Chapter 8

The Melancholy Couple in Winchester ’73

Peter Falconer

A moment toward the end of Winchester ’73 (Anthony Mann, 1950) succinctly expresses the suitability of Lin McAdam (James Stewart) and Lola Manners (Shelley Winters) as an eventual couple. Lin is about to confront the maniacal bandit Waco Johnny Dean (Dan Duryea) in a saloon in the town of Tascosa. Lola has just warned Lin not to “quarrel” with Dean, and she grabs his arm and stops him for a moment before he can get away. What the audience might expect to follow would be Lola pleading more forcefully with Lin not to risk his life tangling with a psychopath. Instead, however, she offers tactical guidance: “Lin, watch his left hand.” Lin recognizes Lola’s gesture with a very slight smile.

This brief exchange shows that the two characters understand the situation, and their relation to it, in similar ways. The economy with which this understanding is communicated between them suggests that it forms part of a much wider shared conception of how the world works. The movie offers this worldview as a basis for the emerging romantic relationship between Lin and Lola. This relationship is not clearly established until they embrace at the end of the film (and even this affirmation is hardly emphatic), but the audience has been subtly prepared for it. The type of attitude or perspective that the two characters have in common can be described as melancholy. It is useful and interesting to think about Lin and Lola in terms of melancholy; this
is relevant not only to their construction as a couple but also to the movie’s broader engagement with its genre and its audience.

In his influential article on the Western genre, Robert Warshow argues that the “melancholy” that he ascribes to the figure of the Western hero “comes from the ‘simple’ recognition that life is unavoidably serious” (1954, 107). Many Westerns ask for a similar recognition from their audiences. Jane Tompkins claims, “One of the hallmarks of the genre is an almost desperate earnestness” (1992, 11), an insistence on the painful seriousness of physical existence. It is this tone that gives the action in many Westerns its significance, and, in order to recognize this, an audience must first be persuaded to accept the seriousness of the world that an individual Western depicts.

A common strategy is to portray the world as inherently violent. This allows the violence of the hero to emerge as a natural response to the conditions in which he finds himself. It becomes part of what connects the character to the setting, making him the “right” man for his milieu. Warshow makes reference to the classic, almost clichéd scenario (dating back at least as far as Wister’s *The Virginian*, and the source of the expectations surrounding Lola’s behavior in the example above) in which the heroine unsuccessfully objects to the hero’s pursuit of violence:

If there is a woman he loves, she is usually unable to understand his motives; she is against killing and being killed, and he finds it impossible to explain to her that there is no point in being “against” these things: they belong to the world.

(1954, 107)

Warshow’s contention that death and violence “belong to the world” of the genre is a premise that Westerns often ask their audiences to accept. In the fictional worlds of many Westerns, violence is inevitable. It can be controlled or confronted, but it cannot be escaped.

The Westerns of Anthony Mann develop this tendency within the genre. The West that Mann presents is a tragic one, characterized by fatalism, cruel irony, and inevitable violent reckoning. As critics like Jim Kitses (1969, 77) have pointed out, Mann’s movies are strongly influenced by classical and Shakespearean tragedy. Mann’s approach is exemplified in another scene from *Winchester ’73*. A cavalry unit has survived an Indian attack with the help of Lin McAdam and his friend High-Spade Frankie Wilson (Millard Mitchell). After the Indians have been repelled, the film dissolves to a shot of Lin’s rifle—the commemorative “one in a thousand” Winchester referred to in the