

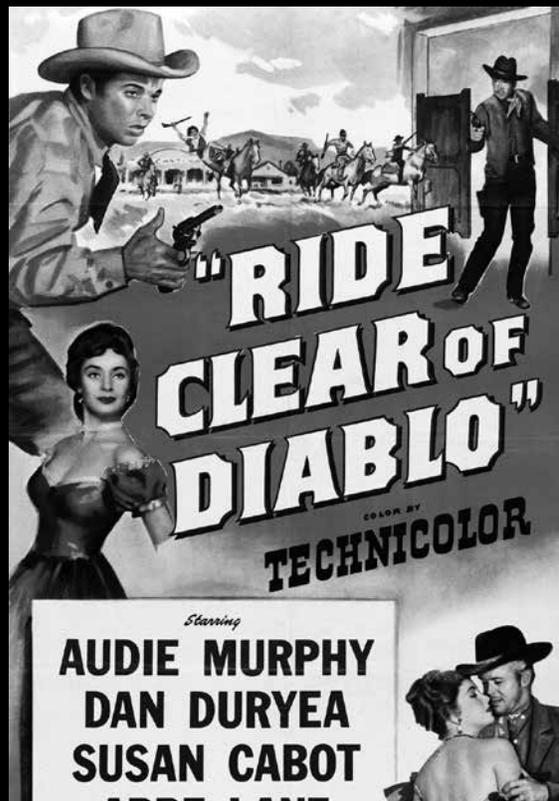


# Don't get mad— get even

Revenge in  
Western films isn't  
always sweet

*The Alabama Hills near Lone Pine, California, were often the locations for many revenge-themed Westerns. Revenge was a frequent plot element in cheap programmers, like 1935's *The Dawn Rider* (top right), A-list movies like 1950's *Winchester '73* (left) and B films like 1954's *Ride Clear of Diablo*.*

Lone Pine photographs by Kirk Ellis



By Robert Nott

When the two men first spy one another in the saloon, they know right away what the other wants: to kill.

They reach for their six-shooters. Only they're not wearing any six-shooters. They're unarmed, like the rest of the people in town, because that's the way the marshal wants it.

The camera lingers – yes, it's a movie – for a second on the face of the first man. He expresses terror, doubt and then, with a slight smile, defiance. There's nothing the other guy can do to him – not now, anyway.

The face of the second man is more revealing. First, hate. Then determination. Then the face telegraphs the theme of the story.

It is the face of James Stewart, playing Lin McAdam in 1950's *Winchester '73*.

It is the face of revenge.

Revenge. The ancient Greeks wrote about it in literature and plays, with one such Grecian character – Oedipus – out to find the man who killed his father, only to realize he's the guilty culprit. Shakespeare loved revenge plots and themes – *Hamlet* is his most famous revenge story, but *Titus Andronicus* is the Shakespeare play where the guy kills the sons of the woman he vows vengeance on and then cooks those kids and serves them as a meal to mom.

It's unlikely movie directors Anthony Mann, Sergio Corbucci or Quentin Tarantino could top that recipe for gruesome vengeance.

Revenge. It seems the perfect fit for Western films, as *Winchester '73* proves: Boy meets gun, boy uses gun to kill his father, boy's brother meets gun and goes gunning for brother who did the killing, that second boy meets girl and nobody gives much of a damn about her until the two boys go at it in a repeating rifle shootout. These men have a job to do, and no woman – not even Shelley Winters – is going to get in the way.

"Revenge is probably the cleanest and simplest motivation that you have for a character. Which is why it can often result in one-dimensional narra-



Kirk Ellis

of a forthcoming book on the Western films of director Budd Boetticher, revolving around Boetticher's 1959 revenge drama *Ride Lonesome*.



"The challenge is to dimensionalize it and give it complexity so there's something more than this instinctive desire for closure that gets you from Act I to Act V if you are thinking drama and Act I to Act III if you are talking film."

*Winchester '73*, directed by Mann, dimensionalized the revenge theme by introducing a protagonist who is so full of hate that he would kill his own brother. Mann's 1950s Westerns, like Boetticher's, pulled the revenge theme out of adolescence and into full-grown adulthood, adding nuances and layers that spoke to the new psychology underscoring the American Western after World War II.

Ellis said *Winchester '73* introduces a "Freudian dynamic between Jimmy Stewart and his brother, where you don't understand right away because Mann – who grew up in an era where there was this interest in the whole psychology of humanity – doesn't let you know up front that Jimmy Stewart's quest is for his brother who has gone bad and killed the father."

*Winchester '73* was not the first Western about revenge, nor the last. In the silent era, William S. Hart made

a career out of playing bad-turned-good men who tried to right their past wrongs, sometimes through revenge. *The Toll Gate*, a 1920 Hart film, features him as an outlaw bent on getting the man who double-crossed him during a train robbery.

"When a man's heart goes poison with revenge," reads one title card for the film, which asks the logical question: At what point does the quest for revenge no longer matter?

Such deep questions got lost in the shallow waters of the B Western films of the 1930s. Those films focused instead on the simple-minded actions of the often simple-minded heroes – played by the likes of Buck Jones, Bob Steele and John Wayne – who, within

the span of about 60 minutes, would put paid to the man who killed their father or brother or best friend.



Want some titles from that grouping? *Border Law*, starring Jones. *Doomed at Sundown*, starring Steele. *The Dawn Rider*, starring Wayne. Some of the plot devices in those pictures make you forget the heroes are out for revenge.

But there's a really good one, from 1933, called *To the Last Man*, which is darker and deeper than the rest, mixing the story of Romeo and Juliet with the Hatfield-McCoy feud and climaxing with almost everybody involved dead.

James Horwitz, in his incisive and underrated 1976 book *They Went Thataway*, noted revenge is one of the

seven basic themes of Westerns (the other, he writes, are the railway story, the cattle empire story, the ranch story, the outlaw story, the cavalry versus the Indians story and the “law and order” story). The B Westerns, he wrote, worked every one of those plots “in a thousand variations.”

“They would become so well known to every Front Row Kid that they became part of their very lives, the games they played, the dreams they dreamed, their idea of life,” Horwitz wrote. One can just imagine 8-year-olds brandishing cap guns playing out the revenge theme in a neighborhood alley, circa 1938.

Bob Herzberg, author of *Hang 'em High: Law and Disorder in Western Films and Literature*, said revenge became a common theme of Western films and literature early on for one reason: In the



Bob Herzberg

West, laws and lawmen were “few and far apart.”

“So revenge is basically the unwritten law,” he said by phone from his home in New York City, where, according to Herzberg, modern-day gang law embraces the revenge theme almost nightly. Citing a line often heard in Western films – “we’re 100 miles away from the nearest law” – Herzberg said it came down to the idea that “you can’t just call a policeman, you gotta do your own killing.”



*“Revenge is probably the cleanest and simplest motivation that you can have for a character.”*

– Kirk Ellis

He said the revenge Western grew up after World War II – with 1948’s *Coroner Creek* serving as a “yardstick of vengeance” – because filmmakers, actors and the audience matured as the atrocities and price of war became clearer and clearer. As a result, those films were no longer “just Bob Steele going after the guy who killed his father. This was something deeper, especially *Winchester ’73*, when the hero is after his own brother who killed his father. You didn’t have that in the 1930s poverty row days.”

*Coroner Creek* features Randolph Scott as a cowboy out to kill the man responsible for the death of Scott’s fiancée. It predates the pictures Scott made with Boetticher and screenwriter Burt Kennedy nearly a decade later in presenting an anti-hero so intent on revenge he doesn’t care about anyone or anything around him.

Later, in the Boetticher-Scott films, the good guy and bad guy often lose track of what the pursuit is all about, Ellis said.

“In *Ride Lonesome*, when you get to the final showdown between Randolph



Randolph Scott and James Best in *Ride Lonesome*.

Scott and Lee Van Cleef, the villain has almost forgotten the reason for the showdown,” Ellis said. “So you have people playing out this archival story because they have to.”

By the last reel of that film, Ellis said, “it’s almost as if the quest doesn’t matter. The story of the West has been reduced to this elementary combat between people who don’t even know why they’re playing their roles anymore.”

There are dozens, if not hundreds, of revenge-themed Westerns, some with offbeat twists, like 1958’s *The Bravados*, where Gregory Peck’s hero, intent on revenge, tracks down the wrong men, and 1960’s *One Foot in Hell*, where an embittered man (Alan Ladd) comes up with an elaborate scheme to financially ruin a town he believes responsible for his wife’s death.

The 1950s seemed chock full of revenge-themed oaters: *Warpath* (1951), *Fort Defiance* (1951), *Rancho Notorious* (1952), *Ride Clear of Diablo* (1954), *The Man from Laramie* (1955, Mann and Stewart again), *Seven Men from Now* (1956, Boetticher and Scott), *Gun the Man Down* (1956), *Rebel in Town* (1956), *From Hell to Texas* (1958) and *Last Train from Gun Hill*, to name but 10. Revenge became a dominant theme in many 1960s spaghetti Westerns as well.

The endings of these revenge Westerns are not always so happy for the hero, even if he managed to pull the trigger faster. One doesn’t sense a lot of satisfaction in the Randolph Scott character of either *Ride Lonesome* or 1957’s *Decision at Sundown*, in which Scott’s character, drunk, realizes his quest for vengeance cost the life of his best friend.

Steve McQueen, playing the title character in Henry Hathaway’s moody 1966 revenge Western *Nevada Smith*, can’t even bring himself to kill off the last of three bad men responsible for his parents’ death.

In that sense, Herzberg said, McQueen’s character has learned what William S. Hart may not have understood some 45 years before: “The character learned in his own way, there’s a realization that revenge is not worth it.”

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