Mechanisms of Violence in Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven* and *Mystic River* 

Allen Redmon

Following his first international success as an actor in the *Man with no Name* trilogy, Clint Eastwood formed his own production company, Malpaso. The name was not selected for artistic purposes, at least none that has been professed to this point, but Eastwood’s selection does have literary significance. With the release of *Unforgiven* (1992), Eastwood fully explores the “bad step”—one English variation of *malpaso*—that culture has made throughout human history and that nearly all of his earlier films had identified in part: namely, that society is typically founded on the mistaken notion that order can be achieved through “good” or “sacred” violence. That Americans and other cultures have invested themselves in such a fable cannot be debated; beyond the way in which daily events support this statement, the success of films that openly embrace this fiction is abundant, films in which a virtuous or an injured hero overcomes all obstacles to see that evil is eradicated using whatever means necessary. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the way in which Eastwood’s most recent film, *Mystic River* (2003), reaches an uncompromised exposé of the consequences that follow reliance on mechanisms of violence.

For more than a decade, Eastwood has been producing films that seem to stage the very tendencies that Rene Girard (anthropological and literary perspective) and Walter Wink (theological perspective) have been working to investigate, each in an attempt to reveal the way in which culture depends on violence for social cohesion and interpersonal concord.¹ Girard’s recognition of the way in which violence galvanizes society and eases personal and communal tensions and his theory’s ability to explain human fascination with and reliance upon violence is quite useful. In * Violence and the Sacred*, Girard proposes that human life is engulfed by mimesis that results in paroxysms of violence. Surprisingly, the violence that is generated by the rivalry in which two individuals are locked is not directed against the rival, but against a common *enemy* upon which the rivals can invent some degree of guilt. A synchronization against a common *one* takes place, an entity that has been deemed guilty in the eyes of the two rivals, if not the entire community, which itself is always already equally injected with rivalries and tensions that cannot find relief apart from acts of violence. The conflagration that results in a communal act of violence against this other temporarily reduces hostility between individuals and allows discord to subside for a season. Girard refers to this phenomenon as the scapegoat mechanism, and claims that this apparatus can be located at the foundation of all human interactions and social formations.

Rather than occurring in a translucent manner, the scapegoat mechanism’s operation is veiled, at least when employed properly. The community, now enjoying unprecedented cohesion, remembers the way in which the violent action against the *one*² inspired camaraderie between the once

---

² Allen Redmon is an assistant professor in the English department at East Texas Baptist University. He is interested in violence in film, film genres, the Bible in film, and examining the Bible as literature.
The comrades attribute their newfound unity to the act of violence that has just been committed, and in so doing, begin to name as sacred that which might otherwise be considered a profane act. The now sacred event is often reenacted in officially sanctioned ritual, maximizing the effect of the original murder and concealing and making permissible the continued use of the scapegoat mechanism.

The usefulness of Girard’s observations does not end with simply identifying the way in which humans rely on mechanisms of violence to moderate ever-increasing tensions and rivalries; he also reveals the resulting “bad step” that occurs as a consequence of this reliance on violence. The peace that the scapegoat mechanism affords does not continue indefinitely for at least two reasons. First, because human relations are negotiated through imitation—or, what Girard labels mimesis,3—civilization is perpetually fated to exist in a world of violence. The effects of the rituals meant to diffuse rivalries will diminish, and when they do, humans will be forced to enact the scapegoat mechanism once again or risk apocalyptic violence.4 Because of the way in which each prior act very much determines all future acts, this cycle can never terminate unless a model emerges that avoids participation in the mechanisms of violence, or a community is willing to recognize the innocent face or voice of a victim crushed in this social apparatus. Without such a model or a public exposé, humanity can only respond in violence to the hostility it encounters, leading to a second “bad step.”

Disillusioned into believing that one can never escape the mechanisms of violence on which society depends, culture is forced to begin to deem some violent acts as “good.” That such a distinction can never be offered objectively and therefore is inherently slippery is never fully considered. Contemplation of the potential flaws in society’s assessment of the “good” violence executed can only frustrate the mechanisms on which that same society depends for some measure of harmony. To ensure that violent acts earn the designation they deserve and that the community at large requires, violence must always be reported from the perspective of the ruling class or the victors. The victim’s perspective must never be observed. Culture is safe and the scapegoat mechanism is intact only as long as the violence is viewed from the perspective of the perpetrators.

Also recognizing culture’s fascination with and dependence upon violence, but believing that the scapegoat mechanism offers only a partial explanation for why societies begin to trust violence in purgative ways, American theologian Walter Wink advocates his own mechanism: the myth of redemptive violence. Wink suggests that human history has been forged on the misguided notion that chaos is subdued and order achieved through acts of violence that very often need not involve a third party, which the scapegoat mechanism requires. Instead, the myth of redemptive violence relies on the emergence of a stronger hero who is able, through surpassing violent force, to annihilate the powerful evil that threatens human existence. In this way, life is reduced to combat, and personal and communal concord is sustained through the perpetuation of the notion that the physically powerful can purge the world of evil through righteous violence.

Several aspects of American culture demonstrate the extent to which Americans depend on Wink’s myth, be it the trends that emerge in American history books, the way in which the American judicial system operates, or the manner in which this society entertains itself. The plot for most American history books revolves around a stronger people throwing off the oppression or threat imposed by an “evil.” Each war is championed as a march to greater freedoms. In his article “The War for Independence and the Myth of Redemptive Violence,” James C. Juhnke shows this tendency:

The average American citizen celebrates the glorious march of freedom: the American revolution won freedom from colonialism; the Civil War won freedom from slavery; and the great world wars of the twentieth century won freedom from totalitarian oppressors. The foundational structure of American history is that of freedom won through violence. (438)
When history is told in this manner, moments of freedom and progress are found only in times of war and violence. Such a position extends beyond the history books and into the way in which the American judicial system operates, a system founded on the belief that the worst “evils” can only be corrected through state-sanctioned executions. Furthermore, Wink shows that the entertainment industry, for adults and children alike, relies on the myth of redemptive violence. For example, Wink presents the classic cartoon Popeye as an affirmation of the myth of redemptive violence:

In a typical segment, Bluto abducts a screaming and kicking Olive Oyl . . . When Popeye attempts to rescue her, the massive Bluto beats his diminutive opponent to a pulp . . . At the last moment, as our hero oozes to the floor . . . a can of spinach pops from Popeye's pocket and spills into his mouth. Transformed by this gracious infusion of power, he easily demolishes the villain and rescues his beloved. (18)

Even in this children's cartoon, order is restored through violence, and all is well until next week's show, when the process begins again. According to Wink, the structure can never change. If Bluto, or the evil and the chaos that Bluto represents, ever wins, the anxieties that are pacified by Popeye's victory would be unleashed and humanity would discover their community in a place of perpetual chaos. American culture cannot afford for the myth of redemptive violence not to work, not when it is entrenched as deeply in its psyche as Wink and others have proposed it to be.

While differences between the scapegoat mechanism and the myth of redemptive violence do exist—namely, vis-à-vis the participants in the violence and the way in which they interact, the two warring parties locked in a one-on-one confrontation, or a cohesive community united against an arbitrarily selected third party—the similarity between these two approaches is what is most important to the present discussion. Both hypotheses share one vital correlation: the guilt or the malevolence of the victim can never be examined. To ensure that a “guilty” verdict is levied and not contested or that the innocence of the perpetrator is never suspected, the victim's voice must never be heard, nor should the victim's face ever be perceived. In his seminal book, Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads, Gil Bailie has shown that the world's societies have always gone to great lengths to keep the victim concealed and silent, thereby allowing a belief in the mechanisms of violence on which the world depends to continue to function. The timelessness of this propensity is illustrated in Aeschylus's ancient play Agamemnon, a brief discussion of which will lead to a better understanding of the method Eastwood uses to expose the mechanisms of violence found in Unforgiven and Mystic River.

To ensure success for him and his fleet, Agamemnon brings himself to slay his daughter, Ipheginia, who is well known and loved by all, each man having heard her sing “in celebration for her father/With a pure voice, affectionately, virginally” (Act One 18). Agamemnon, aware of the instability in his plan to slaughter his daughter but needing to reinvigorate the camaraderie necessary for his mission, takes countless precautions to offer his sacrifice in an “acceptable” manner—that is, one that covers the face and silences the voice of the victim:

Her prayers and her cries of father,
Her life of a maiden,
Counted for nothing with those militarists;
But her father, having duly prayed, told the attendants
To lift her, like a goat, above the altar
With her robes falling about her,
To lift her boldly, her spirit fainting
And hold her back with a gag upon her lovely mouth
By the dumb force of a bridle
The cry which could curse the house. (Act One 210–52)

The Ipheginia being lifted cannot be the Ipheginia whom those on the deck of the ship have seen previously. If she remains the same, the mechanism would collapse. To distinguish the two, Agamemnon's daughter is lifted like an animal. Her dress is torn and falling but not removed entirely; completely stripping her would risk
exposing her tender age and beauty. A gag is placed over her mouth to prevent anything more than grunts and groans from being heard. Ipheginia is systematically stripped of her humanity, and Agamemnon attempts to cast his daughter as just another god-appeasing animal sacrifice. Seeing her as human, hearing the innocence in her cry, or worse, witnessing the story from the perspective of the victim or those who are made to suffer because of Ipheginia’s murder, would result in the collapse of the mechanism on which Agamemnon’s world is founded, a point that the remainder of Aeschylus’s play lays bare. If mechanisms of violence are to gain any measure of success, they must be conveyed from the perspective of the victors, and in such a way that the victim is silent and concealed.

By ensuring that the victim is silent and concealed, societies across all ages have been able to avoid the cultural crisis that occurs when the victim is seen or heard, or when the account is told from the victim’s perspective. Once individuals become aware of the victims who are created when the scapegoat mechanism or the myth of redemptive violence is employed, society becomes paralyzed, unable to respond to chaos or that which is considered evil. Even more damaging to the mechanisms of violence than simply becoming aware of the victims created during their operation is when people begin to show concern for the victims even before the violence is committed. Even when a “greater good” seems within reach, such as the overthrowing of a tyrant leader or the execution of a convicted killer, a society that sees the face or hears the cries of the victim begins to reject violent actions, leaving society in what Baillie calls a “moral double-bind” (17). On the one hand, society recognizes a responsibility to respond on behalf of existing victims, regardless of whether the victim is the self or another; on the other hand, the only response available to individuals after years of investing in violent mechanisms is certain to create more victims. Stuck in the violent paradigms on which the scapegoat mechanism and the myth of redemptive violence rely, yet unwilling or unable to perform the operations mandated by these mechanisms with the same abandon, human beings are brought to a place of calamity, the very calamity recognized in Unforgiven and so luminously depicted in Mystic River.

Film critics have long recognized that Eastwood’s projects consider the question of violence. In fact, Kent Jones contends that Eastwood “is the [director] who has delved the deepest into the question of violence” throughout American cinematic history (48). John Tibbets’s article “Clint Eastwood and the Machinery of Violence” shows the way in which Eastwood’s treatment of violence has evolved over the years. Tibbets claims that a certain relief, or catharsis, marks Eastwood’s earlier films, while Eastwood’s later films, Unforgiven in particular, forces audiences to stare into the complexities of the violence seemingly celebrated in earlier films (10). While critics have been cognizant of the fact that Eastwood’s projects have considered and questioned violence, by leaving the observations of Girard and Wink out of the assessment of Eastwood’s work, prior explanations have been incomplete, often stopping short of recognizing both the way in which Eastwood complicates the violence in his pictures and the statements his films make with regard to violence. For instance, in his book, Clint Eastwood: a Cultural Production, Paul Smith offers the following assessment of the impact of Unforgiven: “Unforgiven suffers from being unable to criticize convincingly the very violence that it itself is involved in and that it does not shrink from re-representing” (267). Such a statement has a certain measure of validity and usefulness, to be sure; Eastwood could have offered a more overt condemnation of the violence in his film. Explicit denunciation would have come at a price, though; Eastwood would not be able to implicate his audience in the mechanisms of violence in the way that his films can when the violence is loosely veiled in the same fashion that all violence is concealed, a point that comes to light only when Eastwood’s films are considered alongside the observations of Girard and Wink. Set within the insights of these two theorists, Eastwood’s most stringent criticism against violence can be ascertained, as can the way in which Eastwood
articulates the cultural crisis for those embracing the mechanisms of violence in an age in which violence is portrayed from the perspective of the victim.

Moving beyond simply complicating the extent to which the hero can be categorized as “good” and the antagonist as “bad,” as many have thought earlier Eastwood films to have done, with *Unforgiven*, Eastwood offers audiences a film in which these distinctions scarcely exist at all. The hero of the film, William Munny (Clint Eastwood), is a retired gunfighter and assassin; the antagonist, Little Bill (Gene Hackman), is a semi-retired sheriff, a man who has left Texas and Kansas to build a house and retire in a more peaceful environment. Eastwood goes to great lengths at the beginning of the film to demonstrate that both Munny and Little Bill are men living in a similar milieu, each attempting to leave his violent past behind him, turning instead to pig farming and carpentry, respectively. Despite their best efforts to change, Little Bill and Munny are wrenched from their reformed present by the mechanisms of violence invoked by Strawberry Alice (Frances Fisher) and the other whores who respond in the only way they know to the injustice that Delilah (Anna Levine) suffers. After Alice’s bounty is offered and the two main characters are dragged into the violence they have sought to transcend, Little Bill and Munny struggle to maintain the assumed role of peaceable citizen rather than become the active participant in violence that each has been in the past.

As the film unfolds, the audience learns that Little Bill and Munny are not only alike in the struggle that each makes to escape past personas; they are also similar in the dual nature that each man possesses. Both are capable of reason and civility on one hand, and horrific acts of brutality on the other. The opening scene of the movie depicts Little Bill as one who works to minimize bloodshed. He attempts to calm Alice by asking, “haven’t you seen enough blood for one night?” The ordinance against firearms in Big Whiskey, presumably put in place by Little Bill himself, further portrays Little Bill as an apparent pacifist. If these were the only scenes presented as testimonials to Little Bill’s character, one would have to conclude that Little Bill is a “good” person.

Other scenes evoke a different response. Little Bill ferociously beats three men during the course of the movie: English Bob (Richard Harris), an old man, far past his prime and unarmed; Munny, unarmed and suffering from a fever that nearly kills him; and Ned Roundtree (Morgan Freeman), who receives his beating while tied to the jailhouse bars and facing the opposite direction. In this way, Little Bill is cast as a man capable of acting as those he loudly condemns during the course of the movie, cowardly men who attack those who cannot defend themselves or who would shoot a man in the back. Little Bill is peaceable; he is also a man consumed by violence, committed to the myth of redemptive violence and the scapegoat mechanism in ways that neither the character nor the audience can deny.

Munny possesses an equally mixed façade. Throughout the movie, Munny is a sympathetic character, one who is equally fair with his partners and with those he kills. His concern for his children, his dead wife, the feelings of a prostitute, and even his past victims reveals, in each case, a man capable of good sense and civility. Even the methodical manner in which he approaches the assassination of the two cowboys who have “cut up a woman” could cast Munny in a positive light. The closing events of the movie present a different William Munny, though, one who the audience is led to believe—through Munny’s own words and the words of his partner, Ned—no longer exists. Yet, in response to the news that Ned has been beaten to death “for what [he] had done,” the Munny who shoots women and children emerges. After killing Skinny (Skinny Dubois), a man who is terribly weak and “unarmed,” and a host of others who are in the bar when he arrives, Munny kills Little Bill, who in the final scene reverts to simply being a man “building a house with a porch,” a persona that diminishes as the contagion of violence spreads as the film develops. The executioner in this scene, Munny suffers from the same schizophrenic personality that plagues Little Bill, a point that complicates all of the violent scenes in the movie. By allowing the main
characters to be composites of the same substance, Eastwood creates a situation in which the murder that is sure to take place of one of these two characters at the film’s conclusion cannot be entirely celebrated.

In addition to the way in which Eastwood complicates the mechanisms of violence found in *Unforgiven* by depicting the hero and the villain in a parallel manner, Eastwood relies on three subtle methods to frustrate the mechanisms of violence on which the film depends. The first is through English Bob and Little Bill’s discussion highlighting the necessity of demonizing one’s rival before the violent mechanisms can become acceptable to the perpetrator. By directly noting the need to demonize a potential victim, Eastwood exposes the extent to which the scapegoat mechanism and the myth of redemptive violence demand that the victim’s dual nature be suppressed, and only the despicable traits become apparent.

Little Bill begins each of the three beatings previously described in the same manner: verbally degrading his rival. He mentions English Bob’s otherness as an Englishman before beating him, shares with Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek) his general disdain for assassins before beating Munny, and calls Ned a “scoundrel” and Munny a “cowardly” man before responding with the violence he deems necessary. No other aspects of the victim can be considered if the violent mechanisms are to function, a point that is communicated with precision when the scenes that result in violence and the scenes in which violence is diverted are juxtaposed. Unlike the violent scenes just mentioned, Little Bill averts violence by focusing on the duality of the man’s character. For example, in the opening scene of the movie, Little Bill claims that Quick Mike (David Mucci) and Davey Boy (Rob Campell) are just “hard workin’ boys who were foolish.” As such, Little Bill cannot see whipping or hanging them as Alice pleads with him to do. “If they were given over to wickedness in a regular way,” Little Bill could understand Alice’s demand for violence. Unable to demonize these two as he does the others on whom he brings violence, and forced to see his potential victim as one who at once posses traits that condemn and exonerate, Little Bill is unable to execute the mechanisms of violence.

English Bob communicates the same requirement, albeit in an inverse fashion. On his way to Big Whiskey, English Bob explains to all he encounters the reason that one would never shoot a queen. He claims, “The sight of royalty would cause one to dismiss all thoughts of bloodshed . . . [one would simply] stand in . . . awe.” English Bob’s comments appear, on the surface, to be somewhat random, only meant to explain in some way the greeting he will receive in Big Whiskey, but failing to contribute much to the force of the film. When situated within the context of Little Bill’s sentiments, though, utterances that reveal the need to demonize a rival before violence can be committed against that person, English Bob’s comments underscore the way in which the violent mechanisms require that a potential victim’s face not be seen, nor voice heard. One risks the inability to execute the mechanisms of violence if the “royalty” of one’s victim is perceived. English Bob’s observation, coupled with Little Bill’s actions, forms one of the subtle techniques that Eastwood uses to show the way in which the violent mechanisms require that a potential victim’s face not be seen, nor voice heard. One risks the inability to execute the mechanisms of violence if the “royalty” of one’s victim is perceived. English Bob’s observation, coupled with Little Bill’s actions, forms one of the subtle techniques that Eastwood uses to show the way in which the violent mechanisms require that a potential victim’s face not be seen, nor voice heard. One risks the inability to execute the mechanisms of violence if the “royalty” of one’s victim is perceived. English Bob’s observation, coupled with Little Bill’s actions, forms one of the subtle techniques that Eastwood uses to show the way in which the violent mechanisms require that a potential victim’s face not be seen, nor voice heard. One risks the inability to execute the mechanisms of violence if the “royalty” of one’s victim is perceived.

A second understated theme in *Unforgiven* through which Eastwood upsets violent mechanisms is found in the main characters’ willingness to recast earlier acts of violence from a new perspective: the perspective of the victim. Two scenes in which this retelling occurs most plainly are of particular importance. The first occurs when Ned and Munny are getting ready to go to sleep after the first day of their journey. Munny asks Ned, “do you remember that drover I shot through the mouth and his teeth came out through the back of his head?” Ned admits that he does, and Munny replies, “He didn’t do anything to deserve to get shot.” By reflecting on his earlier actions from the perspective of the victim, Eastwood is unable to maintain the myth by which the story has been told previously. Munny’s statement is dangerous. The myths of violence demand that acts of violence always be
told from the perspective of the conqueror. By offering the story from the perspective of the victim, Munny risks that earlier acts of violence, previously excusable by some, will now be condemned by all.8

This risk is realized in the second retelling scene found during English Bob and Beauchamp’s night in Little Bill’s jailhouse immediately after Little Bill reads Beauchamp’s mythologized account of English Bob’s duel with “Two Guns” Corky. Rather than an act of defense of a woman’s honor, as Beauchamp’s glamorized story recounts, Little Bill, an eyewitness to the event, explains that English Bob’s act was a work of jealousy and cowardice. Little Bill mocks Beauchamp’s account, portraying Corky as a well-endowed failure of a gunfighter who is unable to keep a stammering and misfiring English Bob from murdering him after shooting himself in the toe and blowing off his hand with his own gun. Seeing that his victim is twice wounded and now without a gun, English Bob is finally able to slowly approach Corky and shoot him “through the liver.” Little Bill’s account is told in a way that makes Corky a sympathetic character, which exposes the myths that circulated around the early version of English Bob’s actions, a point that Eastwood emphasizes brilliantly in his next shot by having Beauchamp at the table reworking his earlier account in a way that more fittingly condemns English Bob’s once heralded action. No longer can the violent act be viewed through the mechanisms of violence that would excuse such atrocities. By retelling the earlier acts of violence from the perspective of sympathetic characters, or “drovers” who “do not deserve to get shot,” one is forced to tear violent acts from the myths that misappropriate them and consider them for what they often are: arbitrary acts against an innocent victim. Eastwood intensifies this observation in a scene that functions as the third subtle blow used to irritate the scapegoat mechanism, the myth of redemptive violence, and the audience’s acceptance of these mechanisms.

One of the most distasteful acts of violence in the movie is the fate of Ned, a character who has truly left behind him the man of violence he once was. Eastwood ensures that the audience will only sympathize with Ned by presenting Ned’s initial whipping at the hands of Little Bill from the perspective of the women who are most responsible for the violence he is forced to bear. Rather remaining in the jailhouse in which the whipping scene opens, Eastwood scans the rooms in which the whores stand, listening with horrified expressions to the snapping of Little Bill’s whip. Presenting the scene through the ears of these women allows Eastwood to remind his audience of their responsibility for the violence occurring in the jailhouse. The women attempt to restore order through violence, only to victimize a man whose innocence the audience understands more than any of the characters in the film can. In this way, Eastwood frustrates the mechanisms of violence in a third subtle manner by challenging their ability to overcome violence; when these mechanisms are employed, chaos is never overcome, but simply displaced—a point articulated most clearly in Ned’s whipping. Unfortunately, Eastwood does not exploit this point to the fullest extent in Unforgiven, not in the way that he will in Mystic River; instead, Eastwood is satisfied to use Ned’s whipping as something of a pivot on which the emphasis for each of the violent acts that follows is presented with the victim and his potential innocence in focus, rather than the evil that the victim’s death might otherwise be thought to eradicate. By examining the three main deaths that occur toward the conclusion of the film, one can see the effect of this “step.”

In overt fashion, Eastwood ensures that the audience views the murders of Davey Boy, Quick Mike, and Little Bill from the perspective of the victim, not the victor. To guarantee that the audience is dissatisfied with Davey Boy’s murder, Eastwood begins from the first scene of the movie to present Davey Boy in a sympathetic manner. Davey Boy is young and clean cut, polite, and goes by the name Davey Boy, emphasizing his youth and innocence. When the two criminals come to town with the ponies that Little Bill has ordered them to give to Skinny (Anthony James), Eastwood further distinguishes Davey Boy from the violence that opens the movie. Even though he
is not the one responsible for the victimization of Delilah, Davey Boy arrives with an extra pony, “the best of the lot,” for the one “his partner cut up.” After witnessing Davey Boy’s offer, the audience is fully prepared to forgive his involvement in the opening affair and to reject any reciprocal violence he might encounter.

The sympathy that the audience feels toward Davey Boy reaches a crescendo in his murder scene. Ned, acting as a sniper, fires a shot from a Spencer rifle that strikes Davey Boy’s horse, causing the horse to fall and break Davey Boy’s leg. Before Davey can drag himself behind some rocks to protect himself, Munny fires two more shots. With each shot, the violent climax the audience knows is certain becomes more and more repulsive. Finally, Munny hits Davey Boy “though the gut.” The audience is forced to watch as Davey Boy’s legs twitch, and to listen as Davey Boy cries out in a childlike voice, “He got me... I’m dyin’ boys.” With an even more youthful and innocent voice, Davey Boy continues, “I’m so thirsty... get me some water... please, Slim, get me some water.” Unable to listen to the cries any longer, Munny demands that someone bring Davey Boy a drink of water while he waits for his victim to die. Eastwood ensures that the victim’s voice is heard by keeping the camera on the murderers and Davey Boy well after the first shot is fired, and even after the fatal shot is fired. By so doing, Eastwood ensures that this act of retributive violence will be rejected rather than function as an instance of the scapegoat mechanism or the myth of redemptive violence. The audience is given no reason to celebrate Davey Boy’s murder.

Quick Mike’s voice is heard and his face seen in a different, and in many ways, a more disruptive, manner. Rather than presenting Quick Mike as a person capable of “foolishness,” but also of good character, Quick Mike possesses no redeeming qualities. He is dirty, crude, and seemingly unrepentant. Other than the few seconds that elapse in which Quick Mike puts up both hands and says, “no, no,” between the Kid opening the outhouse door and his firing the three fatal shots, the audience has no reason to sympathize with the victim. In fact, one might feel a certain satisfaction and be tempted to celebrate the death of one who can cut a woman. Any ability to celebrate is quickly stripped from the audience, though, as the perpetrator of the murder, the Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett), immediately rejects what he has done. In an attempt to dignify his actions, the Kid speaks about how what has just transpired must have been like the old days. He attempts to glamorize what happened by giving Munny a review of what occurred: “I shot the fucker three times... he’s takin’ a shit, he went for his pistol, and I blazed away. First shot got him right in the chest...” At this, the Kid breaks from his story, unable to continue to describe shots two and three. Instead, the Kid confesses that this was the first person he had ever killed, that he had only “busted [the leg of the Mexican] with a shovel.” The Kid follows this confession with the statements, “three shots and he was takin’ a shit... it doesn’t seem real... I ain’t never gonna breathe again, never.” Quick Mike’s face and voice are seen, only not during the killing, as Girard claims the voice must be heard if it is to be heard at all; in fact, only the shots that the Kid fires are heard. Eastwood shifts the camera away from Quick Mike before the Kid’s participation in the mechanisms of violence is consummated. That the Kid, who has been the person most invested in initiating himself into the myths of violence—his lone purpose throughout the movie being to relive the old days—speaks on the victim’s behalf seriously cripples the ability of the violent act to be accepted by the audience.

By offering the audience a hero and a villain indistinguishable from one another, retelling earlier acts of violence from the perspective of the victim, and working to ensure that each of the acts of violence in the film is portrayed from the perspective of the victim, Eastwood has ensured that the film’s final act of violence is an honest description of the ramifications of the mechanisms of violence. For this reason, critics who have found fault with the final scenes in Big Whiskey have failed to recognize what Eastwood is representing in this final sequence, and that this representation is the only way in which one can ultimately expose the mechanisms of violence for
what they are. In many ways, the final scene is a collection of each of the individual charges that have been brought against the mechanisms of violence throughout the film.

For one, Munny’s rivals are unarmed and unprepared for the conflict that ensues. As Eastwood scans the faces of the men who fill that bar, the audience cannot help but remember the fear that existed in Little Bill’s men earlier in the movie when they are preparing to confront English Bob. These men are not seasoned gunmen. The audience can only sympathize with the end they meet. Two, that Munny is unwilling to let the mythmaker Beauchamp recast the events in a way that would uphold the mechanisms of violence at work further decreases the likelihood of the audience ultimately embracing Munny’s actions. Three, by involving the audience in the final exchange between Munny and Little Bill by forcing the audience to stare into the same double-barrel shotgun that Little Bill last sees, Eastwood ensures that the audience will see the violence from the perspective of the victim, thereby forcing the violent mechanisms being employed to collapse.

Were Unforgiven to end in Big Whiskey at the conclusion of the events in the bar, Eastwood would have successfully exposed the mechanisms of violence and captured the “hell” that exists for those caught in these mechanisms. The movie does not end with the events in Big Whiskey, though; instead, the final scene in the movie is a staging of the same scene that opens the movie, sans the lone individual digging the grave. The man struggling with his past no longer remains in the turmoil in which he resides at the film’s opening as a direct result of the money that he earns for his killings. Munny is able to move himself and his children to San Francisco, where he becomes “prosperous” and is able to provide for his children. That this advancement comes at the expense of a handful of cowboys, a sheriff, countless unnamed townspeople, and his dear friend is no longer considered. The promise of a new beginning that prompted Munny to chase the Kid after refusing his offer has been realized, and herein lies the flaw in Eastwood’s movie. By ending Unforgiven in a positive manner via the epilogue, Eastwood produces a movie in which his main character benefits from the very mechanisms that the film implodes. Even though Eastwood shakes the concept that chaos can be overcome through violence, or that anxieties can be eliminated through retributive violence, in the film’s final scene, these mechanisms are resuscitated just enough to allow audiences to leave the theater with some measure of confidence in the violent mechanisms that the rest of the film shatters. In this way, the real genius of Unforgiven is masked.

This “bad step” is corrected in Mystic River. In Eastwood’s most recent production, the mechanisms of violence are uncovered in very much the same way that they have been exposed in Unforgiven, and each of the subsequent films that delves into the complexities of violence that follow it. The vital difference between Mystic River and Eastwood’s earlier films is that Mystic River’s ending in no way compromises the statement that the film makes; instead, Eastwood ends this movie with the same panic and anxiety that propels the characters into the mechanisms of violence during the film’s rising action, which allows Eastwood the opportunity to demonstrate that the mechanisms of violence can only perpetuate the chaos and anxiety that they claim they can overcome.

The characters in Mystic River are shaken by two murders. The first murder is that of eighteen-year-old Katie Markum (Emmy Rossum), whose body is found at the bottom of an animal cage at the abandoned neighborhood zoo. On the same night that Katie is murdered, Dave Boyle (Tim Robbins) comes home covered in another person’s blood, claiming that he might have killed a man. On the surface, the rest of the movie is an exploration of the psyche of the characters in the movie as they struggle to overcome one of these two murders, a labor made more difficult by the characters’ tendency to see the two murders as one event. Viewed through the observations of Girard and Wink, the movie works at another level, one that reveals the ineptitude of the mechanisms of violence and offers a portrait of the cultural crisis that follows when these myths fail. Both of these accomplishments are realized by the ways in
which Eastwood creates a cast of characters heavily reliant on the perceptions and anxieties of Celeste (Marcia Gay Harden), and by the way he frames the present-day actions with the murder of “Just Ray” and the grand narrative with the abduction of Dave as a young boy.

The character most dependent on Celeste’s perception is her husband, Dave. When Dave comes home on the night just discussed, he is clearly shaken. The one calming influence that first night is Celeste’s willingness to touch him and her promise to take care of the clothes that are covered in blood. When he enters the screen the next morning, as a result of the reception he receives the previous night, Dave is relaxed and comfortable. Unfortunately, he encounters a different woman, one who, over the course of the morning, has grown concerned that nothing of her husband’s night is to be found in the paper. As Celeste’s anxiety grows over the absence of a public report of something that would confirm Dave’s story, and as she becomes willing to charge her husband with the one murder she knows does occur the night in question, Dave’s perception of himself is drastically altered.

Dave’s reliance on Celeste’s perception is depicted most explicitly in the scene in which Celeste comes home to find Dave watching vampire movies. In the time that Celeste has spent sitting in her car in an empty parking lot during a rainstorm, Dave spirals into a place of madness, sickened by the way his wife no longer looks at or touches him. In desperation and despair, Dave mournfully relates his current condition to vampires, identifying the way in which he is like the “undead” he has been watching. After being reminded of Dave’s experience as a little boy, causing Celeste to see Dave as a victim rather than the murderer she fears he is, she reaches for her husband. Rather than receiving her affection and being restored by her gesture, as he is early in the film, Dave withdraws. He can no longer find comfort because he is haunted by the potential innocence of the man he once believed to be molesting a child. Celeste’s suspicious and accusatory gaze has rested on Dave too long for him to escape the fact that he cannot distinguish himself from those from whom he has spent his life fleeing. In this way, the lines between victim and perpetrator blur until the mechanisms that have both crushed Dave and been employed by Dave in an attempt to escape his previous horror no longer exist. Left in a place of ambiguity where good and bad cannot be distinguished, Dave crumbles both psychologically and physically. Eastwood represents the latter when Jimmy Markum (Sean Penn), Katie’s father, also begins to be conditioned by Celeste’s perceptions and anxieties in some of the ways that Dave has been shaped by them, ultimately causing him to resort to mechanisms of violence that he has tried to abandon.

Jimmy’s spiral into the mechanisms of violence begins while he is standing over the body of his daughter lying on the embalming table in the funeral home. Jimmy pledges to avenge her murder: “I’m gonna find him, Katie; I’m gonna find him before the police do, and I’m gonna kill him.” Any person invested in the mechanisms of violence and desperate to escape the present darkness that engulfs would respond in like manner, convinced that order will return only once the one responsible for the current misery is eradicated. Although, while viewing his dead daughter for a second time, Jimmy commits himself to a course of action that depends on the mechanisms of violence, his direction has no specific destination until Celeste shares with him her fear that Dave is Katie’s killer. Upon hearing Celeste’s proclamation, the wheels of the mechanisms of violence are put into motion, and Jimmy finds himself in the midst of an apparatus previously forsaken.

Between the events in the opening scene and the modern day in which the bulk of the story takes place, the audience learns that Jimmy himself has committed a murder. Unable to forgive Just Ray for “rolling over” on him to escape a federal rap and forcing him to miss being with his dying wife, Jimmy brings Just Ray to the banks of the Mystic and murders him, albeit with tears in his eyes. Eastwood uses this murder in brilliant fashion to illuminate the consequences that follow the enactment of the mechanisms of violence. Despite the monetary gift that Jimmy sends to the
Harris home each month, Just Ray’s family is in shambles, a point represented most explicitly when the two detectives come to question Brendan Harris (Tom Guiry), Katie’s boyfriend. The audience sees in this scene the emotional environment created at least in part by the father’s disappearance: the youngest son refuses to talk, and the former wife abuses and exposes her eldest son in the same way that she has been abandoned. Eastwood begins to set hurdles in front of those who want to accept without consequences the mechanisms that will follow and offer a promise of restoration. These obstacles become more staggering as the film progresses and as the characters begin to question their own culpability in the violence that victimizes them and those they love.

One of the more ironic parts of the film is the manner in which Jimmy’s murder of Just Ray influences his own family, resulting, to some degree, in the murder of his daughter. Either still truly hating Just Ray, or, more likely, simply disgusted with what he did to him, Jimmy forbids his daughter from seeing Brendan, a move that forces his daughter to plan to run away in secret with her boyfriend to be married. Eastwood emphasizes the relationship between Jimmy’s daughter’s actions and Jimmy’s murder in a rather obtuse manner; in fact, the real connection between the two cannot be accurately recognized until the movie is nearly concluded. Before knowing with any certainty how he might be right, and in a scene that appears with no explanation or sequential reference, Eastwood places Jimmy alone in a dimly lit room mourning aloud. Jimmy cries out to his dead daughter, “I know in my soul I contributed to your death, but I don’t know how.” Nor does the audience, a move that forces the audience to wrestle with Jimmy’s statement until the more hidden reasons for Jimmy’s culpability are considered: mainly, that by being a person who participates in the mechanisms of violence, Jimmy has perpetuated the violence and chaos he experiences indefinitely, which in turn contributes to his daughter’s death. Of course, Jimmy is unable to identify his culpability; to know how he is guilty of Katie’s murder would finally break him from the myths that support him, that support all of human culture as long as they remain masked. In this way, the entire human race is implicated in the murder that always occurs when the mechanisms are used. This statement finds support when heard in the context of Jimmy’s murder of Dave, an event that relies on Celeste’s perception and that is overshadowed by Jimmy’s murder of Just Ray.

Jimmy begins the final moments of the ritual he is performing in which he murders Dave by telling Dave the story of the night that he brought Just Ray to the very spot where he and Dave now stand. Jimmy finds himself in the midst of these mechanisms with the hope that this ceremony will ease the anxiety and turmoil that he is experiencing. In more of a hopeful plea than a declarative statement, as Jimmy joins Dave on the banks of the Mystic, he shares with Dave, “we bury our sins; here, we wash them clean.” Before Jimmy thrusts his knife into Dave’s belly, Dave tries to convince Jimmy that he had not killed Katie, claiming he killed, instead, a child molester. When Jimmy asks why Dave would have kept his killing of a child molester silent, Dave tells Jimmy that he was afraid that Celeste would make the same connection that Dave had already made, linking himself with the monster he tried to kill. Unwilling to entertain the notion that Celeste’s perception could hold such a sway over him, Jimmy stabs Dave and throws him to the ground. Jimmy raises his gun and, in order to implicate the audience in the ritual taking place, Eastwood keeps the victim in the frame, forcing the audience to see the events from the perspective of the perpetrator. This is one of the more artistic ways in which Eastwood visualizes the difference between the violence in Unforgiven and that in Mystic River. Rather than allowing his audience to assume the position of the victim in the mechanisms enacted on screen—a more privileged position in American culture and a much more comfortable position to consider in any culture—in Mystic River, Eastwood forces his audience to take up the role of perpetrator and to consider the emotions that follow when the employment of these mechanisms fails. Eastwood ensures that the exploitation of these mechanisms is as horrific as possible by interweaving the act in which the
audience is very much involved with the disclosure of the true culprits. As these two scenes reach their climaxes, Jimmy, with the audience behind him, fires the gun and the screen becomes a spotless white.

If the violent myths are performing properly, the action that occurs on the banks of the Mystic should replace the chaos and anxiety that has dominated the characters throughout the film with some sense of peace and order. When the pure white screen vanishes, reality is restored, and the audience sees Jimmy again, and thereby, themselves. They should see a restored Jimmy; such is not the case. The next scene places Jimmy on a curb, hunched over a bottle. The mechanisms have failed Jimmy and the audience in the same way that they failed Dave earlier in the film. Eastwood shows the extent to which the mechanisms have failed each of the parties who has attempted to use them by first returning to the abduction account that frames Mystic River, and then by locating and depicting the newest victims, Celeste and her son.

The movie begins with the young Dave being tricked into a car by a pair of child molesters, and very nearly ends with Jimmy and Sean (Kevin Bacon) reflecting on that event twenty-five years later. The importance of this framing device and its ability to deliver the central critique of the movie cannot be understated. On more than one occasion, Sean and Jimmy individually discuss the way that life would have been different if each had been the one to get in the car that day, as though only the one who actually stepped into the car was affected. These ruminations culminate with a minor revision at the end of the movie: Sean states “sometimes I feel like all three of us [Dave, Jimmy, and Sean] got into that car that day . . . we’re just 11-year-old boys trapped in a cellar wondering what it would have been like if we escaped.” For some critics like Kent Jones, this line is another instance of Eastwood giving his characters a “summarizing speech,” and such a synopsis is not entirely inaccurate. Sean’s words are meant to summarize, but they summarize more than just the plight of three boys. Sean’s words encapsulate the quandary in which human beings exist, and they capture the anxiety that propels individuals and cultures to reach in desperation for the violent mechanisms that Eastwood exposes even after the cogs in these mechanisms have become corroded and dilapidated. Afraid that chaos will present itself through violent acts like children being abducted, daughters being murdered, men being pulled out of cars and beaten to death, and wives and children being deprived of husbands and fathers, people participate in myths—like the myth of redemptive violence and the scapegoat mechanism, which maintain that chaos can be overcome, that societies can protect themselves from such horrors by finding and eliminating those responsible for the imposing evil. Peaceful existence seemingly depends on these myths functioning properly, and as a result, they are protected even after they have become archaic. The imagined anxiety that would exist if these myths were dismissed appears unbearable.

This perceived anxiety seems to motivate the words that Jimmy’s wife Annabeth (Laura Linney) offers in the penultimate scene of the movie in an attempt to restore the mechanisms in which she has found her only solace, but myths that her husband is about to abandon. Annabeth shares with Jimmy the words that she used to comfort their two younger daughters as he was in the process of avenging Katie’s murder,14 words that spoke of a father whose heart was full of a love that would cause him to do anything to protect those he loved. Annabeth, speaking as though her life depended on her message being believed, recasts the events of the preceding night in the way they must be recast if the scapegoat mechanism and the myth of redemptive violence are to remain intact: she tells the story from the perspective of the victor rather than the victim. Annabeth attempts to cast Jimmy as nothing worse than a “strong” man, one who can “rule” a world in which chaos can be overcome by remaining strong. Were Eastwood to follow the same pattern he has established throughout the nineties to varying degrees, most notably, Unforgiven, Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil (1997), Absolute Power (1997), True Crime (1999), and Blood Work (2002), the film would end with Annabeth’s speech. The audience would have the
opportunity to leave the theater with the mechanics of violence still intact, even if badly damaged. The passionate embrace that Eastwood stages as the scene fades might very well offer just enough comfort to cloud the clear revelation of the mechanisms of violence in the film. Eastwood breaks from earlier patterns and takes an additional step in Mystic River with a final scene that offers the counterargument to the position for which Annabeth argues—and that Eastwood’s audience has every reason to accept, equally invested in the violent mechanisms that Annabeth’s speech is meant to resuscitate.

The final scene makes obvious the point that the chaos of the film is resolved for the majority of the characters in some magical way, even for the larger community, a point communicated with great subtlety by capturing the entire neighborhood gathered as one voice celebrating the procession of a parade in the frame. Beyond the general camaraderie enjoyed, Eastwood zooms in on both Sean and his wife and Annabeth and her family, which, when understood in terms of the shot that depicts the community, illustrates the way in which the mechanisms of violence function on the individual and communal planes. Although the suffering that follows Katie’s murder has not subsided completely, the movie’s ending offers the sense that recovery has begun. If not for the presence of Celeste and Michael (Cayden Boyd) in the final scene, the movie could end in tremendous unity; the community would be restored, and although shaken, a point depicted in the playful exchange in the final scene between Sean and Jimmy, confidence in the ability of the scapegoat mechanism and the myth of redemptive violence still intact, even if badly damaged. The passionate embrace that Eastwood stages as the scene fades might very well offer just enough comfort to cloud the clear revelation of the mechanisms of violence in the film. Eastwood breaks from earlier patterns and takes an additional step in Mystic River with a final scene that offers the counterargument to the position for which Annabeth argues—and that Eastwood’s audience has every reason to accept, equally invested in the violent mechanisms that Annabeth’s speech is meant to resuscitate.

The final scene makes obvious the point that the chaos of the film is resolved for the majority of the characters in some magical way, even for the larger community, a point communicated with great subtlety by capturing the entire neighborhood gathered as one voice celebrating the procession of a parade in the frame. Beyond the general camaraderie enjoyed, Eastwood zooms in on both Sean and his wife and Annabeth and her family, which, when understood in terms of the shot that depicts the community, illustrates the way in which the mechanisms of violence function on the individual and communal planes. Although the suffering that follows Katie’s murder has not subsided completely, the movie’s ending offers the sense that recovery has begun. If not for the presence of Celeste and Michael (Cayden Boyd) in the final scene, the movie could end in tremendous unity; the community would be restored, and although shaken, a point depicted in the playful exchange in the final scene between Sean and Jimmy, confidence in the ability of the scapegoat mechanism and the myth of redemptive violence to restore order would remain. The presence of Celeste and her son changes this.

Celeste is left fractured by the events that took place during the night, events that resulted in the loss of her husband and her son’s father. Celeste is reduced to aimless wanderings through the crowd, looking for something that she cannot name. She is stultified by the presence of Sean with his wife and child, and by her cousin, who is now reunited with her family. In each instance, Celeste is left starring awkwardly at those over whom chaos has seemingly passed, recognizing that she is now out of place in a world that has unified itself at her expense. Celeste resorts to running down the street, trying to get her son’s attention, who himself sits swept away by what has transpired, oblivious to the cheers and excitement surrounding him. Order has been restored, but the restoration has come at the expense of Celeste and her son who, in the film’s ending, are shattered by the very anxiety through which the Markums and others have passed. The chaos that has threatened the characters throughout the movie settles on Celeste and her son, and in this way, the movie ends with the same tension that marks its beginning. The violent myths on which the world depends to restore order and ease pain require as much—in capable of ever really overcoming evil—only able to shift the chaos from one person or group of people to another, and only able to do so in a manner that actually intensifies the anxiety that stalks individuals in society.

Notes

1. Contemporary society’s problematic reliance on violence is explored in interesting and important ways in In the Line of Fire (1992), A Perfect World (1993), Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil (1997), Absolute Power (1997), True Crime (1999), and Blood Work (2002). A careful analysis of these films will have to find expression in another place, as will earlier films like the Dirty Harry series, Pale Rider (1985), The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976), High Plains Drifter (1973), Hang ‘Em High (1968), and the spaghetti westerns, which are equally interesting.

2. Because the violent act brings about a certain level of peace, the individual or community murdered at the hands of the violent mob is now heralded as something divine, or very much like it.

3. Girard distinguishes between imitation and mimesis because the former only addresses outward modeling, while the latter addresses the way in which the imitator is entirely shaped, inwardly and outwardly, by the one being.

4. This term is not used in the same way that contemporary evangelical theology might use it; instead, following Girard, the term is meant to denote a situation in which existence is impossible without violence.

5. Douglas McReynolds shows the way in which westerns have had characters with mixed personae as early as Angel and the Badman (1947); the contention of this article is that Eastwood pushes all of the important characters in Unforgiven into this duality, which is novel.

6. Munny’s willingness to see that Ned or the Kid gets his share is an example of the latter; his asking Davey Boy’s partners to get him a drink of water is an example of the latter.
7. In all, one can find three scenes in which the type of retelling takes place in *Unforgiven*, the third being the Kid's retelling of his murder of Quick Mike. The murderous act being described by the Kid, to be discussed shortly, occurs on the screen, unlike the other two retellings, which recast murderous acts that occur before the film opens and therefore are considered a different sort of event for the audience.

8. Herbert Cohen makes a similar observation by showing the way in which Munny's visions during his fever and his telling the Schofield Kid, "it's a hell of a thing killing a man" force the audience to consider the consequences of all of the gunfights that audiences have witnessed and celebrated (74).

9. Carl Plantinga offers a nice discussion of this scene and the way in which it reveals the conflict felt by each of the participants in the scene.

10. Girard has the following relevant statement: "Since the truth about violence will not abide in the community, but must inevitably be driven out, its only chance of being heard is when it is in the process of being driven out, in the brief moment that precedes its destruction as the victim" (*Things Hidden* 218).

11. This point is made with great subtlety in the pause created between Little Bill's last words, "I don't deserve this, I was building a house . . . I'll see you in hell, William Munny," and the fatal shot. In this pause, during which the audience looks into the barrels about to fire, Eastwood is able to show the hell that exists for each of the participants in the mechanisms of violence. This point is in direct refutation of Richard Combs's comment that the audience is "not encouraged to think that Big Whiskey . . . could stand in here and now for hell" (13-38). The long pause is meant to bring this thought to the mind of the audience, albeit in a far more sophisticated manner than is found in *High Plains Drifter* (1985), where the town is painted red and renamed Hell.

12. In this way, Jimmy is brought back to the mechanisms of violence that he thinks he has abandoned in a manner reminiscent of William Munny and Little Bill.

13. In this subtle way, Eastwood also reminds us of Dave's victim, further complicating the way in which the murder of Dave is understood.

14. That Annabeth knows what Jimmy is doing and has reason to doubt the assertion, a point supported in her asking Jimmy "what sort of wife says such a thing?" increases the significance of this scene.

---

**Works Cited**


**Works Consulted**


