A Freudian Interpretation of the Film Shane

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This paper reveals the hidden Freudian symbols and messages in the 1953 film *Shane*, which is about how boys traverse the milestone of puberty and become men. Although the writer and director of the film may not have thought of the film as a Freudian story, it can easily be read that way.

*Shane* is a western drama starring Alan Ladd as a weary gunfighter who wants to settle down but repeatedly gets drawn into conflicts that require him to use his gun. The film is a story about how boys become men, suggesting that mature sexuality depends on boys successfully negotiating the developmental crisis of puberty. The film uses the gun (a common Freudian symbol of potency) to represent the penis. Shooting a gun is, of course, a metaphor for sexual intercourse and orgasm.

In the film a young boy named Joey lives with his father and mother on a farm. Shane is a gunfighter who visits the farm and gets involved in the life of the family, and also with men in the nearby town. The character of Shane becomes the boy’s father figure and teaches him that in some cases real men may be called upon to use justifiable violence, but that only real men are capable of discerning when violence is justified. Shane also teaches Joey that if you are attracted to a married woman, you must leave her alone. Decent society has rules, and civilization requires such compromises.

Shane presents himself as a weakling, and he has no relationship with a woman. Is he incapable of a mature sexual/romantic relationship for some reason? The film suggests that he has a fatal psychological flaw that renders him impotent, except with a gun.

The characters in the film are Joe, a farmer, the husband of Marion and the father of Joey; Marion, the wife of Joe and the mother of Joey; Joey, the son, age 10 or 11 (on the verge of puberty); and Shane, a handsome, independent stranger who comes to town and appears to be a gunfighter, but befriends the farmer and tries to settle down.
The following quotations are excerpts of dialogue from the film, followed by their symbolic meaning in italics.

Excerpt 1

Joey to Shane: "I just wanted you to see my rifle" [penis]. 
*Joey is telling Shane that he may be young, but he aspires to become a man.*

Joey to Shane: "I bet you can shoot" [have sexual intercourse as a mature man].

Joe to Shane: "You're leaving." [my penis is bigger than yours]. 
*Joe is telling Shane that he is an interloper in a happy home. As a mature male, Shane is a threat.*

Shane to Joe: "I'll leave, but I'd like it to be my idea." [my penis is just as big as yours]. 
*Shane wants Joe to know that he respects Joe’s right to protect his home from a potentially troublesome outsider, but it would be unmanly to leave as ordered.*

Excerpt 2

Joe to Shane: "The boy's gun [penis] isn't loaded. He's too young" [to have sex]. 
*Joe tells Shane that Joey is a pre-pubertal boy, so he is not a threat to anyone.*

Joe to Shane: "My wife sure can cook" [in the bedroom]. 
*Joe is bragging to Shane and saying that he has a woman (unlike Shane) and his wife likes to have sex with him.*

Excerpt 3

Marian to Joe: "Ask Shane to stay the night." [Shane is an attractive man, and I'd like to have sex with him, but since that would be unacceptable, the next best thing is to have him stay in the house overnight.]

Shane displays his potency to Marion by attacking the tree stump with an ax. [Look how strong and manly I am - more so than your husband. This stump represents his penis and look at me chopping it off. I’m a better man than your husband. Let's have sex.] 

Then Joe (humiliated) joins Shane to show his strength and together they defeat the obstacle by chopping down the tree stump. [There is a sweaty, grunting (homoerotic?) climax when the stump falls. Joe has successfully defended his manhood.]

Excerpt 4
Joey to Shane: "I wish they'd give me some bullets for this gun." [I wish I were a man and could have sex.] "Would you teach me to shoot?" [Would you teach me how to masturbate, how to have sex, and thereby how to become a man?]

Excerpt 5

Joe to Joey: "I'll teach you to shoot [be a potent man] myself." [We don't need an outsider such as Shane to show you how to become a man.]

Joey to Joe: "Can you shoot [be a man] as good as Shane, Pa?"

Joe to Joey: "I don't know, I've never seen him shoot" [have sex].

Excerpt 6

Shane is provoked by a man in a bar and feels he has to fight to prove he is a man. During the fight Joey holds up a stick of candy, as if to say "If only my penis were bigger, I could fight too and help Shane, my surrogate father."

Excerpt 7

Joey to Marion: "I just love Shane, almost as much as I love Pa." [Shane is a more manly man, stronger and more potent than Pa. He uses violence when needed, but Pa is just a farmer.]

Joey to Marion: "Don't you like Shane, Mother?" [Don't you want to dump Pa and get together with Shane?]

Marion to Joe: "Just hold me tight." [to keep me from running to Shane and having sex with him.]

Excerpt 8

Joey to Shane: "I saw your gun [penis]. Can I see it again? Show me how to shoot [I admire your potency; show me how to have sex and become a man].

Shane shows Joey how to handle his gun [penis]. [Joey is ready to demonstrate his potency and become a man.]

Conclusion
The film *Shane* can be interpreted as a moral fable about how boys need a strong father figure to successfully negotiate the developmental crisis of puberty and achieve manhood. An interesting subtext of the film, which contradicts the film’s main text, concerns Shane’s ambiguous sexuality and his psychic flaw. He dresses somewhat effeminately and orders soda pop instead of whiskey when he goes to the town saloon. He is caught in a repetition compulsion; he repeatedly puts himself into situations that require him to act out in violence, apparently to attempt to master a traumatic situation that it is hinted at in his past. Because of his physical or psychic damage, which is not explicitly described in the film, he is incapable of mature sexual performance, so he uses his gun instead. His repressed libido finds an outlet in orgasmic violence. Since he cannot make love, he makes war. As an object lesson, the film suggests that if the developmental crisis of puberty is not mastered successfully, sexual energy will find another, possibly destructive, outlet. Parents should teach their sons that sexuality is a powerful and potentially damaging force, but that it is ultimately a positive force that should not be denied, but rather channelled appropriately.

The film *Shane* can be enjoyed as a western drama with purely entertainment value. Although probably not meant to be read as a Freudian story about how boys transit puberty to become men, it can certainly be read that way. It may well be that psychoanalytic ideas have pervaded society to such an extent that we no longer recognize them. Analyzing the film from a Freudian perspective is a way to see how psychoanalytic symbols bypass conscious awareness but are registered by the unconscious. Thus, viewing the film can be a way to learn about Freudian psychology.