

# **Unforgiven Film Summary**

## **Unforgiven by Clint Eastwood**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Unforgiven Film Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Context.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Summary and Analysis.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">Style and Cinematography.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Symbols.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Essay Questions.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>

## Context

Throughout the years, actor and director Clint Eastwood's most popular and successful genre has overwhelmingly been the western. In fact, many people automatically connect Eastwood's name with the westerns in which he has starred. Over the course of his career, Eastwood has become the epitome of the tough leading man and action hero, in the process also becoming a legend in his own time. Eastwood's legacy of films and series includes *Ambush at Cimarron Pass*, *Rawhide*, *Two Mules for Sister Sara*, *Joe Kidd*, *Bronco Billy* and *Pale Rider*. Although some of these are traditional westerns that tells stories about the old West, others discuss the contemporary cowboy trying to make his way.

*Unforgiven* was Eastwood's first movie to gross over one hundred million dollars at the box office. The film has an all-star cast, including Gene Hackman, Morgan Freeman and Eastwood himself. Prior to starring in *Unforgiven*, Hackman was best known for his roles in movies such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Hoosiers* and *Superman*. Although he had not appeared in as many westerns as Eastwood, Hackman fit well into his role and has since acted in several other westerns. Freeman had been an actor for many years, but had recently gained recognition from his roles in critically acclaimed movies such as *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Glory*. After his excellent performance in *Unforgiven*, he became even more popular and he is now one of the most famous and respected African American actors in Hollywood.

*Unforgiven* was nominated for nine Academy Awards and won four of them: Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor (Gene Hackman), Best Director and Best Film Editing (Joel Cox). Only two other westerns, *Cimarron* (1931) and *Dances With Wolves* (1990), have won the Academy Award for Best Picture.

Two of Eastwood's primary directorial influences were Sergio Leone and Don Siegel. These directors created many of the westerns in which Eastwood had already played a role. Eastwood portrayed the part of "The Man With No Name" in Sergio Leone's movies and he appeared as Dirty Harry in Don Siegel's films. At the end of *Unforgiven*, Eastwood dedicates his film to these legendary directors.

Much like those who influenced him, Eastwood is also considered an effective director. *Unforgiven* was shot in thirty-nine days, wrapping up four days ahead of schedule. Prior to the start of filming, stunt trainers spent two months working on the stunt choreography and teaching actors how to ride horses. According to actors who have starred in Eastwood's films, workdays on his film projects are short, generally painless and a lot of fun.

During a time in which modern, futuristic movies were big sellers and westerns were widely considered outdated, Eastwood managed to create a western that won over both crowds and critics alike. In *Unforgiven*, Eastwood plays with stereotypes and common conceptions about the Old West in order to analyze the act of murder. Between the



fiction and reality of Eastwood's West lies a space in which the truth of human nature and human desires is explored.

Human nature is a subject that often mesmerizes audiences; in this film, Eastwood explores many facets of it. Although William Munny has been a known killer and thief, he has finally calmed down to live peacefully with his wife and children. However, when tempted with the idea of earning good money and killing for an ostensibly good cause, he cannot resist the desire to take this easy way out. Although most people (fortunately) are not killers, they are still able to identify with William Munny and the other characters in this film in some way.

Throughout the filming, neither Eastwood nor screenwriter David Webb Peoples tried to create an antiviolence film. However, given the script and plot events, the idea of an antiviolence theme emerged following the film's release. Although the characters participate in and discuss many violent acts, the viewer sees by the end that violence only hurt rather than helped the characters in the film. Everyone is dead, yet nothing has been solved.



## Summary and Analysis

The film begins with a story in white print rolling up the screen. There is a background of a red sky, with a house to the left and a pole in the middle; to the right, a man buries someone under a tree. The story tells of a young woman who marries a man named William Munny against her family's wishes. Although she could have married anyone, she married this thief and murderer with a bad temper, breaking her mother's heart. However, in 1878, she died of smallpox.

The rest of the film's story begins two years later, in 1880, in Big Whiskey, Wyoming. There is the roll of thunder and the sound of rain in the background as the setting remains dark; it is difficult to see what is going on. The viewer can hear and barely see a couple engaged in sexual intercourse. Yelling and screaming begins in the next room: the scene is set in a brothel. A woman has been attacked by her visitor and he has cut her face with a knife. The other women and their men run in and try to stop him until Skinny, the brothel owner and manager, pulls a gun on the man and finally makes him stop.

The town sheriff, Little Bill, is called to the scene. He asks if the girl is going to die and a woman named Alice sadly says, "She'll live." It turns out that the injured prostitute's only offense had been to laugh upon seeing that her client was not well endowed. Alice follows Little Bill to see what the punishment for the knifing will be and she becomes angry when he says the men involved in the crime will only receive a whipping. Skinny yells that his investment (the injured woman) has been ruined, defaced by the knife cuts, so Little Bill tells the men to bring five ponies to Skinny rather than undergoing a whipping. This only makes Alice angrier. Skinny sends Alice to check on Delilah, the injured girl. The next morning, the women discuss how they can gather enough money to pay assassins to kill the men.

The picture then transitions to the house we saw earlier in the film. A young man rides up to a pigpen, in which William Munny is taking care of his animals with the help of his children. The man accuses Will of being a notorious murderer. Will's son tells Will that two more pigs have the fever and Will takes the stranger into the house. The man says that his uncle Pete told him that if he should ever want a partner for a killing, he should find Will. The man calls himself the Schofield Kid, so named for a type of gun.

The Kid tells Will that he is heading up to Wyoming to kill a couple of no-good men who cut up a lady. (As time has passed, the story of the knifing has been exaggerated, as she is now supposedly missing an ear as well.) Additionally, the reward is one thousand dollars, which they could split. Will explains to the Kid that although he used to kill when he had a drinking problem, he has not had a drop to drink in ten years because his wife cured him of all that. The Kid remarks that Will does not seem prosperous. He suggests that after this killing, Will might be able to buy his wife something new. Will tells him that his wife has already passed away and the Kid leaves. Will rejoins his children to help separate some hogs; in the process, he falls down on his face in the mud. As his



daughter tells him that two more pigs seem to have the fever, he leans on the fence and looks longingly after the Kid.

Suddenly, the story flashes back to Big Whiskey, where a man is riding up with several horses. We see Delilah's scarred face as the men pass to give the horses to Skinny. The women start throwing rocks and mud at the men. A younger, nicer man who did not hurt Delilah has brought her a pony, the best of the lot. Alice yells at him and tells him to go away, but from the expression on Delilah's face, it is apparent that she would have loved to have the pony.

In the next scene, Will is practicing his shooting skills. His young daughter asks her brother, "Did Pa used to kill folks?" Soon after, Will shaves and visits his wife's grave before leaving to follow the Kid. Will falls off as he is trying to mount his horse; he says, "I ain't hardly been in the saddle myself in a while." He tells his children that he would have whipped the horse in the past, but that their dear, departed Ma taught him better. He leaves after saying that he will return in two weeks' time.

Back in Wyoming, Skinny confronts the women about a lie they have told: they circulated word that they had money to pay someone to kill the men behind Delilah's knifing. Skinny asks them what they are going to do when someone comes to collect and they stand there quietly, apparently not having thought of this possibility. Skinny goes to see Little Bill, who is struggling to build a house; from the look of it, this construction project is not going well. Skinny tells Little Bill about what the women have done.

Will goes to see his friend, Ned Logan and also meets Ned's Native American wife, Sally. Ned tells Will that killing is difficult and that it will be harder than he expects. Will tells Ned about what the men did and Ned responds that he supposes "they have it coming." Will asks Ned to look in on the children while he is gone, but Ned decides to go with him to Wyoming. As the men prepare to sleep that night, Will talks about his past killings. He again says that Claudia, his wife, cured him of all that; however, now he wants to do something for his children's sake.

The film then switches to a conversation between some men on a train. They are discussing assassins and one English man among them is suspected by the others to be the infamous English Bob. After insulting America, Bob suggests that they compete to shoot birds; he will shoot for the queen and they may shoot for "whomever." He wins, and then tells the losing man that he is sure the man's aim was affected by his grief about the president's injury. (The audience can assume that Lincoln was recently assassinated.) Bob gets off in Big Whiskey, where he is joined by his biographer, W. W. Beauchamp.

Bob and Beauchamp arrive at the town and are asked by a deputy to turn in their firearms, but Bob claims that they do not have guns. The deputy goes to get his own gun and the other deputies ask where Little Bill is; he says that Little Bill is fixing his porch. The deputies laugh at Little Bill's carpentry, saying that there is not a single straight angle in the place. When Bob and Beauchamp come out of a store, they find



themselves surrounded by armed deputies, including Little Bill. It is obvious that Little Bill and Bob have met in the past. As Beauchamp tries to pull out the book he has been working on, the deputies pull their triggers; Beauchamp is so scared that he urinates on himself. Little Bill knows that they have guns and finally gets Bob's from him before beating him up and putting him in jail.

As Will and Ned travel, they discuss life and love until they are shot at, unsuccessfully, by the Kid. They discover that he is a terrible marksman. The Kid agrees to let Ned join them, even though he does not like the idea. Later, when Ned is looking around, the Kid asks what he is looking at. Ned tells him that it is cloudy and a storm is coming. Ned becomes convinced that the Kid cannot see. He tests the Kid by saying that there is a hawk in the sky and the Kid responds that he could hit the hawk. The Kid then throws Ned's canteen on the ground and shoots at it. Will and Ned try to determine just how far the Kid can actually see, knowing that this information is important to their safety. They correctly determine that his eyesight is actually quite poor.

Back in the jail, Little Bill begins reading English Bob's biography and discovers that he has lied about certain events. Little Bill calls Bob the Duck of Death rather than the Duke of Death. He tells Beauchamp the real story behind some of Bob's so-called feats: Bob was so drunk one night that he kept missing his target, a man named Corky and he only managed to kill him after Corky's gun had exploded in his hand. Little Bill observes that Bob was a coward to kill a man without a weapon. His explanation to Beauchamp demonstrates that the truth about the old West is very different from its many legends.

On the road, the Kid questions Ned and Will about the men they have killed. The Kid (who is younger than they are) says he has killed five, but the older men seem skeptical. At the jail, Little Bill tries to show Beauchamp how difficult it really is to kill a man. He hands Beauchamp a gun and tells him to kill him; of course, Beauchamp is unable to do it. Beauchamp asks what would happen if he gave the gun to Bob and Little Bill tells him to go ahead. Bob refuses to take the gun, knowing that Bill will kill him first if he tries anything. Back on the road, Ned and Will also talk about the difficulty of killing men.

The next day, Little Bill lets Bob leave after telling him that he will shoot him if he sees him again. Beauchamp has decided to stay with Little Bill. After what Little Bill did to Bob, the women at the brothel figure that no one else will come to help them carry out the assassination. Skinny tells Delilah to get a veil to cover her face so that she can earn some money. As the train pulls away with Bob on it, Ned, Will and the Kid come into town.

One of the women tells Alice that a man is looking for her; it is the Kid. Will stays downstairs in the saloon, having become very sick from riding so far in the rain. At Little Bill's house, Little Bill tells Beauchamp that he does not like assassins. The house is leaking from the rain; much to Little Bill's chagrin, Beauchamp innocently suggests that he hang the carpenter. One of the deputies shows up at the house, telling Bill that two strange men have come into town.



At the saloon, Will is hallucinating from a fever, remembering the men he has killed. Ned goes to find the Kid and to visit a woman at the brothel. Will has been drinking during the journey and in the saloon in order to keep his circulation flowing. Importantly, previous discussions in the film have established that Will is a dangerous man when drunk. Little Bill enters and demands that Will give up his pistol. Will says that he did not see any sign ordering him to do so and he claims that he does not have a pistol anyway. Little Bill begins to insult Will, but Will continues to insist that he does not have a gun. Little Bill finally makes Will stand up; the two struggle and Little Bill takes Will's gun away from him.

Upstairs, Alice hurries the other men out of the window as Will gets pushed around by Little Bill inside the saloon. The injured Will crawls out to the street and Ned and the Kid pick him up. Ned sews up Will's cuts in a nearby barn the women told him about. The women come to check on them and the men say that they need three days' worth of food. The women offer what they call "advance payment" (sexual favors) to Ned and the Kid for the killings. The Kid is concerned that Ned will not help him kill the men if Will dies.

While Ned and the Kid go to find the men, Delilah comes to check on Will and he thinks she is an angel. He finds out that he has been there for three days and that Little Bill thinks the men traveled south. Will also finds out from Delilah that the girls do not have any money and are offering sexual relations as payment, but he turns down Delilah's offer. Will apologizes for insulting her, explaining that he would like to be intimate with her, but cannot because of his wife.

Will, Ned and the Kid go to a ranch and find some of the men involved in Delilah's knifing; they kill them. Ned finds that he does not have it in him to kill a man and Will makes the final deadly shot. After this killing, Ned decides to return to Kansas. Little Bill finds out about the killing and heads to the ranch to find the killers.

As the women discuss the men, Delilah finds out that Will's wife is dead. In the meantime, the men at the ranch pretend they are not worried about the assassins coming back to kill again. Ned is captured by the deputies and Little Bill tries to get information from him by whipping him as the town watches.

Little Bill sends one of the deputies to get the women. When they arrive, Little Bill tells them that if their story does not match Ned's, he will kill him. The Kid and Will go back to the ranch to kill another man. After the Kid kills the man, they hurry away from the ranch. Later, the Kid breaks down because this is the first man he has ever killed. Will tells him that he does not remember many of his own killings, because he was drunk most of the time. Will says, "It's a hell of a thing killing a man: you take away all he's got and all he's ever gonna have." The Kid replies, "Yeah. Well, I guess they had it coming." Will responds, "We all have it coming, Kid."

One of the women rides up, bringing them the money they are owed. When Will says that they will give Ned his share, the woman informs him that Ned is dead. She explains that Ned was questioned about Will and the Kid's whereabouts and then one of the men





from the ranch came in and said that Ned had killed a man there. Ned finally confessed Will's identity (the man who killed women and children in '66) and then Little Bill beat him more. After the woman's revelation, the Kid gives Will his gun and tells him to keep it because he never wants to kill anyone again; he says, "I ain't like you, Will." The Kid also says that he would rather be "blind and ragged than dead."

Will asks the Kid to deliver his share of the money to his children, then heads into town to kill Little Bill. As he enters town, Will sees Ned's body in front of the brothel and saloon; someone has placed a sign on him saying that he was an assassin. Inside the saloon, Little Bill is explaining that a posse will be leaving in the morning to chase down the assassins. As he finishes speaking, Will walks in.

Will shoots Skinny for putting Ned's body outside. Little Bill criticizes Will for killing an unarmed man and Will responds, "Well, he should've armed himself if he's going to decorate his saloon with my friend." Will admits that he has killed just about "everything that walked or crawled at one time or another," then states that he is now here to kill Little Bill. Little Bill tells the other men that if Will shoots at him, they should shoot Will down. Suddenly, everyone opens fire in the bar.

As the shooting ends, Will tells everyone who does not want to be killed to "clear on out the back." As the fighting ends, Will takes a moment to have a drink, but his face is not reflected in the nearby mirror. Beauchamp, amazed that Will killed five men on his own, takes mental notes for the book he is writing. Will explains what happened and says that he's always been "lucky in killing folks." However, Beauchamp has noticed that Little Bill is actually still alive. As Will stops to take another drink, he hears the cocking of Little Bill's pistol behind him.

Will shoots Little Bill and Little Bill says that he does not deserve to die like this because he was "Billy the House." Little Bill says, "I'll see you in hell, William Munny," and Will replies, "Yeah," just before he shoots Little Bill again. Will prepares to leave, telling everyone outside that he is leaving and that he will kill their families if they shoot at him. As the townspeople watch, Will rides away.

We once again see the silhouetted picture from earlier (the one that appeared as the backdrop to the scrolling story in the opening sequence). However, this time there are clothes on a line and a man walking toward the tree. As the end of the story rolls up onto the screen, we learn that by the time Claudia's mother, Mrs. Ansonia Feathers, finally came out to Hodgeman County to visit her daughter's grave, William Munny had long since departed. Rumor had it that he left with the children to sell dry goods in San Francisco. Nothing on the grave marker could explain to Mrs. Feathers why her daughter would have married such a dangerous, intemperate thief and robber. As the words roll off the screen, both the clothes and the man disappear from view.



# Characters

## William Munny, played by Clint Eastwood

### Description

William Munny is a "known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition." Will is a tall and handsome man in his fifties or sixties. He has two small children and although he is not overly affectionate, he obviously loves them. The children are around the ages of six and ten and they are named Will and Penny. They only appear in the very beginning of the film, but the viewer gets the sense that they are in awe of Will.

Will has a strong, quiet way about him. Although he does not say much through most of the movie, his actions and the things he does say are rendered more powerful because of his typical silence. Will is a good marksman, but he quit fighting after he married his wife, Claudia. We can assume that Claudia was a quiet, kind woman, as she clearly influenced Will to settle down. Will also attributes some of the actions of his younger days to his love of liquor. In the film, we see that he becomes a much more dangerous man after he begins drinking again.

### Analysis

William Munny is an enigma. Eastwood uses the character of William to examine the character of human nature: specifically, the desire and ability to murder. As the film opens, we learn that William Munny is a well-known thief and killer; however, the first time we see him, he is falling on his face in the mud while chasing hogs with his children. During his wife's life and following her death, William has become a seemingly calm, normal man.

William does not just kill because he has been drinking; he also drinks precisely because he has killed. Without the alcohol, Will might not be able to deal with what he has done or finally finish the killing he started. Although Will may seem addicted to killing, he really has no choice but to keep going once his killing spree has begun. After murdering the first two men, he must kill all the men in Big Whiskey; if he does not, they will chase him home. He knows he has two children to care for and the only way they will continue to have a father is for him to kill everyone in the bar. Even if Little Bill were the only man to remain alive, he would have formed a posse and followed Will, seeking to kill him and possibly his children at a later time.



## Little Bill Daggett, played by Gene Hackman

### Description

Little Bill is a somewhat small and stocky man in his fifties or sixties who is the sheriff of Big Whiskey. Little Bill imposes very strict rules on anyone entering his town; everyone must turn in their weapons at the office on penalty of death. When English Bob and Beauchamp come into town, Little Bill makes it clear that he is not scared of them or anyone. He not only confiscates Bob's concealed gun, but also beats him up in front of the entire town. In many ways, Little Bill seems to wield the power of a despot in Big Whiskey.

Little Bill is a dangerous character. He runs the town as if he is a dictator, expecting everyone, including visitors, to do things his way. When Little Bill first appears in the film, he may seem like a bit of a joke. He is building a house that is quickly falling down and his deputies make fun of him. However, from the moment he walks into town to meet English Bob, it is obvious that everyone listens to him for a good reason: he is one of the deadliest men in the West.

### Analysis

Little Bill Daggett is one of the West's worst characters. Now the sheriff of Big Whiskey, Little Bill was at one time the most dangerous and terrifying of criminals. However, by becoming a town sheriff and attempting to build a "respectable" home (an endeavor that is a complete failure, as he is quite obviously a terrible carpenter), he seems to be making an attempt to turn over a new leaf. In essence, though, he seems to be the same dangerous man as he used to be. The only difference is that now he at least tries to protect the town in which he lives from other men who are as bad as he is

Nonetheless, Little Bill is a very honest man. Rather than lying like English Bob, he tells Beauchamp the truth about things that happened. Little Bill's stories are funny and he does not try to make himself look like a hero in them. Little Bill is also the type of man who wants to show that he is unafraid of anything and to make a statement to criminals. He places Ned's dead body on display so that any other assassins who come seeking bounty will know what to expect. However, in so doing, he incurs Will's wrath and ultimately brings about his own death.

## Ned Logan, played by Morgan Freeman

### Description

Ned is Will's best friend from the old days. They have been through a lot together and Ned understands Will well. Having both married, they settled down on nearby farms and have remained close through the years. When Will makes the decision to follow the Kid,



Ned decides to go with him. He is partly tempted by the money, but most of all, Ned simply wants to get away for a few days.

Ned is a smart, level-headed man. He quickly catches on to the Kid's game, calling his bluff regarding both his empty boastfulness and his impaired vision. Ned also figures out what the prostitutes have done: lied about having the bounty payment money in order to persuade assassins to come and kill the men who wronged Delilah. Although Ned is angry, he keeps his cool and they work out another agreement.

## **Analysis**

Ned is the most loyal character in the film. In particular, he remains loyal to Will through everything they endure together. Even when Ned is beaten by Little Bill, eventually to death, he tries to protect Will and his family. After so many years fighting and traveling together, he is unable to harm Will, even if it might save his own life. However, he is also smart enough to know that even if he were to confess Will's whereabouts, Little Bill will probably kill him anyway.

## **The Schofield Kid, played by Jaimz Woolvett**

### **Description**

The Schofield Kid is a young man who is essentially all talk and little action. From the very beginning, when he meets Will, the young man talks big about his previous work as an assassin; however, he does not offer specifics, because there are none. As his name suggests, the Kid is an innocent: he knows the stories of the old West, but he does not know the truth.

The Kid has extremely poor eyesight and cannot see more than fifty to one hundred feet in front of him. When he tries to shoot Ned and Will as they follow him, he misses them repeatedly. Afterward, he tries to make up excuses for his failure, but Ned quickly guesses the truth.

### **Analysis**

The Schofield Kid is really a secondary character in the story. Although his appearance helps get the plot rolling, he does not remain the center of attention for much of the film. His purpose in the movie is to instigate events and represent innocence.

Despite his big talk, the Kid has never killed anyone and his innocence is obvious throughout the film. For one thing, he is not a good shot unless he is only a few feet away. In addition, he has no idea what the consequences of his actions will be. After he finally kills for the first time, the Kid is so distraught that he says he will never kill another man. His innocence has been lost, but at least he has realized that the path of the thieving murderer is not one he wishes to take.



## English Bob, played by Richard Harris

### Description

English Bob is well known in the West and Beauchamp has decided to be his biographer. Since the publication of the first book about his life, Bob has become a well-dressed, haughty man. While on the train, he not only refuses to reveal his identity, but also treats America with disdain, insulting it as a country that lacks a monarch.

### Analysis

English Bob is a liar. Little Bill reveals to Beauchamp that Bob not only has lied to him about everything he wrote in the first biography, but also is continuing to lie as Beauchamp takes notes for his newest book. English Bob is a terrible gunman and a coward, as evidenced by his killing of an unarmed man earlier in his life. Bob has merely tried to create a new reputation for himself through his biographies so that he can be famous and wealthy.

## W. W. Beauchamp, played by Saul Rubinek

### Description

W. W. Beauchamp rides into Big Whiskey in the company of English Bob. Beauchamp is Bob's biographer and he is thrilled by all the stories he has heard of the glamorous and deadly old West. Like a fascinated child, he believes everything he hears. However, he finds out from Little Bill that Bob's stories are generally false.

### Analysis

Compared to most of the other men in the film, Beauchamp is weak and cowardly. Although he writes books that recount the dangerous events of the West, he runs from any actual danger he encounters. In some ways, Beauchamp is an innocent as well. He expects the old West to be grand and glorious, hazardous and beautiful. However, he learns from Little Bill that most of English Bob's stories are great elaborations or outright lies. His expectations are disappointed, but he is still happy to hear true stories of the old West. In the final bar scene, he gets to experience such stories firsthand.



# Themes

## Violence Solves Nothing

As mentioned, *Unforgiven* is known as being an antiviolence film, although no one involved with the film went into the project with that specific purpose or platform in mind. However, in the end, the film can be seen as carrying an antiviolence message. The script demonstrates that violence may seem to take care of some problems in the short run, but over the long haul, nothing will really change.

In the film, a single act of violence, the man cutting Delilah in the brothel, leads to a string of murderous events. The other women want revenge, but even when they get that revenge, the problem is not solved. Will has to kill Little Bill and the other men because they will follow him if he does not; he cannot leave his children without a parent, so he must murder even more people. The mounting violence leads only to more violence. In the end, many people have been hurt, many people are dead and no one is happy.

## The Past is Inescapable

From the beginning of the film, the viewer learns that William Munny is "a known thief and killer." However, he is falling in mud and chasing hogs the first time he appears, causing the audience to wonder if he has reformed from his infamous past ways. Although Will has become a farmer since his wife's death, it is obvious that he is making virtually no money to support his family. He states that he has left behind his former life of murder and robbery, but the viewer is left to wonder how long this change will last in his current circumstances.

Eventually, Will joins the Kid in order to make some easy money to support his family. He quickly falls back into his old ways, especially after he begins drinking again. It seems that no matter how hard Will tries, he cannot escape his corrupt past. However, one of the important points the film makes is that he did manage to change his ways for quite some time. Had he not made the choice to follow the Kid, none of the subsequent violent events of the film would have occurred. Although his history will always remain a part of his life and influence his character, he does have free "will" and is able to make choices concerning his actions.

## Innocence

In a film all about murder and violence, it may seem surprising that one of the primary themes is innocence. However, at numerous points, the film discusses innocence as well as the loss of innocence.



As the film begins, we see Will and Penny, William Munny's children, toiling on the farm. Although they work hard and have a difficult life, they still carry an air of innocence about them. They do not yet know the evil of the world and of humans, including the evil in which their father was once involved before their mother rescued him from that lifestyle.

Although the Kid claims to have killed five men, the viewer can tell from his shooting skills and his boasting that he probably has not killed anyone. In the end, this turns out to be correct: the Kid was an innocent. After the Kid finally kills a man, he completely breaks down with grief and regret. Only then does he learn that killing a man shows foolishness rather than bravery. His innocence is finally lost.

## Style and Cinematography

Clint Eastwood has become highly regarded as one of the most skilled directors in Hollywood. As mentioned, this epic film was completed in only thirty-nine days, a full four days ahead of schedule. Eastwood is known for finishing his films early and with little difficulties involved for anyone on the set. Although his impeccable stylistic choices must be made within a relatively short time, they are strong decisions with impact that will last throughout the life of the film.

An interesting technique is used throughout the film: in each scene in which something bad happens, the picture is so dark that at times it goes completely black. The decision to film the movie in this manner helps emphasize the emotion and meaning within each scene. As the screen gradually darkens, the audience expects more sad and terrible events to take place. Before Will goes inside for the final bar scene, the street becomes almost entirely black and the only thing that can be heard is the ominous silence of the town in the midst of the storm.

In *Unforgiven*, both Eastwood and screenwriter Peoples reference and pay homage to a number of older films. Although it cannot be verified, the names of Will's children, Will and Penny, seem to refer to the 1968 film *Will Penny*, as does William Munny's name. In that film, a cowboy becomes a gunslinger in order to help two children and their widowed mother. Additionally, Little Bill Daggett's last name comes from the 1969 film *True Grit*. English Bob's name is also inspired by that movie, in which there is a character called Mexican Bob.

One of Eastwood's own films, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), also seems to be referenced in *Unforgiven*. In the final bar scene, when Beauchamp asks Will how he chose the order in which he shot, Will replies, "I guess I just got lucky." In Eastwood's earlier film, his character was asked a similar question by Chief Dan George. Unlike Will, he replies with a detailed analysis of the way various men's eyes and holsters looked.

In a final tip of their hats to the old West, the tavern in which the film's final scene takes place is named Greely's. Horace Greeley was the *New York Tribune* editor who used the famous line, "Go west, young man," in one of his editorials - an exhortation that sent countless individuals westward in search of fortune.





# Motifs

## Journey

The journey motif found in *Unforgiven* is common in both film and literature: as the characters make a physical journey (in this case, from Will's farm to the town and eventually to San Francisco), they also make an emotional and psychological journey.

Will journeys from his new life on the farm with his children to Big Whiskey and his old lifestyle. In the end, Will falls into the patterns that characterized his life before he met his wife, becoming a killer once more. Ned points out as they are traveling that even though there is a good cause in this case, Will would never think about killing another man if Claudia, his wife, were still alive. However, since she is dead, Will returns to his roots and to the murderous ways for which he was known in the past. However, after his assassin work is done, he does return to his family and, hopefully, to a better life and character.

Ned and the Kid make their own journeys as well. Ned leaves home to find some adventure and protect Will from himself and the Kid, but his journey ends in his death. The Kid also makes a remarkable journey, starting out as an innocent youngster with a lot of bravado and ending up a wiser and more mature adult who finds out that killing is not what he expected. The Kid leaves Big Whiskey hoping to live a quieter, less "glamorous" life.

## Stereotypes

As Little Bill and Beauchamp talk, the common stereotypes of the old West are destroyed. It is revealed that that English Bob was a coward and a liar who simply shot an unarmed man (as well as his own foot). The true stories that Little Bill tells are amusing, but do not meet our expectations. In *Unforgiven*, the audience learns that no one can draw a gun as fast as legend would have it and still hit anything, nor do most men fight unless they are seriously threatened or drunk.

Additionally, the character of William Munny is two-sided. In some ways, he fits the stereotype of the ruthless murderer. This is most obvious at the end of the movie, when he kills everyone in the bar. However, at the beginning, he defies all stereotypes as he clumsily works his farm with his children.

## Darkness

*Unforgiven* was shot so that much of the action takes place in partial to complete darkness. From the first violent act against Delilah to the final scenes outside the bar, darkness represents evil; the worst events are kept partially hidden from the viewers' eyes.

## The Fall of Man

The concept of the fall of mankind is incorporated into the story structure. Will, try as he might, has already fallen once in the past; by the end of the movie, he has fallen again. Although Will is already a fallen man when he first appears, the film suggests that his wife and her goodness have redeemed him in some way. However, after he kills all the people in the bar, including the unarmed Skinny, we see that he has fallen once more. In the end, he is a twice-fallen man who has knowingly done wrong: he is unforgiven.



# Symbols

## Mirror

In one of the final bar scenes, Will stops to take a drink before finally killing Little Bill. As he drinks, Will is standing in front of a mirror; however, the audience cannot see his reflection. The lack of a reflection may suggest that, through his hatred and his murder, Will has essentially become a ghost of a man.

When Will first begins his journey, he hopes that he will not only help his family, but also help to right things for a wronged woman. By the conclusion, it seems that Will has lost his soul. Despite this sacrifice, no one ends up happier than they were in the beginning of the story.

## Silhouettes

Silhouettes are used in the first and last scenes of the film, as backdrops to the story that scrolls up the screen. The audience is eventually able to figure out that the house belongs to William, who is burying his wife, Claudia, under the tree. The silhouettes work as an introduction to the story and function as an epilogue at the end.

As the story begins, the silhouette stands behind the story of a man and a woman. Little information about the silhouette is provided; the viewer is left to watch in wonder as the man buries his wife. When the first scene with Eastwood begins, the viewer is astonished to see that he is a normal farmer, chasing pigs in the mud with his children. In silhouette, William Munny could be anyone and he could be doing anything - most likely murdering others after the death of his wife! However, the viewer is surprised to find out that he is just a normal person: an average Joe, so to speak.

At the end, more is revealed about the ending of William Munny's story: he has left for San Francisco and has not been seen in years. The audience is left to wonder at his fate, but can perhaps be thankful for his children's sake that he returned to them. The fact that the viewer is somewhat encouraged to sympathize with Will in the end says a lot for Eastwood's acting skills, but also for the skilled writing of Will's character: a character that, even as a murderer, can become important to the viewer. As the man and the clothes disappear, it is apparent that the part of the story the audience needs to know has finally come to an end.

## Weather

Weather plays a large part in *Unforgiven*. In both the first and last scenes, the sky appears bright red, like a beautiful summer sunset. However, the sky could also be interpreted as being the shade of red one might see before a major thunderstorm begins. Perhaps the red sky is symbolic of "the calm before the storm," which would be



an apt description of the first scene in which Eastwood appears. In the scene, Will is most certainly having difficulties, but he is with the children he loves. Once the Kid rides up, thunder begins rolling; soon after, Will is in the middle of a raging storm of hatred, anger and pain. He is also caught in a literal rainstorm that makes him sick and gives him a raging fever.

Additionally, rain tends to fall in the movie when something bad is about to happen. In the opening scene in Big Whiskey, it is raining just before Delilah is cut by the man. Then, as Will, Ned and the Kid approach Big Whiskey, a storm rolls in and remains hovering over the town almost constantly until the end of the film.

Incidentally, the one snow scene that appears in the movie was not planned. Rather, it was simply a consequence of shooting the film in Calgary, Canada. Nonetheless, it is fitting, as the snow appears during one of the only moments in which there is a sense of peace (albeit temporary peace) in the film.



## Essay Questions

What is the significance and symbolism of the movie's title?

Why does Will initially hide his identity from the Kid? What causes Will to follow the Kid?

How does his memory of Claudia affect Will throughout the film?

Why does Ned decide to go with Will to Wyoming?

How does the presence of the character of W. W. Beauchamp facilitate dialogue throughout the film?

What is English Bob's role and purpose in the events of the movie?

Describe the character of Little Bill Daggett.

The Kid has a very emotional reaction after he kills his first man. What is his reaction and how does it relate to the themes of the film?

Describe and analyze the final bar scene.

How do the silhouetted scenes function in the film?

### Bibliography

International Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0105695/>