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DICHOTOMY IN AMERICAN WESTERN MYTHOLOGY

THESIS

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by

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The fundamental dichotomy between savage and civilized man is examined within the archetypal Western myth of American culture. The roots of the dichotomy are explored through images produced between 1888 and 1909 by artists Frederic Remington and Charles Russell. Four John Ford films are then used as a basis for the "dichotomous archetype" approach to understanding Western myth in film. Next, twenty-nine "historical" and "contemporary" Western movies are discussed chronologically, from The Virginian (1929) to Dances with Wolves (1990), in terms of the savage/civilized schema as it is personified by the roles of archetypal characters. The conclusion proposes a potential resolution of the savage/civilized conflict through an ecumenical mythology that recognizes a universal reverence for nature.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Jim Berry Pearson.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FILMS	vi
Chapter	
INTRODUCTION: THE IDEAS OF WALTER PRESCOTT WEBB	1
I. MYTH, HISTORY AND AMERICAN STUDIES	6
1. A Working Definition of Myth	
2. The Function of Myth in Contemporary Culture	
3. Myth and History	
4. History, American Studies and Synthesis	
5. American Studies and American Western Myth	
II. REMINGTON, RUSSELL AND THE GREAT FRONTIER: DICHOTOMY IN AMERICAN WESTERN MYTH	19
1. Contrast between East and West	
2. Conflict within Western Myth	
3. Dichotomous Archetypes	
4. Inseparability of the Dichotomy	
5. Dichotomy of Archetype, Continuity of Conflict	
III. THE DICHOTOMOUS ARCHETYPE IN WESTERN FILM	49
1. Hollywood Film as Cultural Imprints	
2. Western Genre and the Continuity of Conflict	
3. Origins of the Dichotomous Archetype	
4. On the Fringes: Four Ford Films	
5. The Thorn and the Petal	

IV. THE DICHOTOMOUS ARCHETYPES OF	
TWENTY-NINE FILMS	71
1. The Historical Western	
2. The Contemporary Western	
CONCLUSION: RESOLUTION WITHIN	
TRADITION	111
1. The Idea of the West	
2. <i>Dances with Wolves</i> : A Revival of Tradition	
3. Toward a World Myth: McNeill's Mythistory	
BIBLIOGRAPHY	126

LIST OF FILMS

Historical Westerns

- 1929 *The Virginian*
1939 *Stagecoach*
1946 *My Darling Clementine*
1948 *Red River*
1950 *The Gunfighter*
1952 *High Noon*
1953 *Shane*
1956 *The Searchers*
1958 *The Big Country*
1962 *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*
1962 *Ride the High Country*

1967 *Hombre*
1969 *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*
1970 *Monte Walsh*

1971 *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*
1972 *Jeremiah Johnson*

1980 *Heaven's Gate*
1980 *Tom Horn*

1985 *Rustler's Rhapsody*

1990 *Dances with Wolves*

Contemporary Westerns

- 1962 *Lonely are the Brave*
1963 *Hud*

1971 *The Last Picture Show*

1979 *The Electric Horseman*

1983 *Last Night at the Alamo*
1984 *Country*
1985 *Trip to Bountiful*

1986 *True Stories*
1988 *The Milagro Beanfield War*
1989 *Bagdad Cafe*

INTRODUCTION:

THE IDEAS OF WALTER PRESCOTT WEBB

Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* (1931) and *The Great Frontier* (1952), established new directions for students of American history and world civilization. He saw the subject of the New World ("The Great Frontier") as a plethora of interrelated developments to be examined within the larger context of world civilization. Basic to Webb's approach was the concept of interdisciplinary study. Webb wrote that "any serious student" of the frontier phenomenon "cannot be bound by political lines. He must be ready at any time to cross the borders of his own country, or that of the one he is primarily studying; he must also be ready to break academic fences set up in universities to separate the so-called fields of knowledge."

Nearly half a century later, many universities now recognize the validity of this this sort of approach in college curricula. The emergence of interdisciplinary degree programs reflects a growing need for generalist or gestaltist scholarship. This need has developed in response to the amassing of an overwhelming body of specialized research. The role of interdisciplinary studies, in whatever form the scholarship may take, is to *synthesize* some understanding from this expanding thicket of tree-like information through a forest-like vision. One of the more established forms of interdisciplinary scholarship is American Studies, a field that Walter Prescott Webb helped to pioneer.¹

¹ W. P. Webb was instrumental in establishing the American Civilization (American Studies) Department at The University of Texas, according to Dr. Jim Pearson, former Webb student and professor of History at The University of North Texas.

Webb observed that the frontier period of the New World—its exploration, colonization, exploitation and, finally, assimilation into the known world—was indeed a monumental but quite momentary catalyst in the development of Western civilization. Certainly Webb's Turnerian vision of American institutions forged from frontier experience fell well within the mainstream of scholarly discussion during Webb's time.² *The Great Plains* was well received for its pioneering combination of geology, anthropology, economics and history. However, his probing of the future in *The Great Frontier*, based upon a broad study of world history, attracted considerable controversy.

Central to *The Great Frontier* is Webb's concept of a "frontier parabola." Webb observed that the opening of Europe to the frontiers of the New World coincided with the birth of Renaissance humanism and the end of Medievalism. In *The Great Frontier* Webb suggested that the five-century-long period of frontier movement to the west culminated with the settling of the continental United States, and that civilization, therefore, is in the midst of another cultural transition. What Webb was describing is, in the terms of James Burke's laborious studies, a shift in paradigm.³ Webb speculated that if Medievalism lay at one end of the frontier "parabola" in world history, is it Corporatism that lay at the other?⁴ Given that Webb produced *The Great*

²U. S. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861-1932) proposed that the presence of a western frontier was the primary factor in the development of American political institutions. Turner's frontier thesis, in Webb's words, "expounded the overwhelming importance of the frontier as the dominant force in creating democracy and making the individual free of Old World restrictions" (*The Great Frontier* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1952], p. 6). Turner's now famous paper "The Significance of the Frontier," presented before the American Historical Association in 1893, underscored the importance of the 1890 census report wherein the frontier was listed as "closed." Although Turner's thesis has been challenged repeatedly, the Turnerian approach has continued to dominate American Western history.

³See *The Day the Universe Changed*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985).

⁴In light of the recent writings by Naisbitt and Toffler, among others, Webb's ideas of the "corporate individual" prove worthy of reexamination.

Frontier at the onset of the post-war baby boom and a period of “I like Ike” prosperity, it is understandable that the Webbian perspective of the frontier phenomenon in World history was mistaken as dystopian.

Traditionally, the role of the historian has been the narration of a people’s past. Historical narrative, with its roots in the oral tradition of ancient poetry, has always turned to the past as a source of identity and origin among a people. Webb, however, understood that the twentieth century historian is in a unique position to examine the future, too. Rapid change during this century, unlike any other time before, encouraged Webb to examine the relationship between the past and future.⁵ Within this context, Webb suggested that an outdated frontier mentality toward natural resources would be painfully dysfunctional—disastrous even—in a frontierless reality. In retrospect, Webb’s *The Great Frontier* clearly foreshadowed the recent publications by revisionist environmental historians.⁶

Another observation presented in both *The Great Plains* and *The Great Frontier* concerned American culture and the relationships between the New and Old Worlds. Just as Webb showed how American institutions developed to a great extent out of practical adaptation to unfamiliar frontier

⁵ “The driving force,” Webb wrote of *The Great Frontier*, “behind this activity is the insatiable curiosity as to what the meaning of the Great Frontier has been in modern times,” (p. 408). In the introduction of the book, he wrote, “it is hoped that this introductory study will open a broad front of investigation in the humanities and the sciences, which will eventually . . . reveal just how important the opening and closing of the great frontier has been and will be in the history and destiny of mankind,” (p. xv).

⁶ Scholars at the forefront of Western American history have developed an approach in which the environmental policies (if any) and practices of the past are examined in relation to the development of current policies and practices. These historians contend that an understanding of the historical American West depends upon an understanding of land and water resource management in the West which, in turn, must affect the direction of future policies and practices. Donald Worster, a “leading exponent of the new history,” according to *U. S. News and World Report* (“How the West Was Really Won,” 21 May 1990, p. 57), cites Webb’s contribution to the field of environmental history as “perspicacious and on [the] way to profound historical insight,” (*Rivers of Empire* [New York: Pantheon, 1986], p.13).

environments, he also suggested that American culture followed a similar transition. Americans could hold on to their newly formed institutions, both those borrowed but altered and those created entirely anew, with pride and confidence because, if for no other reason, of the obvious fact that the Old World institutions had failed to function in the new surroundings. European myth, like many Old World institutions and ideas, also faded from American culture as the nation moved westward. The European elements in American culture, growing ever more distant as the nation became increasingly fascinated with the western experience, were progressively replaced with the more accessible western elements with which the American could better identify.

Since myth is a hallmark of a culture, it is worth examining the development of American myth within the context of the Webbian model. The following thesis is a study of Western myth in American culture. The discussion includes ideas and observations from a variety of disciplines, thus crossing some of the "academic fences" described by Webb. The problem to be addressed is an extension of the central theme found in Webb's pioneering research: what impact will the loss of frontier land ultimately have on a society whose most significant institutions were derived from a New World environment of which the frontier was a critical component?

The focus of this study is a *dichotomy* found in mythic archetypes from American Western myth. The first objective is to define myth, to describe its cultural role, and to establish what constitutes American Western myth for the purposes of this study. The second objective is to isolate this dichotomy in the American mythic archetype on two levels: the "external" American conflict between Old and New World ideas, and the "internal" conflict

between Eastern and Western perceptions of the American West. A case study of two American Western artists Frederic Remington and Charles Russell provides the necessary material for recognizing the "dichotomous archetype" in Western myth and its value to an understanding of American culture. Last, the "dichotomous archetype" approach to understanding Western myth in American culture will be applied in a survey of Western film.

The outcome of this study is intended to provide a tool for understanding American culture and the paradoxical relationship between its frontier experience and European heritage. The "dichotomous archetype" approach to American Western myth may help to explain a duality of American cultural identity born of two conflicting sources, the Old and New Worlds. The conclusion to this study will attempt to show an American Western myth in transition toward unity, and seek to identify the potential role of Western myth in an emerging *world* myth for the future.

CHAPTER I:

MYTH, HISTORY, AND AMERICAN STUDIES

1. A Working Definition of Myth

The term "myth" must be defined for the purposes of this paper. Common use of the word is generally associated with negative meaning, as synonymous with non-truth, old wives' tales or misinformation. Scholars, on the other hand, use the term "myth" to mean something much more complex and important. Academic use of the word is connected with man's attempt to sort through and to understand immutable yet evasive truths about himself and the world in which he lives. The word has "two meanings that confuse and irritate teachers," notes William Safire of *The New York Times Magazine*:

My clerical correspondents have locked on to the original meaning of *myth*, a word clipped only in the last century from *mythology*, rooted in the Greek *muthos*, 'narrative story'. To many teachers of religion, and to some psychiatrists, a myth . . . helps people cope—an ostensibly historical story passed on by a culture to help its members explain their practices and beliefs.¹

An example of the latter connotation is given by Sam Keen, a contributing editor to *Psychology Today*, who defines myth as:

Interlocking stories, rituals, rites, customs and beliefs that give a pivotal sense of meaning and direction to a person, a family, a community or a culture Myth is the cultural DNA, the software, the unconscious information, the program that governs the way we see 'reality' and behave.²

¹ "Love That Dare," *The New York Times Magazine*, 17 May 1989, p. 12.

² "The Stories We Live By," *Psychology Today*, December 1988, p. 44.

There is a substantial difference, then, between the common meaning of the word and what academia recognizes as myth. "Journalists," writes Keen, "often use the word 'myth' to mean at best a silly tale and at worst a cynical untruth—a lie."³ Conversely, journalist Safire responds:

Sorry, but that's what the the language is like. Nobody owns it. If they [scholars] want to teach Mythology 101, let them use the word and say sternly 'in the original sense' The rest of us will go on using the new myths and old realities.⁴

Since this paper is an academic work, the word "myth" will adhere to the academic understanding of the word for the purpose of this thesis. The following discussion will use the word to denote a complex and significant part of any culture wherein collective identity is expressed. Myth, in this discourse, will be addressed as an essential cultural tool with specific roles and uses in society. In this view, myth is dynamic; it may be functional or dysfunctional, constructive or destructive, lost or revived—even created new.

Reference to a standard collegiate dictionary is helpful for clarification:

myth (mith) *n.* [Lat. *mythos*<Gk.*muthos*.] 1.a. A traditional story originating in a preliterate society, dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serve as primordial types in a primitive world. b. A body of such stories told among a given people: MYTHOLOGY. c. All such stories as a whole. 2. A real or fictional story, recurring theme, or character type that appeals to the consciousness of a people by embodying its cultural ideals or by giving expression to deep, commonly felt emotions. 3. A fiction or half-truth, esp. one that forms part of an ideology of a society <the *myth* of ethnic superiority> 4. A fictitious story, person or thing.⁵

The first definition is the classical interpretation and applies well in anthropological and archeological research or studies in ancient literature or history. The Greco-Roman mythic tradition in Western culture is an obvious

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "Dare," p.12.

⁵ *Webster's New Riverside University Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984).

example. The second and third definitions are more applicable to the discussion at hand. The last definition is the least scholarly, though perhaps the most familiar.⁶

The first three definitions, in juxtaposition with the fourth, reveal a significant characteristic of myth. The first emphasizes the functional role of myth in society without regard to any conflict between “real” of “fictional” elements. The next two definitions clearly integrate *both* issues: “real or fiction” is aligned with “deep, commonly felt emotions” in the second, and in the third, “fiction or half-truth” is matched by “ideology.” The *objectives* of myth, the ultimate meanings to be accessed through myth, are things larger or more abstract than what empirical knowledge alone can explain. “Deep, commonly felt emotions” and “ideology” are better understood—or *experienced*, for that matter—within the realm of immutable truths that lie beneath the surface of “scientific fact.”⁷ The key here is the conjunctive “or,” connoting that *either* “real or fictional” or a “fiction or half-truth” are viable vehicles of myth by which these collective expressions and universal abstractions of a people are made accessible.

This accessibility is crucial to the identity of a people, and of the individual among a people. Shirley Park Lowery, therefore, defines myth as:

⁶ Although Safire’s argument is logical, indeed unavoidable, Tomoko Masuzawa writes, “to be sure, even under the postmodern interrogation unless we change the meaning of the term, myth may not cease to be a narration of some axial episode, any more than ritual can stop repeating itself. (“Original Lost: An Image of Myth in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *The Journal of Religion* 69 [July 1989]: 309). The word may change—language itself is an invented system of symbols subject to alteration—but, in the Platonic sense, myth^{ness} is an immutable truth. (“A rose by any other name...”)

⁷ Shirley Park Lowery finds the modern’s confusion of myth with non-truth “particularly puzzling in a time when the notion of truth has so narrowed that for many people ‘truth’ and ‘scientific fact’ are precise synonyms. Any idea or story widely believed but contrary to fact is likely to be called myth, a usage that trivializes the meaning of the term” (*Familiar Mysteries, The Truth in Myth*, [New York: Oxford University Press, 1982,]p. 3).

a story about a culture's gods or heroes, a story whose vivid symbols render concrete a special perception about a people and their world. Many myths embody a people's deepest truths, those truths that give purpose, direction, *meaning* to that people's life. That myths use concrete symbols to express abstractions accounts for their unrealistic trappings Whether or not a particular myth corresponds to scientific fact as presently understood...is unimportant. What makes myth important is how it guides our personal lives, supports or challenges a specific social order, makes our physical world a manageable place, or helps us to accept life's mysteries⁸

At this point the discussion turns to the function of myth in contemporary culture.

2. The Function of Myth in Contemporary Culture

Myth, as stated above, is dynamic. This dynamism is related to myth's ability to encompass many dichotomies, among which the real/fiction relationship in only one example. Myth is a powerful entity within society, and its dichotomous edges are often doubly sharp. "The myths of major religions are often considered to be moral and beneficial to society," writes Harold M. Foster, "but the myths of Nazi Germany were incredibly destructive."⁹ The creative/destructive dichotomy can also exist within the same myth or even the same mythic god or hero. The Hindu god Shiva, the creator and destroyer, is an example of this. Other dichotomies found in myth, if not inherent to the nature of myth, are: primitive/modern, individual/group, Oedipus/Father, Eros/Thanos, Ego/Id, earth/sky, past/future, male/female, age/youth, nature/technology, and, in the case of American culture, Old/New World. Keen points out that myth "functions in ways that are both creative and destructive, healthful and pathological."¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid*, p.4.

⁹ "The New Literacy: Television, Purveyor of Modern Myth," *The English Journal* 73 (February 1984): 27.

¹⁰ "Stories," p. 45.

The influence of myth over the individual and the group as a whole is a matter of the dichotomous nature of myth. Primary to the modern individual and to modern society is the function/dysfunction of myth. Mythographers find that during the twentieth-century, technological changes have outpaced myth's ability to change with society in ways that function. The confusion of scientific fact and truth, as discussed above¹¹, has caused Joseph Campbell to proclaim that "our mythology has been wiped out."¹² Kenneth E. Clark, former President of the American Psychological Association, notes a critical absence of a central element of myth in American society—a common hero: "this reflects the fragmentation and pluralism of the society, which now lacks universal values or beliefs..."¹³ Many scholars speak of a need for a new myth for the future.¹⁴ As we move from the Industrial Age into the Age of Information, from the Cold War Era into an Era of Communication, a new myth may for the first time contain a truly *World* view. This is where the historian comes in.

3. Myth and History

Clarification between myth, ritual and tradition is appropriate before discussing the relationship of myth and history. As mentioned above, myth is critically related to a group's and its individual members' identity. This identity is founded upon a belief in *origin* as explained by the group's myth.

¹¹ See footnote number 6.

¹² Campbell sees the loss of mythology as a sign that "we are not nurturing our spiritual side," (interview in *U. S. News and World Report*, 16 April 1984, p. 72). Campbell notes the relationship between a mythless society and a sense of rootlessness among its people. Like Campbell, Berel Lang fears that contemporary society has confused technology with spirituality, crossing "that narrow but potent line between the Sacred and the Profane" ("Faces" *The Yale Review* [Summer 1980]: p.533).

¹³ Interview in *U. S. News and World Report*, 7 June, 1982, p.68.

¹⁴ An example is Robert Theobald's Essay "Beyond Orwell—The Need for New Myths," *The Futurist* 17 (December 1983): 53.

Tomoko Masuzawa translates Mircea Elaide's¹⁵ definitions: myth—narrative of an origin; ritual—repetition/reenactment of an original event or paradigmatic order; and tradition—concern for the transmission of an essential, original “truth” through time. Masuzawa writes:

Interestingly...seen from the perspective of the modern scholar, it is precisely the difference in the management of the desire for the origin—that is, *whether* to embrace this desire and to form a whole system of beliefs and practices around this desire *or* to renounce this desire and to build science at a critical distance from it—that is what distinguishes the subject (the scholar, ‘the Western man’) and the object (the religious person, ‘the premodern,’ ‘the archaic,’ ‘the primitive’) of this scholarship.¹⁶

The “difference” between myth and historical fact, however, melts away when the historian recognizes and understands myth as a major factor of historical events—and of the future. “What is *true*—that is, internally consistent—,” writes Rita Parks, “often goes beyond what is factual...”¹⁷ World historian William McNeill suggests that “myth and history are close kin inasmuch as both explain how things got to be the way they are by telling some sort of a story. But our common parlance reckons myth to be false while history is, or aspires to be, true.”¹⁸ McNeill maintains that myth is not necessarily exclusive of good historical scholarship:

Yet we cannot afford to reject collective self-flattery as silly, contemptible error. Myths are, after all, often self-validating. A nation or any other human group that knows how to behave in crisis situations because it has inherited a heroic historiographical tradition that tells

¹⁵ Principle founder of *Religionswissenschaft* (History of Religions) and, according to Masuzawa, “one of the most influential and representative of the scholars of myths and rituals” *ibid*, p.321.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 309. (Quotation marks indicate Elaide's own words.)

¹⁷Parks, Rita, *The Western Hero in Film and Television, Mass Media Mythology*(Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), p. 2.

¹⁸ “Mythistory, or Truth, Myth, History, and Historians,” *The American Historical Review* 9 (February 1986):p. 1.

how ancestors resisted their enemies successfully is more likely to act together effectively than a group lacking such a tradition.¹⁹

Though Campbell said that in “devising myths appropriate for our times, it is the poet who must awaken us,” McNeill indicates that the historian has a crucial role, too. Myth reveals the relationship between the past and the future, a useful tool for the modern historian. McNeill states that, in the end, “Mythistory is what we actually have—a useful instrument for piloting human groups in their encounters with one another and with the natural environment.”²⁰ And he submits, “to be a truth-seeking mythographer is therefore a high and serious calling, for what a group of people knows and believes about the past channels expectations and affects the decisions on which their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor all depend.”²¹ These are poetic words, indeed, and what McNeill is describing is a world myth for which the responsibility of developing is no longer exclusively reserved for the poet, but the the historical scholar as well.²²

4. History, American Studies and Synthesis

If the historical scholar, along with the poet, is to shoulder the responsibility of “devising myths appropriate for our times,” it might logically necessitate an approach to scholarship unrestricted by established disciplinary boundaries. According to McNeill, such a scholar must be willing to “reckon with multiplex, competing faiths—secular as well as transcendental, revolutionary as well as traditional—that resound among us.”²³ McNeill lists those “professional idea-systems” that are “most

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 10.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² The roots of historianship, of course, originate from ancient epic poetry.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 4.

important to historians” as: “anthropology, sociology, political science, psychology, and economics—together with the newer disciplines of ecology and semeiology,” in addition to “law, theology, and philosophy.”²⁴ The Graduate faculty of American Studies at The University of New Mexico, for example, is “hesitant to accept” applicants who are “overly concerned with very narrow or localized issues and show little interest in the larger American cultural context.”²⁵

The ultimate context from which the scholar must work is World civilization, if he chooses to answer McNeill’s challenge of “cultivating a sense of individual identification with the triumphs and tribulations of humanity as whole,” as an attempt “to develop an ecumenical history, with plenty of room for human diversity in all its complexity.”²⁶ The focus of such scholarship, and the unavoidable obligation of the historian, is the scholar’s own culture. The “art of the serious historian,” McNeill writes, “is helping the group he or she addresses and celebrates to survive and prosper in a treacherous and changing world by knowing more about itself and others.”²⁷

The American Civilization (American Studies) Department at The University of Texas describes itself as “an area studies program focused on the cultural and intellectual life of the United States of America. Its students analyze the American past and present from the perspectives of several disciplines, learn to synthesize their knowledge and, and learn the

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ From a departmental handout given to prospective graduate applicants.

²⁶ “Mythistory”, p. 7.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 10.

habit of mind needed for cultural analysis."²⁸ The word *synthesis* is significant in that it is a direct contrast to definitive study.

Just as Webb's approach was not new, neither is use of the word *synthesis* for describing it. The term was used in 1964 at a conference of Western scholars, within the context of a discussion of the need for alternative approaches to Western studies.²⁹ Jerome Steffen, prompted by concerns that Western studies might altogether perish if new approaches were not found, compiled a list of possible directions wherein he wrote: "Western fiction and symbolism is another category that looms large in the future of Western scholarship."³⁰ As an example, Steffen pointed to a central character from a Wallace Stegner novel, "Lyman," who serves as a "synthesizer" of the past and the future.³¹

McNeill writes of historical methodology:

The historical profession has, however, shied away from an ecumenical view of the human adventure. Professional career patterns reward specialization; and in all the well-trodden fields, where pervasive consensus on important matters has already been achieved, research and innovation necessarily concentrate on minutiae. Residual faith that truth somehow resides in original documents confirms this direction of our energies.... Truth, according to this view, is only attainable on a tiny scale when the diligent historian succeeds in exhausting the relevant documents before they exhaust the historian. But as my previous remarks have made clear, this does not strike me as a valid view of historical method. On the contrary, I call it naive and erroneous.³²

Similarly, Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Frontier* describes a personal process of synthesizing American culture from the context of a World civilization:

²⁸From a departmental handout.

²⁹Steffen, Jerome, ed., *The American West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979): p. 3.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 6.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 165-6.

³²"Mythistory," p. 8.

When it came to the writing [*The Great Frontier*] I had the choice of undertaking a definitive or introductory one. I chose the latter because it was the only possible choice. One lifetime is too short to follow out the ramifications of the concept of the Great Frontier; the task is moreover too much for one mind. I elected to open a subject rather than to attempt to close it. My task was that of presenting the hypothesis, offering such data as could be gathered, and suggesting lines of future investigation.³³

Essentially, this is an inversion of the established pyramid of academic methodology. What Webb described is a generalist's approach to synthesis, rather than a specialist's attempt at a definitive study. He began with the only perspective possible, his own experience and understanding as an American, and moved outward in search of a more whole understanding of the World community and its history. Webb hoped that scholars of other New World communities could apply the same approach and, eventually, be able to compare notes.³⁴

Certainly Webb is not unique among chroniclers. McNeill notes that from Herodotus to Ranke, "the pioneers of our profession have likewise expanded the range of their sympathies and sensibilities beyond previously recognized limits without ever entirely escaping, or even wishing to escape, from the sort of partisanship involved in accepting the general assumptions and beliefs of a particular time and place."³⁵ If the American scholar, then, alongside Joseph Campbell's poet, is to shoulder the responsibility of "devising myths appropriate for our times" via McNeill's definition of

³³ *The Great Frontier*, p. 309.

³⁴ Webb acknowledged the existence of significant variables in experience, such as the strong Catholicism in Latin America or the geographic differences of New Guinea, but maintained that the Great Frontier model is equally applicable. The recent comparative study produced by American Historian Howard Lamar and South African Scholar Leonard Thompson, *The Frontier in History: North America and South Africa Compared* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) is an example of the Webbian approach. Robin W. Winks', paper "The Myth of the American Frontier, Its Relevance to America, Canada and Australia" (presented at the University of Leicester January on 21, 1971) also follows this ethos.

³⁵ "Mythistory," p. 7.

“mythistory,” the field of American Studies provides a logical route to an “ecumenical” vision.

5. American Studies and American Western Myth

If the road to an ecumenical view begins within the scholar’s own cultural backyard, and if myth is a powerful key to unlocking an understanding of both the individual’s relationship to the group, and the group to other groups, as defined above, then the scholar must identify the myth that is unique to their own culture. The American West is probably the most dominant, if not obvious, source of American myth. Elliott West observes that “popular feelings about the West...have swung erratically between hope and disillusionment, affection and anger. Yet the myth has survived, however battered and bent into new shapes. Any political, economic, or social history of the modern West,” he propounds, “must take that myth into account.”³⁶

Unfortunately, Western³⁷ studies have suffered a severe loss of interest during the last decade. “A survey of college curricula,” notes Patricia Nelson Limerick, “indicates a steady decline in courses dealing with ‘history of the West’; significant numbers of graduate students no longer write dissertations on this subject...”³⁸ One of the reasons Limerick cites for this is the need for alternative approaches to understanding the West in American history and culture. Like McNeill and Webb, she proposes an interdisciplinary methodology:

Much of the most interesting work in Western history has been done by individuals who consider themselves first and foremost urban, social,

³⁶ From the introduction to Robert Athearn’s *The Mythic West in Twentieth Century America* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1986) p. ix.

³⁷ Henceforth, use of the word “West” or “Western” will be limited to the American West specifically, rather than the Western Hemisphere in general, until otherwise noted.

³⁸ *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), p. 20.

business labor, Chicano, Indian, or environmental historians.... Their findings fit together to form a revised version of Western history, and this book is therefore an interpretation and a *synthesis*, not a monograph and not a summary. (Italics mine.)³⁹

Limerick continues with a passage conspicuously similar to Webb's own description of his process in writing *The Great Frontier*:

This book has taught me that historians might flee the challenge of synthesis. The genre breeds two alternating fears: that one is only echoing platitudes, and that one has gone out on a limb.... If Western history continues to thrive, I will look back and shudder at my shortsightedness.⁴⁰

Perhaps the role of the scholar here is to utilize the poet, or the creative writer in this case, as source material for "devising myths appropriate for our times." Robert G. Athearn suggests that "popular materials, films, novels, and the works of literary tourists, as well as more formal scholarly works" should be considered together as an approach to understanding the Western myth in contemporary America.⁴¹ Wallace Stegner's preface to *The West as Living Space* discusses the possible approaches to understanding the West—geographical, regional, romantically historical, philosophical, economical, sociological—with a warning that the situation is like the blind men approaching the elephant; instead of looking at the West in piecemeal order, he suggests a "holistic portrait, a look at the gestalt, the whole shebang," in contrast to "a clear impression of some treelike, spearlike, or ropelike part"⁴²

Henry Nash Smith concluded that "a new intellectual system was requisite before the West could be adequately dealt with in literature or its

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *The Mythic West*, p. 15.; Also see Webb's Chapter Ten of *The Great Plains*.

⁴² (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987), p. vi.

social development fully understood.”⁴³ American Studies is an area within which such an intellectual system may thrive. And if *synthesis* is the goal of an American study, it should be noted that, as Campbell (who points to the poet) and Steffen (who points to the novelist) have suggested, the artist in a culture should not be overlooked. Campbell said, “Artists are the mythmakers of today.... The role of the artist is the mythologization of the world.”⁴⁴ The next chapter will discuss the role of two artists whose work is virtually synonymous with Western myth, Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell.

⁴³ *Virgin Land, The American West As Symbol and Myth*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 260.

⁴⁴ *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 85. What artists do, many art historians and aestheticians say, is *synthesize* their world.

CHAPTER TWO

REMINGTON, RUSSELL AND THE GREAT FRONTIER

DICHOTOMY IN AMERICAN MYTH

1. "Contrast" Between East and West

Frederic Remington (1861-1909) and Charles Russell (1864-1926), among the artists who pioneered Western subject matter, are perhaps the most influential in the development of American Western myth. Their paintings and illustrations are exemplary of the mythic Western experience as the last of the frontier was rapidly closing. Remington and Russell witnessed the critical moment in American history, as F. J. Turner had noted, when the 1890 U. S. census reported the frontier "closed."¹ A comparison of heroic Western archetypes as presented by the two artists reveals the dichotomous nature of Western myth and the duality maintained in the American perception of our frontier heritage.² This dichotomy is easily recognized in the *contrast* between Eastern and Western perceptions of the West and the *dichotomy* within the mythic archetypes derived from contrasting experiences. The source of this duality lies in America's Eastern history as a European colony in contrast with the history of the American West as a frontier of the United States. If our past, as discussed above, affects the courses we choose for the future, then America's legacy is a dichotomous heritage.

¹ See footnote number 3 of the Introduction to this thesis.

² American Studies professor and Russell scholar Brian Dippie writes that "few things are more desperately needed in Western art studies today than critical comparisons artist to artist, certainly within each artist's *oeuvre*" (*Remington and Russell: The Sid Richardson Collection* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982], p. 15).

Edward G. White's book, *The Eastern Establishment and The Western Experience*, isolated an East/West tension as a factor in the formation of American Western myth.³ White focused on a legacy of conflict between the industrialized East and the symbolic anti-industrialization found in popular interpretations of the West as it was recorded by Eastern "authorities" like Frederic Remington, Owen Wister and Teddy Roosevelt. White suggests that the mythic proportions in which the frontier West is associated with freedom is a symptom of unresolved conflict within American culture.⁴ This conflict, like the Great Frontier/Metropolis conflict described by Webb, is manifested in an East/West dichotomy within American frontier myth.

The first step toward such a comparison of Remington and Russell is the contrast of an Easterner's and Westerner's experience of the West. Walter Prescott Webb wrote that

the key to understanding the history of the West must be sought, therefore, in a comparative study of what *was* in the East and what *came to be* in the West. The salient truth, the essential truth, is that the West cannot be understood as a mere extension of things Eastern. Though 'the Roots of the present lie deep in the past,' it does not follow that the fruits of the West are identical to those of the East When one makes a comparative study of the sections, the dominant truth which emerges is expressed in the word *contrast*.⁵ [Webb's emphases]

From "deep in the past," the mainstream of Greco-Roman myth in European art and literature can be traced from the tale of the Cretan labyrinth to Picasso's symbolic use of the minotaur. From antiquity until modern times, this classical tradition served European artists, philosophers, poets and revolutionaries as a reflection of European identity. Culture in the

³ *The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1989).

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 202.

⁵ *The Great Plains* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1931), p. 507.

New World, however, evolved within a separate and distinctly different environment from that of the European community. As frontier culture grew independent of the Old World, the distant lands of ancient Greece failed as symbolic assurance for a people facing unprecedented experiences in a strange land.⁶ Without historical ruins or a common heritage in the new land, the Americans replaced the classical myth from Europe with a native one.

In 1780 Thomas Jefferson responded to a request from Europe to describe his native state. The resulting *Notes on the State of Virginia* attempted to provide a comprehensive overview of topography, geology, laws, customs, flora and fauna. "What he actually depicts," observes Colette Brooks, "is a sense of estrangement, of remoteness from the Old World, of experience in the New World which is ultimately *incommunicable*."⁷ Brooks writes of Jefferson, "he finds it impossible to reconcile 'our own knowledge, derived from daily sight' with 'European appellations and descriptions' that have no meaning in the New World."⁸ She adds that "it is not, then, simply a matter of vocabularies that prove incommensurable, but the very geography of experience itself that stamps and constricts the imagination."⁹ Jefferson wrote of the West that "those who come after us will extend the ramifications as they become acquainted with them, and fill up the canvas we begin."¹⁰ This is what Remington and Russell did, literally.

⁶ When Horatio Greenough unveiled his sculpture of George Washington clad in a toga and posed as a Grecian god in 1841, American journalists asked the public why they wished to display a national hero with "nothing but a napkin in his lap." It was the West, instead of Europe that "has provided what has been termed our national epic, a substitute for an *Iliad* or *Aeneid*," according to Michael Sarf. "It served as a young nation's heroic age" and as a "reflection of that nation's values" (*God Bless You Buffalo Bill* [New York: Cornwall Books, 1983], p. 10).

⁷ "Notes on American Mythology," *Partisan Review* 55 (Spring 1988), p.310.

⁸ *Ibid.* Brooks uses the term "paradigm" in her discussion of divergent perspectives (see footnote number four in the introduction of this thesis).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

Webb, in a very Jeffersonian fashion, showed how Old World ideas about land and water practices, economics and government were adapted to the unique environments faced in the New World. The vast ocean of the Great Plains “desert,” however, served as an equally divisive barrier between West and East as did Jefferson’s Atlantic separation from Europe. Like Jefferson, Webb wrote that the

contrast begins in geology and topography and is continued in Anthropology and not discernible in history The history of the white man in the Great Plains is the history of adjustments and modifications, of giving up old things that would no longer function for new things Here one must view the white man and his culture as a dynamic thing.” [Italics mine.]¹¹

This is a Darwinian approach, a “*dynamic*” process, applied to the role of the West in American culture. On the other hand, Webb added,

History may take another view of the Great plains which we may call the *static* view—a still picture [in which] stand the fragments and survivals of an ancient order. The new and the old, innovation and survival, dwell there side by side, the *obverse* and the *converse* of the *struggle* between *man* and *nature*.¹² [my emphasis]

The “*dynamic*” and the “*static*,” the “*contrast*” of “what *was* in the East and what *came to be* in the West,” are clearly illustrated in the works of Remington and Russell. Their lives and works are exemplary of the mythic Western experience as the last of the frontier was rapidly closing. Not only does the work of the two artists reveal a contrast between American and European ideas, but it demonstrates the conflict between Eastern and Western perceptions of the frontier within American Western myth. The images to be compared in this study were produced between 1887 and 1909. This is a deliberate choice because of the period’s relationship to Frederick Jackson

¹¹ *The Great Plains*, p.507-508.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 508.

Turner's famous address before the American Historical Association in 1893 in which he discussed the significance of the frontier's closing.¹³

This comparison of works by the two artists illustrates the source of duality within the myth of the American frontier during a critical time of its formation. Russell was a dedicated Romantic clinging to a fading time of freedom in American history and to the dissolving remnants of the frontier. Remington was drawn to the West in search of adventure, fame and financial success—a proving ground for the red-blooded American. What Remington and Russell have in common is that each artist recognized the American frontier as a finite period in American history. Likewise, each artist painted heroic scenes involving mythic archetypes forged from frontier experiences. What resulted was a uniquely American genre of myth that had evolved separately and independently of any European tradition

2. "Conflict" within the Western Myth

W. P. Webb observed that "the forces issuing from the Great Frontier have found themselves in *conflict* with those older ones from the Metropolis" [emphasis mine].¹⁴ Early in American history, colonial artists tried to rise above provincial status by imitating European taste. But as the nation moved westward, the land played an increasingly dominant role in the development of an *American* culture. The American West, more than any other factor, separated what was European from the American, and was where the conflict described by Webb was the most pronounced.

Meanwhile, Eastern culture continued its emulation of European refinement. Young American artists of promise were pressured to study—even

¹³ The 1890 U. S. Census Report had officially marked the frontier "closed." (See Footnote number three in the introduction to this thesis.)

¹⁴ *The Great Frontier* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1952), pp. 377-8.

to remain—abroad. The history of American art, until the rise of the New York School during the middle of this century, is a story of an underdeveloped patronage dominated by the taste of European academies.¹⁵ Those artists who did remain to study in the institutions of the Eastern United States, like Remington, were taught by graduates of European academies and in programs purposely modeled after the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* in Paris.¹⁶ When Remington turned to the West, instead of Europe, for his subject matter, he brought with him much of the European aesthetic that had been assimilated into the Eastern culture.¹⁷

Both Remington and Russell rejected Eastern values in favor of Western individualism. The artists' images reflect a tension between Eastern and Western perceptions of the West. Russell's two drawings, *Contrast in Artist's Salons* (figs. 1 and 2), are a blatant rejection of Eastern preconceptions and European influences. Although these drawings were created in 1891, they could just as easily have been produced in 1952 as illustrations for Webb's *The Great Frontier*. The contrast between the two studios, one adapted to frontier realities and the other to the Eastern imitation of European refinement, works visually the way Webb's scenario of Jim Brown in *The*

¹⁵ The "arrival" of American art during the twentieth-century, represented by the New York modernists, evolved from an environment of European authority and leadership tempered by undeniably American factors. Today, aspiring artists are pressed toward New York, which, in many ways, has filled the void created when the European modernists undermined the academic monopoly on aesthetics. The fact that the World Wars brought many of the leading European modernists to New York further underscores the continuity of European influences within American art even into this century.

¹⁶ It should be noted that although a strong cultural dialogue existed between American and British artists, the Americans were "browbeaten," as John Kouwenhoven noted, into believing that the mainstream European taste in art, represented by the French Academy, was the supreme authority. (See Kouwenhoven's book *Made in America*, [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948]). Remington's primary instructors during his two years at Yale were Europeans who stressed the academic tradition of Paris. Remington also studied at the Art Students' League in New York, probably with William Merit Chase (who later became a teacher of Georgia O'Keeffe), where some of the younger American modernists also gathered.

¹⁷ David McCollough in McCracken, *Masterworks* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1988), p.19.



Fig. 1. Charles Russell, *Contrast in Artist's Salons—Charlie Painting in His Cabin*, c. 1891, Amon Carter Museum.



Fig. 2. Charles Russell, *Contrast in Artist's Salons—My Studio as Mother Thought*, c. 1891, Amon Carter Museum.

Great Frontier.¹⁸ According to Webb, a “conflict” exists between the new ideas arising from the frontier and those present in Europe. He wrote that “the Metropolis seems to be trying to expand its culture into the frontier, which resents the intrusion and undertakes to develop a culture of its own.”¹⁹ The conflict between Western and Eastern cultures is clearly visible in the work of both Remington and Russell. The mythic tradition used and expanded by the two artists can be viewed as a reaction to the misapplication of a European-based myth from the Metropolis. Within the frontier myth, then, the Metropolis is represented as much by the “Eastern Establishment” as it is by Europe.

One of the stock Easterner-meets-Westerner images popularized by the Old West, and proliferated by Remington and Russell, is that of the “Tenderfoot” (figs. 3 and 4). Usually this character is stereotyped as an urbane and civilized representative of the industrialized East. According to the myth, the Easterner is adapted to eastern life, but not to the frontier. In the versions proliferated by Remington and Russell, the “Tenderfoot” is symbolically “initiated” by a tanked-up cowhand. The images illustrate resentment toward the “intrusion” of the “Metropolis.” Russell’s *The Tenderfoot* (1900) hints at the fear of the inevitable (of which the Indian in the background stands as a reminder) that is manifestly destined to come for the Westerner as it has for the American Indian.

Perhaps this explains Russell’s overindulgence in *The Tenderfoot*, painted after Remington’s drawing *Dance Higher, Dance Faster*, published in *Century*

¹⁸ Chapter Two of *The Great Frontier*, “The Emergence of the Individual,” includes a short story entitled “Jim Brown Knows the Way” wherein Webb illustrates the awkwardness of Old World traditions when faced directly with the New World frontier. The fictional characters of the story metaphorically shed their European ways of dress and behavior in order to adapt.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 377-378.



Fig. 3. Charles Russell, *The Tenderfoot*, 1900, Amon Carter Museum.



Fig. 4. Frederic Remington, *Dance Higher, Dance Faster*, 1888, Texas Christian University. (Published in *Century Magazine*, October, 1888.)

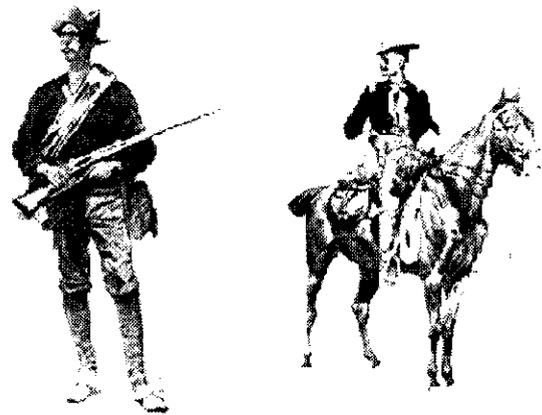


Fig. 5. Frederic Remington, *Infantry Soldier*, 1901, and Lt. S. C. Robertson, 1890, Amon Carter Museum.

Magazine in 1888. Russell expanded the idea from a one-on-one encounter to a virtual mob scene. In addition to the stereotyped aggressor he painted the saloon keeper, the resident Indian, a gambler and a collection of cowboys and ranchmen—the core of a pantheon of characters forming the basis for the Western mythic tradition. Russell's *The Tenderfoot* is like an American version of Raphael's *School of Athens* for the West.²⁰

Yet within this myth, a dichotomy exists between two divergent perceptions of the role of the West in relation to an Eastern or Western vantage point. In one view, represented by Horace Greely's "go West, young man" vision of the future, the West bespoke opportunity and destiny. Another view, filled with reverie for the past, resisted change with a nostalgic longing for an unadulterated land. Colette Brooks concludes that Jefferson's account of America to the Europeans can be understood as

a moving parable which traces the domestication of this New World within the memory of those yet living. In this sense, the struggle is not to survive but to keep the memory of a strange and wondrous world alive; to resist adaptation to what was then forbidding, but thrilling; to what was then truly *new*.²¹

In short, it is the manifestation of Webb's two historical views of the Great Plains—both the "dynamic" and the "static." For the Easterner, the West represented the cutting edge of a "dynamic" culture; for the Westerner, in Webb's words, the "static" view prevailed, which presented a conflict within itself:

Nature's very stubbornness has driven man to the innovations which he has made; but above the level of his efforts and beyond his achievements stand the fragments and survivals of the ancient order.

²⁰ *The School of Athens* (1511) by Raphael (1483-1520) is regarded as one of the seminal works of the High Renaissance. The ancient mathematicians, scientists and philosophers are gathered together in a single painting as a representation of the sum of European intellectual accomplishment. Among the Greco-Roman figures Raphael painted several contemporaries: Leonardo, Michelangelo and—with the modesty of a true Renaissance man—himself.

²¹ "Notes on American Mythology," p.312.

The new and the old, innovation and survival, dwell there side by side, the obverse and the converse of the struggle between man and nature.²²

3. Dichotomous Archetypes

Western myth embodies a dichotomous ethos of either promoting the future or preserving the past. In Remington's case, the heroes were the harbingers of an inevitable outcome assigned to the American West by Manifest Destiny. Russell's myth was a wishful attempt at documenting a fading past. Both artists presented frontier images of independence from Eastern authority achievable only through frontier experience. But Russell actually chose to live the myth, while Remington only visited the West, drawing inspiration from the heroic cavalymen (fig. 5) who facilitated Western expansion. "His paintings and drawings," writes David McCollough of Remington, "had nothing to do with a home in the West. He . . . never stayed more than a month or two at a time. Some of it he thought ugly and depressing."²³ This contrasts sharply with Russell's poetic descriptions of the West despite the harsh and desolate winters he had spent in marginally protective shelters. The archetypal Westerner presented in the life and work of Remington and Russell represents this dichotomy within Western myth.

Remington and Russell continued one of the strongest and most original themes found in American (as opposed to European-based) art and literature, man in nature. The industrialized East represented to both artists the source of Thoreau's "quiet desperation," and the West was equated with the Walden escape to an independent and self-directed life. There is a difference, however, between the artists' visions of the West: Remington

²² *The Great Plains*, p. 508.

²³ From McCracken, *Masterworks* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1988), p. 23.

regarded the West as a challenging process through which the Easterner might build character with Western experience; Russell's West was home, a *place*, in which the Westerner found solace and beauty.

The difference is most easily discernible in their attitudes toward the region and its native population. Divergent perceptions of the American Indian are presented in two works produced around 1890, Remington's *Hunting Caribou—Shoot! Shoot!* (fig. 6), published in *Harper's Weekly*, and Russell's response *Crow Indians Hunting Elk* (fig. 7).²⁴ In this case, Russell's familiarity with Indians, and with hunting for sustenance rather than sport, almost reads as a demonstration aimed at Remington's *Hunting Caribou* for depicting the hunters as impatient bumbler instead of silent, stalkers; Remington's Indians are about to miss a shot because one overexcited hunter could not resist a nudge of encouragement to the shooter.

Perhaps what Russell had to say was lost on Remington. And perhaps what Remington was doing with his art was equally foreign to the unschooled Russell. Remington's composition indicates the artist's familiarity with what the French school termed "the moment of highest drama." This is the ability to show the last critical moment before the depicted action occurs, thus creating a visual tension by capturing the energy of the scene at a frozen moment. The most widely taught and influential example of this is found in Michelangelo's depiction of *God Creating Adam* (fig. 8).

Yet the fact that Remington would choose to include Indians—and not the imaginary Noble Savage—among his list of subject matter is contradictory to his European-based training. The suggestion is that

²⁴ Bryan Dippie has shown that Russell's *Crow Indians* has been misdated. He suggests that the work could not have been produced prior to 1890 (*Looking at Russell* [Ft. Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1985], pp. 49-50).



Fig. 6. Frederic Remington, *Hunting Caribou—Shoot! Shoot!*, 1890, Amon Carter Museum. (Published in *Harper's Weekly*, January 11, 1890.)



Fig. 7. Charles Russell, *Crow Indians Hunting Elk*, c. 1890, Amon Carter Museum.



Fig. 8. Michelangelo, *The Creation of Adam*, 1508-1512, detail from the Sistine Chapel, The Vatican, Rome.



Fig. 9. Frederic Remington, *Crow Indians Firing Into the Agency*, 1887, Amon Carter Museum.



Fig. 10. Frederic Remington, *Naked Indians in Montreal*, 1892, Texas Christian University. (Published in *Harper's Monthly*, January, 1882.)

Remington knowingly defied the rules of the European Grand Manner style of painting that was so prized in the eastern institutions like Yale. "History Painting" was still considered the highest form, but such painting could not address contemporary experience except indirectly through allegorical references.²⁵ John A. Kouwenhoven explains that American art "often failed to create beauty of its own" by European standards because it was "a direct, uninhibited response to the new environment" and was "firmly rooted in contemporary experience."²⁶ The Western experience ("what was truly *new*," in the words of Brooks above) was the focus of Remington and Russell. Only Remington brought with him something old, too, which inevitably affected his vision of the Western experience in American history.

Another comparison of the artists' work underscores the difference in each man's vision of the American frontier and the role of the Indian. It is probable that Russell saw Remington's *Crow Indians Firing into the Agency* (fig. 9), or more likely *Naked Indians in Montreal*, printed in *Harper's weekly* in 1889 (fig. 10). In both cases, Remington gives the viewer a stereotypic, almost cartoonish characterization of ignorant savages. In contrast, Russell's Indians are more complex individuals presented in a greater variety of situations, but never as backdrops for heroic pictures of white cavalymen.

Subtle differences in title and composition of *An Episode in the Opening of the Cattle Country* by Remington (fig. 11) and Russell's *A Desperate Stand* (fig. 12) illustrates the divergence of the artists' perceptions of the white

²⁵ The academic standards by which painting was judged insisted upon works of "high" intellectual and emotional content. History Painting included: 1) Greco-Roman historical or mythological events, or 2) Christian biblical events. All other art was considered less significant by the following hierarchical scale: portraiture, genre (everyday scenes), landscape, still life and animals, in this order.

²⁶ *Made in America*, p. 52. Kouwenhoven was cited by Webb in *The Great Frontier*.

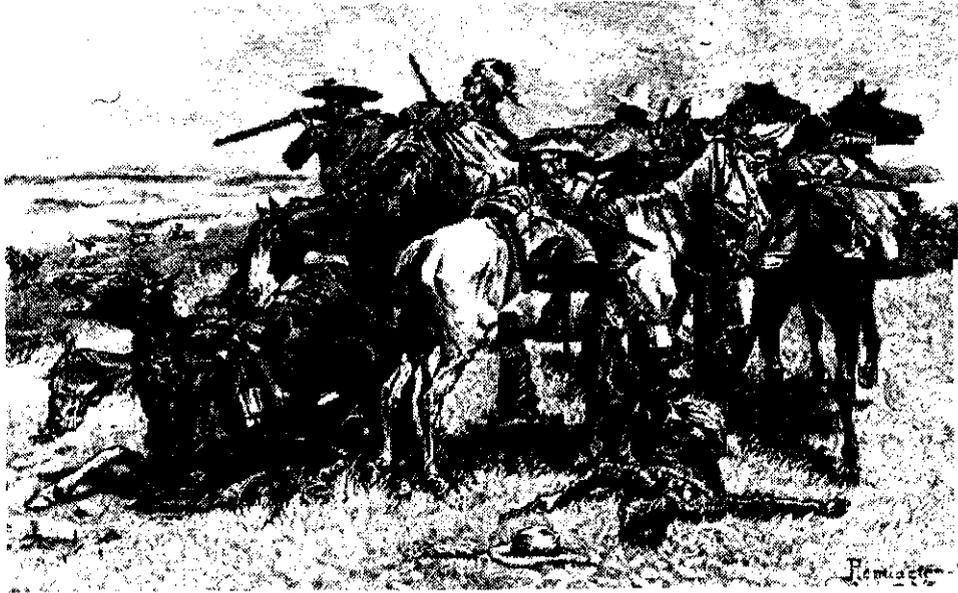


Fig. 11. Frederic Remington, *An Episode in the Opening of the Frontier*, 1888, Amon Carter Museum. (Published in *Century Magazine*, February, 1988.)



Fig. 12. Charles Russell, *A Desperate Stand*, 1898, Amon Carter Museum.

man's role in the frontier. Remington's version of the early cowboys is that of a battle wherein brave pioneers crusade for Manifest Destiny. On the other hand, Russell's picture plane is not cropped so tightly on just the cowboys but encompasses a wider view. Russell distributes gallantry and pathos among the red and white men equally, and he presents heroic stature in a "desperate" loss, rather than confident acquisition. Ultimately, there are no winners in Russell's painting, only the the loss of the last remaining frontier land in America.

The significance of these comparisons is that the possibility of two different attitudes about the American West co-existed as each artist proliferated frontier myth. To Remington, the conflict between the last of the savages and the white expansionists was part of a glorious destiny. His title suggests that this is merely the first "episode" in an inevitable "opening" of the frontier. Remington's myth praises the aggressiveness of the avant-garde of progress clearing the way for civilization. Contrastingly, there are no conquerors in Russell's vision of the West; the heroes in his myth are red and white, both are tragic, neither are triumphant.

Individually, Remington and Russell represent a dichotomy of meanings assigned to the West. Remington's was a myth of the future, an Easterner's break from a present stagnated by a lingering past by charging headlong into the unknown. Russell's was a Westerner's nostalgic grasp at a idyllic past. Together the artists stand at the nexus between East and West, past and future, new and old. Like the horsemen in *The Longhorn Cattle Sign* by Remington (fig. 13), and *Lost in a Snowstorm—We are Friends* by Russell (fig. 14), each artist translated an unspoken language understood in two conflicting worlds. In Remington's *Cattle Sign*, the cowboy does the speaking, distanced



Fig. 13. Frederic Remington, *The Longhorn Cattle Sign*, 1908, Amon Carter Museum.



Fig. 14. Charles Russell, *Lost in a Snow Storm—We Are Friends*, 1888, Amon Carter Museum.

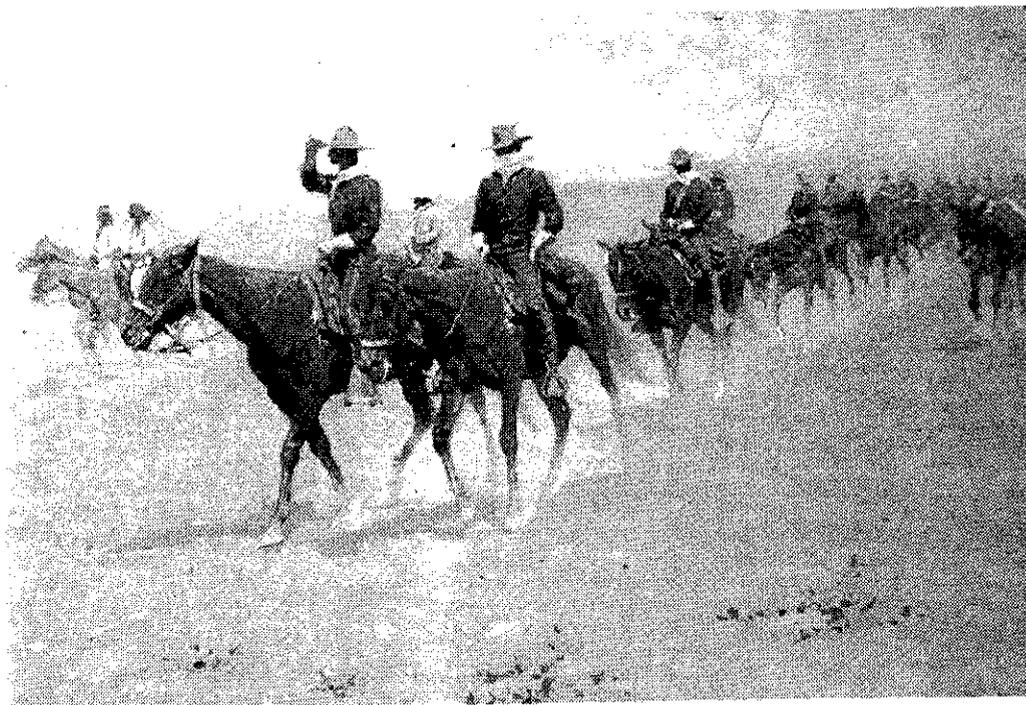


Fig. 15. Frederic Remington, *The Quest (The Advance)*, 1901, Anschutz Corporation, Denver.

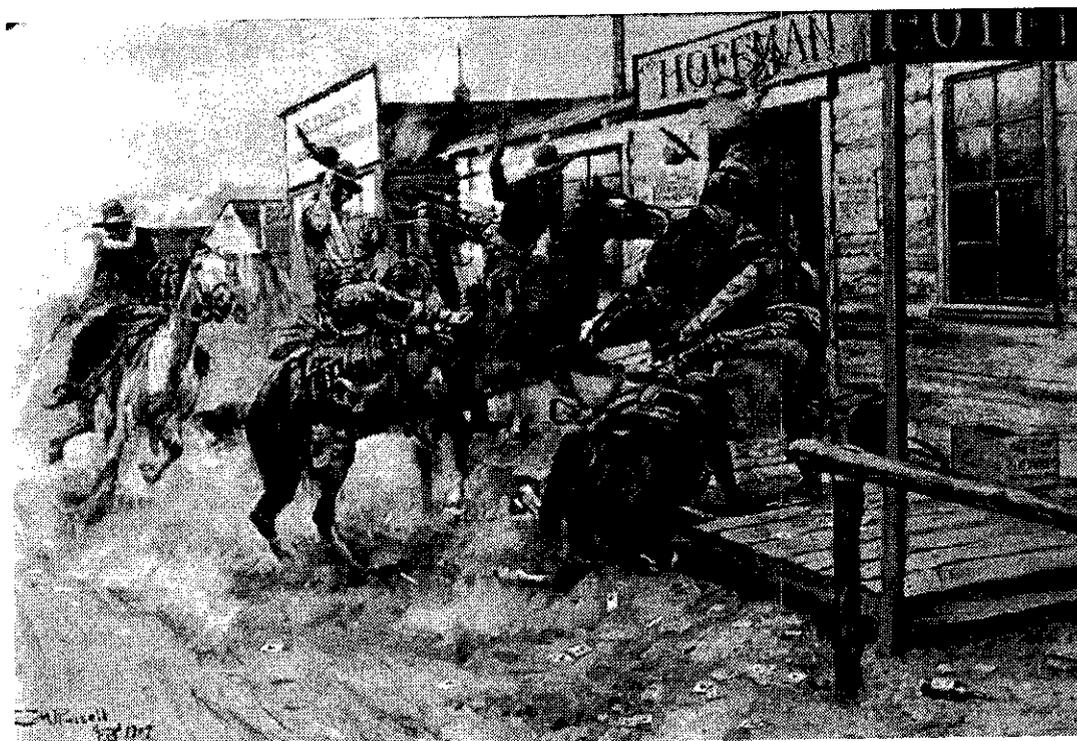


Fig. 16. Charles Russell, *In Without Knocking*, 1909, Amon Carter Museum.

from the red man by a white man's vantage point. At best the cowboy is only interested in locating a maverick steer or, at worst, the subtle inference is that Indians rustle from the cattle industry. Russell's *Lost in a Snowstorm* gives us a view of the cowboy from the opposite side of the same encounter. Here the horsemen are bonded together by an indiscriminating frontier environment that is mutually threatening to red and white men alike. "We are friends," the title reads.

4. Inseparability of the Dichotomy

Thus, the heroes of two different frontier myths are discernible. The Western archetype in Remington's eye was the rugged and disciplined cavalryman as exemplified in *The Quest (The Advance)* (fig. 15), clearing the way for progress. He called the Indian-fighting soldiers "my tribe"²⁷ and referred to "injuns" as the "rubbish of the earth."²⁸ Russell's Western archetype was the socially maladjusted outcast of what E. G. White termed the "Eastern Establishment" as *In Without Knocking* (fig. 16) demonstrates. Russell saw himself as an interloper in someone else's paradise: "those Indians have been living in heaven a thousand years and we took it away from them," he wrote a friend. The American Indian who roamed freely across the open plains before the white man arrived was, in the artist's words, "the only real American."²⁹

Remington and Russell historian Leonard Everett Fisher wrote that "fortunately, there are differences between these two witnesses of the Old West thanks to varying perceptions."³⁰ Fisher qualifies his statement, adding that Russell "painted the West not only as he found and knew it but

²⁷ McCracken, *Masterworks*, p.23.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 29.

²⁹ Dippie, *Looking at Russell*, p.63.

³⁰ *Remington and Russell* (New York: Gallery Books, 1985), p. 66.

as he wanted it to remain," whereas "Remington painted the West as he knew and found it, too, but also as he thought it should be . . . therein lies their fundamental difference."³¹ Remington represented the frontier of a youthful, powerful and expanding nation in which the future and its leaders (i. e., Teddy Roosevelt), were nurtured by Western experience. Russell represented a futile desire to reverse destiny in favor of a presettlement past.

Each aspect of this dichotomy is, perhaps, an inseparable part of each person's own personal inner conflict as an American. Remington, to avoid oversimplification, presents a complexity of attitudes toward the West which swings from the Eastern-bred vision of the future to the Western view of the past and back again. He is himself a veritable dichotomy. Near the end of his life, Remington's black and white exaltation of the West became filled with less confident tones of gray. What has been remembered, what has been handed down as his myth, however, is Remington's heroic cavalryman. "More than anything else," notes Bryan Dippie, the legacy of Remington is "the setting for a great drama: the winning of the West. It was soldier against Indian, civilization against savagery."³²

It is true that Remington described the Sioux warrior as "a perfect animal . . . replete with human depravity, stolid, ferocious, arrogant" and "as a picture perfect; as reality horrible"³³ Yet Dippie perceptively noted Remington's alter ego: "late in life he frequently painted pictures without clear victories, and scholars recently have taken to probing the sobered, even chastened man who . . . could no longer glamorize combat as he had been wont to do in the past."³⁴ Dippie writes of Remington's late work that

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Remington and Russell*, p.11.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.42.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

“instead of being conquered by heroic boys in blue in equal combat on a sun-drenched battlefield, the Indian is shown reduced to helplessness by hunger.”

Even Remington, whose archetype was the mounted soldier, unflinchingly acknowledged the pathetic and unromantic side of the Western expansion. In *Taking a Long, Cool Aim* (fig. 17), the artist gave his Eastern audience a disturbingly poignant look at Western reality. The illustration depicts an Indian village already destroyed by a cavalry charge that has left the carnage of the inhabitants strewn about the ground. Dismounted now, the soldiers line up at the edge of the razed dwellings for a final sweep. An officer poised at the front of the line lowers a confident bead on a helpless, fleeing figure that has emerged from the horrific aftermath. Close examination of this distant form reveals what appears to be a woman clutching something to her breast; it requires little imagination to realize it is a mother carrying an infant child.



Fig. 17. Frederic Remington, *Taking a Long, Cool Aim at a Fleeing Figure*, 1898. (Published in *Cosmopolitan*, January, 1898.)

³⁵ *Ibid.*

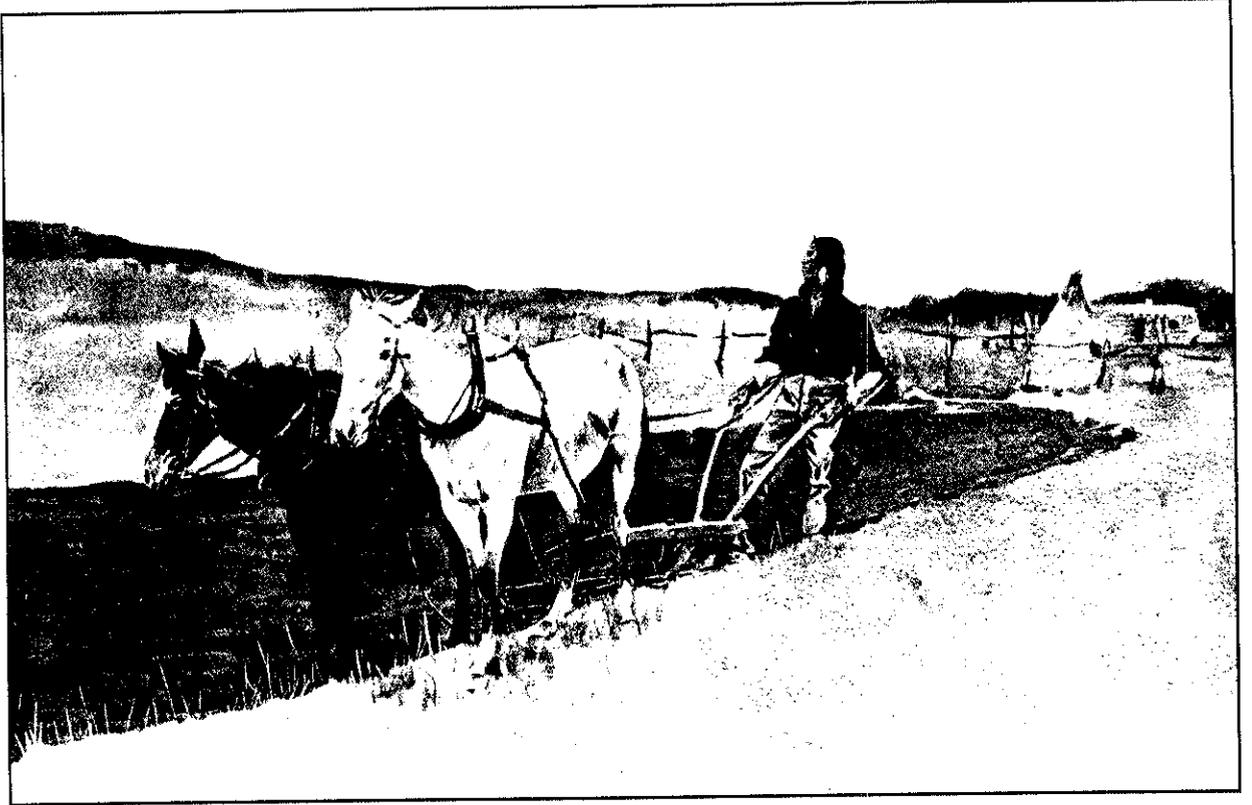


Fig. 18. Frederic Remington, *Twilight of the Indian*, 1898. Private Collection.



Fig. 19. Charles Russell, *Trail's End*, 1926, Buffalo Bill Historical Center.

Whereas Remington's more human compassion for the West is less easily discernible within his *oeuvre* and sometimes contradictory, Russell's relationship with the land and with the Indian is consistent. Russell identified the plight of the Native American with his own sense of lost frontier. He witnessed the closing of the frontier and the impact upon the cowboy as well as the Indian. Russell was close to the Northwestern plains Indians and had once spent a winter in Canada living among some of the last nomadic Pagan clans. He wrote:

The history of how they fought for their country is written in blood, a stain that time cannot grinde out Uncle Sam tells him to play injun once a year and he dances under a flag that has made a farmer out of him Now the agent gives him bib overalls hookes has hands around plow handles and tells him 'its a good thing, push it along.'³⁶

Remington's *Twilight of the American Indian* (fig. 18) is a direct parallel to Russell's words, and it serves as a visual indictment of a white-oriented Western history. Ultimately, both Remington's and Russell's images display an awareness of conflicting forces within the Western myth and the reality it reflected. Where Russell's view was consistently "static," to borrow Webb's analogy of Western history, Remington's represents the "dynamic" view. Dippie summarizes that Russell "was haunted not just by the youthful fantasies . . .but by memories of what once was and by the evidence of change that surrounded him as an everyday reality. Thus his art speaks of an almost mystical passion of lost love, while Remington's tells with some detachment of boyhood dreams betrayed by the imperatives of advancing age."³⁷ Russell's painting *Trail's End* (fig. 19) was left unfinished on his easel when he died in 1926.

³⁶ McCracken, p 132.

³⁷ *Remington and Russell*, p.13.

The lives and art of Remington and Russell are inseparable manifestations of the conflict between an encroaching Eastern culture and an indigenous Western culture. E. G. White concluded that

attempts to resist the tide of corporate professionalism are . . . fallacious . . . but they represent the same reluctance on the part of Americans to wholly embrace an urban and industrial society without positing alternatives to it.³⁸

In our attempt to isolate the dichotomous archetype in Western myth, both Remington and Russell represent the alternatives we have posited against encroaching "Metropolis" values. And the encroachment is still very much with us, as is demonstrated by the editors of *Art in America*, who have perpetuated the fallacy of the European view of the West:

No less exciting to the majority of the more than two hundred artists who traveled in the West during the nineteenth century were the native peoples . . . all fine physical specimens whose nearly naked bodies reminded artists of the Grecian ideal, and whose strong features, natural dignity, and picturesque costumes provided appealing subjects for portraiture.³⁹

Remington had clearly rejected the misapplication of the classical ideal from European antiquity or the romantic fantasies of the Noble Savage, as *Hunting Caribou* has shown. And the self-taught Russell was virtually uncognizant that such an approach even existed. Though both artists differ in their depiction of the Western experience, the "Tenderfoot" images indicate that Remington and Russell are unified in their reaction against the attempts of the Metropolis to extend its culture into the West.

Historian Henry Commager points out:

We were a people almost without a history, without many of those imponderable but essential forces like art and literature and legend and mythology, heroes and villains that bind a people together, contribute to common denominators. And no other people more needed common

³⁸ *The Eastern Establishment and Western Experience*, p. 202.

³⁹ Lipman, Jean, ed., *Art in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p. 43.

denominators than the people so widely scattered and so heterogeneous as the Americans.⁴⁰

The Americans turned to the only possible source for “those imponderable forces” available to them, their native land. The richest source of “art and literature and legend and mythology, heroes and villains” was the singlemost common denominator, the American frontier. As the United States industrialized at the close of the nineteenth century, and as the frontier simultaneously came to closure, the “Western experience” became symbolic—even mythic—of the struggle against the “Eastern Establishment.”

Bryan Dippie writes of Russell’s art that “his perspective has become ours, his nostalgia our own.”⁴¹ The alternative we have most overtly posited against the European tradition in art is the Western myth. Despite the dichotomy between the Western archetypes of Remington and Russell, Western myth remains as meaningful to us today as it did in 1890.

5. Dichotomy in Archetypes, Continuity of Conflict

Thomas Alexander and John Bluth, editors of *The Twentieth Century West, Contributions to an Understanding*, suggest that “to understand the West of today we must understand the West of 1890.”⁴² The images of Remington and Russell compared above were produced near the years of 1890 (when the U. S. Census reported the frontier “closed”) and 1893 (Turner’s address before the American Historical Association). Alexander and Bluth write: “It seems unlikely that we can look back at the nineteenth century as an isolated and discontinuous phenomenon except in a symbolic and mythic sense. It is rather to be seen as carrying the twentieth-century in embryo.”⁴³

⁴⁰ Dorra, Henri, *The American Muse* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 122.

⁴¹ *Looking at Russell*, p. 128.

⁴² (Midvale: Signature Books, 1983), p. 1.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. vii.

Certainly the *oeuvres* of Remington and Russell provide for us today the “symbolic” and “mythic” material from which we draw meaning from our Western heritage. “Every culture produces a distinguishing philosophical outlook,” writes Gerald Kreyche, observing that “in the American West there was and continues to be a distinctive ethos, a special character, a tone and guiding belief, forever setting it apart from those of the Eastern United States.”⁴⁴ What Kreyche is describing is, by definition, myth. The images of Remington and Russell polarize this myth into dichotomous archetypes and illustrate the Eastern/Western contrasts within American Western myth. “The salient truth, the essential truth,” to remark Webb’s words, is that an understanding of Western history must encompass both views of the frontier experience, one as a *process*, represented by Remington, and the other as a *place*, for which Russell stands.

Patricia Nelson Limerick, a leading revisionist historian, claims that far too much emphasis has been placed upon the West as “process” rather than “place.”⁴⁵ She has shown that viewing Western history as a geophysical entity, instead of a process of Westward expansion that ended in 1890, the legacy of Western conquest and challenge is continuous today and into the twenty-first-century. Limerick cites agricultural, environmental and social issues, among others, that were born of the frontier experience in American history and continue to be significant issues today. Limerick’s commentary is similar to Webb’s “frontier parabola” wherein the products of the frontier as a *process*, like economic boom and bust, social individualism and political democracy, must be adjusted to the frontierless reality of the present, a West as *place*.

⁴⁴ *Visions of the American West* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989), p. 1.

⁴⁵ *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), p. 26.

But this does not negate the West as *process* from Western myth, the “symbolic and mythic sense” mentioned by Alexander and Bluth above. The thoughts of Alexander, Bluth and Limerick, are encompassed within Webb’s discussion of western history as a dichotomy of “static” and “dynamic” views where “the new and the old, innovation and survival, dwell side by side, the obverse and the converse of the struggle between man and nature.” The emphasis of Western studies might well be the continuity of such contrast, which Webb had suggested, as a “key” to an understanding of the West. The dichotomies represented by the mythical archetypes of Remington and Russell are virtually inseparable from the whole of our American mythic heritage.

Gerald Kreyche writes of the continuities derived from the historical western experience as

characterized by a series of contradictory drives—toward subjugation and freedom, exploitation, destruction, conservation, and liberation. Understood as a dialectical struggle attempting to produce a new synthesis, the process offers endless polarities. Among these opposing forces were . . . white and red man . . . and, above all, man and nature.⁴⁶

It is logical that the Western archetype derived from this “process” would then be characterized by the same “contradictory drives.” A passage from a contemporary work of Western literature, John Graves’ *Goodbye to a River*, helps to illustrate the continuity of dichotomous archetypes as manifested in the primal man/nature act of hunting:

Saint Henry David Thoreau, incisive moral anthropomorphist that he was, implied that blood sports were for juveniles, not men, and was conceivably right. Prince Hemingway implies the opposite . . . One’s nature, if he owns more than a single mood, implies both views at one time or another, and sometimes in cramping conjunction . . . No fiercely nature-loving female could ever have felt it stronger than I have, at times, and those people I care about hunting with care about it too. It

⁴⁶ *Visions of the American West*, p.5.

goes away if you keep shooting and is replaced by a stone-hard exultation that is just as real, just as far down inside you, and before long you're twisting the heads off the broken-winged ones without even full awareness of what your hands do, your eyes searching up for another bird, another shot.⁴⁷

This passage serves as a metaphor for the impetus of the entire book, indeed our entire experience as a frontier nation. The premise of *Goodbye to a River* is that Graves is making his last journey down the Brazos before the Army Corps of Engineers was to build a series of dams on the river. The entire book, like Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie*, is a very personal account of the experience, yet it has meaning that is in common with the nation as a whole. Graves not only recounts his lifelong relationship of growing up with the river, but he also recounts the history of those who crossed its path long before mankind had the power to harness the river's spirit. Graves' journey, a mixture of historical fact with myth, can be viewed as a microcosm of the Western experience in American history as a whole; the Corps of Engineers can be equated with Remington's cavalry as easily as the Brazos with Russell's Indian.

In the end, one can only take stock of one's own individual relationship to the past and to the future and accept the continuity of conflict, like the changing seasons or the expansion of civilization, "in a symbolic and mythical sense," and take what experience remains before it is hastened away by history:

After that bright afternoon, I knew they were going to let me have at least a little Autumn.⁴⁸

Graves' descriptions of the Thoreau/Hemingway contrast within "one's nature . . . sometimes in cramping conjunction" is analogous to the

⁴⁷ (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1960), p. 53-54.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Remington/Russell dichotomy in Western myth. Perhaps Graves himself embodies what Kreyche termed the *homo Americanus*, a product of the Western "philosophical" and "metaphysical" process of "renewal," and the heir to the West's "contradictory drives" and "endless polarities," the "dialectical struggle attempting to produce a new synthesis."⁴⁹ Robert E. Park speaks of the contemporary Western archetype as a "marginal man" who lives between his link to the land (the place/static view of the West) and, using Christopher Baker's words, the "sense of loss to the historical change" (the process/dynamic view) he is "forced to confront Just such a clash, of course is occurring as the frontier meets the Metropolis."⁵⁰ Parks paraphrases Baker, describing the marginal man as "a necessary step in the synthesis of a new stage in the process of civilization."⁵¹

It is proposed that an understanding of the West today and of 1890 is directly related to an understanding of the West as a dichotomous legacy, as "static" and "dynamic," as "place" and "process." Within this context, perhaps, we are able to examine the continuity of conflict, the inherent contradictions within the West, the physical as well as the mythical relationship of the individual to the West. The comparison of Remington and Russell has provided the polarization of perceptions necessary to isolate the dichotomy of our dreams of progress and preservation. If, then, our Western archetype is destined to be dichotomous, we should be able to recognize the contrasts and contradictions discussed above within the most obvious medium of American mythic tradition today—film.

⁴⁹ *Visions*, p. 5.

⁵⁰ *Taking Stock* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989), p. 172.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER THREE

THE MYTHOLOGY OF WESTERN FILM

1. Hollywood Film as "Cultural Imprints"

Chapter Two of Thomas Schatz's *Hollywood Genres* begins with the following block quotation:

I really want to go back to film school.... Or maybe I'll get my masters in anthropology. That's what movies are about anyway. Cultural imprints.

—writer-director George Lucas, discussing *Star Wars*¹

The quotation reinforces Schatz' anthropological/sociological approach to Hollywood film as "a kind of contemporary ritual" that is the result of a "cumulative process" within society. Schatz writes:

In a genuine "National Cinema" like that developed in Hollywood, with its mass appeal and distribution, with its efforts to project an idealized cultural self-image, and with its reworking of popular stories, it seems not only reasonable but necessary that we seriously consider the status of commercial filmmaking as a form of contemporary mythmaking.²

Joseph Campbell, too, used the film *Star Wars* as an example of contemporary mythmaking. When Campbell said, "in developing myths appropriate for our times, it is the poets who have to awaken us," he proposed that, "George Lucas may be just such a poet."³ *Star Wars*, Campbell reported, "is not a simple morality play; it has to do with the powers of life as they are either fulfilled or broken and suppressed through the action of man."⁴ This scholar of myth emphasizes *contrast* within the mythological

¹ Schatz, Thomas, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981), p.14.

² *Ibid*, p. 261.

³ From an interview in *U. S. News and World Report*, 17 April, 1984, p.72.

⁴ *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 145.

theme whereby "the conditions of the time determine the images and bring the spiritual problem into focus in a contemporary way."⁵

Arthur Asa Berger similarly finds that the *Star Wars* films "contain a clear-cut series of oppositions that give meaning."⁶ Moreover, he lists eleven such opposing pairs or *contrasts*, among which are youth/old age, nature/technology, the "Rebels"/the "Empire", and Good Beasts/Bad beasts.⁷ Schatz, using Claude Levi Strauss' definition of mythology as "a whole system of reference which operates by means of a pair of cultural contrasts," discusses these conflicting components as inherent in Hollywood filmmaking.⁸ He explains that "these 'contrasts' are themselves reduced from the myriad ambiguities of human existence: life/death, good/evil, individual/community, and so on."⁹

The dictionary definition cited in Chapter One of this thesis incorporates the phrases: "real or fictional story, recurring theme, or character type that appeals to the consciousness of a people by embodying its cultural ideals or by giving expression to deep, commonly felt emotions," and "a fiction or half-truth...that forms part of an ideology of a society" (p. 7). Schatz speaks of film genre in terms of "expressing the social and aesthetic sensibilities...of the mass audience."¹⁰ He writes:

Genre study may be more "productive" if we complement the narrow critical focus of traditional genre analysis with a broader sociological perspective. Thus, we may consider a genre film not only as some filmmaker's artistic expression, but further as the cooperation between artists and audience in celebrating their collective ideals. In fact, many qualities traditionally viewed as artistic shortcomings—the

⁵ *U. S. News and World Report*, p. 72.

⁶ "Return of the Jedi: The Rewards of Myth," *Society* 21 (May-June, 1984): p. 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Hollywood*, p. 262.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

psychologically static hero, for instance, or the predictability of the plot—assume a significantly different value when examined as a component of a genre’s ritualistic narrative system. If indeed we are to explain the *why* of Hollywood genres, we must look to their shared social function and to their formal conventions.¹¹

Schatz concludes: “in the final analysis, the relationship of genre filmmaking to cultural mythmaking seems to me to be significant and direct.”¹²

Schatz isolates the interrelationship between Hollywood film and “cultural mythmaking.” Conflict, of course, is central to this “ritualistic narrative system” and “its shared social function.” Genre film, says Schatz, provides a cultural platform for a dynamic process whereby a society’s ideology and identity is not only reinforced but continually tested and revised according to the times. Conflict, then, is essential to the functioning of myth’s dynamic nature:

...genres are not blindly supportive of the cultural status quo. The genre film’s resolution may reinforce the ideology of the larger society, but the nature and articulation of of the dramatic conflicts leading to that climax cannot be ignored. If genres develop and survive because they repeatedly flesh out and reexamine cultural conflicts, then we must consider the possibility that genres function as much to challenge and criticize as to reinforce the values that inform them....This characteristic seems particularly true of genre films. And as such, the genre’s fundamental impulse is to continually *renegotiate* the tenets of American ideology. And what is so fascinating and confounding about Hollywood genre films is their capacity to “play it both ways,” to both criticize and reinforce the values, beliefs, and ideals of our culture within the same narrative context.¹³

What Schatz describes here is is the continuity of conflict, which is the source of dichotomy in the archetype of American Western myth. The very

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 15.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 263. Schatz bases much of his discussion of American film on H. N. Smith’s *Virgin Land* wherein pulp novels of the nineteenth century are treated in the same light.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 35.

“function” of genre film—to “challenge” the collective cultural values and identity as much as to “reinforce” them—is a dichotomous one. Certainly “the genre’s fundamental impulse...to continually *renegotiate* the tenets of American ideology” parallels Shirley Park Lowery’s statement (quoted earlier) that “what makes myth important is how it...supports or challenges a specific order....”¹⁴ The dual function of myth, then, is logically reflected in the myth’s archetypes.

The working definition of myth established at the beginning of this study (p 7) stated that the word myth denotes

a complex and significant part of any culture wherein the collective identity of a people is expressed. Myth, in this discourse, will be addressed as an essential cultural tool with specific roles and uses in society.

The “ritualistic narrative system” of “cooperation between artists and audience in celebrating their collective values and ideals,” as Schatz puts it, falls squarely within the boundaries of this working definition. The “specific roles and uses” of myth relates well to Schatz’s “shared social function” of genre film, just as the expression of the “collective identity” parallels Schatz’s “collective values and ideals.” Psychologist Sam Keen (also quoted earlier in support for this working definition), said that myth “is the cultural DNA, the software, the the unconscious information, the program that governs the way we see ‘reality’ and behave.”¹⁵ It is no coincidence, then, that Schatz highlighted Lucas’s description of film, like Keen’s “cultural DNA,” as “cultural imprints.”

¹⁴ *Familiar Mysteries: The Truth in Myth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 4.

¹⁵ “Personal Myths Guide Daily Life,” *Psychology Today*, December 1988, p. 44.

2. Western Genre and the Continuity of Conflict

Schatz refers to the Western as “America’s foundation ritual.”¹⁶ The Western’s “mythic credentials,” he writes, have been “immortalized” within “the medium of the twentieth-century technology and urbanization.”¹⁷

Schatz observes that Western film has been forced into a mythical function, rather than historiographical, in face of “contemporary civilization’s steady encroachment” and “the impulse to exploit the past as a means of examining the values of contemporary America.”¹⁸ Like McNeill’s description of “mythistory,” Schatz speaks of a “mythic reality more pervasive—and perhaps in some ways more ‘real’—than the historical West itself.”¹⁹

Schatz’s observation of the relationship of the past to the present in genre film also bespeaks an approach to the West that is quite Webbian. As an historian, Webb operated upon the premise that the frontier experience was a temporary catalyst in the formation of American cultural, social and political institutions. The vision of the future for a frontierless society, in this view, depends upon an understanding of the past. Given McNeill’s historical insight into the role of myth in governing the course of a people (discussed in Chapter One of this thesis), the potential role of the film medium becomes obvious. Schatz states:

Not only do genre films establish a sense of continuity between our cultural past and present (or between present and future, as with science fiction), but they also attempt to eliminate the distinction between them.²⁰

¹⁶ *Hollywood*, p. 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Campbell also discussed the mythic nature of the film medium (*The Power of Myth*, p. 15).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Webb, as previously noted, said that the "key" to an understanding of the West is found in an examination of the contrasts and conflicts between "the forces issuing from the Great Frontier" and "those older ones from the Metropolis." Like Webb, Schatz focuses on "the Western's essential conflict . . . expressed in a variety of oppositions: East versus West . . . America versus Europe . . . Individual versus community, town versus wilderness," among others.²¹

The continuity of this "essential conflict," derived from contrasting experiences, is evident within the Western film genre. This conflict, as Schatz notes, emerges as a "static"/"dynamic" dichotomy (which parallels Webb's use of the terms). Schatz writes of the Western hero's "static vision" which "helps to define the community" and to "animate its cultural conflicts" on the one hand, while on the other, the western hero "animates the inherent dynamic qualities of the community," providing a dramatic vehicle "through which the audience can confront general conflicts."²² Schatz explains "that the static nucleus could be conceived as the problem and the variety of solutions...as its dynamic structure."²³ He speaks of the "genre's basic cultural oppositions of inherent dramatic conflicts" as "its most basic determining feature."²⁴ This "most determining feature," it can be said, transpires through the "oppositions" represented by dichotomous archetypes.

Certainly Schatz is not the only critic to have recognized the continuity of "inherent cultural conflicts" within the Western genre and its archetypes. Kitses sees the Western as "a series of antinomies," among which he lists the individual/the community, freedom/restriction, Nature/Culture, the

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 48.

²² *Ibid*, p. 31.

²³ *Ibid*.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

West/the East, America/Europe, the frontier/America, tradition/change and the past/the future.²⁵ Schatz's perception of the Western hero as a vehicle through which contemporary society confronts its cultural conflicts is handled in much greater depth by John H. Lenihan. Like Schatz, Lenihan describes the "classic Western's dichotomy between the heroic, free individualism and the more enduring but constraining social order."²⁶ Lenihan also noticed that the Western evolved in its complexity to become "either supportive or critical (or *both* in the same film)" of contemporary society.²⁷ He concluded:

There is no demonstrable reason why the Western should be less appropriate for today's audience than it was for those of yesterday.... Its proved capacity for redefining America's mythic heritage in contemporary terms would suggest, even during the current period of its quiescence, that the Western is an unlikely candidate for cultural oblivion.²⁸

This issue will be further explored in Chapter Four under the topic of the "contemporary Western."

3. Origins of the Dichotomous Archetype

Although Kitses claims that the Western contains no myth, he speaks of the genre in very mythical terms. "What we are dealing with here," he says, "is no less than a national world view: underlying the whole complex is the grave problem of identity that has special meaning to Americans."²⁹ According to the understanding of myth established in the beginning of this paper, the very function of a people's mythology is to provide group identity and to validate a corresponding world view. Whether or not Kitses

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Showdown, Confronting Modern America in the Western Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), p. 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

²⁹ *Horizons West* (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 1969), p.12.

recognizes myth other than in "strict classical terms [having] to do with Gods," he does recognize the "thrust of contradictions, everywhere apparent in American life and culture."³⁰ Kitses' contribution to the discussion at hand is his emphasis upon "archetypal elements," a direction which, in his words, "the primitive state of film criticism inevitably reveals a yawning abyss."³¹

Kitses, like the other scholars and critics discussed so far, presents contrast and conflict as important to understanding the West in American culture. His study of archetypes in Western film describes "an ambiguous, mercurial concept: the idea of the West as both direction and a place"³² Parallels are easily established between Kitses' view and the process/place concepts outlined earlier in this study. His view reinforces the East/West tension inherent to Western myth in that Kitses (following H.N. Smith's analysis of the nineteenth-century dime novels) observes, "It had been the East and the Beadle Western's" from which the cinema had derived an "impure structure" that was borrowed from "Eastern cracker-barrel traditions."³³

Other scholars and critics agree.³⁴ Douglas Pye writes that "it is important to stress the variable associations of the terms 'West' and 'Frontier.' From the earliest times, these concepts could mean several things, some of them apparently contradictory.... The Western is founded, then on a tremendously rich confluence of romantic narrative and archetypal imagery

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 12-14.

³¹ *Ibid*.

³² *Ibid*, p. 8.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 15.

³⁴ Tag Gallagher even goes so far as to cite European domination of the early Western film production. He writes, "the bulk of Westerns in this period were—like the first Western novels—produced for European markets, mostly by European film companies...." (*Film Genre Reader* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986], p. 204).

modified and localized by recent American experience—the potential source of a number of conflicting but interrelated streams of thought and imagery”³⁵

The roots of Western cinema were in the East. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) was filmed in New Jersey. Not only was Western cinema started in the East for Eastern consumption, some of its archetypes were derived from Eastern sources, too. The historical Billy the Kid, for instance, was a street-toughened urchin of the New York slums, not the “Wild West.” The result was a genre formed by the popular Eastern literary tradition of a romanticized West and the less pretentious, often conflicting but inevitable influences of the physical West itself. The roots of this cultural amalgamation can be traced to the film industry’s appropriation of “location” filming and its incorporation of “real” Westerners for “local color.”³⁶

Tag Gallagher, however, complains that “Schatz, along with his colleagues, assumes that the earliest Westerns were somehow more realistic, primitive, and unselfconscious. But quite the contrary, ‘realism’ was a big issue in 1907.... Some years later, William S. Hart was campaigning against, and Harry Carey was spoofing, the dandy cowboy hero represented by Bronco Billy, Tom Mix, and others”³⁷ Gallagher places his finger on a point to be drawn from Chapters One and Two of this thesis: “Self-reflexivity in the early teens was often evident... Remington paintings (as in Ford’s 1918 *Hell Bent*) come alive in an onlooker’s fantasy—all methods of critiquing general conventions.”³⁸ This is no surprise since the function of myth in culture *is* the dual role of reinforcing and criticizing that culture and its accepted social

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

³⁶ See “The Western” segment of the *Hollywood, The Silent Years* film series.

³⁷ *Genre Reader*, p. 206.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

standards. The dichotomy of the American Western archetype is further complicated by levels of conflict from three dualities: 1) European and American, 2) Eastern and Western, and 3) frontier past and industrial future. The first two generally exist as a conflict of society at large and externally of the Western hero. Conversely, the last often manifests as an *inner* struggle within the isolated and solitary Western archetype.

The curious thing is how the evolution of the Western genre combined these dualities as integral parts of its nature instead of separating the apparent contradictions into black and white. Despite Gallagher's complaint about Schatz and his colleagues, Schatz' observations are perceptive:

It is interesting...that we as a culture have found the story of the "New World" beyond the Alleghenies and the Mississippi even more compelling than the development of the colonies or the Revolutionary War itself. Ironically, the single most evocative location for Western filmmaking and perhaps the genre's most familiar icon (after the image of John Wayne) is Arizona's Monument Valley.... The landscape, with its broad expanses and isolated communities was transformed on celluloid into a familiar iconographic arena where civilized met savage in an interminable mythic contest.³⁹

4. On the Fringe: Four Ford Films

Schatz presents the evolution of the Western archetype in four of John Ford's films as a representation of the genre as a whole. Schatz writes of Ford, "that he was among the most (if not *the* most) influential of Western film directors. Furthermore, the evolution of Ford's treatment of the genre is indicative of its overall historical development."⁴⁰ Schatz discusses Ford's *Stagecoach*, *My Darling Clementine*, *The Searchers* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* in terms of developmental changes in heroic archetypes.

³⁹ *Hollywood*, pp. 47-48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

Although Pye takes Schatz' and others' evolutionary views of the Western to task, Schatz' analysis is useful to this study for its recognition of dichotomy inherent in the Western archetype.

Schatz begins with *Stagecoach* (1939), in which John Wayne as the Ringo Kid "is the living manifestation of the Western's basic conflicts."⁴¹ Ringo, much like the other minor archetypal characters, "must find his own way through an environment of contrary and ambiguous demands."⁴² It is interesting that Ford's gathering of Western archetypes is similar to Russell's collection of characters in *The Tenderfoot* (as discussed above).⁴³ Indeed, one doctoral student has found enough evidence of Russell's influence upon Ford's direction as to produce a dissertation on the topic (in which a comparison of Russell's *The Holdup* [*Holding of the Stage*] 1899, was used in the robbery scene at the beginning of *Stagecoach*).⁴⁴ Schatz writes that

...Ford's constellation of social outcasts represents a range of social issues from alcoholism to white-collar crime to individual self-reliance. Through these characters Ford fleshes out values and contradictions basic to contemporary human existence. The appeal of the stagecoach's passengers derives from their ambiguous social status. Often they are on the periphery of the community and somehow at odds with its value system.⁴⁵

The presentation of the Western archetype on the "periphery of the community" is a consistent theme found in the genre. (The theme is magnified in the "contemporary" Westerns of Larry McMurtry in which critics observe the "marginal man," a byproduct of "the progress of

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 50.

⁴² *Ibid*.

⁴³ Schatz likens the characters of *Stagecoach* to the "Holy Family of the Frontier" (p. 67). It was stated earlier in this thesis that Russell's *The Tenderfoot* is like a "School of Athens of the West" (p. 26).

⁴⁴ Howze, William, "The Influence of Western Painting and Genre Painting in the films of John Ford," The University of Texas, 1986.

⁴⁵ *Hollywood*, p. 50..

civilization."⁴⁶) Schatz emphasizes that Ringo and Dallas eventually flee across the Mexican border as Doc Boone's summary of events ends the film: "Well, they're saved from the blessings of civilization." Schatz contrasts an earlier scene, where the Ladies' Law and Order League righteously drive Doc Boone and Dallas out of town, against this final scene. The comparison indicates, Schatz says, that "beneath his [Doc's] veneer of cynicism, however, is an optimistic vision: the uncivilized outlaw hero and a woman practicing society's oldest profession . . . go off to seek the promise of the American West's New World."⁴⁷

Yet resolution to the conflict between the progress of society, to which the "good" Western archetype must be aligned, and the unavoidable destruction of the archetype by that same progress is awkwardly achieved in *Stagecoach*, if at all. It may be no coincidence that the three western archetypes who have failed to integrate socially into "civilization" have names appropriate to their roles: "Doc Boone" can be understood as a reference to the roots of Western myth (the Daniel Boone who pioneered civilization's passage through the Alleghenies) that has now gone awry—or a rye, one could say; "Dallas" can be viewed as an indication of where the edge of the West geophysically begins, the ninety-eighth meridian, in Webbian terms⁴⁸; and last, "Ringo" might be taken to connote a person encircled by a ring of social restrictions to which his individualism cannot be adapted. In any case, it is clear that the Western hero within the schema of the Western's mythology is assigned to ironic tragedy in that "civilization," to which the archetype's allegiance traditionally belongs, is also the source

⁴⁶ *Taking Stock* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989), pp. 172-3.

⁴⁷ *Hollywood*, p. 50.

⁴⁸ Webb used the ninety-eighth meridian to mark the Eastern edge of the geographic West in general terms. This demarcation placed Dallas and Ft. Worth along that line.

of the archetype's demise. In many films after *Stagecoach*, we see the archetype confronted by the citizenry once protected by the archetype's western skills and knowledge.

"The elements Ford had introduced in *Stagecoach*," writes Schatz, "solidify in *Clementine*."⁴⁹ Only this time the hero rides away alone and the woman remains behind as the cornerstone upon which civilization in any Western community was to be constructed, the school marm. Unlike Dallas, the school marm is Eastern-bred and well-refined. Wyatt Earp, in contrast to Ringo is on the other side of the law, thus somewhat more adapted to the fatal encroachment of civilization as the role would indicate. Still, Earp remains a fringe character whose camp is on the outskirts of the town. His tragic flaw is his allegiance to civilization's progress inside the town. His outward disgust with an unordered community—"What kind of town is this, anyway?" he asks when no one else would assume the responsibility of controlling the violence of a drunk *vaquero*—places Earp into the role of mediator between the wild and the civilized, the new and the old, the past and the future. Over his young brother's grave on the edge of town Earp says, "Maybe when we leave this country, kids like you will be able to grow up and live safe." As a transitional figure, like Moses, the archetype will give up his entry into the Promised Land.

Earp's role as a lawman is a temporary alignment with the forces of civilization, lasting only as long as the tender fingers of progress (represented by Clementine) require the leathered protection of the frontiersman's uncivilized skills. Once again the archetype disengages from society in the end and moves on without the hope of a ranch across the border in Mexico nor a woman to take with him to such a haven. Clementine

⁴⁹ *Hollywood*, p. 69.

remains in the town as the school marm while "Chihuahua" (again, note the woman's name—a geographical reference indicative of the border between civilization and freedom in *Stagecoach*) is, by her death, saved from the prosecution of the now unavoidable stage of progress that will produce "The Ladies' League of Law Order." And like *Stagecoach*, resolution of the conflict between progress and freedom, the past and future, and the old and the new is unconvincingly achieved.

In *Clementine*, however, we find the East/West tension developing with greater complexity as the four central archetypes (Earp, Holliday, Clementine and Chihuahua) form, in Schatz' words, "A fascinating network of interrelationships."⁵⁰ Just as Clementine must "confront her own 'primitive' double" in the form of Chihuahua, so must the relationship between Earp and Holliday's death come to closure. In this approach to the film, Holliday's death is also important to the Western's archetypal schema, as Schatz points out:

The device of using another central character who shares the hero's prosocial allegiance but not his motivation or world view appears frequently in Westerns. This "double" generally points up both the primitive and the cultivated characteristics of the hero and his milieu. Earp and Holliday emerge as oppositional figures on various levels: Earp is the archetypal westerner, Holliday is a well-educated, Eastern-bred doctor; Earp is a stoic, laconic militarist who used force only when necessary, Holliday is cultured and articulate but also prone to violent outbursts: both run the town with self-assured authority, but Earp disdains Holliday's penchant for gunplay; Earp is a natural man who operates on instinct and savvy, Holliday is a cultivated man seeking refuge in the West from a failed romance and a demanding career.⁵¹

Doc Holliday, too, is a fringe character who could not function in the mainstream community of the East. Both Doc Holliday and Earp exist more

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 68-69.

⁵¹ *Ibid*.

or less as social refugees in the West in that neither of the two is willing to be assimilated into Eastern culture. Holliday's fatal flaw is polar to that of Earp. The doctor does not value the arrival of civilization in the West, rather, he is trying to escape its grip. More important, however, is the contrast between Chihuahua's and Holliday's deaths. The tubercular disease Doc brought with him from the East eventually caused his death when his uncontrollable cough made him a target for a Clanton bullet. (Had Holliday not been terminally ill and harboring a death wish, his live-and-let-die attitude might have prevented his participation in the fight, anyway.) His Eastern-bred illness ironically kills Chihuahua as well, as Schatz notes, when she goes under the Doctor's "own misguided scalpel."

The East is represented metaphorically as an unhealthy, unnatural element injected into the natural West. The Western hero is archetypically torn between a moral allegiance to "safe streets," and a deep communion with that which is wild and savage. The sickness of civilization that forces the Western archetype into the fringes of society is like the disease that attacked the American Indian. Charles Russell embodied the fringe character when he wrote, "civilization is nature's worst enemy. All wild things vanish when she comes.... The iron heel of civilization has stamped out nations of men."⁵² This inner conflict between nature and civilization is central to the Western archetype, and it is central to understanding the next film discussed by Schatz, *The Searchers*.

Schatz writes of *The Searchers* that the search provides "a temporal framework for the story" in which the events

⁵² McCracken, C. M. *Russell, Cowboy Artist* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 131.

progressively reveal and qualify the Westerner's contradictory multifaceted personality. The entire film might be read as a procession of characters with whom Ethan is doubled.⁵³

The archetypes of Ethan and Scar can be understood reflexively as a single element. Although Ford was known for casting Indian actors in Indian roles, Schatz points out that the director purposefully placed the blue-eyed Henry Brandon in the role of Scar as a "rhetorical and symbolic expression."⁵⁴ When Ethan and Scar finally confront one another face to face, Ethan quips, "You speak good English," and Scar responds, "You speak good Comanche." Schatz' analogy is perceptive:

...now the threat involves that very same nomadic, self-reliant individuality which society cannot tolerate and which is shared by *both* the hero and the Indian. Ironically, this incompatibility between Ford's hero and society grows to the point where the hero's very presence generates disorder. The coincidence of Ethan's and later Scar's unannounced arrivals into the precariously balanced community, coupled with their similar codes and reputations, finally make it rather difficult to distinguish between Demon Indian and Redeemer Westerner.⁵⁵

The archetype represented by Martin Pawly also serves as a "double" for Ethan in that the "initiate hero," in Schatz' words, "embodies the opposites which Ethan cannot tolerate—he [Martin], like the captive Debbie, is both family and Indian, both civilized and savage, both loved and hated."⁵⁶ The key difference, Schatz points out, is that Martin *accepts* his dualities. But Martin is disconnected from the things to which Ethan is tormentedly tied, the savage half of the wild/civilized dichotomy even though Martin is himself one-eighth Indian. It is ironic that Martin, through Ethan, learns "the ways of the desert and the land" while on a

⁵³ *Hollywood*, p. 72.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 75.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*.

quest to return Debbie to her white people. Schatz hits on a very important element of the Western archetype when he observes that, in the end, the film focuses not upon Martin's re-integration into the community," but upon Ethan's inability to do so." Schatz explains:

Like the dead Indian whose eyes Ethan had shot out early in the search, Ethan is doomed to wander forever between the winds, endlessly traversing the mythic expanses of Monument Valley.⁵⁷

Schatz turns last to *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* wherein Ford delivers his

definitive self-critical statement: "this is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." *Liberty Valance* is, in effect, Ford's effort to print both the fact and the legend, both history and myth, and to suggest how the two interpenetrate one another. Ford...concentrates on the very process whereby our present demands for a favorable vision distort and manipulate the past. Whereas *Stagecoach* and *My Darling Clementine* overtly celebrated the culture's idealized self-image, *Liberty Valance* deconstructs and critiques that image, finally acknowledging the necessary role of myth and legend in the development of history and civilization.⁵⁸

Schatz could just as easily be speaking of McNeill's idea of "mythistory" rather than Ford's films. Ford's archetypes perform as mediators between the past and the present in the mythological process of understanding ourselves as a people. In short, Ford's films function as mythology as defined in this study. It has also been shown here that the function of myth hinges on dualities through which myth simultaneously reinforces and contradicts a culture's idealized self-image. As a filmmaker—and mythmaker—Ford's films demonstrate the contrasts and conflicts associated with myth and its archetypes.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 76.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 77.

Schatz describes, for example, Ford's use of the artificial soundstage and its *papier-mâché* boulder from behind which the archetypal villain Liberty Valance first appears during the stagecoach robbery scene:

With this initial flashback, Ford establishes conflict dramatically (Stoddard versus Valance) and theoretically (Eastern versus Western Law), as well as chronically ("new" versus "old" Shinbone) and filmically (the actual Shinbone versus the stylized realm of the flashback).

Thus, Ford's distinction between fact and legend involves not only character, story and thematics, but also the structuring of space (exterior versus studio, nature versus artifice) and time (present versus past). Whereas all Westerns address two time frames—the old West and the immediate present—*Liberty Valance* addresses three. Placing the *Act of Telling* (i.e., Stoddard's flashback "confession" to the reporter in turn-of-the century Shinbone) between past and present reinforces Ford's concern with the *process* of mythmaking.⁵⁹

Schatz reads *Liberty Valance* as Ford's "farewell to the Westerner and his heroic code" and "a fitting epitaph [that] traces the death of that code and the basis for its mythic legacy."⁶⁰ The cactus rose, then, "represents the torn allegiance...between the garden and the desert, between nature and civilization....a symbol of a lost age when civilization and wilderness co-existed in a precarious but less compromising balance."⁶¹ Hallie and Stoddard are drawn back to the West, away from the success of their Eastern lives, by "a sense of loss and the ghost of Tom Doniphon—who was, as Ford said, 'the central character, the motivation for the whole thing.'"⁶² Hallie has been transformed from a desert cactus flower into a cultivated Eastern rose, but Doniphon could not change. Although Ringo, Wyatt Earp and Ethan Edwards were able to escape an enclosing encroachment (Doc's "blessings of civilization"), Doniphon recognized the futility of trying. The

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 78.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 80.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, pp 78-79.

⁶² *Ibid*.

act of burning his cabin (his dream) and the revelation at the end that he no longer wore a gun (the means to achieve the dream) after Valance was killed, drives home the point. Like Ethan's agitated remark, "I ain't turned my sword into no plowshare," Doniphon, too, refused adaptation and therefore must live a life on the fringes of the community. The significant difference between Doniphon and his archetypal predecessors is that Doniphon recognizes the inevitable, even to the point of bearing its transitional burden and sacrificing everything for which he stood in the process.

One can read Doniphon's figure as tragic. His fatal flaw can be seen as his commitment to the very thing that engineers his demise—and that of all Western heroes during the closure of the frontier—the encroachment of civilization. Doniphon knowingly defies his own Western code, his mythology and his very identity to commit "cold blooded-murder" (his own words) for the sake of progress. But the tragic flaw is not so much Doniphon's commitment as it is that to which he is committed. Nor is his tragic flaw his unwillingness to adapt to the impending change. Rather, his fatal flaw is the very fact that he recognizes, more than any other figure in the film, the reality of their moment in history. Doniphon's solitary awareness, his unsung heroism, is comparable to that of the American Indian in Russell's letters and images. Eventually, like the last nomadic plains tribes when flight deeper into the Western Frontier was impossible, the Western archetype was trapped and the dichotomy within the character itself becomes increasingly complex in his existence on the fringes of society.

5. The Thorn and the Petal

The central conflict within the archetype presented by Ford before *Liberty Valance* was an internal one. The characters around the hero served to explicate the hero's inner struggle between savage and civilized. The Ethan/Scar duality has already been discussed. *Liberty Valance*, however, adds an externalized conflict between the roles of Doniphon and Stoddard. This conflict is realized by the death of Valance who, like the Scar/Ethan dichotomy, mirrors the hero Doniphon. *Both* archetypes are terminated in the act; the allusion of the villain's name—Liberty juxtaposed with violence—further solidifies their archetypal relationships. It is this very complexity of thorn and flower, embodied by the cactus rose, that “lost age when civilization and wilderness co-existed in a precarious but less compromising balance,” which is conceded to the lifelessness of legend.

The symbolism of the Eastern rose should not be overlooked, either. Its traditional connotation of dichotomy, of sharp pain and fragrant pleasure, is not contradictory but parallel to the meanings represented by the cactus rose. The difference in symbology of the flora is that one stands for a passing age while the other indicates the blossoming of a new age. More importantly, one represents a native-born culture, however primitive, and the other the encroachment of an Eastern (via Europe) culture, refined in spite of its Western experience.⁶³

The cactus indicates desert. The rose, on the other hand, is a product of the garden. Just as these symbols represent a correlation to particular

⁶³ The precedence for the Rose/Garden dilemma within the metaphorical pretext of a love lamentation (*Liberty* is a love lamentation) is well established in Europe as early as 1320 by *La Romaunce de la Rose*.

environments, so do the characters of *Liberty Valance*.⁶⁴ Hallie is a Westerner who accepts the transition Doniphon could not. Stoddard is an Easterner and the vehicle for the change, though he is himself transformed by a confrontation with the West. Both Hallie and Stoddard accept their roles, in the end, with sadness for the passing age. Still, they fatalistically move forward, leaving the past behind, at least until Stoddard's government irrigation project brings the "garden" to Shinbone and "real" roses can be grown, literally, in a West transformed.

The analogy is both geophysical and cultural. The historical infusion of Eastern technology will physically turn a wasteland into an agricultural community; the arrival of Eastern culture will produce the culturally tamed version of floral symbology for a more refined society. In other words, the dichotomy of the cactus blossom (Liberty/violence, Doniphon/Liberty Valance, wild/civilized) is paralleled by the rose and consummated in the marriage of Hallie and Stoddard (West/East). The "desert" symbol is that of the old order while the "garden" symbol evokes the fertility of the future for the marriage transformation. But the film ends less with answers than open-ended questions. Who really shot the *archetype* of Liberty Valance? And who—or *what*—shot down the life of Doniphon? Or more broadly, how does a frontierless society of today reconcile with its frontier heritage of the past?

The archetypal questions raised by Ford's *Liberty Valance* parallel the historical questions presented in W.P. Webb's *The Great Frontier*. McNeill's idea of "mythistory" helps to show the relationship of film—a mythmaking

⁶⁴ Again, one need only refer to the dominant rhetorical handbooks of the Middle Ages to find the Desert/Garden images as common examples of metaphorical devices. The long-established tradition of such academic teaching surfaces with great frequency in the poetry of Dante, Chaucer and Boccaccio.

medium—and history. This approach serves to illuminate Ford's dramatization of the interrelationships of myth and history, or in Schatz' words, "in the development of history and civilization." Although Schatz presents an evolutionary view of the Western archetype from a simplistic hero to the complex dichotomy of Doniphan, evidence of such complexity was well evident in the contrasts of Russell and Remington (at least as early as 1888) long before Ford's *Liberty Valance* (1962). This observation is not intended as a critique of Schatz' developmental view of Ford's hero (and the Western's hero in general). Rather, the emphasis in this study is upon the continuity of conflict exhibited in the Western archetype early in its evolutionary development until the "contemporary" Westerns of Larry McMurtry. The birth of the "classic" Western, the period of its "death," the arrival of the "anti-Western" and other developmental critical analysis of the Western, in this view, becomes somewhat tangential to the ever-present dilemma of American Western culture between our frontier heritage and our civilized achievements. The next part of this study will examine this "American" struggle as it is represented by the dichotomous archetypes of Western films from 1929 to 1990.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE DICHOTOMOUS ARCHETYPES IN TWENTY-SEVEN FILMS

1. The "Historical" Western

What follows is a collection of twenty-seven brief film analyses in relation to the preceding discussions. Included among these analyses are three of the four films that were introduced in Section Four of Chapter Three, "On the Fringe, Four Ford Films." (These three are *Stagecoach*, *My Darling Clementine* and *The Searchers*.) The remaining twenty-three films to be considered in this chapter were selected somewhat arbitrarily from a larger list compiled with the assistance of the thesis committee. This list included "B" Westerns, "classics" and "contemporary" Westerns in the broadest definition of the genre. Not all the films on the list were viewed. The choice of films that were viewed depended upon somewhat non-scholarly criteria such as availability on video or the simple limitation of time. The final selection of films date from 1929 to 1989, and will be discussed in chronological order. A twenty-eighth film, *Dances with Wolves* (1990), will be discussed as part of the conclusion.

The films discussed in this study are in no way representative of all the variations found within the genre, nor does the selection of films comprehensively explore the entire history of Western filmmaking. Most historians, in fact, begin with the 1903 production of *The Great Train Robbery*. Some of the "must-sees" are also absent from the ensuing discussion. What the selection of films here does provide is an effective (albeit piecemeal) set of evidence in support of observations made thus far in this study.

These films underscore the mythic function of the Western genre and the prevalence of dichotomy in its archetypes. The first section of analyses includes the "historical" Westerns or those films having a setting during the historical period from approximately the middle of the nineteenth-century and ending shortly after the turn of the century. The second section of this chapter will attempt to show how these dichotomous, archetypal elements of American mythology are manifest in contemporary terms, and the implications for the future.

1929, *The Virginian*. Three levels of dichotomy are represented by the characters in *The Virginian*. On the "external" level, is the overall East/West juxtapositioning of Molly, the newly arrived school marm from New England, against The Virginian and his sidekick Steve. On the Western side of that dichotomy is the "internal" struggle between acceptance and denial of change according to the positions of The Virginian and Steve. The division between these two archetypal cowboys mirrors an "inner" polarity within the hero himself. For this reason, *The Virginian* provides an excellent introduction for all the films to be discussed.

The playful attractions and divisive confrontations between the Eastern-bred school marm and the stalwart characters of a rough-edged Western town explicate the "external" East/West tensions of the Western genre. "Your Eastern Dancin' is kinda different than ours," The Virginian apologizes to the more refined and socially adept Molly during a community social function. Later, when the two are courting, Molly confides in the hero that she feels like an "alien" when she is confronted by Western ways. "I don't understand it," she says. The Virginian replies, "Oh, yes you do—but I like it when you think you don't."

The dialogue between Molly and the Westerner in *The Virginian* indicates an agreement as to their Eastern and Western roles in the frontier: the West forged the rough, simple and clear-eyed Westerner who is capable of providing the necessary protection for a more refined, civilized and complex culture brought by the Easterner. The dream of both the Westerner and the Easterner is a town with streets free from violence, a church and a schoolhouse. These images are the benchmarks of a destiny to which the Western hero is morally dedicated. Like the European knight of the Marian cult, the Western archetype seeks focus for his quest in the chivalric tradition by placing his honor and duty in allegiance to the archetypal symbol of the transition to civilization, the virtuous school marm. The European model, however, fails when the heroine rejects the hero's violent and uncivilized code. Here the "internal" dichotomy begins to surface in *The Virginian* which, in later films, develops into an irreconcilable conflict between the "rewards of civilization" and the inability of that civilization to assimilate its own "knights." What results is the fringe archetype, the "marginal man" (discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis) of Larry McMurtry, when the genre's fundamental antagonism is fully developed. Perhaps *The Virginian* marks a turning point in the development of this crucial element of the Western.

Isolated fragments of frontier culture continued to flicker in the historical West of 1929. The pre-depression American mind could *believe* that some Western men and women lived the old way on rugged ranches somewhere in the distant reaches of the high plains and semi-arid foothills of the Rockies. Certainly places still existed, however diminished in scale, for the Western and Eastern archetypes to come together in that transitional

zone between raw and cooked. Even so, the last remaining relics of the West were fading by 1929.¹ Within ten years of *The Virginian*, the reality of a frontierless society had come to the forefront when Ford directed *Stagecoach*. *The Virginian* gives us the embryonic elements of the the frontier issue to be addressed more overtly in later films: on one hand, is a communion with the natural elements—and on the other, subjugation to the disconnected order of higher civilization.

Despite the tragic conflict between The Virginian and Steve, both men remain intact as Western archetypes. Both men understand and accept the consequences they each face because of “Western law.” Their unity as Westerners places them squarely at odds with the Eastern school marm. The fundamental difference between the Virginian and his alter ego Steve is that one *recognizes* the inevitable and chooses to adapt, while the other fatalistically refuses. The dialogue between the two cowboys at a critical juncture of being partners and soon to be opponents is compelling. The Virginian urges his *compañero* to see the light, “This whole country’s takin’ things more serious. Times are changin’.” Steve answers, “You and me have been friends too long to wind up on opposite sides. This country’s getting too civilized!” This conflict represents the “internal” dichotomy within Western mythology.

This “internal” struggle is a theme that is repeated ritualistically in the Westerns to follow *The Virginian*. What is significant about *The Virginian* is that one very fundamental element of Western myth remains intact in both the Virginian and Steve. During the the final moments of Steve’s life just before the hanging, the two men have exchanged no words. They are disconnected in every way as adversaries except one—both men

¹ Charlie Russell died in 1926.

remain bonded by a spiritual relationship to the wilderness which transcends their temporal predicament. The lonely call of the Whipporwill, a sound once used as a password between the two men earlier in the film, breaks through their incommunicado. What the two men still have in common, regardless of their opposing roles, is their connection to the wild. The reference to the freedom of a undomesticated bird, and to the regenerative processes of the seasons—"Sure full of quail this season" were the only words Steve spoke to the Virginian before he was hanged—at such a critical moment in the film is significant; Steve's calmly spoken words might be construed as an indication of the essential "faith" in the Western archetype's "religion," an American Western mythology of the natural world which transcends concerns for an after life.

When W.P Webb was once asked by a close friend (and Methodist minister) to speak before a church group about "the religion of the cowboy," Webb agreed. At the appointed hour, Webb appeared, was introduced, took the podium and curtly remarked, "The cowboy had no religion," then returned to his seat² Perhaps what Webb meant was that the "cowboy," as a Western archetype, had no religion which his audience would recognize as such, at least not within the context of a formalized institution. It is interesting to note how the image of the church building, in various stages of construction, is repeated in the Western many times as a reference to the progress of civilization into the frontier.

Rather than an exploration of the cowboy's religion, the point to be made is that American Western mythology has, from its early roots in the

² Story told by Dr. Jim Pearson, a former student of Webb's and a professor of history the University of North Texas, during a lecture in his "The Great Frontier" seminar (Spring, 1989).

colonial captivity tales³, maintained a fascination with an alternative and sometimes contradicting world view from that of the European-born, Puritanical elements of American society. It is stated at the onset of this study that what separated American art and literature from its European counterpart was its pervasive preoccupation with man's relationship to nature. Conversely, the legacy of the European Renaissance was the awareness of man's own identity as something separate from nature. This awareness is marked by the realization that man could assume an affective role in his own earthly destiny, thus replacing the mysterious forces of God at the center of the temporal universe with a Humanistic world view. Eventually, faith in scientific inquiry and human reasoning could fulfill mankind's yearning to understand himself and his physical world; spiritual matters were confined to the otherworld and the Positivist came to rule the earthly domain by the nineteenth-century. In the New World, however, a reversal of European Humanism takes root, as evidenced by the American Transcendentalists. Undoubtedly, the intimidating expanses of the frontier were a catalyst for the phenomenon whereby the wilderness was naturally assimilated into the new mythology of American culture.

1939, *Stagecoach*. Thomas Schatz pointed out in a recent lecture that the original Western archetype was the Indian, not the cowboy.⁴ Indeed, the development of the "cowboy" hero was slow. Schatz used a series of stills from *Stagecoach* to show that even when the cowboy archetype had fully

³ One of the most popular prose works of the seventeenth-century in America and England was *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. The story concerns a young woman who is captured by wild Indians, but she eventually returns to civilization. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* describes the captivity tale genre: "As transformed into fictional forms by writers like James Fenimore Cooper (in *The Last of the Mohicans*) and William Faulkner (in *Sanctuary*), it is a genre which has proven to be an integral part of our American literary consciousness (3rd ed [New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1989], p. 145.

⁴ Lecture at The Amon Carter Museum, February 2, 1991.

developed, the Indian was used to frame the hero's story. One of the stills from early in the film showed the U.S. Cavalry rushing through the streets of a frontier town. The patrol was headed out to protect the advancement of civilization from Indian attack. Schatz' point is that the hero was not introduced until after the conflict between the white and red man is established. When the hero is introduced, he is *outside* the boundaries of civilization, which rhetorically aligns his role closer to the Indian's world than the white man's. All the other characters, except the Indians, were introduced within the civilized community. What Schatz did not point out about the still he used is that the cavalrymen were symbolically passing through the shadow of a church steeple as they left the community and entered the fringes of civilization.

1946, *My Darling Clementine*. Although *Clementine* is discussed in some detail in Chapter Three, the film warrants further examination here. On one hand, Wyatt Earp is a fringe character of Western origin upon whom civilization is steadily encroaching. On the other hand, Doc Holiday is also a fringe character, but he is an Easterner and a product of the very civilization from which he is escaping. At the risk of overstretching analogy, the two provide parallel comparisons with the archetypes of Russell the Westerner and Remington the Easterner.

The comparison of Russell's cowboy vision of the West and that of the character of Earp is obvious. Earp could have stepped out of a Russell painting, sat in the newfangled barber's chair in Tombstone and had the same comical experience. The clash of new Eastern technology, (so new the barber says that he doesn't "know how it works yet"), and the old paradigm of the open rangeland would have made a predictable Russell drawing. The

film introduces Earp, like Ringo in *Stagecoach*, outside of the town. This serves to underscore the sense of encroachment in Earp's dialogue with a townsman about the local church meeting: "Oh, a camp meeting," Earp nods in understanding. "No such thing!" the indignant resident responds, "It's a *church* we're building!" The relationship of the civilization's progress and the image of the church is identifiable in its juxtapositioning to the Western hero's "inner dichotomy" of civilization and savageness. This relationship is exemplified by Earp's disgust with Tombstone's violence ("What kinda town is this, anyway?") and Clementine's surprise and comfort at discovering a church in such an undeveloped fringe of the West ("That's the first church bells I've heard in months").

The comparison of Doc with the archetype of Remington is less obvious. Certainly Remington's vision of the West was influenced by his Eastern collegiate background as was as the dramatic characterization of Doc Holiday. When the East catches up with Doc in the form of his Eastern lover Clementine, he is compelled to make a complete and symbolic break from his Eastern past by marrying Chihuahua, a Westerner. "Tell 'em the Queen is dead—long live the Queen," he spouts after the decision, as if his break from the East is like the early American's colonists' break from European authority. But the attempt proves futile when Clementine refuses to leave. The town of Tombstone, then has the three marks of civilization: safe streets (law and order), a church (institutionalized religion) and, finally, a school marm (institutionalized education).

1948, *Red River*. This film focuses on the Western half of the East/West conflict, the "interior" struggle represented by two contrasting Western characters Tom Dunson and Matthew Garth. The pretext is that one, the

elder who refuses adaptation to a changing West, is in conflict with another, younger Western heir who recognizes the changes and who is capable of adaptation. There is an overriding sense of continuity to the process of transition in the West as if to indicate—especially today—that stagnation is always an end in itself. The archetype of the Old Way, Dunson (who we see in the role of the younger, dynamic archetype at the beginning of the film), explains to the younger Garth how the Spanish took the land from the Indian and that he will, in turn, take it from Señor Diego. The two characters mirror each other much the way Ethan and Scar polarized the same archetypal element of the Western fringe character. Dunson's and Garth's roles function within the story like the roles of Doniphon and Liberty Valance in that one recognizes the reality of change and the other fatally denies it. The difference here, however, is the Old/Young arrangement of the dichotomy, in which the younger character does not fall to the encroaching civilization, but adapts to the change.

1950, *The Gunfighter*. Here the archetypal struggle is literally against the gun, as the title implies. Again the focus is on the "inner" conflict within the psyche of a single Western archetype. The other characters in *The Gunfighter* reflect aspects of the central figure in a way similar to *The Searchers*. In terms of the recognize/deny contrast, the Gunfighter's old friend, and now sheriff, represents the alternative that the Gunfighter Ringo has for so long denied. Johnny Ringo, like Tom Dunson, is fatally assigned to his role in the West by his failure to recognize the inevitable consequences of his unadaptability.

On the younger side of the coin are two other conflicting characters whose relationship reflects a continuation of the same dilemma; only this

time a truly viable solution appears. Their archetypal roles are similar to that of Tom Dunson and Matthew Garth in Young/Old context of *Red River* except that here the younger element has found the passive alternative to the changing West. One is the young gunslinger who eventually serves as the vehicle of Ringo's demise; his role reflects the denial of the older gunslinger. The other, Tommy, unknowingly reflects the alternative that Ringo has missed. Tommy enters the bar for one drink only—that's all his wife will allow—and hurries contentedly back to the work of the farm. His "sword," in contrast to the other young man, has been turned in for a "plowshare." It is at this moment that Ringo discovers what it is for which he's searching: the chance of settling down with his wife and son, Jimmy. He pleads with his wife, "You and me and Jimmy on a little place, somewhere—South America . . ." She repels his offer, saying, "One of these days the federals will catch up . . . and it'll be all over."

The town Johnny Ringo once knew has changed; Ringo's woman is the town's school marm. The town now has a church and safe streets, as well. The Western community has already passed through the transition that was coming to *Clementine's* tombstone when Earp left. Instead of order, as Wyatt Earp brought, the famous Johnny Ringo creates disorder. When Ringo is disturbed by the gathering of children around the saloon, he complains, "Doesn't this town have a school?!" (Remember Earp's, "What kind of town is this?!") "Yes," the sheriff answers, "You closed it down," meaning that the excitement of his presence in town caused all the kids to skip out of school.

Ringo begins to recognize the new reality and its changed archetypes. His son (who does not realize that Ringo is his father) asks the gunfighter,

"Who's the toughest?" Ringo points to the aging sheriff. Jimmy, frustrated, quips, "Ah, he doesn't even carry a gun!" Ringo answers, "He doesn't have to . . . he can handle anyone *bare handed*." The inference is that the sheriff is a bigger man because he has given up the old Western law of the gun and now wields the more powerful strength of civilized law and order.

1950, *High Noon*. The hero and setting of *High Noon* are similar to that of *The Gunfighter* but with a twist in archetypal roles. A violent vestige from the newly civilized town's past threatens to disturb its peaceful existence. The sheriff's old code requires that he stand and face the threat whereas the townspeople only want the lawman to leave. Sheriff Kane's dilemma is additionally complicated by his marriage to a pacifist Quaker wife. The Kane/Outlaws conflict resembles that of Doniphon/Valance except that the town, as in *The Gunfighter*, has already made the transition beyond the Westerner's day.

1953, *Shane*. The clearest picture of the recognize/deny and old/young model of the "internal" dichotomy is in the film *Shane*. Here we have the traditional role of the Western hero who serves as the vehicle for the transition to civilization yet cannot remain a part of the New Law and Order. The obvious contrast between Western archetypes is that of the virtuous Shane and the hired villain Wilson. Their crucial difference (like that of Doniphon and Valance) is that one recognized the impending transition. "Your problem," Shane confronts the villain (and himself), "is that you've lived too long . . . your kind of day is over." Stark replies, "My day? What about you, gunslinger?" Despite an earnest attempt to assimilate, to "turn his sword into a plowshare," he cannot; the hero belongs to the Old West, not the New. The Old Way in which the hero seeks focus

for his allegiance to civilization's progress, like Ford's Wyatt Earp, in the chivalric tradition of the Marian Cult, is maintained in the role of the Joe's wife—Marion. But like *The Virginian* and *Clementine* examples, the woman rejects the violent way of her knight.

On another level, the hero of the New West is represented by Joe, the homesteader. He and his wife Marion will inherit a town with safe streets and eventually, a school and a church. What is most significant, however, is how the film's ending focuses on the couple's son Joey, who is the archetype of the *future* West (like Tommy in *The Gunfighter*). Shane's last words to the boy explained why the hero cannot stay: "A man has to be what he is Joey. Can't break the mold. I tried it . . . there's no going back. You grow up strong and straight." The difference between Johnny Ringo and Shane is that the first was mortal and the second immortalized. The boy, however, is of a different West altogether.

1958, *The Big Country*. The situation of a West in transition from the Old Way to the New (as in *Shane*) is the setting for *The Big Country*, but with a few twists. An Easterner brings unexpected insight into a conflict between two stalwart Western ranchers in a battle over water rights. Easterner McKay, a former sea captain, adapts to the Old Western ways and manages to bring about a climactic confrontation between the two archetypal Western cattlemen. The final conflict formally ends the Old West and its violent ways.

Ironically, the gun image here is symbolized not by the Colt .45, but by an exquisite pair of European dueling pistols. The film is filled with the East/West tensions associated with the images of Russell and Remington, only the characters' roles invert some of the stereotyped dramatization

associated with Western movies. One of the most enjoyable characterizations is that of Ramon, a Mexican stablehand whose interaction with McKay provides both comic relief and unassuming insight into the story. In the end, it is Eastern civility which puts an end to the violence of the Old West.

1962, *Ride the High Country*. The opening scene of this film graphically illustrates, perhaps more than any other Western, the encroachment of civilization upon the West at the turn of the century. The appearance of the automobile and the uniformed cop who waves the has-been Western hero, Steve Judd (Joel McCrae), out of the way of a horse/camel race is memorable and ironically fitting. In the midst of the town's festivities, of which the eccentric camel race was a part, the old gunfighter is accidentally reunited with an long ago cohort, Gil Westrum (Randolph Scott. Ironically, Judd finds that his friend from the golden days of the Old West has of late resorted to wearing a ridiculous Buffalo Bill costume for a carnival sideshow to make a living. (It is almost too coincidental that *Liberty Valance* cut its "When the fact becomes legend, sir, print the legend" scene in the same year; it was also Scott's last film.)

The washed up gunfighter and his old friend team up, along with a young initiate, to tackle one last endeavor for which the now civilized West still needs the skills of the Western fringe character. Their awareness of the situation is clear: "The days of the Forty-niners have past. The days of the steady businessman have arrived," Scott laments to McCrae as they embark on their assignment in the mountains.

The rest of the story is a veritable discourse on the adapt/deny, and young/old "internal" model. The two old-timers have arrived at the same

dead-end, yet one has managed to keep his old dignity intact while the other appears to have sold out. As the story unfolds however, the young initiate—and a poor excuse for an heir to the Old West—and the compromising carnival actor are redeemed by the perseverance of the unswerving member of the trio. “He was right,” Westrum admits, “I was wrong. That make all the difference.” In the end Judd is killed in a brief but brave encounter with his glorious past as if his last wish had been granted.

1967, *Hombre*. The main character in *Hombre* is a half-breed fringe character, John Russell (Paul Newman), who clearly embodies the Ethan/Scar “inner” dichotomy from *The Searchers*. The setting, of course, is a West that is changing. Russell’s friend in the town is the local stageline owner who is getting out of the business because the Eastern Railroad is now coming to town. “That’s progress,” the Western-style businessman remarks, admitting that times are changing. He suggests to Russell that he, also, adapt and “put yourself on the winning side for a change.” Russell sarcastically retorts, “Is that where you are?”

The story of *Hombre* parallels *Stagecoach* in that a cross-section of society is represented in the close quarters of a stagecoach heading for trouble. This time, however, the Indian element, represented by Russell, is part of the interior action of the stagecoach rather than the framing device, as it was in *Stagecoach*. The threatening element, too, is now from within the boundaries of the white man’s society, and it does not take the form of the Indian. Instead, the savage role is played by a Liberty Valance-type outlaw. The various roles of the other characters in the film serve to reflect the conflict represented in Russell when precarious situations confront the travelers.

Early in the story, the travelers' relationships are established. Russell embodies the savage/civilized archetype to whom the fingers of civilization had once turned for protection when first entering the frontier, but now, when the wilderness no longer needs the hero's savage skills, has forced to the fringes of society. Unlike Doniphon, however, Russell carries no allegiance to the white man's dream of safe streets, churches, and school houses because he is half Indian. When the greedy, carpet-bagging Indian agent adroitly solicits Russell's unique relationship with the Indian population to assist, for dubious reasons no doubt, in the management of the reservation, Russell's clear-eyed vision cuts to the heart of the matter: "You mean you've got a dirty job for me to do."

Nonetheless, Russell reluctantly assumes one last job of protecting the civilized elements in a harsh wilderness. His tragic flaw, in the end, is comparable to that of Tom Doniphon, and Russell's destiny is sealed. When the occupants are forced to walk in the desert (in contrast to the "Garden"), the socially untouchable half-breed is suddenly thrust into a leadership role; because of the harsh environment, Russell's presence is ironically valued in the *absence* of civilization. His superiority and separateness from the others is metaphorically evident. When the others can't keep up with Russell, one passenger asks him for understanding, almost metaphorically, "We don't walk the way you do?"

1969, *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid*. The overriding "external" theme of this film is the transition of the Old Wild West to the New Corporate West. The two infamous outlaws repeatedly run into unexpected problems because the times are changing. During a rather routine train robbery, "Mr. Woodcock" refused to open the door to the car containing the

company payroll. Butch and Sundance's notoriety failed to persuade the tiny little accountant to give in, "I know who you are, but you don't know Mr. Harman." In other words, the fear once struck by legendary outlaws is now overshadowed by the immense power of industrial tycoons like Harriman. In fact, it is a combination of newfangled technology and Harriman's money which drives Butch and Sundance out of the country and to their final destiny.

Once on the run from corporate-sponsored private investigators, Butch and Sundance approach an old-timer sheriff for advice. Unlike the young troublemakers, the old sheriff recognizes the reality of change in a way similar to the sheriff in *The Gunfighter*. (In the same film, Johnny Ringo's girl refused to consider settling down in South America because "one day the federals will catch up . . . and it'll be all over." This was, ironically, exactly what happens to Butch and Sundance.)

1970, Monte Walsh. The encroachment of the Eastern civilization is nearly completed by the time period in which *Monte Walsh* is set. This film clearly demonstrates the "internal" dichotomy between the archetype who tries to adapt and the archetype who will not. Several symbolic images are used in the film to underscore the events in Monte's life at the turn of the century. The running battle between a wild horse and Monte, for instance, parallels his determination to remain in the Old West. "I've broken every one but the Gray," he barks. When Monte finally manages to win the Gray over during a symbolic, wild ride, the horse and rider together manage to damage a considerable part of the town's architecture.

The film begins as Monte lays a bead on a distant prairie wolf. He is bragging to his best buddy about the time he wrestled one bare handed; the

shot misses. The two cowboys are out of work once again and looking to sign on at another ranch. (Like *Stagecoach* and *Clementine*, the heroes are introduced on the open range.) They manage to find work, for a while at least, and we are introduced to an array of Western characters. One of these, an old man who was said once to have been somewhat of a Western legend during the Indian Wars, tragically reflects the younger cowboy's fears. When Monte and his sidekick meet the old cowboy, the old-timer is a sad sight. Even so, the younger cowboys hope to pry some of the history out of him, but all he will say, morosely, is "I had a good life, I had a good life." Uncomfortably Monte asks, "Anything more we can do for ya?" The old man replies, "Nope." The encounter disturbs Monte and his friend. As they ride off, Monte's partner introspectively says, "Looks like his life is over with." Monte, with equal seriousness adds, "Looks like it to me, ridin' fence."

The scene clarifies the reality of the fringe character, for whom the fence is a sullen symbol. The next time we see the old cowboy, he is mounted on horseback. All the ranch hands are gathered for dinner at a cow camp when they witness the old man riding wildly along a dangerous ridge, whooping and hollering like he was in the old, wild days. One ranch hand exclaims, "He's crazy! What's he think he's doin'?!" Another cowboy solemnly answers, "Suicide." The horse stumbles and the rider falls to his death. It was symbolically the death of the Old Way and serves as a turning point in the film for Monte and his friend.

The remainder of the story depicts the decline of the old open-range lifestyle. This ranch, like the others before, is bought by a larger corporation and fewer hands are needed; times for the cowboy are becoming increasingly harder. Some of Monte's former cohorts become outlaws when no

work could be found. The situation is similar to that of *The Virginian*, only here the reality of change is less cheerfully depicted or clear-cut. In fact, the Virginian and his friend, Steve, have similarity to Monte and Monte's own best friend, for they, too, are divided by the changes occurring in the West.

The Virginian's parallel is Monte's friend, who decides to give up the cowboy trade to take on a wife, a house, and to run a hardware store in town. The Virginian, like Monte's friend, is the one who recognizes the reality of change. Monte parallels Steve in that they both refused to accept the change; only Monte does not fall into crime (although some of the other destitute hands do). The roles of the characters from *The Virginian* and *Monte Walsh* are somewhat different. The first film shows the outlaw on the fringes of society, Steve, who "sold out" in his refusal to accept civilization. But Monte Walsh is the odd man out who maintains his integrity by *not* giving in to the forces of civilization.

Monte Walsh ends where it began; only Monte is now traveling alone and looking for work. He spots the lone prairie wolf again, takes aim, but lowers the gun in a symbolic gesture of communion. Monte, like the wolf, is a fringe character being pressed ever closer to extinction by civilization's encroachment. The lone cowboy turns to his horse and tells the tall tale once again about the time he had wrestled a wolf. The tale is true in that Monte is wrestling with a tough adversary inside and outside of himself.

1971, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*. On the surface, *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* presents an unusual set of elements for a "Western." Although much of the film's unique story and style can be (as often is the case with Westerns) explained in terms of the film's contemporary social, political and artistic

(like Leonard Cohen's soundtrack) circumstances, *McCabe* remains well within the mainstream of American Western mythology as described in this study. The overwhelming theme, for instance, is that of civilization's encroachment—its "rewards," so to speak. The two central characters operate in the story in a way comparable to *Monte Walsh* and *The Virginian*. The "internal" dichotomy is distinguishable in the interaction of McCabe and Mrs. Miller as they face a changing Western paradigm. The "external" dichotomy between East and West is discernible in the hero and heroine's interaction with the larger forces of Western history. This entire structure is strongly reinforced with a backdrop of archetypal symbology.

McCabe opens with the hero traveling horseback through a Northwestern mountain snowstorm. He wears a burly fur overcoat and hat in which, given the pack horse in tow, he could be mistaken as a mountain man. On the edge of a shabby western village, however, he exchanges his garb for that of a gambler's black suit topped by a sharp city-slicker's bowler hat. The transition at the outskirts of the community demonstrates McCabe's Western duality born of two contrasting realities that meet wherever "frontier" exists. He is by definition a fringe character.

Mrs. Miller's arrival, from the opposite side of town, is equally significant. Whereas McCabe's mode of transportation is that of the Western trapper, Mrs. Miller rides the Eastern Industrialist's steam engine. The contrast establishes the "internal" dichotomy of the frontier characters early in the film. Mrs. Miller is the one who recognizes the inevitability of change and will attempt to ride it for what it is worth. McCabe, on the other hand, will deny his impending destiny. As a Western archetype, his allegiance (yes, we are talking about the morality of a pimp) steadfastly

rests upon the "Garden" faith. "A man goes into the wilderness—and with his bare hands—gives birth to an enterprise," so his dream goes. "Another frontier wit, I see," Miller responds. She could have easily called him "another cactus flower," only this time the setting is not Ford's Monument Valley.

It is no coincidence that director Robert Altman carefully juxtaposes the steam engine's smokestack against the steeple of the town's (then neglected) church. The new was here, the old must go and the church will oversee the establishment of civilization. Parallel realities clash in the end: one literally and metaphorically dying and the other, like *Liberty's* rose, watered by the consuming efforts of those dedicated to progress. The townspeople's community spirit is suddenly ignited by an emergency that threatens their prosperous village. As the collection of once rough-edged Western individuals-turned-cooperative-citizens concertedly pump water from the steam engine's belly onto the burning church, the film cuts to the other side of town, to the quiet image of life-blood draining from one of the "bad guys" just killed in McCabe's ensuing battle.

The river that separated the town into halves, connected only by a precariously suspended rope-bridge, divides the archetypal elements associated with frontier and post-frontier communities. Now the river separates McCabe's final fight and the impromptu fire brigade, the old and the new, the past and the future, the encroaching Eastern Establishment and the disappearing West. One scene earlier in the film foreshadowed McCabe's death: the murder on the footbridge of an unsuspecting cowboy complete with chaps, boots, spurs and ten gallon hat. This scene is a metaphor for the entire story: the encroaching forces of progress use the

violent skills of the Westerner to further civilization's reach, pitting Western archetype against Western archetype, and rewards the survivor with death or, at best, a life as a social fringe character. The thug who killed the the naive cowboy was contrastingly dressed like a street kid from an Eastern inner city. The murderer deceptively contrived the cowboy's death, and the murdered man falls from the bridge—the transition between two different worlds—into the river.⁵

McCabe's choice, since he refused to give into change, was either death or, like Schatz describes, "like the dead Indian whose eyes Ethan had shot . . . [he] is doomed to wander forever between the winds, endlessly traversing the mythic expanse of Monument Valley." In either case, the Western archetype who refuses to see the inevitable change, remains blind to the end. McCabe was wandering, ("like Joseph searching for a manger" Cohen sang), when the film opened. Miller's role parallels Tom Doniphon in *Liberty Valance* in that Doniphon was the *only* one who saw the full reality, so chose not to fight. She does not die (it is no accident that *all* the bad guys die with McCabe) but returns, destitute, to the only souls with whom she is at home, the ethnic fringes of the Chinese community; here she may wander forever lost in a haze of opium (instead of the "mythic expanse of Monument Valley"). Doniphon also retreated from the mainstream, became destitute, and confided only in the social fringe equivalent of his loyal black ranch hand.

1972, *Jeremiah Johnson*. The archetypes of the young initiate, the older, passing hero and the divided fringe character are embodied by

⁵ The church is on one side of the river, and the tavern on the other. Jack Nachbar describes an early scene in the film wherein the tavern represents a church, and the "sacred game of poker" becomes the priest's altar (*Focus on the Western* [Englewood Cliff: Prentice-Hall, 1974], p. 107). The institution that was once the center of the Western community passes away as the real church is established.

Jeremiah Johnson.⁶ The story begins with his arrival at the edge of the frontier after serving in the American Civil War. The story of his Western experience chronicles a tenderfoot's adaptation to the wilderness, assimilation as a mountain man and, even to Jeremiah's surprise, transcendence to mythic hero. Jeremiah's costume throughout the film (like Dunson's at the beginning of *Red River*, Ethan's in *The Searchers* and McCabe's change of clothing at the beginning of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*) signifies "inner" division: from the waste up, he dons the trademark garb of functionalism associated with the Western trapper; from the waste down, he continues to wear his Union cavalry trousers and riding boots.

More than half the films discussed so far in this thesis open with the hero traveling on some form of quest, though sometimes aimlessly or unclear to the hero himself. *McCabe* opens and closes to Leonard Cohen's monotone dirge describing the biblical Joseph wandering, looking for a manger. Jeremiah also opens and closes with a folk ballad, singing, "The way that you wander is the way that you choose/the day that you tarry is the day that you lose . . ." Jeremiah's progress from greenhorn to Western myth parallels the drifting search of Ethan and Earp. The focus here is on the *process* by which the archetype becomes the tragically nomadic figure of myth "doomed to wander forever between the winds."

The conflict between Jeremiah and his archenemy, like the Ethan/Scar struggle, shows the dichotomy of savage and civilized within the hero. Jeremiah, however, comes to closure with his "inner" contradictions in a way Ethan did not. "*Jeremiah Johnson* discovers that the Indian cruelties he has

⁶ If *Jeremiah Johnson* does not at first strike one as a Western, bear in mind that Charlie Russell's early experiences in the Western frontier was trapping with Jim Bridger, one of the last of the famous mountain men. The images of the mountain man reappear in his paintings throughout his career. Indeed, it was because of his trapping experiences that he came to know the Indian so well.

suffered are part of Nature's way in a raw wilderness where beauty and savagery are inseparable," writes Lenihan.⁷ The final confrontation between Jeremiah, unlike the climactic facing of Scar and Ethan, is a moment of shattering serenity. After a long series of violent dissolves of fighting, filmically overlaid to indicate the passing of seasons, Jeremiah and a Crow warrior face each other in the stillness of gently falling snow. "A tribe's greatness is measured by the greatness of its enemy," Jeremiah was earlier informed by an elder mountain man. When the Crow warrior displays his right hand unarmed, it is understood that the two are at peace; the gesture communicates at that very moment moment that Jeremiah has been transformed into the greatness of myth.

1980, *Tom Horn*. The central character of this film is based upon the story of the historical Tom Horn who captured Geronimo. Horn's fame is that of an Indian-fighting U.S. Cavalry scout, diametrically in opposition to the Indian in history. The film *Tom Horn* shows that Horn's place is alongside the Indian, however, among the victimized of civilization's encroachment. In the film, Horn and his archenemy Geronimo become the equivalents of the Ethan/Scar and, less obviously, the Doniphon/Valance dichotomies within American mythology.

The film's beginning is similar to *Monte Walsh*; only Horn travels alone. An early scene in town reveals the Westerner/Indian relationship and foreshadows the hero's dilemma. Inside a tavern is a group of bowler-hatted professional boxing promoters traveling from the East to the booming West coast. With them is their pride and joy, a champion prize fighter, to whom they toast. The party pompously allows Horn the honor of joining them in their toast, places a drink in his hand, and expects the cowboy to chime in

⁷ *Showdown* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), p. 82.

eagerly. Horn informs the men that he has never heard of the "famous" fighter turns instead to a photo of Geronimo on the wall and suggests a toast to a "real" fighter. The prize fighter beats Horn to a bleeding pulp.

Soon after his debacle in town, Horn is invited to a banquet hosted by and for the area's big ranchers. The pride in which Eastern lobster was served (only recently possible because of the new railway) and Horn's reaction to "the biggest bug I ever ate" frames the story with with the "external" conflict between East and West. A local sheriff and former wild Westerner like Horn gives the still unadapted Indian-fighter advice concerning opportunity in the new West. The sheriff is squarely a successful man of civility and a respected political figure in town. But the lobster still looks like a big bug to Horn, and the juxtaposition of the two Westerners exemplifies the "internal" conflict of a changing West.

There is a woman, too. She is, of course, the school marm and Eastern-educated. She acts as a kind of mediator between the two archetypes of the New Westerner (the sheriff)—and the Old Westerner who refuses to adapt (Horn), defining the dichotomies of the two archetypes. A woman plays such a role in nearly all of the films discussed so far. In some cases, the role polarizes into two oppositional elements like their counterparts, further reinforcing the tradition of the "internal" dichotomy in the Western genre.

The tragic hanging of Tom Horn is unavoidable mythically, whether the character was able to escape from jail or not. The tradition established from *The Virginian* to *Tom Horn* has never hinted otherwise. Horn's near escape also brings closer to the surface the relationship between the essential Western archetype and the Indian. The charms from his fetish pouch aided his temporary release from incarceration; he made a point to gather them up

before exiting. So, too, were they in his hand at the time of more permanent liberation. Just as Jeremiah Johnson (also a story based on an actual person from Western history) came to become immortalized by the Crow people, Tom Horn came to know the Indian view of the world—and its afterworld: the final slow motion sequence of the falling fetish charms implied an ascent into an afterlife *not* of the white man's design.

1980, *Heaven's Gate*. *Heaven's Gate* is less a revisionist anti-Western than a (disorganized?) parade of the dichotomous archetypes identified in all the films discussed in this study. One lone voice among the critics, Britisher Robin Wood, has insightfully recognized that *Heaven's Gate* is a film which "build(s) on its traditions rather than challenge(s) them."⁸ Wood suggests that *Heaven's Gate* is an extension of the "the inquiry into the validity of the individual hero that was complexly initiated in *The Deer Hunter*."⁹ He describes the director's attitude in both films as:

. . . a nostalgic lament for the hero's non-viability in the context of contemporary America [and]... in its essential nature as at once the culmination of an elegy for a whole tradition embodied at its finest and most complex in the work of John Ford and Howard Hawks (one could relate *The Deer Hunter* equally to *The Searchers* and *Rio Bravo*). Central to that tradition has always been the ambivalent attitude to the figure of the hero—moving between (and sometimes combining) celebration and critique. The heroic status of de Niro in *The Deer Hunter*—his charisma, authority and example presented . . . as essential to the precarious equilibrium of a community on the verge of disintegration—is neither attacked nor seriously questioned; it is simply revealed as obsolete and ultimately useless

One wondered how Cimino would follow up this insight The move in *The Heaven's Gate* toward a concept of the people-as-hero is at once perfectly logical and totally unexpected If this, too, proves useless, it is less because the individual hero has been effectively discredited than because the powers of monopoly capitalism are too strong.¹⁰

⁸ "Heaven's Gate Reopened," *Movie* 31/32 (Winter 1986): 76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 81-82.

If one inserts the "encroachment of civilization" in place of "the powers of monopoly capitalism," the entire passage is virtually a description of Ford's *Liberty Valance*. The Avril/Ella/Nate triangle further supports the comparison to the Stoddard/Hallie/Doniphon trio in *Liberty*. Although Wood misses somewhat the obvious precedents for the "tradition" he is trying to substantiate, he does recognize that tradition as a mythic one in terms compatible to the study at hand:

Cimino . . . deals with myth (from ancient Greece to Roland Barthes) and vast questions of national identity . . . ¹¹

The function of myth, stated at the beginning of this thesis and qualified throughout the previous discussion, is to provide a people with identity.

Thus, it is no surprise that the characters of *Heaven's Gate*

. . . are inevitably more than just people, in whose interaction issues far transcending individual destinies are dramatized and foregrounded; the film[']s inherent relationship to a developed American tradition becomes implicitly analytical independent of any personal voice, because of the ways in which the tradition is thereby both celebrated and qualified.¹²

What Wood is describing here is the role of the archetype in myth.

Furthermore, a people's myth is directly related to that people's identity.

Wood writes,

. . . what is at stake in *Heaven's Gate* is the question of national identity. An obvious reference point here (in relation, especially, to the rollerskating party) is the church floor dance in *My Darling Clementine*.¹³

His analogy speaks of "the dichotomies of Western genre" and of "opposites (Clementine, Chihuahua) that in Ford were irreconcilable."¹⁴ This view

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

follows the tradition of conflict and contrast examined in this thesis, even though Wood attempts to underscore his Marxist agenda by noting the absence of "hierarchy" among the archetypes in the rollerskating scene of *Heaven's Gate* as something different from the church dance scene in *Clementine*. (Again, did he not notice the convolution of hierarchy in *Liberty Valance*?)

Wood also describes *Heaven's Gate's* structure as segmented by "movable building-blocks":

. . . each of the components—each building block, the architectural metaphor being especially apposite to Cimino—constitutes a separate, lucid and forceful "history lesson"¹⁵

The use of interchangeable elements, juxtaposed in contrast of one another, is essential to the structure of a mythic tale. All the key points Wood makes about *Heaven's Gate's* structure hinge on the film's use of contrast and conflict in a way that supports the study at hand. The overriding theme of Wood's discussion is that of the clash between East (Europe) and West, the "external" dichotomy of western mythology.

An extended excerpt from Wood's article serves well for *all* the films examined in this thesis:

The much-criticized use of the Oxford for Harvard works . . . in terms of symbolic drama/national myth rather than of "realistic" historical reconstruction: it adds a non-diagetic level to the creation of Harvard as essentially an "Old World," European culture, characterized by obsolete rituals, value-structures, modes of comportment, societal relations . . .

Cimino's use of Oxford architecture . . . not merely establishes the sense of an Old World tradition, but emphasizes that tradition's insularity . . . Harvard, based on class and privilege, becomes a dream from which the plunge into Wyoming is the rude awakening.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

. . . .Avril discovers in Wyoming, realities which render obsolete the earnest and pious injunctions to bring "culture" to the uncultivated. This "missionary" notion of high culture and of the educational responsibilities of those who have it to bring it to those who have not will give place, in the course of the film, to the awareness of a social-political situation that could be redeemed only by the communal and revolutionary action of the common people working in solidarity

(Again, note that Valance died beneath a banner which read, "Mass Election.")

Much critical abuse of the "What's he doing in the movie?" type has been heaped upon John Hurt (both the actor and the character he plays): he seems so incongruous, so "out of things." Which is precisely the point . . . an Englishman whose upbringing has left him hopelessly unprepared and ill-equipped for the situations in which he will find himself.¹⁶

The analogy reads identically to Webb's scenario from *The Great Frontier*¹⁷ in which Jim Brown, a common American, guides several distinguished Europeans on an Early American sojourn. Metaphorically, the European visitors slowly lose their class-indicative Old World clothing in a process of adaptation until, upon return to the colony, the initiates appear indistinguishable from their American counterparts and have assimilated into a New World culture. Webb's primary goal for using the story was to illustrate the interrelationship of the American frontier and the American social, political and cultural institutions being formed during Colonial America. Secondarily, in juxtaposition with Wood's passage, Webb's use of the archetypal characters in his scenario acknowledges, to use

¹⁶ p. 77.

¹⁷ See footnote number 18 in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Schatz's words, "the necessary role of myth and legend in the development of history and civilization."¹⁸

1985, *Rustlers' Rhapsody*.. This is the last "historical" western considered before the next section of this chapter, and appropriately so. *Rustlers' Rhapsody* takes all the archetypal elements of the western (the singing cowboy variety included), distills them to their essential forms from the period of *The Virginian*, and cross-calibrates them with a funny idea: What if westerns like that were made today? Aside from the unavoidable hilarity, the film actually states through the hero's dialogue, a dialectically synopsised thesis of the archetypal western, albeit in parody, when he is forced to explain to the initiate Westerner (the town drunk, in this case) how and why the story must go the way it does.

The climactic confrontation between the "good guy" and "bad guy", however, is twisted when the "bad guy" (John Wayne's son) turns out to be a former "good guy." The hero is perplexed by the unexpected convolution of archetypal elements which leads to some humorous consequences and (debatably) insightful conclusions. The "good" and "bad" archetypes actually mirror each other (Ethan/Scar) in an almost Freudian sense. The bottom line here is that what the *Rhapsody* presents is the continuous dichotomy of good/bad, wild/civilized, and so on, as the "inner" contradiction within the hero himself that is the result of a changing paradigm.

Well, what if the "old" westerns were made today? The next section will address the "contemporary" western.

¹⁸ *Hollywood Genres*, (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 77.

2. The "Contemporary" Western

Despite the paradigm shift from a frontier to frontierless society that perplexes the "historical" Western archetype, be they one or two polar or the simultaneous singular and polar as the mythology provides, the essential question that has guided this entire thesis remains as it was presented at the beginning (p.3): "what impact (has) the loss of frontier land ultimately (had) on a society whose most significant institutions were derived from a New World environment of which the frontier was a critical component?" In short, how have we—and our mythology—adapted?

It would logically proceed, on one hand, that a new mythology for a new world paradigm without a frontier should have developed. This will be addressed in the conclusion to this study. On the other hand, since myth is innately self-regenerative by its dynamic nature in that it diametrically and dialectically supports and criticizes the cultural status quo, the newer mythology should look principally the same as before. The function of myth is constant though the props—the updated components of the changed reality—may vary. It is on this assumption that a "contemporary" Western can be identified.

The archetypal elements of the Western can certainly be isolated in the science fiction genre, like *Star Wars*, or modern hero film, like *The Right Stuff*. Only the setting and the time have changed according to some film critics. Yet the fundamental issue of the West, of the essential dilemma of American frontier heritage in conflict with the shift from a rural to industrial reality, may well be lost. The "contemporary" Western will be limited here to mean those films in which some aspect of the central—if not only—problem of the Western, strictly as a New World matter (in the

Webbian sense) is addressed: what was the meaning of the physical existence of free, wild land and its subsequential loss of the Great Frontier?

For the sake of clarity, setting will remain the same since contemporary time is by itself so distorted and removed from the frontier period. We have already seen how the "historical" Western (meaning a setting from around 1865 to 1910) indicates a fixation with change. It makes sense, then, that the Western mythology should extend itself into a future setting (our present) in a similar form (other than the "anti-Western" of the "death-of-the-Western" period—which is *not* indicative of the dynamic or creative nature of mythology) in some elemental way. Ten of the thirty films viewed for this study qualify according to the criteria proposed here. These "contemporary" Westerns date from 1962 until 1989. Six of the ten films were produced during the last decade when the "historical" Western was, according to Lenihan, "in its quiescence." The point to be made is that the archetypal Western did not cease for a period, rather it simply transmuted and continued uninterrupted in the "contemporary" Western.

1962, *Lonely are the Brave*. Cowboy Jack Burns picks up where the lone Monte Walsh was last seen. Jack rides into town alone but soon pairs up with his friend Paul. (Monte's friend, killed by the byproduct violence of civilization's encroachment, is resurrected in the figure of Paul.) As an oppositional figure, like Monte's sidekick, Paul recognizes the reality of a civilized West of law and order, however prejudiced the system may be. Unlike his predecessor, Paul chooses to fight, but he does so with *passive* resistance (remember Red River's opposition of the elder Tom Dunson and the younger Matthew Garth?), instead of the old, unbending way of raw strength. This time the mythic archetype on the social fringe is violently

killed (a symbolic and, in a way, benevolent death) in the end, and is replaced by a new form of fringe archetype who uses Stoddard's (from *Liberty*) books instead of guns.

There is the archetypal sheriff, too, who has adapted somewhat to the change by precariously balancing Western individuality and institutional conformity. His contrast with the Army helicopter pilots serves to underscore the West's traditional conflict with encroaching technology. The sheriff secretly roots for the cowboy, "If you'd just turn loose of that horse you'd make it!" But the sheriff knows, as does the film's audience, the significance of the horse to the hero both symbolically and functionally. The death of Tom Horn's horse—a half-wild stallion—foreshadowed the hero's own death. The symbol of the wild horse was also used to represent defiance and success of the hero in both *The Big Country* and *Monte Walsh*.

1963, *Hud*. This film, produced one year after *Liberty Valance*, could be called *The Man who Shot Homer Bannon*. *Hud* represents a plethora of archetypal layering to which an entire thesis could easily be dedicated; the film may well be the definitive "contemporary" Western. Its ending is similar to that of Ford's *Liberty* in that one is left with a perplexing sense of loss and questioning about the meaning of our frontier heritage. Earlier in this study it was asked, "Who really shot the archetype of Liberty Valance? And Who—or what—shot down the life of Tom Doniphon?" McMurtry's screenplay poignantly brings home the rhetorical issue presented in Ford's film. The polarities and reflections of the interrelationships between Homer and Hud, Hud and Lonnie, and Lonnie and Homer, represent dichotomies powerfully magnified by their contemporaneity. The famous Fordian statement from *Liberty* concerning myth and history in the development of

civilization is cast into the concreteness of Grandpa Bannon who said, "little by little the look of the country changes because of the men we admire . . . one day you're gonna have to make up your own mind what's right and what's wrong."

The "look of the country," the physical land element within the American Western myth is perhaps the most consistent thread throughout the Western genre. In *Liberty* the desert cactus will be transformed into the Eastern rose when the land is radically and unnaturally altered. Stoddard quizzes the young Hallie, "Have you ever seen a *real* rose?...Maybe if they dam the river . . ." The Eastern vision of what the West should be weakens the West's myth at its root level, the land. In the end, the vision now stained, Stoddard and Hallie stoically discuss returning to Shinbone, *after* the irrigation project is complete, but they can never really go back to a purer Western myth in which the wild, unaltered land (the Cactus Flower) is held as sacred.¹⁹ Grandpa Sternly fought Hud's suggestion that he consider drilling for oil after losing his herd, "No holes punched in this land while I live!"

Homer Bannon embodied the Western archetype. But the realities of a changed world turned a once potent and affective hero figure into an incompetent and functionless relic. The archetype's legacy is split into Hud and Lonnie who, each reflecting aspects of their grandfather, find themselves torn between the conflicting forces of change. Hud bitterly regrets his inability to live up to Homer's standard not because he is incapable but because the twentieth century reality will not allow it. He vents his frustration rebelliously against his father with stinging words:

¹⁹ Note the discussion of Graves' *Goodbye to a River* in Chapter Two, pp. 18-20 of this thesis.

"We're just gonna roll over dead and let 'em throw dirt in our face?" The burden of recognizing the reality torments Hud.

Lonnie, however, fails to see what Hud realizes. The boy is innocently injected into the modern world with the seed of Homer's values and vision implanted to guide him through the confusion. When Homer felt ill one night, (metaphorically as an archetype as well as physically), Hud displays a rare glimpse of compassion for the old man. "I'll help you upstairs," Hud offers Homer. The aging symbol of another time curtly refuses, "Lonnie will take care of me." It is no accident that it is Lonnie who finds the longhorns during the final round up, not Hud.

"Wild Horse" Homer Bannon is a man of the past, and he is slowly accepting his defeat. "Let's turn 'em loose," Lonnie youthfully suggests of the captured longhorns. "No, they gotta go along with the West," Homer concedes. Hud is also a man of the past and thus frustrated by Homer's acquiescence, since Hud did not have the opportunity that Homer had to assert himself in the Old Day nor is he allowed to keep the only role model available to him. Lonnie, on the other hand, represents the future, and in his innocence can enter into the new age, however uncertain, in a way Hud cannot.

1971, *The Last Picture Show*. The archetypal characterizations presented in *Hud* grow intensely more intricate and complex in *The Last Picture Show* wherein the "Western" elements are much less obvious than in *Hud*. Rather than diminish the film's complexity with a superficial analysis, suffice it to say that *The Last Picture Show* continues the traditional theme of a changing West to which the characters—each individually

reflecting aspects of the essential archetype of Western mythology—either succeed or fail to adapt.

1979, *The Electric Horseman*. Here the continuing theme of civilizations's encroachment is romantically dramatized in simplified good/bad guy juxtapositions. In the "contemporary" Western, the Western archetype is no longer morally obligated to progress, as was the case before, since progress has already been achieved. *Electric Horseman* represents the wish-fulfillment/cultural reinforcement side of the mythology (as opposed to the more introspective reevaluative side represented by McMurtry's screenplays) in which the hero can *still* exercise his individuality against the greater forces of change. In *The Electric Horseman*, the villain is generically represented by Eastern-based big corporate business. The image of a fine horse—superior to the degenerate corporatism—carries the symbolic meaning it always has in Western films as a representation of the Old West. The horse's rescue from its artificial capture reads as a revival of the values nearly lost from Western mythology and its admirable archetype.

1983, *Last Night at the Alamo*. The title of this film clearly states its theme as the generic civilization's encroachment conflict. The story chronicles the last night of a bar, *The Alamo*, and its regular customers before it is demolished to make way for Houston-style urban growth. "Cowboy" is the central figure whose archetypal role is clarified, in the traditional model of the Western genre, by a collection of contrasting characters. In particular is one redneck, with whom "Cowboy" fist fights, mirrors the would-be hero in the "internal" model (like The Virginian/Steve or Doniphon/Valance). The dichotomy articulates the "inner" conflict of "Cowboy's" perception of the world. *Alamo* represents the unromantic, the

old-way-loses side of Western mythology in which the cultural schema is questioned rather than reinforced.

1984, *Country*. The situation of the farmer's economic plight in *Country* sets the Western's encroachment of civilization theme into the "contemporary" setting with powerful realism. The large Eastern-based corporate banking system threatens the very sustenance of individual mid-western farmers who are trying to scratch through hard times. What is interesting about this film is how a younger, less "western" farmer is juxtaposed against his older and staunchly "Old Way" father-in-law who, having seen hard times before, feels for the first time (like Homer Bannon in *Hud*) hopeless.

The focus of this film is in its title, a reference to the root source of Western mythology. *Country* is about the *physical land* and its fundamental meaning to American identity. The theme of civilization's impact on the land—and the resulting impact, mythologically, in terms of man's relation to nature—underlies the entire Western genre. The land issue, however, comes increasingly to the forefront in the "contemporary" Western format.

1985, *A Trip to Bountiful*. The "garden" aspect of American Western Mythology rings clearly in *The Trip to Bountiful*, even though the setting for nearly the entire film (like *Last Night at the Alamo*) is Houston. The encroachment of civilization theme is confirmed continuously by the heroine's almost senile repetition of her earlier experiences on the farm near *Bountiful*. The reality, of course, is that the town no longer exists, except in her mind, since the railroad (a classic indicator of the civilization's arrival in the West now reversed) no longer stops there. Ironically, Bountiful was once an agricultural center of the area with a a gin, and a church and a school . . .

and safe streets; it was the model of a frontier town that has achieved the goal to which the Western archetypes Earp and Doniphon were dedicated to realizing.

The climax of the film, when the aging pilgrim of Bountiful finally escapes Houston's disquieting urbanity and returns to her birthplace, reveals that the *reality* did not matter so long as the *land* was still there. Fulfilled by "running my hands through the soil," the refugee of civilization—a fringe character—achieves a peaceful resolution which enables her to return to Houston without a fight. In short, it was the myth that mattered, and it was reaffirmed by the physical earth from which she had been separated.

1986, *True Stories*. Perhaps the choice of setting for *True Stories* was merely a result of several avant-garde performance artists' attraction to the social eccentricity and regional absurdity formed when Texas flatland culture mixes with high technology. The potential of West Texas had already been fruitfully explored by performance artists Terry and Jo Harvey Allen, with critical acclaim in New York, before *True Stories* was produced.²⁰ Yet, given the archetypal tradition of savage/civilized, past/progress, nature/technology dichotomies in the Western, one can hardly fail to recognize the film more as mainstream Western than modernist art. Odd as this may seem, the plot, setting and characters of *True Stories* are essentially a distillation of the archetypal elements of the Western (which is not to suggest, of course, it is not modern art).

The foundational elements of land and sky so important to Ford's (and other Westerns), as represented by the archetypal image of Monument

²⁰More historically, the first nature-base abstractions painted by Georgia O'Keeffe, a radical shift from her previous Precisionist work, occurred during her first experience in the West when she took a teaching position at Canyon, Texas, near Amarillo. Her personal accounts in letters to Steglitz are filled with rhapsodic notations of the flatland images of earth and sky.

Valley, is readily identifiable in *True Stories*. The entire film is framed by the horizontal bands formed by earth and sky, and all action takes place at the fertile juncture of the two elements. It is suggested that the American Indian cosmology of "Mother Earth" and "Father Sky" is a major influence in the choice of setting. Nowhere else in the United States is it so purely evident as on the Great Plains. Though every segment of the protagonist quest for "love" is presented in a highly spiritual context and at the very center of the earth/sky connection, the techno-culture of the "Virgil, Texas" society is absurdly disconnected from anything associated with the power and simplicity of the land myth despite its obviousness in the setting.

The reconnecting element, the Shaman (Pops Staples), represents everything polar to the pervasive computer-driven religion. (Compare the poker table/mass scene from *McCabe* with the dinner table/mass scene in *True Stories*.) While others in the film searched for personal identity within the insanity of "modern life," the hero finds resolution only through the mystical incantations of ancient African/American Indian origins of the Shaman. Like the archetypal fringe character of the Western, the surrounding characters serve to identify and define the hero through contrast. The hero is mirrored, for instance by "the Computer Guy" in the tradition of the old/new and savage/civilized dichotomies of the Western. *True Stories* can be viewed (as its repeated emphasis on the automobile and highway images support) as a modern day *Stagecoach* in that, in the end, the hero finally escapes civilization's "rewards" and retreats to a ranch house at the fringes of the community to live with his woman.

1988, *The Milagro Beanfield War*. *The Beanfield War* brings to the screen the residual elements of the Old West (like *True Stories'* Shaman and the

Hispanic psychic "Radio Head") in contemporary terms. Although *Beanfield's* setting and characters are not abstracted into strange caricatures as in *True Stories*, they do have a similar effect since the aspects American Indian/Hispanic culture presented in the film (like *retablos* or talking with one's dead Grandfather) must seem queerly unfamiliar to the mainstream of modern American suburban culture. The central conflict between big corporate expansion and a small idealistic farmer, Milagro, parallels the conflict in *Country* except that *Beanfield* is humorous where *Country* is tragic. More importantly, *Beanfield* takes the land myth of *Country* to a somewhat spiritual level via the Hispanic (via Native Mexican Indian) perspective.

The characters from the Western tradition are all there, too. The sheriff who has a foot on both sides of the conflict; the young initiate (a naive young middle-class college student); the unbending Westerner and, of course the woman mediator and the townspeople are comparable to *Liberty Valance's* cast, except that the villain is institutionalized rather than personified.

1989, *Baghdad Cafe*. This last "contemporary" Western qualifies as such because of, if for no other reason, its depiction of the cultural eccentricity of the American Southwest. Even today, the region presents a drastic contrast in experience from the rest of the "civilized" suburban United States. This contrast is evident when the tourist wanders only a short distance from the threads of four-lane familiarity, lined with McDonald's and Holiday Inns, that connect the East and West Coasts. The Eastern/Western, American/European tradition in Western film is tapped by the juxtapositioning of the two central characters, one rural African-American woman (the Black representing not only the savage/civilized of the Shaman

as in *True Stories*, but the fundamental American identity dichotomy of both Old and New World heritage, too) and a German woman. It is ironic, though logical, that Europeans—*Baghdad* was German produced and directed and the entire discussion of *Heaven's Gate* above was based on a British film critic's (Marxist) review—have had so much insight into American culture.

CONCLUSION:

RESOLUTION WITHIN TRADITION

1. The Idea of the West

The physical West is a constant in history. Our understanding of the West, however, also depends upon the many variables of contrasting and conflicting perceptions of, and experiences in, the West. Loren Baritz has shown how the idea of the West has existed in every civilization "from Menelaus to Columbus and beyond."¹ Baritz observed how "it was thought that there was a magic otherworld hidden somewhere on earth, and all man had to do was find it."² Columbus searched for the "Terrestrial Paradise," historian Daniel J. Boorstin contends, or what was commonly known as the "*orbis alterius* or *otro mundo*—another world or 'island of the earth.'"³

Boorstin's book, *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to Know His World and Himself*, explains that Amerigo Vespucci was the first person to have reached the New World and to have understood what it was. Columbus' vision was confined by "the faith of the medieval Christian geographers," but Vespucci, Boorstin writes, "was born . . . in Florence in 1454 in the seed time and on the seed ground for the Italian Renaissance."⁴ What Boorstin's account describes is a moment of change in world view, a paradigm shift. James Burke's *The Day the Universe Changed*, in the author's words, "examines some of those moments of change, in order to show how the changes of view also generated major institutions or ways of thought which

¹ "The Idea of the West," *American Historical Review* 66, p. 619.

² *Ibid.*

³ *The Discoverers: A History of Man's Search to Know Himself and His World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), p.243.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 241-245.

have since survived to become basic elements of modern life.”⁵ Today, we live in a world in which the frontiers opened by Vespucci have closed, and the current paradigm is that of a frontierless world. Does this change also indicate the end of the Renaissance and the birth of a new world view, as Burke’s studies would indicate?

Webb’s *The Great Frontier* presents the period from the discovery of the New World until the close of the frontier as a historical “parabola.” Within this parabola, the foundational American institutions were formed as civilization met the wilderness of the New World. Webb places an important historical change at each end of the frontier curve—the end of medievalism at the first and the rise of “corporatism” at the last. If, as Burke and Boorstin suggest, such shifts have unavoidable impact on civilization, then Webb’s thesis should have correlative changes exemplified in American culture and its mythology. Since myth’s function within a people’s culture, by definition, is to “render concrete a special perception about a people and their world,”⁶ and if the Western is “America’s foundational myth,” as Schatz states,⁷ then the changes to be found should correspond to a changing view of the world.

Jack Nachbar writes of the Western genre:

The Western, as does any popular story formula, embodies the most essential wishes, hopes and beliefs of the people that have produced it. Consequently, as perhaps the most purely native American story form, the Western may be looked upon as a metaphor of the American culture out of which it grew.

. . . . If the Western is truly an indicator of American beliefs, the American’s vision of himself as an indomitable Adam in the new Eden, virtuous in doing God’s work of taming the wild land, is gone forever. The new theme of the past in conflict with the present in nearly all

⁵ (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1985), p. 9.

⁶ Lowery, *Familiar Mysteries, The Truth in Myth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), p.3.

⁷ *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981) p.

contemporary Westerns reveals the desperate emptiness left by the loss of this vision. Without a vision where is purpose? Where is meaning? If the myth of the old Western was a false one, the scattered search of contemporary Westerns for the meaning of the moment when the old Western ideals died reveals an intense present-day American quest for the discovery of another epic moment in American history from which may come a new, more meaningful American mythos.⁸

If the close of the frontier indicates a shift in paradigm, perhaps it explains what John G. Cawelti describes as "generic exhaustion" within the Western Genre.

Generic exhaustion is a common phenomenon in the history of culture The present significance of generic transformation as a creative mode reflects the feeling that not only the traditional genres but the cultural myths they once embodied are no longer fully adequate to the imaginative needs of our time. I think we will begin to see emerging out of the period of generic transformation a new set of generic constructs more directly related to the imaginative landscape of the second half of the twentieth century.⁹

Although the paradigm shift technically happened when the 1890 census reported the frontier as "closed,"¹⁰ assimilation of the change within the myth was slow for a variety of reasons—mostly denial. Columbus died, Boorstin notes, without ever admitting his miscalculations: "Confronted with the possibility of a vast land mass where Christian doctrine insisted it could not be, the pious Columbus fitted it into his faith as the Terrestrial Paradise."¹¹

While Nachbar recognizes the essential dilemma of Western mythology, he does not see the continuity of conflict within the Western film genre. Schatz, however, writes,

⁸ *Focus on the Western* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p.112.

⁹ Grant, Barry Keith, ed., *Film Genre Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p. 200.

¹⁰ See footnote number 3 in the introduction to this thesis.

¹¹ *The Discoverers*, p.243.

The Western's essential conflict between civilization and savagery is expressed in a variety of oppositions: East versus West, Garden versus Desert, America versus Europe, social order versus anarchy, individualism versus community, town versus wilderness, cowboy versus Indian, schoolmarm versus dancehall girl, and so on.¹²

The underlying basis for the Western's legacy of conflict, its roots in the American literary tradition of the captivity tale,¹³ represents what Schatz terms a "dual paradigm" of Puritanism and Indian savagery.¹⁴ The genre cannot be "exhausted" so long as this conflict continues, as it has from *The Virginian* until *The Electric Horseman*, to have relevancy for its audience. Rather, it is not the "imaginative landscape" that has changed for the contemporary Western, as Cawelti describes, but the physical landscape itself. The same West remains in the American imagination as before, and the Western genre is far from exhausted. In fact, the "essential conflict" that is ever present in the Western has been brought poignantly to the fore by the realization of the frontier to frontierless shift in paradigm.

Douglas Pye writes,

In Cooper, this current of romantic narrative, capable of inflection in more than one direction, meets other currents of thought associated particularly with the idea of the West and its significance for America, and this conjunction of romantic mode and complex thematic gave a basic shape to the western But it is important to stress the variable associations of the terms "West" and "frontier." From the earliest times, these concepts could mean several things, some of them apparently contradictory. If the West was seen as a potential Eden, the garden of the world, it was also seen as the wilderness, the great American desert These very familiar oppositions of garden/desert, civilization/savagery, which are at the heart of ideas about the West, were bound up with the western from the earliest time. They were not always overt, or as important to meaning as they are in Cooper, but they are always at least latent within the material of the genre, providing the western with a unique potential for reflecting on American themes

¹² *Hollywood Genres*, p.48.

¹³ See footnote number 2 of Chapter Four.

¹⁴ Lecture at the Amon Carter Museum, February 2, 1991.

Frederic Remington, whose work was disseminated by *Harper's* and *Collier's* weeklies in the years between 1886 and 1909, contains in himself various impulses that indicate the range of visual responses to the West during the period. It is very difficult to separate different impulses in Remington—the categories I have indicated are by no means clearly defined—and this is a crucial point about the western tradition in general: by the end of the nineteenth century, there is no possibility of disentangling the confused and conflicting impulses within the tradition.¹⁵

Russell, on the other hand, is outside the “internal” and “inner” struggles; his was strictly an “external” struggle between what he found to be “paradise” and the outer forces that came to destroy his world as it did the American Indian. H.S. McCracken writes that Russell’s stories and letters provide insight into “the period as well as the man himself”:

From the years that he spent on the frontier, living mainly in the saddle, following the cattle camps, he had acquired a deep conviction that the old life was in every respect better than the new way of life which the railroads and the flood of emigrants were bringing to his beloved land. He had also been strongly influenced by the time he spent among the Indians, whose culture and traditions he had come to respect. The result of his wide experience was a rare insight into the human side of those dramatic times and a profound feeling for all the older ideologies of the West, which combined to turn him against the new urban civilization. Unorthodox as he was, the cowboy artist could have written a significant account of that pioneer era of American history

Although Russell was in some respects half a century ahead of his time, he always preferred to live in the past. “I remember on day we were looking at buffalo carcass,” he wrote to his old cowboy friend T.C. Abbott (Teddy Blue), “and you said Russ I wish I was a Sioux Injun a hundred years ago and I said to me to Ted thairs a pair of us I have often made that wish since an if the buffalo would come back tomorrow I woldent be slow shedding to a brich clout and youd trade that three duce ranch for a buffalo hoss and a pair ear rings like many I know, your all Injun under the hide” Expressing his attitude [about] the Indian, he wrote in another letter: “The Red man was the true American The history of how they fought for their country is written in blood a stain that time cannot grinde out their God was the sun their Church all outdoors their only book was nature

¹⁵ Grant, Barry Keith, ed., *Film Genre Reader* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 147-149.

and they knew all its pages” This letter was addressed to Harry Stanford, a Montana pioneer and friend of Russell’s. It was signed “Ah-Wah-Cous”

What must have been a bit of personal philosophy is found in the following excerpt from the story of “How Lindsay Turned Indian,” as it first appeared in *Outing Magazine* in the issue of December 1907; it was later included in *Trails Plowed Under*

“‘Don’t you believe in God?’ says I. “‘Yes,’ says he. “‘What kind of one?’” I asks. “‘That one,’ says he, pointin’ to the Sun. ‘The one I can see ‘n’ have watched work for many years. He gathers the clouds ‘n’ makes it rain; then warms the ground ‘n’ the grass turns green. When it’s time, he dries it yellow, makin’ it good winter feed for the grass-eaters. Again when he’s mad, my people says, he drives the rain away, dryin’ up the streams ‘n’ water holes. If it wasn’t for him, there couldn’t nothin’ or nobody live. Do you wonder that we ask him to be good, ‘n’ thank him when he is? I’m all Injun but my hide; their God’s my God, ‘n’ I don’t ask for no better.’”¹⁶

2. Dances with Wolves: A Revival of Tradition

The film *Dances With Wolves* (1990) indicates that any “generic transition” of the Western is anything but away from the “essential conflict” of the genre. *Dances* is more of a revival than a transition, and the film builds more upon tradition than it breaks new ground. As Schatz points out, the original Western archetype was American Indian, not the cowboy.¹⁷ The film’s shift from the white man’s orientation (Remington) to that of the Indian’s (Russell) has precedents in films like *A Man Called Horse*, *Tom Horn*, and *Jeremiah Johnson*. *Dances* does give us an attempt at resolution of the Ethan/Scar dichotomy that appeared in *The Searchers*, but it is as weak as the resolution of *Stagecoach*; the final destiny of the Sioux people (after *Dances* has spent much time translating their culture for a non-Indian audience) is left to a brief paragraph of text before the credits roll.

¹⁶ McCracken, Harold, *C. M. Russell, Cowboy Artist* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 131-133.

¹⁷ *Hollywood*, p. 48..

Nonetheless, the tradition remains evident in *Dances*. The backdrop of the Civil War, for instance, is common in a number of films. Dunbar's cavalry uniform, (shed slowly throughout the story in pace with his transition into the Sioux culture) works rhetorically like the costumes of Jeremiah Johnson, Tom Dunson in *Red River* (at the first of the film) and Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers*. The half cavalry, half frontiersman arrangement is indicative of the savage/civilized dichotomy, especially in the latter two examples.

The Eastern-European/Western contrast is presented at one point in *Dances* in a way similar to a scene in *Clementine*. The dysfunctional commander who orders Dunson to the furthestmost outpost in the frontier says "The King is dead! Long live the King!" Then he shoots himself. The Old World Civility, like the Englishman Avril in *Heaven's Gate*—also an alcoholic—is obsolete in face of the wilderness. Doc of *Clementine*—diseased by alcohol *and* tuberculosis—in a desperate attempt to kill his Eastern past (by marrying Chihuahua), proclaims "Tell 'em the Queen is dead! Long live the Queen!"

The symbols of the horse and wolf in *Dances* also have precedence in other Westerns. The wolf at the beginning and end of *Monte Walsh* served metaphorically in the same way as the wolf in *Dances*. (The wolf's life was spared for a little longer in *Monte Walsh*.) Monte's ongoing battle with the Wild Gray, like the bronc ridden by Mr. McKay in *The Big Country*, underscores the significance of the horse in Westerns. In *Tom Horn*, the death of the hero's stallion (a U.S. cavalry issue Bay, like Dunbar's) foreshadows Horn's death; Horn's violent reaction to the slaying of his steed pushed him from the fringe of society all the way out to a place among the

“savage” Indians. (At that moment, the “civilized” community leaders decide Horn is a political liability.) The death of Dunbar’s horse, caused when the hero was the intended target, as was Horn’s situation, is equally moving. The moment also served a similarly significant purpose in the story.

The scene when Dunbar and Kicking Bird learn each other’s word for “Buffalo” parallels the meeting of Scar and Ethan in *The Searchers*. “You speak good English,” Ethan says to Scar, and Scar answers, “You speak good Comanche.” Dunbar noted in his journal how “the quiet one seems as frustrated as I in our attempts to communicate.”

Lastly, the role of Otter compares with that of Joey in *Shane* in that both are heirs to their elders’ changing West. At the end of the gunfight in *Shane*, the wounded hero pats Joey on the head and christens the boy part of a peaceful, non-violent West—the archetypal bad guy is dead. Joey only got to watch the gunfight, but when the pivotal fight scene occurred in *Dances*, Otter is reluctantly forced to kill a man for his first time. Overwhelmed, Otter collapses, perhaps, not because of the violence—he is a brave Sioux of the savage west—but because he realizes his helplessness (like the buffalo that charged him earlier in the film) against his people’s destiny.

3. Toward a World Myth: McNeill’s Mythistory

The moving words of Charlie Russell show that the prototype for John Dunbar’s story was well established long before *Dances* was filmed:

The Red man was the true American The history of how they fought for their country is written in blood a stain that time cannot grinde out their God was the sun their Church all outdoors their only book was nature and they knew all its pages

In the end, *Dances With Wolves* must fail in its attempt at a “guiltless western,” no matter how much effort is made to present the red man’s

experience, so long as it remains a story that is a part of the white man's Western mythology alone; a captivity tale, no matter how it is rearranged, is still a white man's convention: both the hero and heroine in *Dances* are still white.¹⁸ The attempt made in *Dances* to present the "truth" about the West is undermined by the fact that every white man in the film except Dunbar is depicted two-dimensionally and stereotypically. By the end of the film the audience despises the white man—but does this reversal correct history? *Dances* does, however, represent an attempt to resolve the essential savage/civilized conflict within Western mythology.

A more convincing resolution is exemplified by *Jeremiah Johnson*, produced eighteen years before *Dances*. Jeremiah took a full-blood Indian wife (Dunbar's wife was white) and learned the Indian's ways, too. Yet Jeremiah remained a fringe character to the White *and* Red societies. The film's conclusion was much more truthful, both to myth and to history, when the white hero, transformed, faced his Crow alter ego with a distance of silent space separating them. The wild and savage surroundings held them both in communion: when the Crow warrior raises his hand as a sign of peace, the mythologies of the white man and of the red man briefly meet on *equal* ground.

The trend of the Western genre, as it has always been, is toward resolution of its "essential conflict" of savage and civilized. Schatz describes the Western tradition as a "dual paradigm" of two conflicting world views, exemplified by the legacy of the captivity tale.¹⁹ (*Dances With Wolves*, he notes is a "reversed" captivity tale.) The goal of the Western is, as with

¹⁸ One film, *Windwalker* (1980), presents a story in which the basic elements are of Native American origin instead. The structure of *Windwalker* draws from the oral tradition of the red man more than the white man's literary tradition of captivity tales.

¹⁹ Lecture at A. C. Carter Museum, Ft. Worth, Texas, February 2, 1991.

any mythology, an attempt at understanding ourselves and our relation to the world. This is where the past, our history, is significant to our future.

The "art of the serious historian," writes William McNeill, "is helping the group he or she addresses and celebrates to survive and prosper in a treacherous and changing world by knowing more about itself and others."²⁰ The "essential conflict" of the American Western mythology is an attempt to help us understand who we are and how we arrived where we are through a combination of myth and history. "Mythistory is what we actually have—a useful instrument for piloting human groups in their encounters with one another and with the natural environment," McNeil writes, adding, "for what a group of people knows and believes about the past channels expectations and affects the decisions on which their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor all depend."²¹ The challenge of the historian, as McNeill presents it, is the same for the Western: to cultivate "a sense of individual identification with the triumphs and tribulations of humanity as a whole" in an attempt "to develop an ecumenical history."²² McNeill writes:

Historians, by helping to define "us" and "them," play a considerable part in focusing love and hate, the two principal cements of collective behavior known to humanity. But myth making for rival groups has become a dangerous game in the atomic age, and we may well ask whether there is any alternative open to us.

In principle the answer is obvious. Humanity entire possesses a commonality which historians may hope to understand just as firmly as they can comprehend what unites any lesser group.²³

The Western's movement toward resolution of the savage/civilized conflict in its assimilation of the Indian view of the world indicates this

²⁰ "Mythistory," *The American Historical Review* 9 (February, 1986): p. 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

goal. Russell, as a prototype of the this transition, helps to explain why, when he spoke of the Indian's "religion":

. . . Their God was the sun. Their Church all outdoors. Their only book was nature and they knew all its pages.

It is the "Church" of the "all outdoors," the physical reality of nature most clearly expressed in its savage and untamed state, which mythically represents what humanity entire possesses in common. In *Dances with Wolves*, John Dunbar went to the West because he wanted "to see the frontier before it's gone." When he arrived there, his journal entries expressed ecstasy in its beauty. The physical *land*, in other words, was critical in opening his eyes to himself and its natural inhabitants, both wild and civilized. This is also the key difference between the visions of Remington and Russell, as Brian Dippie has observed:

Their separate visions are at the heart of their separate achievements. Remington knew . . . the West as a minimalist stage for action . . . [rather] than . . . the land itself. Russell always elaborated the setting in his paintings. Montana was home to him, and he loved the landmarks that identified specific locales—the Judith Basin, the Great Falls area, the mountains of Glacier Park. A glance at the paintings in the Richardson collection confirms this obvious distinction.²⁴

When, in *Jeremiah Johnson*, the two essential archetypes of the Western faced each other at the story's end, it was ultimately the natural environment which unified the white and the red men. In a world quickly growing closer through mass communications and international economies, McNeill's challenge to concentrate on human "commonality" is more needed and more possible than ever. And in this world, we are equally pressed to solve global environmental problems, or we may have no world inhabitable

²⁴ *Russell and Remington: The Sid Richardson Collection* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 13.

enough for humanity in the future. A world mythology, unified by the commonality of our physical, natural environment is an unavoidable goal.

This thesis has demonstrated that a continuous thread exists within American Western mythology in the form of an essential conflict between what is civilized and what is wild. This conflict, personified by the juxtapositioning of the red archetype—what is indigenous to America—and white archetype—what is European—represents the incompatibility of two different cosmologies. On the one hand, the American Indian's world view integrates mankind with the natural environment, no matter how wild or savage that environment might be; within life's web man is only a part, no greater than or lesser than any other living thing. On the other hand, the Renaissance vision of man in the New World is that of an explorer or conqueror of an earthly domain; our European heritage reinforces a world view of mankind as something separate of, and more refined than, savage nature. Indigenous beliefs that warrant emulation of nature, then, have always clashed with an imported fear of savagery which seeks to civilize what is wild.

Although the Wild West was "conquered" by Western Expansion, indigenous elements have undoubtedly influenced American culture in an opposite direction. The tradition of the Indian Captivity Tale, a strictly American literary genre beginning with the story of Mary Rowlandson in 1682,²⁵ maintained by Cooper and Faulkner (and reversed in *Dances with Wolves*), is a virtual discourse on this process in American Western mythology. As the United States—and the world for that matter—is increasingly interlocked culturally, economically and politically, the potential for resolution of this essential conflict in Western Mythology is

²⁵ See footnote number 3 in Chapter Four of this thesis.

becoming clearer. Indeed, as the land's physical limits are stretched by expanding populations, the necessity for a shift in world paradigm within our culture as Americans and as citizens of a global community toward a more congruent relationship with the natural world is imminent.²⁶

Given the definition of myth established in this thesis, the implications for the tradition of Western mythology in American culture are important in relation to our future. Within the western archetypes of Remington and Russell to *The Virginian* to *Dances with Wolves* we have observed a basic tension between Eastern and Western cosmologies represented by the fringe archetype at the edge of both worlds. If we are in the midst of a shift in paradigm at the end of the frontier parabola in history, perhaps this conflict between Old World and New World orders represents a paradigmatic transition in culture toward a Universal Order. Since the nature of myth in culture is dynamic, this change may be reflected in Western mythology when the indigenous elements are finally assimilated as the foundation for a burgeoning world view for tomorrow. Joseph Campbell said that

the only myth that is going to be worth thinking about in the immediate future is one that is talking about the planet, not the city, not these people, but the planet, and everybody on it. That's my main thought for what the future myth is going to be.²⁷

The legacy of dichotomy within American Western mythology may indicate a potential for such a cultural transition. When Webb stated before a Methodist congregation that the cowboy had no religion, perhaps he was

²⁶ This point is being made currently by the Revisionist historians. Note Patricia Nelson Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), Donald Worster's *Rivers of Empire, Water, Aridity and the Growth of the American West* (New York: Pantheon, 1986) and Richard White's *It's Your Misfortune and None of Mine: A History of the American West*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, forthcoming). See also footnote number 6 in the introduction to this thesis.

²⁷ *The Power of Myth*, p.32.

referring to religion in the white man's sense, brought from Europe to America. In fact, the white man's religion is antithetical to everything for which the Western archetype and his native counterpart stood. As we have seen, the roots of the Western archetype are dichotomous, half white and half red. The Western hero is repeatedly forced into the fringes of society because of his alliance—knowingly or otherwise—with the primitive elements of a wilder land. John Dunbar listened carefully to the old chief recount the history of how the Sioux had fought the Spanish, the Mexicans and the Texans who wanted to possess the land. "They are all the same," the old man says, "they take without asking." Campbell described our cultural irreverence toward the wilderness as "the biblical condemnation of nature" which Americans "inherited" from a European world view in which "God is separate from nature, and nature is condemned of God. It's right there in Genesis: we are to be the masters of the world."²⁸

In contrast, Campbell quoted a letter written in 1852 to a government official from "one of the last Spokesmen of the Paleolithic moral order," Chief Seattle, as an example of a native world view and its corresponding mythology:

. . . The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of a pony, and man, all belong to the same family . . .

Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth.

This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

One thing we know: our god is also your god. The earth is precious to him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator.

Your destiny is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffalo are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent

²⁸ *Ibid.*

of many men and the view of the ripe hills is blotted by talking wires? Where will the thicket be? Gone! Where will the eagle be? Gone! And what is it to say goodbye to the swift pony and the hunt? The end of living and the beginning of survival

The words of Chief Seattle's letter parallel the words of Russell. Both men recognized each other as brothers of the wilderness. Both men also recognized the significance of a closing frontier, the last "secret corners of the forest" as a mythological crisis for an indigenous cosmology in conflict with a foreign world view.

The significance of the indigenous element in American Western mythology, then, is more important than ever to us as Americans. Increasing danger of environmental destruction underscores a need for an ecumenical mythology which encourages a more harmonious relationship with our living planet. Resolution of the essential savage/civilized conflict within Western mythology through universal recognition of a reverence for nature, perhaps, is one way to reintroduce the "pages" of nature's "book" into our own culture. The conclusion of Seattle's letter may indicate where a modern Western mythology might bridge its inherent dichotomy and, in turn, contribute to a new world myth for the future:

As we are part of the land, you too are part of the land. This earth is precious to us. It is also precious to you. One thing we know: there is only one God. No man, be he Red Man or White Man, can be apart. We *are* brothers after all.²⁹

²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 34-35.

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