

The significance of the frontier in the evolution of the Western genre

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Abstract

The aim of the paper is to show the pivotal role of the American West in the evolution of the Western genre. The West is understood here not only as the uncharted area lying west of the Mississippi river but, above all, as a mythical place, which is how it came to be represented in Western fiction. The paper commences with an examination of the Frontier Thesis, aimed at illustrating the symbolic meaning of the Frontier and the West; and then proceeds to discuss precursors of the genre. Next, *The Virginian* is presented as the first American Western, and it is demonstrated that its key characteristics correspond to the basic premises of the Frontier thesis. The paper then follows the evolution of the Western in the 20th century, arguing that transformations in the formula since the 1960s reflect a new, revisionist treatment of the myth of the West.

Key words

American West, frontier, Frontier Thesis, myth of the West, Western genre

Znaczenie granicy w ewolucji westernu

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest ukazanie kluczowej roli amerykańskiego Zachodu w ewolucji gatunku westernu. Zachód jest tu rozumiany nie tylko jako niezbadany obszar rozciągający się na zachód od rzeki Missisipi, ale przede wszystkim jako mityczna kraina, gdyż tak właśnie przyjęło się przedstawiać ten region w literaturze typu western. Artykuł rozpoczyna się od analizy teorii pogranicza, mającej na celu objaśnienie symbolicznego znaczenia Zachodu. Następnie pokrótce omówiono pozycje, które wniosły wkład w rozwój westernu oraz poddano analizie powieść Owena Wistera pt. *Wirgińczyk: Jeździec z Równin*, która jest powszechnie uznawana za pierwszy western w literaturze amerykańskiej. Wykazano, że podstawowe cechy gatunku są powiązane z założeniami teorii pogranicza. Ponadto omówiono transformację westernu w XX wieku, uzasadniając tezę, że przekształcenia gatunku od lat 60-tych odzwierciedlały nowe, rewizjonistyczne podejście do mitu Zachodu.

Słowa kluczowe

amerykański Zachód, granica, mit Zachodu, western

1. Introduction

The early Pilgrim settlers who arrived in the New World in 1620 regarded the huge stretches of land they encountered as a gift from God (Bremer 1995: 32), upon which they were bound by the covenant to establish an ideal Christian society, "a city upon a hill" (Winthrop 1630: 9-10), which would set an example for the whole world (Bremer 1995: 43-44; 89-90; Gray 2004: 35). Since the first settlers founded colonies in the east, the conquest advanced westwards, before long resulting in the emergence of numerous adventure stories revolving around life on the Frontier – the edge of the colonized land beyond which lay uncharted territory. These stories, along with colonial folk

music, Indian captivity narratives, Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* as well as local color literature, are predecessors of the modern Western (Schatz 1992: 431), which became recognized as a genre of fiction in its own right at the beginning of the twentieth century (Cawelti 1999: 57). The Western is therefore the literary outcome of a nearly three-century-long westward expansion. However, instead of serving as a reliable source of information about the conquest, it departs from historical truth in favor of a myth of the West, which glorifies the colonial past.

The aim of this paper is to explore the interconnection between the myth of the West and the vision of the West conjured up by Western novels. Beginning from an analysis of the Frontier Thesis, the paper traces the key elements of the myth of the American West, which are subsequently juxtaposed with the main characteristics of the Western in Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian*. In addition to this, the paper investigates the extent to which American mythology is reflected in this classic representative of the genre. The changes in the formula of the Western are also analyzed so as to determine the correlation between the decline in the popularity of the genre and demythologization of the West in the second half of the 20th century.

2. The Frontier Thesis

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his monumental essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", in which he scrutinized the impact of westward expansion on the molding of American national identity. Contrary to the long-standing belief at the time that American culture originated from the civilization of the Old World, Turner asserted that it was the presence of the frontier that led to the formation of a new, distinct nation (McVeigh 2007: 1-2). According to Turner, the frontier experience forced settlers to break away from the influence of Europe by returning them to a primitive

state in which they could undergo spiritual regeneration, adapt to a new physical environment, and finally be able to recommence their lives as true Americans:

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization (...) Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe [...]. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American. (1893: 3-4)

Such a remarkable transformation was possible due to the fact that the nature of the American frontier, referred to as “the edge of free land”, was markedly different from European frontiers, defined by Turner as “a fortified boundary line running through dense populations” (1893: 3). What was considered as free land in the West, as juxtaposed with the enclosed, densely-populated Old World, ensured for Europeans an equality of opportunities regardless of their financial status, providing favorable conditions for the evolution of democracy, the promotion of a feeling of national unity, and the fostering of the values of equality, individualism as well as freedom, all of which lie at the core of American national identity (Kowalczyk-Twarowski and Pyzik 10-11; Zachara 2009: 249-250). In Turner’s words, the frontier “carried with it individualism, democracy, and nationalism” (1893: 35) and the democracy on the new continent “was strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education and pressing individual liberty” (1893: 32). Finally, Turner also believed that the frontier experience instilled unique traits of character in Americans, such as toughness, determination, self-confidence, optimism and enterprise, permanently setting them apart from other nations (McVeigh 2007: 24).

Turner’s thesis recapitulates the myth of the Frontier, dating back to the arrival of the first Puritan settlers (Stevens

1997: par. 2), who saw the new continent as the promised land. Although in the course of time many Puritan doctrines lost their vital force, the myth continued to gain strength (Kowalczyk-Twarowski and Pyzik 2004: 9-10). For Turner, the concept of the American West is closely connected with that of the frontier, since “each frontier leaves its traces behind it, and when it becomes a settled area the region still partakes of the frontier characteristics” (1893: 4). Thus, it transpires that the West is permeated with the same exceptional attributes as the mythical Frontier, becoming the embodiment of the promised land, where anything can be achieved by moral strength, determination and hard work. These extraordinary qualities of the West are perpetuated in classic Western fiction, which contributed to misconceived notions about daily life on the Frontier. As Richard Slotkin puts it, for the majority of Americans

the West became a landscape known through, and completely identified with, the fictions created around it [...] The fictive or mythic West became the scene in which new acts of mythogenesis would occur – in effect displacing the real contemporary region and the historical Frontier (1998: 61-62).

For the purposes of this paper, analysis of “the fictions” is narrowed down, focusing primarily on classic Western literature and its subsequent modifications in the 20th century. However, it should be noted that over the centuries the myth of the West has been exploited and deconstructed by a multitude of American as well as non-American writers, poets, playwrights, scriptwriters, film directors, politicians and many others, which corroborates its enduring appeal.

3. The first Western and its predecessors

Published in 1902, Owen Wister’s *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* is widely cited as the first literary exponent of the modern Western genre (Cawelti 1977: 219). An instant best-seller (McVeigh 2007: 40), the novel established the staple

characteristics of the genre. Wister's key to success lay in an effective combination of themes and ideologies that had been developed in the Western fiction of the previous decades (Cawelti 1999: 68). In this respect, he was particularly indebted to James Fenimore Cooper, whose *Leatherstocking Tales* set the archetypal pattern of the adventure story (Cawelti 1977: 192), introduced the prototype for the Western hero (Cawelti 1977: 194), and, perhaps most significantly, explored the complex dialectic between the forces of civilization advancing from the east and the magnificent yet hazardous nature of the west (Cawelti 1977: 195). Along with Cooper's saga, the contemporary Western seems to have been influenced by dime novels, which began to be published in 1860 (McVeigh 2007: 39). However, these immensely popular stories, filled with unprecedented adventures in the West, failed to match Cooper's saga in terms of thematic complexity (Topping, Frazier and Peck 2010: par. 2), reducing the dichotomy between the values of civilization and nature into a moral opposition of good and evil, embodied by white pioneers and "savage" Indians, respectively (Cawelti 1977: 209). Nonetheless, dime novels represented a shift from Cooper's frontier backwoodsman towards the figure of an idealized masculine cowboy hero, epitomized by Wister's Virginian (Lusted 2014: 48). Last but not least, the local color movement of the 19th century also appears to have exerted a considerable impact on the modern Western (McVeigh 2007: 41). Local colorists, including Bret Harte, Mark Twain and Stephen Crane, added elements of humor and nostalgia to the genre, which were subsequently taken over by Wister (Cawelti 1977: 219). Furthermore, they depicted a new social hierarchy in the West, which evolved as a result of the absence of intricate eastern social institutions (McVeigh 2007: 42), transforming Cooper's opposition between civilization and nature into a cultural conflict between the non-institutionalized West and the civilized East (Cawelti 1997: 66-67).

4. The characteristics of the Western

The first genuine American Western starts with a scene in which the eastern narrator disembarks from a train in Medicine Bow, Wyoming, from where he is about to be escorted to a remote ranch by one of the cowboys working there, later referred to as the Virginian. Standing forlorn at the railway station, the narrator watches the departure of his eastbound train heading “to the far shores of civilization” (1902: 2). During the journey to the ranch, he dismisses western towns as provincial, shapeless and squalid, yet is quick to perceive the striking beauty of the western landscape, which clearly distinguishes it from the eastern parts of the country:

Yet this wretched husk of squalor spent thought upon appearances; many houses in it wore a false front to seem as if they were two stories high. There they stood, rearing their pitiful masquerade amid a fringe of old tin cans, while at their very doors began a world of crystal light, a land without end, a space across which Noah and Adam might come straight from Genesis. (4)

Elsewhere in the novel, the West is described by the narrator as “indefinite and mystic far” (99) “quiet, open, splendid wilderness” (14) and “land of equality” (17). Thus, imbued with transcendent values, Wister’s West offers spiritual regeneration through the return to a simpler manner of living and close contact with nature, both of which have been lost in the civilized East (Cawelti 1977: 221). However, the West is not a place without perils, which come in the form of dangerous animals, Indians and criminals. Therefore, it is also a testing ground for all newcomers, promoting qualities such as toughness, individualism and self-confidence, which are indispensable for survival in the harsh circumstances of frontier life (Cawelti 1977: 225; Etulain 1996: 9).

What is more, the West is depicted as a land of infinite opportunities, in which neither a lack of aristocratic heritage nor poor education stands in the way of success, which is deter-

mined by one's inner worth and hard work (Slotkin 1998: 175-176). This is the reason why the Virginian, representing a self-made man, becomes a successful rancher at the end of the novel. The democratizing effects of the West may be further substantiated by the Virginian's marriage to Molly, who, unlike the cowboy, is a well-educated member of an aristocratic family.

By introducing a romance between the Virginian and Molly Wood, Wister found yet another channel to explore the dichotomy between the West and the East. Whereas the Virginian embodies the free spirit of the West, Molly symbolizes domesticity and constraints on the hero's freedom, characteristic of the East (Cawelti 1977: 222-223; McVeigh 2007: 45). It seems that the marriage of the two as well as the Virginian's promotion to a ranch foreman bring about the resolution of the conflict in favor of superior western values (Lusted 2014: 47).

Another theme crucial to Wister's novel is redemptive violence, which is perpetrated by the hero in an attempt to purge evil from the community. Due to the inefficacy of the courts in Wyoming, the Virginian is forced to take the law into his own hands. Consequently, the punishment of rustlers is administered through vigilante justice, including a hanging and a gunfight. Although these acts are regarded as illegal in the civilized East, they are condoned in the West, since both of them are aimed at bringing justice to the community (Cawelti 1977: 221; Slotkin 1998: 180-181).

Finally, Wister's central protagonist establishes the image of the masculine Western cowboy hero in popular culture (Topping, Frazier and Peck 2010: para 5). Described as a "slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures" (1), the Virginian is renowned for his strength, cowboy skills, gentlemanliness to women, sharp wit, intelligence as well as inclination to practical jokes. Yet, his most remarkable characteristic is his strict adherence to the code of the West, which entails courage, honor, loyalty, keeping one's word and defending justice, even in the face of death (Cawelti 197: 222-223; McVeigh 2007: 45-

46). This moral code appears to govern all of the Virginian's decisions, but is perhaps most noticeable in the scene in which Molly, fearing for the cowboy's life, tries to convince him to flee the town rather than confront Trampas in a gun duel. Reluctant to break the code, the Virginian rejects Molly's request to save his own life, stating that: "I am goin' my own course, [...] Can't yu' 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" (126). In a shoot-out just after sunset, which has since become the classic denouement of the genre, the Virginian triumphs over his antagonist, restoring order to the community.

5. *The Virginian* and the Frontier Thesis

Having determined the key constituents of the genre, it now becomes possible to examine the similarities between *The Virginian* and the Frontier Thesis. When analyzing the novel, Richard W. Etulain notes that "the parallels between *The Virginian* and Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis are illuminating. Much of what the Wisconsin historian asserted in his path-breaking essay [...] is central to Wister's novel" (1996: 9). Indeed, it appears that several essential ingredients of the novel bear a strong resemblance to the frontier thesis articulated by Turner.

First of all, the central protagonist of Wister's novel epitomizes a number of distinctive traits of character resulting from the process that Turner defines as "Americanization". Demonstrating his valiance, toughness and perseverance in the most challenging conditions, the Virginian may be likened to early settlers, who brought their civilization to the areas they conquered. In addition, it could be stated that the Virginian's story of success upholds the myth of the West as a land where anything is possible.

Secondly, Wister follows Turner in depicting the West as a land of invigorating qualities, where one can undergo spiritual purification and rediscover the most important values of

human life. Sharply contrasted with the hierarchical East, the West functions as a space of freedom, equality and democracy. Wister's belief in equal opportunities for all men in the West may be perhaps summarized by quoting an excerpt of *The Virginian* which contains the following reflections on democracy by the narrator:

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. [...] 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. (38)

Hence, in the American West, membership of the aristocracy is not through birth, but determined solely by the display of one's inner worth and hard work (Cawelti 1977: 227).

Thirdly, despite their strong beliefs in democracy, neither Wister nor Turner appear to harbor any interest in the plight of indigenous tribes of the country or slave labor (Etulain 1996: 10; Slotkin 1998: 55). On the contrary, the theme of violence committed in the process of westward expansion is largely absent in their works, giving way to a mythologized vision of American history. In Wister's novel, frontier violence is replaced by the concept of redemptive violence, considered to be an effective means of meting out punishment for crimes and reinstating justice. In addition, the women's roles in *The Virginian* are marginalized and stereotyped. Jane Tompkins, for instance, states that Western fiction displays animosity towards women's words, portraying female characters as inferior to reticent, masculine western heroes (1992: 62-63). A similar observation is made by Slotkin, who notes that Molly's relationship with the Virginian flourishes only when she is finally able to acknowledge the masculine superiority of the hero and accept the code of the West (1998: 180-182).

6. The Post-Western

Just one year after the publication of *The Virginian*, the first silent Western film entitled *The Great Train Robbery* was released (Schatz 1992: 431). The emergence of the cinematic counterpart of the genre helped increase its popularity and ensured its accessibility to a wider audience. Many of the Western films produced in Hollywood were based on the novels of Zane Grey, Max Brand, Jack Schaefer and Louis L'Amour, who carried the genre forward into its most productive period. Reaching its heyday in the late 1950s (Schatz 1992: 430), Westerns accounted for over 10 per cent of the works of fiction published in the United States and constituted eight of the top ten television shows in the rankings (Cawelti 1999: 1). However, from the late 1960s the genre began to fall into decline (Cawelti 1999: 2-3).

The gradual drop in the popularity of the Western demonstrated a fundamental need for a reassessment of the myth of the West upon which much of its mass appeal was based. For many Americans the romanticized vision of American history, cultivated by the Western, was irreconcilable with the harrowing Vietnam War experience (Cawelti 1999: 100; McVeigh 2004: 149). The myth of the West was further undermined by the Civil Rights Movement as well as the Native American rights movement of the 1960s (Cawelti 1999: 160), which contested the long-standing notion that the United States was founded on principles of egalitarianism, democracy and freedom. By telling the history of westward expansion from a non-white perspective, African American, Indian and Mexican-American writers drew attention to the violent treatment of ethnic minorities by colonizers, which was largely ignored in classic Western fiction (Stevens 1997: par. 9; Slotkin 1998: 589). Finally, the 1960s witnessed the second wave of the feminist movement, which extended women's rights and increased their role in public life (Baxandall and Gordon 2002: 426-428). Once the most popular form of fiction in the United States

(Schatz 1992: 430), the Western, with its apotheosis of a white, male hero, stereotypical depiction of indigenous people, superficial treatment of female characters and a one-sided portrayal of American history, simply became irrelevant. In order to be saved from oblivion, the genre had to undergo a critical review and the significance of its dominant constituents had to be carefully reexamined.

The resulting transformations in the genre are noticeable in both its literary and cinematic form. In literature, the Western novels of contemporary writers, including Larry McMurtry and Cormac McCarthy question the myth of the West as a land of limitless opportunities and underscore the violent character of the conquest. In addition, female characters in the Western novels of writers such as Sandra Dallas are no longer subordinate to men nor devoid of emotional complexity. As regards cinematography, Sidney Poitier's *Buck and the Preacher* (1972) differs from classic representatives of the genre by elevating a member of the oppressed ethnic minorities to the position of the film's protagonist, while Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) may serve as an example of a revisionist Western by challenging the concept of an idealized cowboy-hero. These are just a small number of examples illustrating the modifications that the genre has undergone to adapt to the changing political, cultural and social circumstances of the post-war United States. In fact, some literary critics attribute the longevity of the genre to its adaptability, its remarkable "capacity to respond to a changing social, economic and cultural landscape", which frequently involves "travelling across generic boundaries, poaching and borrowing from many different traditions, whilst contributing to the innovation of the genre" (Campbell 2011: 409-411; Johnson 2012: 124-125). In the twenty-first century the flexibility of the Western is especially prominent in the medium of television, with many TV series, including *Deadwood*, *Heels on Wheels* as well as the highly successful *The Walking Dead* drawing on the conventions of the genre (Johnson 2012: 123-124). Finally, it could also be argued that

the evolution of the Western in the last few decades manifests its strong dependence on the mythology of the West, which continues to occupy an influential position in American consciousness, albeit, now, in a more inclusive and varied form (Lusted 2014: 233).

7. Conclusion

Frederick Jackson Turner's "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" provides an invaluable insight into the mythology that has developed around the American West since the arrival of the first Puritan settlers. This mythology is to a considerable extent perpetuated in classic Western fiction. On the basis of Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, staple characteristics of the genre may be distinguished, many of which correspond to the premises of the Frontier Thesis. Perhaps the most striking resemblance between the essay and the novel lies in the portrayal of the West as a place of moral regeneration as well as a land of freedom, equality and democracy. In addition, Wister's *Virginian* bears all the quintessential American traits of character mentioned by Turner. Finally, both Turner and Wister ignore the plight of Indians and refrain from discussing women's rights.

The decrease in the popularity of the Western, which commenced in the late 1960s, manifested the exhaustion of the genre, which was no longer compatible with pessimistic post-war thinking. In addition, the civil rights and feminist movements of the time put forward a less idealized vision, initiating a debate on the violent past of America and discrimination against non-white minorities. The ideological transformations that the Western underwent in the second half of the 20th century reflect a more critical stance towards the myth of the West. In spite of this, the evolution of the formula testifies to the long-lasting power of the myth, which continues to exert an influence on American society, even though the Frontier is long gone.

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