

# DIRTY HARRY

Directed by Don Siegel  
Produced by Don Siegel  
Distributed by Warner Brothers Pictures  
Released in 1971

Almost everyone agrees that crime should be punished. The real question concerns the criminal himself. Is it necessity or desperation which drives him? If neither, does the criminal strive to inflict pain? Should the criminal be menaced as he menaces the populace? Can the police and the courts be trusted to punish those who actually are guilty, and can they accomplish this before an unacceptable proportion of the populace is raped, robbed, killed, etc.?

In contrast to its reputation for being a right-wing revenge fantasy, *Dirty Harry* actually provides, implicitly, a thoughtful examination of society's problems in crime and punishment.

San Francisco is the perfect setting for such a movie. Not only is it picturesque, it has a reputation for being incredibly liberal. Therefore it's completely believable that the mayor and the police department would be so hard on their top cop, simply because his methods are deemed 'brutal.'

In what seems to be a throwaway scene where Harry 'rescues' a suicidal man, he remarks that he got his nickname because he gets every dirty job—not because he, himself, is dirty. This is critical because it implies that the cops and courts and citizenry secretly applaud Harry's no-nonsense approach. He is the one who always gets the call.

The issue is not whether the ends justify the means. No, when Callahan digs his foot into Scorpio's damaged leg to extract the location of the kidnapped girl, that is torture. But torture is not necessarily wrong. Callahan may be ignoring the law, but the law, itself, makes allowances for exigent circumstances. Preserving life is paramount. And even if the law cannot bend far enough, jury nullification allows the citizens to intervene when upholding the law could mean circumventing justice. (This is something the ungrateful and pompous D.A. fails to acknowledge when berating Callahan.)

So Callahan isn't doing anything wrong to forestall a greater wrong. He's doing the right thing—no caveats, no quibbling.

But still it makes people uncomfortable. This could be because we're afraid of what would happen if the police became convinced an innocent man was a serial killer.

Taking it further, torturing a man for fun is wrong. What makes it right in this circumstance is the need to preserve life. But what kind of man would kidnap a girl—not for politics or revenge—and then renege on a promise to preserve her life after extorting a ransom from her family? This kind of man is evil. He takes delight in destroying a giant neon cross emblazoned with the words 'Jesus Saves,' takes potshots at civilians with a high-powered rifle, and hijacks a school bus of kids to escape capture.

Some people are uncomfortable with Scorpio being tortured because they think there's another way, or because this isn't all his fault, figuring that he was abused or neglected. They cannot accept that he is evil, and that he bears ultimate responsibility for his crimes.

(Admittedly the movie stacks the deck, showing us a reprehensible figure, a lying, racist, murdering maniac—then has him admit to the hero that he is the killer. So here there is no doubt, while in life there is rarely such certainty.)

If the actions of such a horrible man can be explained away, then we can ignore our own relatively insignificant wrongdoings. Evil must be denied so we can escape condemnation.

The fundamental question is whether humans are fundamentally good. *Dirty Harry* tells us that it's not even close. The movie goes further by demonstrating that evil behavior is in no way appealing. The killer is not handsome and has no redeeming virtues. He is a coward who screams like a demon as he begs Callahan for a lawyer in the stadium. And on top of that, Scorpio tries to punish Callahan by spreading lies about police harrassment when Callahan has done nothing wrong.

Callahan only demands of his quarry what he demands of himself. He is extraordinarily disciplined, living a spartan life in the wake of his wife's death. We learn volumes in the best scene of the picture—Callahan's thwarting of the robbery. He puts his life in jeopardy taking on four bank robbers with nothing to lose. Callahan only has six bullets. But his gun is the Magnum .44, which we have not seen until he begins shooting. (He does give them a chance—he does yell "halt.")

Once three of the guys are dead and the fourth is incapacitated, Callahan is a bit cruel. The 'Do You Feel Lucky?' speech is a mini-masterpiece of screen writing. It conveys useful information about the power of this unusual handgun, and it shows that Callahan isn't above terrorizing a criminal (which is different from torture, mind you). Callahan figures, if they want to dish it out, they should be expected to eat it, too. It's not jail or death that he foists on the criminals, but a privileged look into the abyss—being forced to stare down the barrel of a gun, his gun. Callahan is cocky here, marveling at his own brand of sadism.

Much later in the film, however, Callahan has changed. Before, he was willing to let Scorpio live so he'd lead him to the girl. Now he has learned his lesson—we don't pay, we fight, no matter what it takes. At the film's climax, he repeats the same speech to Scorpio, who is wounded but has a gun within reach. Now Callahan is bitter and very angry. He's probably hoping Scorpio will go for the gun so he can kill him and ensure that justice is served. Callahan could murder him and no one would know the difference, *but he does not*.

He is still the hero.

Of course, we cannot contemplate all of this until after the fact. Just like before, we lose track of the number of bullets fired. In the bank robbery scene, Callahan was out of ammunition when he challenged the robber. Does he have any left here? The speech could be just a bluff—no terror, just strategy—to ensure that he can stay alive to bring Scorpio in.

Thus, the final shot is all the more thrilling. We get the relief of learning Callahan will be OK while simultaneously reveling in the destruction of this most vile creature. Preserving his life would be an affront to Man and to God.