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Even the Good Guys Are Bad in *Sin City*

**by
Melanie Woods**

Honorable Mention

2007 Joyce Durham Essay Contest in Women's and Gender Studies

Even the Good Guys are Bad in Sin City

Murder, abuse, rape, pedophilia, prostitution and cannibalism. These are just some of the many typical themes in horror movies today. “Sin City” is no different. Written and directed by Frank Miller, “Sin City” takes on a new level of terror, masquerading itself not only under the guise of a graphic novel, but also as a cinematographic piece of art – the film is shot entirely in black and white with only one or two objects in color in each scene. In analyzing this movie from a feminist standpoint, the list of things to critique goes on quite a bit. Therefore, this essay will only focus on one of these issues: the dichotomy of good guys versus bad guys and how they are not that different.

“Sin City,” based on Miller’s graphic novels, follows three interconnected storylines of heroes, villains and the women they lust after. The first hero we meet is Hartigan, a past-his-prime cop who is on the verge of retiring. His last job is to save a little girl, 11-year-old Nancy Callahan, from Roark Jr., a pedophile who rapes, tortures and kills his young victims. Roark also happens to be the son of a senator and nephew of a powerful cardinal. Hartigan saves Nancy by shooting Roark in the ear, hand and penis. He is shot himself, however, and later put in jail by Senator Roark. Hartigan spends eight years incarcerated, with Nancy’s letters being the only thing that keeps him going. When her letters stop coming, he confesses to raping Nancy, even though he did not, so he can get out and rescue her once more. After a series of car chases and fights, Hartigan and Roark are back where they started – guns drawn, fighting for Nancy. In the end, Hartigan

kills Roark and he and Nancy confess their love for each other before he lets her go and kills himself.

Our second hero is Marv, a superhuman of sorts that is extremely hard to kill and has a deformed appearance. Marv sleeps with Goldie, unaware that she is actually a prostitute. He falls in love with her immediately, calling her “the perfect woman. The goddess.” Marv wakes up to find Goldie murdered. He vows to avenge her death and kills the cops who show up to falsely arrest him for her murder. Marv works his way around the streets of Sin City, killing anyone and everyone who had something to do with her death. His search leads him to the Roark family farm and Kevin, a serial killer who eats his victims’ bodies and saves their heads on a wall like trophies. Marv ends up killing Kevin and Cardinal Roark, who encouraged Kevin’s behavior as he was ridding Sin City of all the “whores.” Marv is executed in the electric chair as punishment. While avenging Goldie’s death, Marv also meets her twin sister Wendy, eventually falling in love with her as well.

The final hero in “Sin City” is Dwight McCarthy, a private investigator who has a soft spot for prostitutes. He is at Shellie’s apartment, a waitress at the local strip joint, when her abusive, alcoholic ex-boyfriend Jack and his friends come over. Jack hits Shellie and Dwight fights him and makes him leave. Seeing that Jack is dangerous, Dwight follows him to Old Town, the red light district of Sin City where the cops stay out and the prostitutes enforce the law. After Jack harasses a young prostitute, he and his friends are killed by Miho, a prostitute. Dwight finds a police badge in Jack’s coat and the girls realize they have violated the truce they have with the cops. Dwight agrees to dump the bodies, but the cops are tipped off about the murders and the girls fear that

things will go back to the way they used to be with “the pimps, the beatings, the drugs, the rapes.” A plan is formed and the trap is set for the prostitutes to kill all the cops involved. The girls are victorious and life in Old Town remains as it was, with Dwight being the new hero.

Incorporated into each of these stories is the dichotomy of good versus evil. In each case, there is a hero – Hartigan, Marv and Dwight – and a villain – Roark, Kevin and Jack. There is also the woman they are fighting over– Nancy, Goldie and Shellie and the Old Town prostitutes. The good guys are portrayed as different from the bad guys, better than them, the people we are rooting for. The bad guys kill women while the good guys protect and save them. The heroes and villains are portrayed as two separate identities that do not overlap. This is not the case, however. In reality, the good guys are not all that different from the men they battle. In fact, each share certain characteristics with their enemy; these similarities are downplayed to the audience, giving them someone to cheer for, someone to align themselves with and relate to. These three relationships can be broken down to reveal a disturbing truth – that even the good guys are bad in Sin City.

The first dichotomy is Hartigan versus Roark. Hartigan is a hero cop, with scars on his face to prove it. He is strong and takes down two of Roark’s wingmen with a single punch each. Hartigan is prepared to take down Roark regardless of who his father is and what the ramifications are. He is a hero’s hero. Roark, on the other hand, has a taste for young girls and thinks he is invincible because of his family. He coaxes young Nancy, telling her that she has “nothing to be scared of” and that all they are going to do is talk. In this opening scene, the audience gravitates toward Hartigan, rooting for the old cop to

nab this one last criminal. Who wants to see a little girl get raped anyway? After Hartigan shoots Roark and is shot himself, Nancy lays in his lap while he strokes her hair. He calls her baby and soothes her, quickly establishing a father-figure role. Later, Nancy visits him in the hospital and tells him that she loves him and will write every day. As she leaves, Hartigan says, “She’s the only friend I’ve got. The daughter I never had. Skinny little Nancy Callahan.” Here Hartigan views himself as her father, but focuses on the shape of her body, similar to how a pedophile, say Roark for instance, would think.

After Hartigan leaves the prison, he finds Nancy on stage at a strip bar, twirling a lasso and dancing in front of several men. He says, “Skinny little Nancy Callahan, she grew up. She filled out.” Again, he references her body, this time in a more obvious sexual manner. Nancy is 19 now, but is still several years younger than Hartigan. Upon spotting him in the bar, Nancy jumps off stage, hugs him and kisses him. She says she loves him and while he acts surprised, he says he loves her too. They get a hotel room and she comes on to him, trying to get him to sleep with her. He doesn’t stop her at first, but then says, “For God’s sake, you’re just a kid.” He pushes her away and tells her that he loves her. Viewers rest easy knowing that their hero is not a pedophile, rather a true father figure to skinny little Nancy. The next scene erases any doubt in the keen mind, however, that Hartigan does indeed have pedophile tendencies: he is in the bathroom and tells us “cold shower. It helps.” In putting the pieces together, it is understood that Hartigan was turned on by the teenaged Nancy but controlled his urges by cooling off. The average viewer might not make the connection, but it is clear that Hartigan wanted to have sex with the much younger Nancy.

As the movie continues, Roark kidnaps Nancy once more. He takes her back to the family farm and starts torturing her with a whip. He notes that she is “a little old for [his] taste,” reminding viewers that *he* is the evil pedophile. Hartigan comes to save the day again and kills Roark, taking away “his weapon” by ripping out Roark’s testicles and penis then repeatedly bashing his head in. Hartigan has defeated the pedophile and walks away with his barely legal lover.

It is clear that the villain in this storyline is a pedophile. What is not so obvious is that Hartigan himself possesses several of the same characteristics. He falls in love with the 8-year-old version of skinny little Nancy while in jail, a love which is only reinforced when he realizes that she has grown curves with age. His pedophilia is accepted, or rather ignored, by viewers because he controls his sexual urges and acts as the hero, the good guy, compared to Roark who actually fulfills his desires to be with little girls.

Similar to Hartigan and Roark, Marv and Kevin are almost one in the same. Marv does not have the physical characteristics of a regular man and appears to have superhero-like abilities: he is immensely strong and does not die after being shot several times. Kevin is not fully human either. He is portrayed like a cat, moving quickly without making a sound, jumping out of windows and landing on his feet, and having claws instead of nails. He wears opalescent goggles and we never fully see his face until the moment he dies. Both Marv and Kevin are portrayed as monsters of some sort, but they differ in how they use their appearances – Kevin for the purposes of sneaking up on whores and killing them, Marv for protecting whores and roughing up the bad guys who prey on them. Also, Kevin is a serial killer; by the end of the movie, he has killed seven prostitutes and started eating another woman, a parole officer. Marv racks up a body

count of his own, but his killing is viewed as more acceptable because he is murdering the bad guys and avenging Goldie's death by "killing [his] way to the truth." He even admits that he has a condition and gets confused sometimes. Marv thinks to himself, "What if I've imagined all this? What if I've finally turned into what they've always said I would turn into? A maniac. A psycho killer."

There is no denying that Marv is a dangerous, possibly evil, person. Yet viewers are still steered toward regarding him as the protector and Kevin as the wicked cannibal. Marv doesn't hit girls, rather he defends them. When Marv visits Nancy, we learn that he once saved her from a frat boy who roughened her up. He says that "it really gets my goat when guys rough up dames." It gets his goat so much that later in the movie when he punches Wendy, viewers don't think twice about the implications of his behavior. He has Kevin tied up to a tree and is about to administer his death when Wendy walks up. She wants to watch him die, but Marv knocks her out and says that he can't let her see the kind of torture he is about to perform. This action is brushed off because he is hurting her to *protect* her, unlike the serial killers and madmen that beat women out of pleasure or rage. Marv is not the psycho killer that Kevin is; he only hits women when he has to. Yet no where is it recognized that this type of behavior could eventually lead to harming women just to harm them. Marv sees in himself the possibility that he is a serial killer, but only in reference to the thugs and criminals he has murdered. What about the issue of him acting out in anger or rage against women one day? This notion is alluded to, but mainly ignored as our hero succeeds in getting even for the death of Goldie, the perfect woman, the goddess.

The third dichotomy is that between Dwight and Jack. This parallel is not as obvious as the other two, but is important to recognize, nonetheless. When Jack enters the movie, he is pounding on Shellie's door yelling for her to let him in. She reveals to viewers that he is married, an alcoholic and beats up on her "to feel like a man." He threatens to kick down the door if she doesn't let him in. On the other side, Dwight is telling Shellie to let Jack in so he can take care of him. Shellie ends up letting Jack in, who recognizes that another man was there and is extremely angry. He tells his friends that he has "never hit a woman in my life" then slugs Shellie. After that, Jack goes to the restroom and is surprised by Dwight, who introduces himself, saying, "I'm Shellie's new boyfriend and I'm out of my mind." He then shoves Jack's head into the soiled toilet bowl. Dwight tells Jack to leave and he and his friends do, heading off to Old Town to finish their night. Dwight has successfully protected Shellie and the bad guy got away, but not without learning a lesson. Dwight's admission of being crazy is downplayed, however, and Shellie is never aware of the potential danger she is in just being with him. If Dwight is out of his mind, how can Shellie ever feel safe? Ever be sure that he won't turn on her? We can see what Jack's behavior is, but Dwight is still a mystery, a loose cannon waiting to fire. Just like with Marv, there is no mention of how his behavior could turn against the very woman he protects.

Regardless, Dwight is the good guy in this tale so he follows Jack and his buddies after they leave Shellie's, fearing that they are out for blood tonight. It is after Jack is murdered that Dwight figures out who he really is: "Iron Jack the papers call him. A god dam hero cop." It is here that Dwight realizes he has to dump the bodies so that the truce between the cops and prostitutes will remain in tact. On his way to discarding the bodies,

Dwight starts hallucinating and has a conversation with Jack, who he fully recognizes is dead. Similar to Dwight, Jack has a split personality; by day he is the local hero cop, by night the cheating, abusive drunk. On the other hand, Dwight is also the hero, knight in shining armor by day, but a crazy, delusional killer by night. It is this parallel that is most important to note. It's as if each man is portraying opposite sides of the same person; Dwight is showing us Jack the hero cop while Jack is showing us what Dwight is capable of: uncontrollable anger and craze. Again, the realization that our hero, the good guy, could ever become bad is completely ignored.

In looking at these three stories as a whole, a depressing picture emerges for the women of Sin City, and ultimately, women in the real world. Their options for a hero are a pedophile, a psychotic killer and a lunatic. Almost makes a girl want to take her chances with the bad guy. "Sin City" fails to recognize that these traits, the bad sides of the heroes, might ever come out and turn the heroes against their women. That Hartigan might act on his impulses and have sex with someone even younger than Nancy. That Marv might unleash his psychotic killer tendencies on women, which was briefly played out when he slapped Wendy. Or that Dwight might act under his delusional craze and harm one of the prostitutes he works so hard to protect. We are led to believe that each of these "good guys" can control their rage, acting out only when confronting a bad guy, yet never once laying a hand on a woman – unless they have to of course.

The girls of Sin City walk away happy, safe and rescued while the bad guys get what they deserve – death. Justice has been served and the audience can relax. But the real issue, the real message, is completely missed. And that is what happens next. These girls go home with men who have played the hero role and killed several people in the

process. But what happens when the good guys' darker side comes out? And it will come out eventually. "Sin City" leads viewers to think that good guy and bad guy are separate identities and that women will be fine as long as they have a good guy on their side. But what do women do when they realize that even the good guys are bad?

Works Cited

Miller, Frank, dir. *Sin City*. Troublemaker Studios, 2005