Katie Sorce Great Film of Great Directors

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Masculinity in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*

Some movies become cult classics; timeless, inspirational, raw and powerful. One movie that fulfills all these categories is Sergio Leone’s epic spaghetti western, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966). The movie clearly makes statements about what it means to be a man, and ultimately creates the perfect man in “The Good”, the man with no name, Blondie. The movie creates a world where only the toughest can survive and puts men and women in their proper place, but also hints at the fragility of male identity and power. Leone uses cinematography to exemplify the perfect male, marrying violence and masculinity.

Movies in our culture are everything. They ingrain stereotypes as well as values that we hold dear. The western genre is so deeply engrained in our culture that the typical cowboy is one of the symbols that has become the epitome of masculinity and heroism. Spaghetti westerns tend to take a different spin on this, especially in *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. With such a clear cut title, one would expect it would be easy to distinguish between the good and the bad guys, but in reality it’s not that easy. Spaghetti westerns tend me poke fun at the old ideology of good versus evil, rogue versus organized society that was present in the classic westerns. The three main characters are all after the same thing... gold. The are all greedy and kill for their personal gain, blurring the lines between good and evil, and yet we want Blondie and Tuco to be victorious. But all three of them also share something else: their undeniable masculinity, with Blondie being the crowning jewel.

These men are able to get what they want using actions, not words (Morton). Blondie himself barely speaks in the movie, speaking only when he has to. He is independent, uncomplicated, tough, and seemingly emotionless (though not un-compassionate, as evident in the scene where he gives his coat to the dying solider, which is what separates him from Angel Eyes) (*Cinephile Nirvana*). Even when faced with near death, he still does not break his surly disposition; he literally looks in to the void and laughs. This fits in to the performance principle, which emphasizes work, toil, sacrifice and discipline and is considered on the masculine side of the gender spectrum (Nichols, 367). Though the men try to sacrifice as little as possible since they are only after their personal gain, they are clearly disciplined shown though their mastery in gunslinging and for Tuco and Blondie’s ability to survive the desert. Their masculinity manifests in physical abilities rather than mental or emotional which are considered more feminine. The less men are able to show emotions, the more manly they are. Tuco is considered less manly than Blondie because he clearly shows his emotions; anger, stress and fear, ultimately making him “the ugly”. Blondie is the “the good” because he is able to completely mask his emotions making him tough and unyielding all the time, even in the face of certain death. Men are expected to live up to seemingly impossible standers of autonomy, mastery and self-control or else their masculinity can be called into question, but Blondie is able to live up to all of these ideals, which is why he is so idolized by men in our culture (Nichols, 368). Just the fact that he isn’t given an actual name gives men the hope that anyone could potentially reach this god-like level of self-discipline and ability. Blondie becomes the projection of what everyone man aspires to be (Neale, 11). And he gives us the hope that anyone could be the man with no name.

One thing that is striking about *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, is it’s almost complete lack of female characters. This in it’s self clearly makes a statement about women’s place in the overly masculine world of the west. The film implies that women cannot change anything and are passive objects that should be seen but not heard (*Cinephile Nirvana)*. The lack of a love story or damsel in distress eliminates any distractions for the men, allowing them to focus on their main objective (Leinberger, 54). Not having to worry about a women ultimately gives them more power and autonomy. Since there is a lack of sex, it’s possible the over-abundant violence could also be a sublimation, rather then just violence to prove they are manly (Nichols, 372).

The only really important women in the film is Maria, the women Angel-Eyes beats up to get information about Bill Carson. This scene is clearly very sexual, taking place in a bedroom, with Maria’s shirt falling off her shoulder. Although she attempts to protect Bill, she can’t fend off Angel Eyes and is forced to tell him everything she knows. This reenforces man being the dominant force, easily being able to get what he wants. However, the fact that all this is being done by “the bad” says that this isn’t exactly acceptable behavior. Most men consider being respectful to women a manly characteristic, so even though it’s okay to exert dominance over women, it’s not okay to straight up physically abuse them. This deviates from the dominant ideology of how men should treat women, another reason why Angel Eyes is considered “the bad”, rejecting the hegemonic order and betraying everyone he meets to get what he wants (Nichols, 296).

Another theme the film explores is fetishism and possible homoerotic subtext. The male body it’s self seems to be fetishized with the extreme close ups, especially in the final duel scene with extreme close ups darting between the eyes, lips, and guns, forcing the audience to look at the male body (*Cinephile Nirvana*). There are several fetishized items in the film, including guns (especially Tuco’s custom pistol specifically for Blondie) and Blondie’s cigars (which are also phallic items) even the buried treasure it’s self seems to be given more value than it actually has, becoming the supposed maltese falcon of the movie (Leinberger, 55).

The movie is so overly masculine its hard not to assume there is homosexual subtext. The movie explores a love-hate relationship between Tuco and Blondie, both men respecting each other but also untrusting, forced to work together if they want the gold (Leinberger, 55). This could be considered a pre-curser to the typical “bro movie” or “bromance”.

Although Blondie seems be to undisputedly masculine, the film still explores the concept that masculinity is not concrete. This is evident in the scene where Tuco finally captures Blondie and has him in a noose, about to shoot the chair out from under him. The audience knows he has to get out of this situation somehow, assuming Blondie has a plan, even thought the situation looks impossible to get out of. It’s then that a cannon ball crashes in from no where, causing Tuco to go tumbling and Blondie to make his escape. The fact that Blondie was only able to escape due to an uncontrollable external force suggests that masculinity is dictated highly by nature, society, and things the individual as no control over, implying masculinity can be changed or called into question at a moment’s notice (Morton). The performance principle states that masculinity comes from what you do, so every moment is a test. Even when Blondie is caught in these seemingly unescapable predicaments, he still holds his head up and puts on that look, still every bit as masculine, even if he isn’t in the position of power. He never begs for his life or tries to talk his way out of a situation like a normal person would do. He’s able to carry on in the burning hot desert and ultimately saves himself despite Tuco’s determination to get his revenge. All his ordeals make him stronger and even more of a “hero”.

Masculinity and violence go hand in hand in Sergio Leone’s *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.* Guns become a part of the male anatomy, violence is fetishized, and taking someone’s life is all apart of a big game. The film explores what it means to be a man; emotionally unyielding, self-sufficient, independent from the control of a woman, et ectera. So since this movie has become a classic in America, what does this say about our culture? Although men still idolize Clint Eastwood’s Man with No Name, I think today the idea of the perfect man is a bit different. And (I hope) people realize that there is no such thing as the “perfect man”, just like there is no perfect woman. We don’t live in a world of gun slinging cowboys anymore. Little boys grow up with super heros, monsters and action heros driving fast cars. These heros always rescue the girl and save the city. Batman catches The Joker without killing him, two boatloads of people decide they would rather die than willfully murder the others so they could live. Unjustified violence is becoming less acceptable in mainstream cinema, and violence towards women is downright taboo, not to mention that women are now fighting back. Women can have masculine qualities of being tough, skilled and sacrificing while still being feminine. *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* will always be a classic for its amazing cinematography, trademark music and the famous three way duel, but it’s ideas of masculinity may finally be going out of style.

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