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Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, the "Alternative" Western, and the American Romance Tradition

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Much criticism of Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* focuses on the way the film dismantles or deconstructs traditional western myths. Maurice Yacowar argues that *Unforgiven* is a myth "disremembered and rebuilt, to express a contemporary understanding of what the west and the Western now mean" (247). Len Engel explores the film's mythopoetic nature, stating that director Eastwood and scriptwriter David Webb Peoples "undermine traditional myths" in a tale that evokes Calvinist undertones of predestination (261). Leighton Grist suggests that the film "problematizes the familiar ideological assumptions of the genre" (294). It is entirely appropriate to view the film as a revisionist attempt to scrutinize and undermine traditional western mythology. In addition, exploring *Unforgiven* in terms of central elements of early American intellectual culture involves a noble attempt to understand American counter-mythology within the context of a richly textured cultural history. *Unforgiven* is very much a revisionist Western. But in what sense is it revisionist? Do all revisionist renderings of American western mythology reflect a uniform political orientation? Do they all involve an unambiguous leftist response to the right-wing political underpinnings of most Westerns? Eastwood does reconstitute and challenge the traditional western myth, since the protagonist Will Munny manifests all of the darker and more brutal impulses that sustained American expansionism. But like

the traditional frontier hero, he also cleans up the town, avenges his friend, and protects the women. Eastwood's account of the west is wonderfully ambiguous; it is the final rendering of a particular brand of the Western he had been enacting since the three cult Westerns of Sergio Leone. The film is at once a thoughtful revision of conventional notions of the west, a self-reflexive inquiry into the history of the Western film genre, and a quintessentially American story. It is what Richard Slotkin would call an "alternative Western." As such, the film reflects the conventions of the American romance as they appear in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Edgar Allan Poe; it employs the ironic mode to capture the complex ambiguities, the fathomless moral and psychological dilemmas of the American frontier experience. In *Unforgiven*, the west becomes what it truly was: a place that drew its identity both from a spirit of self-sacrifice and from an impulse to thoughtless violence and bloodshed.

This ambiguity and irony is intricately woven into the film's characters, imagery, and narrative design, but one scene crystallizes these themes in a particularly poignant way. In the midst of a storm, the outlaw hero Will Munny enters a saloon and whorehouse in the town of Big Whiskey, Wyoming. Together with his partners, the Schofield Kid and Ned Logan, he is in search of two cowboys who have "cut up a whore." Ned and the Kid go upstairs to "take advances" on the bounty they will earn for killing the men. Munny is sick with fever and sits alone at a table. Since they have all ignored the signs forbidding firearms, the town sheriff Little Bill Daggett (along with his men and the dime novelist who ostensibly will record his exploits) enters to confront Munny. Here the film deconstructs all of the traditional social roles and character associations of the Western. Munny assumes the name of Hendershott, a fellow outlaw, now dead, who once hated him out of fear. In a conversation with Ned before Daggett enters the saloon, Munny recalls a hallucinatory vision he has just had concerning Hendershott, saying, "His head was all broke open. You could see inside of it. Worms were coming out." Munny's motives for taking the man's name are unclear. He is racked with guilt because of his violent behavior, and his fever has made him delirious. In this state of near hallucination the distinct self of the outlaw hero is dissolved. Confronted with Little Bill, Munny claims he has no gun, and when Little Bill discovers the lie, he beats him brutally, not as Munny, but as Hendershott. The scene becomes ironic as the outlaw hero is transformed into the fearful and anguished victim he has just seen in a fitful vision. The sheriff, now the perpetrator of senseless violence, does so to enforce a statute against violence. One scenario so prevalent in the conventional Western is artfully displaced: in the traditional story, the law is enforced by heroic men of virtue, and the outlaw, when hero, acts with justifiable motive. But in this scene, the needle of the moral compass spins violently out of control. The outlaw hero's identity is lost in delusion, and the only victim is a long dead violent outlaw who arguably deserves his fate. Should Little Bill come out

the winner in the end (which he does not), the Western's conventional heroic lawman will emerge only later as an absurd caricature in the dime novelist's false narrative. This scene exemplifies the ambiguity and irony that informs Eastwood's particular brand of the revisionist Western.

Eastwood's revisionism is a richly complex matter. His film also provides a view of American frontier history that reflects the influence of American romance aesthetics. In this essay, I will suggest that we gain a better understanding of the major thematic currents present in *Unforgiven* if we consider how the film operates in the tradition of Hawthornian and Melvillian romance. I will first contextualize the work within the broader traditions of western revisionist history and narrative; then I propose to explore how the subversive romance aesthetics of authors such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe link up with the Western genre to create the cultural and intellectual history that in turn produces *Unforgiven*.

I.

Critics universally agree that *Unforgiven* is a clear departure from traditional Westerns. But this assessment tends to oversimplify the genre as a whole. As was the case with the gothic romance in the nineteenth century, the popularity of the Western has led to a superficial assessment of its value. By many, the genre is seen as rather an explicitly conservative and uncritically affirmative of American nationalism and expansionist imperialism. Close scrutiny, however, reveals that the Western is by no means monolithic. 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. Revisionist accounts of the western experience enter the public eye most commonly in films such as *Unforgiven*.¹ But historians, literary scholars, and cultural critics have actively problematized American frontier history and mythology for many years.

Unforgiven embodies some of the critical impulses explored by Patricia Nelson Limerick in *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. Limerick provides a starkly revisionist account of western history and traces its implications for the social and political realities of twentieth-century America. By exploring the west in the context of conflict and conquest, she provides an account of American expansionism rich with historical and moral complexities, burdened with ethical tensions centered on the native American and the white settler, the landowner and the pioneer, the capitalist and the working miner, as well as the interdependencies of east and west.² She writes in partial response to a pervasive western mythology, arguing that the subject of conquest has rarely been treated with appropriate attention to these tensions, since more traditional Western films like *Dodge City*

(1939), *Fort Apache* (1948), *The Alamo* (1960), and *True Grit* (1969)—those that contrast sharply with *Unforgiven*—offered “the occasion for light-hearted national escapism” (19).

Unforgiven responds, as does *Limerick*, to the national mythology expressed through the Western, and presents in ironic terms an alternative version of the central figures of frontier myth. Interestingly, the Western as a genre emerges in the nineteenth century, shortly after the major romances of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe were published. Westerns appear first in the form of popular dime novels that portray their heroes in unambiguously heroic terms, reflecting little of the subversive aesthetics we associate with novels such as *The Scarlet Letter* or *The Confidence Man*. Historical figures in the west, often men of dubious moral substance and even those for whom there are ample historical records, have quickly become more mythic than real under the pressure of Western mythologizing first in the dime novels and then in film. In *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881-1981*, Stephen Tatum traces the process by which Henry McCarty (alias William Bonney and Billy the Kid), a comparatively obscure and ethically questionable young man who died violently, became a fluid and comparatively unstable mythological presence in American film, variously as the greasy vagabond and as the figurative embodiment of the American spirit of rebellion and individualism. In *Unforgiven*, Jaimz Woolvett, cast as the “Schofield Kid,” bears a remarkable resemblance to the one reliable photograph of McCarty, and as such his appearance in the first scene, specifically with his overly affected false bravado (“You don’t look like no rootin’ tootin’ sonofabitchin’ cold-blooded assassin”) is the film’s first reference to the difference between representation and reality, history and popular mythology. Tatum pays particular attention to the change in representation and perception that occurred in 1973 in Sam Peckinpah’s *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. In the wake of the Vietnam conflict and in the midst of a crisis in national identity, narratives surrounding the figure of Billy the Kid shift from the romantic to the ironic mode, and they begin to take on some of the qualities we might otherwise associate with the novels of Hawthorne and Melville. This more subversive approach then dominates the Western throughout the 1970’s and finds its most recent expression in *Unforgiven*.³

Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation* (1992) also explores the various and multiple ideological substructures of western myth as they evolved in film, providing a useful taxonomy for understanding the differences between conventional and revisionist Westerns. Slotkin offers a useful framework for reading Eastwood’s work in *Unforgiven*. Slotkin identifies two traditions in the Western that convey two competing public myths: the “progressive Western,” and the “alternative Western.” The progressive Western is informed by the nationalistic and expansionist ideologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This genre reflects a belief in manifest destiny and the notion of an American special mission,⁴ and has its roots in the dime novels of the nineteenth cen-

ture, which were themselves translated into the early "B" Westerns of the 1930's.⁵

But in the sixties and early seventies, in the wake of growing national discontent with domestic and foreign affairs, the public mythos that had found its greatest expression in the western hero began to break down. The early seventies saw a dramatic decline in Hollywood's production of Westerns. The genre began to alter its formal characteristics under the influence of new ideologies, and the "alternative" Western was born. Slotkin suggests that this emerging sub-genre ends the hegemony of right-wing ideology in the Western (628). The alternative Western took on three forms during the period: the formalist, the neo-realist, and the counterculture (or new cult of the Indian) Western. Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter* and *Joe Kidd* are representative of the formalist aesthetic derived from the "spaghetti Westerns" of Sergio Leone. They feature abstract, ahistorical plots and mysterious gunfighter figures who ignore the normative behaviors of traditional "progressive" western heroes (628-629).⁶ The neo-realist Western, while rooted in an identifiable historical context, moves away from purely traditional or progressive western mythology to portray the darker, meaner, and more brutal aspects of the western experience: *Wild Rovers* (1971), *Culpepper Cattle Company* (1972), *Bad Company* (1972), and *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* (1971) represent neo-realism. But a conscientious attempt to reconstitute a clearly leftist ideology occurs in the counterculture or new "cult of the Indian Western." As Slotkin notes, this sub genre owes its roots to John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) and *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), and to Sidney Salkow's *The Great Sioux Massacre* (1965). The counterculture Western reaches its height in the next decade with films such as *A Man Called Horse* (1969), *Soldier Blue* (1970), and Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (1970). The new "cult of the Indian" Western calls into question the motives and values that have historically informed American progressivist ideology and further asserts the value of native American culture, exposing the dark legacy of brutality that led to the destruction of Indians throughout the West. Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josie Wales* (1976) combines formalist, neo-realist and counterculture genre devices. Richard Slotkin reads *Josie Wales* as "an allegory of post-Vietnam reconciliation" stating that "to protect the multicultural commune that has gathered around him, Josie negotiates a truce with a Comanche chief in terms that echo the concepts of mutual deterrence and détente that were so prominent in the diplomacy of 1973-1977" (*Gunfighter Nation* 632). Thus, the Western has achieved a certain ideological multiplicity, reflecting through its alternative forms a simultaneous adherence to and critique of dominant expansionist nationalism.

In *Unforgiven*, Eastwood provides a masterful example of the alternative sub-genre. But upon close inspection, it appears that the Western in the alternative mode is not the original creation of the late twentieth century. There is, as I have noted, an observable continuity between the

subversive aesthetics of nineteenth-century novelists like Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville, and the ideological subversion that appears in the alternative Western. Both emerge from the same problems with creating cultural history, though at different times, and both challenge in similar ways the dominant ideological perspectives of their age. In addition, the alternative Western and the nineteenth-century romance use similar generic conventions to explore issues and portray themes.

II.

The alternative Western and the romances of Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe share in common a preoccupation with uncertainty and ambiguity. Like *Unforgiven*, many nineteenth-century romances attempt to balance the politics of manifest destiny against a subversive awareness of the darker and more brutal aspects of American expansionism. In "The Custom-House Introductory to *The Scarlet Letter*," Hawthorne describes the location of this balance as a middle space that serves as both a narrative prelude to the novel and as Hawthorne's most significant theoretical statement. Indeed, "The Custom-House Introductory" provides a detailed gloss on the artistic sensibility and narrative method of many nineteenth-century romancers, especially Melville and Poe.⁷ Hawthorne distinguishes between the "romance" and the "novel," arguing that romance narrative provides an alternative to the novel's propensity toward mimetic modes of representation. The romance privileges ambivalence on matters metaphysical, epistemological, and ideological, by creating "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (1442). This "neutral territory" or middle space is a realm of uncertainty, a region of epistemological and perceptual complexity and doubt. Romancers of Hawthorne's kind are unable to reaffirm any form of certitude. As Morse Peckham notes, these writers "went through a period of doubt, of despair, of religious and social isolation" (21-22). While metaphysics and cosmology are a central preoccupation, the "doubt" and "despair" that characterizes their work also found its way into social, cultural, and ideological concerns. Hawthorne and Melville especially were skeptical of utopian social projects, of fervent participation in political and ideological causes. Politically moderate, these writers helped found a tradition of thematic uncertainty, epistemological and moral ambiguity, and subjective perspectivity in the American novel.

Unforgiven can be seen as a recapitulation of just such a subversive romance aesthetics. The film, true to both the romance aesthetics, its moderate politics, and its ambivalence, exposes the anti-heroic, brutal, and dark undercurrents of avarice that characterized the west. But in doing so, the film emerges not as a revisionist polemic on the evils of American history, but as a new kind of revisionism. *Unforgiven* is a postmodern morality play that preserves the complexities of American

historical experience by embracing a favorite genre for Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe—the gothic romance. G. R. Thompson discusses the essential features of gothic literature in his Introduction to *Romantic Gothic Tales*. He suggests that in the genre “the tendency is not so much toward unattainable ultimate meanings as toward obsessive epistemological doubt” (26). Gothic texts foreground epistemological doubt and question our human capacity to *know* objectively. Through the use of gothic romance, Eastwood demonstrates his familiarity with a long-standing romance tradition in America. In *High Plains Drifter*, a film Eastwood directed in 1972, a mysterious stranger punishes a town for its collective cowardice, and as the man fades into the heat of the horizon, the audience is asked to consider that he was a ghost sent to exact a dark retribution. But the film never firmly establishes this fact, permitting the possibility that Eastwood’s character was merely a man, perhaps aware of the town’s history, but nevertheless a man. Both natural and supernatural explanations for events are plausible given the concrete facts of the story, but the audience cannot finally *know* which is true. Eastwood makes use of these same elements in *Unforgiven*, shifting them from the metaphysical to the ideological sphere. Like *High Plains Drifter* (and arguably *Pale Rider*), *Unforgiven* evokes the conventions of the classic gothic hero together with the imagistic patterns typical of the gothic romance in order to portray in skeptical relief the political values the western hero represents within American culture at large.

III.

The film begins in the midst of a storm in Big Whiskey, Wyoming. The darkness of night and storm imagery are of course stock-in-trade devices of the gothic romance. Two cowboys are “entertaining” themselves at Greely’s, the local saloon and whorehouse. One of the cowboys slashes the face of a young prostitute who has innocently giggled at the size of his penis. The town sheriff, a brutal man of infamous repute named Little Bill Daggett, refuses to punish the cowboys, requiring only that they pay the saloon owner, Skinny Dubois, for his loss of “property.” Angry at this injustice, the prostitutes offer a bounty of one-thousand dollars for the death of the cowboys. Hearing of the reward, a young braggart who calls himself the “Schofield Kid” contacts a reformed gunfighter and criminal named William Munny, asking him to help him collect the bounty. Here Eastwood begins to dismantle the “traditional” progressivist myth, showing us another less favorable aspect of the gunfighter figure. Munny is in a deplorable state, a poor pig farmer and widower barely able to support his two children, unable to shoot or ride. Reluctant at first, Munny considers his financial state, his children’s future, and decides to join the Kid. Together with Ned Logan, Munny’s old partner, they head north to Wyoming. Back in Big Whiskey, “English Bob,” another profligate gunslinger (who is attempting to mythologize himself with his companion a dime novel writer) has

come to collect the bounty. He is cruelly and comically beaten and jailed by Daggett, who dismantles the writer's false view of English Bob, insistently referring to him as "The Duck of Death." Munny, Ned, and the Kid enter town at night in the midst of another storm and Munny is beaten by Daggett for carrying firearms. After recovering from a deadly fever, Munny and the Kid kill the cowboys, and after parting from the other two, Ned is captured and beaten to death. Munny decides to avenge him, and in the midst of another storm, he kills Daggett and his henchmen.

The film abounds with gothic iconography, through which it deals with questions of guilt and innocence and treats the figure of the Western hero in ironic terms. In discussing the gothic romance, Thompson writes: "One egregious feature of the gothic is its violent hate-driven eroticism. The male figure in gothic fiction is frequently demonic in his physical and mental torture of the female The psychosexual realm is, moreover, informed by the ambivalent spiritual tradition of the virgin, wherein women are either unattainably pure from earthly taint or are 'debased'" (5). *Unforgiven* opens with reference to this motif, as a male villain debases the youngest, "purest," and least experienced of the prostitutes. His actions are sexually motivated, but his sexuality is malevolent and demonic. As he beats the young woman, he yells: "I'll ride you like a damned steer, bitch" and "I'll cut her tits off." His reaction is most certainly driven by a deeply rooted sense of inadequacy — as the oldest prostitute Strawberry Alice states when telling Little Bill why the cowboy beat the girl: "She didn't even touch his poke. All she did when she seen he had a teensy little pecker is give a giggle. That's all." But the cowboy's reaction to this incidental insult is extreme and deplorable. Beginning to display some of the traits of a gothic hero, the cowboy is driven to irrational and uncontrollable acts of depravity by a seemingly demonic psychological force. In the gothic romance, the characteristics of the victim are as important as those of the villain in creating the contrast between innocence and experience, purity and depravity. The gothic hero most often victimizes the pure and the innocent. In *Unforgiven*, the cowboy's victim is not Strawberry Alice, the older, stronger, and more experienced prostitute; but a young woman with little or no experience with the type of men that frequent whorehouses in the far west. Alice makes clear reference to the young girl's relative innocence. In arguing for harsh punishment for the cowboys, she says: "She didn't know no better." Yet the brutal scene maintains the productive ambivalence that is a feature of the high gothic mode and the alternative Western. The young prostitute's relative innocence is counterbalanced by the fact that she *is* a prostitute, and by the negative biblical association evoked in her name (Delilah). Replete with the imagery and iconography of the gothic, the scene creates a thematic tension that shifts uneasily between the concepts of innocence and impurity. The moral ambiguity evoked at the beginning of the film by the character of the young prostitute vs. her treatment by her gothic attack-

er creates that middle space or neutral territory where innocence and experience, brutality and kindness, greed and selflessness, will be peculiarly and ironically mixed.

Although the guilty cowboy displays gothic traits in the first scene, in the balance of the film he appears merely as a shallow and insensitive brute. The gothic motif is transferred elsewhere, to the protagonist William Munny. Thompson describes gothic heroes as "isolated personages committing vile deeds, then brooding on themselves — alternately indulging forbidden lusts and narcissistically feeling intense remorse, which, paradoxically, further fed the fires of passion" (2). Munny manifests precisely this combination of guilt and sin. His "lust" is not sexual, since in response to Ned's inquiry regarding his sex life he states: "I don't miss it all that much." But Munny has historically indulged a passion for wanton brutality, drunkenness, and greed. The Schofield Kid provides us with Munny's history at the beginning:

My guess is your callin' yourself Mr. William Munny. Same Will Munny as shot Charlie Pepper up in Lake County. . . . You shot Charlie Pepper didn't ya? You're the one who killed William Harvey and robbed that train over in Missouri.

And again as they enter the house:

Uncle Pete says your the meanest God damned sonofabitch alive, and if I ever wanted a partner for a killin', you was the worse one, meanin' the best, on account a' you're as cold as the snow and you don't have no weak nerve nor fear.

In the stories the Kid has heard second-hand from his uncle, Munny possesses all the characteristics of a gothic hero. He is a brutal and hate driven maniac with no rational motive for his actions, only greed and a desire for bloodshed; he is a man influenced by mysterious and malevolent forces that operate just beyond comprehension. But 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. He argues that his dead wife Claudia has "cured" him of "drink and wickedness." Adopting the rhetoric of evangelical Christianity, he tells his children that even his horse is an agent of divine retribution: "This horse is gettin' back at me for the sins of my youth . . . In my youth before I met your dear departed Ma, I used to be weak and given to mistreatin' animals . . . I used to be able to cuss and whip a horse like this, but your Ma, rest her soul, showed me the error of my ways." To Munny, his wife is the embodiment of purity and redemption. Through Munny's perception of her, the film develops the typical gothic tension between innocence and depravity. As he answers an inquiry regarding his violent past, Munny angrily responds: "I ain't like that no more . . . I ain't no crazy, killin' fool." In a reflective moment

over a campfire with Ned, he recalls with brooding and tortured guilt a specific event: "Remember that Drover I shot through the mouth, his teeth come out the back of his head? He didn't do anything to deserve to get shot . . . least nothin' I could remember when I sobered up." Munny is plagued and preoccupied with his past deeds, and he continually attempts to reform himself, avoiding whiskey especially. But he is also concerned about the state of his immortal soul. In the midst of a fever he says, "I seen the Angel of Death . . . the Angel of Death . . . he's got snake eyes . . . Oh Ned I'm scared of dyin'." Munny perpetually tries to convince both himself and those around him that he has reformed himself. Yet Eastwood maintains the film's moral ambivalence throughout, placing his remorseful gothic hero in a situation inconsistent with his impulse to change. This "reformed" killer is on a mission to kill two cowboys, not because of any higher sense of justice, but to collect a bounty. Munny's love for his children, his admirable remorse, and his selfless courage, all consistent with the characteristics of the traditional western hero, stand in stark contrast to his history of brutality, which he reaffirms yet again in his bounty hunt.

As Munny and his partners enter Big Whiskey, the gothic iconography continues. It is late at night and a storm is raging; images of darkness and depravity characterize the scene as they enter the whorehouse. Psychological anguish in Munny gives way to physical pain as he burns with fever. While Ned and the Kid contact the prostitutes and begin to "take advances" on the reward money, Will remains a contrite sinner, refusing to drink and submitting almost willingly to the beating by Little Bill. Then the physical and psychological anguish of the gothic hero merge into one, as Munny suffers guilt ridden delusions and nightmares in the midst of his sickness. Paradoxically, however, just as his act of contrition is complete, Munny remains determined to go through with the killing. Once the task is accomplished, he finds repose on the hill with the Schofield Kid in a moment of tragic self-knowledge. Struggling with his own conscience, the Kid says "I guess they had it comin'," but Munny is unwilling to adopt a position of moral superiority. Consistent with the recognition of guilt typical of the gothic hero, Munny responds: "We all got it comin' Kid."

At this point, Eastwood resolves the plot, and reconstitutes the western hero he has so carefully deconstructed, but in radically different terms. One of the prostitutes informs Munny of Ned's death. The camera focuses in on him, while he begins slowly and steadily drinking the whisky he has thus far so stubbornly avoided. Then the prostitute, recalling the exchange of words between Ned and Little Bill before Ned's death, rebuilds a mythic persona for Munny:

Then Little Bill hurt him so bad, he said who you was. He said how you was really William Munny out of Missouri. And Little Bill said, "The same William Munny who dynamited the Rock Island and Pacific in 69', killin' women and children and all?"

And Ned said you done a lot worse than that. Said you was more cold-blooded than William Bonny and if you hurt Ned again you was gonna come and kill him, like you killed a U.S. Marshall in 70'.

With a glancing reference to Billy the Kid, whose mythic status has emerged over the past hundred years as so unstable, Munny-as-myth is reborn, and he is prepared to avenge Ned's death. In the final scene, Eastwood is careful not to draw any clear moral distinctions between protagonist and antagonist. Little Bill accuses Munny of murdering women and children, and Munny responds with a complete admission of guilt coupled with an unrelenting will to enact retribution in spite of it: "Yea, I killed women and children. Killed everything that walked or crawled one time or another. And I'm here to kill you Little Bill, for what you did to Ned." Munny's revenge is simply that – revenge, self-contained, enacted by one who is entitled to the same fate. With the gothic hero's recognition of guilt and damnation, staring down the barrel of Ned's Henry rifle, Munny coldly responds to Little Bill's appeals. Bill says, "I don't deserve this – to die like this. I was building a house." Munny responds, "Deserve's got nothin to do with it," divorcing the events from any ethical sphere. Then, sealing his fate as gothic hero, he accepts damnation. Little Bill says, "I'll see you in hell, Will Munny." And Munny responds simply and directly: "Yeah." The ending rests on a complete simultaneity of good and evil. Munny's brutality takes full form in his final threat to the town: "Anybody takes a shot at me I'll not only kill him, I'll kill his family and all his friends." Both the affirmative and optative myth of the western hero revealed in Munny's selfless desire for justice and retribution, are combined equally with the image of an unredeemed and profligate brutality and blood-lust. As a gothic western hero, Munny manifests both the virtues and the darker more brutal impulses that accompanied manifest destiny and westward expansionism.

Unforgiven borrows different modes of the gothic romance. Consistent with the conventions of the "historical" gothic mode, which as Thompson suggests draws heavily on legend and fable, the film calls into question the epistemological status of any form of historical representation. Munny's past is presented in quasi-mythic and fable-like terms, as a mixture of fact and folklore. We are invited, in fact, to consider the possibility that the dime novelist in the film, Mr. W. W. Beauchamp, is the teller of the whole tale, including Munny's past and the film's present. Eastwood maintains ironic skepticism regarding the truth value of the narrative, and he seems intent on foregrounding the characters and situations in *Unforgiven* as "story." The film opens as a folktale so to speak, with written framing language rolling up the screen:

She was a comely young woman and not without prospects.
Therefore it was heartbreaking to her mother that she would

enter into marriage with William Munny, a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition . . . When she died, it was not at his hands as her mother might have expected, but of smallpox. That was 1878.

The film closes with the same tone, and with written language on screen from the same unknown narrator:

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 had long since disappeared with the children, some said to San Francisco, 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.

The language in this frame is ornate, Latinate, and out of fashion. Words such as “comely,” “intemperate,” and perhaps even “disposition,” are clearly used to call attention to *Unforgiven* as a period piece, as a *nineteenth-century* legend. Gothic romances are often ironically self-reflexive. The frame-tale sequences of Washington Irving, Poe, Hawthorne, and novels such as Melville’s *The Confidence Man*, are metafictional in nature; thematically, they are very much “about” the genre they enact. While using the gothic romance form, Poe’s “Metzengerstein” parodies the genre, revealing moments of comic exaggeration that force the reader to see the limitations of generic convention. As a film narrative in the tradition of the subversive romance, *Unforgiven* takes the Western as a thematic subject, incorporating the whole history of a genre that began in dime novels within a single narrative, mounting a self-reflexive critique of the tradition. The dime novelist is a pathetically comic figure, a pretentious would-be literary giant who is sadly unaware of his own lack of talent. His dime novel, *The Duke of Death*, functions as a tale within a tale that provides a comic and ironic counterpoint to the pathos of the film’s situation and the fable-like language that frames the narrative as a whole. The moral position the audience is asked to take on individual characters depends upon the degree to which those figures allow themselves to be appropriated by the dime novelist’s false narrative. The most deplorable character is the sociopathic English Bob, who consciously allows himself to be falsely mythologized and incorporated into the developing pantheon of western heroes. Little Bill initially resists this process, but he ultimately steals Bob’s “biographer” and at one point, as the dime novelist writes, Bill crafts his own mythic image by selecting Beauchamp’s words for him: “I do not like assassins, or men of low character.” Will Munny, while a morally dubious figure, achieves the highest and most principled stature where such storytelling is concerned as he resists the dime

novelist to the end, denying even the existence of the myth-tale narrator and his creation. When Beauchamp identifies himself as a writer, Munny echoes Little Bill's earlier question: "Letters and such?" Munny is seemingly unaware that he will be written into the developing national consciousness. The audience knows he will be mythologized, that the dime novelist has sustained some growth from the experience and is perhaps the teller of the tale. But William Munny's resistance, his lack of vanity, his devotion to the dark truth of his own history, gives the new myth a value different from the cheap fables that the Western often produces. This is the value of *Unforgiven* as an alternative Western. The film functions in full recognition of itself as story. It is informed by myth and it is loyal to its own conventions. But it moves beyond them, questioning the prescribed ideologies of genre and exploring the elusive reality of the American past.

By evoking the gothic hero and the ironic and self-reflexive conventions of the gothic romance, and by merging them with the traditional progressive western myth in an alternative Western, Eastwood thus creates a multidimensional and ambiguously represented hero consistent with those in certain American romance novels (consider morally ambiguous figures like Ahab in Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Dimmesdale in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*). The Munny figure maintains all the positive values one associates with the west — strength, courage, self-sacrifice, individualistic spirit — while revealing the malevolent brutality that was equally a feature of the American frontier experience. Violence has always been a feature of the frontier hero as represented in myth. Slotkin writes in *Regeneration Through Violence* that in American mythology the central figures of the frontier were "those who tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness — the rogues, adventurers, and land boomers; the Indian-fighters, traders, missionaries, explorers, and hunters who killed and were killed until they had mastered the wilderness" (4). The Western has always involved this mythological impulse.

By portraying brutality in dramatic terms, and by pointing to the fact that Will Munny's avarice serves no useful purpose, Eastwood evokes a sense of indeterminacy in the otherwise apparently unified myths of the progressive Western. As Thompson writes in discussing the gothic as subversive romance in the nineteenth century, "One of the basic impulses of romantic literature is to counter the perception of paradox by means of dialectical resolution. But the Gothic begins with irreconcilable dualities and as a form, acknowledges the triumph of paradox and ambiguity — the impossibility of ultimate synthesis" (9). While most studies of *Unforgiven* recognize that Eastwood has "re-written" or "rebuilt" the western myth, most suggest that the film creates a unified, "new," and "contemporary" understanding of the western experience. These critics imply that the film reflects a "New Left," revisionist ideology. Eastwood's revisionism is in fact more complex and paradoxical, since he embraces the unanswerable by deliberately

embodying contradictory ideological perspectives. Through his infusion of gothic romance into the Western genre, Eastwood translates the concerns of American romancers from the metaphysical to the ideological sphere, reaffirming the Western as an American morality play, as the narrative medium through which our national mythology is portrayed and ultimately re-envisioned.

A special thanks to Robert Paul Lamb of Purdue University. It is difficult to cite a telephone conversation in a reference list. But many of the ideas in this essay emerged from our lengthy discussions of American history, politics, literature, and from our mutual fascination with the Western.

Notes

1. Revisionism is also prevalent in fiction and has been for some time. The novels of Wallace Stegner, specifically *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*, explore the ethical complexities of westward movement and the dynamics of historical perception. The later novels of Cormac McCarthy, especially *Blood Meridian; or, The Evening Redness in the West*, directly challenge traditional accounts of the western experience, demonstrating dramatically the brutality and avarice central to the frontier experience. Bruce Olds's recent *Bucking the Tiger* provides a quasi-fictional account of the life of John Henry (Doc) Holliday, undercutting the more mythic accounts and exploring the psychological impulses behind the gunman's behavior.

2. This revisionist enterprise entered the public sphere in a dramatic way with an art exhibition entitled "The West As America" which appeared at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art from March 15 to July 7, 1991. The exhibition evoked a tremendous public furor, since it undermined the Frontier hypothesis of Frederick Jackson Turner. In an introductory wall panel, curators challenged Turner's assumptions as well as popular representations of the West, especially as they appear in the art of Frederick Remington, George Caleb Bingham, and Thomas Cole. The panel stated that these works "should not be seen as a record of time and place. More often than not, they are contrived views, meant to answer the hopes and desires of people facing a seemingly unlimited and mostly unsettled portion of the nation." Working under some of the revisionist assumptions of scholars such as Richard Slotkin, the exhibition portrayed the West as a violent place, full of disillusionment, corporate greed, as well as racial and gender discrimination. Many visitors left angry comments in the comment book, and the Washington Post reported thoroughly on the public controversy, with one faction characterizing critics as neo-conservative, and the other referring to the curators as politically correct radicals. A more nuanced controversy emerged over presentation methodology, with

critics arguing that the format and exhibit language was too specialized and academic for a public audience. The controversy was severe enough to cancel tour venues, and the exhibition did not travel beyond the Smithsonian. The furor that surrounded "The West as America" speaks to the importance of the West as a defining idea in the minds of many Americans.

3. This is the third text in a three volume series, including also *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1800* and *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890*. Slotkin provides also a useful sketch of the development of the Western as film genre in "Prologue to the Study of Myth and Genre in American Movies."

4. It is perhaps important to note the historiographic elements implicit in these progressive Westerns. The concept of manifest destiny finds philosophical justification in the metahistory of Hegel, as he develops it in his *Philosophy of Fine Art* and *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. This linkage between American progressivist social theory and Hegelian historiography is fully developed in my own recently published book *Historiography and Narrative Design in the American Romance: A Study of Four Authors*.

5. Examples include such popular classic films as *Hondo* (1953), *The High and the Mighty* (1954), *The Last Command* (1955), and finally *The Alamo* (1960). This sub genre perhaps finds its ultimate expression in *True Grit* (1969), a film in which the main character Rooster Cogburn manifests in full form all the quintessential traits of the western hero: individualism, courage, toughness, and a willingness to engage in heroic self-sacrifice.

6. It should be noted that the fictional persona of "Clint Eastwood" found expression outside the context of the Western — the character of Harry Callahan in the *Dirty Harry* series manifests the same brutal and violent impulses as figures in the Westerns of the same period. Indeed, it could be argued that in many films the central subject matter of the Western has simply been removed from its historical context and set yet again on the streets of modern American cities.

7. The influence of Hawthorne's introduction on the subversive romance aesthetics of the nineteenth century has been explored extensively. Major studies on this topic include Richard Chase's classic *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, Emily Miller Budick's *Fiction and Historical Consciousness: The American Romance Tradition*, Michael Davitt Bell's *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation*, George Dekker's *The American Historical Romance*, G. R. Thompson's *The Art of Authorial Presence: Hawthorne's Provincial Tales*, and G. R. Thompson's and Eric Carl Link's *Neutral Ground: New Traditionalism and the American Romance Controversy*. Herman Melville's aesthetic sensibility appears in "Hawthorne and His Mosses." The similarity of Melville's views with those of Hawthorne's becomes clear as Melville expresses his admiration for Hawthorne's "power of

blackness," the dualistic complexity, irony, and ambiguity inherent in his work.

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