

# Clint Eastwood, the critics and the “heart of darkness”

Mystic River, directed by Clint Eastwood, written by Brian Helgeland, based on the novel by Dennis Lehane

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*Mystic River*, directed by Clint Eastwood, is another terribly poor American film that has been widely and highly praised. Indignation, however, is out of place. One hardly expects anything else from the vast majority of critics at present.

In its own way, this phase of concentrated obtuseness and reaction in American filmmaking—in the final analysis, a reflection of the shift to the right by the entire establishment—hints at the acute state of the social crisis in the US. The lid simply cannot be lifted on real conditions, particularly the vast gap between the rich and the rest of the population: these conditions are too malignant, too threatening and potentially explosive. This situation is untenable in the long term. Social reality will find its way into filmmaking, very likely at the expense and to the dismay of many of its present practitioners.

Eastwood’s film, based on a best-selling novel, is set in a fictional working class Boston neighborhood. It focuses on three men, who were friends as boys. Their relations changed forever when one of the trio, Dave Boyle (Tim Robbins), was abducted and raped by two pedophiles, a policeman and a priest (or men posing as such). Decades later, Boyle is in a sad state, scraping by financially, married to the nervous, uncertain Celeste (Marcia Gay Harden). Jimmy Markum (Sean Penn), another of the three boys, became a local hood, served time in prison and now runs a grocery store. His first wife died; he has children with his second wife, Annabeth (Laura Linney). The third friend, Sean Devine (Kevin Bacon), eventually joined the state police and has worked his way up to the rank of homicide detective. His wife has left him, but continues to haunt him with wordless telephone calls.

The murder of Markum’s beloved daughter by his first wife, 19-year-old Katie, sets off a chain of tragic events, once again linking the three boyhood friends. Devine is the detective assigned to the case, and Boyle, unable to explain his strange behavior on the night of the slaying, falls under suspicion. Desperate for revenge and skeptical about the ability of the police to uncover the truth in such a closed-mouth community, Markum launches his own “investigation” with the assistance of a pair of local hoodlums. He draws mistaken conclusions from circumstantial facts, extracts a confession by violence and executes the wrong man.

The story revolves around an act committed decades before by vicious homosexual predators. One is obliged to note, in the first place, the psychic and juridical reality that among pedophiles, who may be suffering from an immature sexual development, sadistic violence of the variety portrayed in Eastwood’s film is a rarity. The entire film, in other words, rests on a statistical exception, not a social rule.

Leaving that issue aside, *Mystic River* makes other, more significant assumptions about American life that need to be examined. They are not

by any means sunny assumptions. On the contrary, the film portrays a community where profound anxiety prevails. However, we quickly recognize that the source of this tension is not economic and social difficulty—in other words, the reality of American class society. Rather, the characters are haunted by a sense of collective guilt for past crimes of greed, lust and revenge, even as these old sins are paid for by the commission of new ones. Everyone has a guilty conscience, everyone has dirty hands. Markum is plagued by the possibility that he has somehow contributed to his daughter’s death, and he proves to be correct, at least according to the film’s logic. He and Devine feel partly responsible for Boyle’s condition, for being the ones who were *not* taken away and assaulted.

The director comments that his central characters are caught up in a “tragic circle... They have all been traumatized by the past. All became damaged goods.” But, in fact, there is no reason to stop with the three protagonists, and Eastwood’s film does not. As Liam Lacey notes approvingly in Canada’s *Globe and Mail*: “This is a place where family and friends are under a curse, doomed to follow apparently pre-ordained patterns of violence and suffering.” Indeed, the film conveys the impression that the working class residents are so contaminated by their complicity in past, present and future crimes that they can never overcome their own inner mutilation. They are moral and psychological cripples, incapable of rising above their basest impulses. This is a conception of the broad mass of the population that has adherents in numerous quarters, some ostensibly “left-wing.”

Eastwood directs his scenes of urban working class life “with all the freshness” of having lived for the past 30 years in the privileged enclave of Carmel, California.

It would surely be an error to imagine that the director has carefully worked these social questions out in his mind. This vague, but sharply felt contempt for humanity is available at present in large quantities and at low prices. And ignorance also plays a substantial role. This is not to excuse anyone or minimize the damage a false picture, based on lack of insight and knowledge, can cause. Ignorance, hand in hand with reaction, at a certain level forms a link in the chain of social causality.

One reason for the film’s popularity with the critics, aside from the issue of simple opportunism and intellectual corruption, is that the latter sympathize with Eastwood’s intuition about the working class and humanity in general. Reviewers praise the filmmaker for boldly tracing out the ineluctable consequences of an unspeakable event. According to David Edelstein in *Slate*, the mood and tempo of *Mystic River* “suggest a certain tragic inevitability that flows grimly, relentlessly, toward us.” Neither the director nor the critics concern themselves with the source of

the evil that “spreads like a pestilence,” in the breathless words of Ed Gonzalez in *Slant* magazine. They have no need to, since all acknowledge, explicitly or implicitly, that the problem lies in the working class community and, beyond that, the darkness of the human heart.

Why should one act, vicious as it was, have had such a devastating impact? Because the inhabitants of the neighborhood themselves are weak and indeed already fallen creatures, susceptible to violence. The *Chicago Tribune*'s Michael Wilmington calls *Mystic River* “a realistic drama about a community in the throes of change, teetering on moral disintegration.” Gonzalez describes the neighborhood as “a poor, close-knit section of Boston on the brink of moral collapse.” Carrie Rickey in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* rhapsodizes, “You haven’t been watching a police procedural, but a Greek tragedy. You haven’t been watching a drama about the catharsis of vigilantism, but sitting vigil for a community diminished, and permanently damaged, by violence.” One could cite such comments at length. Edelstein writes, “*Mystic River* is finally about how that opening violation ripples into the present, deforming all the lives in this tight-knit, working-class community. It has the range of a classic tragedy.”

Certain critics did not beat around the bush, praising Eastwood’s work for its dim view of humanity as a whole. Peter Travers in *Rolling Stone* noted that the film would appeal to “audiences who aren’t scared off by the twisted side of human nature.” The ever-gloomier Andrew Sarris, who once wrote intelligently about cinema, comments in the *New York Observer*: “Like most of the more interesting films this year, *Mystic River* displays a darker view of our existence in the new millennium than was the norm in the old Hollywood dream factories.” Sarris calls the film “a masterpiece of the first order.”

One really has to turn, however, to A.O. Scott in the *New York Times* for the entire business to be spelled out in no uncertain terms. It is necessary to cite a number of passages from this extraordinary comment. After terming *Mystic River* “mighty,” Scott goes on: “At its starkest, the film...is a parable of incurable trauma, in which violence begets more violence and the primal violation of innocence can never be set right. *Mystic River* is the rare American movie that aspires to—and achieves—the full weight and darkness of tragedy.”

The *Times* critic argues that “though *Mystic River* takes place in a modern American city, it is as thoroughly steeped in tribal codes of kinship, blood and honor as a Shakespeare play or a John Ford western... What gives the movie its extraordinary intensity of feeling is the way Mr. Eastwood grounds the conventions of pulp opera in an unvarnished, thickly inhabited reality. There are scenes that swell with almost unbearable feeling, and the director’s ambitions are enormous, but the movie almost entirely avoids melodrama or grandiosity.”

Most significantly: “When Sean realizes he must tell his old friend Jimmy that his beloved daughter is dead, he wonders what he should say: ‘God said you owed another marker, and he came to collect.’ This grim theology is as close as anyone comes to faith, but Mr. Eastwood’s understanding of the universe, and of human nature, is if anything even more pessimistic. The evil of murderers and child molesters represents a fundamental imbalance in the order of things that neither the forces of law and order nor the impulse toward vengeance can rectify... The actions of his abusers spring from some bestial, uncivilized impulse that cries out to be exterminated. The problem—the tragedy—is that grief, loyalty and even love spring from the same source.”

“A fundamental imbalance in the order of things”? “Some bestial, uncivilized impulse that cries out to be exterminated”? What is going on here? Clearly, something more than a review of a third-rate Hollywood thriller.

First, it should be observed that there is now—and has been for some time—the consensus within the American “intelligentsia” that violence and anti-social behavior in general are not attributable, in the final analysis, to the decay of US capitalism and its institutions, but to the human soul. Or,

in the context of Eastwood’s film, one might amend that to: the fault does not lie with the institutions, except insofar as they are incapable of responding to the presence of inexplicable evil in human hearts. (Of course, the references to collective human responsibility for evil need to be taken with a grain of salt. When the bourgeois commentator speaks about the failings of “our” nature, he or she usually has someone else, someone more oppressed, in mind.)

Beyond this general consideration, there is a more immediate “social subtext.” *Mystic River* and Scott’s comments and others along similar lines, as well as a number of films about the morality or immorality of psychopathic revenge (including *Kill Bill* and *Open Range*), suggest that the events of September 11, 2001, are working their way through the confused and disoriented psyches of certain artists and critics. The almost universal agreement about the permissibility or at least inevitability of bloody vengeance speaks volumes as to the mentality of American liberal intellectuals.

In one of the few dissenting views, Jonathan Rosenbaum in the *Chicago Reader* notes the desperation of reviewers to “establish its [*Mystic River*’s] artistic pedigree.” Indeed, in their eagerness to leap on the Eastwood bandwagon the critics have competed with one another in their comparisons of *Mystic River* to literary classics. Some of the comments are priceless and deserve to be preserved, with the hope that they might at some future date bring a blush of shame to the cheeks of the more honorable.

Rickey and Edelstein are not alone in making references to classical tragedy. David Denby in the *New Yorker* wrote that *Mystic River* “is as close as we are likely to come on the screen to the spirit of Greek tragedy.” Lacey of the *Globe and Mail* suggested that the film’s narrative “unfolds with the inevitability and awfulness of a Greek tragedy.” The final major speech of the film, in which Markum’s wife seeks to legitimize his homicidal actions, Sarris terms a “transcendent Trojan Women-like scene,” although most of the critics, including Edelstein, preferred to compare Annabeth Markum to Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare came in for a number of references, including in the aforementioned passages from Scott of the *Times* and from Ann Hornaday in the *Washington Post*, who described the results of Eastwood’s efforts as “explosive, heartbreaking, tragic on a Shakespearean scale.”

This is all nonsense. The screenplay, by Brian Koppelman, known for his nearly Bardlike exertions on *A Highway to Hell*, *L.A. Confidential* and *A Knight’s Tale*, is poorly constructed, overblown and implausible. The behavior of Boyle and his wife, around which the film revolves, is particularly improbable and absurd. And the attempt to make Markum, a nasty psychopath, into some sort of latter-day Celtic warrior-king is ludicrous.

*Mystic River* is badly written, directed and acted. The latter must be particularly insisted upon in the face of universal acclaim. Penn, a generally fine actor, relies on formulaic and trite “Method” gimmicks. Nothing that he does, including his much-acclaimed animalistic howling at the news of his daughter’s death, stands up to scrutiny. The performance is contrived from beginning to end. All the performers, a talented group, are desperately seeking to be “human” and “real” and, above all, “moving,” and their inflated efforts fall miserably flat.

Why? Because Eastwood’s film is rooted in a profound misreading, or more to the point, a profound ignorance of society and human relationships. His false and shallow premises lead the filmmaker to construct an unconvincing, fantastical drama. The superficiality of the artist’s view of the world obliges him to introduce abstract and unreal (and tedious) connections to inject some coherence into the work. The performers’ contortions come from the need to make these abstract and unreal connections believable and real.

Genuine tragedy is not simply anything one wants to make it. Not every chronicle of unhappy events, even well told, is tragedy of the highest

order. Genuine tragedy has a powerful element of *necessity*; it artistically reflects and maximizes essential features of social life. In some manner, the tragic situation of the protagonists and the drama that unfolds must accord with the larger, “world-historical” conflict at the center of a given epoch’s social life. Try as they may, filmmakers and critics cannot make a small-time thug’s revenge of his daughter’s senseless murder into a drama that speaks to the great social questions of American life today.

Fate in Greek tragedy revealed “the narrow limits within which ancient man, clear in thought but poor in technique, was confined... Tragedy lay inherent in the contradiction between the awakened world of the mind, and the stagnant limitation of means.” (Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*)

By Shakespeare’s time, tragedy had become far more individualistic, bourgeois society having fractured “human relationships into atoms, and given them unprecedented flexibility and mobility.” During this period of its rise, capitalist society “had a great aim for itself. Personal emancipation was its name. Out of it grew the dramas of Shakespeare and Goethe’s *Faust*.”

What does any of this have to do with Eastwood’s ill-conceived and poorly executed film?

The tragedies that need to be written and filmed in America today, in any event, will not reprise ancient concerns with Fate or Elizabethan studies of individual passion. Writers and directors will be obliged, first of all, to uncover the real driving forces in society, the real existing social relationships, not mythologized ones based on “tribal codes of kinship, blood and honor.” On that basis, one is confident, there will be no shortage of material.



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