

SYMMETRY IN DUEL IN THE SUN

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This paper will attempt to analyze David O. Selznick's 1946 film Duel in the Sun in terms of its many kinds of symmetrical balance: formal, sexual, visual; musical and Apollonian - Dionysian (the emotionally expressive with logical order).

A summary of the plot will provide a framework within which these various forms of symmetry will be itemized, and will hopefully emphasize the classical order that characterizes the whole film.

The film begins with a prologue which introduces the film's protagonist and themes. A narrator tells the story of two lovers who found heaven and hell at "Squaw's Head Rock" a landmark in the Southwestern desert. The entire film is a flash-back from this point as we see the half-breed, Pearl Chavez, dancing on the steps of the local gambling casino. Her mother, an Indian, is seen doing a different kind of dance on the bar inside to the extreme enthusiasm of the clientele. She leaves the establishment at the end of the dance with her lover, and is shot to death in the act of adultery by her aristocratic, dignified white husband, Scott Chavez. He is hanged for the murder.

The film proper begins as Pearl goes to live at the vast cattle ranch of the McCanles family. She forms relationships with the family's two sons who both love her: Jesse, a lawyer, law-abiding and restrained, and Lewt, wild and undisciplined. It is the latter whom she selects as her preferred partner and this decision is responsible for the destructive events of the remainder of the film. Jesse leaves home over the controversy regarding the railroad, which his father, Senator McCanles, does not wish on the ranch. The Senator loses his fight to keep the railroad out, but disowns Jesse, who is his mother, Laura Belle's favorite, as Lewt is his father's. Lewt seduces Pearl, and Jesse, coming to tell Pearl he'll be back for her, walks in on the two in Pearl's room. Pearl, devastated, asks him if he could forget about Lewt and her and Jesse says he will never forget. The rivalry of the two brothers intensifies as the departing Jesse strikes Lewt.

Lewt's promise to marry Pearl is thwarted by the racial prejudice of the Senator, and Lewt is persuaded not to marry Pearl. Desolate, she agrees to marry the older but kind-hearted Sam Pierce, straw boss on the Spanish Bit Ranch. Lewt shoots and kills Sam when he announces his betrothal in a bar. Lewt leaves home, a wanted man, and wrecks railroads out of loyalty to his father.

Laura Belle dies, after she and the Senator confess their love, and Jesse returns for Pearl so she can live with him and his betrothed, Helen. Crazy with jealousy, Lewt returns to kill Jesse and succeeds in wounding him seriously. Pearl, nursing Jesse back to health, is told that Lewt is waiting to see her at Squaw's Head Rock one final time before he leaves for Mexico, and also that Lewt will succeed in killing Jesse next time.

Arriving at the location, Pearl shoots Lewt, he shoots her, she crawls back to him, and they die in a last embrace.

The film shows formal unity in many ways: it begins and ends at Squaw's Head Rock. In the prologue a man hunts and kills his faithless wife. At the end, a woman hunts and kills her faithless lover. In the first half of the film, Lewt rescues Pearl from a dark pantry, where she is trying to take an inventory for which she is not trained. In the second half of the film she is taken from a dark barn to which she has retired after the death of Laura Belle by Jesse, who takes her home with him, presumably to a new life. Laura Belle is cowed by the Senator because she is too frightened of him to oppose his cruelty. In the second half she stands up to him when he tries to throw Pearl out. The Senator's stubborn pride and inhumanity in the first half of the film is balanced by his capitulation to Laura Belle in the latter half as he admits it was his jealousy that crippled him, and that he always loved her.

Part of the symmetry of the film's structure is occasioned, as has been seen above, by the sex roles and their reversals. When Pearl arrives at the coach stop and waits for someone to take her to Spanish Bit, Jesse inquires as to her identity and is rebuffed by Pearl who "doesn't talk to strangers." When it dawns on Pearl who her questioner might be, she asks the same questions that Jesse had previously asked, only to receive the same answers in return that she had given Jesse.

In the square-dance scene (in which Lewt was to announce their betrothal), Lewt teaches Pearl to dance, symbolizing her integration into society. After his father has persuaded him to reject her, Pearl becomes the teacher as she instructs the aged Sam Pierce how to dance.

The scene that divides the two parts of the film occurs at the very center of the film, thereby creating a symmetry enforced by the fact that it is the Aristotelian turning point of the action, where good fortune turns to bad. This is the scene where the Senator loses his fight with the railroad, and the ranch wires are cut to permit building the tracks. After this, the Senator is further crippled by this fall from his horse (symbolizing his loss of authority). Jesse is disowned for standing up to his father about the railroad, and leaves home, Lewt seduces Pearl and later rejects her, Laura Belle dies, etc. But with the loss of good fortune comes the character development cited above, so that the second half of the film acts as a healing for that of the first part, much as in Emily Jane Brontë's Wuthering Heights.

The film also balances the Apollonian (law, discipline, the masculine, order, light, logic) with Dionysian (the feminine, feeling, sexual expression, relatedness, freedom). The protagonists can easily be divided into these two camps: Scott Chavez sits in judgement unemotionally on his wife and her lover, finds them guilty, and then executes them. At his trial he just as unemotionally suggests that he himself be hanged, "since the punishment should fit the crime". There is no possible doubt that his wife is a Dionysian when her abandoned dance on the bar, a dance of arousal, is followed by her adulterous assignation.

Pearl is a combination of both: she has her father's high ideals and aspiration, but her mother's earthy sexuality, which shows itself in her addiction to a destructive relationship. Jesse and Laura Belle are Apollonians, but Laura Belle has the humanity and compassion that Jesse begins to show in the latter part of the film, so that the ideal classical balance is effected. Lewt is Dionysian, and only shows Apollonian qualities at the end of the film as he is dying. As stated above, Pearl is both, and the two struggle within her like the two themes in the classical sonata form. She succeeds in uniting these two parts of her nature at the end, when her Apollonian and Dionysian sides join in harmony and she loves Lewt while she kills him to protect those she loves.

The music underlines the above contrasts: the elegiac "Beautiful Dreamer" is associated with Laura Belle, while the raw vigor of the Spanish Bit theme is characteristic of the domineering, avaricious Senator. Jesse is described in gentle Aaron Copeland-like thirds, whereas Lewt and Pearl's incendiary relationship is colored by a Wagnerian leitmotif explicit in its ecstatic climax. The human voice is carefully woven into this fabric of music which balances sound effects as part of its score.

Similarly, the visuals of the film contrast the dark interior of the McCanles mansion with the brilliant wide-open spaces around it. Laura Belle's pale complexion and lavender dresses afford a vivid contrast with the brilliant primary colors worn by Pearl, as well as with Pearl's dusty complexion.

But perhaps the most important balance in the film, assisted by all of the above, is that of the masculine qualities with the feminine ones as defined by Carl Jung, and in this way the film can be seen as a fertility rite.

The central irony of the film is that Pearl Chavez arrives at Spanish Bit Ranch an unwanted half-breed, a social reject, and proceeds to bring this powerful, chauvinistic, racist family, right down to the ground. But within this framework, it can be seen that she and Laura Belle bring a feminine warmth of feeling, compassion, relatedness, self-knowledge and sensitivity to this masculine bastion of violence, logic, and forceful action. By the end of the film these opposites co-exist in harmony: Jesse realizes his moral intransigence regarding Pearl, the Senator admits his mistakes, Laura Belle stands up to the Senator, and Pearl kills Lewt to stop him from killing others. This action precipitates Lewt's realization of the necessity of her extreme action, and his admission that he really loves her. A flower blooms here that "grows nowhere else", part blossom and part cactus, Pearl and Lewt finally united in harmony: the separateness has died and given birth to a unity. The last shot of the film shows the sun blazing triumphantly in the sky (both masculine symbols) but joined to the earth (a feminine symbol).