

## Clint Eastwood Comforts a Confederate Soldier

Shôn Ellerton, September 17, 2021

*A striking moment in film cinema showing compassion in the worst of situations*



If there was a movie ever made that portrayed unlikely companions during one of the most terrible moments in American history, the Civil War, it would have to be Sergio Leone's 1966 classic, *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. Avarice, injustice, malice and revenge, are key features in the film but so is tolerance, compassion and empathy.

I was first introduced to this amazing film at a young age when a friend of my mother's came around with it on a videotape, back in the 80s. I remember him telling us how intricately it was filmed. The facial expressions. The pauses. The atmosphere. The humour. The pathos. The horror and the heroism. And, indeed, despite its relatively long running time, we were glued to this movie.

Since then, I have watched it several times and have never tired of it. What really struck me out on the film in later years is its message depicting an underlying tone of empathy, tolerance and compassion to others. We all know about the unlikely alliance of Blondie (the good guy, played by Eastwood), Tuco (the 'ugly' guy, played by Wallach) and Angel Eyes (the bad guy, played by Van Cleef) in their quest to find the gold. Allied through the vice of greed, each character is remarkably different. Blondie upholds a set of morals plainly evident when he encounters the horrific scenes of a battle on two sides of a river. The paradoxically sinister-named, Angel Eyes, embodies evil and sheer nastiness. The scene of him shooting a man square in the face through a pillow while lying in his bed begging him not to kill him is a harrowing scene to say the least. Although, the man killed by Angel Eyes was not innocent considering

he was paying Angel Eyes to assassinate someone. The scene was certainly not as distressing as that when Frank, played by Henry Fonda, in another of Leone's films, *Once Upon a Time in the West*, coldly killed a farmer and his three children to make way for a new railroad.

What makes *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* so successful as a movie that can be watched over and over is how it illustrates a rich tapestry of morals, vices and virtues played out by an eclectic mix of characters. The scene when summary justice was played out with Tuco about to be hanged while the 'good citizens' of the town watch with avid curiosity and disgust waiting for the rope to tauten only to be saved by sharpshooter, Blondie, while he cuts the rope with a bullet along with shooting off a few hats off the townsfolk. Transposing that very scene to modern day social media justice does not seem that unreasonable considering the summary justice that has been meted out to high-profile subjects focussed on by the media. The scene in which Tuco learns of the death of his parents showing the soft side of him while he grieves in solitude. The deadpan humour of Blondie in which he presents a noose for Tuco when they unearth (literally from a grave) the gold as revenge for Tuco attempting to do the same for him. Tuco exclaims, 'You're joking', in which Blondie replies 'It's no joke, it's a rope'. Classic scene after classic scene. Never a moment of boredom.

However, the scenes which really touched me and still jerk a tear are the scenes when our trio of desperados get caught up in the atrocities of the Civil War. The infamous camp scene when Tuco was brutally beaten up in a Union camp while Angel Eyes (also a Union commander, and an evil one at that) watched on with pleasure trying to extract from Tuco, information relating to the buried gold. During the beating, a band of prisoner musicians with fiddles and harmonicas were ordered to play music (as sweetly as possible) to cover up any sound which might have alerted the camp commander who ordered no one would be tortured or beaten by the officers. The music, [The Story of a Soldier](#) by Ennio Morricone, was used during this scene. It is one of the most haunting and beautiful pieces of music ever made and I cannot listen to it without feeling quite distressed.

What is striking about this scene is the choice of using a Union camp rather than a Confederate camp. No doubt, war exposes every element of human behaviour imaginable. I have never been in a war, nor want to be, but many of us live very far removed from the realities of what it could possibly be like in a conflict situation. I was taught the history of the Civil War in school and, like most

others, learned of the nefarious and evil practice of slavery which the South supported. However, many of us conveniently forget what it must have been like for both Union and Confederate soldiers who were fighting each other. Blondie, in the movie, observes thousands of men being blown apart at the river's edge and mutters out that most famous of lines while chewing the end of his cigar, 'I've never seen so many men wasted so badly.' Blondie and Tuco attend to the Union leader drinking himself to a stupor to dull the pain of the wounds just before he dies. Then they observe all the dead and wounded Union soldiers on the bank with medics rushing around, many of those wounded who cannot be saved.

Tuco and Blondie then climb to the opposite bank in which a mirror image of dead and wounded soldiers are scattered, although the advancing front had already retreated leaving those left to die alone. They stumble on a suffering Confederate soldier lying next to a ruin, unable to speak, shivering with pain. Blondie takes off his jacket and shrouds the wounded man with his jacket to comfort his pain and offers him a puff of his cigar, but not long after, gives up the ghost. The message of compassion and empathy is strong in the movie. There is no bad side. There is no good side. Not to those who have been ordered to fight the worst kind of war. The war against those of the same nation. I agree with the vast majority that slavery, as supported by the South, is evil, but we must also not be intolerant to everything which has a connection in history to what is evil. I daresay, there may be those who would look down on the dying Confederate soldier with glee admonishing him for his part in protecting a regime that supported slavery. In today's world of social media dichotomous thinking, there are many who would treat, with intolerance and contempt, anyone with a connection of a cause, a figurehead, or act which they do not agree with. Even if the connection is unavoidable or hereditary. This is not the only movie Clint Eastwood acted in which spins the message of underlying compassion and tolerance in situations which many would make a simple judgment as to what is right or wrong. *The Beguiled* and *Gran Torino* are two such movies in which the former, once again, takes place in the midst of the Civil War and the latter on promoting patriotism and good citizenry and combatting racism.

I am saddened and disappointed by those who accuse or persecute others by reason of association to something or someone that does not agree with them, especially that which they cannot otherwise avoid. The origins of where one's

ancestry lies. For example, the misguided notion that those who come from a white background are more privileged than those who are not. The country or regime where one may have come from. For example, the unwarranted accusations by those that the Chinese carry viruses, in which many attacks have been made on the Asian community during 2020. And, of course, those who may vote for a different political party. A friend once said to me openly that he would not tolerate anyone who supported the 'other side' of the political fence and certainly not engage in a conversation as to why. Taken from the book, *Coddling of the American Mind*, we should learn to encompass those who we may disagree with rather than shut them out. By doing so, we are losing our ability to engage with opposing thoughts and ideas, and by doing so, we are becoming startlingly intolerant of others. Tolerance and compassion are the best tools we have, as a human race. Without it, we will continue to fight and destroy each other.