

## *The “Western”: Definition of the Myth*

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GIVEN THE dense history of the American West, nearly unexplored in its most fundamental aspects and potentially the richest of American myths, why has there not emerged a modern novelist of the first rank to deal adequately with the subject? Why has the West not produced its equivalent of New England’s Melville or Hawthorne—or, in modern times, of the South’s Faulkner or Warren?

The question has been asked before, but the answers usually given are somewhat too easy. It is true that the Western subject has had the curious fate to be exploited, cheapened and sentimentalized before it had a chance to enrich itself naturally, through the slow accretion of history and change. It is true that the subject of the West has undergone a process of mindless stereotyping by a line of literary racketeers that extends from the hired hacks of a hundred years ago who composed Erastus Beadle’s Dime Novels to such contemporary pulp writers as Nelson Nye and Luke Short—men contemptuous of the stories they have to tell, of the people who animate them and of the settings upon which they are played. It is true that the history of the West has been nearly taken over by the romantic regionalist, almost always an amateur historian with an obsessive but sentimental concern for Western objects and history, a concern which is consistently a means of escaping significance rather than a means of confronting it.

But the real reason that the Western theme remains inadequately explored is more fundamental. It concerns a misunderstanding of the nature of the subject out of which the theme emerges and hence a misunderstanding of its implications, literary and otherwise.

There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of uses to which the Western myth has been put in modern fiction—the first and more familiar is found in the conventional “Western”; the second is found in the serious treatment of the Western theme by such novelists as Walter van Tilburg Clark, A. B. Guthrie and Frederick Manfred. At first glance, it might seem that these

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two uses have as little in common as have the two sets of authors who employ them. But I believe that if they are examined with some care it will become clear that they do have failings in common, and that an understanding of both the uses and their failures will suggest an answer to the question with which I began this note.

In its simplest form, the conventional Western involves an elemental conflict between the personified forces of Good and Evil, as these are variously represented by cowboy and rustler, cowboy and Indian, the marshal and the bank robber, or (in a later and more socially conscious version of the formula) by the conflict between the squatter and the landowner. Complications may enter—the marshal may be beset with worldly temptations; the landowner, imperfectly evil, may enlist our sympathies for a moment; and in curious neo-classic variations, passion may set itself against honor.

It is tempting to dismiss such familiar manipulation of the myth; but the formula persists, and with a disturbing vigor. However cheaply it may be presented, however superficially exploited, its persistence demonstrates the evocation of a deep response in the consciousness of the people. The response is real; but though it may have been widely identified as such, it is not, I believe, really a response to the *Western* myth. It is, rather, a response to another habit of mind, deeply rooted and essentially American in its tone and application.

That is the New England Calvinist habit of mind, whose influence upon American culture has been both pervasive and profound. The early Calvinists saw experience as a never-ending contest between Good and Evil. Though fundamentally corrupt, man might receive, through the grace of God, a state of salvation. Of this inner state of Grace man can never be fully sure, but he may suspect its presence by such outward signs as wealth, power or worldly success. Since this state is the choice of God, the elect tend to be absolutely good; and the more numerous damned tend to be absolutely evil. This affair is wholly predetermined; man's will avails him only the illusion of choice; and the world is only a stage upon which mankind acts out a drama in which Good will ultimately prevail and in which Evil will inevitably be destroyed. In the very simplicity and inadequacy of this world view lies its essentially

dramatic nature. All experience is finally allegorical, and its meaning is determined by something outside itself.

The relationship between this habit of mind and the typically primitive Western is immediately apparent. The hero is inexplicably and essentially good. His virtue does not depend upon the "good deeds" he performs; rather, such deeds operate as outward signs of inward grace. Similarly, the villain is by his nature villainous, and not made so by choice, circumstances or environment; more often than not these are identical to those of the hero. And even in those instances, relatively infrequent today, when the villain is Indian or Mexican, the uses of racial origin are not so conventionally bigoted as they might appear. Racial backgrounds are not explanations of villainy; they are merely outward signs of inward damnation. In the curiously primitive nature of this drama, it is necessary that we know at every moment the figure in whom Evil is concentrated and that we be constantly assured that it is doomed to destruction. Beneath the gunplay, the pounding hooves and the crashing stagecoaches, there is a curious, slow, ritualistic movement that is essentially religious.

There are, to be sure, more sophisticated variations upon this allegorical formula, though even the variations have inescapable connections with the original Calvinistic base. For example, in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, though the hidden base is Calvinistic, certain recognizable Emersonian revisions upon the doctrine emerge. In the Emersonian formula, the Natural Man (i.e., the man who places his faith in his instinct rather than in his reason) replaces the Elect of God. In either formula, the end is a state of Grace, but in the Emersonian version the reliance upon instinct may come about either accidentally out of ignorance or by an initial act of the will whereby one chooses to relinquish the will. The Virginian, the Natural Man, is good by virtue of his "naturalness"; Trampas is evil in the older, more purely Calvinistic sense; and the schoolteacher, Mary Wood, is the figure of Emersonian compromise, the neither-good-nor-evil, code-produced human being whose salvation lies in the surrender of the intellect.

If, viewed in this manner, *The Virginian* seems a grotesque echo of Henry James's formula (the "natural," crude, innocent

American versus the “unnatural,” sensitive, cultured European), we should not be surprised. Calvinism, as it manifests itself in literary art, is most likely to move toward allegory, as does the primitive Western; but when the more serious artist can no longer sustain the religious faith necessary for allegory, then the transformed Calvinist habit of mind is likely to move toward the novel of manners. Henry James, a Calvinist out of the Emersonian transformation, was a novelist of manners less from choice than from necessity; he perceived that “essences” of tremendous complexity lay in human character, and that these essences existed mysteriously, obscurely. The only way to get at them was by an examination of their outward manifestations, which were most precisely discoverable in the manners of individuals, classes, or even nations. To put it baldly, the novel of allegory depends upon a rigid and simple religious or philosophical system; the novel of manners depends upon a stable and numerous society, one in which the moral code can in some way be externalized in the more or less predictable details of daily life.

It seems obvious, then, that the Western landscape and subject, especially in their historic beginnings, are not really appropriate to the Calvinistic formula which has most frequently enclosed them. What has been widely accepted as the “Western” myth is really a habit of mind emerging from the geography and history of New England and applied uncritically to another place and time.

If the popular Western mechanically and irrelevantly furnishes forth perfunctory details, using stories so stereotyped and empty that they have become independent of human beings, and therefore contemptuous of them, what of the serious novel that would make use of the Western theme and subject?

Because of their integrity and talent, one might wish to exempt such novelists as Walter van Tilburg Clark, Frederick Manfred and even A. B. Guthrie from a charge even remotely similar to the one leveled against the legion of hacks who have done so much to cheapen the Western theme. But with the possible exception of Clark, each of these novelists is, in his own way, guilty of mistaking the real nature of his subject and of imprecisely adjusting his form to the demands of that subject.

It is not that they have hit upon the wrong myth, but that they have failed to recognize in the first place that their subject is mythic. Moment by moment, the good novelist is confronted by the necessities and implications of his matter; the worth of his novel will in many respects be dependent upon his success in adjusting form to subject.

Novelists have used, singly or in combination, four forms: the tragic, the comic, the epic and the mythic.

The details which formalize the tragic subject are most often historical and "true," either in fact or effect; thus tragedy has the advantage of seeming inevitable. So that they may have great powers of generalization, its characters are usually of high rank, most often functionaries of the state; the province of tragedy is public life, and hence the feeling that it evokes is public feeling. It is a requisite of tragedy that its outcome be unfortunate, because its theme is the cost of disorder in an ordered universe.

Comedy, on the other hand, is non-historical and invented; the characters are of low or moderate estate—or if they are not, the novelist's focus is upon the non-public aspects of their lives; the conflicts which turn the plot and impel the characters are relatively trivial; the field in which they exist is that of private experience. Thus, the subject of comedy is most often domestic or social; and the outcome, if not always joyful, is at least ironic and mixed. Comedy has been profoundly influential upon the development of the novel; from its near-beginnings in Madame de LaFayette, Defoe and Fielding, and through its development in Jane Austen, Henry James and Ford Madox Ford, it has achieved most of its distinction as a form by exploring the comic subject.

The epic was a form most meaningful to primitive cultures seeking unification of scattered strengths and cultural resources; it has been used imperfectly and with relative infrequency in the last two or three hundred years. Since its central character embodies the most primitive nationalistic aspirations of a people, its plot, though embedded in a kind of history, is really an accretion of fantastic and superhuman adventures. Because its intention is relatively simple, its structure is sequential and repetitive. Unlike the tragic character, the epic character tends to

be one-dimensional, flat and not particularly distinguished by intellectual or moral powers. His virtues are the simple ones of physical courage and strength, singleness of purpose and blind endurance. Again, unlike tragedy, the outcome of the epic is always fortunate for the real subject, the people—though the hero may sacrifice himself to make that outcome possible. Its tone is triumphant; its rhetoric is inflated, extreme; as a form that embodies an intention prior to that of tragedy, it is a movement through those conflicts that must be overcome to establish order in the first place. It does not move among the conflicts that threaten an order long established.

It is upon this epic subject, or more exactly upon the form and manner which is an outgrowth of the subject, that the novelist who would put to serious use the Western theme has most frequently and unfortunately stumbled.

Superficially, the Western adventure seems typically epic, compounded as it is of individual acts of bravery; of strength and endurance before dreadful hardships; of treks across unknown lands; of enemies subjugated and wild beasts slain; of heroes whose names have come down with legendary force. But despite its appearance, the adventure is not epical, and it is not so essentially.

What gives the epic its unique force and what finally justifies and sustains both its rhetoric and repetitive structure, is its fundamentally nationalistic nature. The heroism, the bloodletting, the superhuman bravery, the terrible mutilations—these are given point and intensity only by the nationalistic impulse that lies behind them. Without that impulse, the adventure (handled epically) is empty, is bombast, is violence without rage.

Myth bears certain resemblances to the other forms and subjects I have mentioned; but these are in the main superficial. As in tragedy, the mythic subject rises from the enveloping action of history, but the events that detail that subject are invented. For example, in *Moby-Dick* we are at all times profoundly aware of the social, economic, religious and political forces that impel the *Pequod* and its crew upon their journey, and we believe in those forces as a matter of course. But the events and characters which specify the quest are intensely symbolic and they compel belief on a level different from that of historical reality.

Like the tragic character, the mythic character is designed to generalize the subject; but whereas the tragic character gets his generalizing power from his high rank (ideally, as the functionary of the state, he is a perfect and inclusive type whose fate is inextricably tied to that of his subjects), the mythic character gets his generalizing power from his archetypal nature. The mythic subject typically involves a quest—one that is essentially inner, however externally it may disclose itself. Thus its feeling is neither public in the large and impersonal sense that tragic feeling must be, nor private in the small and domestic sense that comic feeling must be. It is that feeling which comes with an awareness of the cost of insight, the exaction of the human spirit by the terror of truth. The outcome of myth is always mixed; its quest is for an order of the self that is gained at the expense of knowing at last the essential chaos of the universe.

The pure critic or anthropologist might wish to separate myth from its historic base; but in the twentieth century the practicing novelist cannot do so. By his nature, he is not "pure"; and since in the main his imagination is historical, he cannot commit himself seriously to localities, times and subjects that he cannot feel in his bones; therefore the habitation of myth is of great importance to him. In the history of the Western landscape, and in its relation to human character, he may find that habitation, and I know of no other place from which the myth might so richly proceed.

But if the myth is to emerge with some meaning, the novelist must consider the implications of its history.

The history of the West is in some respects the record of its exploitation. Its early exploitation by the Spanish moving up from Mexico was clearly nationalistic, for the open purpose of strengthening an already powerful nation and church. But the American frontiersman, who came from the East through Kentucky and Tennessee and out of St. Louis, was a lone human being who went upon plain and mountain, who subjugated nature on his own terms, and who exploited the land for his own benefit. There was no precise ideological motive for his exploitation, and because of that lack of external motive the adventure became all the more private and intense. Removed from a social structure of some stability, imbued to some degree with a New England-Calvinist-Emersonian tradition that

afforded him an abstract view of the nature of his experience, he suddenly found himself in the midst of a few desperate and concrete facts, primary among which was the necessity for survival in a universe whose brutality he had theretofore but dimly suspected. And whether he wished to or not, he was forced to reconsider those ideas he held about the nature of himself and the world in which he lived, ideas that had once, since they sprang from the very social and economic structure they explained, served him quite adequately.

The Western adventure, then, is not really epic; no national force stronger than himself pushed the American frontiersman beyond the bounds of his known experience into the chaos of a new land, into the unknown. His voyage into the wilderness was most meaningfully a voyage into the self, experimental, private and sometimes obscure.

We may now turn to those novelists, whom I mentioned earlier, who have chosen to deal with the Western adventure but who have mistaken the nature of their subject and who have, consciously or unconsciously, imposed epic strategies upon mythic subjects.

The first (and the best of them) is Walter van Tilburg Clark; the novels with which I am concerned are *The Oxbow Incident* and *The Track of the Cat*. I deal with Clark first in order to get him out of the way, since he has managed to escape the trap into which the others have fallen. He has managed to escape for reasons that may be technically described as accidental, though of course the escape is really a solution and in art there are no accidents. Both of these novels are essentially morality plays, but of a pronounced human subtlety and complexity; and though both make use of the Western landscape, it is not really necessary to either of them. Insofar as these matters can be pinned down, Clark seems to have gathered most of his technical resources from a study of the French novel, particularly the Flaubertian novel, with its concern for locked structure, restrained prose and physical detail raised to symbolic import. Thus, the precisely located scene of his novels is more nearly a necessity demanded by his technique than a genuine use of scene as an aspect of subject. Clark certainly has imposed no epic strategies upon his work, but neither has he



availed himself of the Western myth. Which is to say that he is not an essentially *Western* novelist in the sense that I have been using that word. I hardly need to add that there is no reason why he should be.

*The Big Sky* was A. B. Guthrie's first serious novel, and it remains his best. Guthrie began as a writer of popular fiction, and even in his more serious work he is primarily concerned with the feelings that rise from his subjects rather than with their meanings. In this accidental respect, and on a less intense level, his intention is similar to that of the writer of epic. Moreover, the structure of *The Big Sky* is fundamentally epic; it is sequential, accretive and repetitive, and its primary purpose is to display the epical virtues of physical strength, courage and endurance in its chief characters. But no very vital purpose animates the adventures of the characters; they are flat and typical in the most limited sense of that word; and because of their purposelessness and flatness, the impact of experience upon them is curiously unreal and almost totally visual. We finally see that both plot and character are merely the means whereby we "experience" the landscape, which is the real subject of the novel. This suggests, perhaps, that Guthrie's novel has no true subject. It is an apparatus designed with some elaboration for the rather simple purpose of expressing a few vague and romantic feelings about the land itself. It is unsatisfactory as a work of art; its epical structure and character depiction are irrelevant, if not misleading, since they spring from an imprecise feeling about the subject rather than from an understanding of it. And though a wake of feeling ripples after it, the novel itself is curiously unmemorable.

Frederick Manfred in *Lord Grizzly* displays that ability without which no novelist can long endure—the instinct to choose a good subject. *Lord Grizzly* deals with one of the most potentially rich myths of the West, and one which has the advantage of being firmly embedded in historical fact. It is the story of Hugh Glass, the old hunter who, attacked and terribly wounded by a grizzly, and armed only with a hunting knife, yet manages to slay the bear. Left by his two companions to die, he survives. Without weapons or food, he crawls two hundred miles to take revenge upon the men who abandoned him. Out

of history we know that he found them, yet took no revenge; out of myth we reconstruct the meaning he earned which made the exaction of revenge impossible.

But again, upon the mythic subject has been imposed those devices and techniques which derive from the epic intention. Although the structure of *Lord Grizzly* is not so loose and anecdotal as that of *The Big Sky*, it nevertheless has some of that expansiveness and irrelevance of detail endemic to the epic. In the primitive epic, the unused detail is present, we feel, because of a childlike wonder at its mere existence; but in the literary epic, the only kind possible today, the same detail seems ornamental, artificial and strangely jarring. Moreover, Manfred has chosen a rhetoric derived from the Homeric epic, the Old Testament and folk speech which tends to inflate the subject where it needs constriction and to deflate it where it needs elevation—a rhetoric, in short, which falsifies the subject. Only occasionally does the detail manage to emerge genuinely from the style; but when it does, we can measure the loss achieved by Manfred's choice of certain epical techniques which, imposed upon an unwilling detail, falsify the value of the subject rather than reveal and judge it for what it might be.

It is not surprising that the commercial exploiters of the Western theme have so mistaken the nature of their subject that, unaware, they have imposed upon it a fundamentally alien New England-Calvinistic world view; it is both surprising and disturbing that such talented novelists as Guthrie and Manfred have made a parallel mistake about the nature and implications of their subjects.

The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century adventure of the American West is essentially mythic. It is not tragic: there is no order to be disturbed, its heroes are not of high rank, and the feeling that emerges from the adventure is not public, in the tragic sense of the word. It is not comic: no elaborate social structure furnishes the details of manners, and the difficulties are neither slight nor trivial. Nor is it epic. Except in the Indian wars, its field of action is neither nationalistic nor political.

The mythic subject is one that has not yet found its proper form. I believe that the most usable and authentic myth available to us may be discovered in the adventure of the American West. Viewed in a certain way, the American frontiersman

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—whether he was hunter, guide, scout, explorer or adventurer—becomes an archetypal figure, and begins to extend beyond his location in history. He is nineteenth-century man moving into the twentieth century; he is European man moving into a new continent; he is man moving into the unknown, into potentiality, and by that move profoundly changing his own nature. He and the land into which he moves may have their counterparts in both *Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight* and in *Moby-Dick*—which is to say that, though the myth which embodies him has its locality and time, it is confined by neither. He walks in his time and through his adventure, out of history and into myth. He is an adventurer in chaos, searching for meaning there. He is, in short, ourselves.