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The Dynamics Surrounding the Myth of the American West and the Image of the Cowboy Based on Selected Literary Texts

The myth of the West, with the cowboy as its central figure, holds a special place in American culture. In the 1954 article “Ten-Gallon Hero,” David B. Davis spotlighted Americans’ predilection for all things western:

Gaudy-covered Western or cowboy magazines decorate stands, windows, and shelves ... from Miami to Seattle. Hundreds of cowboy movies and television shows are watched and lived through by millions of Americans. Nearly every little boy demands a cowboy suit (111).

Many scholars have been exploring the cowboy mythos and frontier folklore. The American wrangler has come to symbolize freedom, individuality, and closeness to nature (Fishwick 91). On hearing the word “cowboy,” hardly anyone will associate it solely with an occupation that was popular at a certain time in history. Instead, what comes to mind is a specific icon. In “The Cowboy: America’s Contribution to the World’s Mythology,” Marshall W. Fishwick describes what the mythical cowboy looks like: “our Cowboy is tall, tanned, sinewy, a man quite at home in the great outdoors. Weather-beaten and rough, this child of nature...” (81). Whereas, when defining personality, he notes that the cowboy is

modest, truthful, brave, enduring, democratic, fun-loving, and highly individualistic. He is the envy of all who believe that a good, clean life in God’s outdoors, close to the “real” things, is desirable; a good man to have with you, a demon when he is against you (82).

Undoubtedly, both the cowboy and the West have become deeply symbolic for Americans. This essay argues that the shifting perspectives of the West and the gradual decline of the myth of the cowboy, as echoed in selected plays by Sam Shepard and William Inge and Owen Wister’s novel The Virginian, were largely influenced by real events, prominent historical personages as well as by
fiction and literary characters such as James Fenimore Cooper’s Natty Bumppo. In discussing the historical background, I discuss two major trends influencing the mythologization of the West, namely, presenting it as a place where hardiness and bravery are what really counts and comparing it to the Garden of Eden—a vast pristine land waiting to be settled by man.

As Fishwick notes: “In analyzing the cowboy we are dealing not so much with specific individuals as with a recognizable type; not with a mere historical reality, but with a fictional ideal” (78). Still, a few historical facts on the basis of which the legend was constructed can be distinguished. The term “frontier,” applied to the zone of unsettled land outside the region of already existing colonial settlements, is crucial to interpreting the phenomenon of the West. Successive territorial acquisitions made by the United States after the American Revolutionary War meant a continued westward expansion of the country. The new territories, despite the significant challenges they posed, lured large numbers of settlers. The concept of the frontier is explored in Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis. First of all, as noted by Richard Slotkin, Turner establishes a clear division between “the Metropolis” and “the Wilderness.” While the former constitutes the center of civilization and is synonymous with order, labor, and scarcity, the latter emblematizes the unappropriated resources and natural abundance. Thus, the frontier lies between these two spheres, and the relationship between the spheres is always one-directional—the expansion can take place only from the Metropolis outward (Slotkin 41). Moreover, Turner believes that the frontier was responsible for the unique identity of Americans. The theory stipulates that the farther west subsequent generations of Americans went, the more aspects of European identity were discarded. Consequently, the terms “frontier” and “the West” began to stand for a possibility of starting from scratch and reinventing oneself, of becoming morally and spiritually reborn in difficult but promising conditions and circumstances.

However, the realm of the cowboys depicted in typical cowboy stories was quite different from the real American West. In fact, as observed by Henry Nash Smith in Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth,

there were two quite distinct Wests: the commonplace domesticated area within the agricultural frontier, and the Wild West beyond it. The agricultural West was tedious; its inhabitants belonged to a despised social class. The Wild West was by contrast an exhilarating region of adventure and comradeship in the open air (52).

In his article “Imagined West,” Richard White points out that among numerous stories told by the inhabitants of the frontier in the nineteenth century, the most popular ones focused either on the Arcadian character of the place or on the harsh conditions prevailing there. In the case of the former, the role of nature was highlighted; the idyllic version of the myth described the West in terms of tranquility
and freedom (640). What was emphasized was the restorative and regenerative
class of the land, “its ability to redeem the fortunes of those fallen from high
estate, improve the lot of the lowly, provide the arena for moral and military
heroism” (Slotkin 40). At the same time, the second tendency reinforced the idea
that to survive in the West, strength and determination were vital. Male characters
in western stories displayed violent behavior that seemed “natural, timeless, and
inescapable” (White 640). Conduct that would not be acceptable in any other place,
there appeared correct and justified. Although these two major trends were, to a
large extent, contradictory, they coexisted side by side because both connected
the image of the West with freedom and nature (640). Consequently, both of them
prepared the ground for the national myth to emerge.

When it did emerge, it captured the collective imagination, nurtured simultaneously
by culture as well as literature. The process of settling new territories coincided with
the sudden rise in popularity of dime novels, penny newspapers, and sensational
journals. As a consequence, a wide audience began to be regularly supplied with
cowboy fiction. The stories, most often historical romances and tall tales depicting
thrilling adventures of the heroes of the Wild West, were set in a spectacular, desert-
like landscape of the West and the plot usually unfolded in lonely forts, isolated
homesteads, ranches, the jail, or the saloon (Slotkin 42). Apart from literature
written during the time of America’s westward expansion, the myth of the western
frontier was popularized through a brand new form of entertainment - the cowboy
stage show. The most famous among the cowboy showmen was William F. Cody,
better known as Buffalo Bill. In his show, called Wild West, first presented in Omaha
in 1883, cowboys and Indians claimed to be portraying the “real West.” Thanks to
Buffalo Bill, “the American cowboy was taking his place among the great horsemen
of the world” (Boatright 199). Inspired by the Wild West show’s popularity, frontier
plays started to be created. The ones written in the second half of the nineteenth
century were melodramas in which a noble hero was traveling west in order to
settle new territories. On his way he helped those in trouble, fought with the forces
of nature, as well as with corruption and brutality. Good prevailed, and evil had to
be punished.

Film was another medium that took interest in cowboys. This resulted in the
creation of a totally new genre: the western. The first silent western film, The Great
Train Robbery, made in 1903 by Edwin S. Porter, shocked and mesmerized the
audience with the image of a gun being pointed at them from the screen. In the
article “Riding the Horse, Writing the Usual Myth,” Metin Boşnak and Cem Ceyhan
point out that the movie resembled a modern documentary. Its purpose was to
persuade the audience that they were witnessing “not merely casual entertainment
but, rather, a serious and dignified visual discussion of an era which had already
passed into the nation’s heritage” (21). The world depicted in westerns was
idealized and oversimplified. There was a clear division between good and evil, between positive and negative characters. The society portrayed in westerns observed a code of honor rather than the law, and the heroes were influenced by the people surrounding them, such as peers or family members, rather than by authority imposed on them. Two of the most representative examples of this genre are *High Noon*, directed by Fred Zinnemann in 1952, and *Shane*, directed by George Stevens in 1953.

Country music became another crucial element of the cowboy culture. Western songs, such as Gene Autry’s “Back in the Saddle Again,” Patsy Montana’s “I Want to be a Cowboy’s Sweetheart” or Don Edwards’ “I’d Like To Be In Texas When They Roundup in the Spring,” tell stories about the West and its inhabitants, very often embellishing the truth. Apart from songs, cowboys developed their own poetry, defined only by subject matter. Among the themes chosen by cowboy poets were humorous anecdotes and memories of people and places, cowboy values and lifestyle as well as the landscape of the West.

We can distinguish several stages in the development of the cowboy image. To begin with, it is in the “hunter narratives” that the cowboy prototype, a white male hunter, makes his first appearance in American literature in the seventeenth century. However, as Slotkin points out, before it could happen, the first colonists had to embrace the concept of Indian captivity narratives, a literary genre exemplified by the memoirs of Mary Rowlandson and raising the subject of the frontier experience. Namely, the narratives give accounts of colonists leaving white society involuntarily and entering the world of Native Americans. While the transformation of captivity narratives into hunter narratives is logical for Slotkin, he emphasizes the considerable differences between the two genres. Firstly, the protagonist of the latter is always masculine, and secondly, he crosses his society’s boundary not only willingly, but enthusiastically. In captivity narratives Native Americans are to be feared, whereas in hunter narratives they escape in panic: “He [the hunter] is the heroic agent of an expansive colonial society, rather than the symbol of a colonial culture adrift in an alien landscape and filled with the sense of peril and anxiety” (Slotkin 64).

An important figure in the creation of the cowboy lore and legend was Daniel Boone, a pioneer whose exploits took place in the wilderness of Kentucky. Boone had a special bond with nature. In Canto the Eighth of *Don Juan*, Byron imagines Boone as the “happiest amongst mortals anywhere” (332), living in the Kentucky woodlands. Slotkin maintains that Daniel Boone has become a mythical figure due to his triumphant initiation into the Indian world—he entered that realm willingly and managed to assimilate. The literary figure that chronologically follows Boone and through whom the frontiersman subject is further explored is Natty Bumppo, the protagonist of the *Leatherstocking Tales*, a series of novels written by James...
Fenimore Cooper. The central character becomes friends with Chingachgook, a Delaware chief. Since the two men spend a lot of time together, they learn each other’s habits, so that the reader gets to know and respect the Native American world and its values. Cooper succeeded in creating the most enduring frontier figure in American literature. The historical process depicted by Cooper is a violent one. He provides entertainment by drawing on already existing tales and accounts, for instance, the adventures of Daniel Boone. Yet, simultaneously, having studied analytical writings, such as those of Crèvecoeur or Jefferson, he poses significant questions:

In Cooper’s hands the fictive “geography” of Crèvecoeur and Jefferson, with its characteristic association of frontier regions with particular social types or classes, is organized and developed as a literary plot and as a historiographical doctrine. But Cooper’s concern is to show not only the existence of different phases or stages in American social development, but to exemplify the processes through which one stage impinges upon and finally replaces another. Crèvecoeur’s geopolitical map is an allegorical tableau, stable and relatively free of catastrophic change; Cooper’s map is active, with lines that break and shift as human actors cross the boundaries in both directions, pursuing a struggle that will end only when one people and one geographical realm has been eliminated from the map (Slotkin 87-88).

Another notable individual who contributed to the formation of the cowboy myth was George A. Custer, who gained recognition first as a commander in the Cavalry Corps during the Civil War and later for his involvement in the Indian Wars. Custer’s spectacular accomplishments on the battlefield reminded Americans of everything they took pride in: “To contemplate Custer was to turn from the tragedy of fraternal strife to the classic quest of the republic’s heroic ages, the mission to bring light, law, liberty, Christianity, and commerce to the savage places of the earth” (Slotkin 8). Taking these factors into account, the importance of the Battle of Little Bighorn, in which Custer died defeated by the Sioux and Cheyenne Indians, becomes clearer. Slotkin argues that it provided the American public with one more spectacular tournament in which the great Indian chief, Sitting Bull, stood for the dying past, whereas Custer symbolized the dynamic future. Paradoxically, Custer’s crushing defeat reinforced his myth. Walt Whitman’s “Death-Sonnet for Custer” reveals that. In his analysis of the poem, Slotkin observes that Whitman employs already existing frontier legends, yet offering a new version of the myth. The poem sees Custer’s defeat as a Christ-like sacrifice that completes a “meaningful myth-historical design” (Slotkin 11). Whitman implies that such fate is embedded in the particular environment of the West and thus the whole experience becomes a moral and ideological lesson.
Perhaps the most eminent historical leader known for promoting the cowboy image is Theodore Roosevelt. Although a New Yorker, he bought a ranch in North Dakota and throughout his life was posing for pictures dressed as a cowboy. The conscious reinvention of Roosevelt’s image reflected American society’s attachment to the myths of the cowboy and the West. With the publication of Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* in 1902, these myths entered the canon of classic literature. The novel is set in Wyoming and narrates a young cowboy’s adventures. It is a major contribution to the creation of a national cowboy myth due to the fact that it made an attempt to reconcile the East with the West. The novel explores such themes as nature, education, violence, and the law arguing that westerners’ attitude towards these subjects is superior to the one adopted in the East. According to Richard White, at the end of the nineteenth century many influential people, such as Theodore Roosevelt and Frederic Remington, began to criticize the “overcivilization” and promoted going back to the “cowboy philosophy.” They believed that the West was a land where “life was primitive but also simple, real and basic. Every action in this world mattered, and the fundamental decisions of everyday life supposedly involved clear moral choices. Life in the West could restore authenticity” (White 640).

Wister’s protagonist lives in exactly the same kind of West as that described by White. As he had been earning his living on different ranches since the age of fourteen, he did not obtain any formal education. This, however, does not prevent him from winning the heart of a schoolteacher, Molly, and, what is more, even though he borrows books from her and attempts to educate himself, both of them in the end rely on his wisdom and the experience he gained living in the West. Wister delves into the topic of the subjectivity of morality when the Virginian, following the Judge’s order, executes his friend Steve, who turns out to be a cattle rustler. The protagonist’s feelings are not examined, yet the moral problem is introduced through the description of Molly’s growing reservations. She seems so shocked that the Judge decides to explain to her that westerners follow a different set of rules to those in the East:

> 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 (Wister 273-74).

The Virginian is a true Westerner and an embodiment of frontier values. In “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” a lecture delivered in 1893,
Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the westward expansion defined American life and that due to the constant struggle between civilization and wilderness that took place in the West, the American became a new kind of man, distinguished by the “belief in personal guts, integrity, and ingenuity” (Fishwick 92). The myth of the frontier became an identity-founding legend. Nevertheless, in the face of technological progress and the gradual industrialization of the West, the myth of the cowboy has undergone devaluation, and the romantic realm of the cowboys has become in many ways a phenomenon of the past. This triggered the need for a revision of the myth in literature. Sam Shepard, one of the most riveting playwrights on the contemporary American theatrical stage, is aware of the strength of the frontier myth, yet, he draws our attention to the dangers it involves. The writer contends that the industrialization that took place in recent times has changed the American environment to such an extent that the legends of the cowboy and the West are no longer valid. The decline of the myth is the subject of several of Shepard’s plays. One of them, *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978), tells the story of a family living in the West, whereas another play, *True West* (1980), is about two brothers writing a script for a western movie.

By describing an American family living on a farm, Shepard analyzes numerous concepts connected with the myth of the West. The author focuses on what the terms “West” and “land” mean to each member of the family. Additionally, the play lays bare the helplessness felt by individuals in the face of such social forces as industrialization or growing consumerism. When Shepard passes judgment on the Tates, he simultaneously assesses the condition of contemporary westerners. Shepard’s play explores a variety of attitudes towards the West itself. To begin with, it mocks the sentimental outlook, in the monologue delivered by Wesley in the first act. Each member of the family adopts a different stance towards the land. Ella expresses detachment and believes that the only advantage of owning property in the West is that it can easily be sold, there being still many people who want to own land. Ella’s conviction is reaffirmed by Taylor, a real estate speculator. He stresses the fact that the purpose the land serves is no longer agricultural but housing:

> The land is full of potential. . . . Of course it’s a shame to see agriculture being slowly pushed into the background in deference to low-cost housing, but it’s simply a product of the times we live in. There’s simply more people on the planet these days…. More people demand more shelter. More shelter demands more land. . . . We have to provide for the people some way. The new people (153).

Shepard not only does not follow the tradition of showing the West as a place to escape to, but describes it as a place to escape from. Each member of the family has a vision of starting over somewhere else. First, Ella has plans to go to Europe, which she calls “a whole new place” (149). Her son thinks about Alaska,
believing “it’s full of possibilities. It’s undiscovered” (164). Finally, both Weston and his daughter consider Mexico as a place to go. While the characters are making these escape plans, the outside world seems to enter into their house in order to destroy their family life. Wesley envisions the imminent invasion and it becomes clear that what he fears is really the industrialization:

There’ll be bulldozers crashing through the orchard. There’ll be giant steel balls crashing through the walls. There’ll be foremen with their sleeves rolled up and blue-prints under their arms. There’ll be steel girders spanning areas of land. Cement pilings. Prefab walls. Zombie architecture. . . . A zombie city! Right here. Right where we live now (164).

Wesley voices what seems to be Shepard’s dismay over the process of the romantic individualism of the West being suppressed by the expansion of cutthroat corporate America. In Wesley’s words, “it means more than losing a house. It means losing a country” (163). This is a recurring preoccupation in Shepard’s plays; Wesley’s concern about the family’s orchard being ravaged by modern machinery echoes the anxiety and the nostalgia for nature by Stu, the protagonist of the 1967 play Cowboys #2. Stu is uneasy thinking back on the beautiful orange groves he had cherished, which were uprooted to make room for schools, streets, houses and mansions. In his emotional monologue he expresses his longing for the Western dreamscape persisting in his memory and his aversion to the new inhabitants of the land, with their pet peacocks, symbolizing decadence and corruption. According to Henry Nash Smith, “the westward movement seemed to less imaginative observers a glorious victory of civilization over savagery and barbarism. . . .—the Western hunter and guide was praiseworthy not because of his intrinsic wildness or half-savage glamor, but because he blazed trails that hard-working farmers could follow” (52-53).

This somewhat ruthless yet undeniably progressive point of view is represented in William Inge’s The Dark at the Top of the Stairs (1957) by Rubin Flood’s wife, Cora, who admonishes her husband for behaving like a “young cowboy” (Inge 108). He is always on the road as a traveling harness salesman, instead of looking into more stable occupations, such as a storekeeper or a mechanic, in order to be able to spend more time at home with his family. Rubin, however, insists: “I was raised on a ranch and thought I’d spend my life on it. Sellin’ harness is about all I’m prepared for … as long as there’s any harness to sell” (108). It is clear from his declaration that he is aware of the changing social and economic situation in the world around him, even though he is unwilling to accept any changes. His inability to adapt costs him his job. Coming home to his wife, he admits that “no one’s buyin’ it [harness]. People are buyin’ automobiles. Harness salesmen are … things of the past” (138). Thus, the progress depicted in Shepard’s and Inge’s plays was an inevitable process
in American society, “a society committed to an expansive manifest destiny [where a] romantic love of the vanishing Wild West could be no more than a self-indulgent affectation beside the triumphant official cult of progress, which meant the conquest of the wilderness by farms and towns and cities” (Smith 52).

Another play in which Sam Shepard looks closer at themes connected with the frontier myth is True West. The play tells a story of two brothers who spend a few days in the house of their mother while she is away on vacation. Austin, the younger brother, is a seemingly successful screenwriter, whereas Lee is said to have lived in the desert lately. Austin is working on a new western movie script for an important Hollywood producer, Saul Kimmer. Shepard turns our attention to the deceptiveness of the myth of the West. Firstly, the conflict between the two brothers reveals the discrepancy between the actual West and the one that has been imagined. Even though he claims he dismisses the idea of the West as an outdated, “dead” concept, Austin stands for the false vision of the West that has been perpetuated in the collective consciousness. Lee, on the other hand, symbolizes the West that has been experienced. Secondly, Shepard points to the version of the myth reinforced by Hollywood. Finally, another difference in the perception of the West is introduced through the characters of the brothers’ parents. Their mother exemplifies the New West of suburbia, whereas the father, with all his problems, symbolizes the “true” Old West mentioned in the play’s title. Austin admits that he finds his comfortable suburban lifestyle pointless. What is more, it becomes obvious that he admires his brother: after Lee has said that Austin is unable to steal even a toaster, the younger brother, regarding this as a challenge, steals all toasters in the neighborhood, thinking that in this way he can demonstrate that he is able to survive in the desert, and begs Lee to take him along. Austin falls victim to the myth of the West: he no longer perceives it as it is in reality but rather as a place where he can be reborn and where his life can acquire a new meaning.

Apart from Austin’s and Lee’s visions of the West, Shepard’s play explores the way the myth is treated by popular culture. Saul Kimmer, the producer, represents Hollywood in the play. First, he wants Austin to write a western script, simply to make a profit. However, once he realizes that Lee has actually lived in the desert, he decides that his story may sell better. Thus, Saul calls off shooting a movie based on Austin’s idea and wants him to write a screenplay based on Lee’s ludicrous plot instead. Charlie Schulman points out that it does not mean that Hollywood opts for authenticity. What Shepard emphasizes is Hollywood’s “insatiable hunger to develop the … landscape of real life into formulas of mass consumption” (Schulman 58). Thus, the vision of the West offered by Lee does not differ from the ones that the American audience has been offered repeatedly; it is as false as it is cliché. Among so many inauthentic visions of the West, the only real aspect of it is represented by the brothers’ father. He does not appear in the play, yet he is present in Austin and
Lee’s conversations. However, this picture of the West does not resemble its own myth and is hard to accept. While it is true that the father lives in the desert, he is, nonetheless, addicted to alcohol and constantly short of money. Both brothers think about helping him, yet they know that it will not change anything. Thus, the Old West that their father stands for is a wasteland. Through exploring the influence of the cowboy legends on present-day Americans, Shepard examines the difficulty “to find comfortable roles, self-images, and modes of action in … contemporary world” (Siegel 240). The onset of industrialization and urbanization of the West pushes the rancher and the frontiersman into the realm of the past, and we realize that “[t]his is where the cowboy rides away” (Strait). The frontier spirit in America is mostly visible in the character of American people; however, there are many attempts to revive outward manifestations of the pioneer heritage, mostly for entertainment or as an expression of nostalgia; for example, on July 28, 2012, Americans celebrated the Eighth Annual National Day of the Cowboy. The myths of the cowboy and the West continue to exert a powerful influence on modern imagination. “American literature and culture have been so pervasively influenced by the Western experience that they cannot be understood at all without reference to the West as historical reality, legend and myth” (Cawelti 115), even though in today’s society we rather tend to look around and ask ourselves, echoing Paula Cole’s words: “Where is my lonely ranger? Where have all the cowboys gone?” (Cole).

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