

Shane and the social construction of manhood

All the liberals of my acquaintance deny that any work of art, any billboard, any manifestation of culture whatever, can influence a person in any way. They all proclaim themselves to be immune to viruses transmitted by the mass media, although they all nod their heads together like puppets while repeating the same liberal arguments they have heard on public radio. I seem to be the only person I know who admits to having been influenced by the media. When I was eight years old, I knew I wanted to be a man like Alan Ladd in *Shane*; when I was eighteen, I changed my mind about riding off into the sunset alone, and decided I wanted to save and protect a beautiful, sad, vulnerable doe-eyed empty-headed little thing like Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

It will be a salutary exercise in semiotics to look more closely at *Shane*, and see how its meanings are conveyed. As a plot refresher, let's zip through the story, highlighting the moments of symbolic import.

Joe, played by Van Heflin, is an honest farmer working the homestead with his conventionally attractive wife and stereotypically all-American boy-like son Little Joey. Joe's a-workin' and a-sweatin'. Shane rides up, tall in the saddle, *wearing a magnificent buckskin shirt*. He's travellin' mighty light. Joe asks him where he's bound

for. Shane answers, "One place or another; some place I've never been."

The men are emotionally awkward with one another. Joe wants to be friendly, so he offers Shane a meal, actually saying the words, "My wife sure can cook." Yes indeed, and she is a paragon of wifeliness: pretty as a picture; raises the boy right; handles all the relationship needs, including those between Joe and Shane.

Shane's got a way with the boy, who is mesmerized by him; the wife can't keep her eyes off him. Joe just gabbles away like the poor sodbuster he is. Shane is a man of few words and can't stand all this domesticity: he goes outside to chop some wood. Joe invites him to stay. Shane *takes off the buckskin shirt*; he trades it in for a simple workin' man's shirt.

There is a dark side to Shane's past. In the first scene, a sudden noise causes him to whirl around with his gun drawn. In the middle of the movie, he talks down the importance of guns and gunfighting, but gives in to Joey's badgering and shows him how to pack a pistol. Shane draws faster than the speed of light and blows away a microscopic piece of white rock at a tremendous distance. The kid is agog and Shane can't help looking pleased. The mother sees all this and disapproves. She rebukes Shane, and Shane takes it – he knows she's right. But character is destiny: at the end, Shane tells the boy that "A man has to be what he is" – in his case, a gunfighter.

Nonetheless, at the start of his new life as a hired hand, Shane tries to practice the arts of civilization. Finding himself in the middle of a war between cattle ranchers and homesteaders, he role-models moderation, cooperation, and even nonviolence. A cowpoke throws a glass of whiskey on Shane's new workin' shirt: Shane walks away.

The cattlemen escalate their provocations. Shane and Joe go back to the saloon. This time Shane returns the cowpoke's insult with interest, throwing a glass of whiskey in the miscreant's face. A tremendous fistfight ensues, in which Joe distinguishes himself by coming to Shane's rescue. The males bond. Back at home, the wife-and-earth-mother applies antiseptic. She starts to bandage Shane, but real men don't wear bandages. Shane is embarrassed – hurries out to his bed in the shed. With a certain amount of subtlety, the movie suggests the woman's surge of passionate feelings toward Shane.

The cattlemen hire a gunman, memorably played by Jack Palance; in a harrowing scene, he coldly kills one of the farmers. The homesteaders are in a mood to cut and run. Shane, normally a man of few words, makes a magnificent speech to rally the spirits of Joe and his friends.

The cattlemen send a message to Joe to come to the saloon for a final reckoning. Joe straps on his six-shooter – tells his wife he couldn't expect her to live with him if he "showed yellow." Tells her he knows she'll be in good hands if something happens. He's figured out her feelings about Shane, you see.

Shane *puts on the buckskin shirt*. To keep Joe from going to his death, he beats him unconscious. Then he keeps the appointment at the saloon. Outdraws the psychopathic killer. Blows everyone away.

Points his horse the other way from the farm. Little Joey has followed him to town and seen the gunfight. "I gotta be goin' on," Shane tells the boy. "There's no goin' back." Joey runs after Shane. "Come back, Shane."

What did I learn at the age of eight when I saw this movie? A real man is strong and silent. Is a loner. Withstands pain and keeps his mouth shut. Packs a gun. Isn't the one to start a fight, but is the one to finish it. Is a man of peace who nonetheless prevails by means of superior violence. The bullies talk big; the hero lets his actions speak louder than his words. The bullies start fights and skulk around and hire gunmen; the hero throws quicker and harder punches and shoots faster and straighter than any man alive.

The hero is preternaturally attractive to women, is in fact a prototype of heterosexuality. And yet – he rides off alone. This is because the hero's milieu is *homosocial*. I apologize for dipping into the vocabulary of postmodernist gender studies, but this is exactly the word I want. It means that Shane, in common with other male icons like fighter pilots and athletes, keeps almost exclusively to the company of men. Homosocial men cannot bear anything having to do with women's domestic concerns and women's emotions. When forced to dance, Shane dances well (of course!); but whenever he is around women, he is uncomfortable.

(*Homosexual* men often have strong friendships with women, but no sex; *homosocial* men have sex without friendship. In fact, these men typically exhibit a strong sexual appetite for women, in spite of their loathing for femininity; but since *Shane* is a 1950s movie, we dispense with verisimilitude – we never see Shane visit a whorehouse. Indeed, this is one of the most sexless movies ever made.)

Shane's shyness, needless to say, only endears him all the more to our stick-figure wife-and-mother.

All of this seeped into my psyche and influenced me a few years later when I began the arduous task, along with my male friends, of constructing my masculinity from the ground up.

There is something else of great interest to notice about *Shane*: the screenwriters are playing a double game. They have actually promulgated, throughout the movie, an official ideology that is "politically correct." From the very beginning, we are given the message that Joe, the representative of family values, is everything a man ought to be, and Shane is a damaged personality. Shane himself recognizes this. To drive the point home with a nail, the farmers *all* have families. The cattlemen, on the other hand, have no wives, women, or children at all; in fact, in this movie, they never even ride the range – at all hours of the day and night, they are gathered at the saloon, drinking hard whiskey. If we don't already get the picture, the sound track cues us relentlessly: we can recognize a cattleman at a distance of five miles by the way the music darkens.

But. Joe is played by Van Heflin, who looks like a doofus and talks like a fool. Shane is played by Alan Ladd, who looks like a movie star and says in a very few words everything that needs to be said. Is there a boy in America who wants to grow up to be garrulous old Joe? Is there a boy who *doesn't* want to grow up to be Shane? If only for the buckskin shirt?

Over the top, or between the cracks, of the official ideology – which is that Shane is unfit to love a woman and raise her children – is the true ideology, which is that the love of a woman is a mawkish thing that a real man spurns. Shane's

embarrassment is a polite form of scorn. The movie is ambivalent about Shane's susceptibility to romance. We never know if he yearns for the woman. (His actual behavior is prescribed by the code of conduct that obtains among honorable homosocial males – Joe's wife is "taken," she is "off limits." Shane would never snake his old buddy Joe.) But the movie does not even disguise Shane's complete lack of interest in her, whether as a type of desirable pussycat or as a unique human being. He stands up on principle for all the women (and their hen-pecked husbands) who are doing the family thing: nonetheless, he does not want a family of his own; and he does not even want a roll in the hay. A man's work is choppin' and fightin' and ridin' off into the sunset.

So the implicit message is that the girl-stuff is trivial and boring, and the working daddies who go in for it are life's losers. A real man may have to pay a visit to this nonsense every now and then, and even dance a jig or two; but the sooner he is back in the saddle, the sooner he recovers his metier.

Again, the official ideology of the movie is that guns are bad, and Shane's day is done. The wife says so half way through, when she rebukes Shane for teaching Joey how to shoot; Shane himself says so at the end when he rides off into the night.

But. The director knows perfectly well that we waited through half the damn movie *to see Shane draw the gun at the speed of light and blow away that rock.* Then we wait through the rest of it to watch him drill a hole in Jack Palance. And we know that if movies were real life, Joey, who watches the showdown from the door, would go straight home and practice a little six-shooting.

This technique is on a par with the old ruse employed by skin flicks after the Supreme Court ruled that movies had to have redeeming social value. The "art house" in Richmond, Virginia (that is to say, the porno house) put up a sign over the ticket window, which read as follows:

These shows are displayed because the management feels there is redeeming social value in informing the general public concerning those individuals who flaunt the morals of our society [sic].

But the technique is employed at higher levels of art too. George Bernard Shaw noted a century ago that dozens of London stage plays eluded the official censorship by treating the subject of prostitution (in its elegant, *demimondaine* setting) in the most titillating and lubricious fashion possible for the first two acts, but then, by way of drawing the moral, depicting the tragic end of the heroine in the third act. The story of Camille (the basis of *La Traviata*) is the prototype. Shaw pointed out that a different moral could be drawn:

Naturally the poorer girls in the gallery will believe in the beauty, in the exquisite dresses, and the luxurious living, and will see that there is no real necessity for the consumption

(A tubercular outcome for the "ruined" girl was especially absurd, since rich men's mistresses enjoyed much better health care than girls who were poor but "honest.")

Shaw ran afoul of the censor by writing a drily realistic treatment of the subject, emphasizing the business particulars. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, prostitution is treated as a sensible career move for an attractive girl who otherwise really can expect

to die of consumption after being worked to death in a textile factory. Shaw did not *advocate* prostitution; but by telling the truth about it, he offended the sensibilities of nearly everyone, even though he kept all his characters fully dressed.

The case with television violence is almost the same. The murderous drug dealers live like kings until the boys in blue blow them away in the last five minutes. But any young stud considering a career in controlled substances will hardly be deterred by what he sees on the latest cop show. He will watch the first 45 minutes, slip out during the next-to-last commercial break to score a little coke, and skip the ending.

In the wake of Senator Dole's 1996 election-year challenge to the entertainment industry, Washington, D. C. talk-show hostess Victoria Jones issued a challenge of her own to the conservatives: name one television show that advocates violence or immorality. But notice how she stacked the deck with her choice of words. Certainly no one can name a show that *advocates* violence and immorality: the shows *glamorize* violence and immorality.

There is one minor difference: the old plays never could make marriage appear as exciting as prostitution, whereas television is an equal opportunity glamorizer: the cop violence looks to be almost as much fun as the drug-dealer violence.

Consequently, there may not be a lot of moral difference between the young man who aspires to be a "drug kingpin" and the young man who aspires to be a narcotics officer.

This double-dealing technique of glamorization/condemnation – the glamorization

altogether heartfelt and the condemnation merely *pro forma* – allows the film maker to escape moral responsibility in an elegant way. The cruder ways are to argue various versions of the following:

The violence in my movie merely reflects the violence that is already found in society.

Some people want to see it. They have rights too.

If you don't want to see it, don't buy a ticket.

I have a right under the Constitution to run my business the way I see fit.
(Conservative capitalistic absolutism.)

I have a right under the Constitution to speak freely. (Liberal First Amendment absolutism.)

The first three ripostes are vulgar and immoral, but incredibly effective nonetheless in a society pervaded by liberal cultural shibboleths. The last two positions, like all other forms of absolutism, are, if seriously believed (rather than cynically invoked in the service of making a buck), early warning signs of what I have elsewhere called genuine *mental* illness.

But why raise anyone's hackles with such flimsy excuses when you can use the method of the makers of *Shane*? Then you can say with a straight face, "But didn't you pay attention to the movie? Joe is the real hero. We vindicate the homesteaders. Shane is condemned to a life of feckless wandering. He will never know the joy of hearth and home, the love of a good woman, the pleasures of parenting. Violence is wrong. Shane says so himself."

Right. And Van Heflin got a bigger paycheck than Alan Ladd.