Going Straight: The Past and the Future in *The Return of Frank James*

The casting of Henry Fonda in the leading role of *The Return of Frank James* (1940), Lang's first Hollywood Western, invites us to make a comparison with the preceding collaboration between this star and director, *You Only Live Once* (1937). In the earlier, wonderfully achieved film, a man with a criminal past tries (perhaps) to go straight, fails, and dies along with his wife. *The Return of Frank James* could be taken to be a variation of this narrative. Here a former gang member overcomes his past, revenges the cowardly killing of his brother, and no obstacles seem to stand between him and the love of a beautiful young woman.

George Wilson has demonstrated 'the *variety* of perspectives from which Eddie [the Henry Fonda character] and his behavior can be viewed' (1986: 17) and challenged us to think carefully about the meaning of the ending of *You Only Live Once*. It is my contention that *The Return of Frank James* is related to the earlier film in that it follows up some questions relating to what kind of life can be pursued in the wake of a criminal past. The film does not offer comfortable answers, either about how such a figure might see himself and his future or how a society might use or need him.

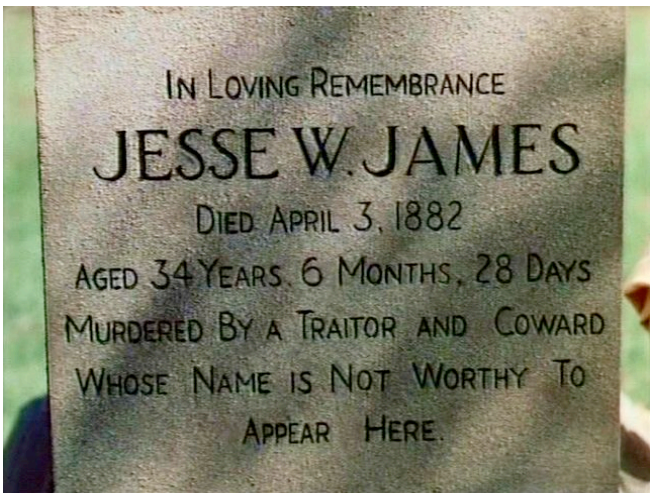
A reason for the relative lack of interest shown by Lang scholars in *The Return of Frank James* may be that it is thought of as a predetermined product, being a sequel to a previous Fox Western, *Jesse James* (Henry King, 1939). King's *Jesse James* begins with a political fable, a series of sequences in which good American families are dispossessed of their land and livelihoods by cynical and brutal forces embodied in Barshee's (Brian Donlevy's) role as a representative of the corporate power of the railroads. (This was a topical matter: the same subject, substituting banks for railroads, forms the opening of *The Grapes of Wrath*, also scripted by Nunnally Johnson, for John Ford in 1940 from the novel by John Steinbeck.) What is striking here is that the farming families are without fathers. The sons are the dispossessed, and the women being bullied and injured are their mothers. Two kinds of men stand in for these fathers. The malign patriarch is the railroad boss McCoy – the casting of Donald Meek, player of mild-mannered curates and justices of the peace elsewhere, stresses that power here has everything to do with corporate muscle and nothing to do with the physical body of the man wielding it. The benign father figure is Major Rufus Cobb (Henry Hull), a stock character of the Western – a newspaper proprietor, albeit in this case one of limited effectiveness. There is a running gag in King's film which survives into Lang's, involving the Major dictating editorials about the need to eliminate various groups (lawyers, dentists) by shooting them down 'like dogs'. But this offers no useful model for the dispossessed sons; when Jesse does shoot Barshee down, he renders himself an outlaw.

These figures form part of the background to the main plot, in which Jesse falls in love with an unexceptional local girl (Nancy Kelly) named Zee [Zerelda]. King constructs his film around a familiar opposition in the Western: on the one hand the possibility of marriage to the girl and settling down to a law-abiding life, and on the other the figure of the wanderer, an outlaw for whom the possibility of marriage is denied, or refused, both by society and by the girl herself. Faced with losing Zee as a result of his outlaw status, Jesse attempts to bridge the divide between malefactor and suitor, giving himself up and trusting the railroad boss's promise to

press for a nominal sentence. Zee commits herself to him in marriage, but he is taken straight to prison, in the opening move of a double-cross.

This marriage could be regarded as the central disaster of the lives we see here. Betrayed by the railroad, Jesse breaks out of gaol with the assistance of his brother Frank (Henry Fonda), but the married man can no longer simply revert to being a lone outlaw. His desire to be a good husband and father is at odds with actions that exclude him from society. The tension in the couple's relationship is clear in a sequence in which Jesse responds to Zee's homemaking, then instantly demands that they pack up house and move on. The tie between them seems finally to be severed when Jesse is absent from the birth of his son, and as a consequence Zee decides to return to her home town with the baby. The pain of separation drives Jesse to take increasingly desperate risks in the robberies performed by the James gang, a form of behaviour which is recognised by the rest of the gang members as a kind of indirect suicide. (The word is used when the gang confront him). This culminates in the raid on the bank at Northfield, Minnesota, in which Jesse is wounded and almost drowns while evading his pursuers. After this, which is presented as if it were experienced by Jesse as a symbolic death and rebirth, he rejoins Zee and makes plans to leave for California. As he is taking down a sampler inscribed 'God Bless Our Home' from the wall of his parlour he is shot in the back.

In *Jesse James,* King remains clearly committed to the ideal of the good, law-abiding family even while he is presenting us with the vigour and glamour of Tyrone Power's gang leader. Jesse's evident distress at his inability to act as the head of a family indicates his commitment to these values. His death is rendered as a moment of pathos, an inevitable end to such a life, but the film mutes the sense of loss by including in its structure Marshal Will Wright (Randolph Scott), who could be described as Jesse's counterpart but on the right side of the law. At several points in the narrative Will plays a role close to that of a husband and father, and the final sequence at Jesse's graveside leaves no doubt that this death will legitimise the unproblematic new couple of Zee and Will, seen here in two-shot, with propriety observed by their being separated in the frame by an intervening tree.



King presents Jesse's problem as a literal, or practical matter of location. An outlaw cannot settle down in one place, and thus be a proper husband to his wife or father to his son, unless he can compromise with the law (the attempt to make a deal with McCoy) or put himself beyond its reach (the proposed move to California). Jesse being shot while removing the sampler from the wall neatly expresses the fatal contradiction between domestic ties and having a price on one's head. But death also redeems his outlaw status. The inscription on the stone erected over his grave both reinserts Jesse into the legitimate community and symbolically expels his assassin from it. The inscription reads 'Murdered by a traitor and coward whose name is not worthy to appear here', and this is the final shot of King's film.

The opening sequences of Lang's *The Return of Frank James* appear to be a continuation of King's narrative, implicitly interrogating its final image, or rather what it claims or proposes. Lang reportedly attached great importance to initial sequences – 'those intricately prepared and extensively revised openings the director hated to let go' (McGilligan 1998: 357) – and they repay close scrutiny.

After his director's credit, Lang begins with what might be thought of as a further title, a shot of a wanted poster, offering a $10,000 reward for Jesse, dead or alive. Then he cuts to a recapitulation, and we see five shots of the murder itself, taken from King's film. But even as Jesse falls dying to the ground, the shot dissolves, not to the gravestone – the next obvious image from the earlier film – but to a sequence of three front pages from different local newspapers.[1] In each case the camera moves in to fill the space of the frame with the headline, as if to enforce the parallel with the incised inscription filling the frame at the close of *Jesse James*. The three headlines read: 'Jesse James Killed By Ford Brothers', 'Good Bye, Jesse' and 'Jesse, By Jehovah! : End Of James Gang'.

The inscription on the gravestone was a bid to fix a particular interpretation of events, to apportion praise and blame. Here it is replaced with something less stable, or with a lesser claim to permanence: the events are offered first as brisk fact, then as sentimental melodrama (further copy on the second page reads 'leaves widow and child') and finally as entertainment, or theatre. The reality of Jesse's death – of which the audience is aware through the recapitulation, a kind of flashback – is now being employed to sell newspapers and inflected as informative or touching or dramatic. (There is an echo here of *You Only Live Once*, in which three provisional versions of a single newspaper front page present the outcome of a trial for murder as variously surprising, inconclusive or grimly resolved. The accompanying photographs of the accused take us from the smile of a free man to the grimace of a convict.) The pious inscription on the gravestone attempted to exclude or negate the existence of the assassins but here they are included: in all three newspapers the Ford brothers are mentioned by name.

This is the key to the distinction between Frank's world and his situation in Lang's film and Jesse and his behaviour in King's. In contrast to the straightforward alternatives faced by Jesse (gaol, California, Northfield), Frank's choices relate to his idea of his identity and the future he might hope for, which are seen both positively and negatively. On one hand the outlaw's retirement is seen as a rebirth, with the demise of the James gang freeing Frank from his past, offering access to a changing West, a new America. On the other there is Frank's obsession with the destruction of the Fords, understood as a return to the terms of the past, to a West both superannuated and deadly, a quest for vengeance that will threaten to destroy the lives of all who become involved in it.

One way in which Lang makes the distinction between these two aspects apparent is in his use of lighting. The se-

quences in the early part of the film which address the question of the desire to avenge Jesse's death are predominantly shot in near darkness, the retreat to a world of shadow the more marked by the absence of any necessity for the dimness. The first of these involves Frank's nephew Clem (Jackie Cooper). In a domestic scene lit largely by firelight, Clem produces the gun that he has purchased so that he can accompany Frank on his quest. The most invidious aspect of the quest for revenge is its possession of the young, and although Frank takes the gun away, it is clear that Clem is already comprehensively seduced by the idea of tracking down the assassins. The second is Frank's visit to Major Cobb. When he becomes aware of Frank's proximity the Major turns down the larger oil lamp in his office, but once Frank is inside and the blinds are safely drawn he does not turn it up again, so that the conversation about the hunting of the Fords takes place in the gloom, a mode con-

tinued in the next two sequences: Frank's visit to Jesse's grave and his robbery of the express office. The robbery sequence also confirms two other dark aspects of the quest, both that Clem's involvement is unstoppable and that the violence unleashed by the pursuit of revenge is not containable, but random and deadly; the watchman Wilson (Louis Mason) dies when he is hit by a stray bullet.

A further way of reading these sequences is in terms of relations between fathers and sons. In his attempt to control Clem we see Frank in the role of good father, and the scene is bracketed by other assertions of authority, namely Frank's two attempts to make his black farmhand Pinky Washington (Ernest Whitman) call him by his assumed rather than his real name. All these acts are ineffective: Clem cannot be diverted from his purpose, and Pinky turns his failure to remember Frank's new name into a joke, a little chant at the dinner table. Alongside this is placed a father/son relationship that expresses commitment to the past: Frank in the role of son, encouraged by the father-figure Major Cobb to pursue the course of revenge.

It is at this point that the possibilities of return for Frank outlined above take on a paradoxical quality. In order to free himself from his past he must establish a new identity, and dispose of his old one by asserting that Frank James is dead. Yet this transformation also becomes a device in his pursuit of vengeance, as he believes that reports of his death will cause the Fords to expose themselves to view. On the porch of a Denver hotel, in front of a mixed audience of Western veterans and Denver businessmen Frank and Clem act out a little charade in which Clem excitedly tells 'Mr Woodson'

[Frank's alias] a tale of the West, the death of Frank James down in Old Mexico.

But Lang shows us that the world that we presume to shape can unravel in unexpected ways. Passing into the hotel (not an old-fashioned saloon but emphatically an interior from the new, modernising West) the couple find themselves telling the story again, this time to a pretty young woman, Eleanor Stone (Gene Tierney). Eleanor's structural position in the film becomes clear as the scene proceeds and Lang shows us Frank's response to her. Even at this point we identify her as the woman who is capable of civilising the wandering male, whose marriage to the hero will be stated or implied by the end of the movie. But this broad perception is complicated in several respects. Like this Denver interior, the civilisation Eleanor represents is not that of the Old West but specifically modern. She is a female reporter (an image of American change dating back at least to the writing of Henry James), and the tide of social transformation of which she is a part is underlined by the dialogue between her and Frank about the roles of women, and even a mention of 'newfangled shorthand'. She is also presented as a figure of extreme youth, not so much an established professional as almost childlike, a quality made explicit in her entranced responses to Clem's rendition of the story, which now becomes a stirring melodrama, involving a stage villain and the protection of a little girl. Tierney's performance (this was her first screen appearance) can be seen as deliberately exploiting the qualities of innocence, trust and promise that had prompted Columbia to put her under contract in 1939. Harry Cohn had described Tierney as 'another Deanna Durbin, except that she can't sing', but the studio did not find a satisfactory vehicle for her (Tierney 1980: 25).

Perhaps Lang is suggesting that Frank can achieve his return to mainstream society only by attaching himself to a woman who is of a distinctly younger generation, one for whom Frank James, alive or dead, is already history. As Clem concludes, Eleanor treats the story as a monument to a past era, commenting that 'he and his brother must have been wonderfully colorful characters'. The movement from the first to the second telling of the story can be seen as a shift from tradition (oral anecdote) to modernity (writing up Western legends for publication, to be 'telegraphed all over the country'). As a final way of defining the place of such material in the new West, Lang adds a short sequence at the Stone dinner table, where the paper that contains the news of Frank's death is now part of the apparatus of an elaborately appointed bourgeois home.

Against this development Lang immediately poses another, older appropriation of Western legend, the theatrical performance. Clem and Frank enter a frontier town in which the Fords are performing as themselves in 'The Death of Jesse James'. Like Clem's earlier story, this show is a melodrama involving an imperiled woman, but now commercial considerations require that the heroine is Nellie Blane (Barbara Pepper), 'the most beautiful woman in the West'. Frank tells Clem he is going 'to scare 'em to death' and at the climax of the drama rises like a nemesis to face the Fords. It is only the performance that ends, however: Bob Ford (John Carradine) hurls an oil lamp at Frank, setting the theatre on fire, and in the resulting confusion makes his escape. A gunbattle follows, during which Charlie Ford (Charles Tannen) falls to his death.

Throughout these sequences Frank spits: once as he walks past the poster for the performance, once in the theatre, once during the chase and again in the final pursuit of Charlie. Is Lang intending to suggest that the killing of the Fords is something Frank would like to rid himself of, as intimate and as inescapable as a bad taste in the mouth? The nature of the gesture also raises a question about the degree of self-consciousness of the figure making it. Perhaps Lang is also hinting at the possibility that Frank is not entirely aware of what he is expressing.[2]

Shortly after this, a pair of sequences present Frank with opportunities for making a moral choice. In the first, which takes place in Denver, Frank learns from Eleanor that Pinky has been arrested and is shortly to be hanged, even though he is, as Frank puts it, 'as innocent as you are'. Eleanor asks 'Is it more important for you to kill a man than to save the life of an innocent one?' and Frank's response is to leave with Clem in pursuit of Bob Ford. In the second sequence, which echoes the first meal in the film shared by Frank and Clem, Frank abandons the hunt for Ford in favour of returning to save Pinky, in the face of furious opposition from Clem.

Two aspects of this decision are significant. First, there is the invoking of a benevolent paternalism – in rescuing Pinky, Frank is acting in accordance with an old-fashioned stereotype, that of the good Southern master in the role of father, conscious that in this society a black farmhand is easy to victimise. Second, his decision does not result from pressure exerted by Eleanor. Her belief in the moral clarity of the issue is based on her lack of any imaginative purchase on the importance that the pursuit of vengeance has for Frank, a lack which is, fittingly, part of her appeal for him. These aspects are underlined through Clem's two responses to the decision. The first is the racist slur that expresses his distance from Frank's paternalism: 'After all our work are we going to give up on account of a darky?'. The second emerges when Clem, claiming that Frank is responding to Eleanor's fear for his safety, enacts this fantasy in a crude imitation of her. That this is indeed a childish, hysterical reaction to Eleanor seems to be confirmed when Frank slaps Clem. Later there will be two further occasions when Eleanor's lack of influence over Frank is at issue. One is a conversation between Eleanor and Major Cobb, the other an exchange where Clem repeats his view of Frank to Eleanor in terms which again insist on it as an adolescent fantasy. It seems that Lang wants to emphasise for us the unimportance of Eleanor's views to Frank, so as to mark his actions as not determined by any firm belief in their future together.

Both the Denver and the meal sequences take place at night, and from this darkness, Frank rides into the light, though still accompanied by Clem. It is evident that Frank thinks of himself as morally cleansed, leaving payment – 'we're honest men' – when he swaps horses, but the film does not quite support this. When he tries to pay for a buggy to take him on the next stage of the journey, the gesture is reprised as comedy when he turns out to have paid the wrong man.

The final act of James outlawry is bringing a mail train to a halt so that Frank and Clem can ride to Kansas City on it. It is the film's last scene at night, and an obvious parallel to the robbery of the express office. The sequence is a reminder that outward signs of menace can mask very different motives (this time, Frank is on a mission to save a life), revealing 'the problematic character of any single perspective on the action', as George Wilson has argued in the case of *You Only Live Once* (1986: 17). The confusion may extend further than appearances: perhaps Frank and Clem do not quite know themselves whether they are honest men or not. The role of the station agent is played by a harmless, comedic figure (Eddie Collins), nobody is hurt and arguably some excitement has been brought into a dull life. On the other hand, guns are drawn, and there is an awareness of danger, accompanied by the puffs of smoke which Lang often uses to suggest threat.

A suggestive piece of imagery occurs here, in the film's final use of a familiar prop, the oil lamp. Previously Lang has shown us lamps being extinguished in order to conceal Frank, or hurled at his person in anger and defiance. Here the agent's swinging the lamp in order to stop the train speaks of order and control, a communication received and understood. Darkness has dominated much of the film thus far, but on this final night Lang for the first time uses light as a medium through which meaning is transmitted.

Much of the rest of the film is taken up by a courtroom sequence in which Frank is tried and acquitted. (The film is entirely uninterested in following the fate of Pinky, and he disappears after Frank's arrival in Liberty.) In this sequence the propriety of the legal process is at risk, at times overwhelmed by the history of this Southern community and its role in the civil war, and by the conflict between farmers and railroad owners. A public occasion is rendered progressively less so, through the invocation of personal histories, friendships and loyalties. This sequence can also be read as one in which the controlling energies spring from father figures: from Major Cobb (who is Frank's defence attorney), and from Southern relics like Colonel Jackson (Edward McWade). The climax of the trial makes the subject of father/son inheritance and phallic potency almost outrageously explicit, with Major Cobb giving a potted history of Frank's revolver – 'I gave him this gun' – climaxing in the 'accidental' firing of the weapon in the courtroom.

Frank's own role in his acquittal is much less important than the received accounts of the life of Frank James. The verdict simply expresses the jury's assertion that the figure they call Frank James is their property, just as Bob Ford represents their disavowed other: this is the community that inscribed the gravestone to Jesse. But while the outcome of the trial is welcome in one sense, it represents not a break from the past but an insistence on its dominance. Unsurprisingly, Frank shows by his intention to pursue Ford immediately that his obsession with revenge is as keen as ever.

The film now has only eight minutes to run. The vengeance plot collapses with a fatal exchange of fire between the two figures most irretrievably committed to the roles of hunter and hunted: Clem and Bob Ford. We see Clem's death and the final scene between Frank and Ford, in which Frank pursues the already mortally wounded man through a livery stable only to find when he catches up with

The Trial

him that he is speaking to a dead body. This moment is offered as a ritual through which Frank can free himself of the obsession with revenge by addressing the dead: 'that's the other one, Jesse'. After this consummation, the film can close with a leave-taking between Frank and Eleanor in which he ambiguously suggests that he will possibly come to Denver for her. Is this a happy ending? Discussing the nature of such endings in Hollywood film, Lang was to describe them as: 'Boy will get girl, the villain will get his just deserts, dreams will come true as though at the touch of a wand' (1948: 27), so this barely fits his definition.

What we have seen on the screen is largely a world locked into the past. I have argued that Frank's acquittal has little to do with his present self. It is a by-product of a community still rehashing its part in the American Civil War, a victory of one group of old men over another. Far from freeing Frank from the role of Frank James, this is actually a way of further imposing it upon him. Clem's

The Old West - the town of Liberty

The Modernising West - the city of Denver

death is the ultimate expression of the deadliness of the idea of the glory of gunfighting as well as demonstrating Frank's failure in his role as father to this boy. After the death of Bob Ford, Lang cuts directly to an image expressing the unchanging nature of the West: Major Cobb and one of his familiar editorials about shooting the opposition down like dogs.

While Frank and Eleanor stand as an intimation of the future, the focus is less on the redeeming quality of the couple and more on their limitations. Nothing in the presentation of Eleanor is allowed to suggest that her youth and innocence are disturbed, that she is affected by the darkness of these events. Tierney's performance was felt at the time to be unimpressive, but I suggest that this may only reflect the nature of the role as Lang chose to direct it. Equally, no part of the treatment of Frank suggests that he is now in a position to become a part of the changing America represented by Eleanor. What might he be, or do? His life seems to consist of a series of dramas in which he is trapped in the role of Frank James, and manipulated accordingly.

Lang carefully positions this film's 'happy ending' through his treatment of the couple's final scene together, in which both actors express their feelings with diffidence. The impression is that they are mutually sexually attracted but have no way of pursuing this beyond indicating that they hope to meet again. Lang also reverses a conventional pattern in having the man of the couple remain static while the woman walks away.

An instructive point of comparison here is with Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946). Again the ending sees the couple Clementine Carter (Cathy Downs), and Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) part, but the promise of the future is felt differently. The woman remains fixed, attached to a point that can be returned to ('I'm the new schoolmarm'), and Wyatt Earp, far from being trapped by his own history or the opinions of his father's generation, is able to give a specific account of his future (seeing his father, buying cattle, returning to 'stop by the schoolhouse' where Clementine is to be found). In contrast Frank's closing verbal gesture is to look directly at Eleanor and tell her that 'There's lots I like about Denver'. The coy deflection of the desire for the woman onto the liking for the place expresses the problem. Frank senses that the two are linked by representing the kind of modernity which could offer him a new life, but cannot make himself, or us, believe that he can bring this about.

It is worth considering this ending alongside *You Only Live Once*, in which George Wilson argues that Eddie's dying vision (of reconciliation in heaven) 'may be genuine or [it] may be horribly false' (1986: 37). Obviously the vision in *The Return of Frank James* concerns a more terrestrial happiness than Eddie's, but we equally cannot know that it is a real possibility. Nothing can ameliorate the failure to save Clem, who could have been a figure holding the promise of a differently imagined future; in terms of age he might have been an equally appropriate partner for Eleanor. Lang's image of the West is one of a world poised between a bloody past and an inaccessible future.

A commonplace used with precision closes the film. In the last shot Eleanor disappears from view, and Lang moves his camera slightly to frame a final image, expressive of an ambiguous, gradual change. It is another wanted poster, echoing the one that opened the movie announcing the fate of Jesse James. Here the poster is slightly different, referring to both brothers. It is older and disintegrating slowly into tatters. It is neither torn down by hand, nor plastered over with a new litany of villainy or seduction.

Rather, in the last few frames of the film the strip containing the brothers' names pulls away in the breeze, exposing the blank wall. Possibly Lang's point is that some aspects of change are beyond human agency, subject to where the wind blows.

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I would like to thank Kirsty Dootson; the materials in the footnotes were a by-product of her research for her forthcoming thesis on Lang's Westerns.

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[1] The notes of a conference with Zanuck held on 6 December 1939 reviewing 'the treatment by Sam Hellman. Based on a story pattern by Nunnally Johnson of 2.DEC.1939' reveal that Zanuck had wanted the shot of the tombstone inserted. The opening sequence would have run as follows: an opening shot of a reward poster, the shooting of Jesse, a shot of the tombstone and then a newspaper with a headline announcing the killing of Jesse and the search for his murderers. (These papers are held in the Twentieth Century Fox collection, Doheny Memorial Library, University of Southern California).

[2] A letter from Kenneth MacGowan (the film's producer) to Lang dated 13 May 1940 comments on the excessiveness of the spitting. MacGowan noted that Zanuck 'found the chase exciting, the photography fine (although he observed that your kodachrome was better in colour), he thought that the dialogue scenes were excellently directed and acted and spoke about what a lot of work you had accomplished. Koenig has told you, I am sure, about having Frank spit and chew about half as much as he has been doing, and also about thinning the moustache a little and eliminating it in the trial sequence.' (The letter is held in the Fritz Lang Collection, Doheny Memorial Library, University of Southern California.)