

On being both Clint Eastwood and a liberated male

by Ralph Keyes

My favorite scene of a Clint Eastwood movie is in "For a Few Dollars More." Playing a bounty killer, Eastwood stalks his prey into a saloon, where the man is playing cards. Walking up behind him, Eastwood picks up the deck and deals his prey five cards, then does the same for himself. Slowly they turn over their hands. The prey shows three kings. Eastwood has three aces.

Beads of sweat pop out on the prey's face. "Didn't hear what the bet was," he says.

"Your life," answers Eastwood, and shoots him.

Pandemonium usually breaks out in the theatre. "All right!" shouts one voice. "Hooee!" howls another. "Showed that dude!"

Which are my feelings exactly. Whenever I leave a Clint Eastwood movie I'm him—tough, inscrutable, able to handle any man.

My friends don't know how they feel about my being Clint Eastwood, women friends especially. His style stands for everything we liberated people are supposed to be against, the macho mystique.

In fact, I'm not sure myself how I feel about being Clint Eastwood, because I'm opposed also to the pressure I feel to be a Real Man—tough, inscrutable, able to handle any other man. But that's not the point. The point is that I have these feelings and probably always will.

RALPH KEYES is a fellow of the Center for Studies of the Person and the author of "We, the Lonely People" (Harper & Row).

Any liberation movement which denies my being Clint Eastwood is no liberation at all.

This is why I haven't been tempted to join a group seeking "male liberation." Most with which I've had contact are ludicrous mirror-images of the women's movement, seeking salvation in self-condemnation. I don't see how gathering to confess macho hang-ups and scrutinize each other for evidence of chauvinism is going to free anyone. Such activity can result in altered behavior based on guilt, but this has nothing to do with liberation.

A friend of mine once participated in a male consciousness-raising group and found it one of the more harrowing experiences of his life. Becoming aware of how the "system" made men pigs was the agenda, and pitched battles took place to determine who was most chauvinistic. My friend kept trying to deal with the other members more personally, more individually. He wanted to talk about his own sexual ambivalence, about bisexuality, which is often on his mind. But they hooted him down, then out of the group.

Such an approach doesn't characterize all efforts to achieve male liberation. Some real efforts are being made to deal compassionately with the limitations men impose on themselves, and those dictated by society. But even the more sensitive men's groups are usually rooted in "how to do better by women," rather than how to do better by ourselves, and in trying to repress machismo

rather than learn to live with it.

Men can't free themselves by becoming a caboose to the women's movement. We need a liberation based on more than how we relate to the opposite sex. No matter how sensitive men and women become to each other's real needs, there will always be walls between us, ways of being the other sex could never fathom.

The movie "Straw Dogs" most sharply defined some of these walls as the '70s got under way. It's rare that I meet a woman who wasn't nauseated by the mayhem of Sam Peckinpah's movie. Judith Crist called it the worst film of the year, "a blood and gore wallow," featuring "mental defectives slaughtering and raping in a variety of sadistic and perverse ways, without pause and without purpose."

But just as common as women's revulsion at the carnage of "Straw Dogs" has been men's delight. It's rare that I meet a man who wasn't guiltily enthralled by this movie.

who didn't thrill to Dustin Hoffman's conversion from civilized nebbish to bloodthirsty warrior. There may have been more male identification going on during "Straw Dogs" than during any other movie since "Easy Rider." But I only hear about this from men when we're alone, never in mixed company, particularly mixed company with pretensions to being liberated.

How men relate to women is only part of their liberation, and a part which can inhibit dealing honestly

with the rest. I have yet to hear of a male liberation movement which appeals to me as a man, a tough man who would also like to be more sensitive.

Real liberation of men is going to come harder than even the most radical feminist can conceive. Men gathered, even to discuss chauvinism, are irresistibly competitive, and terrified of actual contact with each other. This can be as true in a men's consciousness-raising group

Continued on next page

Being Clint Eastwood

Continued from preceding page

as in a sales meeting, except the competition takes different forms. Like who can confess the grossest chauvinism.

Barry Farrell once visited men's rap groups around the country and later wrote of his tour: "The confessions of sexism I heard (but have modestly not repeated) usually struck me as awkward boasting, as in 'I can't help getting into these exploitation trips with women when I'm just trying to relate Or, 'I know the women around here don't trust me, 'cause I've really ripped them off. . . . Hearing this talk led me to wonder if one of the greatest attractions of men's lib mightn't be the bracing experience of hearing one's self denounced as a sexual chauvinist. . . ."

In several encounter groups I've attended, one of the main undercurrents, rarely discussed, is competition among the men for domination of the group and attention from women. But again, the contest takes distorted forms, in this case usually "I'm more sensitive than you are." Or "I'm revealing the most of any man here." Or "I'm not a-scared to cry."

Usually I haven't commented when noticing the men doing this because I'm part of the competition, yet afraid to go head-to-head, to really face what it is we're doing to each other. The one time I did mention to the other men in a group how fiercely I saw us jousting gently for position, the net effect was to squelch them and put me on top. To this day I don't know whether that was what I intended. Competition can be so subtle

I don't like this truth about men, that we compete so constantly and wreak other sorts of havoc on ourselves. But dealing with male hang-ups by trying to deny them, by acting differently without feeling differently, just piles masochism on top of chauvinism.

And even the worst male qualities have redeeming virtues. Some other men and I were discussing competitiveness one evening and found that almost without fail, our closest childhood friends were those with whom we'd fist-fought. Since Konrad Lorenz says there can't be love without aggression, maybe the male will to fight is a guarantor of strongly good feelings in this society, as well as strongly bad.

In the end, men may prove as much in need of liberation as women are, but with a harder case. So much oppression of women is external, with visible enemies to be fought. Men lack such targets, and are forced back on themselves, inside, where the real oppression occurs. Trying to deal with one's internal pressure to be A MAN leads easily to self-hatred. Yet this is the route I hear too often advised, and taken by men seeking liberation.

Real liberation from male roles won't come through guilt and self-repression. Rather, men need to seek freedom with compassion for what

we are, as well as what we'd like to be. Only *we* know what that means, and only we can make a movement based on pride more than guilt. For me that means never joining a men's group which can't accept the fact that I'm Clint Eastwood, as well as my wish to be Gandhi.