

# Dangling between Individualism and Social Approval: The Western Hero in Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*

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*High Noon* (1952), the successful box-office production directed by Fred Zinnemann, became the first adult Western, winning four Oscars, including Best Actor for Gary Cooper. Cooper, who played the lonely hero Will Kane in his most memorable performance, reinforced his standing in Hollywood and revived his popularity. The film also contributed to the deviation from the classic code of the Western films in many ways: the hero's image, the female characters' personalities, the narrative structure, and especially the political implications.

Don Graham states that "*High Noon* is political in the way that the genre is political, for it is about leadership, the community, the very idea of what a city is: unlike many Westerns that depict the forming of a society, *High Noon* probes the question of the survival of a city" (59). Western narratives often deal with political issues such as the ideal balance between individuals and a community and how it is established or reformed; these narratives illustrate a microcosm of American society that struggles to stay unified while preserving its cultural diversity in race, gender, class, ethnicity, and religion.

The narrative's development and ending are also related to film production, which aims to transform individuals with different tastes into the broad audience. Phillip L. Gianos explains that the system of Hollywood products, to catch the widest possible spectrum for its commercial success, chooses safe topics or sugarcoats and personalizes the politics and constructs happy endings (8). Indeed, many traditional Western movies satisfy spectators by emphasizing the final triumph of heroes over villains, where the heroes' individual superiority is doubly approved by the hero's community and the audiences outside the narrative.

Then, does the successful *High Noon* also conceal its ideological conflicts?

The answer seems to be dubious since the relationship between the hero, the villain, and the community is complicated. At the end of the film, the hero Will Kane beats Frank Miller and his gang, but he deserts his relationship with other citizens who refused to help him with the fight, and he leaves his town showing his disgust for the community. It is evident that the hero's social position as a citizen is no longer compatible with his superiority as an individual. However, even though the "individualist" Kane's motivation to fight lacks social approval, *High Noon* suggests that the hero's isolated identity can never be separated from the society.

Before examining *High Noon*, I would like to discuss Will Wright's structural study of the Western genre. Wright, in his *Sixguns and Society*, finds "the prominence of binary structure" (23) in the Westerns and analyzes the genre in the field of myths. The myth originally simplifies the social structure into binary oppositions: "inside society / outside society, good / bad, strong / weak, wilderness / civilization" (114) to communicate a conceptual order to the members of society. In addition to the binary structure, Wright presents sixteen steps inherent in the Western narrative plot:

1. The hero enters a social group.
2. The hero is unknown to the society.
3. The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability.
4. The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given a special status.
5. The society does not completely accept the hero.
6. There is a conflict of interests between the villains and the society.
7. The villains are stronger than the society; the society is weak.
8. There is a strong friendship or respect between the hero and a villain.
9. The villains threaten the society.
10. The hero avoids involvement in the conflict.
11. The villains endanger a friend of the hero.
12. The hero fights the villains.
13. The hero defeats the villains.
14. The society is safe.

15. The society accepts the hero.

16. The hero loses or gives up his special status. (48–49)

While the classical hero is the outsider, he is finally accepted by the society after he eradicates the origin of vice. It is especially important that the hero sacrifices his specific ability, once he proves his superiority and chooses to settle down in the community. Because his prominent power is unnecessary in the society that lacks villains, the hero's ordinary life is never depicted after his victory. The heroic position is temporary on the screen, which suggests the difficulty of maintaining individualism in the society.

In *Politics and Politicians in American Film*, Phillip L. Gianos points out the heroic image's transformation in the path from John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962): "the lone western hero journeys from coexisting with the state of nature and the demands of the social contract to the realization that there is no place for him in either, except in myth" (21). In the opening of *Stagecoach*, the hero Ringo appears as the stranger and joins the social microcosm of the stagecoach comprised of eight other members. He defeats the bunch of Indians who chase the stagecoach, avenges the killing of his father, and finally leaves the town and returns to the wilderness. Released by a sheriff who symbolizes the law, Ringo is approved by the society and simultaneously allowed to keep his freedom and hero image. On the other hand, in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, the hero Tom Doniphon cannot escape from the social contract; the legend of the ideal Western disappears with the hero's death.

*High Noon*, in both its binary and narrative structures, is very different from the classical pattern defined by Will Wright. At first glance, binary oppositions are obvious — marshal (Kane) versus outlaw (Miller), good girl (Amy) versus bad girl (Helen), hero versus the hypocritical community. Still, the main characters' personalities are not so simple that we could classify them into the opposing values. It is clear that Zinnemann emphasizes the difference between Helen and Amy in their appearance, personality, and race. Yet, he never allows us to classify the women based on a moral code. Gwendolyn Foster focuses on the mature personalities of the female characters in *High Noon*:

Katy Jurado who plays Helen Ramirez, a Mexican American business-

woman, shares the metanarrative with Grace Kelly, who plays Amy Fowler Kane, a woman whose Quaker pacifism clearly places her oppositionally in face of a violent, brutal, patriarchal power structure. Both women surprise the viewer with their ability to survive in the narrative. Both are mature women with principles, and neither fits the mold of the classical good-girl, bad-girl scenario. In fact, Zinnemann plays off these clichés of female Western types. (94)

Zinnemann deliberately draws the audience's attention to the disparity between the two female characters: the audience sympathizes with Amy's resistance to violence and Helen's passion for sharing danger with him if Kane would be her own.

Just as we cannot simply dichotomize Amy and Helen in moral judgment, we cannot easily separate Kane from his foe Miller. Richard Slotkin points out the similarity between Kane and Miller; that both men have loved the same woman, Helen, is the reason for their conflict. Helen's statement regarding Kane's manliness emphasizes that Kane is the only man who can "conflict and overcome Miller" (393–4). Slotkin uses the good / bad opposition to explain the distinction of the two manly characters: "the difference between them is Kane's latent instinct for goodness" (394). Will Wright, however, keenly mentions that the good / bad opposition is no longer adaptable to the distinction between the hero and villains in *High Noon*: "the villains do not represent an opposing principle, or concept, to that of the hero, only a physical danger to the sheriff; they could be replaced by a train wreck or an avalanche" (76). Indeed, Miller, whose background is hardly disclosed on the screen, appears only as a symbol of vice. He returns to take revenge on Kane who has sent him to jail, but it is the representatives of the law ("politicians up North") who have released Miller. Though most people are frightened of Miller, he seems to have developed friendships with some men in the saloon. Besides, the hotel clerk is fonder of Miller than he is of Kane because Miller activates hotel business. *High Noon* erases the clear opposition between the hero and the villain and never gives Kane a sufficient reason for his fight until his wife is captured by Miller.

In addition to the deconstruction of binary oppositions, *High Noon's* plot is the reverse of the usual Western narrative pattern. Will Kane is not an out-

sider but has a strong sense to be a member of the society, as he tells his wife that Hadleyville is his town and he has many friends there. Besides, he is called the best marshal in the town's history. Nonetheless, unlike the typical Western hero, Kane asks others to assist him in the fight with Miller and is refused help by almost all the townspeople. After all, Kane fights alone and wins, and therefore he contributes to the safety of the town. Then, is he the hero for the audience? The film's ending is actually a happy one; Kane defeats enemies and restores his relationship with Amy. But the film seems to leave some spectators with an aching void in their heart in the sense that the hero fails to win people's ardent respect, love, or admiration.

Upon its release in 1952, *High Noon* was titled "a western to challenge *Stagecoach* for the all-time championship" in a review for the *New York Times* (Crowther), and the film has received negative criticism owing to the very "challenge." It is well-known that John Wayne, who played Western heroes including Ringo in *Stagecoach* (1938), hated *High Noon* and made *Rio Bravo* (1959) with director Howard Hawks in response to the film. Hawks pits *High Noon* against a good Western because he did not think a good sheriff would run around town "like a chicken with his head cut off asking everyone to help" (Munn 148). He also criticized Kane's awkward victory supported by his pacifist wife.

Don Graham sums up negative criticism for *High Noon*; for some critics like Robert Warshaw and Andrew Starr, it "adulterates the purify of the Western" in two ways: "the addition of anachronistic social or political themes," that is, its inclusion of social drama that smacks of an antipopulism and "a confusion of styles" that deviates from "the context of history and realism" (51). Moreover, Graham attacks the critics who insist that Cooper should have mowed his assailants down with a rifle as John Wayne did in *Stagecoach*, and he denies their inclination toward realism that "the Western must be true to history and that it must embody a single aesthetic mode" (52).

*High Noon* does not satisfy some audiences and critics who seek a superman like Ringo. Furthermore, Kane's ambiguous motivation for his confrontation with Miller will be the focus of argument. Even though Kane takes off a badge for his marriage with a Quaker wife and leaves the town, he returns and regains the badge. Kane's taking back the mark of law effectively shows his

strong intent to confront Miller and leaves him nearly unable to withdraw from it. Marking himself with the temporal law status, without the concession of the townspeople, Kane has to kill enemies in accordance with his “individual” decision.

Richard Slotkin points out two personal elements and one social element in Kane’s decision. First, Kane believes Miller will run after him wherever he goes. Second, he needs to show his pride and honor as a professional. Finally, as a social component in his motives, he cannot let Miller bring his savage control into the progressive town, where he has worked to establish the safe, civilized environment after sending Miller to a prison. But Kane’s priority is “the defense of ‘civilization’” rather than “the procedures of ‘democracy’” (392). On the other hand, citizens are concerned with civilization in terms of economic interests rather than the safe government in Hadleyville. At the church congregation, Mayor Jonas Henderson, played by Thomas Mitchell, convinces others that getting involved in gunplay will hurt their Northern business interests that might be brought about in Hadleyville. Both Kane and other citizens seek their interests under the name of civilization. However, it is not so easy to distinguish their personal interests from their social ones.

Kane, who fails to obtain consensus from the townspeople and is not obligated to work as a marshal, clings to his honor as an individual rather than as a professional. Robert Warshow also agrees that the Westerner fights for his honor, the “purify” of his heroic image:

What does the Westerner fight for? We know he is on the side of justice and order, and of course it can be said he fights for these things. But such broad aims never correspond exactly to his real motives; they only offer him his opportunity. The Westerner himself, when an explanation is asked of him (usually by a woman), is likely to say that he does what he “has to do.” (140)

Kane’s badge represents social order, but he discovers his dignity is justified after realizing that what he will do does not necessarily coincide with others’ interests. He converts himself from a man who is proud to be a citizen to an individualist. Indeed, Kane is the Westerner in that he sticks to his personal belief. However, Kane’s isolated pursuit of the heroic image as the best sheriff

is a motive already implanted by the society. *High Noon* discloses that individualism, which has been applauded in the Western myth, cannot be separated from the society and is always on display. Honor belongs to a person, but it loses its proof unless it is demonstrated in public. This seems to be the very reason why Kane returns to the town and fights with Miller within the community.

*High Noon*, under the influence of McCarthyism and the Cold War, can be interpreted as the allegory of the fight against Hollywood's blacklisting. Indeed, toward the end of the film, Kane's throwing a badge down with contempt for the townspeople indicates the film's attitude. Yet, the film allows critics to conclude otherwise; Wright states, "By defeating the villains in a gun battle, the hero is really defeating the town in principle" (76); Phillip Drummond, on the other hand, concludes that "Kane's victory over Miller is only partial, since in a deeper sense it also marks his defeat by Hadleyville" (76). Both arguments are plausible; it can be said that Kane wins or loses in his fight. Nevertheless, the film, by depicting the hero who is forced to be an individualist, paradoxically implies that an individual is inevitably involved in the community.

Although Kane's individualism separates him from others and renders him a hero, his victory leaves him desolate, along with people's feelings of guilt. *High Noon* shares the consensus with the spectators who find heroism in Kane's individualism and reconciliation with his Quaker wife, but the happy ending is not powerful enough to eliminate the collective dissonance. However, the disconformity that frustrates the audience reveals that the ideal balance between the individualist hero and the society, which has been repeatedly described in the classical Westerns, is just an illusion.

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