

Movies and the American Mind: The Hero Nobody Wanted

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The story of the aging hero, wearied from his past accomplishments, wishing to live out his last days in peace, who must once again take up his weapons and stand forth to face a deadly challenge to his people, is as old in English literature as the BEOWULF epic and, in a slightly different form, as in the biblical story of Samson. This is also the story of the classic American western film HIGH NOON. A notorious killer who once plagued the community is returning to seek revenge on the man and the town responsible for his downfall. The aging marshal, Will Kane, is required to face this killer and his gang in one final showdown. The difference between the traditional version of this story and the narrative of HIGH NOON is that in the film the community deserts its hero, in fact does all it can to dissuade him from his action, and when he persists abandons him to his certain destruction. Although it is individual action that characterizes the American hero, never before had a film documented the nature of the hero's isolation from his society in such excruciating detail. The story of HIGH NOON is a story of triumph against impossible odds, but it is also the story of the failure of a community to take the necessary steps to insure its own survival.

The film was released in 1952, at the close of the war in Korea. This was the time of the first war Americans had fought that did not result in total victory. This was the time of the great fear that the spread of Communism would result in the destruction of the American way of life. This was the time of the first great fear of atomic war. America perceived itself as being under subversive attack and in danger of being overthrown from within or obliterated from without. This was a time

when American institutions were being questioned and fundamental guarantees such as freedom of speech and freedom of political belief were being attacked by many in the name of national security. This was the time of the election to the Presidency of the United States of Dwight D. Eisenhower, the commanding general of the Allied forces in Europe during World War II. Elected in 1952 and destined to serve two four-year terms, it would be Eisenhower's accomplishment as President to restore a sense of calm, even of complacency, to the American psyche. But Eisenhower was not a typical American hero, in that he had not been a battlefield commander, like George Patton or Douglas MacArthur; instead, Eisenhower had been a strategist, who had conducted his war from behind a desk. This was a time, in short, when heroes were hard to find, and those who were found were not, somehow, like those who had gone before.

Watching *HIGH NOON* today is a different experience from viewing it when it was first released. An entire generation of history and development informs today's viewing, and [if this is true, it is important to ask an impossible question: When is a film? Is the film shown in its original release the true version? Is the version seen on television, interrupted by numerous commercials, a valid version? Is the film seen at home on videocassette the same film as that shown in the theaters in 1952? If these versions are different, wherein lies the difference? What has happened to the film, and to the audience's perceptions of it, over the intervening years since its initial release? What perceptions are different? How can these perceptions, changed or not, be interpreted? Can interpretation remain constant? Can the film have the same impact, leave the same impression, create the same response from its first showing to the present day? If not, why? What has changed? Is seeing the film for the first time, forty years after it was made, the same experience, or even the same kind of experience, that viewing the film was during its first showing? Is seeing the film in repeated viewings over the years a repetition of the same experience, or is each viewing somehow different, and if so, different in what way? What accounts for these differences? For of course there

are differences.

Some of the differences that inform the viewing of the film today are these: Gary Cooper, the star of the film, died of throat cancer a generation ago. His image as the great American hero has not lived on after him as, say, John Wayne's has. To a viewer under thirty years of age, Cooper is an actor who represents virtually nothing beyond his portrayal of this single role. But in 1952, Gary Cooper was the definitive American presence on the movie screen, the embodiment of such real American heroes as Sergeant Alvin York, the Congressional Medal of Honor winner from World War I, portrayed by Cooper in the film *SERGEANT YORK*; Lou Gehrig, the "Iron Man" of the New York Yankees baseball team who still holds the record for most consecutive games played, played by Cooper in *THE PRIDE OF THE YANKEES*; as well as the fictional characters such as Robert Jordan, the perfect hero of Ernest Hemingway's definition of "grace under pressure" in *FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS*. There is also the Gary Cooper who is the naive do-gooder from rural America who confounds the city slickers in Frank Capra's *MR. DEEDS GOES TO TOWN* and who, in a darker view, becomes the embodiment of the average American man in Capra's *MEET JOHN DOE*. This is the Gary Cooper who was the title character of *THE VIRGINIAN* in 1929, the role that insured his stardom. All this is lost on the younger viewer of today, but when *HIGH NOON* was released in 1952, all of this and much more was included in the viewer's perceptions when Gary Cooper's name flashed on the screen. Today Cooper is remembered as a movie star of the past, but his legend has faded, and he remains an image only, and a diminished one at that, and this significantly changes the effect *HIGH NOON* can have on an uninformed viewer.

Another legend, billed fifth in *HIGH NOON* and generally unknown in 1952, cast in her first important role, is the woman whose life seemed for a time to be a fairy tale come true and the envy of women all over the world, (Princess) Grace Kelly. Surely everyone knows the story of the girl from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who became a famous and beloved

movie star and who then gave up her Hollywood crown to become a real Princess, Grace of Monaco. As well, everyone must know the unhappiness and tragedy surrounding her last years, and of her untimely death. None of this was or could have been foreseen at the time *HIGH NOON* was made. Grace Kelly was only another young starlet when she was cast in this film. But try to imagine seeing *HIGH NOON* without any subsequent knowledge of Grace Kelly. That was the only way possible to see the film in 1952; conversely, trying to see the film that way today, for anyone over twenty-five years of age, is quite impossible.

HIGH NOON opens with another actor who was little known in 1952 but is instantly recognizable today. Standing on a hilltop scanning the horizon, a pair of six-guns slung on his hips by two separate belt holsters, a cigarette dangling from his lips, and a squinting expression that was to become his trademark as both a hero and a villain in western films is Lee Van Cleef, who became famous along with Clint Eastwood in the Italian-made westerns of director Sergio Leone. It is these images, Cooper's and Kelly's and Van Cleef's, as well as those attached to other lesser-known figures in the film, which inform the film, but this information and its impact changes over the years. What is perceived in the film, any film, is partly dependent upon what images the audience can relate to it and what the relationship is between image, viewer, and viewing circumstance. In this discussion thus far, the images have all related in some way to images from film itself, from other movies and from the actors' roles in these movies. No film exists in isolation from other films, even if it is the first film the viewer has ever seen, because the nature of film is to present a series of images which seem to represent life itself or some version of experience that is like life, and these images blend with the images of memories, dreams, imagined experiences, and images from all forms of media including, but not limited to, other films.

To demonstrate this, let us look at two films which on first glance seem to have absolutely nothing to do with one another, and see if we can discover how one can inform the other. Any person knowledgeable about

film will reconfirm the title CITIZEN KANE as one of the greatest of American films. Among movie fans, film scholars, and "just plain folk," and even among people who have never seen the film, the name of this film provokes a decided response and calls to mind the young genius of Orson Welles and his several accomplishments as well as his many disappointments. CITIZEN KANE is a landmark film regardless of what one thinks of its merits. Seen today, more than fifty years following its initial release, it has the power to dazzle and astonish. Few films can make a similar claim. CITIZEN KANE is a truly legendary film, an icon of American moviemaking. What, however, does this film have to do with HIGH NOON? At first glance, absolutely nothing. But there is a connection.

The use of the name Kane for the marshal in HIGH NOON creates a link between the films. This need not mean that the films have anything else in common, or that this is anything more than a coincidence. But the point here is to demonstrate that there need be no other connection, or even any intention, to fuse the experiences of the two films into one. It is this fusion, this blending of one film into another, that determines the impact, the effect that films have on their audience, that must be investigated if one is to understand the relationship between film and the culture that produces that film. In this case, then, beyond the use of the family name Kane, what is it that these two films may have in common?

Both of these films feature a main character, and require a positive response to that character, who is a maverick, a highly individual and independent thinking and acting hero. This is a particularly American characteristic way of thinking, not only in the portrayal of the hero but in the audience's acceptance of these traits as heroic. Both main characters are driven men, driven by their own interior visions of what they themselves are or need to be and by the correlating view of what they perceive the world outside themselves to be. In Charles Foster (Citizen) Kane's case, it is the joy of manipulating the world, of the belief that the world can be manipulated, and doing so for his own selfish amusement and for the sense of self-accomplishment he realizes through the growth of financial

and political power that becomes so fascinating for the audience. But Charles Foster Kane finishes alone, without power, respect, or love, fabulously wealthy but, we are meant to believe, terribly unhappy. A more careful view shows *Citizen Kane* as a man who is less provably unhappy than disillusioned, with his world and with himself.

Will Kane in *HIGH NOON* seems to be the antithesis of the first Kane, and in many ways he is, but Will Kane is also a man who depends only upon his own assessment of himself, of the world around him, and of his own belief in what he alone is able to do and should accomplish. This is at least an egocentric point of view, although certainly a hero should have some confidence and pride in himself. But the American hero, at least in these two films, is one who goes beyond normal attitudes and becomes entirely self-justified. Where does this attitude come from? The two Kanes are both products of the American frontier. Both are infused with the peculiarly American belief in the limitlessness of the American vision as it pertains to each one's individual circumstances. Both characters refuse to take advice from others. Both are nearly brought to disaster by their involvement with not one but two women. Both are deserted politically by their one-time supporters, and both become outcasts in their own communities. Both then turn their backs upon those they have served. Both are left with a genuine and justifiable disgust with the people who were supposedly their friends and allies. Both are essentially lonely men who confound the efforts of others who try to understand them. Both are tested in their fundamental belief about the American way of life, and both find themselves deceived. Both men are essentially afraid, and their greatness lies in their ability to rise above their fears and face great danger, physical life-threatening danger in the case of Will Kane, financial and political ruin in the case of Charles Foster Kane. These are the qualities shared by the two characters, and these qualities are the essential links between the two films.

If this analysis is a valid one, there is still no reason to believe that it is anything more than a coincidence that the two characters share the

same name. It is probably inevitable that they share some of the same qualities, since these are the qualities of American heroes whoever they may be. Films must draw on the values of the culture from which they spring. There is no reason to believe that the makers of *HIGH NOON* intended or even thought about any connection with *CITIZEN KANE*. Once the viewer makes the connection, however, it must be seen by him to be inevitable, and one which is not to be erased or forgotten. Films provide their audiences with images and icons of myth, and these images and icons continually act and react with one another upon the persons who see them presented on the screen, although the result of that reaction cannot always be predicted. But some connections are always made by the viewer whenever he sees a film either for the first time or repeatedly. These connections may not be, probably are not, made on a conscious level, but it is in the making of these connections that movies are able to create myths and traditions, or to promulgate versions of them, that are perhaps stronger and more real than those any other medium can provide. Without these connections, without the similarity of responses to the presentation on the screen, without the fundamental cultural attitudes that films depict, movies are deprived of their primary ability to move audiences either emotionally or intellectually.

Perceptions of Evil

The moment Lee Van Cleef's face appears in the opening scene of *HIGH NOON*, the American viewer recognizes his image as a portrait of evil. "Evil" is an appropriate term for this context. Evil, in this film and in the American mind, is that which harms, or threatens to harm, the peacefulness of the community. It is that which disturbs the integrity of the family. It is that which prevents social progress. It is that which menaces the moral standards which are agreed to and practiced by society, a society which consists of the individual, his family, and the community group to which he belongs.

Evil comes from without. Its potential exists within the community, as

witness the scenes inside the saloon where the Sunday morning drinkers enthuse about the imminent arrival of Frank Miller, the villain of the film. These men in the bar are eager to follow Miller, but they are incapable of taking evil action on their own. They need leadership to behave badly, and Miller will provide that for them. Until his arrival, these men are kept from taking action by the social pressures of the community, which is a much larger group than they are, and by the restrictions placed on their behavior by the officers of the law. They will not attack a man wearing a badge, as is shown in a scene where Marshal Kane knocks a man to the floor of the saloon. The man complains that Kane's action is improper, since Kane is wearing both a badge and a gun, while the man on the floor has neither. Kane admits this, and apologizes.

What HIGH NOON does is to present the traditional view of evil and then extend it beyond its normal definitions. Let us again examine Van Cleef, who became well-known as a western movie "badman" based upon his appearance and manner, his image as a man who is willing to kill at any moment, his image of a ruthless and unfeeling man whose only emotion is rage. His image is that of one who may explode at any time, whose actions cannot be predicted. His physical movements are smooth and sinuous, serpentine. His voice is as rough as a coarse-grained file. His eyes are expressionless, flat and cold. This is the appearance of evil incarnate. He is sweaty and his clothes are dirty and stained. No good man, no ordinary character appears like this in a Hollywood film of this time. As the old saying went: Cleanliness is next to Godliness. A good man is clean, his clothes are clean, he is clean-shaven. Van Cleef cannot be a good man. Also, he is smoking a cigarette, and in 1952 only bad men smoked on screen in westerns. As well, Van Cleef wears two belt holsters with the guns tilted out from his body to facilitate a fast draw. He is clearly a gunfighter, and is up to no good. The other two members of Miller's gang are likewise easily spotted as evil. One viciously abuses his horse, which no good man would do, and drinks steadily. The other is quarrelsome, abusive, and insulting to the other two.

These men are known to the community they enter. Their faces and names are familiar. They are feared and despised, but no one will face up to them. Instead, the people they encounter on their way to the railroad station recoil in fear; one makes the sign of the cross to ward off evil, a gesture recognizable in countless American films. These three men, formidable as they are, still are not the main threat to the peace of the town, and they too must await the man who is the chief leader of the evil forces that beset the community from without.

Thus far, *HIGH NOON* has presented its villains in the traditional manner of American western films, and has used the conventions of the western genre to introduce the apparent conflict of the film. The audience settles back to await the appearance of the hero, and for the conflict to build between the hero and the gang until the inevitable shootout. But this film has many twists in its reels, and the real conflict, the actual suspense, is not built solely upon the traditional screen western, but upon other considerations.

One of these is the question of guns. Kane's new bride, Amy (played by Grace Kelly,) is a Quaker, a believer in nonviolence, who at the beginning of the film is so opposed to guns that she would leave her new husband rather than see him pick up his guns again, and it is apparent that a condition of the marriage is that Kane give up his weapons. It is, of course, a basic American right for a person to bear arms. A hero without a gun is somehow not American. To deprive a man of his gun is to emasculate him. So this is the struggle of a man who has been deprived of the emblem of his manhood, not just the badge of his office, and it is his new bride who has forced this condition upon him. There are many Biblical allusions in this film, and a moment's thought will show that this situation is very much like that of Samson when he is shorn of his strength by Delilah.

Guns figure in this western in an unusual way. On three separate occasions, a character takes off his gun and hangs it on a peg in Kane's office. Each man does so in order to signify a kind of retirement or

abandonment of his civic office and responsibility. Kane is the first to do this; he does so following his wedding ceremony, after a playful bit of conversation with his bride, demanding a kiss from her before he fully gives up his position as marshal and the life he has known in order to adopt a new life as a storekeeper in some remote place, far from the reputation he has attained as a peace officer. He soon returns to take up his gun again, and it is the buckling on of the gunbelt and the pinning of the badge once again to his shirt that causes the rift in his marriage. In a similar fashion, Lloyd Bridges, playing Harvey Pell, Kane's deputy, attempts to coerce Kane into recommending that he, Pell, be named the new marshal, and when Kane refuses, Pell turns in his gun, putting it on the same peg where Kane had previously placed his. Finally, a second deputy, who had been willing to stand by Kane, performs the same ritual when he discovers that no one else will join them to face the Miller gang. This abandonment of weapons in each case denotes the abandonment of civic responsibility. The gun is the means by which civic responsibility can be carried out. Without his gun, each man in effect gives up his responsibility to the community in which he lives.

The continual repetition of this action throughout the film creates a complex series of questions. In virtually no other western film does such a series of repeated disavowals against the use of weapons occur. Because this is a western, it is obvious that guns are necessary to maintain law and order. The abandonment of guns as a motif flouts all the conventions of the western genre. Why, then, is this action insisted upon and even ritualized in this film? For one thing, the guns that are given up do not belong to the individual deputies but are the property of the community. With each weapon that is returned to the community, the element of threat toward the community is increased, so that the threat of evil from outside the community is compounded by the actions of those who are sworn to protect it as they abandon their oath of office and seek only their own safety or their own ambition. It is not the gun that is evil, it is the abandonment of the means to protect the community that constitutes the evil act. Both

deputies act from selfish motives, but these motives are understandable and, in one case, seemingly justified. Yet by deserting their responsibilities, these deputies become a greater danger to the continued stability of the community than does the gunman seeking revenge.

Set in the contemporary context of 1952, this concern about the use of weapons and the abandonment of responsibility has a special importance. President Harry Truman was still in office. He had ordered the use of the atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the close of World War II. Later, in the Korean War, Douglas MacArthur had advocated the use of nuclear weapons to seal off Korea from Chinese invasion. MacArthur was extremely popular with the American public, who viewed him as a great military hero. Many people hoped he would run for President. Many sided with him when Truman fired him, the action which was probably Truman's most unpopular act in his political career. For many people, the use of atomic weapons seemed logical and necessary if America was to win the Korean War. But America was not to win this war, this first limited conflict in U.S. history. Many believed that this limitation was a betrayal of everything America stood for. But others believed that the use of the atomic bomb was in itself a betrayal of all that America stands for, and the argument is still unresolved to this day.

Kane goes to his old friend and mentor, a retired ex-marshal who no longer can use a gun because of the crippling effects of arthritis in his hands. Kane does not want him to use a gun, but simply to stand with him at the showdon. Kane does not want to face Miller's gang alone, but more importantly he does not want to think that no one but he believes in the course of action he has chosen. He is seeking a sign from just one other person that the action he is taking is the right action. He wants the community, even one member of the community, to acknowledge his action with a positive gesture. It is not to be. The old marshal refuses, and his argument that Kane would worry too much about him and forget to protect himself is logical and persuasive until we realize that it misses the point completely. Evil consists of deserting an old

friend in time of need, just as surely as evil consists of breaking one's word and in abandoning one's sworn duty to community or country.

If breaking an oath is evil, then Amy, Kane's bride, is evil in her action of leaving him. The worst trial Kane is forced to undergo is the desertion of his wife at the moment when he needs her support the most. It is this element of continued betrayals, always made for the most logical of reasons, that runs like a thread through the film as one after another each person Kane turns to deserts him, and in so doing abandons his own honor. Amy does so because of her religious beliefs, which come into conflict with her husband's actions. She alone acts not out of selfish motives but through genuine conviction.

The other woman in the film, Helen Ramirez, is perhaps the most intriguing character in the film. She is a foreigner in the town, a Mexican, a woman of wealth and power, who is viewed as a whore. She is a woman of fierce pride and great strength of mind, and she is afraid of no one. But she is a woman without sentiment, whose emotions do not include love or compassion or pity. She is a survivor, and she commands respect, but she is not a woman who loves or who can be loved. She takes as few risks as possible. She protects herself and her idea of herself without hesitation and with little thought for other people. She is the only character in the film who seems to be completely honest with herself.

Helen Ramirez is dark and Amy Kane is light. In the mythology of American courtship, the dark woman is the evil woman and the fair woman is pure. It is the dark woman who seduces men from their innocence, and it is those men who in turn seduce the fair woman from her purity. The dark, foreign woman is mysterious and desirable. She is the siren who calls in the night and whose seductive voice leads to disaster. She is, in short, not the woman to marry. But in this mythology, she is also the necessary tutor, the initiator into the mysteries of sex and love. She is the devil's mistress, and a man may lose his soul in pursuit of her. The fair lady, on the other hand, is pure in body and spirit, and

she must be won through courtly pursuit and noble gestures. But she must become a little like the dark lady if she is to be a fitting wife; she must lose her innocence. She must submit to a man's will. The world is a man's world, and she must accept that world if she is to join him.

That is the myth. The film uses the myth but alters it. Helen Ramirez is perhaps the strongest character in the film, not excepting Kane. She knows her own mind and is unbeset with doubts. She is pragmatic and clear in her vision. She has no illusions about herself, her life, or the community she inhabits. She is an outsider, a position that allows her to observe her surroundings dispassionately. She is a modern woman in a traditional setting, and she handles herself well in an extremely difficult situation. When she prepares to leave town, she comments that she does not want to live in the kind of town Hadleyville will become when Kane is dead. She has long ago recognized the hypocrisy of the citizens, and she has lived with it. But with no one left to represent honesty, which has been Kane's function, she no longer wishes to stay. The town, she says, will die.

Amy Kane, on the other hand, is a young and naive girl. How young and naive is revealed as the film progresses. The first time Kane and Amy are alone after their wedding, Kane tries to reassure her that he will give up his former life. "I'll try," he says. But she does not know what he means. She responds with an echo of his words, but she doesn't try. She threatens to leave him if he doesn't put down his gun and forget about facing Frank Miller. She is adamant, unable to believe that Kane can refuse to do what she wishes. She tells him, "You don't have to be a hero for me." He is irritated, and realizes that she understands nothing of what is going on. He tells her, "I'm not trying to be a hero. If you think I like this, you're crazy." She leaves.

Helen Ramirez calls Amy's behavior incomprehensible. She says that a woman's place is with her man, and that a woman should fight for him, help him, do anything in her power to keep him. When Amy asks why she doesn't do this herself, Helen answers, "Kane's not my man." But

Amy still cannot bring herself to compromise her beliefs. It is only when she is getting on the train and sees the Miller gang that she realizes what Kane must face, and only when she hears gunfire from the streets of the town does she at last make her decision to stand by her husband.

What Amy Kane does is the most startling and morally paradoxical moment in the film. She runs from the station towards the town, drawn to the sound of the gunfire. When she is unable to locate anyone, she takes refuge in the marshal's office, the place Kane is most likely to be or, absent, to return to. While she is waiting, one of the Miller gang positions himself against the wall outside. He takes one shot at Kane, who is revealed to be wounded and taking refuge in the saddle shop across the street. Amy sees him, and she sees the gang member outside the window. At this point the camera cuts to a view of the outlaw from outside in the street as he discovers both of his guns are empty. He cradles them in his arms, almost like a baby, while he reaches for his cartridges. A shot blasts the momentary silence, gunsmoke surrounds the outlaw, and he pitches face forward and falls to the ground, dead. Amy Kane has shot him in the back, at a moment when he was defenseless and virtually unarmed.

Two things are indefensible in the Hollywood mythology of the old west. One is stealing a man's horse. The other, even worse, is shooting someone in the back. Yet in *HIGH NOON* the marshal's wife commits the worst of crimes. What are we to make of this? The myth has been turned upside down, and in the context of a western film, Amy Kane has committed the most evil act of all. How can we condone it?

Amy Kane must accept and become a part of her husband's world if she is to be a true wife. Like Ruth in the Bible, she must bow before her husband's will. She must share his life, go where he goes, do what is necessary for his well-being. In the extreme circumstances of this film, she must somehow redeem not only herself but also the entire community. She must take action so drastic that it will stand as a counterbalance to all the betrayals Kane has been subject to. So she takes up the gun,

which by great irony is the gun left by the resigning deputy, and shoots the man who has been shooting at her husband. This is the exculpating version, and we have no choice but to accept it. But in fact Amy Kane commits a despicable act, one which we would not accept from anyone else in the film. The film challenges us: What will we accept and what not? There are no easy answers.

Perceptions of Good

We accept Will Kane as the hero of *HIGH NOON*, but what is it exactly that is heroic about him? Moreover, why does he behave as he does? Kane himself does not think he is a hero. But it is easy for us to define his heroism: He is willing to give up his life for what he believes, and his beliefs are those of the American tradition. He can do no other than to stand up to evil. He must try to protect his community. He exhibits great courage and takes great risks with no thought for his own gain, and of course he triumphs. He is in all of these ways a hero any American can identify with.

Yet Kane is an antithetical hero. He begins to run away not once but twice. He sweats, not only from the heat but out of fear. He admits he is afraid. He gives the impression that he would rather do anything else than face Frank Miller. He seems to have no special skills, and we begin to wonder if he can survive. He becomes increasingly disillusioned as he searches for and is denied any help. He is, in his own way, as naive as his bride, and as each layer of hypocrisy is stripped from the community facade, it is as though a layer of skin is being stripped from his flesh. He doubts himself, and his doubts increase to the point that he no longer knows, if he ever did know, why he is following this course.

For most of the film, we are preoccupied with Cooper's portrayal of an increasingly desperate man. We tend to forget the small moment just after the wedding when Kane is flirtatious and boyish, as though thirty years had dropped away. This tiny view of the Kane who was is necessary for a complete picture of the Kane who is, a man facing the most difficult

situation of his life. Kane is a man who can laugh readily and heartily, who can be funny, who can be a lover as well as a fighter, who can be irresponsible in small ways but never in large ones. This man trusts those who occupy elected office to be honest, upright, and dedicated, as he himself tries to be. This is a man who, for the sake of the woman he loves, is willing to try to give up the life he has known for many years and in middle age to try to make a new start. This, too, is a man who takes his oath of office and his civic responsibilities very seriously, and who cannot abandon his duty as he sees it.

Several characters ask him why he stays to face Miller, especially since the townspeople have turned their backs to him and have left him to be gunned down in the street. Only Helen Ramirez asks no such question; instead, she says, "He is Will Kane." This may be the best answer. Kane himself can offer only partial answers and enigmatic replies. "They never made me run before," he tells Amy. But this is early in the film, and it isn't clear, perhaps not even to himself, who Kane means by "they." Is it the Miller gang? The town officials? His wife? All of these? Or is it his nerves he is speaking of, his own fears? There is no answer. We cannot know.

When he is asked by Harvey Pell why he came back, Kane replies, "If you don't know, I can't tell you." But later, when asked why he stays, he answers, "I don't know." The first answer is an American cliché; the second is startling admission for an American hero to make. And we come to believe him—he doesn't know why he stays, why he faces the terrible odds, why in spite of all the betrayal and disillusion he faces, he continues to follow the path he has chosen. Helen Ramirez has said all that can be said: "He is Will Kane." The nature of heroism can be described in terms of what a hero does, but not in terms of why he does it. If evil is a mysterious force in the world, defying all analysis and all theology, so too does heroism contain the same mystery. In terms of cause, both evil and good are equally mysterious.

The first view of the town of Hadleyville in the film is a view of the

church, with the majority of the citizens entering as the three members of the Miller gang ride by on their way to the station. This church is central to the action and to the characters in the film. Amy is a Quaker and so is not a member of the community church. Will and Amy are married by the town judge and not in the church. Kane is not a churchgoing man. Both his position and his temperament keep him from church membership. He is a private man, whose beliefs are strictly his own, and while we do not see him as a godless man, yet we do not picture him as a devout and pious churchgoer. When he goes to the church seeking help after being rebuffed at the saloon, he does so because, as he says, "There are people here." Kane realizes that he is more apt to find the kind of help he needs—men willing to use their guns—at the saloon. But no help is to be found there, and Kane, reluctantly, seeks help among the church congregation.

As Kane enters the church, the minister is reading the scriptural text. The passage is from the Old Testament's final book, Malachi, Chapter 4:1-3:

For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of Hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves in the stall.

And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of hosts.

Kane is allowed to speak. He informs the congregation about Miller's impending arrival and asks for their help. The reaction is swift and chaotic. Everyone talks at once. No one can be heard clearly, but everyone wants to express his view. Finally order is established, and a heated discussion takes place. Miller's story is recounted: He was a

killer, Kane arrested him and sent him "north" to be hanged but Miller's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and now, five years later, Miller has been pardoned. A telegram has warned of his imminent arrival. He has threatened the lives of Kane and the judge who sentenced him. A clear implication is that he will exact vengeance on the town and its people as well.

The discussion turns. Kane is declared responsible for the situation. The judge is accused. The lack of deputies is complained of. "Politicians up north" are said to be responsible—"It's their mess, let them clean it up." Efforts to support Kane are ignored, shouted down, or argued away. The minister refuses to side with Kane, claiming that to tell his congregation to go out and kill is a moral dilemma greater than he or the church can contend with.

Mayor Henderson speaks last. If Kane would leave town immediately, he says, there most likely would be no trouble. The new marshal will arrive the next day, and he can handle the situation then. Henderson urges Kane to leave right now, saying this is best both for Kane and for the town. The verses from Malachi are now revealed in their full irony: Kane will ultimately triumph over Miller and his gang, and the town will have to live with its new knowledge of itself, that it was tried and found wanting.

The Failure of Institutions

The church has failed in this instance to take any leadership or to provide any moral guidance. But if the church is not the institutional answer to the problem of evil, neither are the courts nor the realms of politics capable of providing a solution, at least not in this film. Neither law nor government is able or willing to take action. Judge Mettrick leaves town, without saying goodbye. Judges are human, and have human failings. Mettrick's action is an admission of the limits of institutional law. It is also an expression of the ambivalence Americans feel toward the law. The traditional American attitude is one of independence, of

individual action, and of minimal interference by government in the lives of its citizens. We might well expect, then, the formation of a posse of outraged citizens to protect the town. We might also expect the mayor to take charge and to offer a plan of action to defend the town. Neither happens. The citizens are not willing to take any personal risks, and the politicians are concerned with the town's image and reputation, which means preventing any confrontation or gunplay, since a gunfight would be viewed badly by any potential future investors. Prosperity, financial prosperity, has become the thing of paramount importance.

The Hero Nobody Wanted

Kane returns to his office, sits at his desk, writes out his last will and testament. He pauses before he writes, and we have to wonder what he can write. Everyone he has turned to has refused him. His wife of one hour has left him over a disagreement about the use of guns. The judge, his working partner in the administration of justice, has fled. His best friend has hidden in his house and forced his wife to lie about his whereabouts so Kane will not find him. The mayor, another friend, practically drives him from the town. His mentor, the retired marshal, refuses to help and sits stubbornly in his bitterness over the lack of respect and gratitude he thinks he should deserve for his efforts when he was a peace officer. Harvey Pell, the deputy, has deserted his job and has fought with Kane, trying to force Kane to leave town. Kane has won the fight, but has injured his gun hand in the process. The other deputy has also resigned, claiming that he must think of his family's welfare and so cannot risk his life in such a one-sided fight. All these have deserted Kane, have abandoned their responsibilities to him and to the community. What can Kane possibly write? We are not to know. Kane seals the envelope and write on the front: To be opened in the event of my death. He leaves it on the desk and steps outside.

When Gary Cooper, his face streaked with sweat, racked with fatigue and pain and anguished disappointment, leaves the office and steps out

into the street and checks the time on his watch, then squints up at the glaring sun overhead, the camera pans back from his face to a view of his full stature, and then keeps moving back further and further until we can see the entire length of the street and all the buildings of the town, and there is no other person visible anywhere, and there is no movement and no sound, and Cooper, a tall man, seems to become smaller and smaller until he is miniscule, on the verge of disappearing entirely. Never has anyone looked so alone, so helpless, so isolated as Cooper does in this filmic moment.

The train whistle sounds, and Kane starts off down the deserted street toward the station. The scene cuts to the station. We see Amy Kane and Helen Ramirez get on the train, and then we see Frank Miller's face for the first time as he gets down from the train and greets his men. His face is nearly handsome, but marred by pockmarks left by smallpox and by a certain implacable coldness of expression. He checks the shells in his gun and then the four men start off towards the town.

Amy watches from her seat on the train. She is in turmoil, her face twisted by her inner struggle. When she hears a shot, she runs frantically from the train in the direction of the sound. Kane, meanwhile, has spotted the men coming and waits until they have passed, then calls out Miller's name. This is part of the Hollywood western myth. The deadly game must be played fairly. Miller's brother Ben fires, misses, and is killed by Kane. The men scatter, and all of them move toward the center of town. Amy runs up, stops briefly by the dead body of Ben Miller, and then, horrified, runs on.

In the running gun battle, Kane manages to kill Colby, the Lee Van Cleef character, but Kane himself is wounded by Frank Miller and seeks refuge in the saddle shop. Miller and Pierce, the remaining gang member, separate and take up positions where they have the saddle shop in a crossfire. Pierce is suddenly shot in the back by Amy, who has entered Kane's office through the back door.

Once she shoots Pierce, Amy thrusts the gun away and covers her face

with her hands, appalled at what she has done. Miller sees Pierce fall, cuts behind the building and enters Kane's office. He finds Amy, now weaponless, and drags her out into the street, using her body as a shield. Kane emerges from the saddle shop to face Miller, calling upon him to let Amy go. Amy twists in Miller's grasp and claws at his face, drawing blood in long dark streaks down his pitted face. He pushes her to the ground and fires at Kane, but Kane returns fire and Miller falls dead in the street.

The camera takes up the same long position it held when Kane first started to the station, and as Kane bends down to lift his wife to her feet, the street begins to fill with people, first just a few, then more and more until the street is packed. A boy brings the horse and wagon filled with the Kanes' possessions. Kane watches the townspeople swarm into the street. He does not speak, but simply unpins the marshal's badge from his shirt and, in a gesture nearly impossible to describe, half drops, half flings the badge into the dust at his feet. He and Amy climb into the wagon and drive away. The film is over.

Kane's gesture with the badge seems to sum up the film. He has triumphed, but there is no taste of victory. If, as in the verses from Malachi, he has trod the wicked and they are ashes under the soles of his feet, he also has the taste of ashes in his mouth. The gesture with the badge is one of distaste, as if something familiar had suddenly revealed itself as loathsome. He doesn't speak; he has never been an articulate man, and speech here is not necessary. He and Amy drive off in silence, united at last, but united by what are literally unspeakable acts. We can only speculate about their future, but this time as they leave, there is a significant difference. This time Will Kane takes his gun with him.

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