"Why Was John Wayne So Old?"

by

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In the third quarter of the twentieth century John Wayne emerged as the screen's greatest western hero. Only seven years younger than the century itself, Wayne's image grew taller with each passing year. A controversial public attitude toward the Vietnam War barely phased his growing statnre as the aging cowboy. One may ask was it the aging of Wayne himself which popularized the older western hero or was it a general preference for older heroes? John Wayne was not the only aging star to play the older western hero in films during this period. Charlton Heston, Charles Bronson, Gregory Peck, Henry Fonda, Kirk Douglas and many others did the same to perfection. Nor was it the absence of young actors in Hollywood who could have played the youthful cowboy hero of the films prior to W.W. II. Young actors are always plentiful and, indeed many new male stars emerged. Few, however, played western heroes. While James Dean, Paul Newman, and Dustin Hoffman rose to stardom as contemporary heroes, western scripts continued to call for the mature faces of Joel McCrea and Glenn Ford. After World War II western films increasingly turned to psychological themes. As most commentators have observed, sex and violence played ever more prominent parts.[1] Another theme, less obvious but of fundamental importance, began to emerge, the theme of age, or maturation. The aging of the western hero and of the west itself has run as a common thread through most of the major western films of the last three decades. It is this theme which we will examine in a few of its most prominent incarnations. We will then turn to the question of why those who made westerns and those of us who watched them have found this theme so important.

One of the earliest film genres, the western, quickly developed popularity in the 1920's. The films of William S. Hart aad Buck Jones clearly expressed the Victorian morality which the flapper era flaunted but looked back to with nostalgia. By the late 1930's, however, the form seemed near exhaustion. There were exceptional films, "Stagecoach" (1939) and "The Ox-Bow Incident" (1943), but these were buried ia a flood of vapid films by Ken Maynard and Johnny Mack Brown. The poverty of the form seemed assured when our hero became more adept with a guitar than a six-gun. This decline did not, however, signal the death of the western. On the contrary, the western film came of age after W.W. II.[2]

The westerns of the modern era were, of course, different. One of the most fundamental changes was the addition of psychological depth. The deeply troubled hero, played by Gregory Peck in "The Gunfighter" (1949), is usually accepted as the origin of this departure. Perhaps it showed up a few years before in "The Ox-Bow Incident" (1942). In any case, by deepening our understanding of motivation in characters, both heroes and villains, it added new levels of complexity and meaning, and enriched the

western immeasurably. The weak and vacillating young sheriff in "The Tin Star" (1957), played by Anthony Perkins, would have had to have been a coward before. Now he can feel both courage and fear at the same instant. And the emotional tension between Jane Fonda and Jason Robards in the excellent "Comes a Horseman" (1978), is immensely enhanced by their complex psychological relationship. The cowboy is no longer a simple one-dimensional figure.

Violence receives increased attention in the new western. Older westerns, of course, have always included violence. The barroom brawl is a standard feature. But now the fights are not played for laughs or is the greatest injury a flesh wound or a sore jaw. The blood seems more real, the blows more telling. There were still a few good ol' knock down and dragouts like "McLintock" (1966), but more often came films like "The Chase" (1966), with Brando getting his brains beaten out, and "The Lawman" (1971), with Lee J. Cobb blowing his out, practically into our laps. The epitome of this trend was the celebrated slaughter in "The Wild Bunch" (1969).

Sex, which has usually been absent or barely implied in older westerns, is pushed to the forefront. Sex is now flaunted, usually in the forms of rape, as in "The Big Country"(1958), or prostitution, as in "The Wild Bunch" (1969). These tendencies are a part of the general liberalizing trend in all areas of American life.

The theme of maturity, with which we are most concerned here, first clearly surfaces in "The Gunfighter". The hero is past his prime. Still, his skills invincible and his reputation intact, but he is aging and he longs to stop the endless chain of killings. He is a tragic figure. This hero, and the many that are to follow him, and unlike the classic western hero of W.W. II and before, is not young. He is mature. We can call the theme he symbolizes "maturation"; the maturing of the western hero, and the maturing of the west itself. Often these stories are set at the end of the frontier stage and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Films in the pre-W.W. II period were set at the height of the frontier, the 1870's and 1880's. We may classify these "maturation" films into three groups: those that portray an aging hero, those that concentrate on a maturing west, and those that include both. I will comment on a few films in each group.

The first group, those that portray an aging hero, is the smallest. In "Monte Walsh" (1970), two veteran cowboys face the rigors of ranch life as they move past their prime. The strains are so great on the aging cowboy in this film that one of the minor characters commits suicide by riding a horse down a ridge at break-neck speed rather than face his likely future "ridin' fence". In "Valdez is Coming" (1971), Burt Lancaster portrays an aged Mexican, formerly a noted Army Scout, but now fallen on hard times. He is taunted and humiliated by toughs until they go too far. He puts on his old uniform and miraculously regains his old powers. A central theme in "The Wild Bunch" (1969), is the desperate attempt of the aging leaders to have just one more fling before they die.

Charlton Heston as "Will Penny" (1968), is such a man. As a fifty year old cowboy on a trail drive he is forced to prove his ancient skills in a fight with a young cowboy. "An old man like you belongs at the end of the line ... us young ones does all the work." When Heston meets and falls in love with a woman with a young child he is forced to face his age and his commitment to his way of life. He chooses the old way. As he says on parting with her, " ... its too late for me. I've lived one way all my life." And if the point has escaped us the film ends with a song over the titles, "A lonely rider wakes every morn, And knows that he must go where he's guided, His fate was decided on the day he was born."

Paul Newman plays a young man in "Hud" (1963), but the film actually revolves around his father Homer, acted by Melvin Douglas. Hud is "an unprincipled man" in his father's words, who "don't give a damn." "You don't care about people. You live just for yourself and that makes you not fit to live with." Homer, who Hud accuses of getting old, has strong principles. They are linked to his life as a cattleman and leave no room for sitting back and letting oil companies drill on his land. "I don't want that kind of money", states Homer, "I want my money to come from somethin' that keeps a man doin' for himself." With Homer, as with Monte Walsh, Valdez, and the rest of our aging heroes, we encountered men who have not lost their bearings. They hold on to their expertise and values.

Films that present a maturing west are our second group. The west of "Shane" (1953), is no longer wild and untamed. Shane is after all, employed by a farmer. Shane is a gunman whose time has passed ... almost. There is one last job for Shane's skill but when it is finished he moves on. The maturing west has no place for such as him. The same is true for Yul Brynner and his crew in "The Magnificent Seven" (1960). These men whose skills are deadly have all fallen on hard times. Unemployed, working at odd jobs, or on the lam, they have no place to practice their professional expertise. And so they seize on the one last desperate chance. When it is finished and they have vindicated their skills and their principles, the survivors leave. As the wise old Mexican says to them, "Only the farmers remain. They are like the land. You are like the wind, blowing over the land and passing on."

The two unemployed gunmen in "A Gunfight" (1971), understand this, and, unable to get work, hit upon the idea of staging one last gunfight and selling tickets. It's a fight for their lives and no matter who wins it is the end of the life they know. But it is a fitting end. Burt Lancaster as an aging marshal in "The Lawman" (1971), puts it this way, "Soon there'll be no more towns like Bannock, towns that need a gun like mine." He is tired of the killing but will not go back on his duty as he sees it. "You can't change what you are, and if you try, somethin' always calls you back."

Old and a pale shadow of our former heroes, "cowboys are the last real men left in the world ...", states Thelma Ritter in "The Misfits" (1961). This poignant story sees three western cowboy types trying to recapture the

past by a last effort at "mustanging." But when their love and conscience, Rosalyn, played by Marilyn Monroe, realized that the horses they capture will be sold for pet food, they too can no longer ignore the death of their past. As Gay says, "They changed it all around, smeared it all over with blood." "It's like rop'n a dream now." Our hero has the skill but no place to practice it.

The west has matured but our heroes are not always old. Billy the Kid in "The Left-Handed Gun" (1958), and in "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" (1973), is young. But he is a man of the past. In the latter film Pat Garrett says to Billy, "Feels like times have changed." Billy replies, flatly, "Times maybe, not me." New Mexico is a territory now and Billy's day is over. But, Billy won't change. Both he and Garrett are tired and fatalistic. Garrett laments, "The country's getting old and I'm getting old with it. The Kid don't want it that way . . . and maybe he's the better cuz of it." In the end, of course, Garrett shoots Billy, but then turning from Billy's dead body he sees his own image in a mirror and shoots it too. In killing Billy, he kills his own reason for existence as well.

One of the best of these films is "Lonely Are the Brave" (1962). In it Kirk Douglas, as a contemporary cowboy, tries to get a friend to break out of jail with him. When his friend won't go because he is to be released soon and has a wife "to go back to," the cowboy looks at him with a new awareness and says, "You grew up on me didn't you?" "I just changed," is the reply. "That's what I mean, you changed." The cowboy's friend has grown up. He has matured, while the cowboy has just grown older. Society has matured too, as the cowboy finds after he escapes. He is pursued by men in jeeps and helicopters with walkie talkies. The cowboy's loyalty to his own way of life is symbolized by his horse. He refuses to leave his horse behind even when sure escape beckons. The violent, inevitable end comes as a truck loaded with toilets smashes into the cowboy and his horse as they attempt to cross a rain soaked highway separating them from the border and safety. The horse is shot before the cowboy's glazed eyes and something in him dies too.

Some of the post World War II westerns combine both elements, the aging cowboy and a maturing west. We see it in "The Big Country" in the two feuding patriarchs played by Burl Ives and Charles Bickford. And we see it again in the grizzled old cowhand brilliantly played by Richard Farnsworth in "Comes a Horseman" (1978). Two films stand out in this class. The first is "Ride the High Country" (1962). The old-timers, both former lawmen, now unemployed, accept a job escorting a shipment of gold from a mining camp to safety in a bank. One, played by Joel McCrea hopes to make a fat fee. The other, played by Randolph Scott, hopes to persuade his friend to abscond with the whole shipment, enough wealth to see them through the few remaining years of their lives. Their ultimate loyalty to the principles by which they have lived is the final statement of the film. But along the way, the focus is on maturing men in a maturing west.

The film which best characterizes this last class is "The Shootist"

(1976). John Bernard Books, gunfighter and hero, faces his imminent death by cancer. John Wayne is at his best here. He prepares for death. His meager possessions are not worth much, but that is typical of a western hero. What he really values are his skill and his principles. Both are priceless to Books and he will not part with them while he has life. He arranges his end so that he can go out in a gunfight with three of the "baddest" men in town. He takes a streetcar to the showdown, symbolizing the passing of his time. But even at the end, nearly eaten up by death, and outnumbered, he is unbeaten. He kills all three only to be blasted in the back by the bartender. He dies still pure, a man of skill and honor in a new era that needs neither.

The theme of maturity or aging prolonged the career of John Wayne, and a dozen other western stars. If we had wanted to see stories about young handsome cowboys, John Wayne could have been put out to pasture. The stories were written, the films were made, and the admissions were paid to see the aging cowboy in the aging west. Why did this theme emerge so pervasively? What did it signify about post World War II America?

Down deep inside our aging western hero there is a melancholy. In the final scene of "The Searchers", after titanic effort, the Wayne character has succeeded in reuniting a family. He looks into their home from the front porch. He does not enter. He knows that he cannot enter and, now that his task is accomplished, he no longer belongs, perhaps never belonged. There is in his brow, his shoulders, the one foot a little closer to the door, an almost unbearable longing. How often have we seen that look from our aging hero? Helen Hunt Jackson described such a man in her classic novel, Ramona.

> He was fast becoming that most tragic yet often sublime sight, a man who has survived, not only his own time, but the ideals of it. Earth holds no sharper loneliness; the bitterness of exile, the anguish of friendlessness at their utmost, are it in; and yet it is so much greater than they, that even they seem small part of it.[3]

But Wayne in that final scene turns and leaves just as our western hero always does. And that is significant. Erik Erikson in Childhood and Society discusses a final state of development in human life, that of maturity, which he calls "ego integrity". "It is the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions ..." In that final purposeful turn and stride away, we know that though there is much our hero envies in the settler's life (that life from which we are the linear descendants), he has consciously chosen and accepted his own. Erikson again:

> Although aware of the relativity of all the various life styles which have given meaning to human striving, the possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his own life style against all

> physical and economic threats. For he knows that in individual life is the accidental coincidence of but one life cycle with but one segment of history; and that for him all human integrity stands or falls with the one style of integrity of which he partakes.[4]

Our hoary hero fundamentally accepts himself and his way of life and takes responsibility for his own fate. He neither regrets nor repents. As John Bernard Books says, "In general, I have had a damned good time till lately." Erikson says that "in such final consolidation, death loses its sting."[5] This has always been one of the characteristics of the western hero that we have most admired, his fearlessness in the face of death. But in the older western this courage rings false for the hero never meets his match in any man. The more mature hero of the later films continues to be invincible in combat with mortal men. But, now he faces another foe, and to this our hero must succumb as surely as the long chain of villains once did to him. The sure fate of man is death. But, as Erikson implies, the acceptance of inevitable death allows for the acceptance of life as it is. Thus the melancholy resignation of our aging hero. Our cowboy has matured. What of us?

What of our own maturity? Erikson argues that "integrity" or maturity can ripen only in those who have adapted themselves "to the triumphs and disappointments adherent to being" and "who in some way (have) taken care of things and people." What better way to describe the experience of America since World War II. We have suffered through three inconclusive wars. We have seized affluence only to see that it has a bitter taste. We have reformed and found that so much has stayed the same. And through these "triumphs and disappointments", through these attempts to take "care of things and people", through all of this we have matured. The simple cowboy hero of our youth was a sign of our immaturity. That John Bernard Books can now be our hero is a measure of how far we have come. While John Wayne grew old, we grew up.

NOTES

[1]A few of the most prominent of these are: Jon Tuska, The Filming of the West (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1976); Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies (N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1976); Philip French, Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1977); George Fenin & William K. Everson, The Western: From Silents to the 70's (N.Y.: Penguin, 1977); John H. Lenihan, Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

[2]A bare listing of just some of the major Western films since that period is truly impressive. Starting with "The Gunfighter" (1949) our list must include "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon" (1949), "Wagon Master" (1950), "High Noon" (1952), "Shane" (1953), "Bad Day at Black Rock" (1954), "The Searchers" (1956), "The Big Country" (1958), "The Left-Handed Gun" (1958), "Rio Bravo"(1959), "The Magnificent Seven" (1960), "The Misfits" (1961),"The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" (1962), "Ride the High Country" (1962),"Lonely Are the Brave" (1962), "Hud" (1963), "Cat Ballou" (1965), "The Professionals" (1966), "Will Penny" (1968), "The Wild Bunch" (1969), "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" (1969), "True Grit" (1969), "Monte Walsh" (1970), "Valdez is Coming" (1971), "Junior Bonner" (1972), "The Great Northfield Raid" (1972), "Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid" (1973), "Posse" (1975), "Buffalo Bill and the Indians or Sitting Bull's History Lesson" (1976), "The Missouri Breaks" (1976), "The Shootist" (1976), "Comes a Horseman" (1978), and, finally, "Tom Horn" (1980).

[3]Helen Hunt Jackson, Ramona (N.Y.: Avon Books, 1970), 38.

[4]Erik H. Erikson, Childhood and Society, 2nd Edition (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1963), 268. Also see: Erik H. Erikson, Identity Youth and Crises (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1968), 139-41.

[5]Erikson, Childhood and Society, 268