

Wounded: The Complex Portrayal of Jesse James and Robert Ford in the Film, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*

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Abstract (Class Prompt):

The film, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, goes a long way from portraying James and others as simple heroes or outlaws. The two main characters, Jesse James and Robert Ford are complex. How are we supposed to feel about them? Should we feel sympathy for either of them or should we revile them?

As an Honors 200 essay, the purpose of this paper is to critically assess an acclaimed film which is a character study of one of North America's most fabled bandits and the man who killed him.

Jesse James and Robert Ford are two intimately linked historical figures that are recognized in the modern day for contrasting reasons. Jesse James is heralded as the American Robin Hood; many folk songs praise him as a man who “stole from the rich... and gave to the poor”. His post-Civil War career as a bandit, spent robbing banks and trains in the name of the Confederacy, solidified him as a hero in the hearts and minds of many Southerners and ex-Confederates. Meanwhile, Robert (Bob) Ford was the man who killed him. He’s the “dirty little coward” who “laid poor Jesse in his grave.” The 2007 film *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* explores the complexities of these two characters, in contrast to traditional depictions which present them as caricatures. The film humanizes both characters, garnering notable sympathy for not just Jesse James, but Bob Ford as well. The audience’s sympathy results in their recognition that these men are far more than the stereotypes and stories that have outlived them. Furthermore, the film connects Jesse and Bob by demonstrating that the characters share a similar life experience, in that they share the same unfulfillment, the same bitter taste of a life poorly lived, that plunges them into melancholy and dejection. In so doing, the narrative of the film contradicts its own title and instead presents a more sympathetic and nuanced view of Jesse James and Bob Ford.

Contrary to the focus of popular depictions which show Jesse James in his prime, in the film Jesse’s glory days are long behind him; the film is his epilogue. This focus on the approaching end of Jesse’s life casts a looming shadow over his character and adds an element of sorrow which is one of the film’s first invocations of sympathy on his behalf.

The first actual depiction of Jesse presents him as a wounded family man. The narrator describes him as “growing into middle age... [and] living in a bungalow”. He reclines “in a rocking chair... as his wife wiped her pink hands on an apron and reportedly happily of their two

children”. Jesse’s loving interactions with his wife and children are repeated throughout but they are featured in tandem with the mental and physical wounds that plague him. He is described as having “two incompletely healed bullet holes in his chest and another in his thigh”. His paranoia and mental distress are foreshadowed in that “whenever he walked about the house, he carried several newspapers... each with a foot-long .44 caliber pistol tucked into a fold”. This portrayal of Jesse shows the audience that he is scarred, mentally and physically, from his time fighting in the Civil War and his post-war career as a bandit. The “incompletely healed” wounds represent his failure to escape from his violent past. No matter how much he might long to settle down and raise a family he cannot find peace.

The film does not shy away from also depicting Jesse’s violent actions. He is shown, melancholy and morose, as he murders the character of Ed Miller in cold blood. Jesse guns Ed down after interrogating him about whether he had seen or heard from Jim Cummins, a gang member whom Jesse believes may have turned himself in to the police. At a later stage, Jesse again acts mercilessly as he beats a young boy, whom he believes knows the location of Jim Cummins. His beating of the boy concludes with him sobbing as he saddles his horse. Jesse’s actions, while violent, reveal his sheer desperation, insecurity, and hopelessness. The focus on Jesse’s mental illness, as the cause of his violent action, also serves to somewhat divorce Jesse from his Confederate past, making his character more palpable to a wider audience. The wider audience is moved with sympathy, not for the ruthless, ex-Confederate outlaw, but for the man at the end of his wits, a man quickly descending into mental despair.

The film’s allusion, or outright depiction, of Jesse’s mental illness grows as the plot progresses. While on the hunt for the Jim Cummins, a random scene is shown in which Jesse questions a nervous Charlie Ford about whether he had ever considered suicide. In the midst of

that conversation, Jesse fires several shots unconcernedly into the frozen lake on which they are standing. Later on, Jesse gifts Bob Ford a new gun citing that Bob's old gun may very well fall apart the next time he fires it; the next time Bob fires a shot, it is the one that kills Jesse. The film's presentation of Jesse's assassination further adds to the question of suicide. Shortly before Jesse had unstrapped his guns "for fear the neighbors might see [him]", an awkward move considering he's inside. His exclamation that "that picture needs dusting" is contradictory as well, since when Jesse steps up to "dust" the painting, he can clearly make out the figure of Bob Ford with a gun cocked and aimed at him. Jesse also makes no move to turn at the all too familiar sound of a cocking gun, nor does he turn at the sight of Bob. Through these many scenes, the film establishes a solid suggestion for the idea that Jesse is mentally ill, and that he deliberately allowed himself to be killed in an act of suicide. This notion completely turns the popular perception of Jesse James' assassination as a cowardly act committed by Bob Ford on its head. It shifts the narrative from Jesse, a hero and outlaw in his prime who was gunned down as a helpless martyr, to that of a wounded and struggling man, who is so hopeless that he turns to suicide. Not only does this greatly increase the audience's sympathetic understanding of Jesse, but it also partly exonerates Bob for his crime.

Before the character of Bob Ford is even introduced to the audience he is branded with title of "coward". His initial introduction doesn't win him any favor either. Bob comes across as an insecure, deluded, and awkward boy. He is afflicted with a cracking voice and gracelessly strung sentences that give even Frank James "the willies". He arrogantly believes himself to be "just a rung down from the James brothers" and "destined for great things". At first the film suggests that his sole desire and purpose is centered around either imitating Jesse James or *being* Jesse James; not only is he annoying, but he is also naïve. Bob's early portrayal builds on the

film's title of "coward" and paints such a repulsive character that it's difficult to imagine how else he could be seen.

Despite his initial depiction, the film contextualizes Bob Ford's character through the maltreatment he receives from others. Bob is belittled, ignored, and constantly nagged at by fellow gang members and his own family. While Jesse James doesn't initially belittle Bob, he does continually brush him aside and persists in being impersonal. Bob holds out hope that Jesse will still befriend him eventually; he remains desperate for his approval and respect. However, the relationship between Bob and Jesse takes a significant turn one evening when, sitting at opposite ends of the dinner table, Jesse joins Bob's family in teasing him. Jesse goes beyond just teasing Bob, denigrating his character and antagonizes him. He goes so far as to compare him to George Shepherd, a man who, like Bob, joined the James gang because of Jesse's persona, but was gunned down after the gang learned of his plot to betray them. This interaction sets Bob at odds with even his idol. Jesse's attitude towards Bob leaves him bitter and angry; the man whom he reveres above all treats him no better than everyone else. Through the depiction of the way in which Bob is treated by his family and Jesse, the audience is moved with sympathy for the lack of respect, recognition, and compassion extended to Bob by those closest to him. These scenes establish a more complete understanding of Bob's character; he is a damaged young man, neglected by those who should otherwise love him, and fighting to believe in himself when no one else will. His intense desire for fame and recognition no longer seems so naïve or self-centered.

Bob fails to receive the recognition and admiration that he desired from Jesse, so he seeks it elsewhere. If he can't imitate Jesse, if he can't *be* Jesse, then Bob commits to being the man who *kills* Jesse. His longing for fame is so intense that it draws him into a tragic arrangement

with Governor Crittenden of Missouri; Bob agrees to assassinate the very man whom he had idolized since boyhood. The film's portrayal of Bob, however, is not that of a cold-hearted killer, nor that of a coward. He and his brother, Charlie Ford, spend the time leading up to the assassination in perpetual terror, believing that Jesse could kill either of them at any moment. When the assassination does finally take place, it is done with reluctance and sorrow. When Jesse steps into the room where he is to die, Bob is seated in a rocking chair, close to tears. His face is a mixture of despair and anxiety. His left-hand trembles over his brow and his movements are slow and hesitant. Jesse is shown taking off his guns and solemn piano music plays as he steps up on a stool to dust a painting. From behind, Bob fires a single shot that kills him. In this depiction of Jesse's assassination, the film sets a scene that is much more reminiscent of a funeral than a murder. No glory is won, no revelry is had. Bob, dazed, has to be dragged from the room by Charlie. In this depiction of Jesse's assassination, the film once again deviates from the conventional narrative surrounding Bob's character. He is still the man who "laid poor Jesse in his grave" but, through the film's portrayal, he has done so not as a triumphant murderer, but as something more akin to that of a friend in mourning.

However, the despair doesn't last, and Bob Ford turns eagerly to his newfound fame, lapsing back into his boyish hopes and dreams. In killing Jesse James, Bob receives the acclaim and recognition that he had always longed for. The narrator reveals that after the assassination, Bob "could be correctly identified by more citizens than could the president of the United States". On stage, performing as an actor, Bob estimates that he has reenacted the killing of Jesse "over eight hundred times" to innumerable crowds of people. Despite this, Bob is unfulfilled and not only are his dreams empty, but his pursuit of fame backfires in a cruel turn of events. Bob is described as seeing "his destiny in every king and jack", he is forever overshadowed by Jesse

James. Once more, Bob finds himself an outcast, unpopular and unwanted, only now it is by the whole of society.

The film's depiction of Bob's life, especially in the aftermath of the assassination, solidifies his sympathetic portrayal. Bob's story is the classic narrative of a naïve teenager who pursues an empty promise, only to then be crushed by reality. Although no one in the film understands him, the audience is led by the film to a complete understanding of Bob's person. They witness his life, his hopes and failures, and they see him for who he is. They watch as he is branded "coward" and "traitor", knowing full well that he is merely a wounded boy who longs to be seen.

The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford is ultimately a meditation on the human experience. The film revives the legend of Jesse James and Bob Ford to explore who they were as humans, why they did what they did, and how they met their ends. The film portrays Bob and Jesse as having far more in common, and being far more human, than the traditional narratives suggest. While the film only depicts the final portion of Jesse's life, and contrarily focusses on the whole of Bob's, it is fundamentally the same story. Both spend their lives chasing after an ideal that will never satisfy them. Both suffer from the same realization that their pursuits have amounted to nothing. Jesse's Confederate dream lies in literal ruin, while his career as an outlaw and its consequences perpetually haunts him. His own hope for glory comes at the cost of his sanity, as he finally allows himself to be killed in an act of suicide. Bob faces the same struggle. His dream of "greatness" only goes so far as to make him hated in the eyes of everyone. Speaking to a human desire to be seen, the film shows that both characters are searching for "applause", and both fail to find it. It is through the portrayal of Bob and Jesse's

damaged characters, their failed life endeavors, their emptiness and dejection, that the film sows sympathy in the heart of its audience.