor Franco Nero, many of them executed plans for their own personal gains, often switching sides for the purpose of deceit (Fridlund 57). The Western antihero's essence is that he does what is expected of a hero, but his intentions and methods are often dishonest and deceitful. But the Spaghetti antihero is just one version of the revised Western protagonist. In the decades that followed the emergence of the Revisionist Western, many interpretations of the Western hero made an appearance. One significant interpretation was the result of the genre's defeat, as much as it was also critique of expectations of masculinity.

In the 1980s, Westerns ceased to receive as much attention as they previously had, and many productions of the decade were financial failures. In combination with the aftermath of the second wave of feminism, the archetypal male hero was no longer welcomed in popular culture. As a response to this shift in reception, the Western hero adapted his persona and became a mirror of its demise. Like *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980), *The Grey Fox* (Philip Borsos, 1982) and *Django Strikes Again* (Nello Rossati, 1987), many revised Western protagonists from that period were characterized by aging and a desire for normality (Foster 52-55). It metaphorically signaled the literal decay of the Western hero as a longstanding emblem of American identity. Simultaneously, it served as proof of the unsustainable nature of male hegemony and stoicism. The second wave of feminism exposed the fragile nature of gender roles. Even though the movement mostly focused on the inequalities experienced by women in a patriarchal society, it inherently raised questions regarding men's position in that structure (Mitchell 152-153). With women fighting to gain more power and earn more roles in significant positions, the men who, up until that point, had occupied these positions were faced with the challenge of reflecting on the expectations that society had imposed upon them as well.

Masculinity was, indeed, in crisis and no longer capable to keep up with its own expectations. This crisis is apparent if one compares well-known productions of the earlier, classical Western period and more recent adaptations of the Western hero. *The Searchers* is a perfect example of a beloved early Western production, directed by John Ford, one of the most famous names of the genre. The film's protagonist, Ethan Edwards, played by iconic John Wayne, is canonical because of his undeniably cold-blooded nature. *Unforgiven*

features another iconic actor of the genre, Clint Eastwood, in the role of William Munny, who is roused from his dormant state as a widowed farmer to get involved in one last mission. The film, directed and produced by Eastwood himself, is a recent Revisionist Western, exposing a much more modern interpretation of the same themes that dominated the genre in the 1980s.

5. The Western Film

The Western is one of the most recognized as well as one of the most complex genres in the history of American film. It emerged as a frontier narrative, intended to reproduce the elements that shaped the American Frontier. This reproduction has proven to be – much like multiple accounts of the frontier's history – based on myth, the romanticized portrayal of life in the West during and after westward migration. The genre makes use of a multitude of tropes, such as lone cowboys, barren landscapes, villainous Native Americans, and questionable morality. It developed in the late nineteenth century, during the silent film era, and experienced a powerful return in the 1930s, the peak of the Western film, which lasted until the 1970s (Foster 58). There are many speculations regarding the advent of the Western as a genre, many claiming Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) to have been the first Western story (Paul 338; Wagner 216; Wright, *West* 39), and the silent short *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903) to have been the first Western film (Langford 56; Wright, *Guns* 5). Even though the components that mark the genre are specifically dedicated to telling the story of characters that were part of the American Frontier, the Western is still both consumed and created worldwide, with noteworthy productions such as *The Salvation* (2014), a Danish Western, *The Dark Valley* or *Das Finstere Tal* (2014), an Austrian-German twist on the lone traveler, and *The Proposition* (2005), directed by the Australian John Hillcoat.

The Western tropes have taken space internationally, often representing an ideal which people aspire to, as Wright acknowledges that "[i]n an entertaining way [the cowboy myth] suggests to people in market society what values they should have, what attitudes bring success, what actions they should take" (*West* 1). In his paper, Slatta asserts that there is a contemporary return of the Western myth, and a so-called "cowboy renaissance" supported by annual events and gatherings as well as the impressive number of photographers, filmmakers, writers and other creators who keep the mythical representations of the West alive even today (87). Barry Langford claims that "[the

Western] has a fair claim to be the longest-lived of all major film genres, as well as the most prolific" (54). Especially in the framework of film studies, the continuous emergence of contemporary takes on Westerns, such as *Django: Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012), *The Homesman* (Tommy Lee Jones, 2014), *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) and even the animated film *Rango* (Gore Verbinski, 2011), is significant as it enables scholars to observe how the genre has undergone changes and adapted to more current themes and motifs.

The genre is thematically intricate, especially due to its rich branching of subgenres. Spaghetti Westerns, for instance, engage with a lot more violence than classical Westerns, bringing fights, and sometimes even barbarity, to the forefront of the picture (Hoberman 38; Langford 76; Lusted 187). According to Bert Fridlund, the environment in a Spaghetti Western "is predominantly urban, with nature (often barren) as an arena of occasional fights and pursuits" (35). The hero, who is without family or loses it after vengeance, is cunning, manipulative and focuses on capital gain (35-36). Spaghetti Western women do not fit into the same archetype as American Western women, as the traditional fate of the saloon woman is to die after helping the hero (Fridlund 46). Films such as *A Fistful of Dollars* (Sergio Leone, 1964), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (Sergio Leone, 1969) and *Django* (Sergio Corbucci, 1966) made use of explicitly barbaric scenes, with debatably sexual undertones, such as the rape of a woman and the whipping of another (Fridlund 93-106). The Spaghetti Western also presented a morally ambiguous protagonist – usually both part hero and part villain – whose actions were mostly executed for personal gain, but who still possessed somewhat of a moral compass (Fridlund 8-9; Lusted 188). But moral ambiguity is not reserved to the Spaghetti Western subgenre alone. Its significance prevailed and even increased with time, becoming characteristic of many other subgenres of the Western, such as the Contemporary and the Neo-Western, which led to the revival of the Western film in the twenty-first century (White, *Contemporary* 7). These more recent subgenres employ the same typically Western motifs, but instead place their characters in a contemporary setting, and especially in the middle of civilization (Foster 72-73; Neale, *Genre* 28). Movies such as *No Country for Old Men* (Ethan Coen, Joel Coen, 2007), *Django Unchained* (Quentin Tarantino, 2012) and even *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) challenge the norms of the Western genre and the cowboy narrative, and produce stories which adhere to what is more familiar to a twenty-first century audience (Foster 71). The emergence of these subgenres points to both the complexity of the Western, but also to its significance in relation to the modern world, as they incorporate issues of homosexuality,

the interrelation of race and region as experienced especially in Southern culture, and female characters who, in one way or another, take equivalent positions to the hero as regards some plot functions and narrative sequences.

Anthony Mann, director of films in America's most prominent film movements, the noir and the Western, explains the long-lasting popularity of the Western genre by saying that "it gives you more freedom of action, in landscape, in passion. It's a primitive form. It's not governed by rule; you can do anything with it. […]" (qtd. in Bandy and Stoehr 12). Mann unfolds his own interpretation of what the Western is as a genre, but through his explanation also hints at the very connection between the frontier myth and how the American Western adopted and adapted this myth. The way in which he describes the Western as a genre resembles the way in which the conquest of the American frontier is often narrated in historical accounts: as a "primitive" domain which is free to be ruled since it is "not governed by rule" (Mann qtd. in Bandy and Stoehr 12). If one considers Mann's view as a director to even partly represent the Western as a film genre, then the genre's makeup mirrors its storytelling. And it is entirely justifiable to accept Anthony Mann's metaphor for the genre as representative of its values, since the Western is deeply embedded in the frontier myth, employing it in order to illustrate the idealized values of American democracy: "The particular complex of history, fantasy and ideology clustered around the 'frontier myth' codified in the Western has been assigned a central, even defining, place in the formation of American national identity and national character" (Langford 54). The Western is significant and successful because it reinforces for its audience what they hold to be the very essence of their national history and identity.

And it is thus that the Western film held a prestigious role in Hollywood for so many decades of the twentieth century. It is also the reason why the Western as a genre is noteworthy for scholars of film studies. With so much material worthy of analysis, including the genre's eminent reception, it is ideal for the examination of how Western film has been reshaped by time. It is true, however, that the actual amount and diversity of Western films produced is often unpronounced. As Langford identifies in his chapter on the genre's history, the field of studies on Western film has often maintained particular attention for specific films, amongst which are the two movies forming the focus of this thesis: *The Searchers* (1956) and *Unforgiven* (1992) (57). As previously mentioned, the Western and its subgenres employ a multitude of tropes which are recognized as characteristic, including cowboys, horses, ranches, guns, and saloons. However, amongst all the different motifs such as violence and moral ambiguity, one of the genre's most permanent and

prominent characteristics is that of the dry, barren landscape. The attributes dry and barren do not indicate an environment that offers the possibility of growth and prosperity. However, in the context of the Western and the frontier, the landscape represents an empty canvas – land that has been untouched and is ready to be assumed and recreated.

The distinguished landscape of the Western film is in itself a symbol for the taming and conquering of the frontier territory during the westward migration movement. Jane Tompkins closely examines how the land's openness and nothingness serve to aid the lone rider in his domination (74-75). With this symbolization there is also an implication of entitlement. The land does not offer itself to be dominated. The land is barren, dry, helpless. It has no choice but to be dominated. This falls in line with the values of the frontier claiming the West to be a place that is helpless and savage, which needs to be rescued and civilized. However, Tompkins also admits to the Western treating the landscape as powerful:

> Power, more than any other quality, is what is being celebrated and struggled with in these grandiose vistas. The worship of power, the desire for it, and, at the same time, an awe of it bordering on reverence and dread emanate from these panoramic, wide-angle views. There is romance going on here. The landscape arouses the viewer's desire for, wish to identify with, an object that is over-powering and majestic, an object that draws the viewer ineluctably to itself and crushes him with the thought of its greatness and ineffability. (76)

Although both interpretations contradict each other, they also both support the makeup of the frontier myth: the desire to conquer, ultimately the desire for power. In Tompkins' view, the landscape's barren state is also symbolical of its "power, endurance, and rugged majesty," and it is these attributes that the men of the West attempt to imitate, both in appearance and in behavior (72). Tompkins further argues that "[t]o be a man in the Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving" (73). It is so that the genre's most crucial characteristic is born: the rugged, lone rider.

As Bryant Keith Alexander states, "[…] performative masculinity and femininity, race relations and the propriety and power of Whiteness, arguments on human rights and social justice, testaments on environmentalism and sustainability" are amongst some of the subjects that can be extracted and discussed from the storylines of many Western films (471). Alexander's statement aligns with a more contemporary reading of these films, nonetheless not a necessarily recent one. Carter points out how the post-World War II sentiments and the subsequent tumultuous atmosphere of America in the 1960s had a

politically allegorical impact on popular media, including the Western. With questions arising regarding American values and national identity, a new, revised form of the Western arose, with "darker narratives, ambiguous heroes, and revisionist attacks on the triumphalist, Anglo-American version of US history that classical Westerns were said to champion" (Carter 31). Carter proceeds to include multiple theories concerning the evolution of the Western, claiming that the Vietnam War and the resulting social awakening possibly led to the "death" of the Western (32). He mentions the "relationship between era and artefact" to highlight his point that being subjected to a tense socio-political atmosphere led to a development within the genre itself (32-33). This development generated more films which, while remaining loyal to the form of the classical Western, approached archetypal themes differently by raising awareness of their problematic nature.

The Western is a complex genre: a rich, although still partly unclear history; a specific fan demographic drawn to the nationalist undertone of the genre's roots; a multitude of employed tropes which remained loyal to the genre, but also a thematic pattern which underwent changes in the four decades of the Western's prime time. In fact, filmmakers incorporate recurring and sometimes contradictory elements in a targeted manner on different levels, such as the historical, ideological and mythical level, which are linked to the different meanings of individual films addressing relevant social, cultural, and political issues (Nelson 23). It is for this reason that the Western film is a good candidate for political allegorical readings, to observe not just the shift of filmmaking, but also of its social climate, as Steven Frye affirms: "As the most dominant and popular rendering of American mythology in the twentieth century, Western film has always mirrored the shifting political currents and the malleable identity of American national culture" (63). In this regard, the tropical nature of the male hero is a good starting point for observation of how the Western genre has evolved in its depiction of the protagonist as well as in its handling of gender roles and toxic masculinity.

6. *The Searchers*

6.1 Summary

The Searchers is one of the most recognized Western films of all time (Buscombe, *The Searchers* 68). Directed by one of the biggest names in the Hollywood of the Western and starring one of the most iconic actors of the Western genre, *The Searchers* fits very well into the criteria of a classic Western (Lusted 140). Set in Texas, but filmed in the Monument

Valley of the Arizona-Utah border, the story centers Ethan Edwards, who has returned home to his brother Aaron's family after disappearing for eight years following the American Civil War (Bandy and Stoehr 5). From the very beginning, Ethan is a very ambiguous character. He does not disclose much information regarding his activities in the past eight years, such as where he has been and how he has acquired his affluence. Shortly after his arrival, a neighbor of his brother's reports that his cattle have been stolen and so, together with the Texas Rangers, Ethan ventures out to retrieve them. When they come to the cadavers of the cattle, Ethan suspects that it was a plan put together by the Comanche to divert the men away from their families. When they return home, they find the house in ruin and Ethan's brother, his wife Martha, and their son Ben dead. It is presumed that Lucy and Debbie, their daughters, have been abducted by the Comanche.

The rest of the film follows Ethan Edwards on his journey to recover the girls and claim revenge for his family. Even though he is accompanied by others, such as Martin Pawley, the family's adopted son, Rev. Captain Clayton, an authority figure, and Brad Jorgensen, Lucy's fiancé, Ethan is the undeclared leader of this mission, oftentimes clearly displaying a wish to carry out the search by himself. The film skims through five years of the search in which, in the end, only Ethan and Martin are left. They eventually discover Debbie's location and establish that she has become the wife of the Comanche chief. Unexpectedly, Debbie claims that she is now a Comanche herself and wishes to remain part of the tribe. This does not sit well with Ethan who has displayed clear signs of abhorrence to the natives, including Martin Pawley. When the men finally pursue their mission to rescue her, the film is overflowed with tension as it is unclear for both the characters and the audience whether Ethan is going to kill Debbie for having become a Comanche, or stick to his plan to rescue his niece. In the end, Ethan's morals remain as ambiguous as his character, as he chooses to bring Debbie home and go against his principles. The final shot of the movie shows him leaving just the way he arrived: alone.

6.2 The Western Hero's Fight Against Native Americans

The idea of Manifest Destiny strengthened the belief that those who opposed the development of a civilization were inherently evil, and those who sought to expand their territory and tame the wilderness were virtuous. Ethan endorses this not only through his explicit distaste for Native Americans, but from the blatantly brutal ways he expresses his distaste. Gaylyn Studlar remarks that "'Indian-haters' like Ethan Edwards come to embody

the masculinist and racist positions attributed as being central to the western's representations" (187). He positions himself as superior when surrounded by natives, regarding them as savage and perhaps even brainless, a point emphasized by the film when he inspects the girls who had been held hostage by the tribes and rescued as women with exaggerated childlike and animalistic behavior. At the beginning of the search to recover Lucy and Debbie, the group comes across a Comanche burial ground. Upon uncovering the body of a clearly deceased Native American, Ethan pulls out his pistol and takes two more shots at the body, presumably shooting at the corpse's eyes, before stating: "Ain't got no eyes, he can't enter the spirit land. Has to wonder forever between the winds" (00:26:55-00:26:58). His hatred goes as far as his initial determination to kill Debbie for having become a Comanche. Ethan's prejudice is rooted in vengeful aggression.

In his chapter "A Fine Good Place to Be," Carter discusses the probability that Ethan himself was not only the person to find Martin and take him to Aaron after his entire family was killed by Comanches, but that Ethan might actually be his biological father, meaning that Ethan had himself been involved with a native woman (87). A possible contributing moment for this theory is when Ethan and Martin have a verbal altercation and it is revealed that one of the pieces of hair displayed on Scar's scalp collection is actually Martin's mother's: "Ethan: You remember that scalp strung on Scar's lance. Long and wavy? Martin: Yeah, I saw it and don't try to tell me it was aunt Martha's or Lucy's. Ethan: It was your mother's" (*The Searchers*, 01:49:52-01:50:00). The choice of phrasing hints at the fact that Ethan did not mean Martin's adopted mother, who Martin clearly chooses to call aunt, but Martin's biological mother. From this, it is understood that Ethan knew her, and since he was able to identify by a bunch of hair that it was Martin's mother, one can assume that they were close. Although this is based on speculations, one cannot deny that Ethan had previously had experiences with the Comanche tribe past which have influenced his current feelings towards Native Americans. It can be argued that Ethan's refusal to openly grieve, as also seen with the murder of his brother's family, plays a factor in his cruelty towards anyone with native blood.

In a similar vein, Laurie retorts to Martin, who persists in his viewpoint to recover Debbie, that even Martha would have wanted Ethan to kill Debbie (01:47:33-01:47:47). This is a central scene because it uncovers the endemic violence inflicted on Native Americans by white American settlers during westward expansion. It also criticizes the institutional racism permeating contemporary American society (Carter 106). With Laurie's firm conviction that Debbie has to be removed from their white community, while

she intends to marry the mixed-race Martin, the film exposes the hypocrisy of American society that engenders intolerance of other beliefs and ethnicities. Laurie forces Martin to carry out the deed of murdering Debbie so that she can be together with him. She wants to take control over the murder by commanding Martin what to do, which shows that she has traits of character that are traditionally associated with masculinity (Studlar 173, 186). Murdering Debbie signifies not only the reversal of the gender order, but also the lost respect towards her in a way consistent with the imperialist ideology of "Manifest Domesticity" (Kaplan 591). Laurie's allegations of miscegenation against Debbie implies that one becomes complicit in racism because of not speaking up against it. When Martin finally finds Debbie, she refuses to join him and leave the Comanche tribe as they "are [her] people" (01:27:32). By fully abandoning the white racist community, she acknowledges the inhumanity and brutality of the US cavalry in killing Native Americans.

6.3 Traditional and Contemporary Concepts of Femininity and Masculinity

As previously argued, Western male heroes are typically stoic, a characteristic which has influenced society's expectations of masculinity. It has, however, through the repression of any emotions associated with vulnerability and weakness, led to men dealing with such sentiments by reacting violently – the only socially acceptable form of masculine emotional expression. Ethan Edwards perfectly fits that role. His facial expression only undergoes changes in a handful of instances throughout the film. He maintains the same level of composure and indifference even when he lets the rangers know that the burial ground they have come across is a ploy to lure the men away from their families (00:16:10). He displays the same level of composure when he actually watches the house of his brother's family burn down and even remains calm after discovering the bodies. It was clear that Ethan cared about both his brother and Martha, for whom he showed an unusual amount of admiration. But, upon discovering the bodies, he knew better than to let anyone see him in a vulnerable state, unlike Martin whose lack of composure is constantly juxtaposed to Ethan's coolness throughout the film. The same composure is maintained when Ethan discovers deceased Look – a Native American woman whom Martin had accidentally bought off from her tribe – as Martin, once again, becomes agitated (01:12:00). Ethan kills people and animals multiple times on their quest to recover Debbie, and he always remains collected, not showing any sign of discomfort, not even when he shoots a man in the back and takes his money back from him (00:58:24-00:58:50). Even the moments in which Ethan

displays happiness is when he is laughing at the unfortune or absurdity of others, such as Martin's mistake when he accidentally "buys" himself a Native American wife and the farcical fight between Martin and Laurie's new fiancé, Charlie. Ethan Edwards is known for his self-possession. As a hero, he is the ideal embodiment of stoic masculinity, very much maintaining loyalty to the narrative of a white, heteronormative, patriarchal America. But as a character, he is not entirely unrealistic since his composure is not sustainable, leading him to take out his anger by obsessing over a picture of evil he has created in his mind and thrust upon Native Americans.

While on the search, which represents his initiation into manhood, Martin does not reciprocate Laurie's love with the same intensity. Instead, he treats her like a little child, as he does not understand or accept her feelings nor takes her serious. Brad D. Foster underlines that Western films of the early 1960s "include independent women who are of a firm mind, but who are ultimately incapable of establishing their freedom from men" (35). The film suggests that postwar American society recognized that men and women were equal concerning their wishes and aims in life, and that women needed freedom as well as men in order to develop themselves further, as Laurie's need for action indicates. Arguably, modernism after the war hindered a woman's ability to determine her own life (Hamilton 78). By being trapped in the house, taking care of the husband and children, women were given obligations rather than freedom. Correspondingly, "[i]n Westerns directed by John Ford, in particular, women are central to the civilising task set by the active male protagonists" (Lusted 250). Studlar and Bernstein also suggest that "Ford's Westerns feature a heretofore unrecognized 'accommodation of masculinity to feminine values (Christianity, family-centered domesticity)' and a potentially feminizing sacrifice to ensure the birthright of future generations of Americans" (11). This paralleled 1950s women who were burdened by the obligation to make good for society's faults, which was reinforced by the "cult of domesticity" that restricted women to the private sphere of the home (Kaplan 581; Paul 402-403). Accordingly, Laurie becomes angry for not being able to accept the lifestyle that her potential spouse Martin offers when leaving her repeatedly in order to find Debbie. The only way out is to rebel against this situation because she cannot stand her society's almost schizophrenic stance that gives her opportunity, but at the same time imprisons her in stereotypical gender roles. Thus, it is out of patriotism that Laurie marries Martin after his defeat of Charlie in a showdown because she wants to honor the virtues on which the American nation was built, such as violence, freedom, and independence.

Laurie is unafraid of progress with regard to evolving gender roles, yet she does not recognize it as such. She projects the gender norms of her time, which prevent women from the opportunity of social advancement (Wright, *West* 147). With her expression of discontent, she criticizes the ways in which the American market economy and institutions undermine women's access to equal labor and power in the public sphere. Women traditionally assume the roles of mothers and wives, which the myth of the West naturalizes by claiming that their influence in the domestic sphere ensures a society with high morals (Foster 33-34). The emotional intelligence associated with women is said to temper men's pragmatic and emotionally hard behavior (Welter 53). Thus, the attitude in post-Civil War and WW II America rewards those females who adhere to the rules of society and are grateful for the opportunity that it affords. Laurie's behavior corresponds with this vision because too much comfort has ruined her rebellion. Debbie contradicts the patriarchal values and attitudes to women, as she has assimilated her appearance and behavior to those of the Comanche wives (Maltby 43). The stark contrast between Laurie and Debbie indicates that in a situation where a woman is required to behave as a perfect wife and mother, there is no room for independently-minded females.

6.4 The Deconstruction of Stoic Masculinity

The philosopher and feminist Judith Butler coined the term "gender performativity" in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, which means that gender is produced and reproduced in social interactions (33-34). Gender is regarded as a social construct and the differences between the genders are constantly enacted in social relations (*Trouble* 9-11; *Undoing* 1). Butler argues that identities cannot be conceived as binary categories because there are also variations and incoherent gender identities (*Trouble* 20-21). She states that "[…] gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (33). Identification with a gender is thus determined by the actions, codes and clothes attributed to either women or men, so that they are recognized and accepted as a particular gender in society (Barker 301-308). Butler concludes that "drag" is a better term to designate gender since it is the performance that enables the creation of hegemonic identities, which do not exist outside of performative acts (175). Raewyn W. Connell, too, maintains that white hegemonic masculinity asserts its cultural and economic dominance by subordinating women, homosexuals, and ethnic minority men (77-81). He seeks to

illuminate the social implications of the unequal power relations and the resulting hierarchical organization of gender in society. According to gender theory, socially constructed identities do not only interact with economic and social institutions, but also with social classes and racial or ethnic backgrounds (Butler 6; Connell 75). Therefore, gender performances are embedded in complex processes in which men and women acquire a sense for their own gender.

From this contemporary point of view, Ethan's loss of composure signifies a more realistic representation of the toxic, societally manipulated masculinity that many narratives employ. This form of masculinity is considered as unsustainable because it relies on the repression of sentimentality. Femininity has been associated with heightened emotionality for centuries and, as gender has only recently begun to be viewed socially as a non-binary concept, it has naturally driven masculinity to stray further and further away from the deemed feminine nature of vulnerability. But the desired image of masculinity is a dead end, as it leads to internal conflict which must, one way or another, be resolved. The image of Ethan Edwards is desired, yet not attainable, because even he succumbs to his own trauma and fears. He externalizes his repressed grief by shooting at a dead corpse, belittling Martin, and even attempting to kill an entire herd of bison for the purpose of starving the Comanche (Cohen 93). It has been recognized by many that Ethan develops a sociopathic persona throughout the film in his obsession to find Debbie and get revenge (Carter 85-86; Eckstein 20-21; Mitchell 5). It further highlights the argument that not even an iconic hero like Ethan Edwards can sustain his own perfectly masculine image.

The film, however, does not sentence Ethan to demise. Arguably because of Martin, he undergoes some changes by the end of the story. Possibly in a moment of fear due to his injury, Ethan hands Martin his new will, stating that in the event of his death, Martin replacing Debbie has been named as the inheritor of his belongings. And, in a most surprising and iconic moment, Ethan appears to have changed his mind and, instead of killing Debbie as was originally his intention, he picks her up and delivers the line: "Let's go home, Debbie" (01:56:00). Although he retains the same composed demeanor, it is undeniable that Ethan's morals might have shifted in the process of Debbie's rescue. At one point, after being injured, he is even illustrated as weak and powerless, as Martin, the boy he had previously disliked, must care for him. Ethan Edwards represents both the embodiment, but also the downfall of stoic masculinity, and because he softens in the end, *The Searchers* can be deemed more revisionist than it has often been claimed.

6.5 The Western Hero and Postwar Gender Roles

Ethan's qualities as a leader are more reminiscent of the implemented gender roles of the 1940s and 1950s rather than the Western cowboy's character. As Foster identifies in his thesis on masculinity and Western films, the postwar period was marked by men submerging themselves in the role of the provider, in an attempt to make up for the time they had lost while at war (7-15). The wish to regain control over their lives and destinies is a factor that was transferred into many Western films, creating a figure which might not work a 9-to-5 job, but certainly ensures that his community is provided for. Much like the breadwinner role of the 40s and 50s, the Western hero cannot be tied down at home for long periods of time before becoming anxious. Ethan Edwards is not any different. He embodies a powerful man, with authoritative demeanor, someone who goes through hardship to ensure the protection of his community. He, too, cannot be tied down to a home. One can assume he does not even have his own to begin with. He escapes the aftermath of the Civil War by venturing out into the wild and disappearing for eight years, and it is not by surprise that he returns seeming to have acquired wealth. It is also not inconvenient that upon his homecoming, he must once again leave the only place that could restrain him in order to return to the wilderness and do his job. Another aspect mentioned by Foster in his paper which connects postwar gender roles to Western films is that by focusing on their work, men became decreasingly paternal (25). This is reflective of many Western heroes, some who do not have any children, such as Ethan Edwards, and some who have children, but do not seem to establish a close bond with them, such as William Munny (*Unforgiven*).

Ethan can be considered an extreme. The viewers know nothing of his romantic past, and his relation to Martin's biological mother is mostly speculative. He barely has any form of intimate instincts, even confusing Debbie with Lucy when he first arrives at the house. The only time he displays a genuine form of affection is towards Martha, his sister-in-law. Their chemistry has led to many theorizing over a possible hidden relationship between the two characters (Buscombe, *The Searchers* 9; Carter 100; Studlar 180). Ethan's lack of intimate relationships, and his distancing from social life, is not necessarily a form of protest against the gender roles of the 40s and 50s. Rather, it is a more extreme version of the working man. The community is Ethan's family, which is why so many people love and respect him. His conflict with the Comanche could be interpreted as both a wish for revenge, but also, if taking in consideration the narrative of Manifest Destiny, a seal of protection for his community and their advancements. This characterization is fitting if one considers his insistence to be alone. By adopting the people of his community as his family,

he ensures that he always has someone to take care of to maintain his virility, while simultaneously not being tied down to any explicit commitments. In the context of his more immediate relationships he is emotionally reserved, showing nothing more and nothing less than devotion and loyalty towards those he cares about. He frequently makes it clear that he only trusts himself to get the job done. He repeatedly attempts to stray away from the group of rangers and, even while traveling as a duo, he leaves to continue Debbie's rescue by himself without letting Martin know.

Ethan's entry and exit, the beginning and end of the film, also illustrate him by himself, surrounded by the dry Western landscape. In *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), John Wayne is equally set against the dramatic landscape of Monument Valley. His wish to be and get the job done alone signifies both a distrust, but also a fear of being vulnerable. By himself, no one is there to see and judge him, were he to make a mistake or fail. But he debatably learns the truth about solitude during this journey. Ethan's lowest moment throughout the entire film is when he must succumb to being taken care of by a person that he had previously strongly disliked and disrespected. In a slip of attention, Ethan gets shot in the shoulder with a poisoned arrow, leaving him unable to use his left arm (01:27:58). It is good that Martin is persistent even as Ethan attempts to push him away. Arguably, it is because Martin does not let go that Ethan revises his morals, choosing Martin as the heir of his belongings and choosing to save Debbie despite her assumed loyalty to the Comanche tribe (Cohen 88-89). As naïve as Martin is portrayed throughout the film, he is there to both literally and figuratively remove the poison from Ethan's body and nurse him back to normal (01:30:20). Martin's involvement, and growth, serves Ethan well both by saving his life and by aiding his character development through his own.

While Ethan is the official hero of the story, it is Martin's character arc that makes *The Searchers* as highly-regarded as it has been. In the beginning, his role as a character is unclear. Ethan clearly dislikes him for his origins, and he is oftentimes depicted as Ethan's opposite. He lacks composure, often foolishly lashing out or experiencing bouts of childish frustration, while Ethan mostly watches over unbothered. Even in his relationship with Laurie, it is she who helps him and, when necessary, puts him in his place. But Martin's foolish behavior is due to his need to prove himself as one of the men. His most comic moments are instances in which he attempts to strongly assert himself, such as his determination to catch up with Ethan which leads Laurie to push him in frustration, making him trip and fall over a bench (00:53:27), as well as his absurd fight with Charlie when he returns (01:39:48). Martin is not alone. Even his adoptive younger brother is intrigued in

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the beginning by the machismo attained through being able to own and use Ethan's saber. The young lieutenant who mistakes Ethan for the captain is portrayed in the same naïve manner as Martin is in the beginning of the film. They are unsure of themselves, but clearly wish to prove that they, too, are real men or at least determined to be. Martin is special because, unlike other young male characters, the audience is able to observe his character development from the beginning until the end.

7. The Creation of the Western Hero
7.1 Two Western Heroes: Ethan Edwards and Martin Pawley

After spending five years searching for Debbie with Ethan, Martin begins to mirror him, ironically placing Ethan in the father figure. This is symbolically implied when the men finally reach Scar's camp after five years. In a visually memorable instance, Ethan and Martin, wearing the exact same shirt in two different colors, dismount their horses in perfect synchronicity (01:21:57). It is further highlighted when the two men are attacked and engage in a fire exchange with the Comanche. The first shootout occurs when the duo first ventures out with the rangers in search for Lucy and Debbie. In this exchange, Martin seems to be scared and unsure of himself, appearing to briefly faint (or look away from the shooting) before getting back up and continuing to shoot, determined to "be a man" (00:33:10-00:34:50). In the last shootout, he appears more confident, complementing and even mirroring Ethan's gunmanship in a battle in which Ethan is the one who gets hurt and Martin is the one who takes care of him (01:29:10-01:30:25). As Hamilton explores in "'A pistol don't make a man': Technology and Masculine Gender Performances," the ability to own and use a weapon is a defining aspect of a man's masculinity (137-166). Martin's skilled use of a gun at the end of the film serves as proof of his abilities as a man, no longer a boy.

Another defining aspect of Martin's character progression is his confrontation with Charlie, Laurie's fiancé. His naivety in thinking that Laurie would wait for him without asking her leads him to lose Laurie's trust (01:37:25). Thankfully, the searchers arrive back at the Jorgensen ranch just before the wedding, and Martin is able to earn Laurie back from Charlie through a physical altercation. Although the fight is laughable in nature, as the rest of the men at the wedding party stand around egging them on, Martin's newfound determination to win Laurie back by any means is admired. He, once again, proves himself as a man who is not afraid to fight to get what he wants. Tompkins supports this view: "The

cowboy hero's taciturnity, like his awkward manners around women and inability to dance, is only superficially a flaw; actually, it's proof of his manhood and trueheartedness. In Westerns silence, sexual potency, and integrity go together" (54). Martin's final step to reaching manhood occurs when he ventures out by himself, much like Ethan would have, to rescue Debbie. He reaches her in her tent, but before the siblings can flee, Scar appears. The scene is set up ambiguously, as the viewers do not get to see what happens next and have to assume that it is Ethan that must have come to their rescue. But Martin finally asserts himself, as he, not Ethan, is the one to kill Scar and validate his own masculinity. Martin's narrative is that of the boy who finally becomes a man, mentored by the embodiment of manliness himself. He represents, in many ways, the new generation of cowboys about to take shape in the Western. Because while Martin learns the craft of being a man, in the end he is not as reserved as Ethan. The fact that Martin gains his manhood without losing himself can be taken as a signal for the emergence of a revised cowboy.

Ethan Edwards and Martin Pawley are undeniably complementary characters. Whether the theory of their true kinship is accurate or not, it does not rule out the fact that they both aid each other's character arcs (Cohen 86-87). Ethan's influence on Martin is more obvious, since Martin's naivety and foolishness is straightened out by traveling with Ethan for half a decade. But not much attention has been payed to how Ethan's character is influenced by Martin's naivety. Where one lacks, the other makes up. Ethan is the image of power and manhood which Martin aspires to be. But, as discussed in the context of unsustainable gender roles, due to Ethan's rigid character, he is prone to make fatal mistakes. Martin's persistence and presence not only save Ethan's life, but his light-heartedness dramatically jolts Ethan's morals. Martin helps transform Ethan from a stoic figure, filled and fueled by hatred, to someone who is willing to forgive and look past his own anger. In retrospect, Ethan's change of heart to save Debbie does not occur the moment he picks her up. His change of heart occurs when Martin is willing to place himself between Ethan and Debbie in order to save her life from her uncle's own hands. It is in this very scene that Ethan gets shot by a poisoned arrow, and it is in the next scene that he reveals his revised will declaring Martin Pawley as the inheritor of his belongings.

The Searchers creates two incredibly strong and complex characters, both of which seem to struggle with their own need to adhere to a socially constructed masculine norm. Ethan's main struggle is the maintenance of this image as the repression of his anger and grief pushes him to spiral into aggressive patterns. Martin's main struggle is being taken seriously by someone who sees him not only as a boy, but also the evil result of

miscegenation, forcing him to work particularly hard to earn his image as a man. They both compensate for which the other is lacking. Martin's character is originally governed by femininity, "including devotion to happy domesticity, displays of romantic love and sentimental affection, and commitment to principles of forgiveness and nonviolence" (Studlar 185). As a boy of civilization, he has never experienced hardship and therefore cannot maintain his composure in the face of challenges. But his lack of composure leads to his character allowing humanity to dictate his character, an attribute that is absent in Ethan's persona. Ethan's past has made him into a person who avoids vulnerability, actively repressing his humanity in order to seek revenge. Martin's presence possibly changes that, while Ethan's stoicism teaches Martin how to stand up for himself and those he cares about. Overall, John Ford's film presents a complex, nevertheless more fluid image of masculinity than expected (Winkler 151). For a 1950s feature, *The Searchers* proves a far more advanced understanding of masculinity than many Westerns of the period through its ability to identify and play with gender expectations across multiple dimensions.

7.2 The Affirmation of Hegemonic Masculinity

An acclaimed linguist and professor at Georgetown University, Tannen is the author of *You Just Don't Understand*, a best seller for nearly four years (Crawford 92). The book deals with the differences in the ways men and women communicate, based on examples of modern society and relationships. Her second book, *The Argument Culture*, is concerned with the culture of agonism in American society. Tannen demands a "tolerant culture" which respects every opinion and does not insist on the rightness of one's own opinion (*Argument* 288). Moreover, she argues that in an antagonistic culture, people no longer see the truth as it manipulates their thinking and distorts facts (11). It also arises from the influence of the media (30). Tannen illustrates that in exchanges of words, one usually seeks confirmation of one's point of view by drawing on the mechanism of blaming the other side. The result is that people tend to oversimplify and misrepresent complex ideas in favor of winning the argument (273-276). These tensions are also noticeable in *The Searchers*, where messages are conveyed using a loaded language that is not conducive to reasoning. An example of this is the dispute between Ethan Edwards and captain Clayton about the best way of attacking the Comanches:

> Ethan: You think the Reverend's… What does a quarter-breed Cherokee know about the old Comanche trick of sleeping with his best pony tied right by his side. You've got about as much chance of stampeding that herd as…

Clayton: As you have of finding them girls alive by raiding into them! I say we do it my way, Ethan. And that's an order!
Ethan: Yes, sir. But if you're wrong…don't ever give me another!
(*The Searchers*, 00:28:05-00:28:33)

In this argument in a debate-like format, Ethan wants to show that he is better than the captain and the rest of the group. The contrasting views between the searchers contribute to the hostile environment reflective of the public discourse in American culture that Tannen describes as essentially male. She distinguishes between male and female speech by stating that "women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence" (Tannen 42). The language used by the searchers is in keeping with men's desire to demonstrate knowledge in front of a group of people.

Ethan Edwards is depicted as a natural leader. Every room he enters, he appears to tower over everyone else present. Even next to his brother, one is inclined to compare Ethan's proud and powerful presence to that of his domesticated brother. Ethan categorically has an image to maintain, one of the reasons for which he fights so hard to not appear vulnerable. The tough, composed exterior that he displays makes other men trust in his opinion. The captain/reverend seems to know exactly who Ethan is. When they meet again upon Ethan's sudden return from the wild, the captain questions him about his criminal activity, but does not pester him, instead offering him to join the Texas Rangers (01:42:31). Ethan refuses, but on their expedition, it becomes clear that he is the most respected man there. While leading the search for Lucy and Debbie, even though in theory, the captain of the rangers would be expected to take charge, it is Ethan who is placed in the forefront. He is the one to inspect and assess the killed cattle and is the one to identify which tribe had done it (00:15:55-00:16:22). This causes the captain to actually rely on Ethan's advice more than on his own. Ethan doesn't just dominate the Western landscape, but dominates everything else in it. Assumingly, because of his experience in the war and his time away from home, he has gathered a lot of useful knowledge, even learning to speak Spanish and Comanche. The captain is clearly overshadowed by Ethan. He exudes authority to the point where, in an awkward encounter years later, Ethan is confused by a lieutenant to be the captain as the man himself stands right next to them (01:43:30).

In her book *You Just Don't Understand*, Tannen claims that the essence of women's and men's differences in speech behavior is expressed by looking at opposition and conflict from early childhood to adolescence and adulthood (166-207). She illustrates that men want

to attack the other's point of view and criticize it, whereas women do not attack or criticize it immediately, as they do not want "to stand out or appear better than others" (Tannen 77). Women often try to include their personal opinions and do not want to be challenged because they perceive it as public humiliation (67). In the verbal exchange mentioned above, the searchers feel the need to argue the statements of others. It highlights the fact that men are more comfortable with speaking in public than women, as the female characters in the film are only shown speaking in a small group of people. Another reason are the different attitudes of speaking in public that are typical for women and for men. In *The Searchers*, Martin adopts a male style of speech as he becomes quite self-assured over the course of the film. He will not be brushed away by Ethan's initial superciliousness. Later, he pursues the purpose of his search for Debbie in spite of him being treated very provocatively by Ethan, who seems to be making a point of him being a member of a superior race and higher social class than Martin. He casually and arrogantly inspects Martin's plain clothing and lack of money as a sign of his limited wealth. Ethan first makes some rudimentary gestures of politeness but actually does not interact with Martin at all; neither does the viewer gain the impression that he is interested in Martin's experiences – he is simply too full of himself and his potential social exploits. In the following interaction, Ethan is shocked that Martin offers some kind of resistance to receiving a brush-off, since he seems to consider matters settled as soon as he has spoken his mind:

> Ethan: How? You got any horses, or money to buy them. You ain't even got money for cartridges. Jorgensen's offering you a good living here.
> Ethan: She's been with the bucks! She's nothing now but a…
> Ethan: Martin, I want you to know…
> Martin: Yeah…you want me to know I've got no kin, no money, no horses! All I got here is a bunch of dead-man's clothes to wear! You told me that already, so, shut your mouth!
> (*The Searchers*, 00:50:37-00:51:00)

Similarly, Ethan's outburst of hostility towards the captain may be the result of having borne the latter's superficial approach to the task of finding Debbie for too long a time. That is why he is always suspicious of other men, wants to take control over his environment by commanding others what to do, and shows his contempt towards them. Nevertheless, he does not demonstrate typical cowboy behavior all the time, as he is also rude and greedy, such as when he shoots without warning at several unarmed Native Americans (Wright, *West* 23). It is also manifested when he uses Martin as a bait to lure Futterman to their camp in order to kill him and recover his money, which reveals his deceiving and cruel side of character. Conversely, Mrs. Jorgensen acts as the voice of

morality and religion in this film, given that she was a schoolteacher. In her emotional speech, she refers to the disintegration of national values, claiming that they are Texicans and should not blame the country for their disappointments and failures (00:47:31-00:47:53). She recalls that Westerners often forget the hardships endured by their ancestors and descendants as they are not limited in their freedom and are not dependent on somebody. The film seems to imply that this is negative because people need to be bound on institutions and on other people through which they can build their own identity. According to Studlar, "*The Searchers* […] illustrates the triumph of 'feminine' values that are ultimately 'listened to' by Ethan Edwards as well as by the film's audience" (172). Thus, it can be argued that Ethan's independence and individualism are mitigated by his quest to find a sense of belonging, which is probably the reason why he declares Martin as his heir and decides to save Debbie. At these moments, he learns what is really important in life, as people also have to count on their fellows.

Laurie's character is formed in opposition to Ethan's, as she is predominantly defined by domesticity and romantic love (Wright, *West* 149). She states: "Look here, Martin Pawley, I'm a woman. We women wash and mend your dirty clothes all your lives. When you're little, we even wash you! How you can ever make out to be bashful in front of a woman, I'll never know" (00:46:28–00:46:36). She is also more likely to start a conversation with Martin whenever he returns home because she wants to connect and establish relationships with others. Tannen found in her research on conversational differences between men and women that girls like talking to their friends about private and emotional things like secrets. Boys, on the other hand, have friends because of the same activities they like and use language because they want to dominate in a group of boys (*Conversation* 77, 80). Because of the different social environments in which boys and girls learn aspects of interpersonal communication, they use language in a different way to exchange opinions and achieve certain intentions. Therefore, Martin, who writes Laurie only once in five years, struggles to articulate his thoughts and feelings to her.

Men also talk more than women in mixed-gender interactions, as "[f]or most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. This is done by exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance such as storytelling, joking, or imparting information" (Tannen, *Conversation* 77). Ethan is indicative of this male speech, as he is hardly a paragon of friendliness and communicative empathy. In one instance, he interrupts Mrs. Jorgensen, who is worried about the boys wasting their lives in the long search. But

his need to busy himself derives from the "honor codes" of the West and sense of duty, which oblige him to carry out violent actions and use language economically, as the latter deters the hero from actually doing things (Carter 36-37; Tompkins 52). His actions are so meticulously carried out that it renders the unfolding of any process of introspection well-nigh impossible. Ethan Edwards demonstrates superiority and domination in conversations, and very often tries to control them by directing the discussion to the topics that interest him. However, his character development indicates that attitudes and manners of expression can alter over the years. At the beginning of the film, Ethan comes across as arrogant and very proud of himself, making fun of the captain because he does not know a lot about Native Americans and joking about Martin because of his lower wealth and status. Over the course of the film, he adapts his language and behavior to the situation and social status of other people in order to create mutual acceptance or comprehension.

8. *Unforgiven*

8.1 Summary

Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) has not escaped attention either. It has a good standing as a Revisionist Western and it has been critically acclaimed for transgressing the boundaries of the Western genre as a whole (Bandy and Stoehr 265; Frye 61; Nelson 15-16). As a modern production, created after decades of technological advancements and structural changes within Hollywood, *Unforgiven* has been nominated and has received multiple awards (Bandy and Stoehr 242; Carter 115). Clint Eastwood's film offers a drastically different performance than *The Searchers*, challenging many of the tropes that the Western genre had based its success on. William Munny is a former outlaw, renowned for his cold blood. When a prostitute in Big Whiskey, Wyoming, has her face slashed by a man and the saloon owner receives the reimbursement, the girls she works with put their money together as a prize for whoever is able to find and kill the malefactor and his companion. Will is approached at his home in Kansas by a young man, "Schofield Kid," who suggests this opportunity to him. Munny refuses at first. His circumstances have changed. He is now a widowed father of two, making a living on a deteriorating pig farm struck by sickness. But after rethinking his position, concluding that he needs the money to get him back on his feet, he convinces his friend and former outlaw Ned Logan to join him before catching up with the Kid. In the meantime, the audience becomes acquainted with English Bob who arrives in Wyoming with his autobiographer W. W. Beauchamp to

claim the prize. In a physical altercation, sheriff Little Bill runs English Bob out of town, both because of their rivalry but also because he wants to prevent anyone's claim to the bounty. After witnessing Little Bill expose English Bob's deceit, Beauchamp decides to remain in Wyoming and become the sheriff's autobiographer instead. Contrary to *The Searchers*, most of the action in *Unforgiven* occurs in the town of Big Whiskey.

While Ned and Kid are receiving "advances" on their payment, a sick Will is confronted and kicked out of the saloon by Little Bill. The group camps at a rundown shack and waits for Will to regain his strength before venturing out to kill the first of the wanted cowboys. The experience of having the power over someone's life takes a toll on Ned, who ends up captured by the town's cowboys on his way back home after leaving the group. It is at this point that the story deviates far from how classic Westerns approach the theme of race, as the town's cowboys bring Ned, a colored man, in to be whipped for information on Will and Kid. Meanwhile, the duo has finished the mission and killed the remaining wanted cowboy. As they collect their reward, they are informed that Ned is dead, displayed in front of the saloon as a warning to any other assassins. Will sends Kid south, staying behind to avenge his friend. He returns to the saloon, single-handedly shoots any threats, including Little Bill, before making an iconic exit. The film ends with a shot identical to the introductory capture of Munny's farm engulfed by sunset shade as the caption concludes William's story, which recalls the endings of *For a Few Dollars More* (Sergio Leone, 1965), *High Plains Drifter* (Clint Eastwood, 1973), and the Star Wars films (George Lucas et al.).

8.2 The Anti-Hero William Munny

Unforgiven's protagonist William Munny is unlike traditional cowboys. As opposed to figures such as Ethan Edwards, Munny's depiction most of the film is that of a weak and tired man who has given up on himself. His backstory is crucial for understanding his character. Unlike Ethan, whose backstory remains entirely ambiguous and is mainly based on speculation, William Munny is more open to discussing his past. It is clear that he is a formerly well-known assassin and criminal, but he places a lot of emphasis on his wish to no longer be defined by the decisions he had made before meeting his late wife, Claudia. Early in the film, he confesses to Ned that Claudia had straightened him up, making him recognize what a horrible person he had been in the past: "I ain't the same, Ned. Claudia, she straightened me up, cleared me of drinking whiskey and all. Just cause we're going on

this killing, that don't mean I'm going to go back to being the way I was. Just need the money. Get a new start for them youngsters" (*Unforgiven*, 00:29:55-00:30:14). He quit drinking and settled down on a pig farm with his wife and two children.

But William's present situation is depicted in a pitiable manner, highlighting that his life lacks any thrill, as a widowed man left to take care of two children and a decaying pig farm. He not only needs the bounty to help him maintain his farm and children, but he has visibly been avoiding the rush of adventure for a long time. With greying hair and a withdrawn demeanor, Will, unlike Ethan, does not exude strength and power. For someone like the Kid, who has never met him but only heard the legends, it comes across as a joke that he would have ever been a murdering criminal. *Unforgiven* was first released in 1992, thirty-six years after *The Searchers*. As previously discussed, the genre underwent significant changes in the decades that separate these two canonical films. The most significant change was itself the decay of the genre, as the public lost interest in the wild, wild West. The introduction of the old cowboy was a signal of the death of this mythical figure. Reasoning behind the creation of the old and retired Western hero has already been argued, but William Munny is an interesting example to closely investigate, especially in contrast to a figure like Ethan Edwards.

8.3 The Contrast Between Ethan Edwards and William Munny

Edwards is not a young cowboy, emphasized in the foregrounded contrast between him and Martin. But his dominant presence is enough to completely remove age as a significant factor in his character, whereas Will's inferior bearing almost forces the viewer to define him by his old age. It is both his bearing but also his own image of himself which paint him as Edwards' opposite. While other characters insist on bringing up thier legendary past, his response is to shrink himself, claiming that he no longer engages in that lifestyle. William Munny lets himself be defined by the end of his life, his character maintaining an anti-climactic nature up until his last scene. This choice in characterization has been criticized because it unrealistically exaggerates the downfall of the powerful cowboy before entirely resurrecting him (Carter 140-147). There are concrete reasons for Will's revival, such as "the plight of the 'women of Big Whiskey'" (Carter 134); however, the film works very hard to convince the viewers that he has given up his old ways, before reassessing his principles in the last action scene of the entire film (Carter 151). As Andrew Patrick Nelson remarks, "[y]et even films that set out to offer corrections to the genre's earlier slights of

blacks and women, […], do so by drawing upon time-honored conventions of Western heroism in order to elevate their consciously gendered and racialized protagonists to the level of myth" (25). In the context of the Western hero acting as the image of the genre, Munny's anti-climactic character is a possible metaphor for the loss of interest in the Western film towards the end of the century. In this case, one can retrospectively even argue that Munny's comeback in the end of the film is meant to signify that, much like his character, just because the genre is dormant, does not mean that it has nothing left to prove (Lusted 271; Smith 29-31). Much like the Western landscape, the hero, too, cannot ever be fully tamed because sooner or later, he is going to be unleashed again.

Munny's storyline not only emphasizes that he has aged, but it constantly highlights that he has changed as a man. Edwards' character, as observed, was entirely based on his avoidance of displaying vulnerabilities. Munny's character juxtaposes this by being one of the most vulnerable cowboys of the genre. Physical vulnerabilities inflicted by age, such as his inability to mount a horse and shoot a gun, serve as proof of his loss of strength (00:17:15-00:19:35). However, his display of emotional vulnerability serves as proof of his loss of power. Where Ethan typically dominates a situation by asserting his durability, William openly displays his weaknesses by talking about his past. Unlike Ethan, he does not repress his feelings and acknowledges that he is a weak man for the very reasons which make Edwards a strong man. In a situation in which Ethan would probably not find himself in, Will, sick with a fever, refuses to stand up for himself against a hostile Little Bill. While Ethan represents an extreme of stoic masculinity, Will represents the other extreme of that spectrum. He embodies the "broken-down pig farmer" that Kid insists on calling him, victimizing himself (00:08:50). One cannot help but feel pity for him. William Munny, just like Clint Eastwood himself, is a legendary figure in the Western world of *Unforgiven*, the stories of a cool-headed and cold-blooded criminal following him wherever he goes (Blundell and Ormand 544; Ingrassia 54; Kupfer 112). But he gave up drinking and settled down on a pig farm with his family. William Munny did that which Ethan Edwards, and most Western heroes, run away from their entire life: being tied down to one place.

What Ethan and William do have in common are their own principles. Despite their differences as characters, both of them are initially very loyal to their principles. Ethan strongly holds on to his belief that the Comanche are evil, before Martin's innocence sways him to abandon his initial morals. William, too, strongly holds to the new life he has chosen for himself: free of alcohol and free of crime. He emphatically maintained

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that he had changed and no longer wanted to engage in the same lifestyle he had previously led. The intention of the mission was to assassinate two dishonorable men and claim a prize that he was in dire need of. Much like Ethan, William has a change of heart towards the end of the film as his friend, who had not actually hurt anyone, is tortured, killed, and displayed as a sign of warning. The town's sheriff, along with the majority of Big Whiskey's male inhabitants, are suddenly those depicted as the film's main villains. They disrespect the saloon's female workers, they held themselves above anyone who enters their town, and they have no problem unjustly beating someone and running them out of town. While his last scene of avenge arguably goes against the essence of Munny's character, who is defined by his old age and inabilities, it revives Munny and makes him into the Western hero that the audience sees in Ethan Edwards: someone who is willing to protect that which they believe is good and destroy that which they believe is evil.

Just like in *The Searchers*, a Western hero's gunmanship is the defining point of his manhood. Martin's character gains his power by mastering a gun by the end of their search. In *Unforgiven*, Will's castration is emphasized by his inability to shoot a gun after eleven years. Additionally, the Kid's weak eyesight, therefore poor aim, is also held against him. Ned does not even get the chance to shoot the Spencer carbine he brought with him as he realizes his inability to take someone else's life. But gunmanship is a clearly important factor in *Unforgiven*. In the town of Big Whiskey, guns are prohibited, but apparently only for visitors, as the men of the town are pictured cleaning their guns in the sheriff's office, all while debating the best conditions for getting shot (00:36:37). Paradoxically, the very men who cannot even properly shoot a gun are not welcomed in a town which claims gun prohibition, but actually praises gunmanship. In contrast to the group, the sheriff claims to have a lot more knowledge regarding the mastery of armament: "Being a good shot and being quick with a pistol don't do no harm, but it don't mean much next to being cool-headed. A man who will keep his head, not get rattled under fire, like as not will kill you" (*Unforgiven*, 01:00:45-01:00:58). In this scene, Little Bill discloses his expertise regarding gun fights to Beauchamp, who has clearly never found himself in such a situation before, being characterized as a castrated sidekick as well (Beard 55). But Little Bill never demonstrates his skills, resorting to fist fights and whippings to maintain his dominance. He thrives on others' belief that he is superior because of his masculine capabilities, even though he never exhibits them. In this scene, he is trying to use his alleged gunmanship to impress Beauchamp into becoming his biographer, and he succeeds.

8.4 The Myth of the Western Hero

Little Bill is an interesting character, as he represents many of the values encountered in old-school Western heroes. It is easier to draw similarities between him and Ethan Edwards. Bill is also composed. As the sheriff of the town, he is expected to handle situations with a cool temper. Much like Ethan Edwards, he has an image to maintain, which is why he becomes so intrigued by the idea of a personal biographer. He tries hard to maintain this image by speaking of all the tough towns he has worked in, as one of his henchmen announces: "Little Bill come out of Kansas and Texas, boys. He worked them tough towns," implying that he is just as rugged as legends like William Munny (00:38:29-00:38:32). Furthermore, he tries to uphold this image by tearing apart other legends, such as English Bob. He is also the one to torture Ned and play mind games with English Bob, displaying a violent side but only for the protection of the community. But Bill is just a caricature of the classic Western hero. He is defined by talk, but not by actions. While characters like Ethan Edwards represent the legend, Bill's character uncovers the mythical nature of the legend. The Kid also falls prey to this fantasy. He is arrogant, claiming to be someone he is not and lashing out when proven wrong. He puts on a show to prove that he can be one of the bad guys, but he can barely shoot, especially due to his eyesight, and he claims to have killed five men when in actuality he had never killed anyone (01:00:01). It is through these two characters that it becomes obvious that in *Unforgiven*, the traits which create the masculine Western hero are, too, all based on myth (Blundell and Ormand 557; Kupfer 111). This is also emphasized when, in the final scene, Bill's composure leads to him getting shot by Munny in front of all the men who had looked up to him, completely removing his masculinity by removing his dignity. The Kid, too, proves that the glory of the Western hero is a myth when he finally kills someone and ends up feeling remorse and regret.

In fact, Little Bill ridiculously emulates the gesture of grandeur in armed conflicts, expressing arrogance and obliviousness to the deeper meaning of what is happening in his town, as his unrelenting fight against the "white trash" that is rising in all communities illustrates (01:17:15). The increasing display of pure militaria, such as arms and cartridge belts, showcases male dominance and gunmanship, but it also alludes to the aggression and war led by the United States as the perceived aggressor in international conflicts. The final sequence of the film constitutes the moment of Little Bill's recognition of the destructive, anti-human nature of war. Little Bill's death also points to a sense of vulnerability of the isolated individual in a warlike assault, which is reinforced by his final statement before

dying at the hands of Munny: "I don't deserve this. To die like this. I was building a house" (02:01:23). Munny does not consider the latter's dying worth his attention. In Carter's view, "Daggett's violent outbursts – always threatening to spiral out of control and into hysteria – are seen here to have crystallised into a tyrannical but ultimately 'rational' use of brute force that lacks any moral or social sanction" (149). His brutality has indeed devastating human consequences for the people of Big Whiskey and ultimately for himself. His law enforcement instrumentalized for violence can be understood as having come to its ultimate fruition. The film thus shows that the myth's premises of hubris and legitimate violence masked as "frontier justice" can end in disaster (Carter 6). In its critical stance towards violence, *Unforgiven* presents the traumatic wartime experiences and their consequences for the men who fought by depicting the sacrifices the male characters have to make in times of a perceived crisis.

8.5 The Reversal of the Gender Order

The film justifies Munny's background presence through his character's past, but he persists with the same energy throughout most of the film. He refuses to drink any alcohol, even as he becomes sick from the cold rain, and when Little Bill confronts him, his response is not hostile as he lets himself be beaten and kicked out. Up until his last scene, William Munny appears to have given up on everything that had ever contributed to his reputation, strongly resisting the need to hurt anyone whose pain is not justifiable. His soft nature is even contrasted to that of his friend Ned, as Munny declines any "advances" from the saloon ladies. William is castrated, both literally through the loss of his wife and his rejection of sexuality, but also figuratively through the loss of every characteristic that had made him the epitome of masculinity. Nevertheless, Munny's character is a common trope in neo-Westerns, often employed to underline that if the violence does not catch up with the cowboy, time will, stripping him of his manhood. His abstinence is evidenced by his refusal of Delilah's offering him "a free one" which she thinks is rude, as she takes it as an offense at her disfigured face (01:27:30-01:28:10). But William remains within the bounds of perfect etiquette when he explains that it is on the grounds of his wife and not because he considers her ugly that he rejects her offer (Babiak, "Rewriting" 57-58). Because of his lack of explicitness, Delilah misunderstands William concerning his wife as she thinks that she is still alive, which is clarified by her friend in a subsequent scene.

A similar misunderstanding occurs when he lies to Little Bill about his gun toting, which results in his beating up to the point of unconsciousness (01:15:06-01:17:45). His way of speaking is in accordance with women's speech that is described as indirect and tentative, as women do not want to dominate in a conversation like men do (Tannen, *Conversation* 216-244). Women are considered to be polite and insecure, and mostly make inquiring statements to maintain a conversation. Their speech is usually hesitant because they want to encourage others to state their ideas (224-228). Furthermore, they are not taken seriously and can be misunderstood easily because when they say something, they can mean something else so that problems may ensue in mixed-gender communication (142-143). Overall, women are perceived as less competent and less persuasive than men by using the typically female speech. Men, on the other hand, tend to be aggressive, direct, concrete, and are inclined to assert themselves in conversations. They prefer disagreements and even find it interesting and stimulating (168-169). However, Tannen elucidates in her article "How to Give Orders Like a Man" that both men and women can be indirect and subtle when it comes to communicating, they only differ in approaching an issue or problem. Stefan Brandt affirms that "[t]he mixture of traditionally 'female' and 'male' characteristics has proven to be almost a necessity for survival. In an era that has understood the dangers of hyper-masculinization, the realization of a man's communicative potential (that used to be identified as 'effeminate' in former fictions) appears to be a *sine qua non*" (77). Consequently, the theory that women are more indirect than men cannot be generalized, as it also depends on the character of the speaker and on his or her regional, ethnic, and class background.

According to Francine M. Deutsch, social interactions have the capacity of becoming less gendered, and not only gendered differently, as male-female relations can be viewed as the site of change by recognizing the factors that produce gender equality and eliminate oppressive social practices (113-114). For her, "structural changes would promote changes at the interactional level by undermining the perception that women are less competent than men in the domains that matter" (118). *Unforgiven* supports this idea, as the prostitutes working in the saloon manifest a high amount of agency, independence and control, which can be ascribed in part to the increasing cultural influence of feminist movements in the 1990s (Buscombe, *Unforgiven* 22). A case in point is that they outwit the town's sheriff Little Bill by gaining his confidence. Furthermore, they have a distinct sense of solidarity that verges on sisterhood in black communities, as opposed to the men of Big Whiskey who are mainly defined by homosocial bonds and competition (Beard 54;

Hamilton 28). The prostitutes decide to avenge their friend Delilah who has been treated unjustly as "damaged property" by the saloon's owner (00:04:40). However, they also come to their aid in order to advocate for their equal rights (Blundell and Ormand 541; Carter 134; Kamir 228). They do so by invoking the natural rights, on which the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 was founded, according to which people are born with certain universal rights. For example, life, liberty and property are expressed in these rights (Jefferson, "Declaration"). In this respect, the prostitutes' struggle for their values, beliefs and rights presents the social concern for marginal existences and anti-bourgeois attitudes in contemporary American society.

In summary, Tannen observes that communication problems between men and women can occur due to misinterpretation of the meanings expressed in conversations (*Conversation* 290). In her criticism of Tannen's approach, Mary Crawford criticizes the assumption that boys and girls grow up in different worlds by questioning why girls should join a group that prepares for a future as one of the less privileged (96). Feminists want to assert themselves through language in a society dominated by men, as power struggles in communication reflect the general imbalance of power in gender relations. The films assume that no one is to blame for problems arising in male-female communication. It is a natural process that girls and boys separate into same-sex groups and learn the respective style. The films suggest that men and women need to learn how to be flexible enough to accommodate the different styles. By showing the different communicative styles and their functions, *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven* indicate that no style is inherently superior or inferior, but call for a spirit of non-confrontational interaction.

9. The Metanarrative of *Unforgiven*
9.1 The Western Hero's Remorse
Remorse is one of the central themes of *Unforgiven*. Will's characterization is heavily dependent on his feelings of guilt regarding his past. Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla points out that "Munny's remorse is the character's fatal flaw: the obstacle that causes his internal tension and prevents him from moving toward a level of stability where he considers himself to be truly forgiven" (160). His exterior visible appearance is thus turned into interior invisible phenomenon of human nature (Sánchez-Escalonilla 158-159). Will confesses to Ned that he is no longer the man he used to be, no longer a "mean" guy, and that he just wants to be a normal fellow (00:31:25-00:31:40). For most of the film, Will

clings to the image of his deceased wife, who convinced him to let go of his criminal ways. He is not impressed by someone like the Kid, who tries really hard to step into the shoes of a cold-blooded outlaw like Munny. Will insists on not drinking, with the belief that alcohol would reset him to his old ways. Even when he does shoot to kill one of the wanted cowboys, he offers the young man a peaceful death. Singled out from the rest of his group, the man crawls into a safe space behind a rock structure. Will, from a high point, urges the cowboy's companion to cross over and give the dying man some water (01:33:25). The cowboy assumingly dies, however, the scene that leads to his death is curious, as it does not involve the same cruel or even exciting fire exchange that characterize Western films such as *The Searchers*, in which most men appear exuberant by their opportunity to shoot and kill a Native American. Ethan even purposefully shoots multiple men in the back after setting Martin up as the bait, and does not show any signs of regret, instead pocketing one of the dead men to retrieve his money. Ethan's instinct to shoot and kill is formed in a way in which taking someone else's life no longer affects him.

The legends about Will's past life imply that he, too, was once as cold-blooded as Ethan, but it is apparent that he now has a hard time taking someone's life, even if their death could be justified as punishment for a crime. The Kid also learns about the power of remorse when he is the one to shoot the remaining wanted cowboy. After fleeing the scene, the two men wait for their reward by a tree. The Kid, still affected by a rush of adrenaline, sits and takes gulps of whiskey from a bottle. At first, he plays it off as pride, claiming "I shot that fucker three times!" with a smile on his face. But as he reflects on the moment, he admits that this was his first killing before starting to cry: "It don't seem real. How he ain't gonna never breathe again ever. How he's dead. And the other one too. All on account of pulling the trigger" (01:48:30-01:48:48). Will, who had urged the Kid to keep drinking, assumingly to forget his actions, for the first time in the film explicitly acknowledges the power of killing a man. He cannot offer the Kid a solution to his guilt, as he himself has been carrying around that guilt his entire life, unable to get rid of it. The Kid's remorse is so powerful that, after receiving the money and the news about Ned, he lets Will take his Schofield, claiming "I'm never gonna use it again. I won't kill nobody no more. I ain't like you, Will. […] I guess I'd rather be blind and ragged than dead" (01:52:30-01:53:02). The Kid cannot carry the burden that comes with the power over someone's life. After spending so much time with Will and observing that even someone as legendary as him has been diminished to a powerless pig farmer, he realizes that the glory is not worth its consequences. Through

this, *Unforgiven* seemingly argues the same unsustainability for the Western hero's stoic masculinity by emphasizing his future as unhappy and remorseful.

The film can be described as a metanarrative, since it focuses on the Western hero as a legendary figure, underscoring the mythical nature of the Western itself. Beauchamp's role is significant for this choice because he embodies the creator of this myth, acting as the biographer of men who make up unrealistic tales to appear powerful (Kupfer 105). Men like English Bob and Little Bill both lust after the glory of the Western hero, but they are portrayed as too greedy to ever attain it. The Kid lusts after Munny's glory, but he realizes that it comes with a price that he is not willing to pay (Blundell and Ormand 556-557). Munny's own disconnection from his past also stresses the fragility of such glory. When, in the final scene, he single-handedly shoots most men in the saloon, he only manages to reclaim his glory through the presence of the author, Beauchamp, who immediately becomes fascinated by the iconic William Munny. Because the film pays so much attention to Will as a legend, he becomes an allegory for the character of the Western hero as a whole. "What would have happened if he had not settled down?" is the question that his character poses (00:12:05-00:12:24). *Unforgiven* constantly contrasts Munny's criminal past with his current retired state, therefore bringing attention to the future of the Western hero altogether. It is an important question considering the time of the film's release, a decade of uncertainty for the Western genre. Likewise, Foster notes that "westerns during the 1980s largely focus on how the old western hero comes to terms with the fact that the West had reached its inevitable end – simultaneously mourning the past role the conservative, patriarchal American man had established in the workplace, but who now was forced to yield some measure of responsibility to the opposite sex" (52). In addition, the financial failures of the 1980s forced filmmakers to re-evaluate their work.

9.2 The Myths of Objectivism and Subjectivism

The juxtaposition of the hero and anti-hero in *Unforgiven* reveals the important function of William's return to Skinny's saloon. Throughout most of the film, William Munny adopts the position of an anti-hero by consciously rejecting the conventional conception of heroism and counteracting all orders and conventions of militant and military actions. At the end of the film, Munny's emotional sterility and reserve have developed from his unspectacular life as a pig farmer to full-blown characteristics dominating his personality in order to

restore justice in the town of Big Whiskey. However, the inscription on the grave marker of Munny's wife does not disclose this information, as the epilogue proclaims:

> Some years later, Mrs. Ansonia Feathers made the arduous journey to Hodgeman County to visit the last resting place of her only daughter. William Munny has long since disappeared with the children.... some said to San Fransisco where it was rumored he prospered in dry goods. And there was nothing on the marker to explain to Mrs. Feathers why her only daughter had married a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition.
> (*Unforgiven*, 02:05:12-02:05:50)

The heavy emphasis on the final comment could be read as establishing the importance of myth over factual information in the Western genre "because [myth] operates to deflect humans from identifying and resolving their actual problems" (Henderson 51). The preference for unreliable narration and multiple perspectives in the film serves as a device to underline the problems of objectivity and knowledge. The main narrative of William Munny's life is thus framed by several conflicting accounts of what really happened. One of the frame narratives accuses the story of being fictional, while another defends it against this claim and stresses its historical truth, "[…] making it unclear if Munny's past is as violent as the reputation claims or whether, as for others around him, it is the product of myth" (Lusted 269-270). This opens up the question of contingency and reliability, which draws the viewers themselves into the philosophical issue of what constitutes truth and certainty.

The film projects an image of the Western hero that undermines the hegemony of white masculinity, as Munny dislikes and criticizes himself because he thinks that he has a flawed character. Although he represents the counterpart of Little Bill, he shares with him a violent past that both men cannot fully overcome. Little Bill wields power over his community in order to defend it from intruders, thereby implicitly extolling the virtues of his own, not altogether unprecarious, existence. The scene, in which he almost beats Munny to death, which resembles the beating in *A Fistful of Dollars*, is functionally superfluous as his behavior is rejected as anything but exemplary, and therefore points to Eastwood's need to insist on the viewers' "correct" understanding of Little Bill. However, it is functional for the film as a whole as it presents models of personal development not to emulate, paths in comparison to which Munny's own personality seems very favorable. Certainly, Munny, along with the Kid, have learned the truth about the "real" West. The Kid's naïve ideas about war presumably stem from war propaganda and adventure stories, and are ultimately destroyed. Symbolically, the Kid's poor eyesight forces him to approach his victim at the

outhouse so close that it opens his eyes as to what it really takes to kill someone, all while allowing him to distance himself from the myths of the West and his own ostentatious manner of relating to them: "Like the Kid, we are to finally see the narratives of the Old West for the distortions and falsehoods they are. In calling into question the Western tale, *Unforgiven* indirectly asks us to question ourselves and our enchantment with the violence that is the staple of the genre" (Kupfer 112). In so doing, the viewers are encouraged to question the reality status, authority and reliability of Western films, its value as truth or fact. It also makes the viewers aware of the fact that the sense of sight is more reliable than the sense of hearing, as the Kid's seeing produces more reliable evidence than his hearing of the Western stories.

Little Bill and William Munny represent two enduring Western myths: the myths of objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism takes as its ally scientific truth, rationality, precision, fairness and impartiality, as reflected in the discourse of science, law, government, journalism, morality, business, and economics. Subjectivism takes as its allies emotions, intuitive insight, imagination, humaneness, and a "higher" truth. Accordingly, to be objective is to be rational, and to be subjective is to be irrational and to give in to the emotions (Cuordileone 239; Kimmel et al. 36). Subjectivity can be dangerous as it can lead to losing touch with reality, while objectivity can be dangerous because it misses what is most important and meaningful to individual people (Barker 46-47). From this it follows that objectivity can be unfair as it must ignore the most relevant realms of experience in favor of the abstract, universal, and impersonal. It can also be inhuman as there are no objective and rational means at getting at feelings and aesthetic sensibilities. *Unforgiven* offers a multidimensional vision of reality as it projects counterimages of the self. Munny is deprived of masculine personality traits central to the Western hero. However, at the end of the film, he is reborn and elevated to the status of a classic Western hero. Similarly, Little Bill's hypocritical rationalism is undermined by his criticism of the Western culture of violence (Babiak, "Rewriting" 59-60; Galtung 291). Peter E. S. Babiak affirms that "*Unforgiven* refuses to provide us with any clear viewpoint from which the actions of any of its characters may be assessed" (57). Thus, the film presents an ambivalent system of norms for the Western hero's conduct.

Furthermore, the Kid's distorted perception of reality reinforces the impression that the myth's claim to objectivity and truth is false (Blundell and Ormand 553-560). The viewers participate in the split between reason and imagination, between the appearance of things and the reality of things. The film thus raises the question of the extent to which

human beings are able to perceive and know reality by incorporating skepticism towards an objective reality since people construct reality according to their world (Frye 71). It has a mirror function for the viewer: by adopting the characters' points of view and identifying with them, Eastwood makes the viewer aware of his or her own failure in reconstructing an objective reality and in resisting the satisfaction gained from the well-intentioned violence (Beard 48). In summary, then, the didactic function of *Unforgiven* alerts the viewers to the manipulative power of words, the high-minded talk of heroism and a seemingly enlightened position on race, identity, and justice. William Beard concludes that "[…] the Western is criticised as a distortion of history and experience, and its consumption is equated with the corrupt craving of viewers for the spectacle of triumphalist power and violence" (56). Thus, the director presents the viewers with their own human limitations, and the ways in which Western writers and filmmakers construct realities according to their imagination.

10. Sources and Influences in *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven*

10.1 The Cold War Discourse

In the postwar era in America, progress was the most characteristic aspect, and this was mostly demonstrated by the socio-political, economic, demographic, and technological transformations in society (Cuordileone xv). The U.S. won in World War II and became a global superpower (Cuordileone xv; McVeigh 78). There existed a lot of conflict between traditional values and economic and technological progress which was also represented geographically (McVeigh 117). The East embodied progression and was associated with class privileges, corruption and industrialization, while the West of the country embodied traditional old values, such as individualism, freedom, and equality (Blundell and Ormand 554; Slotkin 18; Wright, *West* 5). Progress and mass culture became a challenge for the citizens, as they came up with changing social roles for the population. In Westerns, the tension or conflict between urban ways and old-fashioned rural values is often symbolized by the intrusion of an outsider or interloper who attacks the community.

In *The Searchers*, the war cruelties and unrelenting fight against the enemy represented by Native Americans are equated with American domestic and foreign affairs during the Cold War period. For example, Communism and/or the nuclear bomb as well as women's and civil rights movements constituted a threat to national security and male dominance, provoking anxiety of the foreign "other" (Cuordileone xviii; Leyda 86; McVeigh 76-78). The tensions of the Cold War, most notably the rivalry and aggression

between the United States and the Soviet Union, are translated in the film by the distrust, contempt, and prejudices against Native Americans. Richard Slotkin also reads the film as a discourse on the Cold War: "Through Ethan Edwards, Ford metaphorically explores the logic of the 'savage war'/Cold war analogy […] and finds that it produces an overwhelming, and finally malign, pressure to choose 'destruction' over 'rescue'" (472). It becomes noticeable that the dull ambience in the dark interior of the Edwards' house mirrors Ethan's disturbed mental state, which soon turns to dread and vengeance when the whole Edwards' family, except their daughters, is found dead. The enemy can be interpreted as the illustration of a part of Ethan's life, as his grim character and illicit desire for Martha and Debbie compel him to destroy the latter. It can thus be seen as a destructive force that originates in Ethan himself.

The sublimity of Monument Valley, too, is contrasted against the Native American or Communist antagonist, which is also powerful, but inspires only fear (Leyda 90). The emphasis is frequently put on nature and the limitations it imposes. The landscape often appears remote and inaccessible, which reinforces the feeling that the civilized community of the Edwards' and Jorgensen's homesteads is jeopardized as danger might be lurking behind every corner. The setting is integral to the film as it sometimes becomes a character in itself, challenging the hero to fights with the enemy. In *Unforgiven*, the allegory of confrontation between good and evil with good triumphing is represented by the characters William Munny and Little Bill. On the one hand, the character of William Munny is the embodiment of individual autonomy with faith in his transcendental wife who "has become the bar against which his actions are measured, and, in a way, a reflection of the divine justice that he does not wish to violate" (Sánchez-Escalonilla 160). On the other hand, Little Bill's character personifies the contradictory nature and belief of a sheriff who turns out to be evil. His treacherous, hypocritical and fatalistic behavior is representative of the white capitalist patriarchy from which the American nation has sprung (Beard 54). When one of the prostitutes in the saloon is assaulted by a cowboy, Little Bill settles the dispute by demanding compensation from the cowboys for the benefit of the proprietor of the establishment. The prostitutes' protest against this injustice seemed to have been successful at first sight, but actually it is rendered ineffective because the efforts of the various individuals are channeled into one great unifying war effort (Beard 52-53; Carter 135). Even though the use of physical violence might be justified, the emphasis on revenge exposes the trivialization of violence through the eroticism of female bodies in armed conflicts and capitalist structures.

This choice of narrative structure can also be construed as a reaction to the war experiences and the large number of destitute Native and African Americans in the armed forces who believed the war to be their ticket out of the slums (Hamilton 37-38; Paul 347). After the military defeat of America, they were left disillusioned and distressed for having failed to achieve their personal dream of success (Langford 80). In the political context of the Cold War, the Western myth was a crucial factor in explaining and justifying American involvement in Southeast Asia (Lusted 197; Paul 344). *Unforgiven* revises the triumphant narrative of heroic violence by highlighting the consequences arising out of suffering and pain, as Leighton Grist asserts:

> This emphasis on the disturbing nature of violence contests its more familiar generic representation. While most Westerns deal with the ideological motivations and consequences of violence, far fewer examine the destructive reality, the actual effects of violent acts. Since the sixties, violence in the Western has been represented with differing degrees of explicitness, but the intention has rarely been to convey pain. (297)

In this sense, the film demonstrates that even markedly different individuals like Ned and the Kid have a chance of making it in America, but the effort is considerable as the individuation American style is tough and hard to sustain. The film clearly states that war is not glorious but cruel by means of the futility of Ned's death and the Kid's disillusionment.

10.2 Puritan Sources

The following section deals with the foundational myths of the American nation that considerably influenced Western films and stories. Thus, it will be argued that *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven* are structured as Puritan myths. More specifically, they evoke the memory of the Pilgrim Fathers' errand into the wilderness of the new world in that an intruder's destructive power is God's will that needs to be destroyed. In the Puritan morality, guns and other temptations are impious devices inciting mankind to interfere with God's plan (Elkin 81; Paul 146). This narrative structure reveals the concept of mankind's duality:

> Indeed, in the gunfight […] the hero's heightened gravity and dedicated exclusion of all other loyalties present a study in puritan virtue, while the evil one presents nothing more nor less than the old New England Protestant devil […]. In the gunfight there are deliverance and redemption. Here is the real meaning of the western: a puritan moral tale in which the savior-hero redeems the community from the temptations of the devil. (Homans 146)

In *The Searchers*, the gloominess and puritanism of Ethan's character is determined by feelings of jealousy and guilt towards Debbie and Scar. Because he cannot give in to his desires, as it would go against his morals, he attempts to kill them in a fit of chaste fury. In contrast, William Munny delivers his soul by overcoming the devil's temptations in his delirium. After suffering a fever and Little Bill's beating, Munny has an encounter with "the angel of death with snake eyes" (01:22:33-01:22:45). It is described as a gloomy and unpleasant place, similar to the Christian concept of hell. Munny urges Ned to not tell anyone about the things he did in the past, which refers to the belief that people are judged for their deeds after death (01:23:13-01:23:21). Those who did not lead good lives were believed to get punished in a certain section of the underworld. His feverish delirium can be understood within the context of hell, in which Claudia is likened to a worm as "her face was all covered with worms" (01:23:02). In this sequence, his late wife represents the serpent in the Garden of Eden whose temptations Munny overcomes in a near-death experience.

Munny undergoes a conversion of fear into courage without, however, resorting to redemptive violence in the conventional sense (Beard 48; Faragher 78). His confrontation with death is the ultimate assertion of life that is necessary for his transformation into a form of meaning. As Babiak notes, "Eastwood's character is presented as motivated by the desire to address specific wrongs, whereas the motivation for the initiating act of violence is usually connected to self-interested or ego-assertive behavior" ("Icons" 68). The regeneration and healing through an inner process of spiritual development are essential in that they act as a moral obligation for political action to revenge his friend and the women of Big Whiskey. William Munny's features are described as regular by the Kid: "You don't look like no son-of-a-bitching, cold-blooded assassin" (00:08:48). He is a pale character, probably infinitely malleable and able and willing to adapt to any new situation and make it his. Daniel Candel Bormann also observes that his features are close to blankness, "he is thoughtful but plain, looks rather slow in his thoughts and actions, even when the latter are deadly; he is not given to emotional raptures; he handles the pigs clumsily and unsuccessfully, but prefers to wallow in the mud than to give up; […]" (7). His features can be summed up as being puritanical, expressing harshness of judgment of himself and others. Moreover, William Munny is headed for the life of a recluse, as expressed in his austere mien and severity of speech and manner. He wills life not to move him in the least, which reflects his resistance to the power of events as having the potential to induce interest,

fascination or fear in him, including his failure to recall the past deeds that the Kid is curious about. William's escape from his criminal past can only be achieved by what appears to be total dedication to "the metaphysical presence of his wife" (Bormann 7). Frye draws parallels between Munny and the gothic hero, claiming that "a tortured conscience is central to the gothic hero, and Munny, throughout the film, struggles to reform himself of his darker impulses and to separate himself from his own sad history" (69). The film thus transforms the Puritan binarism into the psychological quality of life, revealing the hypocrisy of Puritans, the doubt or skepticism in the psyche, and the Puritan belief in election and sainthood undermined by the uncertainty of salvation (Engler and Scheiding 65; Paul 155). This uncertainty translates itself into gloom and doubt, a state of consciousness where one is not sure of faith anymore.

Little Bill's hegemonic masculinity involving narcissistic traits, such as "power, omnipotence, mastery and control" (Neale, "Masculinity" 5), also exemplifies the hypocrisy of Puritans as it is based on the abuse of power and despotism. In fact, he turns the Western's concept of heroism around as his whole enterprise turns out to be purely selfish: seeking glory, he does not allow anyone else to attain a high position in his town (Blundell and Ormand 550). Kamir summarizes that "Little Bill demonstrates the close affinity between honor-driven, power-thirsty outlaws, state terror, and the logic of deterrence, as well as the threat they all pose to human dignity" (224). Thus, through Little Bill's character, *Unforgiven* criticizes and ridicules the rigidity and dry views of a society that turns out to be cunning and cruel. Paradoxically, in revising English Bob's biography and Western myths in general, he gives textual cues for what can be regarded as credible and what should be treated with circumspection (Blundell and Ormand 558). Yet his harsh dismissal of the mythical heroes only leads to the dissolution of the boundaries of fact and fiction and an abandonment of the belief in an extralinguistic referentiality. To take an obvious example, he confuses words with actions by branding Ned as the assassin. This suspension of the logic of action is equivalent to the Puritan pattern of thinking, as "[…] the rhetoric of the Promised Land and divine providence on the one hand aims to uphold an ideological construction of the 'new world' which quite obviously was at odds with the actual experiences of the 'saints' […], and on the other serves as a legitimization of colonial rule, an instrument of control, and a means to homogenize the colony […]" (Paul 154). In this regard, Little Bill's death represents his futile attempts to convert alleged assassins and liars to his own highly questionable principles. In the same way, the destruction of Little

Bill and his deputies can be read as an allegory for the postwar years and the crisis felt by the veterans fighting for democracy overseas.

10.3 Madness as the Voice of Truth

As Foucault describes in his cultural history of madness and mental illness in European societies, the stance towards madness changed significantly during the course of a few hundred years. In the cultural perception before and during the Renaissance, madness was not simply an illness, but it represented a perception of truths and the right to voice them even against the ruling class (Foucault 29-35). Madness separated its sufferers from society and thereby provided them with the ability to see beyond the usual societal restrictions. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the treatment of madness was institutionalized and those perceived as mad were locked away (Foucault 38-64). Whoever did not conform to the social order was diagnosed as being mentally ill and robbed of their right to voice their opinion. In the literature of the Renaissance, madness was used to aim criticism at society and to voice opinions which may otherwise not have been acceptable. The change in the cultural perception of madness which Foucault describes is reflected in the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the notion of the madman or madwoman as bearer of truth that has been suppressed by societal convention still lingers.

In Ethan's rage against Native Americans and his obsession to kill Debbie, which can be described as a form of madness, he stays isolated from society. What is more, "[…] Ethan began considering deception (here envisioned as misdirection) as a way of dealing with his conflicted feelings" (Cohen 93). By keeping apart from society and pretending to be insane, he is able to see more clearly and instead of clouding his judgement, Ethan's madness turns him into a relentless, sharp-minded investigator (Slotkin 465). Thus, he is able to see through "the diversionary tactics of Scar's raid on the settlers" (Winkler 152). He also discovers Futterman's deceits in obtaining his money and uses this knowledge to his advantage. Similarly, Laurie's discriminating way of perceiving Native Americans takes the form of an elaborate rant, which is evocative of Ethan's racist attitudes and feelings. Nonetheless, it can be an expression of her failure to commit Martin to herself, as her emotional outbursts occur at the same time as he leaves her. While Ethan hides behind madness, he finds out the truth about the stolen cattle and that the rangers have been lured into a trap by the Comanche. In his delirium, he is able to confront the chief Scar and take revenge on his tribe. Likewise, by pretending to be mad, Laurie succeeds in fooling her

family and in hiding her intentions. And so, it is through Ethan's obsession over Native Americans and Laurie's hysteria that clarity of vision, the discovery of subterfuge and, ultimately, truth are realized.

Some critical scholars even see Debbie's abductor Scar as Ethan's alter ego, who probably raped Martha, and it is assumed that he was in a sexual relationship with Debbie (Bandy and Stoehr 169-171; Carter 78; Eckstein 15). As previously mentioned, the destruction of Scar allows Ethan to release his repressed feelings towards Debbie and Martha. Ethan's desire to kill Debbie is also based on the idea that being sexually defiled by the Comanches is worse than being dead (Carter 85-86). One of the finest examples are the deranged female captives liberated by the U.S. cavalry, as they are no longer seen as individuals who ought to be taken seriously, but as savages reduced to medical cases. In this respect, Slotkin critically comments: "By rescuing a pure and unsullied Debbie from Scar, Ethan can symbolically expiate his own guilt toward Aaron and in a sense redeem Martha's sin as well, since her living avatar will be a virgin daughter" (466). Thus, Ethan is guided by old-fashioned conventionality and medieval ideas of penance. In addition, Ethan's reactions align with those of his real-life counterparts who had to cope with anxieties of an external threat and the insecurities of living up to an "ideal of masculinity" (Foster 43-44). Barker mentions that exerting dominance over women, male subordinates and the environment provided an outlet for these emotions (304). In his analysis of the allegorical use of Monument Valley in *The Searchers*, Richard Hutson "understand[s] Ethan's madness as an exaggerated commitment to the fantasy of male power and autonomy imagistically linked to the geology of the valley" (96). This is part of the reason for Ethan's inflexibility and isolation in social interactions.

In *Unforgiven*, madness also serves as a device that lets a character voice truth which society does not, or does not want to, acknowledge. William Munny suffers from his past warlike experiences, which are reminiscent of the Vietnam War considering "the film's origins in the 1970s, when screenwriter David Webb Peoples completed the first draft of his script and when, according to Kitses, the Western's 'revisionist shadow' became the dominant iteration of the genre" (Nelson 22). Against this background, the film can be read as a critique of war, as the men enlisted in the army suffered from shell shock after fighting in the war. Munny embodies the problems of the American society after the war, as the psychological damage it caused in individuals was not addressed adequately by society (Carter 86). He lost his best friend Ned in their pursuit of the two cowboys, and when he hears of his fate he feels that he is guilty of his death, as Ned did not kill anyone. The

absurdity of action hinted in this scene illustrates the absurd logic of war in general, as enlisted soldiers were blindly functioning according to plans and orders. This is highlighted by the fact that Ned died without having been buried as William deplores while leaving the town of Big Whiskey, implying that the death and disappearance of comrades were not commemorated appropriately. This option of William Munny's characterization is an allusion to men's experiences of war. In *The Searchers*, Ethan Edwards' character also shows the futility of trying to make society see that the cause of violence lies in the cruelty of society itself, as he leaves in complete isolation and without having been understood. Although both Ethan Edwards and William Munny leave the community at the end of the film, the difference between the two is that William was successful in his mission, while Ethan was unable to gain any sympathy for his cause.

11. Conclusion

The Searchers and *Unforgiven* are both established films within the Western genre, but their plots are extremely different. *The Searchers* deals with the vengeful nature of the Western hero, as he struggles to maintain his own boundaries of good and evil. *Unforgiven*, on the other hand, deals with the passing of the Western hero, as he contemplates his own choices. They are both categorically Western, but they also both paint a different version of the wild, wild West. Ethan and Will offer two individually but equally unsustainable versions of the Western hero. While Ethan's ruggedness cannot withstand his trauma, Will's remorse cannot sustain his legend. However, their madness offers them the opportunity to resolve the conflicts and reaffirm their values respectively. If observed in the context of their time, Ethan Edwards' character development arguably signals the drastic changes that the hero of the genre is about to undergo due to a tense socio-political climate. He is a rugged cowboy, who, by the end of the film, has overcome his feelings of anger and has experienced a shift in principles. The film thereby defines the traditional gender roles, sexual standards and racial conflicts of postwar America, while also making a statement about people's need to emancipate themselves from constraints and humans' natural tendency towards sexual interracial relationships. By avoiding simplistic reduction of the dilemmas related to gender, race, class and ethnicity, the film renders life more intelligently and accurately, seeking to evoke understanding about human motivation first and judgement later.

In *The Searchers*, John Ford depicts the main character Ethan Edwards as typifying his time. Ethan returns to his brother's family from the Civil War, a period of time that is often linked to the post-World War II era, giving way to the affluent and consumer-oriented society of the twentieth century (Cuordileone 97-99; Newlin viii). The scourge of the Civil War, and accordingly World War II, lies in the past and America is on the rise as an economic leader. The rise of capitalism after the war is symbolically dealt with by the theme of taking advantage of man's fear and capitalizing on it. Ethan's ambushing the trader Futterman can be seen as a criticism on commercialism and his scalping of Scar's head as mankind's scientific attempts to control an uncontrollable nature. Moreover, the unequal relationship between Ethan and Martin evokes the arrogance and snobbishness of managers and the submissive attitude of workers in capitalist American society, at times resulting in rebellion and rage, as illustrated by Martin's resistance to Ethan's immoral and arrogant behavior. Within the context of the time *The Searchers* was produced, Ethan stands exemplarily for the modern man faced by a void in light of the loss of order and hierarchy or religious guidance in the corporate economy of the postwar era.

In *Unforgiven*, William Munny cannot keep up with society's progress. Nevertheless, he is willing to kill for money in order to provide for his family, even though he does not possess the ability to saddle up a horse or use a gun due to his old age and weakness. Astute sheriffs like Little Bill exert their authority and are capable of keeping up with the times. By contrast, William Munny is haunted by the genealogical guilt of his past and the historical guilt of America as a nation which succeeds Colonial America. His masculinity is constructed in such a way as to malfunction before reversing it drastically, as he resurrects in order to defend Big Whiskey from the real danger embodied by Little Bill. William does not see himself as a romantic hero, and his own complicity in violent acts conforms to the Puritan idea of depravity, which can be interpreted as a paranoia about society and change as he cannot fit society's demands. Society after the war was making progress and demands on the individual were increasing in the wake of the Second-wave feminist movement, resulting in the reevaluation of the traditional gender norms (Cuordileone 3, 124; Hamilton 38-39). Rather than taking this as a challenge, the protagonist in *Unforgiven* gives up, at least for the majority of the film, and acts as if he would prefer to stop change in a time of social upheavals and major reforms. He finds himself in the West that is making a lot of progress, and he cannot deal with this development.

Will's character signals a forgotten iconic Western hero. Although he seemingly redeems himself and offers the kind of gunfight he is known for, his character has already been established and he must still return to his children and his new, remorseful lifestyle. Will's character is undoubtedly a mirror of the Western cowboy over time. Still capable to deliver the same iconic performance, the Western hero has been changed, and forced to forever reflect upon his past. In her article, Catherine Ingrassia claims that "the end of the film speaks, ultimately, to the failure of language – cinematic or linguistic – to challenge successfully the power of the myths it simultaneously helps construct" (57). Will's shifting principles and his remorse for his past deeds is the film's signal for future Westerns to be more critical of their characterization in order to avoid the very glorified, but mythical nature of the hero that has emerged from the genre's relationship with the American Frontier. The end message is that "we can never stop writing the West, we can only start reading it differently" (Ingrassia 58). It can be concluded that Will champions the cause of marginalized social groups rather than striving for power or glory. For a critical viewer who may synthesize and challenge different positions presented in the film, it becomes apparent that the film acts as a deterrent to speaking out against minority groups in public. It also raises concerns about the credibility and reality status of the Western genre altogether, thereby unmasking the detrimental effects of myths that stoke latent racist and sexist sentiments. Myths provide a simple and non-falsifiable causal theory that provokes actions or assertions widely held by the discursive community. By constructing and deconstructing the myths of the West and their heroes, both films illuminate the ambivalence in gender and race relations, the power struggles embedded in society, and the psychological implications of progress and war.

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Appendix

Abstract (English)

This thesis aims to analyze the Western films *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven* as symbolic representations of American values, given that the films' representation of the historical past relates to the time in which they were released. Therefore, the films are read as discourses on the social norms and armed conflicts of contemporary American society. *The Searchers* deals with the looming masculinity crisis in combination with the feminist and Communist threats of the Cold War period. In contrast, *Unforgiven* is a metanarrative about the classic Western values and gender norms. By revising and subverting the myths of the West, it uncovers the truth about the heroic tales and argues for a tolerant society. By means of the Western hero, the audience can experience the impressive scenery of the American West, but also the traces of the frontier narrative which celebrates the triumphalist conquest of the wilderness by European settlers, paving the way for civilization and progress. At the same time, they expose the gender bias, violence and endemic racism inherent in the myths of American ideology. In *The Searchers*, Ethan Edwards represents stoic masculinity that is contrasted with the domestic women and savage Natives. In the course of the film, his character changes due to the influence of the young and light-hearted Martin Pawley, who asserts his masculinity without, however, losing humanity. As a postmodern production, *Unforgiven* represents the downfall of heroic masculinity through the portrayal of an old and weak Western hero afflicted by remorse. Both films explore and challenge the classic Western codes by dealing with issues of honor and guilt, gender and race equality, social justice, and the conflict between good and evil. Although *The Searchers* and *Unforgiven* are produced in different social contexts, the heroes' inner conflicts illustrate the unsustainability to maintain a hegemonic masculinity based on dominance and oppression.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, die Westernfilme *The Searchers* und *Unforgiven* als symbolische Darstellungen amerikanischer Werte zu analysieren, da die filmische Darstellung der historischen Vergangenheit sich auf die Zeit bezieht, in der sie erschienen sind. Deshalb werden die Filme als Diskurse von sozialen Normen und bewaffneten Konflikten der modernen amerikanischen Gesellschaft interpretiert. *The Searchers* handelt von der drohenden Krise der Männlichkeit zusammen mit der feministischen und kommunistischen Bedrohung während des Kalten Krieges. Im Gegensatz dazu ist *Unforgiven* eine Metanarrative über die klassischen westlichen Werte und

Geschlechternormen. Indem es die Mythen des Westens revidiert und untergräbt, deckt es die Wahrheit über die Heldengeschichten auf und spricht sich für eine tolerante Gesellschaft aus. Anhand des Westernhelden kann das Publikum die beeindruckende Landschaft des amerikanischen Westens, aber auch die Spuren der Frontier-Erzählung nachvollziehen, die die triumphalistische Eroberung der Wildnis durch europäische Siedler zelebriert, da sie der Zivilisation und dem Fortschritt den Weg ebneten. Gleichzeitig entlarven sie die Voreingenommenheit gegenüber den Geschlechtern, Gewaltbereitschaft und weit verbreiteten Rassismus, die den Mythen der amerikanischen Ideologie innewohnen. In *The Searchers* steht Ethan Edwards für stoische Männlichkeit, die den häuslichen Frauen und wilden Ureinwohnern gegenübersteht. Im Laufe des Films ändert sich sein Charakter durch den Einfluss des jungen und unbeschwerten Martin Pawley, der seine Männlichkeit geltend macht, ohne jedoch die Menschlichkeit zu verlieren. Als eine postmoderne Produktion stellt *Unforgiven* den Niedergang der heldenhaften Männlichkeit dar anhand eines alten und schwachen Westernhelden, der von schlechtem Gewissen gequält wird. Beide Filme untersuchen und hinterfragen die klassischen Normen des Western, indem sie Fragen der Ehre und der Schuld, Gleichberechtigung der Geschlechter und Rassen, soziale Gerechtigkeit und den Konflikt zwischen Gut und Böse behandeln. Obwohl *The Searchers* und *Unforgiven* in unterschiedlichen sozialen Kontexten produziert wurden, verdeutlicht die innere Zerrissenheit der Helden die Unhaltbarkeit, die auf Dominanz und Unterdrückung beruhende hegemoniale Männlichkeit aufrechtzuerhalten.