Adventure, Mystery, and Romance

Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture

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The Western: A Look at the Evolution of a Formula

In concentrating on the definition and comparison of formulaic structures, their artistic limitations and potentials, and the cultural and psychological basis of their appeals, I was not able to say very much about the historical evolution of individual formulas. Formulas do tend to change over the course of time and many different factors interact during this process of evolution: the impact of new media, the inventiveness of creators and performers, and, above all, changes in the culture. In the third chapter I showed how changing cultural attitudes toward crime influenced the creation of a number of different crime formulas. In this chapter, I will narrow my focus and concentrate on the evolution of a single formula, the western, as an illustration of how the process of formulaic development can be analyzed. The western is a particularly interesting subject for this kind of analysis since its history covers nearly one hundred and fifty years and several different media. Because of this considerable length of time, and the enormous number of individual western novels, films, stories, dramas, radio programs, comic books, and Wild West spectacles, I will necessarily have to be highly selective in my treatment. Since the western tends to be as formalized in its way as the detective story, such selectivity is not inappropriate. I have attempted to hit upon the major points of variation in the formula and thereby to chart the major phases of the western's evolution.

The western formula probably came into existence when James Fenimore Cooper made a particularly felicitous combination of fictional materials dealing with the settlement of the American wilderness and the archetypal pattern of the adventure story. Cooper's first full-scale development of this material in The Pioneers had elements of the adventure archetype but was essentially a novel of manners with strong melodramatic overtones. By the time Cooper completed his Leatherstocking saga with The Deerslayer, the basic shape of the western formula had become the adventure story, and this has remained the case down to the present time. Though writers often attempt to use western materials in connection with other literary archetypes, their stories clearly differ from what we think of as the "western" in the degree that they depart from the basic form of the adventure with its apotheosis of a hero.

Unlike the detective story, the western formula is not defined by a fixed pattern of action. Where the plot of the detective story is always the same,
responsibility for taking those actions that will bring about the final destruction of the old life and the establishment of settled society. The fact that this resolution almost invariably requires a transcendent and heroic violence indicates that the contending forces of civilization and wilderness reflect strongly conflicting values.

In The Six-Gun Mystique, I presented a more detailed analysis of the general characteristics of the western formula and indicated its many sources of appeal. The reader may wish to refer to that discussion for a fuller cataloging of the western formula's major elements of setting, character, and action. For our present purpose of analyzing some of the major changes in the formula over the course of its history, the most significant aspect of the western is its representation of the relationship between the hero and the contending forces of civilization and wilderness, for it is in the changing treatment of this conflict, so basic to American thought and feeling, that the western most clearly reflects the attitudes of its creators and audiences at different periods. Therefore, we will begin our analysis of the western's evolution with a discussion of Cooper's treatment of the dialectic between civilization and nature in his Leatherstocking saga.

**Cooper and the Beginnings of the Western Formula**

James Fenimore Cooper was a man of many contradictions. Since these contradictions embodied some of the major problems and paradoxes of American civilization, and because he had a talent for getting them down on paper, he became one of the chief inventors of American literature. His great creation, Nathaniel Bumppo, the Leatherstocking, became the prototype for the western hero and thus the progenitor of countless stories, novels, films, and television programs that use the formula Cooper first articulated. Cooper not only became the founder of this major popular tradition but the influence of his Leatherstocking is equally inescapable in major American writers and forms part of the background of Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, Twain, Faulkner, and Hemingway. From the beginning, the western intersected with the mainstream of American literature, and, though it developed in its own direction, it has never completely lost touch. One might even say that it was the popular western's function to resolve some of the irresolvable contradictions of American values that our major writers have laid bare. It was Cooper who began the process by exploring some of the central paradoxes of our culture and by establishing some of the ways in which they could be resolved in literature.

Like many of his contemporaries, Cooper was strongly torn between the traditional ideal of culture cultivated by the European aristocracy and the new conception of American democracy. In terms of his own career and background, the conflict between his commitment to a traditional social order and the fascination of a new openness and freedom shaped his life.

Though scion of an aristocratic family, Cooper became a writer of extremely popular novels who supported refined activities by appealing to a large public. Though he was a man of cultivated tastes and spent much of his life in Europe, Cooper was a dedicated patriot and the first major author to set forth a distinctive vision of the American landscape. Yet throughout his life he was dedicated to the ideal of the gentleman. In his book, paradoxically entitled The American Democrat, Cooper even went so far as to argue "if the laborer is indispensable to civilization, so is also the gentleman. While the one produces, the other directs his skill to those arts which raise the polished man above the barbarian. . . . Were society to be satisfied with a mere supply of the natural wants, there would be no civilization. The savage condition attends this much. All beyond it, notwithstanding, is so much progress made in the direction of the gentleman." Yet this apologist for the gentry was also the great romanticizer of the primitive. His great heroes, Natty Bumppo the Leatherstocking and Chingachgook and Uncas the noble savages, were men of the wilderness.

Henry Nash Smith has suggested that these paradoxical oppositions of attitude reflected a basic ideological conflict in nineteenth-century American culture between the sense of America as a continuation of European civilization and the vision of a new and better society growing out of the more natural circumstances of the virgin wilderness. Cooper felt the opposing pulls of civilization and nature even more strongly than most of his contemporaries. In his exploration of the dialectic between advancing civilization and the free and natural life of the wilderness, and in his attempt to synthesize these forces, Cooper invented the western. His fictional medium for this exploration was the series of novels centered upon the life of the frontiersman Natty Bumppo, who was loosely modeled on the actual figure of Daniel Boone. This series, The Pioneers (1823), The Last of the Mohicans (1826), The Prairie (1827), The Pathfinder (1840), and The Deerslayer (1841), have become known as the Leatherstocking Tales.

Cooper's conception of the Leatherstocking saga underwent a considerable evolution. It is even tempting to say, with some oversimplification, that Cooper's transformation of his western narrative from a story of the re-establishment of the gentry in the new West, to a tale of the isolated hero whose very virtues make him flee the oncoming civilization, summarizes the evolution of the western itself from the epic of the pioneers in the nineteenth century to the ambiguous myth of the gunfighter in the 1950s, from Wister's Virginian who not only outguns the villain but becomes a successful rancher and political leader to Henry King's Jimmy Ringo who wants to escape from his gunslinging past but is pursued and destroyed by his own reputation as the fastest gun in the West. In Cooper's case it seems clear that this gradual shift of context, hero, and theme reflected an increasing tension between his aristocratic predispositions and his vision of American society. Cooper's initial hopes for American civilization were high because he felt that the new society, while undoubtedly lacking some of the brilliance of European
civilization, would more than compensate for this loss by general peace, prosperity, and decorum. In his *Notions of the Americans* (1828), the key characteristic of American life was progress, and while progress had its costs, it also meant the triumph of common sense and of a "decent middling standard of life based on an expanding provision for social wants and national growth, under the firm governance of order and decorum." Cooper also believed that once the earlier phases of settlement were over, a new kind of social order would develop led by an American gentry class, purified of the corruptions characteristic of European aristocracy, committed to democratic values, and supported by the voluntary deference of their fellow citizens. Under the leadership of this new gentry class, American society would synthesize democratic common sense and moral simplicity with the traditional refinement and cultivation of European civilization.

The democratic gentleman must differ in many essential particulars, from the aristocratical gentleman, though in their ordinary habits and tastes they are virtually identical. Their principles vary; and, to a slight degree, their deportment accordingly. The democrat, recognizing the right of all to participate in power, will be more liberal in his general sentiments, a quality of superiority in itself; but, in conceding this much to his fellow men, he will proudly maintain his own independence of vulgar domination, as indispensable to his personal habits.

The *Pioneers*, first-written of the Leatherstocking Tales, presented Cooper’s vision of the development of the new American society in almost allegorical fashion. The plot is one of resolution and synthesis. The central action is divided into two lines: the dynastic misunderstanding between the Temple and Effingham families and the conflict of interest between Judge Temple, who represents law and civilization, and Natty Bumppo, who resents the impingement of legal restrictions on the freedom of the old wilderness life. At the beginning of the novel, Natty, who is an aging hunter, his equally old Indian friend Chingachgook, and the young Oliver Edwards appear in the vicinity of the new settlement of Templeton, which has been developed by Judge Temple. When Natty shoots a deer out of season, he comes into conflict with the law of the settlement. This rift is further complicated when two schemers, Hiram Doolittle and Jotham Riddle, attempt to take advantage of the law to search Natty’s wilderness hut because they believe the old man has hidden some horde of wealth. Actually, Natty has been protecting old Major Effingham, who Natty and his friends believe has been cheated out of his fortune by Judge Temple. When Natty assaults the wretched Doolittle to keep him from entering the hut, Judge Temple feels that he must enforce the principles of law and order and in his capacity as judge he sentences Natty to a short term of imprisonment. After an escape from jail and a narrow escape from a forest fire, all these complications are unraveled. It turns out that Judge Temple had been keeping the Effingham fortune in trust during the Revolutionary War and has himself been looking for the heirs to the fortune.

Young Oliver Edwards is revealed as the grandson of Major Effingham, and he marries the judge’s lovely daughter Elizabeth, with whom he has fallen in love. Though Natty refuses to accept the Temple-Effingham offer of a peaceful old age in the new settlement and, like Daniel Boone, heads off into the wilderness, he has made his peace with the Temple-Effingham family and he departs giving his blessing to the union of Oliver and Elizabeth.

Thus, in *The Pioneers*, the advance of American civilization is seen in generally optimistic terms. At the end of the novel, though the old hunter no longer has a role, the wilderness is rapidly on its way to becoming the ordered and harmonious society that Cooper describes at the beginning of the novel:

Beautiful and thriving villages are found interspersed along the margins of the small lakes, or situated at those points of the streams which are favourable to manufacturing; and neat and comfortable farms, with every indication of wealth about them, are scattered profusely through the vales, and even to the mountain tops. Roads diverge in every direction, from the even and graceful bottoms of the valleys, to the most rugged and intricaded passes of the hills. Academies, and minor edifices of learning, meet the eye of the stranger at every few miles, and places for the worship of God abound with that frequency which characterizes a moral and reflecting people, and with that variety of exterior and canonical government which flows from unfettered liberty of conscience. In short, the whole district is hourly exhibiting how much can be done, in even a rugged country, and with a severe climate, under the domination of mild laws, and where every man feels a direct interest in the prosperity of a commonwealth, of which he knows himself to form a part. The expedients of the pioneers who first broke ground in the settlement of this country are succeeded by the permanent improvements of the yeoman, who intends to leave his remains to moulder under the sod which he tills, or perhaps, of the son, who, born in the land, piously wishes to linger around the grave of his father. Only forty years have passed since this territory was a wilderness.

I have quoted this passage at some length because it exemplifies so completely what might be called the official myth of the West, that vision that Henry Nash Smith so brilliantly analyzes, of an agrarian paradise in the interior of the United States. *The Pioneers* differs somewhat from the Jeffersonian version of the agrarian utopia in the special role assigned to an American gentry class, in this case the Temple-Effingham dynasty. In most respects, however, the world of *The Pioneers* is well on the way to becoming that serene Jeffersonian society of virtuous yeomen presided over by a natural aristocracy of talent and virtue. Cooper even goes so far as to see to the defeat and expulsion of the two major dangers to this ideal republic: the corrupt and ambitious politician and lawyer and the greedy entrepreneur, symbolized by the two figures of Hiram Doolittle and Jotham Riddle. *The Pioneers* was the last of the Leatherstocking Tales in which an
optimistic view of progress determined the narrative focus. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper shifted his attention from the complex problems of reestablishing social institutions in a new settlement to the theme that would dominate the rest of the series: the violence of Indian warfare and the destruction of the old wilderness life.

Violence does exist in the world of *The Pioneers*, but it is largely the result of accident, misunderstanding, or natural forces. Oliver Effingham is wounded at the beginning by a misdirected bullet from the gun of Judge Temple; the heroine, Elizabeth Temple, narrowly escapes death from a panther; a forest fire endangers many of the characters at the climax of the novel. But the landscape of *The Last of the Mohicans* mixes romantic grandeur with danger lurking behind every bush.

The river was confined between high and craggy rocks, one of which impended above the spot where the canoe rested. As these, again, were surmounted by tall trees, which appeared to totter on the brows of the precipice, it gave the stream the appearance of running through a deep and narrow dell. All beneath the fantastic limbs and ragged tree-tops, which were, here and there, dimly painted against the starry zenith, lay alike in shadowed obscurity. Behind them, the curvature of the banks soon bounded the view, by the same dark and wooded outline; but in front, and apparently at no great distance, the water seemed piled against the heavens, whence it tumbled into caves, out of which issued those sullen sounds that had loaded the evening atmosphere. It seemed, in truth, to be a spot devoted to seclusion, and the sisters imbibed a soothing impression of security, as they gazed upon its romantic, though not unappalling beauties. A general movement among their conductors, however, soon recalled them from a contemplation of the wild charms that night had assisted to lend the place, to a painful sense of their real peril.

This landscape takes on the double implication of transcendence and violence that is so typical of the western. Cooper's increasing emphasis on violence in *The Last of the Mohicans* also meant that he abandoned the fixed social setting of *The Pioneers* and placed his characters in motion across the wilderness, involving them in what became the western's characteristic rhythm of chase and pursuit. In *The Pioneers* the important action takes place in the settlement, in Judge Temple's mansion, in the law court, in the prison, and in the area just outside the town where Natty has his cabin. There is relatively little sense of the surrounding wilderness coming up to and endangering the town. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, the wilderness has erupted in the violence of the French and Indian War, the story opens with the destruction of a wilderness settlement, and the remainder of the narrative deals with the leading characters' attempts to escape from a group of Indians involved in the massacre.

Because of the new emphasis on violence, there are also important changes in the cast of characters of *The Last of the Mohicans*. These new characterizations adumbrate to a remarkable extent the future development of the western. Most important is the conception of the western hero, the extraordinary man whose double gifts of civilization and savagery make him able to confront and conquer the perils of the wilderness. Natty Bumppo does appear in *The Pioneers*, but in that book Cooper seems more concerned with the problem of where he fits in socially than with his extraordinary powers. In fact, there is more pathos than heroism about the old woodsman. As Natty finds himself in situation after situation with which he doesn't quite know how to cope, he can only complain in the tones of a bitter and helpless old man about the incomprehensibility of newfangled notions of law. Though something of the Natty to come breaks through occasionally, particularly in his Daniel Boone-like gesture of refusing to stay in the settlement, the last scene of *The Pioneers* places Natty right back in the traditional social order from which he seems to be fleeing. As Natty is about to go off into the wilderness, Oliver Effingham shows him the monument he has erected to the memory of old Major Effingham, whom Natty had long served and protected. The monument reads in part:

*The morning of his life was spent in honor, wealth, and power; but its evening was obscured by poverty, neglect, and disease, which were alleviated only by the tender care of his old, faithful, and upright friend and attendant, Nathaniel Bumppo. His descendants rear this stone to the virtues of the master, and to the enduring gratitude of the servant."

When Natty hears this statement he replies in the tone and manner of an old family servant:

"And did ye say it, lad? have you then got the old man's name cut in the stone, by the side of his master's? God bless ye, children! 'twas a kind thought, and kindness goes to the heart as life shortens."

This presentation of Natty as faithful old retainer is not simply a matter of age. In *The Prairie* he is older still, but an aura of mystery and majesty surround him. Compare, for example, the first descriptions of the old hunter in the two novels. In *The Pioneers*, Natty is first described to us from the perspective of Elizabeth Temple, who, returning to the settlement after a long stay in the East, sees the hunter as one of the local curiosities:

*There was a peculiarity in the manner of the hunter that attracted the notice of the young female, who had been a close and interested observer of his appearance and equipments from the moment he came into view. He was tall and so meagre as to make him seem above even the six feet that he actually stood in his stockings. On his head, which was thinly covered with lank, sandy hair, he wore a cap made of foxskin. . . . His face was skinny and thin almost to emaciation; but it bore no signs of disease. . . . The cold and the exposure had, together, given it a color of uniform red. His gray eyes were glancing under a pair of shaggy brows that overhung them in long hairs of gray mingled with the natural hue; his scrappy neck was bare, and burnt to the same tint with his face."

*
The Western

by the more skillful Leatherstocking. Alice Munro, the genteel and refined
ingenue, spends most of her time weeping and fainting. She is the first in a
long line of eastern women who can’t deal with the western experience until
they have learned to accept the guidance of the hero. The Natty of The Last
of the Mohicans is no longer the curious combination of deferent old family
retainer and subservient hater of law that he is in The Pioneers. He has
become a hero.

This increasing romanticization of the Leatherstocking hero, along with the
new focus on violence as the dominant element of the frontier experience,
probably reflects an increasing tension between conflicting attitudes and
feelings in Cooper’s mind. Divided between his belief in a traditional social
hierarchy and the dream of a free, spontaneous life in nature, Cooper had
originally developed the figure of Natty Bumppo in terms of two distinct
aspects; first, there is the loyal servant of the great family, a man of simple
Christian virtues who has no desire to challenge the traditional social order;
second, there is the marginal, lonely man of the wilderness who hates the
restrictions of society and who fears, above all, the operations of a social
authority that he does not understand or feel he needs. In The Pioneers these
conflicting aspects of Natty’s significance pose relatively few problems;
Natty’s subservient impulses are controlled by his dedication to the Temple-
Effingham dynasty; he remains on the periphery of the action; and, finally,
the development of civilization under the benevolent and wise leadership of
the American gentility is so obviously progressive that any criticism of society
implicit in Natty’s final rejection of the settlement is blunted.

As Cooper’s own confidence in the evolution of civilization in the United
States became more qualified and his views of democracy more disillusioned,
his fascination with nature as an ideal became more intense. As the
Leatherstocking Tales progressed, the nobility and heroism of the natural
man became more idealized, the advance of the pioneers became increasingly
associated with violence and anarchy, and the settlement of the wilderness
connected with the loss of significant values. These trends are already evident
in The Last of the Mohicans. Natty is younger, more heroic, and a far more
central character. The situation is one of violence, and the representatives of
civilization have become more effete and overrefined. In addition, the theme
of the vanishing wilderness is developed far more extensively in an elegiac
picture of the decline of the noble Delawares. Cooper still remains somewhat
ambiguous about whether the destruction of his noble savages is to be
attributed to a principle of violence in nature itself, as symbolized by the
diabolical Mingos, or is the result of the advance of white settlement. In the
end, he retreats to the old resolution of dynastic marriage, a resolution that in
this case hardly balances the tragedy of the deaths of Uncas and Cora.

The situation becomes even more ambiguous in The Prairie, which is, in
many ways, the darkest, most sinister, of the Leatherstocking Tales. In this
novel, the conflict between Leatherstocking’s natural freedom and the
parties discharged their pieces at the same instant, the concussions mingling in one report. The mountains indeed gave back but a single echo.\footnote{14}

Cooper's treatment of this scene gives it a very different interpretation than the twentieth-century western. In the contemporary western, the violent confrontation of the protagonist and his savage enemy represents the point at which the hero finally transcends the various uncertainties and reluctances that have prevented him from dealing with his antagonist. It is, in all but the most complex and serious westerns, a moment of supreme culmination and resolution in which good finally rises above the limitations of reality and triumphs over evil. For Cooper, however, this moment of violent action comes near the beginning of the story and it is initiation rather than culmination. Moreover, it is a moment of considerable ambiguity, for Natty's shooting of the Indian is followed by one of the most strange and haunting scenes in the history of the western. During his adversary's dying moments, Natty, in almost maternal fashion, cradles the Indian's head in his lap, assuring him that his scalp will not be taken and soothing the dying man and receiving in return his adult name, Hawkeye. Finally, with the death of the Indian, that ineffable melancholy, which is so much the sign of the older Hawkeye, settles down:

"His spirit has fled!" said Deerslayer, in a suppressed, melancholy voice. "Ah! me! Well, to this must we all come, sooner or later; and he is happiest, let his skin be of what color it may, who is best fitted to meet it. Here lies the body of no doubt a brave warrior, and the soul is already flying toward its Heaven or Hell, whether that be a happy hunting ground, a place scant of game, regions of glory, according to Moravian doctrine, or flames of fire! So it happens, too, as regards other matters. Here have old Hutter and Hurry Harry got themselves into difficulty, if they havn't got themselves into torment and death, and all for a bounty that luck offers to me in what many would think a lawful and suitable manner. But not a farthing of such money shall cross my hand. White I was born and white will I die; clinging to color to the last, even though the King's majesty, his governors, and all his councils, both at home and in the Colonies, forget from what they come, and where they hope to go, and all for a little advantage in warfare. No, no—warrior, hand of mine shall never molest your scalp, and so your soul may rest in peace on the p'int of making a decent appearance when the body comes to join it, in your own land of spirits."\footnote{19}

Many ambiguities flit in and out of this passage. Natty cannot but be glad to have killed the Indian, not only because in doing so he has saved his own life, but because he has proved his ability to act like a warrior when necessary, something that has been on his mind since the beginning of the novel. Yet at the same time he feels an unmistakable sadness at the event, and we cannot but see this killing, as many critics have pointed out, as a fall from innocence, a passage on Natty's part from a simple and spontaneous way of

life in harmony with the beauty and serenity of nature into a moral universe in which violence and death are inescapable, not only in the world but in oneself. From this point on Natty will never really be able to enjoy his beloved forest without knowing its dangers at the same time, just as henceforth in order to live with his noble Indian companion, Chingachgook, he will also have to commit himself to hatred and destruction of the savage Mingo. The episode also thrusts into prominence the conflict of loyalties and values that derive from Natty's position as a man between two cultures and races. His initiation into violence immediately confronts him with the division within himself; he is Indian enough to respect the warrior's way of life, but he cannot bring himself to adopt the Indian ethic and religion insofar as it contravenes Christian teachings against violence. Moreover, he knows from experience that the white culture as represented in such men as Thomas Hutter and Hurry Harry is even more meaninglessly violent than that of the Indians. Faced with this web of emotional and cultural conflicts within himself, Natty kills but finds he can take no real satisfaction in the deed. His ambiguity of values is so great that he cannot even decide on a way in which he can tell of the action to his dearest friend:

"If I was Injin-born, I might tell of this, or carry on the scalp, and boast of the exp'ite afore the whole tribe; or, if my inimy had only been even a bear, 'twould have been nat'ral and proper to let everybody know what had happened; but I don't well see how I'm to let even Chingachgook into this secret, so long as it can be done only by boasting with a white tongue. And why should I wish to boast of it a'ter all? It's slaying a human, although he was a savage."\footnote{19}

Similar ambiguities cluster around Natty's other triumphs. Though he receives the name of a warrior and proves his ability as a leader, he also discovers his immutable alienation from his own people, without, at the same time, being able to assimilate himself wholly into the Indian way of life. He becomes inextricably caught between cultures, a potentially great leader without a possible following. Natty enters on the adventures of The Deerslayer in company with Hurry Harry March, the white backwoodsman, and he leaves with his lifelong friend, the noble Indian Chingachgook, but in the course of the action he is neither white nor Indian. For the white culture, though it teaches Christian charity and love and sets up the imitation of Christ as its highest virtue, is represented in actuality by the rapacious avarice and selfishness of Hurry Harry and Tom Hutter, who spend most of the book trying to take Indian scalps for bounty. As Natty points out, there seems to be a basic contradiction in white society between Christianity and violence:

"all is contradiction in the settlements, while all is concord in the woods. Forts and churches almost always go together, and yet they're downright contradictions, churches being for peace and forts for war. No, no—give
me the strong places of the wilderness, which is the trees, and the churches, too, which are arbors raised by the hand of nature.”

In *The Pioneers* white settlement had its ambiguities, but it also had its great virtues, as represented by the benevolent public spirit of the Temple-Effingham dynasty and the increasing social harmony that rewarded their efforts. In this context, Natty’s rejection of the limitations of civilization seems understandable but not conclusive. Though Natty might not be able to fit comfortably into it, the benevolent and harmonious future of American civilization clearly outweighed the simple and natural virtues represented by the Leatherstocking and, as we have seen, associated with the faithful family retainer as well as the wilderness. In *The Deerslayer*, however, American civilization is represented by the rapacious and selfish violence of Hurry Harry and Tom Hutter, and by the sensual passion and materialism of Judith Hutter. The public-spirited gentry no longer lurk in the wings ready to transform the raw forces of the frontier into the peaceful and harmonious society of Templeton. In this context, Natty’s rejection of a role in the new civilization takes on a more heroic, if romanticized, meaning. The personal peculiarities of *The Pioneers* have been erected into idealized ethical principles against which the dominant drives of American settlement have been measured and found wanting. Instead of the story of pioneers creating a new and better society on the American frontier, *The Deerslayer* becomes an elegy for a lost Eden. The idealized new Adam is already obsolete. Judith Hutter sums up the sense of loss that pervades *The Deerslayer* in a conversation with her sister Hetty:

“We must quit this spot, Hetty, and remove into the settlements.”

“I am sorry you think so, Judith,” returned Hetty, dropping her head on her bosom, and looking thoughtfully down at the spot where the funeral pile of her mother could just be seen. “I am very sorry to hear it. I would rather stay here, where, if I wasn’t born, I’ve passed my life. I don’t like the settlements—they are full of wickedness and heartburnings, while God dwells unhurt in these hills! I love the trees, and the mountains, and the lake, and the springs; all that His bounty has given us, and it would grieve me sorely, Judith, to be forced to quit them. You are handsome, and not at all half-witted, and one day you will marry, and then you will have a husband, and I a brother, to take care of us, if women can’t really take care of themselves in such a place.”

“Ahh! if this could be so, Hetty, then, indeed, I could now be a thousand times happier in these woods than in the settlements! Once I did not feel thus, but now I do. Yet where is the man to turn this beautiful place into such a garden of Eden for us?”

By creating an increasingly idealized Natty Bumppo, Cooper joined the European tradition of pastoral to the historical violence and darkness of the American frontier. The result was a narrative pattern that symbolized his complex feelings about the meaning of American social development. As Cooper’s own doubts about the future of American society increased, so did the wisdom and virtue of his hero until in *The Deerslayer* the young Natty talks like a natural philosopher and behaves like an incarnation of the faithful shepherd. Yet, the action of the novel stresses violence. The fact of the matter is that the sweet, gentle lover of the woods is forced by the circumstances of his life to become a killer of men. How far from the pastoral ideal is the character described by D. H. Lawrence as “a man who turns his back on white society. A man who keeps his moral integrity hard and intact. An isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring man, who lives by death, by killing, but who is pure white.”

This striking combination of pastoral innocence with deadly violence became a central theme of *The Deerslayer*. It completed the transformation of the Leatherstocking series from the saga of advancing civilization in America into a strangely ambiguous adventure story about the hero’s loss of innocence. Originally Cooper had predicted that American society would progress from the primitive equilibrarian society of pioneers through a chaotic phase of social competition into a stable and benevolent social hierarchy. This final stage would be a civilization less refined, but more democratic and moral, than that of Europe. American advance on the West could be seen with some reservations as progress toward this admirable social state. The happy outcome of *The Pioneers* with its dynastic marriage symbolized the hope of this new society, the Temple-Effingham family playing the role of the new American gentry. But to read the Leatherstocking series from the perspective of *The Deerslayer* is to encounter a very different view of American civilization. When we follow the series in its fictional chronology beginning with *The Deerslayer*, it is at least possible to see the pioneers as dominated by violence, destruction and senseless waste. The action of *The Deerslayer* results largely from the avarice and brutality of Harry March and Tom Hutter, two backwoodsmen who bring on a fight with the Indians primarily because they want scalps for the bounty money. Into the vortex of their violence the gentle and innocent Natty Bumppo is sucked. Through this action the pastoral hero becomes implicated with society against his will. Society’s need for his skill in violence forces him into a role as participant in the destruction of the wilderness he loves. From this beginning, the rest of the Leatherstocking series can be seen as the hero’s increasingly frustrated attempt to rediscover the simplicity of innocence of his lost way of life, a quest that finally turns into headlong flight from civilization. In *The Prairie* he even takes a step that he had always rejected: he symbolically accepts kinship with the Indians by adopting the Pawnee warrior Hardheart as his son. At the last he dies among the Plains Indians, totally alienated from the society he has spent his life killing for.

So it is possible to see the Leatherstocking series in two contrary ways. From one angle, it appears to be an affirmation of the benevolent progress of American civilization; from another, it is an attack on that same civilization as measured against the natural nobility of a pastoral hero. David W. Noble
has suggested a most interesting way of reconciling these seemingly contrary themes. He argues that the story of Leatherstocking embodies the American myth of a new society based on nature confronted with the realities and limitations of human life. Leatherstocking's inability to marry, his life of violence, and his final flight symbolize the failure of the myth:

For Cooper, it was here on the great plains, during Jefferson's administrations, that the myth of the frontier perished because of the penetration of the last unknown territories by human beings, who, by their very presence, destroyed the mysterious potential of the virgin land. In the words of Professor Lewis, there no longer existed "space as spaciousness, as the unbounded, the area of total possibility." And from the first moment when Deerslayer was forced to participate in the disharmony of history "he has prepared for this moment. The five Leatherstocking novels are a sustained argument against the autonomous existence of an American Adam."

Professor Noble's interpretation does not take into account the changes in theme and pattern between The Pioneers and The Deerslayer and Cooper's increasing tendency to treat his backwoods hero as an idealized figure of wisdom and virtue. I am still inclined to agree with Henry Nash Smith and others that Cooper was a writer of basic contradictions and unresolved ambiguities: a firm believer in the ultimate value of simple Christianity, yet at the same time deeply committed to refined and sophisticated civilization; a lover of the wilderness and a devotee of gentility; at once a progressive and a conservative; quite able to see in man a natural moral instinct and at the same time certain of basic human depravity; an affirmer of the freedom and lawlessness of the forest and an upholder of law and social hierarchy. His Leatherstocking hero does seem to embody a lost possibility, a myth of human potentiality that cannot be realized in any conceivable social order, and yet Cooper seems to reject both the romantic view of man and the kind of open society in which such a man might rise to a high social level. His social ideal is a very traditional conception of order based on an established gentry class. These conflicting views never really get resolved, nor does Cooper push them to the point where their basic irreconcilability becomes evident. Instead, he invents narrative patterns in which it is possible to resolve the tensions associated with conflicting values without working out the conflicts themselves. For example, Natty's flight into the wilderness averts a real showdown between the values of nature and of civilization. Another instance is the treatment of violence in The Deerslayer. From the beginning Natty feels divided between the pacifism of his Moravian background and the code of violence that he shares with the Indians. Cooper does not ask us to face the irreconcilability of these values. Instead, in Deerslayer's showdown with the Indians, a reluctant but deadly hero has violence thrust upon him by a treacherous and irreconcilable adversary.

Even in the case of Natty's romance, this principle of avoiding the ultimate irreconcilability of values operates. The conflict here is between the values of domesticity—marriage, family, social respectability, and security—and the ideal of a free, unconstrained, masculine way of life. But Natty never really has to work this conflict out to a point of decision between his natural freedom and the lure of domesticity, neither in The Pathfinder nor The Deerslayer. In one case it turns out that the girl doesn't really love him, and in the other Natty does not love the girl.

Cooper's great popular success as well as his ultimate limitation as a serious writer lay in his refusal or incapacity to fully explore the dialectic of civilization and nature that his imagination generated. He felt the ambiguities of the American dream of a new society more keenly than most of his contemporaries, yet his mind was too conventional and satisfied with life in general to see these ambiguities in the tragic terms in which they would be developed by Hawthorne and Melville. Thus Cooper became the creator of a dialectic of action and a type of hero that in the hands of lesser writers could serve the purposes of popular escapist fantasy, resolving in fantasy the ideal of peaceful progress toward civilization and the impulse toward lawless freedom and aggressive violence. By creating a setting and a group of plot patterns through which the irreconcilable conflicts of society and individual freedom, of peaceful civilization and uncontrolled violence, could be resolved in action, Cooper brought the western into existence. We must now examine how some of his successors used his invention.

Nick of the Woods and the Dime Novel

The most important early novel of western adventure in the manner of Cooper, Robert Montgomery Bird's Nick of the Woods (1837), supposedly presented a "realistic" picture of Indian warfare in contrast to the noble savages of Cooper. Actually, Bird's novel greatly simplified Cooper's dialectic, glossing over the complexities in Cooper's treatment of the frontier. Thus it became a step in the direction of the dime novel.

One of the most important changes Bird made in Cooper's narrative pattern was to eliminate the noble savage altogether. He transformed Cooper's complex contrast between white civilizations and the natural ethic of the wilderness into a simple opposition of good and evil: decent pioneers trying to settle the wilderness and overcome the savage Indians. With this exception, Bird's cast of characters is basically the same as The Last of the Mohicans and The Prairie: the aristocratic lovers Roland and Edith Forrester match Duncan Heyward and Alice Munro; the half-caste Telie Doe whose father lives with the Indians resembles Cora Munro; Colonel Bruce and the Kentuckians represent the good pioneers, and Roaring Ralph Stackpole symbolizes the kind of frontier anarchist Cooper portrayed in Ishmael Bush. Most important of all, the Leatherstocking figure, torn between Christian pacifism and deadly violence, appears in the role of Nathan Slaughter, the Quaker Indian-hater. The action, too, resembles Cooper with its central focus on flight and pursuit, framed by aristocratic romance and dynastic
plots. Bird develops a complicated story that springs from the theft of a will. In consequence the hero is deprived of his aristocratic heritage. The villain tries to eliminate the hero and mar the heroine by using the savage Indians to accomplish his desires. Thus, being rescued from the Indians also involves the elimination of the villain and the recovery of a great inheritance, to say nothing of a happy marriage between hero and heroine.

Though his characters and plot derive from Cooper's example, Bird treats them in such a way as to resolve the ambiguities of Cooper's dialectic and to affirm clearly the virtues of American civilization. The Indians become diabolical savages without any redeeming qualities. There is no sense that natural values are being lost in the advance of civilization. As Bird says in his preface:

The North American savage has never appeared to us the gallant and heroic personage he seems to others. The single fact that he wages war—systematic war—upon beings incapable of resistance or defence,—upon women and children, whom all other races in the world no matter how barbarous, consent to spare,—has hitherto been, and we suppose, to the end of our days will remain, a stumbling-block to our imagination; we look into the woods for the mighty warrior ... rushing to meet his foe, and behold him retiring, laden with the scalps of miserable squaws and their babes.22

In addition, the aristocratic hero no longer seems, like Cooper's gentleman, vaguely incompetent in the woods. Roland Forrester, the hero of Nick of the Woods, possesses both an aristocratic background and the energy and adaptability of a self-made man. Bird completely avoids any ambiguous comparisons such as that between Uncas and Duncan Heyward in The Last of the Mohicans that might cast doubt on the capacity of his hero to be equally at home in the drawing rooms of his native Virginia or on the dark and bloody ground of the Kentucky frontier. Nor does he pose any basic questions about the relation between Christian pacifism and the war against Indians. Though his Nathan Slaughter embodies this contradiction—like Natty he has a Christian pacifist upbringing but is a committed destroyer of Indians—Bird resolves the contradiction between belief and action. Since Slaughter has been driven mad by the Indian's massacre of his family, his savage assaults on the Indians and the contradictions between his violent behavior and the pacifist beliefs he continues to assert are justified by the savagery of the Indians and Slaughter's own anguished mental state.

The dime novel carried this reduction of Cooper's dialectic of civilization and nature still further in the direction of simple moral opposition. Only a skeletal residue of Cooper's ideal of natural simplicity remains in Seth Jones (1860), one of the earliest successful dime novels. Though most of the male characters are presented to us as "nature's noblemen," the term has evidently ceased to mean anything other than that the character is strong, healthy, and vigorous. The idea that there is a way of life or a set of moral values associated with nature and opposed to civilization simply doesn't enter the picture. In fact, the first of the various "nature's noblemen" we encounter in Seth Jones is chopping down a tree and when asked why he has come out to the frontier, he replies, "Enterprise, sir; I was tired of the civilization portion of the country, and when such glorious fields were offered to the emigrant as have here spread before him, I considered it a duty to avail myself of them."23 Such incidents suggest that nature has become identified with the gospel of success. The dialectic between civilized aristocrat and backwoodsman so important to the Leatherstocking series has been translated into the mythical terms of disguise. The central character of the book, though apparently a rough backwoodsman, continually gives hints that he is not what he seems. One such incident is surely one of the great moments in popular literature. Seth, who has been captured by Indians while trying to rescue the heroine, leaves the following message scratched on a flat stone in a brook where it is found by the girl's father and sweetheart:

Hurry forward. There are six Indians, and they have got Ina with them. They don't suspect you are following them, and are hurrying up for village. I think we will camp two or three miles from here. Make the noise of the whippowil when you want to do the business, and I will understand.

Yours, respectfully.

SETH JONES24

Such a master of epistolary form could hardly be just a simple backwoodsman. It is no surprise when, at the end of the story, Seth is revealed as the dashing young Eugene Morton, Revolutionary War hero and scion of a distinguished New England family.

Henry Nash Smith points out that Seth Jones's disguise is "a neat maneuver for combining the picturesque appeal of the 'low' hunter with the official status of the 'straight' upper-class hero."25 As Smith suggests, such devices undercut the Leatherstocking character's significance as a symbol of natural virtue opposed to the artificialities and constraints of civilization.

Through such developments, the dime novel moved the western away from Cooper's ambiguous examination of the discrepancy between the American dream of a new society and the reality of greed and violence on the frontier. During the heyday of the dime novel the western developed primarily as a form of adolescent escapism, complete with the simple moral conflicts and stereotyped characters and situations usually found in such literature. The western setting, instead of being the place where advanced civilization confronts the virgin wilderness, gradually developed a new set of connotations.

Edward L. Wheeler's Deadwood Dick on Deck, or Calamity Jane, the Heroine of Whoop-up (1878) illustrates the full-blown dime novel. The story of this novel exemplifies the common principle of pulp literature that incident takes precedence over plot, i.e., that it is more important to have a lot of exciting actions than to have them clearly related to each other. In such a narrative characters exist less for the purpose of confronting difficult moral
or human problems than for getting into and out of scrapes. Thus, instead of a single line of action, *Deadwood Dick on Deck*, despite its brevity, contains at least five strands of plot that intersect at various points. The brew is further thickened by the fact that almost all the main characters are in disguises of one kind or another. The hero, Earl Beverly, of the distinguished Virginia Beverlys, has come West because he mistakenly believes himself guilty of murder and forgery. Disguised as Sandy the miner, he hopes to make a new life. He is pursued by the man who had originally led him into temptation, the rich but evil Honorable Cecil Grosvenor, who, for reasons never made too clear, still wishes to destroy Sandy. The conflict between Sandy and Cecil becomes further complicated when Sandy makes friends with a girl who has disguised herself as a man. Under the name of Dusty Dick, this young lady becomes known as Sandy’s “pard.” Dusty Dick, coincidentally, is also fleeing from Cecil, who had tricked her into marriage before she discovered his true character. The triangle Sandy-Dusty Dick-Cecil Grosvenor is resolved at the end when another character in disguise turns out to be a detective who has discovered that Sandy is innocent of the crimes he thought he had committed. In addition, Cecil’s marriage to Dusty Dick turns out to be invalid because—second plot strand—the villain’s real wife shows up to controvert him. She is Mad Marie, the highwaywoman, who fits mysteriously around the periphery of the narrative until it is time for her to play her role. The third strand involves Calamity Jane and the Danite ghoul, Arkansas Alf, a vicious outlaw and Cecil’s henchman. Calamity seeks revenge against Arkansas Alf because he has committed some horrible but nameless offense against her. Fourth, we have the complex relationship between the other characters and the lady who is usually referred to as “the beautiful blonde proprietress of the Castle Garden, Madame Minnie Majilton.” Madame Minnie loves Sandy, who loves Dusty Dick. Cecil lusts after Madame Minnie, but is scorned, which adds more fuel to the fires of his vengeful spirit. To wrap up all these complications requires a transcendent hero indeed. The fifth strand is, believe it or not, none other than Deadwood Dick, who, disguised as Old Bullwhacker, the “regulator,” always manages to appear on the scene in time to help get the situation straightened out.

Aside from the usual perilous scrapes, flights, captures, and battles, *Deadwood Dick on Deck* places great emphasis on disguises and on an elaborate play with sexual roles. In *Deadwood Dick on Deck* disguises fly so thick and fast that in one episode we find Calamity Jane disguised as Deadwood Dick disguised as an old man. She is unmasked by Deadwood Dick himself disguised as somebody else. This play with disguises has always been a vital part of children’s literature. Perhaps young people who are having social roles thrust upon them in the process of growing up find a great fascination in disguises because a disguise is a role that can be put off when it is no longer wanted. Thus such stories enable adolescent readers to participate imaginatively in the process of putting on and taking off roles at will, a kind of experimentation without commitment that may help ease some of the tensions associated with the increasing pressure on the young person to undertake a permanent social role. Such reflections seem to be borne out by the treatment of sex in these books. In one sense, there is no sex at all in the dime novels; everything is very pure, and one cannot imagine a hero being unchaste. Yet, at the same time, the hero is usually a center of female admiration. At one point beauteous blonde Madame Minnie Majilton tells Sandy:

I mean that three women in this very town adore you—worship you as the only perfect man in the mines. First of all is Dusty Dick, who has got you into all this trouble in the eyes of your friends; secondly, ranks that eccentric daredevil girl, Calamity Jane. She probably loves you in the fiercest, most intense manner. I fill the third place myself. I am beautiful, and of a most generous, impulsive nature—the very woman suited to you. I have money, independent of yours. I have brought you here to ask you to marry me. Earlier to-day Cecil Grosvenor proposed and I refused him. I want you, Sandy—will you take me?

Unfortunately for the success of her suit, Madame Minnie forgets that no self-respecting young American hero could possibly accept such an aggressive and independent woman, particularly one who runs a dance hall. Where Madame Minnie represents an overly aggressive feminine sexuality, Calamity Jane plays the part of an overly masculine woman. It is the sweet and clinging Dusty Dick who is our hero's true and appropriate love, but, interestingly enough, she must play a transvestite before the romance can blossom. Again this seems to make sense in terms of an adolescent reader’s psychological needs. A figure like Dusty Dick can be both boyish companion and sexual object, easing in fantasy the uncertainty that accompanies the adolescent’s increasing awareness of girls in sexual terms. The figure of the boyish woman or the woman who takes a man’s role before changing into a lover plays an important role in many later westerns.

This kind of resolution in fantasy of the sexual and status anxieties characteristic of adolescents does not, on the surface at least, have anything to do with the West. In fact, the same themes frequently appear in other forms of literature aimed primarily at adolescents, including the Alger books and the Rover boys. Certain aspects of the western setting as defined by Cooper and his followers were particularly appropriate to the presentation of these themes. The West had a mythical aura that neither the nineteenth-century city nor the small town could match. It was a setting in which transcendent heroes, disguises, and perilous scrapes could be more believably generated because it had the quality of romantic distance. Moreover, the dime novelists could characterize the West as a place where peer group relationships dominated the social order. The Wild West thus became the locus of an adolescent dream society without the complex institutions and restrictions on impulsive freedom associated with the East. In line with this development,
the favorite villain was a figure associated with the corrupt institutions and artificial social roles of the East. In *Deadwood Dick on Deck*, the chief villain is an eastern politician and crooked banker while the true-blue hero has fled the East because in its corrupt society he has been branded a criminal:

"in the eyes of the law I am a criminal—a forger, and an accused murderer. You heard Cecil Grosvendor throw it up in my face; it is the only weapon he has to brand me with. If he were in the States, where law reigns supreme, he would have me more in his power."

The concept of the West as a society of comrades dimly reflects Cooper's dialectic of civilization and nature. The residual influence of Cooper's pastoral ideal can still be seen from time to time. For example, at the beginning of *Deadwood Dick on Deck*, the hero Sandy muses on the natural beauties of the West:

"Nowhere does Nature so forcibly illustrate the power of the Divine Creator as in the mountainous regions," Sandy muttered, as he gazed dreamily off through an opening between the mountain peaks. "I sometimes wonder how it is that people do not more devoutly worship God in His works."

*Deadwood Dick on Deck* shows not only a simplification of Cooper’s dialectic but a shift away from the opposition of civilization and nature that dominated Cooper's presentation of the West. First of all, the Indians are gone. *Deadwood Dick on Deck* is set in a mining town in the Black Hills, and its characters are entirely white. This contrasts sharply with an earlier dime novel like *Seth Jones* in which escape from Indians still furnishes, as in Cooper, the primary source of the action. While many later dime novels deal with Indian warfare, the Indian has become an item of furniture rather than an opposing force. In Cooper, while the Indian is not exactly equivalent to Nature, he represents a way of life that has a natural simplicity and dignity and is therefore opposed to both the refinement of high civilization and the greed and avarice of the advancing pioneers. Cooper's version of the Indian way of life presents a significant moral alternative to white civilization. Thus, the noble Mohicans, Uncas and Chingachgook, embody a pastoral critique of the artificiality, vanity, and selfishness of white civilization. Even Cooper's Indian villains, the savage Mingos, suggest an awesome natural force. In *Seth Jones*, the only thing left to the Indians is savagery, while the later dime novel tends to eliminate even that, giving the role of savage to white outlaws.

These changes reflect a new meaning of the West. Cooper's image of the West as a place of encounter between civilization and nature gave way to the portrayal of the West as an open society where the intricacies of complex social institutions are unknown, where people are surrounded by loyal friends, where hearty individualists can give vent to their spontaneous urges, and where justice is done directly and without ambiguity. The dime novel West is also a place of excitement and color; it is, to use the current phrase,
Like Cooper, Wister was a man of upper-class background who found himself in a world in which the status of his class seemed increasingly tenuous. As White has shown in *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience*, Wister's childhood experience and cultural situation rather closely paralleled that of two friends who also became early twentieth-century apostles of the West, Frederic Remington and Theodore Roosevelt. All three men came from established eastern families, felt a sense of the loss of family position, underwent neurotic crises in their youth, and found personal regeneration in the West. Wister became the exponent of the West in fiction, Remington its artistic interpreter and the illustrator of many of Wister's books, while Roosevelt created a political symbolism that drew heavily on the western mystique. Wister dedicated his major western novel to Roosevelt.

Undoubtedly, Wister's own sense of regeneration in the West was reflected in his portrayal of a young man who has left a decaying Virginia to find a new life in Wyoming and of a New England heroine who is transformed by her western experience. Wister's new treatment of the West depended on literary precedent as well as personal experience and need. Wister's version of the West caught on with the public because it synthesized a number of important cultural trends into the archetypal form of adventure. While Wister certainly knew Cooper and probably had some awareness of the dime novel tradition, another literary development had an important influence on his portrayal of the West. Along with the dime novel, there emerged in the later nineteenth century a new kind of western literature that, unlike most of the western adventure stories, was written by men with an actual experience of the area. The humorous, satirical, sometimes sentimental sketches written by Bret Harte, Mark Twain, and Stephen Crane, and their numerous imitators embodied an image of the West far different from Cooper's romantic wilderness. This new version of the frontier was social rather than natural, and it was of a society distinctively different from that of the East, to the point that a new kind of dialectic began to operate, replacing the opposition of nature and civilization by a cultural dialectic between the East and the West. Twain's *Roughing It* satirically embodies this tension in its portrayal of the narrator as greenhorn being initiated into the new society of the West. Twain was far too familiar with his subject to make a heroic romanticization of this new society. In *Roughing It*, western life has its delights, but it is also profoundly corrupting. As the narrator becomes acclimated to its animalistic brutality, he is bitten by the get-rich-quick fever; his mad pursuit of wealth in the mining country drives all other ideas from his mind. When the bust comes, he can barely muster enough energy and interest in life to go back to work for a living:

After a three months' absence, I found myself in San Francisco again, without a cent. When my credit was about exhausted (for I had become too mean and lazy, now, to work on a morning paper, and there were no vacancies on the evening journals), I was created San Francisco correspondent of the *Enterprise*, and at the end of five months I was out of debt, but my interest in my work was gone; for my correspondence being a daily one without rest or respite, I got unashamedly tired of it. I wanted another change. The vagabond instinct was strong upon me.

The key to the West as Twain portrayed it in *Roughing It* was not nature, but a new kind of social order in which the traditional restraints were off and the hierarchy changed every day as one man's claim played out and another struck it rich.

In the early days a poverty-stricken Mexican who lived in a canyon directly back of Virginia City had a stream of water as large as a man's wrist trickling from the hillside on his premises. The Ophir Company segregated a hundred feet of their mine and traded it to him for the stream of water. The hundred feet proved to be the richest part of the entire mine; four years after the swap its market value (including its mill) was $1,500,000.

Twain himself was fascinated by this new society and the men it produced. *Roughing It* is full of humorous, colorful, fantastic, and even sometimes terrifying anecdotes about western life. Yet, at the same time that he feels its glamour and excitement, Twain cannot accept this life and its values without reservation. His ambiguity reveals itself clearly in his treatment of the very type that later western writers would so strenuously romanticize: the gunfighter. One such character, the desperado Slade, so intrigued Twain that he devoted two chapters to a discussion of the man's character. Occasionally Twain speaks of Slade in something resembling the accents of a dime novelist: "an outlaw among outlaws and yet their relentless scourge, Slade was at once the most bloody, the most dangerous, and the most valuable citizen that inhabited the savage fastnesses of the mountains." But in the final evaluation of the gunfighter there is none of the haze of romance that later clustered around this character. Instead, there is the complex puzzle of human behavior and its problematic moral significance, as Twain reflects on the strangely pathetic way in which Slade faced his execution:

There is something about the desperado nature that is wholly unaccountable—at least it looks unaccountable. It is this. The true desperado is gifted with splendid courage, and yet he will take the most infamous advantage of his enemy; armed and free he will stand up before a host and fight until he is shot to pieces, and yet when he is under the gallows and helpless he will cry and plead like a child.... Many a notorious coward, many a chicken-hearted poltroon, coarse, brutal, degraded, has made his dying speech with what looked like the calmest fortitude, and so we are justified in believing, from the low intellect of such a creature, that it was not moral courage that enabled him to do it. Then, if moral courage is not the requisite quality, what could it have been that this stout hearted Slade lacked?—this bloody, desperate, kindly-mannered, urbane gentleman, who never
hesitated to warn his most ruffianly enemies that he would kill them whenever or wherever he came across them next! I think it is a conundrum worth investigating.  

Harte was far more sentimental than Twain in his treatment of the West, though his basic emphasis was much the same: the West as a uniquely colorful society in which the traditional moral and social restraints no longer operated. But Harte was particularly fascinated with the way in which traditional middle-class values and attitudes might reappear in such a society among individuals who seemed to have left such virtues as domesticity, purity, and love far behind. Thus Harte's classic situation was the appearance in the wide-open mining camp of some symbol of traditional middle-class ideals—a baby, an innocent maiden, a feeling of true romantic love or self-sacrifice—and he delighted in tracing the impact of this symbol on the rough and lawless souls who encountered it. Thus his chief stock in trade was sentimental and, occasionally, ironic paradox. The brutal and violent miner gives his life in an attempt to save the baby from drowning. The innocent young girl dies in the arms of a prostitute and both are redeemed by the experience. The dance-hall girl who has nothing but contempt for the most handsome and virile men falls in love with a man who has been totally paralyzed in an accident and devotes her life to service as his nurse. Thus, for Harte, the Wild West was a place where people rediscovered and reaffirmed the most important values of life, a quality that would be central to the western romances of Wister and Zane Grey. Yet, despite his sentimentality, Harte had a darker and more complex view of life than would be characteristic of the modern western. In his stories, though the characters might be redeemed, it was usually too late. Their regeneration usually cost them their lives. It is interesting to compare Harte's most famous story, "The Luck of Roaring Camp," with two later westerns modeled on the same basic situation: Wister's novel *Lon Mclean* and John Ford's film *Three Godfathers*. All three of these works concern rough characters whose lives are changed when they become involved with a small child. In Harte's story, one gets the sense there is something inherently hostile to Roaring Camp's attempt to reform itself when the prostitute, Cherokee Sal, dies while giving birth to a child. Though the aura of the child transforms the camp from a slough of violent outcasts into a quiet and decorous place, nature itself rises against the experiment and camp, child, and all are swept away in a violent rainstorm. The story ends on a note of sentimental tragedy with the most violent and brutal of all the miners giving his life in a fruitless attempt to rescue the child. In Wister's novel and Ford's film, the result is almost the opposite. In both cases, responsibility for a child transforms the lawless cowboy who, after various trials and tribulations in the attempt to live up to his new duties, will clearly settle down into happy domesticity, having found a sweetheart to complete his newfound family. Thus, where Harte ultimately points up the almost irreconcilable paradox of lawless violence and the peaceful virtues of settled domesticity, Wister and Ford synthesize the two sets of values in a redemptive conclusion.

The twentieth-century western inherited from Harte, Twain, and other local colorists a new sense of the western setting as well as elements of humor and sentiment that would persist in such stock characters as those created by movie actors like Andy Devine and Walter Brennan. But, above all, what the western needed was a new hero. As writers came to treat the West not as the embodiment of nature but as a different social environment, the Leatherstocking hero, defined by his adherence to natural values and his flight from society, was not longer very appropriate. Actually, while the Leatherstocking figure became an important protagonist in the twentieth-century nonformulaic western epics of writers like A. B. Guthrie, Frederick Manfred, and Vardis Fisher, he tended to disappear from the formula western because the kind of values that he symbolized were not associated with the West of mining towns, cattle ranches, and farms. The benevolent outlaw, so beloved of the dime novel, was somewhat more a part of the new legend of the West, but this character was so obviously mythical that he could not operate much beyond the limits of the dime novel and later western pulps. Harte, Twain, and other western writers peopled the western town and gave a distinctive shape and character to its society, but they were not primarily interested in heroes. Therefore it was, above all, Owen Wister who initiated the modern western by creating a hero type who belonged to the new image of the West but was, at the same time, in the tradition of transcendent heroism launched by Cooper. This new figure was the cowboy.

Wister certainly did not invent the cowboy-hero, but he did give this already popular figure a new thematic significance. Though the cowboy had already become an American hero through the dime novel, through newspaper stories, books, and plays about western figures like Wild Bill Hickok, Wyatt Earp, and General Custer and, above all, through the enormously popular spectacle of the *Wild West Show*, Wister, in *The Virginian*, created a story that related the cowboy-hero to a number of important social and cultural themes. The novel begins with the relationship between the narrator and the Virginian, the first of a number of studies in cultural contrast between East and West. The narrator, a somewhat effete easterner on his first visit to friends in the West, encounters the Virginian at the railway station of Medicine Bow when he disembarks for the long overland journey to the ranch of his friend, Judge Henry. The Virginian, a cowboy on the Henry ranch, has been delegated to meet the "tenderfoot." Their first encounter immediately establishes the basic contrast between East and West. The easterner is tired and confused. The railroad has somehow misplaced his trunk, and he feels utterly cast adrift in a savage wilderness.

I started after [the train] as it went its way to the far shores of civilization. It grew small in the unending gulf of space, until all sign of its presence was gone save a faint skein of smoke against the evening sky. And now my lost
trunk came back into my thoughts, and Medicine Bow seemed a lonely spot. A sort of ship had left me marooned in a foreign ocean; the Pullman was comfortably steaming home to port, while I—how was I to find Judge Henry's ranch? Where in the unfeatured wilderness was Sunk Creek?  

In the midst of the narrator's despair, the Virginian politely introduces himself with a letter from Judge Henry. When the narrator adopts a condescending and familiar attitude toward this "slim young giant" who radiates an air of "splendor despite his 'shabbiness of attire,'" he is met by a sharp but civil wit that shakes him to the core and leads him to his first realization about the West: that this is not simply a savage wilderness but a land where the inner spirit of men counts more than the surface manners and attitudes of civilization. In such a setting a man must prove his worth by action and not by any assumed or inherited status:

This handsome, ungrammatical son of the soil had set between us the bar of his cold and perfect civility. No polished person could have done it better. What was the matter? I looked at him and suddenly it came to me. If he had tried familiarity with me the first two minutes of our acquaintance, I should have resented it; by what right, then, had I tried it with him? It smacked of patronizing; on this occasion he had come off the better gentleman of the two. Here in flesh and blood was a truth which I had long believed in words, but never met before. The creature we call a gentleman lies deep in the hearts of thousands that are born without chance to muster the outward graces of the type.

After this realization, the narrator soon comes to a new view of the West. Despite the appearance of wilderness or squalor, this landscape is a place where deep truths of human nature and life, hidden in the East by the artifices and traditions of civilization, are being known again. Soon he begins to see the apparent chaos and emptiness of Medicine Bow in very different terms:

I have seen and slept in many like it since. Scattered wide, they littered the frontier from the Columbia to the Rio Grande, from the Missouri to the Sierras. They lay stark, dotted over a planet of treeless dust, like soiled packs of cards. Each was similar to the next, as one old five-spot of clubs resembles another. Houses, empty bottles, and garbage, they were forever the same shapeless pattern. More forlorn they were than stale bones. They seemed to have been strewn there by the wind and to be waiting till the wind should come again and blow them away. Yet serene above their futility swam a pure and quiet light, such as the East never sees; they might be bathing in the air of creation's first morning. Beneath sun and stars their days and nights were immaculate and wonderful.

Just as the purity of the landscape redeems the seeming squalor of the town, so the inner nobility of the cowboys illumines their apparent wildness:

Even where baseness was visible, baseness was not uppermost. Daring, laughter, endurance, these were what I saw upon the countenance of the cowboys. And this very first day of my knowledge marks a date with me. For something about them, and the idea of them, smote my American heart, and I have never forgotten it, nor ever shall, as long as I live. In their flesh our natural passions ran tumultuous; but often in their spirit sat hidden a true nobility, and often beneath its unexpected shining their figures took a heroic stature.

Wister's image of the West is dominated by the theme of moral regeneration. To some extent, his treatment of this theme reflects a primitivism not unlike Cooper's. Because civilization and its artificial traditions have not yet taken a firm hold in the West, the influence of nature is more strongly felt in that "pure and quiet light, such as the East never sees." But the influence of nature is less important for Wister than the code of the western community, a distinctive set of values and processes that is in many respects a result of the community's closeness to nature but also reflects certain basic social circumstances. Because institutional law and government have not yet fully developed in the West, the community has had to create its own methods of insuring order and achieving justice. As Judge Henry explains when the heroine is distressed by vigilante justice, the code of the West is not inimical to law. On the contrary, the vigilantes represent the community acting directly, instead of allowing its will to be distorted by complex and easily corrupted institutional machinery. Of course, Judge Henry insists this situation will change when civilization reaches the West, yet in his praise of the principle of vigilante justice, the judge intimates that the western type of direct action is not merely a necessary expedient, but a rebirth of moral vitality in the community:

In Wyoming the law has been letting our cattle-thieves go for two years. We are in a very bad way, and we are trying to make that way a little better until civilization can reach us. At present we lie beyond its pale. The courts, or rather the juries, into whose hands we have put the law, are not dealing the law. They are withered hands, or rather they are imitation hands made for show, with no life in them, no grip. They cannot hold a cattle-thief. And so when your ordinary citizen sees this, and sees that he has placed justice in a dead hand, he must take justice back into his own hands where it was once at the beginning of all things. Call this primitive, if you will. But so far from being a defiance of the law, it is an assertion of it—the fundamental assertion of self-governing men, upon whom our whole social fabric is based.

As presented by Wister, the code embodies the community's moral will but it also gives full weight to the importance of individual honor. Since the fundamental principles of honor and the will of the community transcend responsibility to the official agencies of government and the codified, written law, the Virginian finds it incumbent upon him to participate both in a lynching and a duel, illegal actions according to the written law, but recognized by all his fellow western males as inescapable obligations. The
Virginian's difficulties do not come from the demands of the code. Though the actions it requires of him are dangerous, they cause him little inner conflict. His real problem is that he has fallen in love with the eastern schoolteacher, Molly Wood. Women pose a basic threat to the code, because they are the harbingers of law and order enforced by police and courts, and of the whole machinery of schools and peaceful town life. These institutions make masculine courage and strength a much less important social factor. The Virginian becomes increasingly aware of the danger his love poses to the code, and at one point his love makes him break with the code, by explaining to Molly the villainy of another man:

Having read his sweetheart's mind very plainly, the lover now broke his dearest custom. It was his code never to speak ill of any man to any woman. Men's quarrels were not for women's ears. In his scheme, good women were to know only a fragment of men's lives. He had lived many outlaw years, and his wide knowledge of evil made innocence doubly precious to him. But to-day he must depart from his code, having read her mind well. He would speak evil of one man to one woman, because his reticence had hurt her. 41

But if the hero's romantic interest in the schoolmarm tends to draw him away from the code, his struggle with the villain Trampas reaffirms his dedication to it and ultimately demonstrates what seems to be Wister's main thesis: that the kind of individual moral courage and community responsibility embodied in the code is a vital part of the American tradition and needs to be reawakened in modern American society. Romance and the struggle against villainy are interspersed throughout the novel. At the very beginning of the novel, the Virginian confronts Trampas over a card game and puts him down with the immortal phrase, "When you call me that, smile!" This supremely cool challenge, which forces on Trampas the necessity of choosing either to draw his gun or back down, illustrates an important aspect of the code—one must never shy away from violence, but at the same time never bring it on by one's own actions. Honor cannot be compromised, but the true hero, as opposed to a lawless man like Trampas, always lives within distinct moral limits. He never fights out of anger or even from a desire for glory, but only when he must preserve his own honor or enact the community's just sentence. In this initial incident, the Virginian is supremely in control of himself and no inner conflict gives him any doubt about the proper course of action. But it is not long before the snake enters this garden of honorable masculinity. Careering across the countryside in a stagecoach driven by a drunken driver, Miss Molly Stark Wood of Bennington, Vermont, descendant of revolutionary heroes, is nearly tumbled into a dangerously high creek before a dashing man on horseback rides out of nowhere and deposits her safely on the other shore. After saving her life, a gallant gentleman can hardly avoid falling in love with the lady. When they meet again, some time later, the Virginian announces his determination to make Molly love him, even though she has just finished unmercifully roasting him for his part in some masculine high jinks. Thus begins the conflict between the masculine code of the West and the genteel ideas of civility that Molly carries with her from the East.

Wister develops the Virginian's courtship of Molly and his conflict with Trampas in counterpoint until the two lines of action intersect and the Virginian must choose between his two commitments. Molly is at first quite resistant to the Virginian's courtship. Her eastern manners and beliefs make her recoil at what seems to be the Virginian's crudity, childishness, and lack of civility. When she discovers that, despite his lack of formal education and social graces, the Virginian has an instinctive gentility as well as a strong native intelligence, she begins to become interested in him. We have already seen the narrator of the book go through a similar process. Molly's eastern prejudices against the West and her inability to conceive of the idea that a Wood of Bennington, Vermont, might marry a cowboy still defend her against the Virginian's love until a dramatic incident completely changes her attitude. On his way to a rendezvous with Molly, the Virginian is attacked and left for dead by a marauding band of Indians. (Note how in Wister, as in many later dime novels, the Indian has become a narrative convenience rather than a central element of the story.) When the Virginian does not appear at the rendezvous, Molly rides out along the trail and finds him seriously wounded. Wister represents this as a great moment of truth for Molly. Casting off her demure gentility, she summons up the courage and daring of her revolutionary ancestors, rescues the Virginian, and nurses him back to health in her cabin. This experience is the first real step in the westernizing of Molly, which Wister sees as a kind of atavistic return to the spirit of her ancestors. In this way, Wister suggests that the West is not entirely a new cultural experience, but a rebirth of the revolutionary generation's vigor.

Along with this awakening of the deeper instincts in her blood, Molly's love for the Virginian blossoms and she agrees to marry him. Now the story moves toward the final confrontation between Molly's eastern scheme of values and the code of the West. Trampas increasingly menaces the good community of the ranch. When he tries to persuade the ranch crew to go off hunting gold, he is outwitted by the Virginian. In response, he leaves the ranch and turns rustler, carrying along two of the Virginian's former friends to be members of his gang. The code of the West swings into action against the rustlers. Judge Henry, the ranch owner, makes the Virginian leader of a posse charged with the capture and execution of the rustlers. The Virginian must reluctantly join in the lynching of his former friend Steve, while Trampas escapes and succeeds in eluding further pursuit. Finally, Trampas returns to town and the Virginian prepares to meet his challenge to individual combat. Molly insists that the Virginian refuse to fight Trampas or she will break off their engagement and return to the East. Caught in this conflict of love, duty, and honor, the Virginian does not hesitate. He explains to Molly
why the code of masculine honor must always take precedence over other obligations:

"Can't you see how it must be about a man? It's not for their benefit, friends or enemies, that I have got this thing to do. If any man happened to say I was a thief and I heard about it, would I let him go on spreadin' such a thing of me? Don't I owe my own honesty something better than that? Would I sit down in a corner rubbin' my honesty and whisperin' to it, 'There! there! I know you ain't a thief'? No, seh; not a little bit! What men say about my nature is not just merely an outside thing. For the fact that I let 'em keep on sayin' it is a proof I don't value my nature enough to shield it from their slander and give them their punishment. And that's being a poor sort of a jay."42

So the Virginian confronts Trampas, believing that his defense of his honor will lose him the woman he loves. But, of course, it doesn't work out that way. Once Molly sees her sweetheart in danger, she realizes that her love for him transcends all her moral compulsions. Their reunion follows:

The Virginian walked to the hotel, and stood on the threshold of his sweetheart's room. She had heard his step and was upon her feet. Her lips were parted, and her eyes fixed on him, nor did she move, or speak.

"Yu' have to know it," said he. "I have killed Trampas." "Oh, thank God!" she said; and she found her in his arms. Long they embraced without speaking, and what they whispered then with their kisses matters not.

Thus did her New England conscience battle to the end, and, in the end, capitulated to love. And the next day, with the bishop's blessing, and Mrs. Taylor's broadest smile, the Virginian departed with his bride into the mountains.43

The fourth main plot line of The Virginian is the story of his success. Like some grown-up Alger hero, the Virginian, beginning as a poor cowboy, is soon appointed foreman of Judge Henry's ranch. In that post, he meets the challenge of leadership and demonstrates his aspiration to rise in life by investing his wages in land so that he can become a rancher himself. At the end of the novel, we are assured that the Virginian will continue to rise and in due course become one of Wyoming's leading citizens.

What Wister did with his story of the Virginian was to synthesize Cooper's opposition of nature and civilization with the gospel of success and progress, thus making his hero both an exponent of natural law and of the major ideals of American society. This shift is particularly evident in Wister's treatment of the code of the West, which, as we have seen, is based on both the individual's sense of personal honor and the moral will of the community. In the final conflict with Trampas, the hero not only maintains the purity of his individual image but acts in the true interest of the community. Cooper was never quite able to resolve the conflict between Leatherstocking's commitment to the wilderness life and the advance of civilization. In one of his later novels, The Oak Openings, he attempted to create a protagonist who, like

the Virginian, would pass from the wilderness into society and become a success. But two things prevented Cooper from arriving at the kind of happy synthesis that Wister pulled off in The Virginian: first, Cooper could not imagine that the qualities that made a Leatherstocking so effective in the wilderness would also lead him to social success. Second, Cooper's view of civilization was still strongly enough permeated by traditional aristocratic assumptions that he did not consider it appropriate or even possible for a man to rise from the status of a frontiersman to that of a leading citizen in a single lifetime. Consequently, he made the protagonist of The Oak Openings a beehunter rather than an Indian fighter like Natty. Ben Boden's involvement in the wilderness is a matter of accumulating capital rather than a commitment to the life of nature. Once he has acquired enough of a stake to become a merchant, he turns his back on the wilderness. Cooper makes it clear that Ben is only the founder of a genteel family. At the end of the novel we are assured that it will take another generation for the rough edges to wear off before the Boden family will take its place with the gentry.

For Wister, however, the western hero possesses qualities that civilized society badly needs. It is not his lack of refinement that prevents the Virginian from assuming his rightful place as a social leader, but the shallow prejudices of an overrefined and effete society that has lost contact with its own most significant values. When the Virginian goes east to meet Molly's family, it is Molly's great aunt, the one closest to the family's revolutionary heritage, who understands and fully appreciates the Virginian's qualities. This representative of an earlier order sees the basic resemblance between the Virginian and General Stark, the founder of the family. Because of this she understands that the West is not a barbarous land, but a place where the original American traits of individual vigor, courage, and enterprise have been reborn: "There he is," she said, showing the family portrait. 'And a rough time he must have had of it now and then. New Hampshire was full of fine young men in those days. But nowadays most of them have gone away to seek their fortunes in the West."44

Thus Wister resolved the old ambiguity between nature and civilization by presenting the West not as a set of natural values basically antithetical to civilization, but as a social environment in which the American dream could be born again. As Wister summed up the message of his book in the "Rededication and Preface" that he wrote for a new edition:

If this book be anything more than an American story, it is an expression of American faith. Our Democracy has many enemies, both in Wall Street and in the Labor Unions; but as those in Wall Street have by their excesses created those in the Unions, they are the worst; if the pillars of our house fall, it is they who will have been the cause thereof. But I believe the pillars will not fall, and that, with mistakes at times, but with wisdom in the main, we people will prove ourselves equal to the severest test to which political man has yet subjected himself—the test of Democracy.45
There are many similarities between Wister's view of the West and Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis, for the two men were near contemporaries. Like Wister, Turner characterized frontier society in terms of revitalization. He argued that America's recurrent frontier experience was the source of many of the values and institutions of democracy, just as Wister, in The Virginian, portrayed the West as a place of social and cultural regeneration, where the vigor and enterprise of revolutionary America might be rediscovered. Turner saw the closing of the frontier and the growth of large industrial corporations, labor organizations, and governmental bureaucracies as signs that American culture was entering a new phase of development. Because he believed that the most important aspects of American democracy had depended on the open frontier, he feared that in the new institutional context these values might be lost. Similarly, Wister represented the West as an environment of decaying values and the West as a source of social and moral regeneration. His comments in the 1911 "Rededication" quotes above even suggest Turner's view of the danger of large organizations in the absence of an open frontier.

In actuality, however, Turner and Wister's views of the frontier were quite different. That one can find so much surface similarity between them suggests the extent to which both reflected certain widespread cultural preoccupations at the end of the nineteenth century: the final settlement of the continental United States, the growing awareness of the changes wrought by industrialism, the sense of moral decay in American life, the realization that America was changing from a predominantly rural to an urban society, and the search for some sense of reassurance and regeneration. We find the same preoccupations and the same fascination with America's frontier experience in individuals as diverse as Wister's dedicatee Theodore Roosevelt, who made the quest for national regeneration a basic topic of his political rhetoric, and in the sentimental religious novelist Harold Bell Wright, who wrote best-seller after best-seller by sending his jaded urban protagonists to the Ozark Mountains or the West in search of redemption. Turner, who stimulated American historical interest in the western experience, and Wister, who created the modern western romance, shared these preoccupations, but if we look more closely at their versions of the West we discover fundamental differences. For Turner, the most important aspect of the West was the way in which it maintained social fluidity and equality of opportunity, and because of this, transformed the mass of men into free individuals with hope and idealism for the future.

Most important of all has been the fact that an area of free land has continually lain on the western border of the settled area of the United States. Whenever social conditions tended to crystallize in the East, whenever Capital tended to press upon labor or political restraints to impede the freedom of the mass, there was this gate of escape to the free conditions of the frontier. These free lands promoted individualism, economic equality, freedom to rise, democracy... In a word, then, free lands meant free opportunities. Their existence has differentiated the American democracy from the democracies which have preceded it, because ever, as democracy in the East took the form of highly specialized and complicated industrial society, in the West it kept in touch with primitive conditions. For Wister, however, the real significance of the West lay not in the way that western social conditions transformed the mass of men, but in the revitalization of aristocracy. For him the rise of the Virginian symbolized the emergence of a new kind of elite capable of providing the vigorous and moral political leadership that America desperately needed. America, as Wister saw it, was as much a class society as any other country; the difference lay in the fact that the American elite was not determined by family status or traditional prerogative, but by inner worth tested in the competition between men.

There can be no doubt of this:
All America is divided into two classes,—the quality and the equality. The latter will always recognize the former when mistaken for it. Both will be with us until our women bear nothing but kings.
It was through the Declaration of Independence that we Americans acknowledged the eternal inequality of man. For by it we abolished a cut-and-dried aristocracy. We had seen little men artificially held down in low places, and our own justice-loving hearts abhorred the violence to human nature. Therefore, we decreed that every man should thenceforth have equal liberty to find his own level. By this very decree we acknowledged and gave freedom to true aristocracy, saying "Let the best man win, whoever he is." Let the best man win! That is America's word. That is true democracy. And true democracy and true aristocracy are one and the same thing. If anybody cannot see this, so much the worse for his eyesight.

Turner's West was that of a liberal progressive, and he laid considerable stress on the necessity for social action to "conserve democratic institutions and ideas" in a period when the natural safety-valve of free land would no longer operate to prevent the formation of rigid classes:
In the later period of its development, Western democracy has been gaining experience in the problem of social control. It has steadily enlarged the sphere of its action and the instruments for its perpetuation. By its system of public schools, from the grades to the graduate work of the great universities, the West has created a larger single body of intelligent plain people than can be found elsewhere in the world. Its political tendencies, whether we consider Democracy, Populism, or Republicanism, are distinctly in the direction of greater social control and the conservation of the old democratic ideals.

Wister's view of the future of western politics reveals a very different perspective:
When the thieves prevailed at length, as they did forcing cattle owners to leave the country or be ruined, the Virginian had forestalled this crime. The herds were driven away to Montana. Then, in 1892, came the cattle war, when after putting their men in office, and coming to own some of the newspapers, the thieves brought ruin on themselves as well. For in a broken country there is nothing left to steal."

If we ask how the same West that could produce the heroic Virginian and revitalize the eastern narrator and heroine could also be taken over by a gang of thieves, we see, I think, the essential conservatism of Wister's point of view. Where Turner sees the West as playing a fundamental role in the ongoing evolution of American democracy, Wister sees it essentially as a return to the true American aristocracy, a return that is threatened rather than enhanced by further social evolution. Wister admired the early stages of western development. He hoped the new elite, revitalized by their contact with the primitive strength and honor of the code of the West, would return and reform the corrupted East. His friend and hero, Theodore Roosevelt, seemed to be playing this role; though offspring of an aristocratic family, Roosevelt had lived in the West and had proved himself a man of courage and honor by western standards. Enormously vigorous and projecting a high sense of honor and morality, Theodore Roosevelt seemed able to articulate and embody the moral will of the people. Indeed, Roosevelt's career might be interpreted as a national embodiment of the same kind of democratic aristocracy that the Virginian symbolized in western terms. Yet it remained an open question for Wister whether the Virginian could overcome the "thieves" just as he was not sure whether Theodore Roosevelt could roll back the "political darkness" that "still lay dense upon every State in the Union [when] this book was dedicated to the greatest benefactor we people have known since Lincoln." Despite the success of his hero, there still remained an edge of the elegaic tone with which Cooper orchestrated his Leatherstocking series. For the society that had begun to evolve in the West after the disappearance of the cowboy looked ominously like that new American society that Cooper, too, hoped would be only a passing phase. All the romance and excitement and honor seemed to be gone:

What is become of the horseman, the cowpuncher, the last romantic figure upon our soil? For he was a romantic. Whatever he did, he did with his might. . . . The cowpuncher's unlovened hours did not unman him. If he gave his word, he kept it. Wall Street would have found him behind the times. Nor did he talk lewdly to women; Newport would have thought him old-fashioned. He and his brief epoch make a complete picture, for in themselves they were as complete as the pioneers of the land or the explorers of the sea. A transition has followed the horseman of the plains; a shapeless state, a condition of men and manners unlovely as that bald moment in the year when winter is gone and spring not come, and the face of Nature is ugly. I shall not dwell upon it here. Those who have seen it know well what I mean. Such transition was inevitable. Let us give thanks that it is but a transition, and not a finality."

But the elegaic tone is muted in Wister. Generally the note of triumph and synthesis rings clear, and it is to this that Wister probably owed the great success of his book and its capacity to spawn so immense a progeny. The Virginian brings together in harmony a number of conflicting forces or principles in American life and this synthesis and resolution of conflicting values is a literary exemplification of the principle of having your cake and eating it too. Wister's characters, actions, and settings have a surface verisimilitude, but it is moral fantasy that shapes character and action. Thus, a reader can enjoy a world in which things work out just as he wishes them to without any sense that this world is overly artificial or contrived. This principle so permeates the book that we can find examples at every level from particulars of style to the overall pattern of the action. Two passages quoted earlier, one of which describes the jerry-built ugliness of the western town against the serene and uplifting beauty of the landscape and the other the cowboy's inner nobility of spirit lying under his rude and seemingly amoral exterior, are good examples of the basic stylistic level. In just this fashion Wister constantly represents characters and setting through a synthesis of seeming commonness, ugliness, or violence with transcendent beauty and morality. On a larger scale, the character of the Virginian neatly combines verisimilitude and fantasy. In one sense the Virginian is the opposite of a traditional romantic hero. His origin is obscure, he has to work for a living, he likes to horse around and play practical jokes. He is far from chaste and pure, and in one of the first episodes in the novel Wister even suggests his involvement in an adulterous love affair. Yet, the Virginian is also a shining knight, a man of supreme integrity and purity, a chevalier without fear and without reproach. Such a combination is inescapably attractive and has been the delight of readers since 1902. Even today I find that cynical and sophisticated students are more often than not charmed by The Virginian, rather delighted, I expect, that its verisimilitude about little things allows them to accept a fantasy that otherwise they would feel compelled to reject. The Virginian also synthesized a number of other cultural conflicts. Just as Conan Doyle created a character of great fascination by bringing together in a single figure the diverging cultural symbols of the romantic artist and the scientist, Wister combined in the Virginian several conflicting images of American life: the Virginian is a new self-made man, but he is also a throwback to heroic types of the past like the medieval knight; he is a nascent entrepreneur and he marries a New England schoolteacher, but he is also a son of the old South and carries in his demeanor the chivalric ideals of the antebellum South; thus he represents a synthesis of the conflicting stereotypes of Cavalier and Yankee; he is a tough, fearless killer, skilled in violence, and a gentle lover and friend; and, finally, he is a supreme individualist of unstained honor, and yet a dedicated agent of the commu-
emphasize on extraordinary heroics and spectacular adventures. The evolution of the formula in these types of western is very slow and changes tend to be superficial rather than basic. A western novel written by Louis L’Amour in the 1960s is somewhat franker and more graphic in the portrayal of sex and violence, and perhaps somewhat more ambiguous about the moral qualities of its hero than one of the sagas of Max Brand from the 1920s, but the basic patterns of action and character will be similar. In these types of western, created for a special audience of western addicts, continuity is more valued than change. Just as in the case of the detective story, the true devotee prefers a new gimmick to a basic reorientation of the formula.

Yet even these more conservative types of western reflect to some extent the impact of changes that are more dramatically evident in the development of the “adult” western, where cycles of audience interest and disinterest tend to generate more fundamental changes in the formula. The process works something like this. While western devotees are likely to enjoy almost any version of the formula, the larger mass audience can make or break an expensive film production, a relatively complex novel, or a major television production. Thus while the pulp novel and the inexpensive film or television production appeal to a limited but constant audience, the big money comes from works that appeal to the general public, for these add to the basic western audience a number of other groups who are not ordinarily addicted to westerns. To attract this larger, more diverse public, western creators must not only work at a higher level of artistic effectiveness; they must manipulate the western formula so that it responds to the interests, values, and assumptions of people who are not so enamored of cowboy hats, horses, guns, and the other western paraphernalia that they will accept what seems a false or irrelevant picture of the world.

Because of this audience selectivity, the “adult” western appears to move through a cyclical process of evolution. A major new western or group of westerns attracts the attention of the large public and becomes a best-seller. Hoping to profit from the new vogue, other writers or filmmakers imitate the initial success by creating their own version of what they take to be the elements and patterns that account for its popularity. Eventually these imitations become so mechanical and uninspired that the public tires of them. At the same time public attitudes and interests change so that the current version of the formula continues to appeal only to the limited group of western devotees. From this point, profits and production will tend to fall off until a new version of the formula once again appeals to a large public and the cycle begins over again. Thus the development of the high-quality western in the twentieth century has been marked by a series of such cycles in which new “adult” westerns become temporarily appealing to the general public and then decline, only to be replaced by another version of the formula. The first such cycle followed on the success of Wister’s The Virginian and reached a peak in the early 1920s, declining after 1925. During this period writers like Harold Bell Wright, Zane Grey, and Emerson Hough...
achieved a consistent best-seller status with their western novels, and their success was mirrored in the great popularity in film of W. S. Hart, Tom Mix, and of such films as The Covered Wagon and The Iron Horse. The later twenties and the thirties was a period of great flourishing for the B westerns and the pulp story and novel but not for the "adult" western. Few western novels reached the best-seller list and the production of high-budget western films fell off significantly. W. S. Hart retired, and John Ford, whose Iron Horse was one of the great successes of the twenties, did not make another western until his 1939 Stagecoach.

The popular success of Stagecoach is generally considered to be the beginning of a new cycle of "adult" western films that reached a peak in the late forties and early fifties, when films like High Noon and Shane were among the most successful and esteemed productions of 1952 and 1953. Westerns continued to be highly popular throughout the 1950s and, with the adaptation of this new "adult" version to television series like "Gunsmoke" and "Bonanza," the western probably reached a high point of appeal to the general public in the later 1950s when eight of the top ten television series were westerns. It is clear from the films of the later 1950s that the patterns of the "classic" film of the forties and early fifties were beginning to break up. Through the early 1960s the number of television westerns dropped off. Though many high-budget westerns continued to be produced, few of them achieved the broad popular success of the earlier works of John Ford or of High Noon and Shane. Then, in the later 1960s, several striking new versions of the formula appeared in successful films like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, True Grit, The Wild Bunch, and Sergio Leone's Clint Eastwood series, and it appeared that another cycle was beginning.

To trace the evolution of the western formula in the twentieth century, and to draw some tentative hypotheses about its cultural significance, I will concentrate on these major cycles.

The two key figures of the period of great western popularity following Wister were the writer Zane Grey and the filmmaker W. S. Hart, for in these creators the dominant early twentieth-century version of the western formula came to fruition and achieved its greatest general popularity. Though many other western writers and filmmakers were important during this era, Grey and Hart produced what was unquestionably the most effective and successful work of the period 1910–25. Grey was not only the leading western writer but the single most popular author of the post-World War I era, with at least one book among the top best-sellers for almost ten years straight. Hart was eventually eclipsed by other western stars, particularly Tom Mix, but during his relatively short filmmaking career he was more the exponent of the "adult" western than any other single director or star. Grey and Hart never worked together, perhaps because Hart's work had begun to decline before Grey movies were being produced on a large scale (eventually over one hundred western films were based on Grey novels, several being produced in as many as four different versions over the years). Nevertheless, their works have so many points in common that it seems reasonable to view them as exponents of the same essential version of the formula. In fact, though he never appeared in a Grey film, Hart would have been the perfect embodiment of many of Grey's central figures with their mixture of maturity and innocence, of experience and purity, of shyness and latent violence. And many of Hart's stories could easily have been written by Grey, for they share the same plot patterns, the same kinds of characters and themes, the same aura of hard-bitten heroic adventure and surface concern for verisimilitude, mixed with a deep religiosity and sentimentalism.

Grey began his writing career with an attempt at historical romance in the mold of the early twentieth-century successes of Winston Churchill, but met with little public response. It was after, like Owen Wister, took a trip to the West and began to write of western adventures in the manner of The Virginian that his popular success blossomed. Hart came to films through the stage, and the stamp of Wister was on him, too, since one of his most successful roles had been in a dramatic adaptation of The Virginian. Hart certainly felt that his version of the West was more realistic than Wister's, and I suspect that Grey did, too. From today's perspective, the opposite seems to be the case. While Wister's novel remains fairly plausible, given the archetypal patterns of heroic adventure, the works of Hart and Grey seem like excessively sentimental and melodramatic treatments of Wister's formula of the drama of individual and social regeneration in the West.

Grey and Hart developed the western in several new directions, but their basic indebtedness to the formulaic structure embodied in The Virginian is quite clear. Like Wister, Grey and Hart portray the West as a distinctive moral and symbolic landscape with strong implications of regeneration or redemption for those protagonists who can respond to its challenge by recovering basic human and American values. As in The Virginian, the dialectic between the cultivated but enervated East and the vigorous, vital and democratic West plays an important role in their works, commonly shaping a plot line that deals with the developing love between hero and heroine. In many instances the heroine's commitment to eastern genteel values of culture and social order provide a major obstacle to the romance, since, despite her initial attraction to the hero, she is distressed by his apparent ignorance of the finer things and his code of violent individualism. Like Wister's Molly Wood, the heroines of Grey and Hart usually come around in the end, the deep force of their love driving them back into the hero's arms when his life is threatened. There are many other important thematic and structural similarities between Wister's Virginian and the novels and films of Grey and Hart: all place great emphasis on the unwritten and extralegal "Code of the West" as a basic factor in the hero's identity and in the specific problems he confronts in the course of the story; all tend to build their stories around patterns of gradually increasing violence moving toward a climactic confrontation between hero and villain in what has become the classic resolution of the shootout; each in his own way develops and elaborates the same quasi-allegorical landscape of town, desert, and
mountains and the same social and historical background of large cattle and sheep ranching with their attendant episodes of rustling, range wars, and wide-open towns. It is interesting to note that neither of these creators does very much with either the mining development of the West or with other types of agriculture such as wheat-raising or the family subsistence farm, probably because in the minds of both writers and their publics the uniqueness of the West and its difference from the rest of the country was most strikingly symbolized by the open-range cattle industry.

Despite their dependence on the Wister version of the western formula, Grey and Hart added important structural emphases and themes of their own. Along with other writers and filmmakers such as Harold Bell Wright, Emerson Hough, and Tom Mix, Grey and Hart were important contributors to the process by which the western formula, having passed from the adolescent fantasy of the dime novel to the more complex social and historical allegorizing of Wister, became in the first quarter of the twentieth century a popular mythology for grown-ups as well as children. Grey and Hart developed the qualities of melodramatic intensity that transformed the more sophisticated political allegory and social comedy of The Virginian into the incredible but immensely effective popular fantasies of Riders of the Purple Sage and Hell's Hinges. We can clearly see this process in operation in some of the new elements or emphases that Grey and Hart added to the formula, such as their treatment of the hero. Wister's Virginian, despite his skills in violence, was not a gunfighter or an outlaw. And, though he adhered to the unwritten law of the West, he was fully integrated into the community of the ranch and the town from the very beginning. As Grey and Hart developed their conception of the hero, however, he shed his close ties with society and became the more mysterious and alienated figure of the heroic gunfighter or outlaw. Grey's Lassiter, in Riders of the Purple Sage (1912), is probably the first widely successful version of the gunfighter in the western. Complete with fast draw, special costume, and a mysterious sinister past, Lassiter adumbrates such favorite western heroes of a later era as Shane, Destry, Doc Holliday, and Wild Bill Hickok. Hart, too, made something of a specialty of the heroic outlaw in figures like Draw Egan (The Return of Draw Egan) and Blaze Tracy (Hell's Hinges).

Unlike the Virginian, this new style western hero was typically an older man and very much a loner, at least at the beginning of his adventures. Even when he was not explicitly an outlaw, he was an outcast from society, either because of his violent past or his inability to settle down:

And he reflected that years of it had made him what he was—only a wild horse wrangler, poor and with no prospects of any profit. Long he had dreamed of a home and perhaps a family. Vain, idle dreams! The romance, the thrilling adventure, the constant change of scene and action, characteristic of the life of a wild-horse hunter, had called to him in his youth and fastened upon him in his manhood. What else could he do now? He had become a lone hunter, a wanderer of the wild range, and it was not likely that he could settle down to the humdrum toil of a farmer or cattleman. Yet, as is implicit in this confession, the Grey hero has a deep yearning to become part of society. This action—the domestication of the wild hero—was one essential subject of Grey and Hart's westerns. In their stories, a mature, hard-bitten hero with a violent past encounters a young woman with whom he falls in love. But there are serious obstacles to their love. As a good daughter of Wister's Molly Wood, the heroine initially rejects the hero's violence or, in some cases, finds herself committed by kinship or loyalty to the hero's enemies. There must be a climax of justifiable violence to eliminate the enemies and to overcome the heroine's scruples. In the end, hero and heroine are clearly on their way to marriage, a family, and a settled life thereafter.

The other great subject of the westerns of this period also takes off from a theme that was central to Wister. Grey and Hart were both fascinated by the idea of the West as a testing ground of character and idea. Time after time their stories represented a protagonist—usually female—whose personal qualities and attitudes, formed in the East, were challenged and tested in the western environment where situations of the most basic sort call upon the deepest resources of character and reveal what a person truly is. Grey's novels in particular are peopled with one heroine after another, who, searching for lost identity, finds regeneration and happiness in the West under the influence of its inspiring scenery, its opportunities for romance with a devastatingly glamorous and wild member of the opposite sex, and its purging, redemptive violence.

Though this basic pattern is obviously reminiscent of The Virginian, Grey and Hart invested it with mythical and melodramatic overtones that are quite different from the political allegory and social comedy surrounding the adventures of Wister's hero. Instead of Wister's explicit treatment of political and social issues like western vigilante justice, Grey and Hart place much greater stress on sexual and religious motifs. Their leading men and women typically combine hints of dazzling erotic intensity and prowess with an actual chastity, purity, and gentility that would hardly bring blushes to the cheek of a Victorian maiden. In presenting his heroines Grey loved to dangle a seemingly corrupted and soiled dove before the reader's eyes only to assure him that the lady in question was truly virginal, sweet, and bent on monogamous domesticity. Two favorite feminine types were the eastern sophisticate whose flirtations and artificialities soon give way to deep and powerful love for the hero, and the wild heroine who appears on the scene like a sexy nature girl but soon reveals that beneath her sassy manner, her artfully torn chemise, and apparent promiscuity beats a heart as pure as the driven snow.

The same melodramatic polarities characterize the Grey-Hart hero's erotic quality. He is typically mature, experienced, and an outcast, with a past that
hints not only at terrible deeds of violence but at smoldering erotic prowess. Sometimes he is suspected of perverse erotic relationships with Indian girls or Mexicans, relationships that by the racist attitudes of the period were ineffably fascinating and deeply disturbing. No decent girl could possibly be attracted to a man who ... Actually, it usually turns out that the hero’s seamy past is only a myth. Though he may be a killer, his sexual life has been, despite manifold temptations, above reproach. These erotic motifs and their treatment in Grey and Hart suggest on a more sophisticated level the curious fascination with sexuality that we found so prevalent in the earlier dime novels.

In presenting the developing romantic connection between hero and heroine, Grey and Hart typically create a strong tension between symbolic sexuality and actual purity. Hero and heroine are usually brought together by emotional forces beyond their control and often against their explicit wishes. In To the Last Man, for example, Jean Isbel and Ellen Jorth are members of opposing families in a feud, but from their first meeting they are irresistibly drawn together. At one point in their relationship, Jean leaves a small gift for Ellen, which she is reluctant even to look at. Grey’s description of her reaction to the little package is a good illustration of his technique of suggesting sexuality while maintaining chastity:

By and by she fell asleep, only to dream that the package was a caressing hand stealing about her, feeling for her, and holding it with soft, strong clasp. When she awoke she had the strangest sensation in her right palm. It was moist, throbbing, hot, and the feel of it on her cheek was strangely thrilling and comforting. She lay awake then. The night was dark and still. Only a low moan of wind in the pines and the faint tinkle of a sheep bell broke the serenity. She felt very small and lonely lying there in the deep forest, and, try how she would, it was impossible to think the same then as she did in the clear light of day. Resentment, pride, anger—these seemed abated now. If the events of the day had not changed her, they had at least brought up softer and kinder memories and emotions than she had known for long.57

For the ardent lovers of Grey and Hart, sex and religion are strangely intermixed. Sexual passion is treated as a semimystical moral and religious experience and is often associated with the redemptive and healing qualities of the simpler life and morally elevating landscape of the West. Georgianna Stockwell, the flapper heroine of Code of the West, at first scorns the simple, unsophisticated passion of Cal Thurman and the stringent western code of feminine behavior by which he and his family live. But she soon comes to see herself in a new perspective:

Stranger from the East ... she had come with her painted cheeks, her lipstick, her frocks, and her bare knees, her slang and her intolerance of restraint. She saw it all now—her pitiful little vanity of person, her absorption of the modern freedom, with its feminine rant about equality with men, her deliberate flirting habits from what she considered a pursuit of fun and mischief, her selfish and cruel desire to punish boys whose offense had been to like her.64

But now under the influence of her growing love for Cal Thurman, this flapper heroine becomes a new person:

Out of the pain of the succeeding days ... Georgianna underwent the developing and transforming experience of real love. It brought her deeper pangs, yet a vision of future happiness. It made her a woman. It relieved her burden. It decided the future.65

The same kind of total transformation takes place in the W. S. Hart character when he meets and falls in love with the heroine. Blaze Tracy, in Hell’s Hinges, is converted from a gambling, drinking outlaw into a Bible-reading, teetotaling pillar of the church by one sweet glance from the heroine, and much the same fate befalls other Hart heroes.

This curious combination of sexuality, romance, religion, and traditional middle-class social values with the idea of the West as challenge and regeneration gave a unique flavor to the western formula in the 1910s and 1920s. The location of these values in the West is particularly striking in light of the fact the Grey and Hart also portray it as the land of the gun and the saloon. In Hell’s Hinges, for example, the town is symbolically divided between the saloon and the church. Grey’s novels also frequently dwell on the violence, lawlessness, and immorality that characterize the West:

He had returned to an environment where proficiency with a gun was the law. Self-preservation was the only law among those lawless men with whom misfortune had thrown him. He could not avoid them without incurring their hatred and distrust. He must mingle with them as in the past, though it seemed his whole nature had changed. And mingling with these outlaws was never free from risk. The unexpected always happened. There were always newcomers, always drunken ruffians, always some would-be killer like Cawthorne, who yearned for fame among his evil kind. There must now always be the chance of some friend or ally of Setter, who would draw on him at sight. Lastly, owing to the reputation he had attained and hated, there was always the possibility of meeting such a gunman as Mr. Wood had spoke of—that strange product of frontier life, the victim of his own blood lust, who would want to kill him solely because of his reputation.66

In fact, the theme of violence in the West was much more intense in Grey and Hart than in Wister. However important violence may be to what happens in The Virginian, the actual quantity of mayhem is relatively small compared to the all-out range wars and violent clashes of rival groups that Grey and Hart delighted in: The image of cleansing, purging fire that Hart develops so dramatically in Hell’s Hinges is only an extreme example of the orgies of violence in such novels as To the Last Man, Riders of the Purple Sage, and
Chapter Eight

The U. P. Trail. Of course, violence has always been a crucial element of the western formula. For Cooper, it usually resulted from the clash between Indian and white and represented the conflict between the larger forces of nature and civilization. In The Virginian, the hero is forced into violent acts in order to uphold the community’s unwritten law and to defend his own code of honor. But Grey’s heroes tend to engage in still larger orgies of violence as avengers of the innocent and destroyers of evil. Their acts of violence are carried out with a kind of transcendent religious passion that might be seen as a sort of manic blood lust were it not in such a good and holy cause. There is perhaps no better image of this special presentation of violence than the climactic scene of W. S. Hart’s Hell’s Hinges in which the religious symbolism always just beneath the surface in Grey’s violent climaxes is made quite explicit as we watch Hart’s avenging angel with six-guns literally purge the devil’s lair by fire.

This intensification of violence is accompanied by a more mythical and symbolic treatment of the landscape in Grey and Hart. There is not, in the history of western literature, a purpler prose than that of Zane Grey. Much of his notoriously overwritten quality comes from lengthy paeans to the beauty, mystery, and moral force of the western landscape. Important as the western landscape was to Wister, his treatment of it is sober and restrained when put beside an analogous passage in Grey:

She looked, and saw the island, and the water folding it with ripples and with smooth spaces. The sun was throwing upon the pine boughs a light of deepening red gold, and the shadow of the fishing rock lay over a little bay of quiet water and sandy shore. In this forerunning glow of the sunset, the pasture spread like emerald; for the dry touch of summer had not yet come near it. He pointed upward to the high mountains which they had approached, and showed her where the stream led into their first unfoldings. . . . They felt each other tremble, and for a moment she stood hiding her head upon his breast. Then she looked round at the trees, and the shores, and the flowing stream, and he heard her whispering how beautiful it was. (Wister)\(^1\)

He felt a sheer force, a downward drawing of an immense abyss beneath him. As he looked afar he saw a black basin of timbered country, the darkest and wildest he had ever gazed upon, a hundred miles of blue distance across to an unfung mountain range, hazy purple against the sky. It seemed to be a stupendous gulf surrounded on three sides by bold, undulating lines of peaks and on his side by a wall so high that he felt lifted aloft on the rim of the sky. . . . For leagues and leagues a colossal red and yellow wall, a rampart, a mountain-faced cliff, seemed to zigzag westward. Grand and bold were the promontories reaching out over the void. They ran toward the westering sun. Sweeping and impressive were the long lines slanting away from them, sloping darkly spotted down to merge into the blank timber. Jean had never seen such a wild and rugged manifestation of nature’s depths and upheavals. (Grey)\(^2\)

Hart’s western landscapes are by no means visual equivalents to Grey’s, which are to some extent unique. Perhaps the closest thing in film to a passage like the above is found in some of John Ford’s dazzling long shots of Monument Valley. At least three of the central qualities of Grey’s landscapes are found in Hart—the feeling of vastness, emptiness, and wildness. These qualities, in Wister, are distinctly subordinate to those aspects of landscape that have a human dimension and impress. To put it another way, Wister’s western landscapes are often similar in character to the paintings of Remington and Russell that also focus on human activity against a spectacular background. In Grey, however, the landscape is more reminiscent of earlier painters like Albert Bierstadt or Thomas Moran in whose work the human image is swallowed up by the transcendent spectacle of mountainous vistas.

For Grey, and to a lesser extent for Hart, the western landscape becomes symbolic of the transcendent religious and moral forces of wilderness rather than, as in Wister’s case, an environment for a certain kind of human culture. This vision of the landscape, combined with the image of purgative violence and the religious-erotic treatment of hero and heroine, added a new dimension to the western formula in the work of Grey, Hart, and many of their contemporaries. Culturally, the popularity of this new version of the formula suggests that the West had come to have a new meaning for many Americans. First of all, by this time the West had become more important as a moral symbol than as a social or historical reality. Of course, the American view of the West had been strongly colored by allegory from the very beginning, but with the closing of the frontier and the passage of time the distance between writers, the public, and the events of the old West increased. Many of the qualities we have discerned in the work of Grey and Hart were exemplary of that ability to color history with romance and to clothe fantasy with verisimilitude that are of the essence of the successful formulaic creator’s skills.

The kind of cultural affirmations and resolutions that Grey and Hart set forth in their version of the western formula also probably played an important part both in their individual popularity and in the way in which the success of their work helped to establish the western as one of the primary twentieth-century American literary and cinematic formulas. In my view, it was their particular combination of western heroism and the wilderness, with certain traditional social patterns and values, that was the crucial element in their cultural significance. In the works of Grey and Hart, heroic deeds and character grow out of the western landscape of wild and unsettled nature and lead to fulfillment and happiness on the part of those protagonists who are strong and true enough to meet the challenge of lawless openness by purging the evil forces that also flourish in this environment. It seems important that these heroic deeds are usually individual rather than social acts that do not carry with them the broader political and social implications so important to the actions of the Virginian. In fact, the violent purgation that so often climaxes a novel by Grey or a film by Hart sometimes goes so far as to wipe out
true role in life as the adoring lovers of still stronger, more virtuous, more heroic men:

Those shining stars made her yield. She whispered to them that they had claimed her—the West claimed her—Stewart claimed her forever, whether he lived or died. She gave up to her love. And it was as if he was there in person, dark-faced, fire-eyed, violent in his action, crushing her to his breast in that farewell moment, kissing her with one burning kiss of passion with wild, cold, terrible lips of renunciation. "I am your wife," she whispered to him. In that moment, throbbing, exalted, quivering in her first sweet, tumultuous surrender to love, she would have given her all, her life, to be in his arms again, to meet his lips, to put forever out of his power any thought of wild sacrifice.  

In the western creations of Grey, Hart, and their contemporaries the elements of the formula are deployed to develop the image of the West as a symbolic landscape where the elevating inspiration of the vastness and openness of nature together with the challenge of violent situations and lawless men can lead to a rebirth of heroic individual morality and the development of an ideal relationship between men and women. Though the hero invariably succeeds in purging the evil and lawless forces and in establishing an ideal domestic relationship with the heroine, there seems to be an increasing sense that this happy resolution cannot be spread to society as a whole. In The Virginian, after his violent deeds, the hero became "an important man, with a strong grip on many various enterprises, and able to give his wife all and more than she asked or desired." 64 It is difficult to imagine a Grey or Hart hero as successful entrepreneur or to imagine the transition between the mythic landscape of their stories and the modern world, a transition of which Wister is careful to remind us. Grey's heroes and heroines existed in a timeless, suspended world where their romance and heroism could be complete and pure. As Henry Nash Smith observed of the dime novel, the cost paid for this purity was that this vision of the West could not become involved in a meaningful dialectic with the urban industrial society of modern America. Thus, in Grey's hand, and in that of the many pulp western novelists and makers of B films who followed his lead, the West became an object of escapist fantasy for adults seeking temporary release from the routine monotony and unheroic ambiguities of twentieth-century American life. There is some indication that Grey himself sensed the essential fantasy of his vision in the fact that so many of his stories eventuate in the formation of an ideal society of two people in some isolated enclave in the mountains. For me, the ultimate symbol of Grey's version of the West is the secret mountain valley into which Lassiter and Jane Withersteen flee at the end of Riders of the Purple Sage, sealing off forever all possibility of entrance or exit by a massive rock slide that wipes out the evil pursuers. From such a garden of Eden there can be no fall or anything else.
The Classic Western: John Ford and Others

The popularity of Grey's highly idealized and moralistic version of the western formula began to decline with the onset of the Depression. Though new Grey books were published annually until 1961, more than twenty years past his death in 1939, his amazing mass popularity of the 1920s had decidedly faded. After his record run of a decade, Grey does not appear among the top best-sellers after 1925. Similarly there is a hiatus in the western film between the silents of the 1920s—W. S. Hart, Tom Mix, and epics like The Covered Wagon, and The Iron Horse—and the new westerns of the 1940s and 1950s by directors and stars like John Ford, Howard Hawks, Anthony Mann, Fred Zinneman, William Wyler, Gary Cooper, John Wayne, Henry Fonda, and James Stewart. While there were still many westerns produced in the 1930s, they were largely for the Saturday matinee and pulp crowd. In the 1930s, westerns of this sort still strongly depended on the version of the formula articulated by Zane Grey, with the exception of a few unique writers and directors such as the novelist Ernest Haycox and the director King Vidor, who had begun to evolve a new treatment of the western formula.

This new version came to fruition at the beginning of the 1940s with John Ford's Stagecoach (1939), based on a story by Ernest Haycox. Its success placed a lasting mark on the western film. Still, without detracting in the least from the unique artistry of Stagecoach, it is worth noting that a number of contemporary westerns show some of the same transformations in the formula, among them George Marshall's Destry Rides Again (1939), Henry King's Jesse James (1940), Fritz Lang's The Return of Frank James (1940), and William Wyler's The Westerner (1940).

The differences between this new version of the western formula and the pattern found in Grey and his contemporaries becomes quite clear when we look at Stagecoach. As might be expected, there is considerable continuity between Stagecoach and the typical Zane Grey western. Like Grey, Ford emphasizes the theme of regeneration through the challenge of the wilderness, using the spectacular forms of the western landscape to give a symbolic background to the drama. Monument Valley in northern Arizona, where, beginning with Stagecoach, Ford shot so many of his films, is a landscape as spectacular as Grey's Tonto Basin, also in Arizona. A number of Ford's basic character types also echo Grey's—the gunfighter hero driven by an obsession to avenge a past wrong (Grey's Lassiter and Ford's Ringo Kid) and the seemingly corrupt heroine who turns out to be morally pure (Grey's Ellen Jorth and Ford's Dallas). Nevertheless, despite these indications of Grey's influence on a continuous formulaic tradition, Stagecoach presents a very different vision of the West from Riders of the Purple Sage. Compared to the highly colored ambience and melodramatic situations of Grey and his contemporaries, Stagecoach has restraint and subtlety that reflects a richer and more complex handling of setting, plot, character, and theme. Though Ford's landscape is certainly a symbolic one, it is not redolent of evangelical mysticism and moralistic allegory in the same way as Grey's sweeping mountains and canyons. Instead, Ford uses the landscape of Monument Valley to express subtly the ambiguous relationship of danger, the threat of death, and regeneration. Instead of filling our souls with religious awe or pure romantic passion as Grey's panoramas supposedly affect his sympathetic characters, the great isolated monoliths of Monument Valley in Stagecoach seem richly enigmatic. They are neither hostile nor benevolent, nor are they pretty in the sense of Grey's gorgeous, many-colored landscapes. Ford's panoramic long shots of the stagecoach threading its way among these massive rock formations suggest a sublimity and mystery beside which Grey's purple prose seems a pseudo-mystical posturing.

The qualities of greater subtlety and richness extend to character and action. While Ford and other western directors of this period work largely with casts of stereotyped characters not unlike those in a novel by Grey or a film by W. S. Hart, these stereotypes are typically qualified and enlivened by touches of comedy and irony. In Stagecoach the virginaly pure romantic ingenue is, in fact, a prostitute. The hero makes his de rigueur appearance from the middle of the wilderness, bent on revenge, but instead of being a mysterious figure in black, he is a nice young cowboy just escaped from prison and a bit shy and awkward about breaking into society on the same day, as he puts it. Larger patterns of action also have comic or ironic resonances and complexities. Like Hell's Hinges, much of the action of Stagecoach grows out of a conflict between the churchgoers and the sinners, a conflict symbolized in the town of Hell's Hinges by the church and the saloon and in Stagecoach by the daylight town of Tonto and the night town of Lordsburg. But where Hart melodramatizes this conflict by placing all our sympathies on the side of the church people, Ford presents the Ladies' Law and Order League as a bastion of rigid, repressive puritanism, shows Tonto's most respectable citizen as a hypocritical embzzler, and gives our fullest sympathies to a prostitute, a drunken doctor, an escaped convict, a whiskey drummer, and a dubious gambler. This unlikely group triumphs over the challenge of the enigmatic and hostile wilderness, but even regeneration has its ironic qualifications. The drunken doctor soberes up and successfully officiates at the birth of a baby in the middle of the desert, heroically faces the attacking Apaches, and, finally, helps the hero in his climactic confrontation with the villains. Yet at the end of the film it is clear that he is going to go on drinking. The hero and his prostitute—sweetheart go off together "into the sunset," though actually the departure is in the middle of the night, and they leave as fugitives to go across the border into Mexico. There is no integration into society like Hart and Grey's regenerated outlaws.

The artistic density of the westerns of the 1940s and 1950s is most strikingly evident in the work of John Ford, but a number of other directors worked very successfully with a similar version of the formula in the same period. Future
generations are likely to look on this as the classic era of the western film. Several factors contributed to the special quality of major westerns during this time. First of all, for both creators and large segments of the audience, the western had become a conscious artistic genre as well as a popular story formula. In addition, there had developed a large corps of directors, writers, actors, and technicians with considerable experience in the creation of westerns. But it was, above all, what the West had come to mean to the American public and the consequent interest that the public displayed in a revitalized version of the western formula that made it possible for all this talent and creative energy to be centered around the production of western films.

The decline of the 1920s' version of the western formula into pulp novels and B western films reflected the impact of the boom and bust of the late 1920s and the depression of the 1930s.

The fate of Prohibition is somewhat analogous to that of the moralistic vision of the West. Begun as a great experiment in social morality, Prohibition became, in the booming prosperity of the later 1920s, a black comedy, no longer taken very seriously even by many of its former proponents. Like Prohibition, the westerns of Grey and Hart embodied a vision of regeneration and purification leading to the reestablishment of the basic norms of nineteenth-century small-town society: religious piety, monogamy, feminine chastity, temperance, and the family circle. But, in an America whose moralistic assumptions had been deeply threatened by rapid urbanization, and then shattered by the chaos of Depression, the association of western heroism with this set of moral norms seemed increasingly old-fashioned and even faintly comical. One suspects that Zane Grey retained a good deal of his popularity throughout the 1930s because his gift for exciting narrative transcended to some degree his moralistic attitudes. In the case of a writer like Harold Bell Wright, or even a filmmaker like W. S. Hart, action and character were more inextricably linked with moral vision, and the decline in popularity was precipitous. Even today, while there is still a steady sale of Grey's novels, which can be fun to read in spite of their moral sentiments, the name of Harold Bell Wright has practically disappeared from the scene, and the films of W. S. Hart are largely viewed by sophisticated students of the cinema as a curious and interesting phase in the history of the film.

Another sign of this general decline of traditional moral assumptions in the late 1920s and 1930s was the rapid rise to great popularity of another film formula, the gangster melodrama. As I noted in an earlier chapter, this was the period when films like *Underworld* (1927), *Little Caesar* (1930), and *Public Enemy* (1931), with performers like Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney, eclipsed traditional western stories and heroes in mass popularity. The extent to which these films challenged traditional morality is evident from the agitation of groups like the Legion of Decency. Eventually, these groups brought enough pressure to bear on Hollywood so that some elements were censored in the new gangster films. Despite these vigorous countermeasures on the part of its moral watchdogs, the American public increasingly showed its delight in the gangster film and such related formulas as the hard-boiled detective story.

Such circumstances suggest that in the 1930s American moviemakers were deeply troubled by the gap between their inherited moral universe and their experience of social and cultural change. On the one hand, they indicated their unwillingness to give up their traditional moral values by tolerating and even supporting the moralistic censorship of self-appointed guardians of the faith, yet, on the other, they indicated their sense of the inadequacy of the traditional moral vision by turning away from novels and films that simply affirmed it in favor of works that explored its inadequacies. For the middle-class reader, Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck replaced Harold Bell Wright and Zane Grey on best-seller lists, while for the still broader cultural spectrum of filmgoers, Robinson and Cagney's snarling gangsters became more popular protagonists than the morally regenerate outlaws of W. S. Hart.

In the face of this change in public attitude and interest, the western either had to undergo substantial changes or to decline altogether to the level of juvenile adventure, or, possibly, faced by competition with more contemporary forms of adventure in an urban setting, to disappear altogether. Actually, the genre entered upon a new phase of creative activity that may well be its greatest period. A new vision of the meaning of the West inspired a formula more responsive to the conflicts of value and feeling that characterized the period from 1940 to 1960. Instead of simply affirming the traditional morality and dramatically resolving conflicts within it, this new image of the West encouraged a richer exploration of the tensions between old moral assumptions and new uncertainties of experience. It also expressed a sense of loss associated with the passage of a simpler and less ambiguous era while acknowledging its inevitability. Thus, in contrast to the sense of moral triumph and regeneration through violence that characterized the western of the 1910s and 1920s, the new "classic" western was typically more muted, elegaic, and even sometimes tragic in its pattern of action.

The essential feature of this new vision of the West was the notion of the "old West" as a heroic period in the past distinctly different from the rest of American society and history. The symbolic drama of the old West's passing generated new and more complex kinds of stories. To some extent, this vision of the West had always been implicit in the western. We find it in Natty Bumppo's occasional laments for the passing of the old wilderness life, or in Wister's preface to *The Virginian*, when he remarks that the cowboy "will never come again. He rides in his historic yesterday."

But there are two major differences between these earlier notions of the West as bygone era and the "old West" of the 1940s and 1950s. First, this earlier phase of the West was usually associated with the wilderness and the Indians. It was, in effect, a version of pastoral. The new meaning of the "old West" was, on the
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The Western which seems to be the underlying mythical pattern of this version of the western formula. In the classic western, however, the story shifts from the myth of foundation to a concern with social transition—the passing from the old West into modern society. The hero becomes not so much the founder of a new order as a somewhat archaic survival, driven by motives and values that are never quite in harmony with the new social order. His climactic violence, though legitimated by its service to the community, does not integrate him into society. Instead, it separates him still further, either because a community so pacified has no need of his unique talents, or because the new society cannot aid him or do him honor. Thus, the relation of the hero to the community tends to move in a reverse direction from that of the pre-1940s western. There the hero typically made the transition from outlawy to domestication. In the classic western, the hero increasingly moves toward isolation, separation, and alienation.

This aspect of the classic western is particularly evident in a film like John Ford’s My Darling Clementine (1946) where there is really no necessity for the hero to depart at the end. Yet Ford obviously felt that it was artistically and emotionally right for Wyatt Earp to say farewell to his new love Clementine and to leave the town he has purged of evil, dropping only a vague hint of his ultimate return. Similarly, the hero and heroine of Stagecoach cannot remain in the town but must take the purity of their love and their heroic courage off to some mythical ranch across the border. Again, the events of the story do not require this ending. It would certainly not have been difficult for Ford to arrange for his hero to be exonerated for killing the villains, but, again, it just seems wrong for these two representatives of the old West to stay in the orderly and pacified town, with the Indians driven back to the reservation, the unrestrained men of violence killed, and the army and the law firmly in control. In his films of the 1940s, Ford did not deal with the theme of the passing of the old West as explicitly as he did later, but part of the richness of his work comes from the way in which exciting adventure and good-humored social comedy—the dominant tones of Stagecoach and My Darling Clementine—are inextricably mixed with a subtle feeling of melancholy for a more heroic life that is passing.

Melancholy about the passing of the old West and ambiguity about the new society that has replaced it became a more explicit thematic concern in Ford westerns of the 1950s and 1960s such as The Searchers (1956), The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), and Cheyenne Autumn (1964). In Liberty Valance, for example, the old western hero, Tom Doniphon, is morally and emotionally destroyed when he purges the community of the last anarchic outlaw and enables the new-style western leader, a young lawyer from the East, to become the community’s representative man. Though the result is progress and happiness, there is, nonetheless, a deep sense that something valuable has been lost. There is also an ironic twist in the fact that the young lawyer’s political success is based on his false reputation as the heroic killer of the outlaw Liberty Valance, a deed actually performed by Doniphon. Thus

contrary, a vision of a particular kind of social order, a complex elaboration of the conception of a unique western society that developed in the later dime novel and in local-color writers like Bret Harte, and later, in a very different way, was conceptualized in Frederick Jackson Turner’s theory of the influence of the frontier on American life. These earlier views of western society did not usually treat it as something that was irrevocably past. Even Turner was at great pains to show how the frontier had molded contemporary American society. By the 1940s, however, the “old West” was clearly seen as past, its significance lying in its discontinuity with the rest of American life. Walter Prescott Webb, a great historian of the West, eloquently expressed this view of the “old West” in his analysis of the cattle kingdom:

The cattle kingdom was a world within itself, with a culture all its own, which, though of brief duration, was complete and self-satisfying. The cattle kingdom worked out its own means and methods of utilization; it formulated its own law, called the code of the West, and did it largely upon extra-legal grounds. The existence of the cattle kingdom for a generation is the best single bit of evidence that here in the West were the basis and promise of a new civilization unlike anything previously known to the Anglo-European-American experience. Eventually it ceased to be a kingdom and became a province. The Industrial Revolution furnished the means by which the beginnings of this original and distinctive civilization have been destroyed or reduced to vestigial remains. Since the destruction of the plains Indians and the buffalo civilization, the cattle kingdom is the most logical thing that has happened in the Great Plains, where, in spite of science and invention, the spirit of the Great American Desert still is manifest. 66

And, as Webb saw it, the central feature of the cattle kingdom was its emphasis on individual courage:

Where population is sparse, where the supports of conventions and of laws are withdrawn and men are thrown upon their own resources, courage becomes a fundamental and essential attribute in the individual. The Western man of the old days had little choice but to be courageous. The germ of courage had to be in him; but this germ being given, the life he led developed it to a high degree. 67

The second important difference between earlier conceptions of the “old West” and the underlying cultural myth of the classic westerns of the 1940s and 1950s was the extent to which the passing of the “old West” and the evolving pioneer society became the basic focus of western films. In The Virginian and in the westerns of Hart and Grey, the hero is typically integrated into the new pioneer society that is gradually evolving out of a more chaotic and lawless earlier era. The hero’s culminating act of violence is a final purging of the lawless men who prevent the new society from coming into existence. It represents the culmination of the period of foundation,
the new society is founded on a legend of heroism, created by a man who cannot himself find what he needs in it. Cheyenne Autumn, based on Mari Sandoz’s moving account of the attempts of a band of Cheyenne Indians to leave their arid southern reservation and return to their northern homeland, is an even more elegaic if less coherent account of the passing of the old West. With its heroic band of Indians set against the rapacity, greed, and bureaucratic inhumanity of the Indian Bureau and the government, Cheyenne Autumn adumbrated a new version of the formula in which the complex dramatic tensions of the classic western gave way to the quest for a new mythology in which the Indian becomes again an idealized figure. But this is one of the developments that followed after the breakdown of the classic synthesis.

The dramatic tensions created by the central theme of the passing of the old West provided the background for a particularly interesting type of hero. Unlike the natural gentleman of Owen Wister, or the romantic heroes of Zane Grey and W. S. Hart, the western hero of the classic period is largely developed through his complex and ambiguous relationship with society. Whatever romantic involvements he may have, the classic western hero’s role as a man-in-the-middle between groups that represent the old and the new West is far more important than his relations with the opposite sex. Indeed, in many classic westerns there is relatively little romantic interest of the sort that was so important to Wister and Grey. Instead, the plot concerns situations in which the hero finds himself both involved with, and alienated from, society. In this type of story, the gunfighter often takes the place of the cowboy as hero, because the gunfighter’s position with respect to the law is, by convention, ambiguous. According to the mythical code of the old West, the gunfighter is not a criminal, though he may have killed many men. By the standards of the new West, he is illegally taking the law into his own hands. Split between old and new concepts of law and morality, the town finds itself torn between its disapproval of what the gunfighter stands for and its need for his services. The gunfighter’s own motives are also likely to be ambivalent. He may be tired of his violent way of life and hopeful of settling down to a peaceful old age, but is usually unable to do so because of his reputation and the need to prove himself anew against younger gunmen, or because of the town’s inability to purge itself of evil through the regular processes of the law.

The man-in-the-middle’s problem usually is that he cannot resolve his inner conflict by committing himself to one of the two courses of action or ways of life that divide him. Classic westerns often end in the hero’s death or in violence, reluctantly entered upon, that does not fully resolve the conflict. Wister’s Virginian chose to live out the code of the West as a matter of honor and duty, even though his sweetheart threatened to leave him. But his problem was solved when she saw him in danger and realized that her love was greater than her genteel antipathy to violence. The hero thus gained both a victory over his enemy and a respectable place in society. In contrast, the sheriff in High Noon is forced to fight alone by the town’s failure to support him, but is left so bitter by his victory that he can only turn his back on society in disgust. In Shane, the hero has to take up again the role of gunfighter in order to save the farmers from being driven off their land. But once he has destroyed the old order by killing the tyrannical rancher and his hired gunfighter, he has no place in the new community and must ride into lonely exile. In a more comic vein, Howard Hawks’s heroic sheriff in Rio Bravo destroys the tyrannical rancher and gets the girl, but the film’s predominant image is that of the small heroic group isolated from the rest of society in its fortress jail.

Whether it tended toward the tragic and elegiac as in Ford, the comic as in Hawks, or the mythic as in Anthony Mann, the classic western became a vehicle for exploring such value conflicts as that between traditional ways of life and progress, individualism and organization, violence and legal process, conformity and individual freedom, and heroism and the average man. The western’s traditional resolution in legitimated violence and the mythical detachment of the story from the present time implicit in the idea of the old West offered a plausible and compelling way of giving these conflicts symbolic expression. Not surprisingly, a number of westerns of the classic period such as High Noon and The Ox-Bow Incident were explicitly conceived as allegories with strong implications for the contemporary scene. Critics, also, began to interpret westerns in terms of contemporary situations and to point out analogies between the western film and such important political events of the period as the Korean conflict and McCarthy’s crusade against communism. Whatever one may think about the validity of such interpretations, the tendency to make them indicates the degree to which at least some of the more sophisticated members of the public responded explicitly to the classic western’s expression of American value conflicts.

The classic version of the western formula also flourished in the new medium of television as what was commonly referred to as the new “adult” western. “Bonanza” was far less pure as a western than “Gunsmoke,” since its variety of central characters made it possible for the show to borrow plots from such diverse popular traditions as the detective story and the social melodrama. Still, the main line of both series was that of the classic western: the representation of a heroic figure (or in the case of “Bonanza” a group of heroes) as mediators between the aggressive individualists of the old West and the new values of the settled town.

It is certainly claiming too much to suggest that all Americans who enjoyed westerns during the classic period read the tension between American traditions of individualistic democracy and the emerging international corporate society into the conflict between the old West and the new settled society symbolized by growing towns, and orderly legal process, and the coming of the railroad and telegraph. Yet the special qualities of the classic
western heroes as played by Gary Cooper, John Wayne, James Stewart, Henry Fonda, Joel McCrea, Randolph Scott, and their imitators lay in their reluctance to commit themselves to any particular social group, their ambivalence about who was right and wrong, and their strong desire to retain their own personal integrity and the purity of their individual code. As Robert Warshow so eloquently described this classic stance:

What does the Westerner fight for? We know he is on the side of justice and order, and of course it can be said he fights for these things. But such broad aims never correspond exactly to his real motives; they only offer him his opportunity. The Westerner himself, when an explanation is asked of him (usually by a woman), is likely to say that he does what he “has to do.” If justice and order did not continually demand his protection, he would be without a calling. Indeed, we come upon him often in just that situation, as the reign of law settles over the West and he is forced to see that his day is over; those are the pictures which end with his death or with his departure for some more remote frontier. What he defends, at bottom, is the purity of his own image . . . he fights not for advantage and not for the right, but to state what he is, and he must live in a world which permits that statement.  

The appeal of such a heroic figure is probably greatest in a time when another tradition nor some concept of a future goal adequately defines what is virtuous for a man. In such a period, the extraordinary hero is one who, torn by the conflicting demands of different social roles and value systems, yet manages to assert his identity in action. In this respect, the classic western hero bears a strong resemblance to the hard-boiled heroes of Hemingway, Hammett, and Chandler, a heroic type who was embodied in the film performances of Humphrey Bogart at the same time that the classic western reached its peak. In fact, the classic western hero’s basic pattern of initial reluctance and ambivalence finally resolved by violence was practically identical to that developed by the Bogart persona in such films as The Big Sleep, To Have and Have Not, and Casablanca. In these films, the conflict between a traditional world and a new social order is represented by urban corruption or by the coming of war. As in the western, the hero has rejected or left behind the traditional world, but he is not prepared to commit himself to the new order, for he senses that it will destroy his individual identity. In the end, he finds a mode of action, usually through violence, that reaffirms his individual code. Or, to put it in terms that were popularized by the sociologist David Riesman in the same period we are concerned with, this type of hero insists upon asserting his inner-directed self in an increasingly other-directed world.

This reflection gives us some additional insight into the way in which the meaning of the hero’s violence in the classic western differs from that of the westerns of Zane Grey and W. S. Hart. In that earlier version of the western formula, the hero’s violence was the means by which the evil and anarchic forces were finally purged and the hero integrated with society. But in the classic western, as in the hard-boiled detective story, the hero’s violence is primarily an expression of his capacity for individual moral judgment and action, a capacity that separates him from society as much as it makes him a part of it. While in Casablanca Bogart’s commitment to the Free French cause seems a rather romanticized expression of wartime Hollywood patriotism, the more detached and mythical setting of the classic western made the hero’s violence more ambiguous and individualistic.

In general, then, the classic version of the western formula developed by projecting contemporary tensions and conflicts of values into a mythical past where they could be balanced against one another and resolved in an increasingly ambiguous moment of violent action. These conflicts were essentially expressions of the tension between those traditional values that had been so strongly affirmed in the Wister-Grey-Hart version of the western formula and the new attitudes and values of a modern urban industrial society. The basic premise of the classic western was a recognition of the inevitable passing of the old order of things, reflected in the myth of the “old West,” together with an attempt to affirm that the new society would somehow be based on the older values. But, just as after World War II, Americans increasingly recognized the gap between their traditional values and goals and the new circumstances of their lives, the classic western increasingly reflected a discontinuity between the old West and the new society that had replaced it. One striking expression of this widening gap was a documentary entitled The Real West and narrated with great power and pathos by an aging and sick Gary Cooper. This documentary, claiming in the way of many of our best mythical treatments of the West to give us, at long last, the true story, was permeated with the sense of an exciting and heroic era, a time of great challenge and adventure, surviving only in the curious old photographs and decaying ghost towns that furnished the film’s predominant visual imagery.  

The artistic power and wide public popularity of the classic version of the western formula came from its ability to hold the vision of the old West and the emergent outlines of modern America in a dramatic tension mediated by the striking figure of the hero. But this balance could be maintained only so long as creators and audiences found satisfaction in the elegiac treatment of the old West and in the reluctant, ambiguous hero who remained torn between commitments. In the more polarized social and political atmosphere of the 1960s, the classic version of the western formula came to seem increasingly old-fashioned, and it soon became evident that the western again required some redefinition and revitalization of its formula.
The Jewish Cowboy, the Black Avenger, and the Return of the Vanishing American: Current Trends in the Formula

Since the high water mark of the late 1950s, the cultural significance of the western has perceptibly shifted. Westerns are still quite popular; at least one of the TV programs that was launched in the 1950s, "Gunsmoke," is among the longest running video series. A substantial proportion of the biggest movie hits of the last few years—Leone's Clint Eastwood series, George Roy Hill's Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch, Hathaway's True Grit, and Arthur Penn's Little Big Man, to name a few—have been westerns. The creation of westerns continues to be a significant part of American movie production, even though it seems clear that the western no longer holds the predominant position it did twenty years ago. The number of new TV western series has slowed to a trickle. The enormous output of low-budget westerns—once a mainstay of the American film industry—has dwindled away. Directors and stars are no longer largely identified with their work in westerns as John Ford, Anthony Mann, Raoul Walsh, John Wayne, Henry Fonda, and James Stewart were in the period between 1950 and 1965. Only one major new American western director—Sam Peckinpah—has emerged since 1960. Similarly, only one new western superstar—Clint Eastwood—has come up during the same time. Even more surprising, some of the most successful westerns of the period, the group of films produced by the Italian Sergio Leone, have been international productions, largely filmed in other countries and imported into the United States in a curiously ironic cultural return.

The decline of the major Hollywood studios and the rise of independent production has inevitably affected the flow of westerns by breaking up the teams of actors, directors, cameramen, and stuntmen who used to turn out a regular quota of westerns every year. Even if we recognize the impact of changes in the film industry as an important influence on contemporary production, there are still enough differences in the form and content of current western films to suggest that the western themes and patterns of action that so deeply engaged American filmmakers and audiences for some twenty years after World War II have lost much of their interest. It seems to me that the diversity of contemporary westerns reflects a quest for new themes and meanings to revitalize the traditional western formula.

By the early 1960s the patterns of the classic western were beginning to break up. Though the classic version of the formula persisted for a somewhat longer time on television, the most creative filmmakers had already begun to depart from the traditions of the 1940s and 1950s. The swan song of the classic western was Sam Peckinpah's elegy to a disappearing heroism, Ride the High Country (1962). The two heroes of this film, portrayed by two aging western stars, Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea, move once more toward their redemptive gunfight, but in the end they fight not to save the decent
Eastwood as “the man with no name”—an anonymity that underlines his lack of human feeling and motive—performs his most violent deeds without a quiver of his characteristic cigarillo or a ripple of his serape. His role in a number of films is that of bounty hunter, a man who kills with no personal interest but the monetary reward, despicable in the moral universe of the traditional western. If the hero has any motive beyond money, it is usually to perform some terrible revenge for a long past deed, a revenge that commonly seems more like a dehumanizing obsession than a justifiable moral purpose. In many cases, the object of the hero’s revenge is as interesting and sympathetic a character as he is, if not more so. In *Once upon a Time in the West*, for example, the “villain” is played by Henry Fonda, the noble hero of many classic westerns, and the “hero” by Charles Bronson, who had earlier made a specialty of villains. With such heroes, one asks, who needs villains? Yet the Leone films do arouse our interest in the hero’s actions despite his morally ambiguous character by showing us a world that seems to deserve whatever violence can be wreaked upon it.

Leone’s western towns are full of grotesque and ugly people in striking contrast to the decent, respectable, mildly comic townspeople of the classic western. But even more striking than the grotesque, bitterly sardonic way in which he represents his minor characters, Leone stresses their weakness and helplessness against the grasping tyrants and manic outlaws who bedevil them. These townspeople sometimes employ a vapid and impotent morality as a justification for not doing anything about the frustrating and miserable conditions of their lives, but the amoral hero has no moral pretensions—he says even less than the traditional western hero. Instead, he works smoothly and effectively against the men of power. The fact that a number of minor and relatively helpless bystanders are destroyed in the process seems more advantageous than otherwise. Because the world is violent, treacherous, and corrupt, the moral man is the one who can use violence, treachery, and corruption most effectively. The chief thing that differentiates hero from villain is the hero’s coolness and lack of violent emotion; the villain is typically given to rages of greed, lust, or hatred that prevent him from effectively using the tools of power.

Public enthusiasm for the Leone films has commonly been interpreted as a simple response of salacious sadism, the cruder masses of the public taking lip-licking delight in the vivid portrayal of bloodshed and death. No doubt there are such appeals in the Leone films. Anyone who has attended one of these films in company with a large and varied audience can testify to what seems at first a shocking ghoulishness of response—applause when an innocent person is destroyed on screen, laughter at the most horrible kinds of maiming and killing. One could easily become convinced that such films are creating a bloodthirsty public who will eventually turn from fantasy to reality to satisfy their cravings. Yet few Clint Eastwood fans become mass murderers.

The orientation toward violence in the Leone films is not as simple as it seems on the surface. On closer examination, I should say that these films perhaps appeal as much to a sense of passivity as to violence. Their grotesque humor may well be more an invitation to laugh at our own sense of helplessness and victimization than an incitement to strike out against it. Their moral ambiguity, their rejection of clear distinctions between hero and villain, and their effects of grotesque horror might as well be interpreted as an attempt to transform our sense of moral paralysis and impotence in the face of worldwide violence into mockery and bitter comedy.

If this is the case, we have here one new kind of thematic portrayal of violence together with an implicit psychological strategy toward it. Violence is innate in human life, and the only defense against it is detached mockery. By avoiding emotional and moral involvement, we develop a capacity to gain pleasure from horror and outrage through identification with victimizer as well as victim. This attitude is close to the one implicit in the contemporary horror film—the current crop of Draculas, Blaculas, Frankensteins, and Wolfmen—where we are invited to identify with the monster as well as with those he victimizes, in contrast to the traditional horror story where the monster represented an outside evil that had to be purged to save the world. Like the Italian western, which it resembles in its grotesque tone and its cultivation of horrific incident, the new-style horror film has been one of the great popular successes of the last two decades.

The distinctive quality of the Leone western emerges in another way when we compare it with another type of contemporary western, a formula version that might be called the return of the rugged individual. These films, dominantly starring John Wayne, have been strongly influenced by certain aspects of the Italian western but are generally attempts to restate the traditional western themes in a slightly new fashion. Typically, this second type of contemporary western deals with an aging hero whose great days seem over but who embarks upon one more heroic quest or battle. Unlike the Italian western, this American type portrays the hero's quest as the pursuit of a clearly moral purpose. In *True Grit* the hero is a marshal who has been employed by a young lady to bring in the murderer of her father. In *Big Jake* Jake's grandson has been kidnapped by a band of outlaws and he is out to recover the child; in *Chisum* corrupt and lawless men threaten to destroy the peaceful cattle empire that John Chisum has built up through hard work and honest dealing. Similar plot devices insure that the deeds of the protagonists of *Rio Lobo* and *The Cowboys* are covered with the mantle of morality. But in many ways this air of morality seems more like a ritual than a reality, a cloak for naked aggression rather than the reluctant violence of the heroes of *My Darling Clementine*, *High Noon*, and *Shane*. The leading figure in these rugged individualist westerns is very different from the lyrical or stoic heroes of the forties and fifties. In fact, he resembles the official villains of the earlier westerns as much as he does the heroes. John Chisum is an overbearing cattle
baron, like Stryker, the villain of *Shane*. Big Jake has the same ruthlessness and love-hate relationship with his sons as the maniacal Dock Tobin of Anthony Mann's *Man of the West*, while the Wild Bunch of Sam Peckinpah's film bears more resemblance to the vicious Clanton gang than to the gentle Wyatt Earp of *My Darling Clementine*. Yet, in these more recent films, the ruthless aggressiveness, concern with power, and penchant for violence that were seen as dangerous and even evil in the classic westerns are portrayed as positive values or moral necessities in these sagas of rugged individualism in the West. To make the contrast more precise, we might compare Howard Hawks's *Red River* (1948) and the recent *Chisum*. These two films have basic plot similarities and in both the central figure is played by John Wayne. In *Red River* Wayne's overbearing individualism, his tyrannical authority, and his ruthless appeals to violence nearly bring about the destruction of the cattle drive. It is only the rejection of violence and the concern for the welfare of others embodied in the secondary hero figure of Wayne's adopted son, played by Montgomery Clift, that finally resolves the difficulties. But in *Chisum* these very aggressive qualities make the hero successful while the more pacific and less domineering temperaments of younger men are shown to be inadequate to the overcoming of evil.

In none of these films is there much question of group regeneration associated with the hero's purging action. On the contrary, society is usually represented as weak and corrupt; its agencies—such as posses and armed forces—are given to impulsive and inefficient violence that is more likely to bring on further innocent suffering than to establish true justice. Because society is violent and corrupt, the only solution lies in the private action of a good leader who is able to overcome the outlaw's evil aggression and society's own endemic violence and corruption by superior ruthlessness and power of his own. In this emphasis on the failure of society to protect the innocent and on the need for the private leader and avenger, these new westerns clearly resemble the new gangster film and novel exemplified by *The Godfather*. I should say that the orientation toward violence and society is almost identical in these works. Because society has failed to extend its protection and order to an adequate extent, the little man is constantly threatened by violence against which he cannot protect himself. The fantasied solution is to fall back on the Godfather, or in the case of the western on the grandfather, Big Jake, and to create under his absolute authority a close-knit small group, like a family, that in return for absolute loyalty will protect its members. It is interesting that no western constructed along these lines has achieved anything like the success of *The Godfather*. Perhaps because this fantasy is so immediate a response to the tensions of modern urban life, its embodiment in a relatively contemporary urban setting, as in the gangster story, is more compelling than its displacement to a heroic past.

The westerns embodying the fantasied return of the rugged individualist bear a greater superficial resemblance to the traditional western than most other types being produced today, but I would guess the more creative potentialities for the western's future lie in a third type, which involves the attempt to create a new cultural myth of the West. In its simplest and least interesting form this new western myth is simply the old formula with an ethnic hero at the center. Thus black westerns like *The Legend of Nigger Charley, Buck and the Preacher*, and *Soul Soldier* are more or less traditional westerns with black heroes and plots that have some of their conflicts generated by racial tension. Because of this, the black western has heretofore been only in a minimal sense a creative transformation of the western. Like the new black police, detective, and gangster films, the black westerns are culturally important in that they represent a capturing of traditionally white legends and hero figures for black audiences. Certainly this development reflects some breakdown of traditional stereotypes. With a few notable exceptions like John Ford's unduly neglected *Sergeant Rutledge* (1960), black characters almost never appeared in earlier westerns and when they did it was in minor comic roles. A few all-black westerns were made for limited distribution, but these had no significance as far as the white public was concerned for they were never exhibited in other than totally black theaters. The new black westerns, however, import their heroes into the context of a largely white western society and are made with fair-sized budgets. Though they are particularly aimed at black urban audiences, they are seen by substantial segments of the white public as well. Doubtless it reflects some transformation of racial attitudes for audiences to accept a black man playing a formerly white heroic role and in the process saving innocent whites and avenging himself on white villains. But aside from this substitution of a black for a white hero, the new black westerns have not as yet involved any major departures from traditional western formulas. Thus it is not surprising to find critics like Clayton Riley speaking rather acerbically about them:

The new Black movies . . . have accomplished little more than a restatement of those themes the American cinema has traditionally bled dry and then discarded. Like the stepchild we get the leftover, in this case a celluloid hand-me-down. Black movies bringing color to the old movie industry Triple-S stamp: Slapstick, Sadism and Safety—from anything that might disturb the Republic's peace of mind.72

The black perspective may well become a source of creative transformation of the western if filmmakers begin to work the rich and fascinating vein of the actual role of black people in the history of the West. Certainly some of the black characters described by Durham and Jones in *The Negro Cowboy* could be the basis for a rich new version of the western myth. At the present time, however, the emergence of a new attitude toward the Indian in films like *A Man Called Horse, Soldier Blue*, and *Little Big Man* seems more important as the impetus behind a new vision of the meaning of the western experience. Since the time of James Fenimore Cooper, the serious western has
often manifested a sympathetic attitude toward the Indian and has at times been openly critical of the way in which Americans have treated him. But, until recently, this sympathy has usually been focused for dramatic purposes on the tragedy of individuals. Two main story formulas would probably cover most of the serious representations of Indians in the western until the last decade or so: the elegy of the Vanishing American or the Last of the Mohicans, and the tragedy of the white man who loved an Indian maiden or vice versa. In both these stories the central point of sympathy was the plight of an individual caught in a larger clash between groups. The striking thing about the more recent Indian westerns is that they move beyond sympathy for the plight of individuals toward an attempt at a reconstruction of the Indian experience itself. Their central plot device has been the story of the white man who becomes an Indian or who, through his experiences, becomes identified with the Indian perspective in the clash between white and Indian. In effect, this amounts to an almost complete reversal of some of the symbolic meanings ascribed to major groups in the western. The pioneers become a symbol of fanaticism, avarice, and aggressive violence while the Indians represent a good group with a way of life in harmony with nature and truly fulfilling to the individual. It is through his involvement with the Indians and their way of life that the hero is regenerated. The cavalry, symbol of law and order, becomes the instrument of brutal massacre until at the end of Little Big Man one cheers for the Indians to destroy Custer and his men because we have seen incident after incident in which the cavalry callously and needlessly slaughters women and children.

This new Indian western is clearly a response to that complex new fascination with traditional Indian culture, particularly among the young, that Leslie Fiedler analyzes in *The Return of the Vanishing American*. In its treatment of violence as an expression of aggressive drives toward destruction in the pioneer spirit, in its negative and guilt-ridden assessment of the winning of the West, and its reversal of traditional valuations of the symbolic figures and groups of the western story this new formula has a great deal in common with another recent form that I have labeled, rather facetiously, the legend of the Jewish cowboy. The hero of this type of western is not literally Jewish, though often played by Jewish actors. Actually, I suspect that Jews are likely to be the last of the ethnic groups to insist on donning the mantle of the cowboy hero. The heroes of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, however, behave more like characters transported from the pages of a novel by Saul Bellow or Bernard Malamud into the legendary West than they do like the traditional western hero. They win our interest and sympathy not by courage and heroic deeds but by bemused incompetence, genial cowardice, and the ability to face the worst with buoyancy and wit. They are six-gun schemers and existentialists in cowboy boots. The West they inhabit is rapidly becoming the modern industrial world, and they are hopelessly out of place in the new society. Their real enemy is not the Indian or the outlaw but the corporation. They stand for a leisurely traditional way of life that is giving way to the ruthless mechanical efficiency of the corporate society. Butch Cassidy is an outlaw who is finally driven from the country by the irresistible force of organization in the form of a super-posse hired by the Union Pacific Railroad. McCabe is a small-time gambler and brothel keeper who is killed by a gang of thugs hired by a mining company that wants to take over his property. The new myth implicit in these westerns contrasts the individualistic violence of the outlaw or Indian with the brutal, streamlined force of organized society and expresses the view that the corporate violence of modern society is more dangerous and evil than the acts of individual aggression implicit in the Indian or outlaw's way of life. Thus many of the traditional meanings of the western are reversed—society cannot be purged or regenerated by heroic acts because progress means destruction of humane values. The good groups are the simpler traditional societies of outlaws and Indians, but these and the values they represent are doomed to extinction. The true hero is not the man who brings law and order but the alienated and absurd individual who cannot fit into the new society.

All three of the new western types I have discussed—the Italian western, the western Godfather, and the search for a new myth—share a disillusioned and pessimistic view of society and an obsession with the place of violence in it. As the western has always done, these new formulas project the tensions and concerns of the present into the legendary past in order to seek in the imagination some kind of resolution or acceptance of conflicts of value and feeling that cannot be solved in the present. The classic westerns of the post-World War II period seemed to reflect a balanced tension between traditional values and the sense of new social circumstances. The westerns of today, however, suggest no such balance. Instead, they seem to reflect a considerable variety of different emotional and ideological accommodations to the pessimism about society that they all share. Three major kinds of attitude seem to have emerged; first, a sense of human depravity and corruption that almost seems to take delight in the destructiveness of violence by accepting it as an inevitable expression of man's nature; second, the fantasy of a superior father-figure who can protect the innocent and wreak vengeance on the guilty, a fantasy that reflects a profound disbelief in the modern agencies of law and justice to serve their proper function. In this context, violence is the product of morally purposeful individual action in defense of the good group against the threats offered by the rest of society. Finally, the search for a new western myth expresses the view that violence has been the underlying force in the development of American society and that all modern white Americans are implicated in guilt for their aggressive destruction of other ways of life. The contemporary western reflects the conflict between these differing views of our past and present. Whether any of them will eventually serve as the basis of a new consensus about the meaning of the West only the further course of history can determine.