

## Clint Eastwood's *Homages*

by Earl P. Holt III

Whenever I view a film, I've trained myself to ask, "***What is the Director trying to say to his audience?***" As a result, I often approach films like a film *reviewer* would by looking beyond the unfolding plot. This means I sometimes look for patterns that other viewers may ignore, but which can sometimes be quite interesting.

One pattern I've noticed is the way in which Clint Eastwood's later films often made it a practice to pay *homage* to the classic Westerns that preceded his own films and which may have inspired him. For example, in both ***High Plains Drifter*** (1973) and ***Pale Rider*** (1985) he clearly adopted the theme from the 1953 film ***Shane***. In each, an ***avenging angel*** returns to protect the innocent and dispatch their oppressors, but with differing plots and characters.



Eastwood's most strikingly obvious tribute is evident in ***Dirty Harry*** (1971) which is a modern remake of ***High Noon*** (1952.) In both films, their central characters are lawmen who remain the only forces that

**stand between psychopathic murderers and the innocent public both men are sworn to protect and serve. Yet, in both, their tasks are made nearly impossible by a lack of cooperation from the very people who are essential to eliminating these existential threats.**

In *High Noon*, the tranquility of a small western town named Hadleyville is suddenly disturbed when its residents learn that a notorious murderer and his gang plan to return that very day and avenge themselves against the town's Marshall, its Circuit Judge, the jurors who sat on their trials, and anyone else who participated in their arrests and convictions. Prior to their trials, this gang tyrannized the residents of Hadleyville.

Frank Miller, the gang's psychopathic leader, has inexplicably been pardoned by the state's Governor, despite his murder conviction and death sentence handed down by a Hadleyville jury. The town's Marshall receives a telegraph message warning that Miller is on the Noon Train, and returning to Hadleyville in mere hours. He plans to reunite with his three former gang-members who are already waiting at the depot, and seek the revenge he publicly vowed years ago following his trial.

The timing of this threat could not be worse from the standpoint of the town's safety: Marshall Will Kane -- who is largely responsible for having restored law and order to the town -- has retired that very day, and plans to leave Hadleyville with his new Quaker bride to begin a second career as a shopkeeper. Moreover, Kane's replacement won't arrive until the following day, leaving only an immature Deputy Marshall to protect the town's residents. Making the situation even worse, the Deputy Marshall is enraged at having been passed over by the town's Selectmen in their search for a new Marshall to replace his departing boss.

**Much of the film's plot consists of Marshall Kane's futile efforts to enlist his fellow citizens as Special Deputies to help him confront and neutralize the imminent threat this murderous gang poses to every**

resident of the town. And, even though officially retired, the Marshall's **moral code** will not permit him to abandon his friends and neighbors, the very same people who spurn his appeals for assistance.

The reaction of his friends and neighbors astonishes and then angers Marshall Kane: he discovers that the same citizens for whom he has restored law and order, and for whom he routinely risks his life, will do nothing to assist him in return. Their ambivalence at his plight has its roots in a variety of motives, which run the gamut from cowardice to cynicism and from jealousy to civic "*boosterism*." However, by refusing his pleas for help, it is tacitly understood that facing Frank Miller's gang alone will mean certain death for Marshall Kane.



**Marshall Will Kane**



**Frank Miller's Gang**

The common denominator in the town's ambivalence is a refusal to view this existential threat in an objective and realistic manner. Every one of the excuses or rationales each man offers is merely an example of self-delusion. To add insult to injury, the Marshall's beautiful new bride is a Quaker who, owing to her religious pacifism, threatens to leave him if he

insists upon taking up arms and confronting the gang. She tells him that she doesn't understand why they can't simply leave, to which he replies (paraphrase) **"If you don't understand, I haven't got time to tell you..."**

In ***High Noon's*** denouement (climax,) Marshall Kane dispatches three of the four gang members by virtue of his experience, skill and cunning, but with one exception: realizing that her husband will be gunned down in the street without her intervention, Marshall Kane's Quaker wife seizes the opportunity to dispatch the fourth villain by secretly shooting him in his back and through a window, just as the villain takes deadly aim at her husband.

**Her epiphany may very well arise from the sudden recognition that her pacifism can only exist where others are willing to take up arms and risk their own lives in defense of her naïve idealism. In any event, her action saves both their lives and permits the newly married couple to reconcile, perhaps with a new and greater appreciation for each other.**

Marshall Kane permits no such reconciliation between himself and his former neighbors: when he finally guns down Frank Miller, the last of the gang, Hadleyville's residents swarm back onto the streets out of curiosity. Then, as a final demonstration of his contempt for a town that turned its back on him in his (and their) hour of need, the Marshall pitches his badge into the dirt and dust of the town's main street, before he and his new bride leave Hadleyville forever.

In the film ***Dirty Harry***, much like the external threat in ***High Noon***, the relative tranquility of 1970s San Francisco is suddenly disturbed when a rooftop sniper calling himself *Scorpio* murders an innocent young woman, and then attempts to extort large sums from the city to cease murdering more innocent victims. And, like Marshall Will Kane before him, Inspector Harry Callahan recognizes that he is the only official in San

Francisco who is willing to do what's necessary to stop this psychopathic murderer.

San Francisco's despicable Mayor immediately begins to weigh the political consequences of any response. Although he self-righteously declares that ***"The City of San Francisco does not pay criminals not to commit crimes,"*** that is exactly what he repeatedly attempts to do. When the Mayor initially stalls for time trying to find the money, *Scorpio* murders a nine year-old boy to prove he is not bluffing.

Now, San Francisco recognizes it has a serial murderer on its hands, and one who is clearly a psychopath. To give emphasis to the point, *Scorpio* then murders a police officer and abducts, rapes, tortures and murders a 14 year-old girl, who he then buries alive in order to extort more ransom money from the city.

**Much of the film consists of Inspector Harry Callahan's efforts to end the killer's rampage, despite repeated interference from those in authority who frustrate his efforts at every turn. Much like Marshall Kane in *High Noon*, he is bewildered by the lack of cooperation and support he receives from those who should be assisting him. And, while Harry's moral code won't permit him to abandon the citizens of San Francisco he is sworn to protect, he soon realizes that -- much like Marshall Kane -- he alone, is willing to do what is essential to end this reign of terror.**

Harry gets no support from his own Police Chief, who is a cowardly reptile and a political tool, like many who *schmooze* and back-slap their way to that lofty rank. He is also betrayed by the Corrupt Leftist Media, which always seem willing to sensationalize phony or dubious allegations of *"police brutality"* to spike their viewership and advertising revenues. Worst of all, the Mayor is a political whore who is willing to comply with



any demands the serial killer makes in order to avoid paying a political price with San Francisco voters.

The reaction of those in authority astonishes and then angers Harry: like Marshall Kane before him, he soon discovers that those for whom he daily risks his life will do little or nothing to assist him. As Harry angrily describes it to the mayor and police chief, they obstruct his efforts to dispatch the serial murderer and foolishly "*play this creep's game.*" As in *High Noon*, their common denominator is a refusal to view this external threat in an objective and realistic manner.

In the hope she may still be alive, at one point Harry successfully tracks down, arrests and tortures a confession from *Scorpio* in order to obtain the location of the girl he abducted and buried for ransom. The fact that *Scorpio* reveals the exact location of the girl proves he is the serial killer, although it's too late to save her. Harry also recovers conclusive evidence of guilt from *Scorpio*, including the rifle he used to murder at least three of his victims.



**Scorpio's "Voluntary" Confession**

Soon after, Harry is summoned to the San Francisco District Attorney's office, probably expecting to receive some kind of commendation for ridding the streets (and rooftops) of this murderous psychopath. Instead, he is informed by the DA that after consulting with an Appellate Court Judge on the case, the DA intends to throw out *Scorpio's* confession, his arrest and all evidence obtained in Harry's search.

The DA and Judge both rebuke Harry for violating a litany of the serial killer's extensive rights, including the Fourth, Fifth and Eighth Amendments to the Constitution, as well as the Supreme Court decisions in *Miranda v. Arizona* and *Mapp v. Ohio*. The DA even informs Harry that not only is he releasing Scorpio, but that Harry is lucky **HE**, himself isn't being indicted. The DA states: ***"You're lucky I'm not indicting YOU for assault with intent to commit murder."***

As he is leaving the DA's offices, Harry has a final exchange with the DA who is about to return a prolific serial murderer and psychopath to the streets of San Francisco:

**Harry:** ***"You know you're crazy if you think you've heard the last of this guy: He's gonna kill again!"***

**DA:** (with a skeptical and condescending smirk) ***"And just how do you know that?"***

**Harry:** ***"Because he LIKES it."***

Harry is quickly vindicated in his prediction because *Scorpio* soon commandeers a school bus full of grade school kids, which he then holds hostage to extort ever greater sums from the city and a jet airliner to fly him and his captives to an undisclosed destination.

In the film's *denouement*, as the Mayor and Police Chief once again scramble to meet *Scorpio's* demands for a third time, Harry recognizes that he is the only one in San Francisco who has the moral and physical courage to end this reign of terror. He then deliberately disobeys direct orders from the Chief of Police and the Mayor of San Francisco, and sets about rescuing the children on the hijacked school bus.



**Harry Callahan Rescuing Kids**

After exposing himself to enormous personal risks, Harry successfully rescues the kids and splatters the psychopath with two rounds from his .44 Magnum. He then engages in one final gesture of contempt for a city whose power structure turned their backs on him in his (and their) hour of need. Harry pitches his badge into a backwater lagoon -- where *Scorpio's* lifeless body now floats -- just as Marshall Kane in *High Noon* threw his own badge into the dusty streets of Hadleyville where Frank Miller's gang lay dead.