

## ***Logan* (2017) and the Lost Object of Masculinity, or the Trouble with *Shane*.**

### **Jon Mitchell**

James Mangold's 2017 film, *Logan*, offers up a future world in which the X-Men are no more. All that remains are a few old and ravaged mutants, including Logan and Xavier whose worsening dementia is having a catastrophic impact on his psychic abilities that is becoming increasingly dangerous for others. Both of these former X-Men become roped into assisting a group of synthetic mutant children as they run from those who attempt to subdue and destroy them. Principal among these children is X-23, Laura, who has been created from Logan's DNA. By staging this potential daughter along with a suggested queerness of the other mutant children the film seemingly offers up a critique of patriarchal ideologies often at the heart of the superhero genre. However, this article is concerned with the way the film intertextually references the 1953 western film, *Shane* which creates an ambivalence in the *Logan*'s meaning. The presence of *Shane*, the article argues, disturbs the surface gender critical storyline offering up instead the sense of a redemptive heroic masculinity that wrangles patriarchal ideology in through the backdoor.

Jon Mitchell is an Associate Professor of American Studies. He joined the School of American Studies at UEA in 2010. Jon's research interests include US masculinity and national identity in popular culture; gender theory; queer theory; US literature and culture of the 50s and 60s; psychoanalytic theory (Lacan and Zizek); narrative theory (narratology and post-narratology); 'Christian Identity' and fundamentalism; and methodology in American Studies

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*Logan* is a 2017 film directed by James Mangold and loosely based upon the 'Old Man Logan' series, itself an offshoot of Marvel's *X-Men* comic-book franchise. The Old-Man Logan comic-books deal with an alternative, post-apocalyptic universe where superheroes are no more, and control of the world is divided between a handful of supervillains. Though this is not dealt with in the film, the script maintains both this post-apocalyptic feel, and a sense of aging superheroes with Charles Xavier's deteriorating mind – an issue that has the potential for catastrophic violence due to Xavier's mutant powers – and Logan's deteriorating strength and ensuing impotence – most obviously hinted at by his failing claws at certain moments in the film.

Mangold has a history of making films depicting damaged or toxic masculinity. Typically, his focus is on its redemption through the taking of responsibility for self and others. This can be seen most prominently in both *Cop Land* (1997), and his 2007 remake of *3:10 To Yuma*. This theme is also central to *Logan*. The film's storyline concerns Logan's fading strength and his reluctant, yet inevitable, self-sacrificial assistance to Laura: a young female mutant with powers similar to his own. At the same time, for much of the film at least, he also continues to provide care for the ailing Xavier (former Professor X) who, because of the destructive potential of his deteriorating mind, has been declared a weapon of mass destruction. Laura, who, we later learn, has been replicated from Logan's DNA – and therefore becomes a daughter figure for him as the film develops – is one of many cloned mutant children who, discovering they were to be terminated, had escaped from the experimental facility of

Dr Rice, and are being hunted by Rice's number one, the cyborg Donald Pierce, and his posse of mercenaries, the Reavers. Laura's quest is to travel to North Dakota and join her former mutant inmates before they all make their escape to a new mutant community, aptly named Eden, believed to exist – the film suggests - in Canada. The knowledge of Eden comes from surviving *X-Men* comic-books detailing the past exploits of the heroic group. This metafictional touch allows the film, along with the physical failings of both Xavier and Logan, to seemingly critique the idea of superheroes, and especially the patriarchal underpinnings of a group such as the X-Men.

Though the film is set in 2029 and concerns a dystopian present and a potential redemptive future, running intertextually throughout *Logan* are references to the 1953 Western, *Shane*. However, rather than reading *Logan* as a contemporary Western or a re-working of the Western, by referencing the 1953 film, *Logan* engages a very particular understanding of the Western hero for very specific ends, and it is this specific use of this specific film that will be the focus of this discussion. *Shane*, as it will be shown, acts as both a counterpoint and a standard bearer for *Logan*: Mangold's film juxtaposes the tight schematic of the older film – the outsider gunslinger who saves the small farmer from external tyranny – with the dystopian life and seemingly hopeless quest that Logan has reluctantly engaged in.

This juxtaposition acts as the dynamic of *Logan*, yet the inclusion of *Shane* disrupts the surface narrative and renders a cohesive understanding of the film unstable.<sup>1</sup> On one level, *Logan* offers a dystopian narrative that seems to cynically critique the superhero film and especially its idealisation of masculinity in action. As a product of twenty-first century thought that works to appeal to twenty-first century sensibilities, *Logan* ambivalently tries to distance itself from the perceived toxicity of such masculine heroics through a complicated ideological dance of implied and direct critique. Nevertheless, though seeming to critique patriarchal ideology while flirting with a potential feminist/queer futurity as represented both by the focus upon Laura, and through the power and diversity of the other mutant children, *Logan* simultaneously undermines this position through its inclusion of *Shane* and the comparative it establishes between a perceived, if ultimately constructed, past and a dystopian present. Such a comparative sentimentally creates feelings of loss while simultaneously stimulating a desire for that which the film posits as both being a problematic and being lost: masculinity in action. This conflict is never fully resolved in the film, rather, *Logan* arguably instead tries to rescue masculinity from its worst criticisms, and if not find it a place amongst contemporary identity politics, then at least render it a benevolent ally.

References to *Shane* are woven throughout *Logan*, which pivots around this figure as a symbol of redemptive hope. Redemptive because the popular understanding of the cowboy in America is often as a figure of hope: he is the man standing apart from society, but always on hand to redeem the given community from whatever unwanted threat and maintain the status quo of the diegetic social order (i.e., to get the bad guys).<sup>2</sup> The cowboy figure – always-already a cultural kernel of the superhero – puts himself under erasure; his role is often to restore order in a society to which he cannot belong – an act that *Shane* clearly does, and that *Logan* eventually also does. However, the legacy of the cowboy is not just order, but also, moreover, myth: the myth of progress, of an 'egalitarian' society, and of the American male as a responsible, self-sacrificing hero, and the protector of others. In this way he is patriarchal, or at least paternal and represented as benevolently so.

The Western as a genre is, of course, much more complicated, and ideologically diverse than this generally accepted plot. So here a distinction is being made between Westerns in their individuality

from a more generalized Western plot – abundantly used in American popular culture of the twentieth century and beyond –with its simple schema of good heroic guys vs bad corrupt guys.<sup>3</sup> As noted, *Logan* seems to be doing something very specific with the Western, and the choice of this specific Western film is not without significance: why *Shane*, for instance, as opposed to any other Western?<sup>4</sup> Comparatively, *Shane* itself borrows the popular Western schema, and is closer to this general plot than other such films of the same period as *Red River* (1948), *Rio Grande* (1950), or *Vera Cruz* (1954) to name but a few. Further, *Shane* is politically liberal and represents a popular narrative of individualism fettered by tyranny at the heart of the general Western plot – a narrative seen in countless films and TV programmes. Overall, *Shane* codifies the popular image of the cowboy as hero that haunts the narrative of *Logan*, and, through nostalgia and sentimentality, anchors both character and film to a seemingly lost ideal of heroic masculinity.

Such sentimentality is located through the older film's narrative focalization. It is, for instance, partially through the eyes of the little boy, Joey, that we come to view Shane. Joey's age, and unquestioning adoration of Shane creates a sense of innocence. This allows for a filter through which male heroics can be sentimentalized, while the tension in *Shane* suggests the necessary eventual loss of this innocence as Joey ideally becomes, largely through Shane's sacrifice, a responsible man with strong values. In *Logan*, innocence seems to be already lost, or indeed was never there in the first place, and as with much in *Logan*, values, like innocence, are often evoked comparative to *Shane* through their absence as with Xavier's nostalgia for his lost youth, or Logan's cynicism. They are also, however, evoked through obfuscation as can be seen by the film's presentation of Laura.

Both films pivot in different ways around a child, but to what extent, for instance, should we read X-23, Laura, as a child, rather than as a genetic experiment – especially as the film does not lead us to the same or even similar sympathies with X-24? Nevertheless, only by obfuscating this and representing X-23 unquestionably as a child, as Laura an innocent in need of defending from Dr Rice – first by the nurse, mother-figure, then by the more successful Logan, father-figure – can the dynamics of the film as protective hero narrative actually work.<sup>5</sup> Just as Joey is used to evoke the innocence at stake in *Shane* to move the narrative from violence to responsibility, so similarly used is Laura in *Logan*.

While the older film bleeds into the newer film throughout, there are three significant scenes in which the ambivalence between twenty-first century political sensibilities and attempts to redeem masculinity play out that are worthy of comment. The first, and the key scene as it is the one in which we experience a direct contact with the older film, occurs in a hotel bedroom about a third of the way through.

After escaping their pursuers, Pierce and the Reavers, the protagonists find respite in an Oklahoma City hotel. Lying ill and largely immobilized, on the hotel bed, the one-time leader of the X-Men, Charles Xavier watches a TV showing scenes from a 1950s Western film in which the eponymous hero comes into town and helps a small farmer and his family hold their own against the big rancher. In the same room as Charles, though occupying his motorized wheelchair – upright and clearly more of an active presence – Laura also watches the film, though with a certain disinterest. It is from this detached perspective – whereby the young girl has literally, the film seems to suggest, usurped the former patriarch's place – that the scene is focalised. The popular Western plot as represented by *Shane* with its schema of American individualism and heroic masculinity is initially defamiliarized here and presented as anachronistic. Like both Logan's and Xavier's former monikers – Professor X and Wolverine – *Shane* is presented as a relic: an irrelevancy of the past. It is at this moment of

juxtaposition that Charles brings the film more to the fore of the scene while exposing the cultural lineage of the patriarchal dividend as with, melancholic significance, he reminisces on his childhood and the first time he watched the film. 'This film is a classic, Laura.' Xavier remembers with reverence. 'Almost a hundred years old now. I first saw it at the Essoldo in Dewsbury when I was your age.' (Logan, 2017).

This scene raises the sense of both a lost past and a patriarchal lineage showing how little boys learn to be men from the actions of older men, or more significantly the need for older men to pass on and thus maintain the legacies of patriarchy.<sup>6</sup> It also shows how often this learning comes from the hero worship of cultural (in this case, film) icons. Arguably, by staging Xavier together with the damaged female child, however, instead of the usual older/younger male coupling – as in *Shane* – the film seems to suggest, by its very absence, the highly schematic and most often exclusionary nature of masculine teaching: Xavier, the film seeks to firmly establish, is no longer Professor X, the benign paternal authority, but a destructive liability. Enfeebled and dying, he has nothing to teach Laura, nothing useful for her current predicament. He cannot teach her or protect her. He can only, the film suggests, get lost in his own impotent wistfulness. She, ultimately, as the film tries to show, has to find a way to help herself. Initially, at least, Logan and Xavier are much less her saviours and much more a means to an end even if, as his reminiscence suggests, Xavier might wish it to be different.

The inclusion of *Shane* in this scene, as popular cowboy hero, in one sense comparatively exposes the desperation of Laura's situation – her feelings of victimization by, on one hand individual males, such as Pierce and the Reavers, and on the other the more general patriarchal authority invested in Dr Price and the military-industrial society he represents.<sup>7</sup> Adding to this desperation is her frustrated dependence upon her supposed male protectors, which is furthered by Logan's own reluctance to play the hero role. Locked into feelings of impotent rage at his own rapid physical failings, Logan, as ever a reluctant hero, even mocks Laura for her unwitting faith in a future that is promised in a comic-book. 'This is "...all bullshit, right?" he exclaims decrying the comic-book "In the real-world people die! And no self-promoting asshole in a fucking leotard can stop it. This is just ice-cream for bedwetters..." (Logan, 2017).

Despite Logan's cynical outburst, *Shane* quietly continues playing contrapuntally to the scene. After being appeased by Xavier, Logan leaves Laura to play nurse to the older man, throwing the bottle of his pills to her with dosage directions.<sup>8</sup> He leaves just as the TV plays the emotionally charged ending of the film where *Shane* tells Joey Starrett why he cannot stay. Both Logan and *Shane* are affected by the violence in their past and they both leave, but in different ways and for different reasons. Coordinating this moment in such a way, *Logan* collapses these two scenes into each other and stages Logan, in his annoyed indifference, as the anti-*Shane* lost in the impotence of his own rage, rather than using his strength for others. Logan, the scene seeks to establish, clearly falls short of the ideal, and like Xavier is of questionable use to Laura.

Up to this point in the film's narrative, it is important to remember that Logan has become unwittingly caught up in Laura's plight: it is more situational than by choice. Logan's main concern has been protecting Xavier, and equally protecting others from Xavier's destructive capacity. Thus, the two characters are presented as old, incapable, and/or indifferent. The film suggests that neither Xavier nor Logan has anything relevant to teach Laura; it does, however, seemingly be trying to teach us about what Lauren Berlant calls 'Dead Citizenship.'<sup>9</sup> 'Dead Citizenship' for Berlant is "constitutional personhood in its public-sphere abstraction and supra-historicity, reproductive heterosexuality in the

zone of privacy.” (Berlant, 1997, p. 60). Logan’s cynical criticism of heroics, along with other markers of ageing, reluctance, and failure in the film up to this point, act as the antithesis of the classic Western, *Shane*. The scene seemingly speaks to a shift across the first half of the twenty-first century in identity politics predicated upon civil rights, feminist, and queer disassembling which works to unhinge the fixity (deadness) of an American citizenship grounded upon a romanticised patrilineal transfer of power from older to younger white males; fathers to sons; screen heroes to American males all wrapped up in the promotion of the heteronormative American family.

*Logan*, on the face of it, with its representations of degeneration and ageing is far removed in both tone and aspect from typical superhero movies, and what it seems to suggest instead is a critical position more in keeping with an idea like queer failure, as discussed by J Halberstam, that uses failure and the abject to question and/or deconstruct normative structures of power.<sup>10</sup> For example, the film seems to move away from the reproductive teleology of the heteronormative family, and suggests instead an alternative family: a child with two possible fathers, or at least a lineage that ends with a female rather than male benefactor. This is a family then with queer potentiality – flirted with earlier in the film during the humorous domestic spat between Logan and Caliban that somewhat parodically acted out the breadwinner/homemaker gender division.

Despite such flirtation, however, it remains questionable how far this critique of patriarchy, or the promotion of queerness goes. This evocation of the non-normative family, for instance, can also be read into the dystopian sense of the film. Just as Xavier’s mental failing, and Logan’s developing impotence produce feelings of degeneration, so this queerness can also be similarly read itself as degenerative – something wrong or out of place. The non-normative family can also be seen as an unwelcome dystopian construct, especially when equated with *Shane* and its strong representation of “reproductive heterosexuality in the zone of privacy”.

The 1950s film brings with it – deliberately or not – 1950s cultural baggage, and specifically the strong cultural panic over masculinity played out in the period whereby young boys were often considered, if not properly steered towards a very specific idea of male responsibility, to be in danger of becoming criminals, weak men, or homosexuals. Nevertheless, despite the inclusion of the older Western very strongly acting as a possible corrective to all that ails the present of *Logan* including this queer potentiality, like much else in *Logan*, an ambivalence remains in its representation.

We must, therefore, be careful with simply accepting the potential alterity *Logan* traffics in. Mary Poppins would have us understand that a ‘spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down’; yes, but as grown-ups, it is more often the bitterness of salt that helps us stomach the sweetness (Logan’s “ice-cream for bedwetters”). Logan’s salty cynicism undermines the heroic myth encapsulated by *Shane*, but it also seems to act as a rhetorical lubricant for accepting patriarchal ideologies at a distance. Does this cynicism, played comparatively against *Shane*, not create the conditions of possibility for the viewer to accept heroic masculinity as a melancholic lost object, one which we anticipate Logan will eventually resuscitate as he most often has done, despite his constant reluctance, in his previous outings? The film’s narrative is dependent on Laura’s need of him, and isn’t this need the very motivation which helps to redeem Logan from his apathy? By including *Shane* as both intertextual and diegetic references, doesn’t *Logan* encourage the viewer, primed by a long history of screen heroics, to yearn for Logan to take up the heroic position and bend to a perceived expectation of a ‘natural’ necessity, and identify as a father-protector to his daughter? Arguably, this very relationship is one *Logan* is at pains to establish, and it is difficult to understand the inclusion of *Shane* otherwise.

As a part of this ideological interplay between heroic masculinity and queer and/or alternative potentialities, during this hotel room scene *Shane* moves from the background and is elevated onto the same temporal plane as the events unfolding in *Logan*. This stages between all the characters, including Shane, a rather complex version of what Eve Sedgwick has called 'the erotic triangle,' that, to radically simplify Sedgwick's thesis "uses women as exchangeable, perhaps, symbolic, property [of men] for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men." (Sedgwick, 2015, pp. 25-6). It is, as Sedgwick claims, a power structure that allows for the promotion of homosocial bonding between men as a means of consolidating masculine privilege and power, while the trafficking in women both staves off the homoerotic or queer potentiality of the interaction, while drastically limiting female agency.<sup>11</sup> It is important, therefore, that not only is Laura read as a child, but it is also essential that she is both female and not fully in control of her powers as it is she who sits figuratively at the centre of the film's circulation of (masculine) power between men. That she is a young girl in need of both a protector and a benevolent mentor, rather than a woman, allows us to think of the erotic triangle here being less about the female as object of sexual desire, and more the object of paternal desire.

Up to this point in the film, the character's actions have mostly been reactive. This pause in the unfolding of the story, this scene with its sentimentality and its tensions seems to be the start of something, and taking the film at face value, it seems to champion female empowerment in that it is the start of Laura assuming control over herself and thus her destiny, which accounts for her (re)placement in Xavier's chair. Yes, but the inclusion of *Shane*, and the spectre of heroic masculinity that he evokes in contrast to Xavier's enfeeblement, and Logan's cynicism and reluctance offers a different understanding of the scene whereby Laura can be seen as being simply reduced to an object of male exchange. The events in this scene, the interplay between the characters, suggests the way patriarchal power, as benign protection – evoked by Shane – starts to be transferred from the older man, Xavier (former Professor X) through Laura's predicament onto the (relatively) younger man, Logan.

To push this reading a little further, an erotic triangle is also simultaneously present between *Logan*, the Western, and the gaze of the idealized male viewer.<sup>12</sup> The connection made between Logan's cynical criticism of heroics and the viewer - the labour of deconstructing masculinity, whilst clearly present, is always-already prevented from tipping over into its actualisation - the total repudiation of both the cowboy myth and its attendant ideals of masculinity - by the very simultaneous re-enactment (recentralisation) of masculinity as desire through the inclusion of the Western as diegetic and intertextual presence. *Shane* here, as previously mentioned, arguably acts as an agent correcting or policing the ideological critique raised by the film. Just as Sedgwick demonstrates how the inclusion of the female ensures the heteronormative reading of the homosocial, so *Shane* ensures a reading of masculinity in *Logan* as benevolent paternalism. Laura thus becomes the mask – the object that simultaneously sets in motion the very desire for the masculinity her presence in the film works to negate. Though seemingly central to the film's storyline, she can instead be read as merely an ideological device – a very well-wrought and extended McGuffin – side-lined through the use of *Shane* to what is arguably the film's central narrative concern: reinvigorating a heroic masculinity, and reincorporating a past patrilineage that was nostalgically introduced earlier in the scene by Xavier's reminiscence. In short, while the film is critical of the exclusions and entitlements of masculinity, the presence of *Shane* in *Logan* ostensibly re-invests what R. W. Connell has called hegemonic masculinity in the understanding of masculinity as a benevolent paternalism encapsulated in the image of the

responsible cowboy hero, and it does this during a time in which masculinity in public discussions was and still remains under intense scrutiny.

The notion of toxic masculinity became prevalent in the 2010s as a way to critique traditional male behaviours such as aggression, entitlement and excessive competition that worked to promote men and subjugate women. This critique reached a peak in the latter half of the decade with the #MeToo movement and the publicization of and moves to prosecute historic sexual harassment cases. The problematic origin of the term, however, and one that is more in keeping with Mangold's vision in *Logan* comes from the Mythopoetic Men's Movement of the 1980s which, despite its attempts to avoid misogyny, perceived a masculinity made toxic both by the excesses of late capitalism – long work hours, an alienation of man from nature, constant competition between men, a decline of patriarchal wisdom – and by feminist challenges to male filial and public structures. The Mythopoetic Men's Movement, borrowing from a selective understanding of western history, folklore, and Native American mythology, advocated an idea of the 'deep masculine.' This is a masculinity that was honourable and guided by responsible actions; the mythopoetic man honoured the past, followed the wisdom of patriarchal teachings, and acted as a responsible member of, and benevolent protector within his community. Mythopoetic men, observes Michael Kimmel, proclaim 'the unheralded goodness of the men who fight the fires and till the soil and nurture their families.' (Kimmel, 1995, pp. 366-7). Such viewpoints developed out of mid-twentieth century tensions in ideas of masculinity, and it is not difficult to notice the disdain for post-industrial America in favour of both an idealized and rather simplified traditional agrarianism, along with a notion of benign paternalism in the arguments of the Mythopoetic Men's Movement. Equally, it is not difficult to see how the inclusion of *Shane* incorporates both the mid-century tensions, and the very similar themes of responsible masculinity over mindless aggression, and the celebration of nature over science clearly at the heart of *Logan*.

Though not suggesting any direct links between Mangold and the Mythopoetic Men's Movement, it is interesting how his understanding and representation of masculinity in *Logan* – a masculinity not about individual competition and aggression, or selfish withdrawal, but about care, protection, leadership, and, when necessary, self-sacrifice – closely adheres to their beliefs. In interview, for instance, when asked about casting non-American actors for his *3:10 To Yuma*, Mangold responds:

[b]est guys for the roles. I didn't have an Affirmative Action program for American actors. You're making a Western and you need men of power and physicality, and who carry an innate masculinity, in order to be able to just step into this genre. To cast a couple of kids from Malibu who look awkward riding horses and make me think of Young Guns would be a disaster. (Esther, 2008)<sup>13</sup>

While there is much to unpack here about Mangold's gender assumptions, just to note how that idea of 'men of power and physicality' and that sense of 'innate masculinity' leans heavily on similar assumptions about the 'deep masculine' held by the Mythopoetic Men's Movement. "In Mangold's films, masculinity is not about being the strongest, or the fastest, or the bravest." Daniel Kinsley observes. "It is about finding one's self through action. It's about carrying on in the face of time, fear, hurt, loss. In short, it's about responsibility; choosing a moment to make a stand, and giving it everything you've got." (Kinsley). Indeed, Mangold has Logan limp and drag and bleed and force himself through a Western-style landscape scorched by the excesses of industrialization in order to make his final stand. Just like other Western heroes such as Marshal Will Kane in *High Noon* (1952), Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (1956), William Munny in *Unforgiven* (1992), or even the Waco Kid in *Blazing Saddles* (1974), Mangold has Logan brought back from impotence into action through the idea

that society (the mutant children and their futurity) has need of his paternal protection to oppose an external threat that only such a man can overcome.

On closer inspection Logan's cynicism arguably becomes less about undermining heroics per se, and more about entreating us to understand that the true heroes are not the 'super' ones with great powers – "the self-promoting asshole in a fucking leotard" – but the men who stand up and take responsibility often reluctantly or bitterly, but always regardless of the odds. It is a masculinity that is represented as self-effacing and sacrificial which can both be seen both *in* the film – Logan uses the last of his heroics to further diversity – and *as* film – we can enjoy a seemingly outmoded sense of masculine heroics quite nostalgically while championing the (masking) diversity that the film's storyline works to promote.

While this hotel room scene is the most significant as it is the one in which the two films directly interact, there are two other important scenes in *Logan* that borrow from *Shane*: the meeting with the Munson family; and the film's end scene. Before looking at the scene in which the protagonists are offered succour by the Munson family, however, the linking scene prior to it has some impact.

In his 1844 musings Nathaniel Hawthorne comments on his idyllic reflection on nature being interrupted by the whistle of the encroaching steam engine. (Marx, 1967, pp. 11-16). In *Logan* a reverse parallel of this machine-in-the-garden motif occurs when into the highway traffic through which they are driving a number of horses impede the protagonists' path. This synecdochal interruption then is similar to *Shane* playing in the background of the hotel scene. Symbols of the Western break into the contemporary narrative to haunt the film's storyline with hints of the mythic past. It also offers a structural segue to the Munson family scene, which is a pastiche of *Shane's* encounter with the Starrett family.

At the Munson family home, we discover that, similar to Joe Starrett's situation, Munson is being pressured out of his farm by a big corporation. Logan offers to help when the corporation's thugs break Munson's generator, and indeed Logan does help when he outmanoeuvres them. However, Logan's violent ways bring greater violence in his wake. Unlike the positive outcome in *Shane*, the presence of Logan's group brings the Pierce/Reavers posse close behind, which leads to the massacre of the entire family, along with Charles Xavier by another Wolverine Clone – X-24. The scene both continues to foreground Logan as saviour, but also importantly depicts him as a victim: someone who suffers a profound loss, for who does Logan mourn? Not the African-American family who have been ignominiously slaughtered, and whom the film largely, and seemingly quite quickly forgets, but the white patriarch whose loss is such a devastating blow to Logan – an emotional experience the viewer, via the focalization of the narrative through Logan's pain, is entreated to join in with. The scene further aids in the representation of the gradual rejuvenation of Logan's hero complex as he is motivated by righteous vengeance in order to honour his former friend and mentor, while committing to protect Laura and the other mutant children against an overwhelming enemy.

X-24 is the ultimate menace in the film, and that he is both a double of Logan, and a clone, like Laura is significant. X-24 underscores the way the film securely locates and quarantines toxic masculinity away from Logan. Instead of accepting the logic the scene again initially suggests – the toxicity of the white hero-saviour motif that had caused the visitation of such unnecessary destruction upon the Munson family – the film also uses these moments of death to distract from this critique by introducing a deadly foe who, along with Rice, Pierce and the Reavers, are the real perpetrators of



male violence as suggested by the film. The outcome of this is that the scene seems to become less a political statement about the destructive history of white violence in the US and the disenfranchisement of black lives, though it would appear that the film seeks to raise this issue, but a reiteration of the white avenger trope – familiar in other Westerns – and the demarcation of a strict binary between benevolent and destructive masculinity.<sup>14</sup> Overall, then when considering its function in the narrative, the scene seems to be little more than a way to brutally end Xavier's life – a step that, rather than simply undermining masculinity by questioning the patriarchal power that Xavier represented, instead seems to also invest that power in Logan and move him towards accepting his responsibility as heroic male.

Just as this film in its problematically brief handling of the Munson family murder arguably marginalizes race, its treatment of queerness, as already noted, is equally reductive. The mutants as in much of X-Men history arguably represent (a queer) diversity.<sup>15</sup> It is, however, significant that these mutant children, as briefly noted earlier, are not naturally recurring, but have, like Frankenstein's monster, been created in a lab. The children have potentially more in common with X-24 than with Logan or other X-Men mutants. It is around this that the film is the most ambivalent as it presents Dr Rice as both a bastardizer of nature – the logical extension of this is that the children with their mutations are degenerate: the product of Rice's attempts to pervert a 'natural order' – and also as the archetypal villainous patriarch threatening the innocence of the very same children, and thus the queer futurity they promise. Add to this the viewer's knowledge that this future is an uncertain one in the probably made-up and thus non-existent land of Eden, and we find again that the film vacillates around an idea of queerness that it cannot fully commit to or develop in any productive way. Indeed, as earlier discussed, close scrutiny shows that the film subtly undercuts the queer potential it stages. This ambivalence can only be redirected back to the Shane myth as the kids, despite their many powers, and a plot arc that seems to insist, despite the contrary evidence, that this is Laura's and their story, take a back seat to Logan's final stand. Ultimately, Logan's 'fraternal' fight with X-24 pits heroic masculinity and protective paternalism against toxic masculinity and self-serving patriarchal control.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the displays of masculine aggression and combat, it is Laura, in the end, who eventually stops X-24 due to Logan being terminally injured. This, like her occupancy of Xavier's chair in the earlier scene, again attempts to suggest the breaking of the patrilineage of dominant masculinity. This is arguably the film's firmest statement against male privilege in society. Nevertheless, she does so with an adamantium bullet – a bullet intended for Logan's own suicide – rather than using her own skill and strength as Logan has done. While the film champions her as the final destroyer of toxic masculinity, her kill can simultaneously be seen as less about claiming her own agency and more about underscoring Logan's physical self-sacrifice rather than his self-destruction. The bullet destroys not the hero's masculinity, which is secured by his sacrifice, but the toxic masculinity of the villain. Logan's death scene also shows Laura becoming a dutiful daughter weeping over her dead father who she has both reclaimed and redeemed. It is not insignificant that tearfully in this scene she calls him daddy for the first and only time, the infantile term evoking the very innocence connecting her back to Joey Starrett and the scene playing on the television in the earlier part of the film. This interpellation indicates that she finally accepts him as a paternal presence in her life. It also subtly affirms his role of hero-protector whose sacrifice has ensured the survival of her and her fellow mutants' future, subtly reinstating the reproductive teleology effaced earlier by the potentially queer family.

It is in this moment that Laura recites Shane's final words to Joey Starrett.

There's no living with a killing. There's no going back. Right or wrong, it's a brand. A brand that sticks. Now run on home to your mother, and tell her everything's alright. There's no more guns in the valley... (Logan, 2017)

Here she shows how she has internalized the message from the older film and uses it to eulogize Logan's life which again suggests the passing on of power to Laura: it is she, after all, who speaks Shane's words over Logan's grave. However, the film weirdly forces here a shifting between identities, an uncomfortable vacillation of allusions as Laura occupies the moral space of Shane, seemingly conferring on Logan the role of Joey Starrett, the innocent. The ambivalence that runs throughout the film is heightened in this scene – what is being suggested by equating Logan with Joey, the innocent who becomes a responsible man through the sacrifice of male heroism? Is innocence now dead also, or have sins been washed away by Logan's death? Is this the final deconstruction of the myth of heroic masculinity, and of exclusionary patrilineage through the transfer of agency to Laura, and to what extent is Laura now Shane, and what is the significance of this for her future? To what extent, instead, or even as well, is this the martyring of a benevolent paternalism and an unspoken questioning of the new alterity that has replaced it? The film doesn't answer the questions it poses in this moment, instead it seems to get mired in its own ambivalence leaving the viewer with a kind of postmodern uncertainty, and interpretative unease, but neither one of deliberate making. It is only Laura's display of grief for her dead 'father' that assuages the tension while also suggesting a more widespread mourning for the loss of this hero.

In this brief concluding scene, the film sees Laura and the others head into Canada in search of Eden. This trip north, of course, distances the children from the myth of the West, but the ending nevertheless sees her crossing a frontier and returning to the land of her father, but not before canonizing Logan's mythological connections to Shane, specifically, and the popular cowboy hero, more generally as Laura tilts the cross marking his grave into an X. Though Logan had always been reluctant, by doing this Laura claims him posthumously as one of the X-Men. The link established through this action between the Christian symbol of the cross and the X-Men arguably underscores the whole messianic self-sacrifice of the American male hero, thus reinscribing 'the man for others' idea shared by both Mangold and the Mythopoetic Men's Movement.

In conclusion, this exploration of *Logan* contends that the film, as discussed, has much ideological window dressing, and the inclusion of the popular idea of cowboy heroics as represented by diegetic and intertextual references to *Shane* engages a doubling of meaning in *Logan* revealing an alternative reading than the film seeks on the face of it to render. Indeed, the contention here has been that Laura's whole story, along with the deaths of the Munson family, and the queer flavouring of the mutants can easily be read as one continued McGuffin. The story that is arguably set in motion, seems to be one of redemption, or at least significant differentiation, of heroic masculinity from toxic masculinity. Overall, the intertextual and metafictional nature of the scenes herein discussed – the inclusion of *Shane* along with Logan's reluctance and cynicism predicated by the X-Men comics – works like an ideological turnstile that allows for the departure from the mythos underpinning American patriarchal systems while returning the viewer to a more acceptable understanding of patriarchy. The use of *Shane*, and the comics that Logan belittles act as objects of ideological exposure. They are held up as schematic fictions that *Logan* seems, on the face of it, to use to show how they fail to represent real conditions of existence. Simultaneously, they also act as a screen for the very heroic fantasies they suggest. *Logan* in one move enacts for both the film's protagonists, and the viewers, what Slavoj

Žižek calls fetishistic disavowal (I know very well.... but I pretend that this is not so) allowing the film, though not without ambivalence and tension to both represent itself as in keeping with twenty-first century gender/identity politics, while promoting an idea of benevolent paternalism and wrangling unquestioned patriarchal values through the backdoor.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course the extent of this depends on how much one knows and recognizes the old western.

<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Mitchell, *Revisions of the American Adam: Innocence, Identity and Masculinity in Twentieth Century America*. (London: Continuum, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> See Peter Homans, "The Western: The Legend and the Cardboard Hero" *Look*, March 13, 1962. "For each of us," Homans claims, "even the word "Western" brings to mind an ordered sequence of character, event and detail. There may, of course, be variations within the pattern – but the basic outline remains constant." However, see also Lee Clark Mitchell's *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Mitchell challenges Homans, but finds an obsession with masculinity a constant within the genre. Here, I claim that Mangold's incorporation of *Shane* evokes this popular understanding of the Western that Homans identifies, while Mangold's own interest in masculinity finds him emphasise this gender obsession in the genre that Mitchell observes.

<sup>4</sup> Another significant question: why incorporate a Western into this film at all?

<sup>5</sup> Very little sympathy or empathy for instance is given to X-24 who, like Laura, is also an experiment by Dr Rice. This is also shown in the naming. X-23 is given a name, Laura; X-24 retains his experimental de-humanized designation.

<sup>6</sup> This sense of patrilineal male initiation and its assumed importance to the 'healthy' development of boys into men has a long history in twentieth century America, and reaching back into the nineteenth century. It is a key tenet not only of the Mythopoetic Men's movement but also of the Promise Keepers both of which are two of the most popular and significant men's movements in the last forty-plus years.

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<sup>7</sup> Despite many incarnations of the cowboy hero from John Wayne's belligerent and despotic Tom Dunson through to Kieffer Sutherland's earnest Doc Holliday, I say popular because there are strong echoes of Owen Wister's Virginian in Shaeffler's *Shane*, and this sense of the Western hero supporting the everyday people against a hostile power has been both a recurring cultural trope in American culture as well as being the basis for US cold war foreign policy.

<sup>8</sup> Of course, we can over-egg the analysis and suggest how Logan in throwing the pills to Laura interpellates her into the feminine: he surrenders his engagement with the caring role and passes it on to the only present female. Remember the only other female in the film up to this point is the compassionate nurse who works to save Laura, but is ultimately too weak to do so. There is also a visual suggestion of binarized gender representations as the less canny and unfortunate Caliban who is presented as physically slighter and temperamentally gentler than Logan (he plays housewife to Logan's breadwinner at the film's start) is led first to his unwitting betrayal of Logan as he is used to track their escape and thus to his inevitable demise at the hands of Pierce and the Reavers. Further, Caliban's mutant ability as a tracker of other mutants connects him to the stock Western figure of the Indian. Thus, Caliban in the film loosely suggest a compound racialized and feminized other. Both Caliban and the female nurse represent a failed femininity against which Logan's, though reluctant, masculinity can be usefully foregrounded.

<sup>9</sup> Berlant uses 'dead' here as in, "dead metaphor" whereby, through repetition, "[t]he unlikeliness risked in the analogy the metaphor makes becomes so conventionalized as to no longer seem figural."

<sup>10</sup> See J. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*. (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011)

<sup>11</sup> For example, in the famous male-bonding scene between *Shane* and Joe Starrett as they hew out a tree stump, the interpersonal intimacy is being enacted between the two men, but the film stages their attraction to Marion Starrett so as to intervene in the viewers' recognition of this intimacy to re-order the scene by introducing the overlay of compulsory heterosexuality. The film underscores this by literally screening Marion – herself a character as 'lifeless' in terms of agency as the dead tree they work over – standing between the two men as a centralised focus for the viewer during this and similar other scenes throughout the film.

<sup>12</sup> See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). The scopophilic pleasure here, however, is upon masculinity, thus Laura as a female child in need is necessary to break the homoerotic potential in this visual pleasure; her inclusion turns the pleasure of looking at men, into the pleasure of protecting the, if not totally innocent, then those in need.

<sup>13</sup> There is a suggestion here of a failure of masculinity. See Jane Gilvary "Skinny Jeans, John Wayne, And The Feminization Of America." *The Bulletin*. August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010. In her piece she articulates what Mangold only seems to be suggesting here:

American men aren't men anymore because feminists have equated maleness with everything that's repugnant and have molded men to be more like women. Feminists have slayed the real man by suppressing his desires for adventure, beauty, and competition, his yearning for greatness and excitement. John Wayne once said, "I'm the stuff men are made of." America needs more John Waynes.

<sup>14</sup> *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, for instance, is a good example here, or more contemporaneously *The Revenant* Further, this trope of white saviourism has significant historical echoes of the avenging rescue scene in *Birth of a Nation* (1915) where the KKK subdue black insurrection.

<sup>15</sup> See for example: Neil Shyminsky, "Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants: Appropriation, Assimilation, and the X-Men" *The International Journal of Comic Art*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Fall 2006), 387 – 405; Michael J. Lecker, "Why Can't I Be Just Like Everyone Else?": A Queer Reading of the X-Men" *The International Journal of Comic Art*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (Spring 2007), 679 – 87; William Earnest, "Making Gay Sense of the X-Men" in *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics: Social Issues in Disguise*, ed. Barry Brummett (Los Angeles: sage, 2008), 215 – 232; Jason Zingsheim, "X-Men Evolution: Mutational Identity and Shifting Subjectivities" *Howard Journal of Communications*, Vol. 22 No. 3 (2011), 223 – 23; Drew Murphy, "Days of Future Past: Queer Identities and the X-Men", in Esther De Dauw, and Daniel J. Connell (eds), *Toxic Masculinity: Mapping the Monstrous in Our Heroes* (Jackson, MS, 2020; online edn, Mississippi Scholarship Online, 20 May 2021), <https://doi-org.uea.idm.oclc.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496828934.003.0006>

<sup>16</sup> There is a potential nod here in this fight of the two Wolverines, to the fight between the two Supermans (good and bad) in *Superman III*. The split between the protective self-sacrificing man, and the destructive self-satisfying man.