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Katherine Lamb

katherineplamb11@gmail.com

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Bellarmino University

Within the Shadow of the Cowboy:
Myths and Realities of the Old American West

Katherine Lamb

Advisor: Dr. Kathryn West

Readers: Dr. Fedja Buric and Dr. Jon Blandford

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Introduction

The American cowboy is among the most widely misinterpreted figures in American history. The mythic figure of the cowboy does not look like the real ranch hands who littered the American West throughout the nineteenth century, nor does he act like them. Instead, he is set apart, as a figurehead of masculinity and American ideals, determined to roam the frontier as a guardian of justice and stability. This version of the cowboy, however, is not bound within the pages of novels or within limitations of film. The cowboy's ideals, persona, look, and code remain a vivid part of the American mythos, continuing to shape the perception of the West—and of the US--today.

Similarly, the figure of the prostitute has been misinterpreted as much as has been the cowboy. While many women doing this kind of work lead a miserable existence, the history of the West is scattered with examples of women who made money through sex work and used it to better their communities. This thesis will explore the figures of the cowboy and the prostitute as depicted in literature and film and then demonstrate how those depictions vary from the real lives of people who lived in the American West.

The cowboy has a trademark look that features a western hat, boots, and a trusty steed at his side. He possesses an air of charisma that makes him alluring to women and men alike. The cowboy can have any woman he encounters, but chooses to deal with female populations with politeness and generosity despite his widely felt adoration. In addition to his outward charm, his internal consciousness is untouched by the vices of the frontier, guiding his character towards the

moral high ground in all he does. His moral compass helps to keep him humble in the face of his omniscience and success on the frontier, allowing him to be agreeable to audiences. The attitude of the cowboy does not waver in the face of hardship, nor does he shy away from a challenge. Instead, he perseveres, pulling himself up from his bootstraps, to face what lies ahead. These qualities can be seen in other men mythologized in America, including George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Just like the cowboy, these male American heroes showed bravery, competency, wit, and perseverance in the face of danger. The cowpuncher embodies the ideals of chivalry and duty embodied in his predecessor the gallant knight of old. The cowboy is an amalgamation of these ideals, fashioned into a highly marketable package fit for mass consumption. The idea of the cowboy is still sought after today, with many people reading and watching romanticized versions of the West and becoming infatuated with what they see. The cowboy that is widely understood was bred to be consumed in this way, manufactured to be loved and admired by all.

Not all cowboys, however, wore white hats. The outlaw, or the “bad boy” of the plains, rides alongside the cowboy in this mythical interpretation of the West. The outlaw embodies many of the same qualities as the cowboy, having charm and good looks, but is not confined by the same moral code or sense of responsibility. The outlaw functions as the cowboy’s foil, working to highlight his better qualities while providing him the obstacles against which to express his unmatched skill and unwavering spirit. The outlaw trope has been mythologized alongside the cowboy, drawing upon a few of the most notorious figures from the Wild West such as Billy the Kid and Jesse James.

These tropes were mythologized in dime store westerns, first seen around the time of the Civil War. These short reads often dealt with easily digestible plotlines involving the topics of

“virtue” and “justice” that were marketed for the uneducated lower classes. Around 1860, literacy rates were on the rise in the United States and the mechanization of printing had been made more cost effective. As a result, dime store novels were printed by the millions and disseminated to the masses, especially young boys and men who enlisted in the army or were industrial laborers. These stories often dealt with physical depictions of the West, focusing on violent conflicts between Native Americans and proto cowboys. These novels infused the preexisting fascination with the West with a sense of adventure and danger that sensationalized the West.

The Real Cowboy

Real cowboys, and the people with whom the cowboy interacted, did not lead the adventurous lifestyles described in these fictional accounts. Rather, cowboys were a diverse group of young men who toiled and worked without accolade or fame. The birth of the American cowboy begins long before cattle ever stepped foot onto North American soil. Cowboys are a conglomeration of African riding and herding techniques brought to North America by Spaniards by way of what is now Mexico hundreds of years ago. The Spanish learned to ride horses for herding from the *a la Jenta* in North Africa and learned how to rope animals from tribes in West Africa (*History of the American Cowboy*). The Spaniards then brought these techniques and cattle to North America, giving birth to the *vaqueros* that are widely recognized as the precursors to the American cowboy. The first cowboys were the indigenous or “mixed-blood” people living in Mexico at that time of the Spaniards arrival (*History of the American Cowboy*). Cattle herding was not a sought-after position, requiring hard work and earning low wages, and thus fell upon the shoulders of minoritized or impoverished groups.

Cattle spread from what is now Mexico up into the plains region of the United States unbridled for years. The *vaqueros* did not castrate their cattle, resulting in massive amounts of cattle roaming the territory (*History of the American Cowboy*). In addition to the abundance of cattle in the region, wild horses roamed the North American plains. The presence of cattle and horses made the plains region of North America the perfect environment for cattle ranching and the cowboy. And as the United States purchased large masses of land to fulfill the nation’s

imagined “manifest destiny,” industrious men and women traveled westward to take advantage of the ample resources and “open” land.

Genuine cowboys were a diverse group of young men, between fifteen to twenty-five years of age, who labored on the plains of the American West caring for one of the hottest commodities of their time: beef. Being a cowboy was not the adventure trade that television and film would have you believe; instead, it was a dirty, thankless job that paid sometimes less than a dollar a day. Euro-Americans were the largest demographic of cowboys out West, but it is important to note that a quarter of American cowboys were Black, and another sizeable portion were Hispanic or Native American. A real cowboy did not have the time or the money to be handsome; he was often unshaven, dirty, and clad in the cheapest clothing he could find. To be successful, a cowboy was usually small in stature, weighing anywhere between one hundred and twenty and a hundred and fifty pounds, standing at roughly five feet, five inches tall (*History of the American Cowboy*). A cowboy did not carry a gun, nor was he allowed to, as it was dangerous to carry a heavy weapon on horseback and firearms were often prohibited by ranchers and county laws (*History of the American Cowboy*). Additionally, the cowboy’s steed was never his own, but instead, often was loaned to him by his employer. This steed was not the strong, muscular horse depicted in film, but rather a small pony primarily meant for nimble transportation and a lightweight handler. Thus, a real cattle hand from history might more closely resemble the jockeys at the Kentucky Derby than John Wayne who stood at six foot four and one hundred and seventy pounds.

A true cowboy did not have the time to chase Native Americans and outlaws but would instead be occupied by managing his cattle or trekking along the cattle trails of the late 1800s. Bringing cattle from the Southwestern region of the United States east was the primary concern

of these cowboys, which required them to carry all their tools with them. It was far more likely to find a cowboy with a rope and hammer on his belt than a pistol, which is a common misconception perpetuated by Hollywood. Working the cattle trails was not violent or glamorous work but instead was a thankless job that required grit and determination. Real cowboys on the frontier did not have the luxury of bathing, drinking, or socializing in saloons regularly. Instead, they often spent most of their days on horseback facing the elements to protect their employer's property, the cattle. Cowboys rarely faced off with Native Americans (*History of the American Cowboy*). A cowboy often let the Native Americans take his cows without a fight and usually interacted with them only to pay a toll for crossing their territory. During the rise of the American cowboy Native Americans also bought into the cattle ranching boom that was occurring in the West.

In short, history paints a different image of the cowboy: a young man of the working class whose main concern was caring for cattle, not at all a heroic man seeking adventure, gunslinging his way through the frontier. One might now ask, how has the image of the cowboy become so distorted? Many argue that the advent of this mythological figure began long before the introduction of the cowboy himself. The fascination with the West is as old as the United States. One of the earliest figures in American history who helped to bring about this myth is founding father and author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson.

The Formation of the West

Thomas Jefferson played a pivotal role in conceiving the myth of the American West. Jefferson not only purchased the physical land that is represented in this mythology, but also worked to shape how Americans, and the world, would come to understand it. The conception of

the myth can be found within Thomas Jefferson's *Account of Louisiana*, which was presented before Congress in 1803. This short text outlines the idea of "openness" that becomes associated with the West in literature, film, and history.

Thomas Jefferson wrote *Account of Louisiana* with specific intentions. This text differs significantly from the writings that Thomas Jefferson is known for, which are scientific and pragmatic in nature. Amy Hamilton writes that in this text "Jefferson compiled not so much scientific facts but a series of micromyths about an enormous swath of land that he sought to incorporate into the new nation's grand narrative in order to turn Louisiana into an American reality" (Hamilton 314). These micromyths stem from the writings of other explorers, traders, scientists, and frontiersmen who preceded Jefferson. These myths serve to paint the land as open, vast, fertile, and ready for the taking. However, these myths are not accredited to their original sources throughout the text. In fact, Jefferson does not cite any sources throughout this text. This lack of citations is motivated by a specific purpose: to imagine the West as an undiscovered, open space waiting for American acquisition. Amy Hamilton notes the following in relation to the uncharacteristic lack of maps, data, and studies in the *Account*: "From Jefferson's viewpoint, maps were powerful instruments of legitimation and could therefore be turned into instruments of authority. But since Jefferson wanted to acknowledge no definite authority about Louisianan geography, it should not surprise readers that he made no use of known existing maps of the region, justifying his choice all too briefly in the book's opening paragraph" (321).

This negligence of data and preexisting knowledge about the West is purposefully employed by Jefferson to fabricate American legitimacy over western land. By exaggerating the lack of structure in the West, Jefferson then can make the argument that the United States is the only thing that can properly rectify the situation. This means that the United States can enter this

open space, insert borders, rules, standards, and institutions without ever having to recognize and people or powers that might have existed in the space prior. This is especially the case for Native Americans who lived in the West prior to and after the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson denotes in his section titled “Inhabitants and their Origins” that only those who remain from French and Spanish colonialism and others of Europeans descent are classified as residents of the land (Jefferson 23). Native Americans, conversely, are in a separate section of the text and do not fall under the title of residents. There are serious implications to the distinctions made within this text. Jefferson is clearly outlining his understanding of who has rights to the land in the West, making it apparent that Natives do not possess this right in his eyes. Jefferson concludes his section on Native Americans by stating “The Nations of the Missouri, though cruel, treacherous and insolent, may doubtless be kept in order by the United States, if proper regulations are adopted with respect to them” (41). This highlights how Jefferson viewed Native Americans as “savage” and as groups that needed to be heavily controlled and regulated by the state. This sentiment is reflected in the treatment of Natives in the West thereafter, where they are viewed as not having any rights to the land nor any place in the expanding nation.

This text is important to the discussion of the formation of the West’s identity in media, literature, and culture because it solidifies this concept of “openness” with the West. Patricia Limerick writes that “The West, in the most common figure of speech, had to be ‘opened’ – a metaphor based on the assumption that the virgin west was ‘closed,’ locked up, held captive by the Indians” (Limerick 41). There are numerous ideas touched upon in this excerpt. The first is the vilification of the Native population. Secondly, is the concept of the physical land of the west being virginal or referred to as female. The association of the land as being female in the West often is found with idea that it was a space that needed to be conquered. This conquering of land

reflects the sentiment of the men who were formative in shaping how the West would be understood and, later, how societies within the West would operate.

The Birth of the Western

Fiction began to indulge in this fascination with the West soon after, notably with the series of novels produced by James Fenimore Cooper entitled *The Leatherstocking Tales*. These novels trace the life of the main character, Natty Bumppo, who endeavors to escape the responsibilities of adulthood by moving ever more westward. Written over the course of twenty years, these novels trace the life of Natty Bumppo, who goes by numerous names throughout the series, from his youth to his old age in the early American frontier. The frontier in these novels is vastly different from the Western frontier depicted in the cowboy novels that follow in its wake. Here, the frontier is the land just west of the original colonies, in what is now New York, far from the plains and desert landscapes depicted in Western films. Despite this regional difference, many of the attitudes about the West remain the same between the time of the *Leatherstocking Tales* and modern iterations of western literature such as *The Virginian*.

Natty Bumppo functions as a precursor or a prototype to the cowboy hero that will emerge at the end of the century. Natty Bumppo is a white man who was raised by members of the Delaware Indian tribe. Throughout the novels, Bumppo is made out to be a brave, loyal, and honorable man who has acute survival skills. He is a mediator between the European settlers and the natives with whom he feels a kinship yet maintains distance from civilization throughout the series. There are parallels between the Daniel Boone mythos that is emerging at this same time in Kentucky and Bumppo of Cooper's imagination. Boone and Bumppo alike both rejected the "pursuits of ordinary [civilized] men," preferring to live out their lives in the woods, far from

modern amenities or comforts (Smith 60). Cooper's character of Bumppo specifically was created to exist within this tension, the pull of nature over and against the push of civil society, that he witnessed while living in the frontier of New York state. As a result, Bumppo becomes a literary symbol of resisting civilization and a return to the woods, to more natural or wild forms of existence. This impulse lingers within the cowboy hero but is less overtly stated. The cowboy, still somewhat of a loner figure on the plains, runs from domesticity all the while bringing about justice for the people living within. Henry Nash Smith argues that the birth of the western hero adopts the "Leatherstocking *persona* but made younger and more genteel" (Smith 99). Smith's assertion is backed by the character of the Virginian that is written by Owen Wister nearly sixty years after the publication of the final novel in the *Leatherstocking Tales*.

Prior to 1902, stories of the cowboy journeyed throughout the United States in the form of dime store novels and short stories. These iterations of the beloved hero had not yet established the well-known character type that is widely understood today: the cowboy. The first formal literary attention given to the cowboy is found in Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian*. First published in 1902, *The Virginian* became widely successful in the United States in the time of its publication and into modernity. As previously discussed, the character of the Virginian drew upon frontier heroes that came before him such as Daniel Boone and Natty Bumppo of the *Leatherstocking Tales*. It is recognized as the first Western novel, as it is the first time that the many stories and myths of the frontier are condensed into a cohesive narrative. The *Virginian* has been adapted into television series and movies and has inspired an onslaught of western novels that followed in its wake. It takes inspiration from the dime store novel and numerous short stories, including works of Mark Twain and Bret Harte, as well as Wister's personal experience in the West, culminating in a romantic depiction of life in the Wyoming Territory.

Owen Wister did not stumble upon the story of the cowboy by chance. As a highly educated and well-to-do Easterner, he had the means and the connections to travel out West for leisure, or in Wister's case, to recover from poor health brought on by city-life (Davis). From these western excursions, Wister was inspired to write about the people and places that he experienced that vastly differed from life on the eastern seaboard. Many of these experiences were first made into short stories, often involving animals, gunslingers, and the first iteration of what would later become the renowned character the Virginian. Eventually, Wister combined his short stories and his experiences from his travels into *The Virginian*. *The Virginian* is acclaimed for its importance in that it is influential in shaping the distinctive archetype of the cowboy in Western American literature.

The novel is narrated by an Easterner, modeled after Wister himself, who meets the Virginian on his first journey out West in the town of Medicine Bow. The narrator has been made the responsibility of the Virginian by a mutual friend, Judge Henry, who has asked the Virginian to deliver the narrator to him safely. This first encounter flowers into a friendship built upon mutual trust and admiration that continues throughout the novel. The narrator recounts the experiences and stories of the Virginian as he roams from job to job throughout the Western territory and his exploits with other cowboys, notably his conflict with the rowdy cowboy Trampas, whom he eventually defeats in the traditional cowboy fashion: a shoot-out. The novel ends with the Virginian marrying a schoolmarm from Vermont, Molly Stark, and becoming a partner in the Judge's ranch – ultimately giving up the wild cowboy games for love and domesticity.

In the introduction to *The Virginian* Wister writes “What is become of the horseman, the cowpuncher, the last romantic figure upon our soil? For he was romantic... Whatever he did, he

did with his might... Well, he will be here among us always, invisible, waiting his chance to live and play as he would like” (Wister 8). The introduction of the novel is critical for understanding the essence of the *Virginian* as a character and as an idea. Wister’s driving force is to recount the lore of the cowboy to his audiences, the myth of an American figure that resides solely in the past. Robert Davis asserts that “the chief point of the West depicted in fiction is that it has already past” when he discusses the influence of Wister on the Western genre. This detail frames the entirety of the action that occurs within the main body of the text and informs how readers ought to understand the cowboy in history. This understanding, however, is Wister’s way of bending the history of the cowboy to help create a marketable protagonist. The cowboy, at the time this novel was written and into modernity, is alive and well. It is true that perhaps the lifestyle and freedoms enjoyed by the fictional cowboy have changed; however, the essence of the cowboy has remained untouched by time. The values and qualities of the cowboy are still revered by mainstream American thought and continue to inform American identities in music, film, fashion, and more. The idea of the cowboy—his imagined grit, resiliency, and steadfast morals-- has become synonymous with American culture. And even as new generations lose sight of the cowboy of the 1800s, his memory persists in the form of space adventurers and the superhero.

In addition to remaining in the past, the *Virginian*, and by extension the cowboy, exemplifies a desire to be removed from the stressors of civilization and domesticity. This urge to move away from civilization is referred to by Robert Davis as the Huck Finn Thesis, which involves the desire to flee domesticity and civilization for the “open” and “wild” frontier. The narrator remarks in his discussion of the history of cowpunchers that “the romance of American adventure had drawn them all alike to this great playground of young men” (59). Here, the

narrator is noticing the similarities among young men on the frontier; a shared disposition of playfulness and duty that informs their action. An affinity for “playing” on the frontier is an essential aspect of the cowboy in fiction. The cowboy exists in tension with the push of domesticity and civilization that comes from the East. The cowboy simultaneously runs away from civilization while, as the purveyor of justice, unlocks the door for its entry into the frontier. This can be seen throughout the novel as the Virginian struggles against the urge to play and the call of responsibility and domesticity, which is embodied by the female lead of the schoolmarm, Molly Stark.

The Virginian first encounters Molly Stark as she is making her way out West. In typical heroic fashion, the Virginian saves Molly Stark from her flooding stagecoach that had toppled into a river at the fault of the drunken driver. The narrator recounts that the Virginian “took her out of the stage on his horse so suddenly that she screamed” and that he “said something to her about cheering up, and its being alright” (83). This first encounter is emblematic of the heroism and chivalry of the cowboy. The narrator recounts time and time again the selfless heroic acts that the Virginian takes on for the good of others. This specific vignette alludes to the knight of old trope found throughout literature well before the birth of the cowboy. Saving the damsel in distress is often another of the many tasks laid before the cowboy. The Virginian follows in the footsteps of the chivalric knights of old, saving the fair maiden in distress, protecting her from the evils of the natural world. This encounter also foreshadows the affinity that the Virginian will develop for Miss Stark in the days to come, which, will ultimately lead to him give up his youthful ways.

This same impulse to maintain a carefree, even childish existence, is present in other iterations of the cowboy in literature as well. Stephen Crane’s short story “The Bride Comes to

Yellow Sky” depicts the end of the game for cowboys. This story recounts the journey home of Jack Potter and his new bride to Yellow Sky, a small Western town that resembles what one might find in a classic Hollywood western. This short story provides insight into the allure of the cowboy and why women are often left out or given lesser roles in American Western narrative.

Within this text, Potter functions as a cowboy, in his dress, speech, and role within the town. Potter is the town marshal, and is described as “a man known, liked, and feared in his corner” (Crane). As the Marshall, Potter is well respected and is seen as bearer of justice and peace within the small town. According to the narrator, Potter’s new bride is plain and not particularly young, a decent cook, but not spoken about in overly attractive terms (Crane). On what ought to be a joyous train ride home for a newlywed couple, the pair is overcome by a sense of guilt and embarrassment, with the narrator stating that “A sense of mutual guilt invaded their minds and developed a finer tenderness” as they neared their destination (Crane).

Potter is described as “beginning to find the shadow of a deed weigh upon him like a leaden slab,” further emphasizing this weight felt by the couple. This guilty conscience comes from Potter not consulting Yellow Sky before “the transaction” of marrying his bride. Now, Potter is “bringing his bride before an innocent and unsuspecting community” (Crane). This illuminates an important facet of the cowboy and how he functions within the western narrative. The cowboy and all that accompany him on his adventures are a part of his game. This is an elaborate game concocted by the boyish desires of men, wanting to be free of the confines of civil society. Death and marriage are two things that inevitably end the game for the cowboy, which thrives on lawlessness in the West. Marriage as an institution seeks to bring structure and decency to people and often is accompanied by other comforts of civilization. Marriage comes with rules, expectations, and religious ramifications, and calls people to answer to a higher

power. Thus, the marriage of Jack Potter and his bride will be melancholy news for the people of Yellow Sky, especially Potter's "playmate" Scratchy Wilson, the town rascal.

Readers are introduced to Scratchy when he is drunk, attempting to wreak havoc on the town of Yellow Sky. Scratchy is described in terms of the outlaw trope as follows: "In either hand the man held a long, heavy, blue-black revolver. Often, he yelled, and these cries rang through a semblance of a deserted village, shrilly flying over the roofs in a volume that seemed to have no relation to the ordinary vocal strength of a man" (Crane). Scratchy, much like the outlaw in other western fiction, is the foil of Jack Potter, his opponent in the game.

When the train closes in on Yellow Sky, Jack Potter speaks from a "constricted throat and in mournful cadence, as one announcing death" (Crane). Here, the narrator describes to readers in dramatic detail the extent to which Potter fears bringing his wife before the people of Yellow Sky. Once the train comes to a stop, the bride and groom "fled," making a point to avoid as many people as possible. The subplot of the text, involving Scratchy Wilson, and the main plot merge as the Potters approach the Marshall's home. Scratchy stands waiting outside of the newlyweds' home, with his revolvers loaded. He points one at the bridegroom and exclaims "The time has come for me to settle with you, and I'm goin' to do it my own way and loaf along with no interferin'" (Crane). This is where the short story leans into the stereotypical standoff between the outlaw and the cowboy. Potter's rational, heroic disposition informs his action as he explains to Scratchy that he does not have a gun and that he is merely bringing his new bride home. The narrator recounts that this news visibly upsets Scratchy who states "'Well... I s'pose it's all off now'" (Crane). As Potter moves towards a more civilized existence and leaves the game behind him, Scratchy is left wandering the plains without an opponent. The story closes with the

following lines that depict Scratchy as a defeated child who has been left alone in the school yard:

He was looking at the ground. "Married!" He was not a student of chivalry; it was merely that in the presence of this foreign condition he was a simple child of the earlier plains. He picked up his starboard revolver, and placing both weapons in their holsters, he went away. His feet made funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand.

Like a dejected child deprived of his favorite game, Scratchy Wilson scuffs his way off into the sunset.

In contrast to Scratchy Wilson, the Virginian much more willingly gives up "the game" to head into domestic bliss with Molly Stark. The Virginian remains nameless throughout the course of the novel yet is referred to by the narrator time and time again as "the trustworthy man." This becomes an important facet of the character that emerges from this text. The cowboy, despite his roaming tendencies and his affinity for gunslinging, remains steadfast to his values as he enforces the understood moral code of the West. This code, like the chivalric code followed by medieval knights, guides the Virginian in his interactions throughout his travels. The Virginian makes this moral code explicit through his exploits described in the novel, especially in his dealings with women. The Virginian is also depicted as being a polite womanizer throughout the text. The label "polite womanizer" is applied in this context because he abides by his moral codes as he interacts with numerous women on the frontier. These morals, however, do not align with the morals of the East that are still informed by the politeness of the Victorian era. In chapter ten, Trampas alleges that Molly Stark had been in relations with a bachelor named Lin Mclean. The Virginian's honor takes great offense to Trampas spreading lies and rumors about this young woman and tells him "Quit that... Or I'll break your neck" (89). The Virginian goes

on to speak to all of the men in his company and proclaims “We ain’t a Christian outfit a little bit, and maybe we have most forgotten what decency feels like. But I reckon we haven’t *plumb* forgot what it means” (90). This encounter is telling of the Virginian’s moral code and virtuous world view. He feels as though he is held to a standard of decency and imparts this responsibility onto his comrades on the frontier. The narrator goes on to praise the Virginian, stating that “He had championed the feeble, and spoken honorably in meeting, and according to all the constitutions and bylaws of morality he should have been walking in Virtue’s especial calm” (90). Here, the narrator notes that the Virginian walks away from the group uncomfortable about talking about the young lady without knowing her personally even though he ought to be proud of his decency and the strength of his morals. This scene reveals the internal character of the Virginian, and as an extension, the cowboy. His moral code is clear: chivalry and truth reign supreme. However, humility and dignity also are present. With the narrator’s commentary, the Virginian is not painted as pretentious about his beliefs, but rather as a humble and virtuous man.

This trustworthiness feeds into another important attribute of the cowboy: his skillfulness and charisma. The cowboy, as the quintessence of American cultural values, possesses numerous skills and abilities or omnicompetence as the Virginian is described by Robert Davis in his work *Playing Cowboys*. He has a certain level of athleticism, wit, and smarts that set him apart from other men on the frontier, making him out to be the pinnacle of American masculinity. This is often coupled with physical attractiveness and a certain aura of mystery that comes from his boundless wandering. For instance, out of all the bachelors present at Judge Henry’s barbeque in chapter ten, the Virginian is the only one who can dance the waltz with confidence (93). This is just one of many examples of the abundance of abilities possessed by the Virginian. Possessing this wide array of talents grew out of the Virginian to be a hallmark of cowboys at large. Not

only are cowboys meant to be chivalrous, polite, and virtuous but they are also meant to be capable of any task presented to them.

In its totality, *The Virginian* serves a blueprint for the archetype of the cowboy and opens the flood gate for the stream of western novels that follow in its wake. The character of the Virginian is a strong, capable male lead who lives by the chivalric code of old with a tinge of danger brought about by his affinity for gunslinging and adventure. Despite the Virginian's departure from the real histories of cattle ranchers from the West, his persona has cemented how America thinks about the cowboy. Next, we will be examining the ramifications of placing this hypermasculine figure as the center of the West and how this affects feminine figures that fall within his shadow.

Virgin Conquest in the West

In addition to the cowboy, the physical landscape of the West has been mythologized over time. One of the most well-known depictions of this is “American Progress” painted by John Gast in 1872. This painting illustrates the move west, with pioneers trailing behind the female figure, “Columbia,” who is cloaked in Roman garb and carries with her a telegraph wire and a schoolbook, symbols of America. Behind her, the white settlers journey on horseback or by wagon as they venture into the dark, foreboding West. In their wake, nature and Native Americans are seen fleeing, disappearing into the edges of the painting. Columbia is bringing about progress and civilization to the “untouched” land west of the Mississippi River, bringing with her the modern amenities of the Western world. This work of art is one example of how the concept of the West has been shaped in highly specific, and gendered, terms. Here, the female figure is emblematic of the land itself and she is ushering in settlers. In the history and literature of the American West, the land is seen as female and something to be conquered. Columbia here is not being conquered but is still an emblem of land as female and thus to be treated as such.



John Gast, American Progress, 1872.
 Chromolithograph published by George A. Croft.
 Source: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

Figure 1. “American Progress” by John Gast, painted in 1872.

For example, the land that is now understood to be the West was written and spoken about in feminine terms, often being hyper sexualized in the process. Annette Kolodny put it best, stating that America’s oldest myth is “a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine – that is, not simply the land as mother, but the land as woman...” (4). Here, Kolodny is referring to the rhetoric surrounding the West that associated it with virginity and bounty that was ripe for the taking for white men. This concept extends back to the idea of North America being a “New World” untouched and ready to be civilized by Europeans and grows into an obsession with dominating this “virginity.”

The concept of virginity has persisted through the centuries and has been weaponized against women as a measure of their moral character and worth as individual. “The Purity Myth,” as it is called by feminist author Jessica Valenti, is a socially constructed standard for morality used to rank women’s worth since antiquity. Valenti argues that the virgin, as understood by Western society, is always a thin, able-bodied, white woman clad in white garments (Valenti). A virgin is never a woman of color, nor is she a person with a disability, transgender, or low income (Valenti). Therefore, a “virgin” is a narrow, often unattainable standard thrust upon women in society and has, historically, been a way for men, and women, to subjugate others based off of presumed moral superiority. This dominant social construct is rooted in religion, with the imagery of virginity being strongly associated in Christianity with the Virgin Mary, which gives it weight and perceived credibility by large swaths of the globe. As a result, women, especially women in predominately Christian societies, have been forced to abide by the unrealistic standards set out by the virgin mother. Some feminists see “Mary’s virginity with a misogyny that reifies male power over women, subordinates female sexuality and creativity to a virginal ideal, and perpetuates the notion of femininity as passive receptivity” while other feminist readers see “Mary’s virginity a positive expression of female autonomy and power” (Foskett). Despite the lack of consensus on the specific interpretations of the Virgin Mary, the implications of the notion of virginity are widespread and generally detrimental to the uplift of women in society. Women, unlike men whose characters are judged based off universal standards of morality, are assessed on their levels of perceived purity that are founded upon myth.

Thus, the rhetoric of virginity has long been associated with prized possessions and objects for conquest. This world was not only uninhabited, but it was also associated with ideas

of paradise and the biblical imagery of Eden. This associated harkens back to the European pastoral literature that imagined the New World to be free of hardship for workers and a return to the “the lost state of innocence” that is lost in adulthood (6). The New World was feminine and treated as such, conquered, and pillaged without consent. This idea is illustrated in Columbia, a distinctly womanly figure who is lighting the western path.

The West, like the New World, was conceived in feminine terms, “as an object of domination and exploitation” as well as “a maternal ‘garden,’ receiving and nurturing human children (5). Henry Nash Smith argues that this understanding of the West stems from a pastoral impulse, growing out of Jefferson’s vision for the western-most part of the nation (Smith 15-17). As a result of this impulse, the West was a “regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of the womb or breast in a feminine landscape” (Kolodny 6). The effects of this impulse and the myth of the West directly correlate to the pastoral literature and western literature that emerges thereafter. Kolodny argues that the connection to the land that Jefferson so ardently supports in his *Notes on Louisiana* provokes “an almost erotic intimacy in the bond of man and soil” (27). The importance of this document is often overlooked because it lacks Jefferson’s usual empirical analysis and scientific precision. Despite its irregularities, this document is a pivotal in understanding how the physical landscape of the West was defined in the early years of the United States’ development. Once this is established, the implications of the ideas derived from this text can be seen more clearly in American culture, literature, film, and popular media.

The consequences of the land being understood in feminine terms include how women are portrayed in fiction and how real women were treated in the West. This land, even though glorified for being bountiful, abundant, and life-bearing, has repeatedly been abused and misused

by men, much like women throughout history. The feminine language used to discuss the landscape also reflects how America understands women – as objects of conquest. This is presented in fictional Western Literature, where women are often framed as damsels in distress in need of a cowboy to save them, a modern iteration of the chivalric code. This can be seen in the previous discussion of *The Virginian*, where the main character saves an unassuming schoolmarm from certain peril. This encounter is emblematic of the heroism and chivalry of the cowboy. The narrator recounts time and time again the selfless heroic acts that the Virginian takes on for the good of others. This specific vignette alluded to the knight of old trope found throughout literature well before the birth of the cowboy. Saving the damsel in distressed is often another one of the many tasks laid before the cowboy. The Virginian follows in the footsteps of the chivalric knights of old, saving the fair maiden in distress, protecting her from the evils of the natural world. This encounter also foreshadows the affinity that the Virginian will develop of Miss Stark in the days to come, which, will ultimately lead to him giving up his youthful ways.

This passage shows one of the more “positive” ways in which women are depicted in western literature. Molly Stark, although a two-dimensional character within the text, is presented as having intellect and some agency over her life. However, she is presented throughout the novel as an unmarried object that is ready for the taking on the frontier. This is reinforced by how the cowpunchers on the frontier are vying for her attention. Thus, even within the first official Western novel, we see how women, much like the land, are presented to audiences as objects there for men to overpower and make their own, much like the Wyoming Territory within *The Virginian*.

The “Fallen” Women of the West

Unlike Molly Stark, another common portrayal of women in Western literature includes the trope of a “whore” with a heart of gold. This trope takes the saloon girls, madams, and common prostitute that did indeed litter the Western frontier and makes them into yet another character that exists within the shadow of the cowboy. The prostitute is often another female figure that needs a savior, morally and sometimes physically from imminent danger.

The prostitute, or “the whore with a heart of gold,” is ever present in depictions of the American West. They are often illustrated as young women moving westward for economic gain or as fallen angels, in need of salvation. In the words of historian Michael Rutter, these women have been mythologized into either “the whore with a golden heart” or “the gold digger with a heart of stone” (Rutter). Despite their fictionalization by authors and filmmakers alike, the prostitute played a formative role in building the West as it exists today. The American West is in fact founded upon the lived experiences of hundreds of real women. Whether it be through madams, mistresses, or brothels, prostitution helped to establish the West economically. As historians have gained a better understanding of the social makeup of the western frontier, we have come to realize the significant contribution such work and workers made. Prostitutes, much like the cowboy, are “inseparably entwined with the rugged western landscape and the culture of the American West” (Rutter). The experiences of these women help to illuminate elements of early western societies that otherwise would be lost to history and helps to bring to light the lives

of real women who often get overshadowed by the western archetypes, especially the cowboy, of film and literature.

Prostitution as a profession, however, precedes the West and the United States by thousands of years. Prostitution is first mentioned around the year 4000 B.C.E. and it can be assumed existed well before this time. Sometimes called “the world’s oldest profession,” which came about because of Rudyard Kipling’s poem “On the City Wall” published in 1853, prostitution has been a constant presence in human history, despite its underrepresentation in history books and classroom lectures (Clarkson). This lack of representation or discussion about prostitution and sex work at large is due to the socialization of individuals to see matters of sexuality and sensuality as taboo. This is largely because of religion and the weaponization of morality against women, like that discussed above in “The Outcasts of Poker Flat” and “The House of Offense.” Religion came to vilify prostitution as norms of celibacy, monogamy, and chastity took root. Female chastity grew in importance as the custom of purchasing a bride became more widespread. Chastity increased the value of a bride and therefore became a desirable quality in women (Clarkson). This resulted in virginity becoming one of the most, if not the most important characteristic a woman could have in society, which placed so called “fallen women” or “soiled doves” at the bottom of the hierarchy.

As previously mentioned, the prostitute has been made into a trope in similar ways to that of the cowboy. The prostitute helped to build the moral wonderland the cowboy, the outlaw, and the Native American play games in, but were themselves depicted as two-dimensional characters (as were Native Americans). The lived experiences of these women and their individuality has been reduced to the perceived impropriety of their profession and nothing more. Additionally, the prostitute has been used as fuel for the moralizing and domesticating exploits of the “decent”

women who traveled to the West. This leaves little room for the experiences or the voices of the prostitutes to be heard and has resulted in their histories and contributions being overlooked.

The first question that is often asked about the prostitutes of the old American West is what was their motivation? The risks associated with prostitution are high, including unwanted pregnancies, venereal diseases, violence, legal ramifications, and ostracization from “decent” society, so this is a logical question to ask (Rutter). Some might incorrectly assume that these women moved to the West out of a love for sex, economic gain, or moral inferiority, and perhaps some women did. However, it does a disservice to these women and the history of the Old American West by generalizing the myriad of reasons why an individual might turn to prostitution.

Historian Patricia Limerick asserts that once you “acknowledge the human reality of Western prostitutes...you have taken a major step in removing Western history from the domain of myth and symbol and restoring it to actuality” (Limerick 52). Including women in the narrative of Western history, especially historically subjugated women such as prostitutes, updates the tired narrative of the Old West and realigns it with reality. If one generalizes the reasoning for an entire group of people, history is reduced to the realm of myth and symbols, removed of its original humanity.

Moving westward and working as a madame, mistress, or prostitute allowed some women to have agency over where and when they worked. Conversely some women moved west because it was their only option, as a widow or an unmarried woman from a dysfunctional home. Some women turned to prostitution because they had been estranged from Victorian society for their sexual exploits or all the men in their lives had died, resulting in the woman’s financial ruin.

Prostitution allowed for some women to have their own money, and sometimes with this capital these “soiled doves” helped to strengthen the communities in which they worked. It has been found that many prostitutes used their earnings to help establish schools, churches, and businesses throughout the mining towns that littered the western frontier in the early twentieth century. Infamous Colorado Madam, Lauren Evans, is said to have provided food, shelter, and funds to families whose father was away for extended periods of time and during the pandemic of 1918, she disguised her women as nurses so they could aid the sick without ridicule (Shovald). Jennie Rogers, another Colorado madam, purchased the most valuable land around Denver, and helped fund irrigation projects that helped to provide the city with water (Russell 106). Additionally, financially successful madams in the boomtowns of the Old West were some of the first employers to provide healthcare for their workers (Russell 101). The infamously wealthy madam of the Pacific North West, Lou Graham, was one of the wealthiest individuals in Seattle in the late 1800s and helped to establish the public school system in the city (Russell 106). This was the case for some Euro-American women who saw the West as “a place of opportunity, one where they could work their way out of the profession entirely due to high demand and high revenues” (Simmons). Author Thaddeus Russell asserts, in his book entitled *A Renegade History of the United States*, that “Women who wished to escape the restrictions of Victorian America had no better place to go than the so-called frontier, where a particular combination of economic and demographic forces gave renegade women many unusual advantages” (Russell 102). It is important to note, however, that this kind of mobility or capital gain was not seen by all women. Some Euro-American prostitutes faced violence and were exploited on the frontier, just as anywhere else on the globe. Additionally, Chinese prostitutes were often forced into prostitution against their will in Western mining towns (Simmons).

This is not to say that the women who were able to profit from prostitution in the West did not face discrimination. Prostitution, much like any other service industry, fluctuated over time, usually centering around mining towns, also known as boomtowns in the Old West. Boomtowns centered around mining and had predominately male inhabitants. This is because of the laborious nature of the work and conditions in the Old West, which were not deemed fit for family life and civilized comforts. In addition to this, mining depended upon a singular finite material, which caused miners to frequently move from one town to another seeking out more resources to support their trade. Because of this, the Old West, for a short period of time, was dominated by males. For instance, by the year 1850 the population of the state of California, not including the Native American population, was ninety-three percent male (Russell 103). With this imbalance of gender representation in the new territory, there was a gaping “need” that could be fulfilled by prostitutes. Some prostitutes, mostly white or Euro-American women, became wealthy by taking advantage of the lack of feminine influence in the Old West, earning some of the highest wages in the West (Russell 103). As a prostitute gained notoriety and stability, becoming a more “high class prostitute,” she would be able to chase economic opportunities more freely throughout the West (Simmons). Additionally, within mining towns, the “fallen women” were often segregated from the more “civilized” women in the mining towns. And as previously mentioned, prostitution is often coupled with other illicit activities and violence. If a prostitute did not have the economic means or a place in a brothel, she would be more vulnerable to disease, maltreatment, and violence.

Race was another determining factor of a prostitute’s success in the West, with French prostitutes being the most sought after (Rutter). Most prostitutes in the early West were immigrants either from Europe, Mexico, or China. In the Southwest, most prostitutes were

Hispanic, much like the cowhands and cowboys from the same region. At the peak of the Gold Rush in San Francisco it was reported that there were three hundred prostitutes, ninety of which were reported to be white, with the majority being Irish immigrants (Rutter). The rest of the three hundred prostitutes recorded were of Chinese, African, Native American, or Mexican descent (Rutter). After the Civil War, the West saw an influx of Black prostitutes in the West, mostly in Texas and the surrounding areas. Prostitution was a highly racialized field of work, with men only purchasing services from certain groups of women. Chinese prostitutes were at the bottom of the highly racialized hierarchy of prostitutes from this time with white or white-passing prostitutes at the top. This diversity is not represented in the saloon girl or madam that often accompanies the cast of an American Western. Nor are these women represented in Western American literature.

One writer who leans into the trope of western prostitution is Bret Harte. Bret Harte, known for his short stories depicting the California Gold Rush, often uses the tropes of the miner, the pioneer, the gambler, the prostitute, and the outlaw. In doing so, Harte's work affords readers an opportunity to clearly evaluate and dissect these common western tropes. Specifically, Harte's story "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" depicts the tropes of the gambler turned outlaw figure and the "whore" with a heart of gold. These character types illuminate how gender is depicted in the West through fiction and through film and are presented to the audience through a narrator who is sarcastic and critical of the standards of morality held by society at this time. Sarcasm and humor blanket this short text, which provides the reader space for interpretation and criticism of the tropes found within. Within this text, Harte tackles themes of morality and gender roles through the use of a witty, often sardonic narrator who is acutely aware of the double standards of the frontier. A close reading of this text highlights some figures that are often eclipsed by the

cowboy, namely the prostitute, and presents audiences with a new look into western mining civilizations.

“The Outcasts of Poker Flat” tells the story of four criminals who are exiled from the small frontier town of Poker Flat. These four exiles, a gambler, a drunkard, a madam, and a saloon girl are banished to face the elements and emigrate to a new town that might tolerate their impropriety. Along the way, this horde of misfits run into a young couple who are fleeing their homes because of their forbidden love. The group of rowdy exiles and naive lovers are forced on a perilous journey, hoping to survive just until they reach the next town over. Throughout the text, Harte evaluates questions of morality, gender roles, and stereotypes through these characters and the voice of the narrator. Additionally, the character of Mr. Oakhurst serves as a “cowboy turned outlaw figure” within the text, which offers insight into different variations of the cowboy archetype.

The very name of the settlement, Poker Flat, refers to calling or flatting in a game of poker. The name of this town suggests that gambling and the professions associated with such an activity would be readily available in the settlement. From the opening of the text, however, it becomes clear that Poker Flat is rebelling against its reputation and striving to become an orderly and virtuous civilization. This rejection of immoral behavior is in reaction to “the loss of several thousand dollars, two valuable horses, and a prominent citizen” (3). The moral refinement catalyzed by the unrest is framed as alien to the Poker Flat. Prior to November of 1850, the narrator reveals that Poker Flat was “unused to Sabbath influences” (1). This surge in virtuosity starkly juxtaposes the assumed normative culture of Poker Flat and the “wild west” that is often associated with the frontier.

The narrator comments on this shift by stating that “[Poker Flat] was experiencing a spasm of virtuous reaction, quite as lawless and ungovernable as any of the acts that had provoked it” (Harte 3). This spasm most directly takes the form of the killing of immoral men and the banishment of other individuals deemed unfit for society. The narrator refers to the hanging of the two men as their “permanent” removal from Poker Flat and the exile of the others as being “temporary” (3). This comment also suggests that the actions taken by these “virtuous” people are, in the opinion of the narrator, equally as damaging and “lawless” as those immoral individuals they are attempting to rid from society. Thus, the narrator subversively highlights how murder and the uprooting of people from their homes is not a moral good, but is in fact a cruel, unjust, and harsh reaction. From the very beginning of the story, this comment exposes the hypocrisy of the people of Poker Flat but is done so subtly that it might be overlooked on first reading. The narrator continues to critique and question the morality of the situation of Poker Flat but does so in such a way that is subtle, giving the narrator an air of archness throughout. This subtle, or polite, critique is seen again when the narrator discusses the “easily established standards of evil” with the introduction of the female exiles. This comment suggests that the townspeople of Poker Flat did not understand the complexities of morality. If a reader does not understand that the narrator is critical of these morals, they might agree with the “lawmakers” of Poker Flat that prostitution is an obviously immoral profession and should be treated as such. Here lies some of the great hypocrisy that exists within the realm of morality and sex work in American history and its depiction in literature. Women prostitutes are subject to immense scrutiny for their part in a profession that requires the participation of two parties. The men, on the other hand, are not subject to the same harmful moralizing forces that are inflicted upon women.

The main character of the text, Mr. Oakhurst, is set apart from the other exiles from the beginning. He is immediately described as having a higher emotional intelligence and rational ability than his companions. This can be derived from his introduction where the narrator notes that he is “conscious of a change in [the town’s] moral atmosphere” which suggests his enhanced sense of emotional intelligence (1). Mr. Oakhurst is also described as having a “calm, handsome face,” which physically portrays the level-headedness, pragmatism, and coolness that he is known for, all attributes necessary for a gambler. This distinction is maintained throughout the text and Mr. Oakhurst, despite his gambling profession, becomes the moral compass and protector of the misfit travelers.

This is the first look readers get into the gendered double standards for “moral” behavior found within this short text. Although Mr. Oakhurst is exiled due to his gambling, which is deemed immoral by the people of Poker Flat, he is still respected as a moral, reasonable man. This can be derived from two sources from the opening of the text. The first being that members of the “secret committee” of Poker Flat ensured that Mr. Oakhurst was not hanged for his impropriety. The narrator reveals that it is those “who had been fortunate enough to win from Mr. Oakhurst” who overruled the violent wishes of those who had lost to him. Mr. Oakhurst is set apart further by the fact that he was “aware of the hesitation of the judges” when it came to deciding his sentence. This line could be read as they were hesitant to let him live. But the characterization of Mr. Oakhurst suggests that he was viewed as a reasonable man, and thus it would seem that the judges might see his banishment as a waste of energy or wholly unnecessary. This is built upon his reputation as a gambler. Mr. Oakhurst’s profession, although immoral, is presented as being a craft that requires intelligence, reason, and wit, which are all

traits that are not associated with the other outcasts who accompany him and are traits that are often sought after in society.

The female exiles are introduced without any mention of their emotional or rational capacity, but instead are defined in terms of their gender and the “sinful” nature of their profession. It is stated that the women’s “impropriety was professional” and that the residents of Poker Flat found it easy to convict them because of the blatant “evil” associated with their line of work (2). This is a common reaction in literature to characters involved or forced into sex work. Such lines of work are often evaluated based on moral standards established by the church or government, which often overshadows the individual's humanity and nuanced state of existence. The women, who readers later come to know as “The Duchess” and “Mother Shipton,” continue to be framed in a stereotypically irrational light. With the announcement of the verdict, Mr. Oakhurst is described as having “philosophic calmness” (3), that he meets the verdict with rational self-awareness, understanding that this was the “fate” of his line of work. Thus, Mr. Oakhurst is presented as being a criminal, but a reasonable and moral criminal. The Duchess and Mother Shipton, however, are described as having an overtly emotional reaction to their exile and are not presented as having strong morals. The Duchess is described as breaking out into “hysterical tears” and Mother Shipton is depicted as spewing out “bad language” (7). These women, unlike Mr. Oakhurst, are depicted by the narrator as being irrational, overly emotional, and crude, playing into stereotypes associated with criminals but also misogynistic stereotypes touting women’s overly emotional dispositions. This initial introduction of the women provides no insight into the inner workings of their minds, which the narrator excludes throughout the text, nor any insight into who they are as individuals. Instead, the female exiles remain undeveloped and function only as tropes throughout the first half of the text.

The narration goes on to suggest that Mr. Oakhurst was the only capable member of the party. Specifically, Mr. Oakhurst is described as recognizing that the others are not equipped for the treacherous journey back to civilization and he is the only one who recognizes the impending danger ahead of the group. His reasonable demeanor is also supported by the fact that he does not drink because it “interfered with a profession which required coolness, impassiveness, and presence of mind” (10). Mr. Oakhurst’s coolness is juxtaposed by the narrator describing how the other exiles become belligerently drunk upon their first stop on their journey. Uncle Billy is described as being in a “stupor,” the Duchess as “maudlin,” and Mother Shipton as snoring as a result of their whiskey consumption. Thus, the other exiles are depicted as easily falling prey to their vices, thereby lacking self-control or awareness about the dangers of their situation.

The danger of the situation is amplified by the imagery provided about the environment around the travelers. The trail the exiles are following is depicted as “narrow and difficult” and the spot at which they have paused is described as “wild and impressive” (18). The group has now completely departed from any form of civilization and are truly up against the untamed forces of the wilderness. The difficulty of the journey is symbolic of the spread of civilization. In order to find a town sheltered from the standards of morality that come from the East, the exiles have to embark on a treacherous journey. Civilization and the constructed ideas of order and morality that accompany it have begun to permeate the former safe havens for people who did not fit within the hierarchy of morality in the East.

It is at this pause in the journey that the cohort of exiles runs into another group of travelers who more closely align within the typical standards of morality promoted by the people of Poker Flat. The “Innocents,” Piney Woods and Tom Simson, emerge from the woods hailing from Sandy Bar over the mountain’s ridge. This couple is the embodiment of what many would

deem as “pure” and “moral” in society. Tom Simson is known as “The Innocent of Sandy Bar” and is depicted as having freckles and being boyish in disposition (12). This idea of “innocence” is supported by John Oakhurst’s reflection on a previous encounter with Tom where he states “Tommy, you’re a good little man, but you can’t gamble worth a cent. Don’t try it over again” (11). It is important to note that this comment made by Mr. Oakhurst works to characterize Tom, but also adds to Mr. Oakhurst’s reputation within the text. The account of when Tom and John Oakhurst first meet shows that Oakhurst cares for others. Not only does he provide Tom with advice to avoid gambling, but he also returns the money that he won from Tom. This act is included within the text to show that Mr. Oakhurst can care for other people and often acts upon this concern for others.

Piney Woods is described as “a stout, comely damsel of fifteen” and is seen blushing and giggling throughout the exchange between Tom and Mr. Oakhurst, which adds to her innocent, childlike image. However, following Piney’s introduction the narrator notes, yet again, Mr. Oakhurst's superior ability to gauge the social and moral standings of a situation. This can be derived from the line “Mr. Oakhurst seldom troubled himself with sentiment, still less with propriety; but he had a vague idea that the situation was not fortunate” (13). The situation that is referred to here is that of the seemingly “innocent” couple. This line suggests that Mr. Oakhurst ascertains from this chance encounter that perhaps Piney and Tom are not running away to preserve the ideals of love and marriage but are instead running away because of the repercussions of “immoral” actions. Such actions as Piney having become pregnant before marriage could have them exiled or marginalized in their hometown of Sandy Bar. Furthermore, Mr. Oakhurst had the “presence of mind sufficiently to kick Uncle Billy, who was about to say something” showing that Mr. Oakhurst and Uncle Billy noticed the immoral circumstances of

“the Innocents” travel and had the propriety to ensure that their secret was not exposed. The insight provided by Mr. Oakhurst's character and the narrator here undermines the seemingly moral image that the couple initially carries. It is notable, however, that the narrator throughout the rest of the text will refer to Piney as a “virgin” or “virginal” despite the implications of this encounter. Perhaps this is done ironically, to point out how things are often not as they appear. Or perhaps it is to appease readers who want to believe in the untainted purity of the couple.

As another gesture of innocence, Tom incorrectly assumes that The Duchess is Mr. Oakhurst's wife. This causes Uncle Billy to roar with laughter. This innocent mistake reveals to readers how the Duchess is perceived by society due to her profession. Because of her professional promiscuity, the Duchess is rendered unfit for marriage by society. The mere idea of her being married is so absurd that Uncle Billy roars with laughter, having to step away from the group to compose himself. Mr. Oakhurst, again to maintain his gentlemanly image, kicks Uncle Billy to save the Duchess from further embarrassment. The maltreatment of these women is a direct result of the weaponization of morality by the townsfolk of Poker Flat. There is a long history of prostitutes being misrepresented and misunderstood on the western frontier. Prostitutes were often marginalized and villainized by other female settlers as a means of societal elevation. The need for law and order arose with the establishment of more stable civilizations and the increased domesticity of the frontier, namely the influx of women and children moving westward.

Once the journeys of the moral characters and the immoral characters converge, they are all forced to take refuge from a devastating snowstorm. The group takes shelter in a cabin and attempts to wait out the storm, but quickly their situation becomes bleak. Uncle Billy, during the first night at the cabin, steals the mules and is nowhere to be found. Mr. Oakhurst initially

responds angrily to the situation, but then regains his cool demeanor. He fabricates a story about Uncle Billy scaring off the mules accidentally in the night in order not to frighten the innocent couple and to maintain the anonymity of himself and his fellow exiles. Mr. Oakhurst explains to his fellow exiles that “They’ll find out the truth about us *all* when they find out anything... and there’s no good frightening them now” (19). This decision yet again reinforces Mr. Oakhurst's concern for others and moral nature and begins to uncover the shame that all of these characters carry from being removed from society. Even the composed Mr. Oakhurst does not want Tom and Piney to view him as a tainted individual.

As the characters endure isolation together for over a week, bonds start to form. Notably, Oakhurst cached the whiskey and playing cards away from the group so that they were not tempted by their vices. Storytelling and singing ensue as the outcasts attempt to fill their time as they wait out the storm. Another source of joy in this seemingly desolate time is that the Duchess and Mother Shipton take pleasure in caring for young Piney. The Duchess is specifically mentioned to have “assumed the care of Piney” as the days in the cabin continued (26). Mother Shipton showed her care for Piney in a different way, by saving her rations for the young woman over the course of their stay in the cabin. Mother Shipton starved herself in order for Piney to have a better chance at surviving the wait. This type of care, the giving of one’s life, is the most extreme form of care one can show another human being, which is also a stereotypically gendered behavior. Mother Shipton, with what agency she had, took control of her situation, and made the moral decision to save another over choosing her own preservation. This act of love for another human being undermines the judgment that the people of Poker Flat placed upon Mother Shipton. This seems to redeem Mother Shipton in the eyes of the reader, which only comes when she adopts the role of the caring, self-sacrificing mother. Similarly, in the final days in the cabin,

the Duchess stays by Piney's side as they continue to care for each other till the end of their lives. Despite Mother Shipton's efforts, Piney and the Duchess both end up losing their lives in the cabin. Once the people of Poker Flat find their bodies, it is said that "you could scarcely have told from the equal peace that dwelt upon them which was her that had sinned" (33).

Mr. Oakhurst, leaving the camp with Tom Simson, also sacrifices himself in the hope of preserving the others. Mr. Oakhurst fashions a pair of snowshoes for Tom so that he can try to find help in Poker Flat to save the Duchess and Piney. Mr. Oakhurst accompanies Tom halfway to his destination but does not travel with him back to Poker Flat. He does not return to Poker Flat because his death is guaranteed if he returns. If he stays in the woods, he takes back some agency in his death and has some control over Fate. The first sign that Mr. Oakhurst was not going to not return to the cabin can be seen when he kisses the Duchess goodbye. The Duchess is stunned by this show of affection, effectively "leaving her pallid face aflame and her trembling limbs rigid with amazement" (28). Currently, the Duchess is not aware of Mr. Oakhurst's decision to not return to the cabin. It is not until she realizes that he had stockpiled a few days' worth of firewood that she realizes his plan. This kiss can be read as symbolic in multiple ways. Perhaps Mr. Oakhurst was showing the Duchess that she was worthy of affection before he passed on. Or, this kiss might have been the physical manifestation of Mr. Oakhurst's debilitating loneliness, or merely just a final act of kindness.

Mr. Oakhurst shoots himself beneath one of the largest pine trees in the gulch, and symbolically places a deuce of clubs above his head as his grave marker. This act of marking his grave with a playing card speaks to Mr. Oakhurst's understanding of reality: that life is but a game of chance. Fate, in the eyes of Mr. Oakhurst, is one of the main actors in the unfortunate events that unfolded in November of 1850. It would seem, however, that through the very act of

taking his own life, Mr. Oakhurst was actively rebelling against this idea of fate. And perhaps through this permanent act of rebellion against the hand he was dealt in life, Mr. Oakhurst is beginning to see that it was not fate at all that influenced his situation, but instead the weaponization of morality by his neighbors in Poker Flat.

This weaponization of morality is only briefly mentioned in the beginning of the short story, as it is stated that Poker Flat was experiencing a “spasm of virtuous reaction, quite as lawless and ungovernable as any of the acts that had provoked it” (Harte). This “spasm” of virtuosity results in the banishment of four individuals to certain death. The tension created by the supposed morality and the violent implications of these “virtuous” actions are poked fun at by the narrator throughout the text as the irony of the situation become clear. This irony that stems from the supposed morality of the townsfolk is played up further in film adaptations of “The Outcasts of Poker Flat.” For instance, the 1937 adaptation of the story, directed by Christy Cabanne, plays up the moral conflict of the story by introducing the characters of a pastor, a schoolmarm, and a child named Luck (*Outcasts of Poker Flat (1937)*). With the addition of these characters, the film is able to elaborate on the idea of morality and the implications of banishing individuals. Some of the ways the stakes are heightened include making Mr. Oakhurst the adopted parent of Luck, the child, and having him fall in love with the schoolmarm. So, when the death of Mr. Oakhurst comes about, the devastation felt by viewers is heightened and the decisions of the townsfolk are more easily critiqued.

From these tragic deaths, readers can extrapolate numerous truths. The most obvious of which is that death is the great equalizer among human beings. Regardless of their level of religiosity or their station in life, the outcasts stranded in the snowstorm all met the same fate. Neither wit, wealth, notoriety nor purity saved Mr. Oakhurst, Mother Shipton, Piney Woods, or

the Duchess from their human mortality. Secondly, the death of these individuals crystalizes the text's critique on societal standards of morality. The character that is deemed to be the pinnacle of purity by society, a young, virginal woman, meets the same fate as one of the most detested women in society: the prostitute. Of a similar vein, the hero of the story, Mr. Oakhurst, the reasonable, gentlemanly gambler is not able to save the damsel(s) in distress from the forces of nature. However, he is not culpable for the deaths of the three women. The responsibility for their deaths lays solely on the shoulders of those in Poker Flat who exiled the group in the first place in the name of order and morality.

For instance, Mother Shipton in Bret Harte's "Outcasts of Poker Flat" is depicted in terms of her offense against society until her death at the end of the story which brings to light some of her humanity. Similarly, the Duchess within this same story only serves as a foil to Piney Wood's purity throughout the short text. Based off the short story, John Ford's film *Stagecoach* depicts a young prostitute being isolated by other white women, then marrying the cowboy, John Wayne, who saves her from her life of indecency. These portrayals are devoid of any of the nuance of hardship faced by many prostitutes in the West. Much like the cowboy, the portrayal of the Western prostitute has been whitewashed and commodified to be more easily digested by the American public.

While prostitutes were sometimes victimized, mentally and physically, by the cowboys and the miners, they also often came under fire from the domestic women of the Old West, who often set themselves up as arbiters of the morals of their communities, which can be seen in Mary Austin's "The House of Offense." Mary Austin is an American naturalist writer from the late nineteenth century who specialized in writing about the Southwestern United States. Her focus centered around the flora and fauna and the indigenous people from the region. She also

wrote about the lives and experiences of western people, including women living in the Southwest.

One of her stories, “The House of Offense,” deals with similar themes of White women weaponizing morality to elevate their status in society. Within this text, however, Austin is looking specifically at a role of a white woman, who weaponizes morality against a prostitute to raise her status within society. This story opens with the description of “the House,” which is labeled by the narrator as a building that “wore its offence upon its front” (Austin 247). The house, which is composed of a series of small rooms with doors opening to a veranda is home to the community’s prostitute population and is looked down upon by the townsfolk. One particularly harsh critic is Mrs. Henby, who lives on the street adjacent to the House. Mr. Henby works in the mines, leaving Mrs. Henby home alone for most days of the week. This loneliness is amplified by the fact that Mrs. Henby was unable to have children of her own, so is in isolation while her husband is in the mines. Mrs. Henby is described as having a “virtuous sense of well-being” from her work in the domestic sphere cooking, cleaning and “keep[ing] the front room always looking as if nobody lived in it” (248). This is juxtaposed by the description of Hard Mag, one of the prostitutes residing within the House across the way. Mag is characterized as being “handsome enough to have done much better by herself” (248). These two women, in a few short pages, bring to light the dichotomy of the western housewife and the prostitute.

The interaction between the women begins over the back fence of the Henby property. Mrs. Henby watches Mag as she goes about her chores, remarking that “Mag, in the intervals of sinning, was largely occupied with the tasks of widowed and neglected women” (249). She goes on to further remark that “the root of sin lay in self-indulgence and might be fostered by such small matters as sitting too much in rocking-chairs and wearing too becoming hats” (249). This

excerpt provides insight into how Mrs. Henby views herself against the like of Mag and the other women of the House. Mrs. Henby not only sees herself as morally superior to Mag, but she also sees herself as a force of unwavering virtue. The narrator goes on to recount that Mrs. Henby offers Mag some radishes from her own garden, which Mag refuses, to Mrs. Henby's relief for she does not "like to be seen handing things through the fence to the inmates of the House" (249). Mrs. Henby's seeming moral superiority continues throughout the following pages as she helps tend to an ill member of the House. This positions Mrs. Henby as a moral authority, playing into the tradition role held by white women as the "Angel of the House." Conversely, Mag is seen as a fallen woman, devoid of traditional womanly qualities and knowledge and viewed as less than. The relationship between these two women is commonly found throughout Western American literature, where usually white, Protestant women nominate themselves as the moral authorities of a region to elevate their status. Patricia Limerick asserts that white women who used their "capacity to scorn others" to be seen as "a superior sort of creature, placed above others" was an act of self-determination (Limerick 53). This can be seen in Mrs. Henby, who is using her moral authority to compensate for her not having children, which she and society at large perceive as a failure for a woman.

The issue of Mrs. Henby's inability to bear children comes to a head when Mag asks her if she would be willing to take in her fatherless child, born out of wedlock. Mrs. Henby immediately refuses Mag's request, even though Mag explains that the child was born out of a loving relationship that went awry. Mag, to convince Mrs. Henby to take her child, pleads "You'd be the saving of her – if you would" (Austin 251). This reinforces the aforementioned moral superiority felt by many white women on the Western frontier. This plea leans into this moral image Mrs. Henby holds of herself, which Mag continues to play into until the child is brought

into the Henby household. For instance, Mag, five days after her initial plea, rhetorically asks Mrs. Henby “are you going to see that innocent child brought to this place and never lift a hand to it?” (252). Then, Mag provokes Mrs. Henby further by questioning her Christian morals, which finally pushes the teetering Mrs. Henby to agreement so long as Mag flees town.

This story shows the tension found between the prostitute and the “angel of the house” in Western literature. As Hard Mag and the other prostitutes leave town, the narrator observes the following: “They went out as they came, with scant warning, helped by coarse laughter of the creatures they preyed upon, and with so much of careless haste that about two hours after their flitting --- caught, it was supposed, from the neglected fires, the whole shell of the House burst into flame” (254). This passage leaves the reader with the image of this house of impropriety going up in flames, like something one would find in the depths of hell. Also, found within the closing lines of this story, the responsibility of prostitution and the offenses that often follow it are squarely placed upon the shoulders of the women involved. Conversely, the men paying for said service are referred to as the “poor creatures” that were “preyed upon” by these women. This shows how repeatedly in Western history, and human history at large, the moral commentary surrounding prostitution often removed any fault from the men involved. This results in the perceived “issue” of prostitution in history to be entirely misunderstood. Oftentimes, the perspectives of the women who engaged in this profession are often lost, gleaned over, or misrepresented, resulting in tropes and archetypes of the real women who lived in the Old West.

The weaponization of morality, specifically against prostitutes, is, however, another way that women attempted to elevate their status during the expansion of the nation. Euro-American women specifically used their existing status of the “angel of the house” and their perceived

moral authority, derived from stereotypes surrounding their gender, to place themselves above those deemed morally inferior in society. Patricia Limerick argues that “[d]owngrading Indians, Hispanics, Mormons, immoral men, or fallen women, many white women made it clear that the disorientation of migration had not stolen their confident ability to sort and rank humanity from best to worst” (Limerick 54). This sorting of human beings based on morality is, according to Limerick, the way that white women in the West became “active self-determiners” (53). Similar to the ways that some prostitutes moved West as a business maneuver, some white women saw the West as a place where they could elevate their social status. This elevation could not be achieved in the mainstream work force, which barred women from being employed in most sectors, but instead happened within the “private sphere” of life.

This is not to say, however, that the domestic women of the Old American West lived in the lap of luxury. Often these women also faced great hardship, including raising families and performing back-breaking labor in order to survive. Some women moved west at the whim of their husbands, having no control over what happened to them or their offspring. For instance, Mary Jane Hayden journeyed with her children out west because her husband had caught “gold fever” (Moynihan 5). In her memoir, Mrs. Hayden recounts the discussion of her husband’s decision to move to the frontier. When she asks her husband what he planned to do with her and their children, who were in poor health at the time, he states that she would be sent to her mother’s until he returned. This “did not meet [Mrs. Hayden’s] approval” (Moynihan 5). Mrs. Hayden was eventually able to advocate for herself, telling her husband that “We were married to live together... I am willing to go with you to any part of *God’s Foot Stool* where you think you can do the best... you have no right to go where I cannot... and if you do, you need never return for I shall look upon you as dead” (Moynihan 6). The Hayden family eventually journeyed

over the Overland Trail and settled in Oregon to become successful farmers. Mrs. Hayden's recollection of the decision-making process for some families during the Gold Rush illuminates how little the needs, feelings, or thoughts of women were considered in the process. Mrs. Hayden was fortunate because ultimately, she got a say in her and her family's fate while many other women who were forced westward had no control over their future. For instance, Mary Sheehan was a "daughter of the frontier" or brought out West because of the escapades of her father who went from one mining town to another in search of riches (188). Sheehan married a man by the name of Peter Ronan at the age of nineteen, which changed her nomadic life on the frontier to the life of a wife of a politician. Peter Ronan became the federal agent for the Flathead Indian Reservation, where the Ronan family spent a large majority of the lives, which Mrs. Ronan calls the "most interesting and difficult [years] of my life" (190). As a result, Mary Sheehan Ronan experiences the hardships of being a wife on the frontier that lacked the comforts of civilization and that of a woman who experienced the effects of the Nez Perce War of 1877.

Many women did not reap the same success as did Mrs. Hayden and Mrs. Ronan, as poverty and hardship were in abundance across the West. Agnes Smedley was a young woman from the mining town of Trinidad, Colorado. She grew up in poverty with a mother who was in ruins and a sister who was married off at sixteen, then died tragically in childbirth, leaving Smedley on her own. She did not receive a formal education until her adult life when she attended university courses intermittently between moves from the West to the East coast and an unhappy marriage. As a result of her poverty-stricken youth and the disillusion she felt with the American dream, Smedley became a member of the Socialist Party, an early feminist, and a pacifist. In *Daughter of Earth*, Smedley writes of the trials women faced on the frontier, especially those of her mother, who was abused by her husband for years. In this text, Smedley

recounts a confrontation that occurred between her mother, her father, and her aunt Helen. Her father, John Rogers, accuses her aunt of having relations with her “Dago beau” (Schlissel 132). John, who is putting on this show to abuse his wife further, continues to berate Helen until she attacks him. Agnes’ mother eventually pulls Helen from her husband’s grasp, to which he responds with “Takin’ the part of a whore agin yer own husband!” (133). Helen goes on to retort that it is him who has made her a “whore,” because she must give all her earnings to her older sisters just so that she can “buy grub and duds for herself and the kids” (133). Later, Smedley recounts how her mother, and many other women in their town, had to hide the fact that they had voted in an election to escape the wrath of their husbands. This vignette gives us a glimpse into the psychological and physical abuse endured by some of the more “traditional” women found in the mining towns of the Old American West.

By looking at the lives of a few women, the social stratification of the West can be more clearly discerned than what is provided in textbooks and fictional depictions. Power, for prostitutes and “domestic” women alike, was fleeting. Some women were able to use the lawlessness of the Old West to elevate their status, while others saw continued oppression and hardship. There is not a singular stock-character in fiction or film that accurately embodies the nuanced experiences of *real* women who lived in the West. The women of the West, much like any other human being, did not fit neatly into the character of the saloon girl or the angel of the house. These women, as all human beings do, occupied numerous identities and roles, including mother, daughter, teacher, spiritual guide, healer, prostitute, business owner, and entrepreneur. Hollywood and fiction alike have watered down the role of these women in Western history aiding the dominant masculine narrative. Western films tend to star the cowboy, the outlaw, or the pioneer, often leaving supporting roles for women, specifically white women. This results in

women of color and underprivileged women being eliminated from the narrative and plunges audiences into a state of unreality. To combat this misinformation, it is crucial that the lives of real western women are shared, not only in academic circles, but also in mainstream curriculum in secondary education, film, and literature.

Conclusion

One evening, in the weeds of researching cowboys, prostitution, and life in the Old American West, I had a conversation with two of my close male friends about the nature of a cowboy. I had mentioned my research only in passing, but when I mentioned “cowboys” both of their eyes lit up with boyish delight. Immediately my audience, whom I was talking to virtually at the time, became animated with excitement. One of my friends exclaimed “I could have *definitely* been a cowboy... I practically am one now!” The other began to saunter down the hall, with his hands on his hips, a twang to his voice, and an added layer of bravado to his demeanor. My friends began to eagerly debate which among them had the “chops” to be a cowboy. Initially, I was taken aback by their immediate excitement at my mention of my research and was further amused by their immediate reenactment of the mythical cowboy that I had been researching for the past year and a half. Without any prompting, they immediately associated the cowboy with guns, fighting, and chivalry. It was as if I had stumbled across a couple of kids playing cowboys and Indians in their living room as a western film played in the background. As the debate continued, I eventually interjected their conversation with some facts, such as that cowboys did not carry guns nor was gunslinging a normal occurrence among *real* cowboys in the West. I also commented that both of my friends were far too tall and enjoyed too many modern comforts to make it as a cowboy back in the day. My comments were immediately rejected. Both of my friends refuted the facts that I had placed before them and assured me that I had it all wrong, they were the twenty-first century equivalent of a cowboy, the modern John Wayne.

As I have continued with my research and have had the pleasure of sharing it with more people, I have found that it often elicits a similar response. When cowboys are mentioned, I almost always receive a smile, laugh, or a chuckle in response and immediate recognition of the figure that I am studying. I share these experiences to highlight how the cowboy, even in the twenty-first century, still plays a prominent role in American culture and identity. This is seen in music, film, and popular culture where the cowboy is still used as a symbol of American ideals and masculinity. Americana fashion and western wear come in and out of fashion each decade, songs are still written about the lives of “cowboys” and the United States is commonly characterized by the cowboy by outsiders.

For instance, the band The Highwaymen, with Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Kris Kristofferson, and Waylon Jennings, has carried the myth of the cowboy into the present. The song “Don’t Let your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys,” originally written by Ed and Patsy Bruce, has become a country classic and draws upon many characteristics of the archetype of the figure. A cover of this song was done by ‘The Highwaymen’ which increased its popularity and acclaim in the genre. The song opens with the following lines:

Cowboys ain’t easy to love
And they’re harder to hold
They’d rather give you a song
Than diamonds or gold
Lonestar belt buckles and old faded Levis
And each night begins a new day
If you don't understand him and he don't die young
He'll probably just ride away.

From the start, this song exemplifies the nomadic, rootless life of the cowboy of old and alludes to the Huck Finn thesis discussed in previous chapters. Here, we see the non-committal, boyish nature of the cowboy, who is running from civilization, and responsibility, to the wild West. The chorus follows these lines, traditionally sung by Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings, which continues to warn audiences against becoming a cowboy:

Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys
 Don't let 'em pick guitars or drive them old trucks
 Let 'em be doctors and lawyers and such
 Mamas don't let your babies grow up to be cowboys
 'Cause they'll never stay home and they're always alone
 Even with someone they love

In this iconic chorus, we see how the cowboy has evolved since the nineteenth century, with the cowboy now being associated with “guitars” and “old trucks,” not typical to traditional figures such as the Virginian but perhaps modern variations of the pistol and noble steed noble. Despite the introduction of modern cowboy attributes, we see the chorus return to the aimless wandering that is prominent throughout all fictional depictions of the cowboy. As mentioned, this wandering predates the cowboy with figures like Natty Bumppo and Rip van Winkle, who wandered the American wilderness, dodging domesticity and civilization at every turn.

Also, in this song, we see the trope of the prostitute appear, in relation to the cowboy of course, in the second verse. The verse begins by listing what the cowboy likes, which includes “smoky old pool rooms,” “puppies,” and “girls of the night.” This is the only time that there is mention to these “girls of the night” in the song, which exemplifies how other figures from the Old West often only serve as support for the cowboy, and not a starring role.

Another song made famous by the Highwaymen is “The Last Cowboy Song,” which was also written by Ed Bruce. This song laments that the age of the cowboy has died and that the glory of the Old American West has been left behind. This song touches upon the industrialization of the cattle trade and glorifies the forgotten work of the cattle hands of the West. Here, the death of the cowboy is brought about by semi-trucks, feedlots, and the mass production of cattle in the United States. The song mourns the days of the cattle trails and gives the cowboy a seat amongst the great American heroes. The cowboy is said to have “blazed the trail with Lewis and Clark” and “rode with the Seventh when Custer went down,” conflating this fictional figure with other mythical individuals and historical events and people in American history. With reference to Lewis and Clark, we see that the cowboy helped to “open” the West and the allusion to Custer is a nod to the violence shown towards Native Americans throughout this conquest. But both of these allusions are not meant to denote a negative connotation, but rather inspire a sense of patriotism and nostalgia within the listener. The chorus of the song also inspires a sense of nostalgia, stating that:

This is the last cowboy song, the end of a hundred-year waltz

Voices sound sad as they're singing along, another piece of America's lost

Even today, a hundred years removed from the time of cowpunchers and the Old American West, a sense of loss washes over listeners, despite having knowledge of the violence towards minorities and women that coincide with the time of the cowboy.

The cowboy is not the only trope from the Old West that has been immortalized in song. Kenny Rogers’s song “The Gambler” depicts the gambler trope from the West and paints a picture of a man who is resoundingly similar to Mr. Oakhurst from the pages of Bret Harte. This song recounts a conversation between the narrator and a gambler, who offers listeners some sage

advice from his life of speculating. Here, the gambler, just as with Mr. Oakhurst, is presented as a wise, rational man, who has learned to harness his vices and luck to his own benefit. This advice is wrapped up into a catchy chorus:

You've got to know when to hold 'em

Know when to fold 'em

Know when to walk away

And know when to run

You never count your money

When you're sittin' at the table

There'll be time enough for countin'

When the dealin's done.

In recent years, cowboy music and the country genre have been inundated with more diverse narratives, branching out from providing masculine voices. The Highwomen, a musical group composed of Brandi Carlile, Natalie Hemby, Marin Morris, and Amanda Shires, does just that. Formed at the heels of the Me-Too movement in the twenty-tens, The Highwomen push back at the lack of women represented in the country genre and strive to introduce diverse narratives to the musical community. Their self-titled song “Highwomen” does just that. This song presents narratives that often go untold in the country genre, as it is overshadowed by masculine cowboy tropes. For instance, this song recounts the tales of a woman taking her children on the treacherous journey from Honduras to Mexico, of a woman healer who is killed in the Salem Witch Trials, a freedom rider from the Civil Rights movement, a young woman who is forbidden from becoming a preacher due to her gender. These stories, each sung by a different member of

the group, highlight the forgotten voices of the nation. The fifth verse summarizes the intent of the creative group in the following lines:

We are The Highwomen
Singing stories still untold
We carry the sons you can only hold
We are the daughters of the silent generations
You sent our hearts to die alone in foreign nations
It may return to us as tiny drops of rain
But we will still remain.

The impact of this song is not fully understood unless it is compared to the song that inspired it, “Highwayman” by The Highwaymen. “Highwayman,” sung by Johnny Cash, tells the story of a highwayman, a sailor, a dam builder, and a pilot of a star ship. This song looks at the hard work and toil of men, specifically highlighting the risk and the losses associated with each line of work. With this in mind, the impact of the Highwomen’s work is crystallized, as they share a diverse set of experiences in their music, emphasizing women risking themselves for the betterment of others. This stands in stark contrast against the work of the Highwaymen, who focused on recounting the stories of individual figures, with an emphasis on themes of adventure and individualism.

It is not just the stories of women that need to be told to unearth the reality of the Old American West; the stories of immigrants, Native Americans, and minoritized groups also must be shared. Other musicians are starting to do similar work within the country genre, diversifying audiences and the narratives that are shared through music. Orville Peck, who emerged on the music scene in 2019, is a Canadian performer and musician. Peck is a masked musician who

leans into western tropes, often using cowboy imagery and rodeo aesthetics in his music videos, lyrics, and dress. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, Peck also introduces homoerotic narratives and campy visuals that are unusual for the genre of music all the while sounding like a lost member of The Highwaymen. In Peck's song "No Glory in the West" on his debut album *Pony*, references are made to themes found in other cowboy music, such as rootlessness, the loneliness associated with rugged individuality, and the gruesome reality of life on the plains. This song paints a romantic, yet dark image of the West that is not uncommon for cowboy music from the 60s and 70s. What differs, however, is who is telling these stories. The artistry of Orville Peck highlights the theme of homoerotic relations within Western American history, but he is not the first one. Willie Nelson's song, "Cowboys are Frequently, Secretly Fond of Each Other" touches upon the motifs of love and sexuality found in stories like Anne Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain," which was adapted into a critically acclaimed film in 2005. "Brokeback Mountain" tells the story of two cowboys' forbidden love and the intersection of masculinity, gender roles, and sexuality and the hyper-masculine mythos of the cowboy. This story and its film adaptation have received both acclaim and ridicule due to their overt depiction of homoerotic relationships.

Proulx's story in 1997, however, was not the first iteration of queer cowboys in literature. Prominent authors from the time of the Gold Rush and at the peak of western expansion, including Bret Harte and Mark Twain, also alluded to these illicit relations in their work. Specifically, Bret Harte's short story "Tennessee's Partner" is riddled with erotic male tension. This story, first published in the *Overland Monthly* in 1869, follows the story of Tennessee and Tennessee's Partner. This story is often noted for being the first "buddy novel," but modern scholarship would argue that there is more to the relationship of Tennessee and his partner. In the

story, Tennessee steals his partner's wife and moves away to Maryville with her after the trio lives together for a short period of time. Tennessee's partner is described as not having a name "any other than this relative title; that he had ever existed as a separate and distinct individuality we only learned later" and quickly forgives his partner for stealing his bride ("Tennessee's Partner"). Recent scholars argue that "[t]he Partner's non-combative affection upon Tennessee's return is a breach of the masculine code; other miners in the camp expected a shooting" (Packard 101). Instead of lashing out violently, as the Partner is expected to by the miners in town, he receives Tennessee with the same affections as before his betrayal. In this story, humor, violence, and masculine stereotypes are used to build the narrative structure with "homoerotic harmony at its center" (101). This story was met with criticism when it was first published, with Mark Twain arguing that the reaction of the Partner went against human nature (101). Harte's depiction of male relationships in the Old West, however, seems to present a more accurate representation of the human experience than Twain might have cared to admit.

New understandings of the West go beyond looking at masculinity, relationships, and gender roles in a different light. Modern authors are also privileging the experiences of Native Americans, who have been overshadowed by the cowboy for decades. One of these authors is Leslie Marmon Silko. Silko is a member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe and is renowned for her books *Laguna Woman*, *Ceremony*, *Storyteller*, and *Almanac of the Dead*. Her novel *Ceremony*, published in 1977, follows the life of Tayo, a young man from the Pueblo tribe who is struggling with post-traumatic stress because of fighting in the Vietnam War. In addition to his Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from the war, Tayo also is grappling with the destruction caused by the white man in his immediate community and the world around him. Through a blending of prose, poetry, and traditional narrative form, readers follow Tayo on his journey to finding the right ceremony to help

heal his wounds and save his community from destitution. This story, at first glance, seems to be completely detached from the tropes of the Old American West. But, if one takes a step back, it is made clear that Silko's story not only shows the adverse effects of manifest destiny and white cattle ranching in the West, but also features a figure that juxtaposes the cowboy. In the end, *Ceremony* acts as a modern cowboy novel that centers Native American culture, spirituality, and strength in the West.

The work of *The Highwomen*, Orville Peck, Leslie Marmon Silko, among others sheds light on the figures often overshadowed by the cowboy in history and are beginning to refocus America's understanding of the Old American West. Despite the strides toward diversifying the western American narrative, more traditional depictions of the cowboy remain. Television shows such as *Deadwood*, *Longmire*, and *Yellowstone* have reinvigorated the public's interest in the cowboy. Acclaimed filmmakers such as the Coen Brothers and Quentin Tarantino have also aided in this effort, infusing violent fast-paced action into the Old West. The influx of violence in film can also be found in modern iterations of the cowboy novel, such as the work of author Cormac McCarthy, who is renowned for his gruesome portrayal of life in the West. McCarthy's acclaimed *Border Trilogy* places the cowboy in the twentieth century, long after the heyday of cattle ranching in the post-Civil War period (Arnold 198). Some have claimed that "McCarthy's cowboys must adapt to the new western environment or die," which causes his novels to convey a sense of desperation. McCarthy's presentation of the cowboy, as he readjusts his identity to the changing world around him grounding the novels in the concept of the death of the cowboy, or the last cowboy, which results in grotesque violence shown towards men, women, and children. This same affinity for violence has been adopted by filmmakers such as the Coen Brothers, who adapted McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* in 2007. The violence that has been infused into the

West in modernity seem to plunge the myth of the cowboy further into the realm of unreality. Modern iterations of Western films have created a cultural presumption that the experiences presented are more accurate depictions of the West. This assumption is rational, in that the violence and hardship presented in films such as *No Country for Old Men* transport viewers into what feels like a gritty, rugged West. Despite the sense of realism created in these modern adaptations, the *real* cowboy lived a mundane, tiresome existence, with little time for violent encounters.

The mythical cowboy is crucial part of the American identity, informing standards of masculinity, justice, and bravery. His imagery, demeanor, and aesthetic are all still utilized by marketers to evoke a sense of nostalgia and patriotism in consumers. Globally, the United States is often made synonymous with the cowboy, which helps to maintain his prominence domestically and abroad. The West has been cultivated by authors, historians, and filmmakers as a playground for those who have been emboldened by their sense of *noblesse oblige* to ride through the frontier bearing the weight of justice on their back. The myth of the cowboy, despite its marketability, falls short of encapsulating the diverse experiences of people who *lived* in the Old American West. Women acted as key establishers of western American civilizations, especially women who are often overlooked by history because of their “indiscretions.” Immigrants and Native Americans bore the brunt of the labor and hardship that accompanied the white man’s conquest of the territory. The West was not virginal, “open,” or new; yet it was still dominated by white settlers for their own benefit. It is critical that the stories of the *true* West are introduced to mainstream media to combat the unreality and myth that loses sight of humanity. There is, in fact, room in the West for those who do not fit the stock characters produced by Hollywood and widely consumed literature, and space must be created for their stories to be told.

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