



# The Palimpsest of American Subjectivity in the Iconography of Clint Eastwood

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**Abstract:** The article explores the iconography of Clint Eastwood as representative of American ideals of individualism and self-reliance and the manner in which it evolves through the changing cultural atmosphere of United States post the Second World War. From advocating vigilantism in the *Dollars Trilogy* of the 60s and the *Dirty Harry* series of the 70s during the Vietnam War, the Eastwood icon radically critiques itself through the 80s to the 90s with films like *Unforgiven* (1992) and *Gran Torino* (2008). Eastwood is the author of his own icon as he has directed nearly all his Hollywood ventures, basing his mythological iconicity on the laconic ‘The Man with No Name’ in Sergei Leone’s *Dollars Trilogy*. Although Clint Eastwood, personally, may well hold deeply conservative values, and has been a vocal member of the Republican Party, the Eastwood icon emerges as a subversion of the politics of its author and the tropes of the Western. It is also a radical reversal of the very genre that birthed the icon: the quintessential Hollywood film that reproduced mythical individualistic values of American masculinity. The Icon, which Eastwood sought to retire with a profound twist in *Gran Torino*, somehow lingers on post the 2010s, owing to the remarkable artistic longevity of its author, as a palimpsest in *The Mule* (2018) and *Cry Macho* (2021), in self-conscious throwbacks representing the now-obsolete mythical values that encode American masculinity and subjectivity.

*Keywords: Western, Clint Eastwood, Iconography, American Subjectivity, Masculinity, Hollywood, Vigilantism, Myth.*

## Introduction

The signifying icon of the 91-year-old Clint Eastwood, in the social-media age, has become a relic of a conservative Republican past in American culture. While his directorial project *American Sniper* (2014), based on the memoir of Kris Kyle reinforced stereotypes of Hollywood’s Islamophobic gaze, Eastwood’s infamous anti-Obama interview with an empty chair at the Republican National Convention in 2012, has cemented his place in the cultural consciousness of the millennial as a ‘Boomer’ and the embodiment of obsolete American values. In its post 9/11 neo-imperialism,

the United States has manifested the mythic representation of the Wild West in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. As the USA, in 2021, deals with its failure on the world stage as a superpower, with its callous retreat and the Taliban retake of Afghanistan, critics have duly pointed out the end of the American era. However, until the 2010s, ‘American values’ of individualism and self-reliance—and its post-cold war march of triumph as the harbinger of democracy worldwide through its ‘endless wars’ in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and the Gulf—held fort on the world stage. My article examines the icon of Clint Eastwood as the embodiment of the values at the peak of the post WWII American project, who also paradoxically evolved to question these values.

### **The Eastwood Icon**

The Eastwood Icon, one of Hollywood’s most recognizable symbols, is essentially an amalgamation of ‘The Stranger’ persona, constructed by Sergio Leone’s Spaghetti Western films about *The Man with No Name*, and with The Stranger’s later urban reincarnation in the *Dirty Harry* series produced by Eastwood. Both The Stranger and Dirty Harry have been seen as symbols of American masculinity and the ideal American anti-hero pitted against: anarchy in the Wild West in the case of The Stranger, and Socialist tendencies—evidenced in happenings of the Civil Rights Movement, Anti-Vietnam War protests and Counter Culture—of the 60’s and 70’s in the case of Dirty Harry. Both The Stranger and Dirty Harry represent American values of individualism and the American Dream, at the core of which is the Frontier Myth. Frederick Jackson Turner greatly contributed to this idea by arguing that the American way of life is characterised by a ‘Frontier existence’ since each settlement was surrounded by an abundance of natural resources. Every American, Turner felt, had access to a world of unlimited opportunity in the ‘Wild, Wild West’. This idea of ‘The West’ is that of an idealised past, which holds within it a future of endless possibilities and resources. The myth of the West has influenced American notions that hold that the past has very little bearing on the future; and that every man is capable of achieving states of ‘self-actualisation’ and self-reliance through hard work, irrespective of his present circumstances—the Enlightenment rationalist belief that material success and moral progress go together.

The icon of Clint Eastwood emerges in this Wild West, and its first spectral appearance was in the Western television series of the 1950s' *Rawhide*. The series, which was set in the 1850s—the golden age of the mythical West— and dealt with the lives of cowboys in a cattle-drive, lasted eight seasons from 1958-66. Eastwood—who later came to symbolise the “quintessential American male”, embodying the values of rugged individualism and self-reliance—showed clever financial foresight and arranged with the producers to be paid a sum every month throughout his life. Though he was not happy playing the role of the 19-year-old Rowdy Yates at a time when he was nearing 30, *Rawhide* made him financially independent very early in his career.

Eastwood emerged as a movie star with the release of Sergio Leone's revisionist Western *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), where he played 'The Stranger'— a man with no name and no past, who comes to a land of limitless resources somewhere in the mythical Wild West. The Stranger, like the Japanese Samurai, is a mythical self-reliant figure who travels alone. Since The Stranger has no name, he is recognised by the audience and referenced in popular culture as simply: Clint Eastwood. Geoffrey Coleman Weiss in *The Gunfighter's Shadow* argues that the identities of The Man with No Name and Dirty Harry are completely fused with that of the Eastwood icon. The two characters, which served as two major pillars for the construction of the Eastwood icon, also derive their meanings from the Eastwood icon. Since most of the characters associated with the Eastwood icon were represented as mythological figures, Weiss calls the phenomenon of the Eastwood icon “mythological iconicity”, and sees it as “a conceptual sign recalled by systems of signification” (Weiss 6). Weiss argues that Eastwood's “iconic image provides a point of contact” (8) and his movies are a site where one can meet with a “presence”—in this case, the Eastwood icon embodied in the characters of *The Man With No Name* and *Dirty Harry*. Weiss argues that “Eastwood's importance as an icon lies not only in the ease of his (re) presentation but also the cultural significance of his ‘presence’, which circulates more widely than its immediate representation on film” (8).

## Reinvention and Self-Critique post the Cold War

Using his initial image of the masculine star, primarily of the Western, Eastwood has played upon existing images and genres to produce critiques of his own personae and genres associated with them. He has also gone on to critique the idea of vigilante justice that was upheld by his earlier films like *The Dollars Trilogy* or the *Dirty Harry* series with films like *Mystic River* and *Gran Torino*. His authorship in the capacity of actor, director, and producer of cinematic texts has resulted in the production of ‘different’ films within the framework of mainstream Hollywood cinema. From the raw machismo of ‘The Man With No Name’ in Sergio Leone’s *Dollars Trilogy* and *Dirty Harry*, Eastwood’s laconic persona — under Eastwood’s authorship — gradually transforms into more complex and vulnerable male protagonists of the post 90’s films such as *The Bridges of Madison County* and *Million Dollar Baby*.

Eastwood’s career is inextricably linked to post-war American political history. The Eastwood icon always existed in the realm of a secular, conservative mythology linked to the American Dream of the Wild West, yet this icon was celebrated by the counter-culture. During the 1980s, with the counter-culture movement effectively over, the Eastwood icon became primarily associated with conservative American politics (Weiss 14); with Ronald Reagan making his 1984 “Make my day” speech using a direct quote from a *Dirty Harry* film. In 1984, Eastwood also became the Mayor of Carmel in California.

The conservative Reagan era has been one of the biggest challenges to the American Dream. Kevin Philips in *The Politics of Rich and Poor* describes how the Reagan era caused a massive redistribution of wealth in favour of the rich. It was immediately after the Reagan era that Clint Eastwood began radical attempts to revise the Eastwood icon. The icon had to adapt to the new direction of liberal democracy that the dream was taking, where spaces were now being created for gender, sexual, and race difference. Weiss argues that it is not possible for an academic study to determine the meaning of an icon—something that Paul Smith, in *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production* had attempted—and that any study of the Eastwood icon must instead focus on examining the signifying structures surrounding it. This essay will

now proceed to examine how Eastwood, in the roles of director and producer of cinema, sustains and reinvents the Eastwood icon and the theme of vigilante justice upheld in his earlier films. It will do so by focusing on *Dirty Harry* and *The Unforgiven* in the intertextual framework of the Eastwood icon. From the beginning of his career Eastwood has been interested in all aspects of filmmaking, and had even directed a few scenes in a few episodes of *Rawhide*. Embodying the American principles of self-reliance and individualism, Eastwood has always sought to be in absolute control of his career. Eastwood set up his production company *Malpaso* in 1968. Thereafter, most of Eastwood's acting vehicles have been produced by his company, and have often been directed by Eastwood himself.

### **Vigilante justice in Dirty Harry**

Before *Dirty Harry*, Eastwood had played a cop in *Coogan's Bluff*—a story of a cowboy-cop in the city. Inspector Coogan, in *Coogan's Bluff*, has a shadow of *The Man With No Name*. It showed the Eastwood icon's first interaction with the city. The awkward Coogan was magnified to mythical proportions in *Dirty Harry* (1971), directed by Don Siegel. Based on *Dead Right*, a screenplay by Harry Julian and Rita Fink, the project was initially supposed to star Frank Sinatra and be directed by Irvin Kirshner. The role had been previously rejected by Western stars such as John Wayne, Paul Newman, and Robert Mitchum. When Sinatra passed on the role, Eastwood accepted it in December 1970.

*Dirty Harry* Callaghan is a character Eastwood has revisited most often, primarily because the series has been the most lucrative of his career. *Dirty Harry* has had four sequels: *Magnum Force* in 1973, *The Enforcer* in 1976, *Sudden Impact* in 1983 (directed by Eastwood himself), and *The Dead Pool* in 1988. *Dirty Harry* is the Stranger in an urban milieu. According to Weiss, "'Dirty Harry' completes the process, which the Spaghetti Westerns initiated, of making Eastwood interchangeable with his icon." (81) *Dirty Harry*, like the Stranger, works and lives alone. To place the subject of Inspector Harry Callaghan in the structure of 'the city', away from his mythical origins in the 'Wild West', the film makes references to Harry's past—such

as his dead wife and his previous violent encounters with wrong-doers—but these details are insignificant and have no bearing to the present or the future. Dirty Harry and the Stranger live by the principles of ‘common sense’, self-reliance and individualism. The villains in Eastwood’s most cop films are invariably mindless psychopaths, which make Dirty Harry’s retributive actions seem in tune with ‘common sense’. Popular culture and mythology are forms in which the hegemonic world-view is transmitted. According to Antonio Gramsci, the institutions of the State and civil society work to create a consensus on what should be understood as ‘common sense’ in order to protect existing hierarchies. Dirty Harry, as an agent of the State and the Eastwood Icon as an agent of the civil society, seek to represent this common sense.

Harry Callaghan delivers justice out of a personal sense of right and wrong that is also made to appear in tune with a universal idea of morality and justice. Harry is a mythical figure who represented a prototype of the American white male subject. Actor Jim Carrey, in a tribute to Clint Eastwood, said:

Everybody at some point has identified with Eastwood’s films. He was the man who could deliver justice. When you were being beaten in school by a bully, and you watched an Eastwood film, you will realise that the bully is the man who grows up to have his butt kicked by *The Man with No Name*. He was our salvation. My theory is that he did not have a name so that we could all fit our names in it. (onn jack)

According to Abie Hadjitarkhani, *The Man with No Name* does not fit in with the definition of a mythological hero’s development as given by Joseph John Campbell’s ‘monomyth’ of a hero’s journey. The Stranger ‘becomes’ a hero not because of any intrinsic heroic qualities, but is “created through action”. (Hadjitarkhani 20) Hadjitarkhani writes: “He does not begin as a hero, he has no intention of being a hero, he does not end up a hero, and yet, many of his actions function precisely in a heroic capacity, producing hero effects (of unknown but significant duration)” (20). He writes that *The Man with no Name* evolved to Dirty Harry Callaghan—“an emotionally crippled, nearly psychotic, vigilante cop in dystopian 70’s San Francisco” (20)—in seven years. Thus, from near-nihilistic mythical figure that helps people incidentally, the Eastwood icon evolved to a problematic agent of the state who propounds that the legal and political institutions are not adequate to stop criminal

activities; and that the vigilante figure of Dirty Harry who delivers justice on his own terms is needed to ensure that there is no crime.

Dirty Harry embodied the Eastwood icon's unwavering belief in vigilante justice. In Dirty Harry, 'human rights' is not something a criminal, especially the mindless psychopath in the San Francisco dystopia deserves. Harry is entirely dismissive of the "Miranda Rights" that was the result of *Miranda v. Arizona* case in 1966 where the Supreme Court of the USA pronounced a landmark judgement which makes the police obliged to inform suspects of their rights.

### ***Unforgiven's Last Stand***

In a landmark film that reworked the Eastwood Icon like never before, Eastwood revisits the idea of the Wild West through the return of The Man With No Name. It was designed as Eastwood's comeback western and also marked the last time the icon was seen in the West. Like *Gran Torino* is Eastwood's last word as an action hero, *Unforgiven* announced The Stranger's retirement.

Set in the Old West of the late nineteenth-century, *Unforgiven* traces the story of William Munny a former killer in the Wild West, who has renounced violence and now lives as a struggling pig farmer, recently widowed, with two children. The opening scene of the film shows him burying his dead wife, Claudia Feathers who was "a comely young woman and not without prospects" who had married Munny, "a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition". His wife had reformed him, and had made him give up drinking whiskey and living by violent means. Poverty forces him to come out of retirement after he is offered a partnership by the Schofield Kid, a myopic bounty hunter, to kill two men who had brutally cut up a prostitute's face. A group of prostitutes at the Big Whiskey, where this incident had occurred, have offered a bounty of \$1,000 for the killing of the two men. Munny, though he is a figure haunted by his violent actions in the past, decides to take up the job one last time and persuades his former partner Ned Logan, who had also retired and settled down to a peaceful life, to come along, while the sheriff of the town, Little Bill Daggett, has resolved to thwart all efforts of bounty hunters.

Through the long and arduous journey, Munny refuses to touch alcohol and barely has the strength to bear the harsh weather conditions. When they arrive at the town, Little Bill—who does not allow people to carry guns in the town—discovers his gun and beats him up brutally. As they kill the one of the men, Munny and Logan are consumed with guilt as the film critiques the violence inherent in the genre of the Western. Immediately after the first killing, the guilt-ridden Logan decides to go back, and Munny understands and asks him to do so. Munny and the Schofield Kid proceed to kill the other man, and this time the boastful Kid—who claims that he has killed five men before—does the actual killing. Shaken by the deed, the Kid confesses to Munny that he has never killed a person before. In a monologue that shows how radically the Eastwood icon has changed his worldview and especially his view of vigilante justice, Munny says: “It's a hell of a thing, killin' a man. Take away all he's got, and all he's ever gonna have.” As he says this, the camera closes in on Eastwood's face, and it is as if Eastwood, the director, is making a statement to his audience.

Soon after, Munny learns that Logan has been captured and tortured to death by the town's sheriff, Little Bill. Munny then, despite his existential dilemma concerning violence, goes out to seek revenge. As Munny enters Skinny's Pub, where the townsfolk, led by the sheriff, are celebrating Logan's death, the colour tone of the film turns darker. There is rain, and Munny, who is filmed—riding his horse wearing a hat—in silhouettes, increasingly starts to resemble *The Stranger*. He asks who owns the bar and kills the bar's owner in front of all the people in the bar. When the sheriff identifies him as a known killer, Munny says, in words echoing the deeds of *The Man With No Name*: “I've killed women and children. I've killed everything that walks and crawls at one time or another, and now I come to kill you, Little Bill, for what you done to Ned.” It echoes *The Man With No Name's* instruction to the undertaker in *A Fistful of Dollars* to get four coffins ready.

With all odds against him, he shoots down Little Bill and his four deputies, while the townsfolk run away from the scene. He then swigs down a drink, in harsh acceptance of his identity: He is a killer. Despite his intentions to change Munny



remains a prisoner of his past. When he sees that the sheriff still has life left in him has reached for a gun, Munny towers over him—like Dirty Harry when he mouths his famous line “Do I feel Lucky”—with his gun. The sheriff says that he does not deserve to die like this at a time he was thinking of retirement and building a house in front of which he wanted to sit in the evenings and watch the sun set. Munny, in reply, says: “Deserve has nothing to do with this.” All the while there is apocalyptic thunder and rain as we see the great Western hero revisiting a dead genre and Eastwood—in a testament to his remarkable control over his long career—walks out, like Munny, of being a Western vigilante hero on his own terms.

### **“The final image” in *Gran Torino***

Eastwood intended *Gran Torino* (2008) to be his last starring role as action hero, and the film very consciously attempts to draw curtains on the Eastwood icon as the 78-year-old stars as Walt Kowalski, a Korean War veteran, a widower, who like almost all Eastwoodian characters is tough and self-sufficient. He is a quintessential American, who treasures his 1972 *Gran Torino* that he contributed in manufacturing in his long career as an employee in the Ford factory.

He gets attached to his neighbouring Hmong family. The neighbourhood has, over the years, become mixed-race and is a site of frequent teenage gang skirmishes. The two dominant gangs of Black and Hmong teenage boys terrorise the neighbourhood, but Kowalski stands up to them. He lives life on his terms, and will not have anybody messing up the lawn of his house that is adorned by a large American flag. The Hmong siblings, Thao and Sue become Kowalski’s friends. The Hmong gang kidnaps Sue and rapes her, and it is up to Kowalski to deliver justice as the Hmong community refuses to involve the police in the matter. Thao urges Kowalski to take him along so that they can deliver retributive justice to the men who raped Sue. But the Eastwoodian character Kowalski—with generous flashes of Dirty Harry and *The Man With No Name*—asks him not to act in haste. He locks up Thao in his house, and goes alone to the house where the Hmong gang are waiting for Kowalski and Thao to carry out their revenge. In the full view of the neighbourhood, Kowalski—in a scene that generates expectations of an *Unforgiven*-like climax—

confronts the gang. He stands on the street and puts his hand inside his jacket, in a gesture indicating that he is going to take out a weapon, provoking the entire gang to shoot at him, and sacrifices himself. It is a radical alteration to the theme of vigilante justice that Eastwood problematizes in the later part of his career. Here, the Eastwood icon—the man who delivers justice outside the state—has to sacrifice himself for the apparatuses of the legal system to perform their function. The film would have been, as Eastwood intended, a fitting end to a remarkable career spent playing with the image of a vigilante hero. The film stands as a mark of Eastwood, like Munny, riding out into the sunset on his own terms, with full control over his own icon.

### **Conclusion**

*Gran Torino* is the only film in which Eastwood's character dies on screen. For a man, so terrified of death that he faked smoking in all of his iconic roles from the *Dollars Trilogy* to *Gran Torino*, Eastwood—the creator and manipulator of his icon—seemed to realize, like so many of his generation in perhaps the last years of dominant White Supremacy, the end of an era in 2008 with the election of Barack Obama as the first Black president of the United States. From here on Eastwood's politics, which showed nuance and self-critique at the end of the Cold War, once again turns increasingly reactionary and conservative with directorial features such as a biography of FBI director J Edgar Hoover and Islamophobic celebrations of American masculinity in *American Sniper*. It marks the beginning of the same wave that sought to undo the progressive racial gains of Obama as President by replacing him with a White Supremacist in the form of Donald Trump. The Eastwood character returns to the screen as a palimpsest of old-world masculinity and individualism in *The Mule* (2018), and will return again in 2021 in the aptly titled *Cry Macho*. These Octogenarian Eastwood characters, post-*Gran Torino*, are a testimony to the author's extraordinary creative longevity, but also bemoan the passing of a certain colour of American supremacy, marked by a resigned acceptance of the twilight of his own life and the values of the post WWII American Golden Age.

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