The Virginian's Cultural Clashes

A Study of Cultural Representation in Owen Wister's novel *The Virginian*

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Denne oppgåva tek føre seg korleis kulturelle ulikskapar er framstilte i Owen Wister sin roman *The Virginian* frå 1902. Handlinga i boka utspelar seg i dei nyleg etablerte vestlege grensetraktene av USA, der immigrantar frå ymse kulturelle og sosiale samfunnslag samlast og saman skal skapa eit felles samfunn. Dei tre hovudkarakterane i romanen representerer ulike kulturelle perspektiv og ambisjonar for korleis eit samfunn bør vera, og desse ulike verdiane vert knytte til den sentrale konflikten mellom den amerikanske vesten og den etablerte austkysten. Usemja mellom dei to motståande verdisyna kjem særskilt fram i problemstillingar som gjeld næringsgrunnlag, sosial etablering og institusjonelle lover og reglar. *The Virginian* følgjer desse karakterane, og det lokale samfunnet dei lever i, gjennom eit halvt tiår med kulturell utvikling og grunnleggande samfunnsendring. Forteljarstemma, som og verkar som ein av dei tre hovudkarakterane i boka, tilhøyrer ein akademisk ung mann med verdiar som er forma på den urbane og kultiverte austkysten, noko som ser ut til å påverka framstillinga hans. Det samfunnet han skildrar som den amerikanske vesten er på mange sett eit romantisk ideal med særeigne normer, og på denne måten underbyggjer romanen det mytiske omdømet den amerikanske vesten har fått.

Hovudfokuset i denne oppgåva er å utforska korleis dei kulturelle ulikskapane mellom aust og vest er framstilte, og kva kulturelle endringar som vert skildra gjennom den tida handlinga utspelar seg. Det vert og fokusert på korleis boka skildrar den amerikanske vesten som eit samfunnsideal.

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Introduction

> "There's no tellin' in this country," said the Virginian. "Folks come easy, and they go easy. In settled places, like back in the States, even a poor man mostly has a home. Don't care if it's only a barrel on a lot, the fello' will keep frequentin' that lot, and if yu' want him yu' can find him. But out hyeh in the sage-brush, a man's home is apt to be his saddle blanket. First thing yu' know, he has moved it to Texas.
>
> (Owen Wister, *The Virginian* 43)

On my desk, next to my computer and my cup of hot tea, lie two editions of Owen Wister's *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (Oxford's Classics, 1998, and Signet Classics, 2002). The first has a colorful front with a painting of a mounted cowboy in action (see Appendix 1). A gun-belt is buckled around his waist, there is determination in his posture, and the open plains of the desert are visible in the background. The horseman dominates his surroundings as he also dominates the book cover, and his appearance is that of a self-asserting hero-figure of the kind that adventure stories of the Old West are notoriously known for. The other edition of the novel, however, is wrapped in a calm dark-blue color and is illustrated with a Victorian painting of a lush and tranquil natural scene with leafy trees and green grass bordering on a winding river and a lake (see Appendix 2). The sun is peering out from behind a cloud, covering the landscape in a dim light which stages a soft and serene atmosphere and makes the aspects of nature seem almost tangible. Therefore, if one were to

quickly glance at this second cover only, one might expect *The Virginian* to be a classic nineteenth-century romance novel.

An intriguing feature of Wister's novel is that both of these cover illustrations do justice to the story, regardless of their differing focus. *The Virginian* encompasses both of the two pervasive images of the Old West, the one of the heroic gunslinger seeking freedom through violence, and the one of the serene landscape, where freedom is in the natural scene, a landscape which in the novel is likened to "Genesis" (18) simply awaiting the hand of the cultivator (see White 620). Hence, Wister's novel is a Western adventure story with an unflinching cowboy-hero who battles an evil villain, and, at the same time, it is what Wister personally called a "colonial romance" (6), with the kind of romance and sentiment one might expect from a respectable Victorian novel. As the first fully conjured Western, *The Virginian* "moved the era of Jane Austen to the old West and changed the world," Max Evans claims (373), and *The Virginian* was indeed a new product, shaped on the borderline between commercial and serious fiction. The story-line is filled with action and excitement, but the pace is slow and the themes and topics presented are dense and controversial for their time. Consequently, the novel manages to capture the interest of readers who actively analyze and question what they read, as well as those who simply enjoy the humor, the likeable characters and the happy ending the narrative offers.

The novel was, and still is, a massive sales-hit, being the best-selling novel in the US the year of its publication, and, since then, selling at least 2 million copies more, which makes it among the most read American novels of all times. Furthermore, as the inventor of the modern Western, it has influenced a substantial literary genre and an entire industry of entertainment which has become a defining component of American popular culture. Fifty years after Wister introduced the singing cowboy-hero, Westerns comprised 11 percent of all fiction produced in the US, and eight of the ten most watched TV-shows featured imagined

adventures set in the West (see White 613). The cultural position the Western has acquired in contemporary American culture is plainly illustrated through the amount of Western expressions and metaphors incorporated into the language. Generations of Americans now use idioms such as "the last stand" and "hired guns" as an integrated part of their everyday speech. As Richard White explains, "for more than a century the American West has been the most imagined section of the US" (613). For that reason, the legacy of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* has, if not "changed the world" as Evans puts it, then at least changed American culture.

Considering the novel's position it is not surprising that it has been the subject of a great deal of academic study. Articles and dissertations have been written about the novel in terms of genre, racism, gender roles, sexuality, the symbolism of the railroad, conservatism, capitalism, and Wister's relationship with his famous mother, to mention some examples. A number of these works include comments on the story's underlying theme of cultural encounters between East and West, but only a few seem to make cultural encounters, development and transition the main focus of their examination. This thesis will focus on the ways in which cultural encounters and transformations are staged and acted out in Wister's *The Virginian.* The discussion which follows is based predominantly on the three central characters of the story as they represent different cultural backgrounds, and, by their personal experiences with the West as well as with each other, bring out the theme of cultural clash and transculturation. A consequence of this focus on characters is that the setting of the West as a region and an area of cultural encounters is not discussed separately in the following chapters. It is, however, explored indirectly through the overlaying analysis of the characters.

The Virginian is the story of two young Easterners, the unnamed narrator-character and the schoolmarm Molly Wood, who travel to the Western frontier environment of Wyoming in the 1870s and meet the Western hero-figure known as the Virginian. Through

their encounters cultural customs clash and differing perceptions of ideology and morality are debated. From these confrontations new friendships emerge across regional and cultural borders, love blossoms between East and West, and binary spheres based on customary traditions are challenged and eventually merged. The narrator-character observes closely as the hero and the heroine are confronted with, and soon embody, the transcultural development and progress which is inescapably changing the region around them. As the story progresses the frontier takes long strides from wilderness to civilization, merging customs of the Old West with Eastern ideas of education and commerce. The Eastern girl and the Western cowboy are positioned at the very center of this process. Motivated by young love they learn to live together, teaching and influencing each other until they have developed their own transcultural union, one which allows them to live happily ever after.

The third main character in Wister's novel, the unnamed narrator-character, is the narrative voice in the story. The story-line follows his time and experiences in cattle-land, and all events which occur and the relationships which are formed in the story are narrated through his observations and memory. The novel starts with him arriving, young and eager, in the Western territory, equipped with an Eastern tenderfoot's biases and expectations. Often at his own expense, he recounts the drama of his initiation into the ways of the West. As the story develops, so does his perception and understanding of the Western ideology, and his relationships with the characters inhabiting it. He is both a central participant and an outside observer of the cultural conflict zone that is the Western territory. He claims to depict events as he sees them, but as an Easterner he sees them with Eastern eyes, and he writes them down with an Eastern audience in mind. His presence as a character in the story stirs up cultural clashes and events, while his position as editor of voices allows him to frame events and dialogue. Hence, his control in terms of interpreting and illustrating the process of cultural transition within the story is unique. This also goes for the formation of each individual

character's image and, most importantly, the notion of the West as a regenerating and nigh on mythic space. The West, as depicted in the novel, is an open land of redemptive possibility, a space which can cure any illness, be that Wister's own personal history of sickness and depression, or the political blights of the American society. As an enthusiastic believer that the West is the way forward for America, Wister's narrator portrays a set of Western values intended to inspire the American people. In this thesis I will discuss and explore how this classic image was created, and to what effect and purpose.

The first chapter, entitled "Mapping the Territory," is intended to form a foundation for the chapters that follow. It offers some general information about the historical and generic environment from which *The Virginian* was created, as well as some basic features of the Western as a genre. It also presents some theoretical issues relating to literary transculturation, which serves as a helpful framework when approaching questions of transcultural change.

The second chapter addresses the narrator and his role in the story. Through an examination of narrative features, it seeks to shed some light on how the novel's iconic image of the West is created. It also examines how the West is made out as a contrast to the East, and how this is reflected through the manners and features of the characters and events which take place in the story.

Chapter three explores how the hero and the heroine are shaped and portrayed. They each represent their native region in regard to heritage and background, but, as it turns out, they are far from stereotypical in terms of character. Their unconventionalities within the limit of their inherent cultural and social roles make them more interesting and appealing than your average fictional character, and allow them to stand out in comparison to others around them. The twist of allowing an atypical representative personify the cultural perspective of the West also adds another layer to the discussion of cultural representation. One may ask to what

extent the fact that they are atypical affects their role as representatives of their respective cultural regions. Finally, the question of what this unconventional twist may have to say for the depiction of cultural clashes and transcultural change will be taken into account.

Chapter One: Mapping the Territory

> Now back East you can be middling and get along. But if you go to try a thing on in this Western county, you've got to do it *well.* You've got to deal cyards *well*; you've got to steal *well*; and if you claim to be quick with your gun, you must be quick, for you're a public temptation, and some man will not resist trying to prove he is the quicker.
> (Owen Wister, *The Virginian* 261)

The Virginian, a novel on the borderline between serious and commercial fiction, is set in the frontier environment of Wyoming between 1847 and 1890. With scattered population and a newly built railroad Wister's Wyoming was a land of cattle kings, traveling aristocrats, bonanza-seeking miners, and low-waged cowboys. The West was a site of opportunity, a place where people of different geographical, social and cultural backgrounds met in search of a new life. In this contact zone of cultural variances, of conflicting values, ideas, assumptions, ideology and biases, Wister creates his Western hero, the first of its kind, with features and attitudes molding later generations of Western gunfighters.

But how "Western" was really Wister's Western novel? And how "Western" was his cowboy hero? The purpose of this chapter is to map the territory, to explore the field and to introduce concepts which will provide a basis for the discussion and analysis that follows. The first part of "Mapping the Territory" aims to offer some basic information about the establishment of the Western genre, the contemporary literary environment from which Wister's novel arose, the influences it was founded on, and the legacy it created. The second

part addresses the challenge of approaching a fictional representation of cultural development, and of studying cultural clashes in a setting of continual development and transformation.

The Western

In order to talk about the West, as presented through Wister's classic Western, in terms of a certain "culture" or as a particular set of values, ideas, lifestyle and ideology, a few general comments might be useful to outline some of the Western genre's central characteristics. As the result of a long literary tradition, going back to the writings of Theodore Roosevelt, Frederick Jackson Turner, and the Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill, the Western genre has embraced the cowboy as the premier character of the West. The choice of the cowboy as a hero-figure seems to be rather ironical, however, if seen through the point of view of historians; the now glorified cowboy culture was, in reality, a decidedly inefficient and short-lived phenomenon with young men herding cattle, sometimes thousands of miles, across lands populated by Indians or owned by farmers, and the strain from the long and time-consuming trek affected both the quality of the meat and the health of the men. Unforgiving working conditions made cattle-herding an unfavorable means of making a living, a fact which tended to be reflected in the character of the men seeking such labor. As noted by Stephen McVeigh in *The American Western* (2007), the real cowboys of the West were "generally considered less than wholesome figures, at best foul mouthed, drunken delinquents, at worst, criminals capable of any amount of violent excess" (33).

Still, through the influence of nineteenth-century Eastern literature and entertainment, of which Wister's *The Virginian* has a prominent position, the long days on horseback and the nights spent under the open desert sky became, together with the cowboy himself, interconnected with adventure and romance. Among the earliest examples of this is the cowboy figure which appeared in Roosevelt's influential collection of articles on Western life,

Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail (1888); the cowboys of the West are "as hardy and self-reliant as any men who ever breathed – with bronzed, set faces and keen eyes that look all the world straight in the face without flinching" he claims amiably (qtd. in McVeigh 17), and descriptions along these lines play a considerable part in the renovation of the cowboy's rather dubious image. That is to say that Roosevelt, through his celebration of the cowboy, elevated him to become a heroic and iconic figure of the West, up to a point where he even considered him to serve as a model for the rest of the American nation; in his own words Roosevelt claims that "brave, hospitable, hardy and adventurous, [the cowboy] is the grim pioneer of our race" (qtd. in McVeigh 44).

Roosevelt's desire to develop an inspirational icon for the American nation seems fairly reasonable considering the social environment he operated in. At the end of the nineteenth century, the American society embodied a climate where rapid and traumatic changes brought on a tangible nostalgia for the past, and a longing for a simpler kind of life. The frontier, with its seemingly limitless resources and possibilities had been a source of optimism, but by 1890 the frontier was becoming a concept of the past. Taking advantage of the nostalgic longing among the American people, figures such as Owen Wister, Theodore Roosevelt, Fredrick Jackson Turner, and William F. Cody, who were all connected in some way or another, presented the West as a place where "the vigor and enterprise of revolutionary America might be rediscovered," John Cawelti explains in *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (226). As the arena where the American character had been forged and shaped, the frontier of the past was celebrated for its combination of tradition, heroism and inspiration, and, particularly, for its role in the creation of the principal values and institutions of democracy. The moral behind this was the idea that the American values of the historical frontier were the same values needed to heal America's contemporary afflictions (see Cawelti 226, McVeigh 13). Accordingly, the way of the West was the way forward for America.

Roosevelt was not alone in his admiration of the Western cowboy. William Cody – better known by his nickname Buffalo Bill – and his Wild West Show played an important part in the process of codifying many of the conventions we associate with the Western today (McVeigh 32). Cody's Wild West showed the American audience frontier characters who were "keen of eye, sturdy in build, inured to hardship, experienced in the knowledge of Indian habits and language, familiar with the hunt, and trustworthy in the hour of extremest danger" (qtd. in 32-33). In Cody's show the cowboy was remade to embody the spirit of the West: the independence from society, the close affinity with nature, a striking set of skills, and an attractive self-confidence (34). As McVeigh explains, "as Cody traveled, first across America and then the world, the image of the cowboy took hold as *the* symbol of the character of the American West, a symbol that would resonate trough the twentieth century" (34).

Cody's stage persona, Buffalo Bill, was also a leading character in the vastly popular tradition of dime novels, a series of inexpensive and easily obtainable novels which provided general Americans with a wealth of popular fiction during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Wrapped in boldly colored covers, the dime novels presented Wild West adventure to a newly literate working-class readership, spreading the stereotypes of the West across the United States. Though mainly directed at an adolescent audience, the dime novels, with their fixed formula of themes and characters, are generally considered as the forerunner of what we presently refer to as the Western genre. However, it took the effort of authors the like of Owen Wister to apply this formula in serious works of fiction, and to give the cowboy hero a new thematic significance. Through Wister's *The Virginian* the cowboy-figure evolved from the heroic Western gunslinger, as known through the various series of dime novels, into a more complex character interrelated with a number of social and cultural themes. Thus *The Virginian* provided the West in general, and the cowboy-hero in particular, with a new image.

The best-selling novel set in the late nineteenth-century's rural Wyoming has therefore been credited as the first modern Western (see Cawelti 219, Shulman vii-viii).

One reason behind the substantial influence *The Virginian* has had on later generations of Westerns is the way the novel's central themes of contemporary transcultural changes and developments are not only presented in the novel's story-line, but are also reflected in terms of the novel's genre. The integration of elements from different contemporary styles of writing provided *The Virginian* with the makings of what was to become a new literary genre; the style of writing subsequently connected with the modern Western. The combination of the form and function of nineteenth-century local color writing, as well as elements commonly associated with realism, made Wister's novel a new phenomenon in Western literature. As such the novel represents what McVeigh refers to as a "middle ground between two styles of Western writing while setting a precedent all of its own" (41).

On the one hand, like the local color writings of Mark Twain and Bret Harte, *The Virginian* is filled with humor, satire and sentiment, and includes detailed descriptions of an area and an environment created out of the author's own experiences, as opposed to most Western adventure stories at the time. Even though *The Virginian* embraces the classic adventure-story's romantic focus on nature and wilderness, the novel also allows social and cultural themes a considerable presence, addressing current topics such as the new Western social hierarchy and the cultural gap between East and West in a manner comparable to the style of Mark Twain. Furthermore, *The Virginian* seems to share Bret Harte's vision of the West as a place which enables people to rediscover and reaffirm the most important values in life. An essential difference between the two writers is, however, that whereas Harte's characters tragically tend to find their redemption too late in life, Wister's novel is optimistically depicting a series of characters who are redeemed by the frontier while they are still young, promising and prosperous. The perpetual optimism rendered through *The*

Virginian has remained a central part of the romance in the modern Western (see McVeigh 41-42, Cawelti 216-19).

On the other hand, Wister also borrowed elements from the tradition of realist writers such as Stephen Crane and Hamlin Garland (see McVeigh 42, Cawelti 216). Wister's novel shares Cranes and Garland's efforts of portraying a more tangible Western environment where stereotypes are less prominent and events are described with a larger amount of historical realism (McVeigh 42). Wister has, in his novel, included a stereotypical set of characters – the cowboy-hero, the Eastern fair lady, the tenderfoot writer – but they are not depicted with stereotypical traits. As will be explored in more detail in later chapters, the cowboy presented in *The Virginian* does not come across as a conventional hero as much as a complex and vulnerable character who cries on his friend's shoulder and picks flowers for sick ladies. The realism Wister has incorporated into *The Virginian* has brought greater range and more depth into his writing, McVeigh claims:

> This means that *The Virginian* is not the simple Western narrative that its focus on romance between the Virginian and Molly Wood, its humor and, in the conflict between the Virginian and Trampas, its escalating action, may suggest. Rather Wister's novel is also a discursive and dense novel engaging in the political, social and cultural debates abroad in turn-of-the-century America. (43)

It may be this combination of various styles of writing; the elements of adventure, humor, satire and sentiment, along with the more serious nature of the social and cultural themes featured, that lies at the heart of the novel's phenomenal success, McVeigh concludes (43).

The Virginian's blend of elements and topics initiated a formula which has served as a guide for subsequent Westerns. In *West of Everything* Jane Tompkins meditates over the arch-images and conventions that formed the Western genre, from the nineteenth-century works of Wister, Roosevelt and Cody and the adventure-stories of the dime novels, up until the modern Western as we know it today. Referring to iconic images like the gunfight, the mounted horseman outlined against the sky, or the saloon girl, she argues that they all carry with them "worlds of meaning and value, codes of conduct, standards of judgment, and habits of perception that shape our sense of the world and govern our behavior without our having the slightest awareness of it" (6). As such the genre has acquired a pervasive position in American culture, a position which is rooted in the genre's immense popularity and its ability to reach a wide and varied readership, Tompkins explains:

> People from all levels of society read Westerns: presidents, truck drivers, librarians, soldiers, college students, businessmen, homeless people. They are read by women as well as men, rich and poor, young and old. In one way or another Westerns – novels and films – have touched the lives of virtually everyone who lived during the first three-quarters of this [the twentieth] century. (5)

One reason for the genre's popularity may be, according to Tompkins, that the West functions for most people as a symbol of freedom, an escape from the conditions of modern industrial society. It allows an alternative to our mechanized existence, social entanglements, economical struggles and political injustice. The "Big Sky country" is not a particular geographical area as much as an ideological reference. The West is both real and imagined; it is a physical region which represents a psychological and spiritual place (see Tompkins 4,

Cawelti 193). Most of the ideological references of the West are related to the symbolic landscape. The desert, the most classic Western landscape, functions as a "tabula rasa," a blank slate on which one can write "the story [one] wants to live" (Tompkins 74). The open plains allow the lone horseman complete domination and control, his view extending as far as the eye can see, and unlimited access gives him freedom to move unrestrained across the terrain (Tompkins 74-75). The West has become "a set of symbols that constituted, not history, but an explanation of history, and in that a sense myth," McVeigh explains. The West's significance as a mythic space has over time outweighed its importance as a real place, and for a vast number of Americans the West has become "a landscape known through and completely identified with the fictions created about it" (26).

The West's significance as a mythic space, and the factors behind the formation of cultural specificity are also the primary focus of Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation.* Here he traces "the system of mythic and ideological formulations that constitute the Myth of the Frontier" and the way it has shaped the life, thought and politics of the American society (4). Most helpful to our study of *The Virginian* is the way Slotkin's theory clarifies the difference between the two concepts *ideology* and *myth*, explaining how they make up different but closely related aspects of what he calls "the culture-making process." Ideology, as understood by Slotkin, is "the basic system of concepts, beliefs, and values that defines a society's way of interpreting its place in the cosmos and the meaning of its history" (5). A culture's ideology is, in most cases, expressed in narrative form, he explains, and consequently myths are created:

> Myths are stories drawn from a society's history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society's ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness – with all the complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain (5).

Through frequent usage and retelling, occurring over time, the original mythic story is abstracted and transformed into deeply encoded sets of symbols or icons. These mythic icons are "capable of evoking a complex system of historical associations by a single image or phrase" (6). For an American, Slotkin explains, allusions to keywords such as "the Frontier" or "the Alamo" will evoke implicit understanding of the entire historical scenario of these icons as well as the tradition that has developed around them. Like Tompkins he stresses the cultural importance the Western arch-images, which he refers to as Western mythic icons, have acquired in the American society.

Several of these mythic icons, such as the open plains of the Western landscape, mirror the genre's prominent optimism. An impression regularly reflected in the opening sections of Western novels is that in the open desert landscape the possibilities are infinite. Full of promise these novels present the New World as "a void … waiting to be peopled," "a space to be filled," and a "territory to master" (Tompkins 74). This sense of freedom and new possibilities is such an integrated part of the identity of the West that it can be traced back to the nineteenth century and the beginning of the Western genre. Contemporary historian Frederick Jackson Turner mentions the freedom of the West as early as 1893 in connection with his influential thesis about the American frontier. Here Turner argues that in order to survive the hardships and struggles of the frontier environment, the colonist sheds his ties to the Old World and becomes "a new product that is American" (qtd. in McVeigh 23). As McVeigh explains, the new product is independent of "Old World concepts such as deference to authority and the focus and reliance on social organization," and as a result we might say that the Western frontier produces "the world's first genuinely free man" (24).

In spite of the Western's central core of optimism, the genre is not essentially a form of light entertainment. Popular belief tends to consider the Western adolescent and escapist, a

heritage from the time of adventure stories and Dime novels perhaps. In actuality, according to Tompkins, "one of the hallmarks of the [Western] genre is an almost desperate earnestness" (11). The Western answers needs, arouses desires, and portrays a vision of life which is far from trivial and juvenile (10-11). This is perhaps best illustrated through the genre's premier character – the cowboy hero. To be a hero in a Western is never comfortable. The cowboy hero is exposed to extremes: riding for miles on end through a merciless desert, hot, thirsty, and exhausted, or trapped in a snowstorm in below-zero weather, miles from the nearest possibility of shelter. He might be without food and water, his muscles ache, he is most likely shot at and wounded, and every move he makes involves pain. Ironically, as Tompkins observes, "His pain is part of our pleasure. It guarantees that the sensations are real" (3). On our hero's heals are men chasing him, he might be attacked by a wild animal any moment, and most likely he has just suffered a personal tragedy. Western heroes are caught in situations in which their only possibility of salvation requires unrelenting persistence, a higher purpose, and their own ability to sustain pain. As Roosevelt claims in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail,* the men who inhabit the frontier "run risks to life and limb that are unknown to the dwellers of cities," and it is vital for them to be strong in order to survive the "stern and unending struggles" of their surroundings and the "grim harshness of their existence" (qtd. in McVeigh 17). Western author Louis L'Amour states this notion even more plainly in his iconic words from *Heller With a Gun* (1955): "It was a hard land, and it bred hard men to hard ways" (qtd. in Tompkins 11).

In *The Virginian* the two opposing gunslingers, the Virginian and his arch enemy Trampas, are both feeling their share of misery while waiting for their pledged duel to the death. The Virginian walks with heavy steps into the main-street, having just lost the woman he loves, and stands there waiting for the right moment to kill or be killed. The situation is, as

he says, “mean luck. Mighty mean” (306). Trampas, for his part, uses these final minutes to battle his nerves and the thoughts about his own morality:

> After five years, here was the end coming – coming before dark. Trampas had got up this morning with no such thought. … And he thought of how he had eaten his breakfast. How would he eat his supper? For supper would come afterward. Some people were eating theirs now, with nothing like this before them. His heart ached and grew cold to think of them, easy and comfortable with plates and cups of coffee. (311)

Their shared misery notwithstanding, the situation “had come to that point where there was no way out, save the ancient, eternal way between man and man” (301), and Trampas never got to eat his supper.

The supreme hardships the Western hero needs to face are among the genre’s most compelling aspects. Interestingly, the reader’s fascination of the hero’s struggles might be explained by the reader’s ability to relate to the hero-figure’s problems, regardless of their extraordinary scale, and as such acquire a sense of common reference. Tompkins explains:

> …all the qualities required of the protagonist are qualities required to complete an excruciatingly difficult task: self-discipline; unswerving purpose; the exercise of knowledge, skill, ingenuity, and excellent judgment; and a capacity to continue in the face of total exhaustion and overwhelming odds. (12)

Although on a more modest scale, as Tompkins suggests, the qualities required of the hero in order to overcome his challenges are essentially the same qualities which the reader depends

on to cope with life's day-to-day struggles (12-13). The Western relates to the reader's negative feelings of everyday stress and efforts, and incorporates them into a plot featuring a life-and-death situation. Life's various problems and difficulties are connected with a new and enhanced sense of purpose, and hard work is transformed from something one wishes to avoid into the most desirable endeavor. A vital element of this process is how, at the end of the episode, the reader is allowed to share the hero's reward for all the hard work, and to gather inspiration from his hard-won achievements. As Tompkins puts it: "The laboriousness of the experience, its mind-numbing and back-breaking demands, are essential to the form of satisfaction the narrative affords" (12). In other words, we might conclude that, contrary to popular belief, Westerns are not appreciated for their recreational value as much as for their seriousness. They appeal to the human desire of meeting a challenge, of being put to the ultimate test and eventually succeed. Accordingly, the attractiveness of the Western universe is not necessarily a hunger for adventure as much as a hunger for meaning (Tompkins 15). Being reminded of, or perhaps discovering, a higher purpose of life should be considered an integrated part of the reading experience.

Cultural Clash and Transformation

One of the attractions of the genre is that, in the midst of our own chaotic reality, Westerns strive to create a world of clear alternatives, fundamental oppositions painted black and white for our benefit. In a Western, according to Tompkins:

> There are two choices: either you can remain in a world of illusions, by which is understood religion, culture, and class distinctions, a world of fancy words and pretty actions, of "manners for the parlor and the ball room, and …

> womanly tricks for courting";[1] or you can face life as it really is – blood, death, a cold wind blowing, and a gun in the hand. These are the classic oppositions from which all Westerns derive their meaning: parlor versus mesa, East versus West, woman versus man, illusions versus truth, words versus things. (48)

East and West are obligatory binaries in the Western genre. The West strives to be all that the East is not; the clean open landscape contrasts the polluted environment and corrupt society of city life. Fancy talk and a fashionable appearance are frowned upon while the "sons of the soil" are celebrated for their "honest" roughness. As touched upon earlier, one of the most important legacies of Wister's *The Virginian* is that the novel depicts the frontier as a social entity rather than a natural one. Building on "the wilderness-civilization dialectic," McVeigh explains, the novel highlights differences between the West and the East through an exploration of the varieties between the contrasting regions' values and institutions (41). In the conflict zone of different cultures that the Western territory hosted, Wister's novel explores the differences between the New and the Old World, between the wilderness and civilization, the tough ranch-hands and the literate Easterners. Most interestingly, however, the novel explores the transcultural processes that this clash of cultures eventually fueled, resulting in gradual changes within the community as well as within the central characters.

The East – West dichotomy is emphasized from an early stage in Wister's novel. On his first evening in the West, the narrator-character in *The Virginian* steps into a Western saloon and watches a group of cowboys enjoying a game of poker. Amiably he renders an image of what he sees:

1 Under the heading of "Women and the Language of Men" Tompkins quotes from Louis L'Amour's novel *Radigan* (1958).

> …there was scarce a face among them that had not in it something very likable. Here were lusty horsemen ridden from the heat of the sun, and the wet of the storm, to divert themselves awhile. Youth untamed, sat here for an idle moment, spending easily its hard earned wages. City saloons rose into my vision, and I instantly preferred this Rocky Mountain place. More of death it undoubtedly saw, but less of vice, than did its New York equivalents. And death is a thing much cleaner than vice. (30-31)

Ironically, the Eastern narrator-character appears to be blind to the "vice" of gambling, prostitution and violence so obligatory in Western saloons. It seems that such activities, by his own definition, are "cleaner" when executed in a Western saloon by men in boots than in a "city saloon" by men wearing suits.

Interestingly, according to Tompkins, the most characteristic feature of these clear-cut oppositions is that they break down as soon as they are subjected to pressure. Attitudes and fixed ideas frequently change shape and turn into the opposite of their original form. A hero who swears never to do something, most likely ends up doing exactly that. "It's as if the genre's determination to have a world of absolute dichotomies ensures that interpenetration and transmutation will occur," Tompkins explains (48). While apparently striving to give the readers a world of clear alternatives, Westerns are just as compulsively driven to break down the binaries and make the oppositions contain each other.

In *The Virginian* this interpenetration and transmutation takes form through the East – West dichotomy, gradually breaking down the cultural differences between the regions and the characters connected to them as the story progresses. As the various Eastern and Western characters are removed from their original cultural environment and develop new relationships across their former binary cultural backgrounds, their own cultural identities are

transformed and adapted accordingly. While exploring the process of gradual cultural transformation, as presented in the novel, it might be useful to explore some basic concepts concerning transculturation.

Instead of treating cultural identity as something static, a final result of a process of cultural change, theories of transculturation study the dynamic process itself. Central to this approach is the notion that there can be no final result in transcultural change as the process is never-ending. In "Transculturation: Contrapuntal Notes to Critical Orthodoxy" Mark Millington discusses the concept of transculturation presented in Fernando Ortiz's *Contrapunteo cubano* (1940). Ortiz first coined the term as a way of describing the different phases involved when a culture is transformed through encounters with foreign cultural elements. The way Ortiz defines the concept of transculturation, it embodies more than a simple acquisition of new cultural elements. Central in his understanding is that it involves cultural change or transformation. As Millington explains, "That experience [of transculturation] involves both loss and gain though neither is absolute: the loss is partial and the gain is of new cultural phenomena (and not of a complete new culture)" (Millington 263). Rather than assuming simple assimilation on the one hand, or a mosaic of two belief systems held simultaneously on the other, the idea of transculturation highlights how culture is never static, but a continuous process involving adjustments and transformations.[2] The process of transculturation thus includes moments of *deculturation* as well as *acculturation*, which in sum are encompassed by the concept of *transculturation*. The experiences of loss and gain, however, are not absolute. Elements of *deculturation* and *acculturation* only occur momentarily as the loss of culture is merely partial, and the gain consists of the absorption of new cultural phenomena rather than the adoption of a completely new culture (263). Transculturation, as theorized by Ortiz, stresses variety and fluidity of the movements and

2 It should be noted that Millington points to possible inconsistencies in Ortiz's theorizing with regard to the extent to which transculturation involves, or "subsumes," assimilation (263).

phases involved, and the various influences may be asymmetrical in quantity and quality and still be efficient. One needs to bear in mind, as Milllington puts it, "that all cultures are heterogeneous, potentially contradictory and constantly in transformation, however slowly" (267).

The Virginian provides numerous examples of the transcultural process, as it is described by Ortiz. The novel presents neither the East nor the West –and their representative characters– as static, but, rather, as in transition, undergoing transformative change. These cultural changes involve elements of both loss and gain, consistent with theories of transculturation, and we see instances of deculturation as well as acculturation. Among the novel's earliest examples of this kind of change is the incident when the Virginian and his fellow cow-punchers are out riding:

> By the levels of Bear Creek that reach like inlets among the promontories of the lonely hills, they came upon the schoolhouse, roofed and ready for the first native Wyoming crop. It symbolized the dawn of a neighborhood, and it brought a change into the wilderness air. The feel of it struck cold upon the free spirits of the cow-punchers, and they told each other that, what with women and children and wire fences, this country would not long be a country for men. They stopped for a meal at an old comrade's. They looked over his gate and there he was pottering among garden furrows. (70)

What used to be "a country for men" is *partially lost* under the new influences brought on by "women and children," and the "dawn of a neighborhood" is approaching, allowing the land *to gain* civilization in the process of change. Wister's cow-punchers find that their old fellow horseman has replaced his spurs with family life, and even the open plains are lost, changed

into a fenced-in and cultivated garden. Their old friend remains unchanged in other aspects, though, as he keeps up his big-mouthed banter with his buddies, for instance, and it seems that his main priorities simply have taken a new shape. A change has indeed been brought "into the wilderness air," and their old comrade has been transformed by new cultural influences, and thus become a participant in the transcultural process. He sets the path for the rest of the cowboys, foreshadowing what will soon become of them all.

After their visit to the newly made family man, the Virginian swears joyfully about the state of his friend, and leads the boys into a "quite unprintable" song about "how he took his Looloo girl to the schoolhouse for to learn her A B C" (71). The song mocks both family life and the new-found need for education. Three years later, however, the Virginian has had a change of heart, and he finds himself in town about to marry the schoolmarm, the prime representative of the new times. With him are his two closest friends, one of them a newlywed husband and father and the other a cow-puncher who in his "vagrant heart ... began to envy the man who could bring himself to marry" (300). The former merry men use this occasion to stand in the bar "full of sentiment, empty of words, memory and affection busy in their hearts," looking back on their lost days of youth and a time when they used to see "rough days together" (300). After a moment of silence one of them tries to break it by bringing up talk about the weather, a topic which immediately leads them into the teething of McLean's kid, and words run dry again. Their priorities have obviously changed, and it would seem that they have all followed the lead of their old friend who settled down next to the schoolhouse few years before.

There are limits to the hero-figure's cultural transformation, however, as we see an example of when the Virginian, on the eve of his wedding day, is literally forced to choose between his wife-to-be (and a potential future as a family man) on the one hand, and the code of the West on the other. Standing in his hotel room, his sweetheart Molly at his feet

threatening to quit him if he walks out the door, and arch-enemy Trampas waiting in the street with loaded guns ready for the promised duel (as noted earlier), the Virginian is forced to search his soul to find where his allegiance lays. The whole situation is indeed "mean luck," but for all his new-found values and dreams for the future, the cowboy hero says his good-bye to the schoolmarm and walks out to face his enemy, proving that his heart still belongs to the West. The new times may have changed parts of his Western mindset, but evidently the Virginian has not entirely abandoned his Western lifestyle. His personal cultural transformation proves to be only partial; when put to the test, he remains a Western hero. As fortune favors him he also gets his bride the following morning.

In the discussion of cultural differences and transition within and between different cultural groups it is easy to connect regional background with cultural background, and, further, cultural background with cultural identity. These terms easily lend themselves to sweeping generalizations though, and they might not be as transparent as one would like to imagine. When we talk about East and West as clear-cut categories, then the characters originating from the individual regions are necessarily positioned into distinct cultural groups that allow for comparisons and contrasts. In *The Virginian* a handful characters serve as representatives for the cultural groups they originate from, and any analysis in terms of cultural differences will consequently be based on vast generalizations and simplifications.

There are a few things worth keeping in mind while analyzing notions of cultural representations and cultural identities. For analytical purposes it is tempting to treat a character's cultural belonging as something static, a fixed aspect of the character's identity. However, in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990) Stuart Hall argues against the idea of regarding any kind of identity as an accomplished fact. "Identity," according to Hall, is "a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (392). He discusses two different conceptions of cultural identity,

starting with what he finds to be the most commonly applied approach, the notion of a collective, shared culture, which people with a similar history and background hold in common, allowing them to be considered as one people with shared, stable frames of reference (393). This perspective is useful for purposes of unity, as well as for the creation of social networks and movements. In order to discuss the Western's East – West dichotomy, as presented in *The Virginian*, it is necessary to treat each opposing region as a separate unity, focusing on common features rather than individual varieties. Nevertheless, this approach does not show the whole truth, Hall claims, as it imposes an imaginary coherence on experiences which are in reality fragmented and always in process, undergoing change. Neither does it provide much practical framework for our study of transcultural development within and between *The Virginian's* central characters.

However, Hall also introduces a second approach to cultural identity which addresses these fragments by pointing to the individual differences within a cultural group, based on the conception of identity as a constant process of transformation. Identity, as such, is a matter of becoming rather than being (394). Cultural identities, according to this view, are not something which already exists, fixed in history and tradition, but rather subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power. Identities are thus not *given* to us by the past but created through the different ways *we position ourselves* within the narratives from the past (394). And when cultural identity is treated as a continuous process rather than inheritance, politics are allowed to enter into the equation. Hall explains:

> Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of

> identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental 'law of origin.' (395)

This connection between politics and cultural transition is also explored by Diana Taylor in "Transculturating Transculturation." Here Taylor distinguishes between two different aspects of what is referred to as "culture." The inherited or "given" system of conceptions, symbols, and norms shared by the people in the community she refers to as the "first face of culture."[3] This is the subconscious cultural heritage which binds the community together and sets it apart from alien cultural elements. However, there is also, according to Taylor, a conscious side of cultural identity. What she calls the "second face of culture" comprises the political choices made through "strategic use of cultural symbols." These cultural symbols are the elements of the community's cultural identity which are recognized by the community itself and purposefully used as a political resource. Cultural elements emphasized in a deliberate manner provide a powerful tool in group action (91).

The theory of transculturation involves both faces of culture, Taylor claims. The first facet traces the process of transition and exchange when cultures meet, at the same time as it examines shared historic and socio-political forces shaping the culture as a whole. The second facet of a culture in the process of transculturation, however, studies the society's own consciousness of its cultural elements, and the political choices made as a result of that realization during their contact with foreign culture. She explains:

> The issue in transculturation, then, is not only one of meaning (what do symbols mean in different contexts). It is also one of political positioning and

3 Taylor borrows these terms from David Laitin's *Hegemony and Culture*.

> selection: which forms, symbols or aspects of cultural identity become highlighted or confrontational, when and why. (91)

The selection of cultural elements that are gained and lost during a process of transculturation is thus not as random as it might seem. People tend to take, if given the choice, what they need from the new possibilities open to them, and they consciously emphasize and hold on to the elements they consider to be the most essential part of their own cultural heredity.

Thus, Taylor argues against the notion that in a process of cultural exchange and transformation the acquisition of new cultural elements is forced. This seems to be a view Wister shared as well, as it is apparent in the setting and story of his novel. *The Virginian* is set in the final years of the American frontier, and depicts a region and an environment in rapid and dramatic change. Central in this setting is the loss of the open plains and the "good old days" of the cowboy culture. In spite of the nostalgia and underlying sentimentality that characterize the novel's depiction of cultural transition, there is no indication in the novel that the process of acculturation, the cultural influences flooding in from the East, is forced upon the Western region. On the contrary, it is evident that the transition towards greater civilization is fueled by the locals' own desire for the services and goods that the East has to offer. They choose civilization; civilization is not enforced on them. There are numerous examples of this in the novel, but it is perhaps most noticeably illustrated through the relationship between the Virginian and Molly Wood. First of all, Molly Wood, the schoolmarm, travels West by invitation from the local community as a result of a growing demand for Eastern education. Further, after settling into her new environment it is the Western hero-figure who first approaches the Eastern schoolmarm, and she repeatedly rejects his courtship. Only by one-sided and long-lasting persistence is the Western hero eventually able to form a marital union with the Eastern schoolmarm. It is also the cowboy-hero's own

idea that he should take time off from his regular activities to better his education, occasionally replacing his spurs with books. Consequently, the Western cowboy-hero does not come across as a passive pawn in an inevitable transcultural process; he deliberately chooses his Eastern bride as well as the change in lifestyle their union brings.

The American Western of the twentieth century is thus a genre, an ideology, a mythic space and a conflict zone of Americans representing diverse cultures and ethnicities. It is a historical and geographical place, and it is a psychological state. For some the West is a political concept, for others it is a source of entertainment which has little to do with reality. For Owen Wister the American West presented a lifestyle which healed him from depression and failing health. It was a place he traveled to each year to escape everyday struggles in the East. Accordingly, it makes sense that he celebrated the West, and that when he wrote his famous novel it depicted an ideal West of the past, a place of myth and imagination rather than contemporary reality. What he shows the reader in *The Virginian* is a "vanished world," as he claims in his introduction to the novel, and he adds: "No journeys, save those which memory can take, will bring you to it now" (Wister 6). But the novel also takes a political stance; its myth-making has influenced generations of Western authors, and spread the idea that the way of the West was, and still is, the way forward for America. This idea has been conveyed along with the genre through the twentieth century and is in many respects still a common attitude in the US today. This is evident when considering the position the mythic icons of the West have gained in American society and culture.

Wister's vision of what happens with Eastern people who are transplanted from their native cities to the open Western plains has influenced generations of Westerns, but how did Wister convey this vision? The following chapters will explore and discuss the manner of which Wister depicted the cultural differences of the conflict zone of the Western territory.

Chapter Two: Entering the West with the "Tenderfoot" Narrator

> Medicine Bow was quiet as I went my way to my quilts. So still, that through the air the deep whistles of the freight trains came from below the horizon across great miles of silence. I passed cow-boys, whom half an hour before I had seen prancing and roaring, now rolled in their blankets beneath the open and shining night.
>
> "What world am I in?" I said aloud. "Does this same planet hold Fifth Avenue?"
>
> And I went to sleep, pondering over my native land.
>
> (Owen Wister, *The Virginian* 37)

The Virginian is a story of development and transition. As a portrait of young people from different backgrounds whose lives become intertwined in the conflict zone of the New World, the cultural interaction, and clashes, between their native Eastern and Western customs form a basic foundation for the novel's story line. As one of these characters is the narrator of the story, the cultural difference between East and West also has an impact on the way the story is presented. Through the frame of a personal narration, the story is told by a narrator with his own agenda and politics. He moves between different narrative levels and varies the extent of his personal participation in the story, which enables him to manipulate and control the narrative focus. As a result, he creates a compelling atmosphere and imagery which is fairly transparent when studied critically, but equally easy to be blinded by, the moment we allow ourselves to be carried away by the romance. The hero-figure is presented

as faultless and flawless and the West comes across as a place of opportunity and prospect. All in all, the narrator promotes the West in such a manner that the novel has inspired and shaped an entire industry of Western entertainment. But how did *The Virginian* create the renowned image of the West? And how does the novel's romanticism affect the narrator's credibility as a cultural observer?

This chapter will discuss the manner in which the narrator of *The Virginian* presents the story; his use of different narrative levels, the linguistic features he applies, and his editorial power in regards to other voices and viewpoints. The aim is to examine how the narrative perspective affects his portrait of the West as a cultural region, and how it subtly guides the reader's focus in matters of cultural imagery and ethics. In this connection, it is also important to explore how the narrator shapes the image of the hero, an image which inspired a new formula for Western hero-figures, and how this might affect the way the narrator, as a character, relates to the West. Central in this discussion is also an analysis of the character of the narrator and how his personal participation in the story affects his position as narrator and cultural observer. Finally, the analysis of the narrator will be rounded up with some comments on his development as a character, from the time he entered the West as a tenderfoot, until the time when the tenderfoot knew his way around the West.

The Narrator and his Story

As an identifiable character in the story, Wister's narrator appears to be what Rimmon-Kenan, in *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (1983), refers to as an intradiegetic narrator; a narrator who is inside of (as opposed to above) the story, or "a diegetic character in the first narrative" as she herself phrases it (94). The novel is framed as a story where our unnamed narrator tells about his experiences as a younger man. The plot is therefore centered around his own presence in the story, and narrated through his own perspective. This large degree of

participation on the behalf of the narrator permits him great freedom in the construction and manipulation of events. It allows him to overtly contribute in the story, to be what Rimmon-Kenan refers to as a homodiegetic narrator; "one who takes part in the story at least in some manifestation of his 'self'" (95), and thus to have ample influence as to how the plot is progressing. Though an intra-homodiegetic approach such as this allows the narrator-character an opportunity to shape the plot rather than simply tell it, it also limits the narrator's scope. While narrating personal experiences as they happened, he is necessarily ignorant of events and bits of knowledge occurring outside of his immediate surroundings.

Even so, Wister's narrator overcomes these limitations by narrating his experiences in the past tense and occasionally stepping back from the first narrative to tell the story from a position of when he is older and better informed than the young and naive person he was at the time when the events took place. The narrator uses his position as a more experienced self to assume a superior and more authoritative voice. In doing so, he takes on a heterodiegetic position – the position of one who does not participate in the story he narrates (Rimmon-Kenan 95) – as opposed to the homodiegetic position he assumes as a character. While narrating from this outer position, he possesses extended insight on events and settings, prior knowledge about the characters involved, and a critical distance towards his own experiences as a character. This critical distance allows him to comment on, and judge, the events of the story. From the start we see frequent occasions where the narrator steps back from his homodiegetic narrative and reveals extended knowledge, providing the reader with background information about the characters, or adding comments based on hindsight reflection regarding his own experiences or actions. Distance, absence, and elevated authority to some extent allow him the quality which has often been referred to as omniscience, characterized as follows:

> familiarity, in principle, with the characters' innermost thoughts and feelings; knowledge of past, present and future; presence in locations where characters are supposed to be unaccompanied (e.g. on a lonely stroll or during a love-scene in a locked room); and knowledge of what happens in several places at the same time. (Rimmon-Keenan 95)

This inconsistency in the narrator's status, between a fairly omniscient older narrator and a young and naive narrator-character, makes the narrator's position difficult to label, but it provides him with practically unlimited freedom in terms of the construction of the story.

As the story begins, the Eastern intra-homodiegetic narrator (the narrator-character) experiences his first encounter with the Western society of Wyoming, and his use of the first person narrative voice allows the reader to discover the "New World" along with him. While on this narrative level, the narrator-character's scope is limited and he only knows what he, as a character, can see and hear. This is evident as he, while entering new locations, is only able to perceive fragments of the conversations taking place around him, exemplified through his remark that "what answer was given to them I did not hear, nor did I see who spoke" (27). His first impressions of the new region are depicted through a continuous use of rhetorical questions, as he ponders over local curiosities and meditates over new cultural insights:

> Yes, I was dazed. How did they count distance in this country? You spoke in a neighborly fashion about driving over to town, and it meant – I did not know yet how many days. And what would be meant by the term "dropping in," I wondered. And how many miles would be considered really far? I abstained further questioning the "trustworthy man." My questions had not fared excessively well. (17)

This fragmented and questioning account of the narrator-character's first encounter with Western culture creates an atmosphere which convincingly embodies the confusion and excitement involved in meeting something alien and new. The narrator-character has, to use his own words, "stepped into a world unknown to me indeed, and novelties were occurring with scarce any time to get breath between them" (19). Due to his way of re-creating this "unknown world," he convincingly visualizes these novelties to the reader as well.

The narrator-character's alleged ignorance highlights and reveals customs of the Western culture in a manner only an outsider can perceive. Making the most of his position as a stranger in a new society, he highlights his own Eastern manner and makes it an integrated part of the narrative plot. This allows him to explore the Western peculiarities as they clash with his own Eastern norms and concepts. His "civilized" and bookish conduct is efficiently contrasted and enhanced during his interaction with the simple lifestyle of the cow-punchers, and the cultural differences between East and West are easily perceived.

The way *The Virginian's* plot is constructed around an Eastern narrator getting to know the West through active participation, primarily absorbing elements from his new environment but also, by his presence, influencing it, serves as a solid foundation for a study of culture and transition. A fundamental component of theories of cultural transition is that there can be no transculturation unless there are human beings to transport it (Millington 261). Thus, according to the transcultural model, the narrator-character contributes to the dynamic process of cultural change simply by being an Easterner in the West. By way of his position at the center of the Western region's transcultural process, the narrator is also able to depict it as a first-hand experience.

Regardless of his extensive participation in the events of the Western society, however, the narrator-character more or less keeps the position of an outsider throughout the

story, retaining the identity of an Eastern novice even as his skill level and social adaptation increases. Although not an ideal position for the narrator-character personally, this outsiderness might in fact be his greatest advantage when it comes to efficiently depicting and illuminating elements of Western society. In "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff" Mikhail Bakhtin argues against the notion that "in order better to understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting ones own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture," which he claims to be one-sided, and thus untrustworthy (6). Even though "a certain entry as a living being into a foreign culture" is necessary to create understanding, he stresses that "if this were the only aspect of this understanding, it would merely be duplication and would not entail anything new or enriching" (7). A person needs to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding, Bakhtin explains, preferably in time, space and culture:

> In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly … A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. (7)

In this dialogue, which only exists in the encounter with a foreign culture, we raise new questions which the culture has not been asking itself. The answers we find reveal new aspects and new semantic depths. According to Bakhtin we are dependent on these questions in order to creatively understand anything foreign, and they must be *our own* questions in order to achieve the desired effect. The aim is mutual understanding: "Such a dialogic

encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing," which means that "Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched" (7). That is to say that, the narrator's shifting narrative levels, his inconsistent manner of fluctuating between closeness and distance to the story, might help him explore and depict the specificity and dynamic of the frontier environment.

The narrator-character's outsideness is also fuelled by his reticence concerning his own motives. With the exception of his rather demonstrative display of Eastern bookishness, the narrator-character is very selective when it comes to information regarding his own person. He allows the reader to know that he is a young man, a few years younger than the Virginian, and that this is his first encounter with the West. He does not, however, share any information about his background or character, a prominent example of which being the fact that he remains a nameless character throughout the story. Characteristic of his overt Eastern helplessness he goes by the somewhat less honorable nickname "the tenderfoot," a slang term characterizing a newcomer in a comparably rough or newly settled region, particularly a person not yet hardened to outdoor life. Rather than revealing his Eastern family name, the narrator-character chooses to accept the fairly unfavorable nickname as it is given to him by his new Western community. Effectively, as he both consents to, and applies, the new Western name, he also forms a new identity in accommodating the Western environment and culture.

By his silence regarding his Eastern life, the narrator-character consequently masks any alternative identity to the one he shapes in the West. The reader is aware of his occasional travels back East, but not to what kind of life, or to what end, he returns to. Rather than recounting his own experiences during these visits to the Eastern civilization, he uses these time-gaps to follow the events taking place in Wyoming. Since the narrator is not present at these times, he uses letters and rumors as sources of information in order to keep track of the

main characters in the story. Further, on the his return to the Western territory, he makes detailed notes of how events have progressed in his absence, summarizing the progress with information allegedly told to him by other characters. It is thus evident that even though *The Virginian* bears the mark of a personal narrative, the novel's real focus is on the Western region rather than on the man who tells the story.

The narrator also indicates that although he places himself as a character at the center of events, it is not his intention to become the center of the story. Though he is present at most events throughout the story, he mainly takes the role of an observer. He might occasionally also functions as a catalyst, setting events in motion and driving the plot forward, but at these times his colorful descriptions of the events and characters around him makes them the natural focal point of the situation. Consequently the excitement of the frontier, particularly its vibrant cast of characters, tends to overshadow the person who is pulling the strings and framing the story. The narrator, therefore, gains ample opportunity to guide the reader's focus towards the images which best serve his agenda to highlight.

The narrator-character's amiable tale of his adventures in the West is only part of the novel's structure, however. As noted, while a large portion of the story, especially in the first part of the novel, is narrated by an intra-homodiegetic narrator, the reflections of an older and more experienced narrator are also a central part of the construction of the story. In addition, there are sections of heterodiegetic narration, marked by distance from the first narrative, in which the narrator has certain advantages, such as a greater degree of intimate knowledge regarding the other characters in the story, which would not be accessible to a homodiegetic narrator. In the first part of the novel, these passages tend to be fairly short and to be incorporated into sections of the intra-homodiegetic narration which means that transitions are sometimes hardly noticeable. They often blend in quite well and are therefore easily regarded as a part of the intra-homodiegetic narrative. The effect of this is that the reader gets the first-

hand descriptions of the narrator's story, which, as it were, are integrated into the more extensive heterodiegetic narrative, which tends to dominate the latter part of the novel.

An early example of the combination of the two levels of narration is found in a section where the narrator-character is describing his own inadequacy to fit in among the local cow-punchers of Medicine Bow. During his depiction of how his "tenderfoot innocence" clashes with the local customs of the eating-house, he suddenly changes narrative level for a moment and delivers an after-the-event reflection of how he himself, as a character, is perceived and interpreted by the others present in this particular situation:

> By reason of something, – my clothes, my hat, my pronunciation, whatever it might be – I possessed the secret of estranging people at sight. Yet I was doing better than I knew; my strict silence and attention to the corned beef made me in the eyes of the cow-boys at table compare well with the over-talkative commercial travelers. (20)

Though narrated in the same style as the main story, this is a comment made by a narrator who writes at a later time than the events took place. "I was doing better *than I knew*" suggests that the heterodiegetic narrator knows more now than he did at the time when he experienced the situation. The information about the narrator-character's position in the eyes of the cow-boys suggests either an omniscient access to the minds of the described characters, or a guess made as the result of reflective hindsight. Either way, it is information which the narrator-character, at this instance, would be unable to access. By providing the reader with this additional information, or rather interpretation, the narrator induces a more favorable impression of himself. The reader is left with the impression that his detailed accounts of his

own inadequacy are somewhat enhanced for effect, and that in reality he made a quite decent figure, doing better than the average Eastern traveler.

In addition to his continuous shifts between the two levels of narration, the narrator also has more direct means to guide the reader, as when he occasionally adds sections where he addresses the implied reader intrusively, asking questions or meditating over the topic at hand; "I do not know with which of the two estimates … *you* agreed. Did you think that ...? That would have been an error" (65; emphasis mine). Sections of intrusive digressions are most common in cases where the plot includes controversial topics. In one example, where the narrator meditates over cattle-lynching, the narrator addresses the reader with moralizing speeches, sometimes over the course of several pages. By continuously asking rhetorical questions and changing the tense from past to present, the narrator separates the intrusive sections from the main plot, allowing them to stand out as digressions (see e.g. ch. 33, esp. 280-85). For instance, he begs: "forgive me for asking you to use your mind. That is a thing which no novelist should expect of his reader" (282), even though this is exactly what he expects. Or rather, we might say that by offering his own opinion, it seems that he expects the reader to follow *his* mind. As his voice is the only voice present in these digressions, his ostensible meditations are more argumentative and opinionated than philosophical. Essentially, they take the form of lectures, and offer no alternative version or viewpoint to the ethics he presents.

The fairly controversial values that *The Virginian* introduces are a vital element of the novel's later influence and position in Western literature. They contribute to the narrator's presentation of what McVeigh refers to as Wister's code of the West; "a set of values and practices which have little to do with institutional law and government but rather have grown out of the social and cultural circumstances of the West" (45). These values answer to the practical reality of the frontier environment and its unique challenges, particularly in regards

to peacekeeping and justice. Central to the code is the West's esteem for individual honor, and the principle that a true hero acts according to his own moral limits rather than formal conventions. The Western hero should not be afraid of violent confrontation, but neither should he pursue it unnecessarily (46). Consequently, as McVeigh explains, the Virginian's involvement in a lynching and a shoot-out, actions which would be judged illegal by civilized law, are, by his local community, recognized as obligations rather than crimes (45).

The narrator's authority as an editor of voices is evident in matters regarding the code of the West as even the Eastern characters in the novel offer no real opposition against the new, and to them controversial, set of morals presented. This is particularly obvious in the case of the intellectual and resourceful Eastern schoolmarm Molly Wood who, after weeks of not sleeping or eating, horror-stricken by her lover's part in the lynching of local cattle-thieves, still accepts Judge Henry's Western "voice of reason" without a single counter-argument: "'There is your principle, Miss Wood, as I see it. Now can you help me to see anything different?' She could not" (284).

The narrator's professed role of authority is also evident as he defines and explains terms which are not listed in ordinary dictionaries, acting as a teacher for the reader. We see an example of this when rumors in the Eastern home town of Molly hits her family with the prospect of Molly being engaged to marry "a rustler." As this is an unknown term for the Easterners confusion gets the best of them:

> "Heavens, Andrew!" Said his wife; "what is a rustler?"
>
> It was not in any dictionary, and current translations of it were inconsistent. A man at Hoosic falls said that he had … heard the term applied in a complimentary way to people who were alive and pushing. Another man

had always supposed it meant some kind of horse. But the most alarming version of all was that a rustler was a cattle thief.

Now the truth is that all these meanings were right. (173)

The narrator, in this section, describes a number of different speculations connected with the meaning of a word not included "in any dictionary." He then concludes with "Now the truth is...," assuming an authority towards "the true meaning" of this Western term. At this point, the narrator shows great confidence and authority, seemingly intent on instructing the reader how things are to be interpreted, and which side of the matter is the most truthful one. Interestingly, this is the same narrator who willingly admits that he does not understand the West or its conventions, and never will be able to blend in. This is, therefore, another indication of how the narrator has grown to be a wiser, or at least more confident, person than he was by the time he narrates his experiences of the West.

The voice of the lecturing and assertive heterodiegetic narrator tends to become more prominent as the story evolves. Though opening with a predominantly limited first-person tale, the novel's narrative scope gradually widens as the story progresses, allowing the reader to glance more frequently into settings where the narrator-character is not present. On these occasions conversations, actions, and the inner thoughts and emotions of the various characters are extensively reported on by the narrator, whether the scene takes place in public locations or in private rooms. An example of this is the way he renders Molly's concerned thoughts regarding the letter her cowboy lover intends to write to her strict and traditional mother in the East:

What would he say to her mother? How would her mother like such a letter as he would write to her? Suppose he should misspell a word? Would not

> sentences from him at this time – written sentences – be a further bar to his welcome acceptance at Bennington? (238)

In this case the heterodiegetic narrator demonstrates how he is intimately acquainted with the mind of Molly, intrusively exploring her emotional state, and allowing the reader an explanation behind her nervous and worried state. Interestingly, though the narrator, while on the heterodiegetic level, seems fairly omniscient about the heroine's innermost thoughts and desires, he is unable to follow those belonging to the hero. In spite of an almost obsessive attempt to pierce through the mystery of the Western hero-figure, the narrator remains unsuccessful. Even as he grows accustomed to the Western culture and way of life, shedding most of his tenderfoot ways, he claims to be no closer to grasping the character of the Virginian: "I didn't pretend to understand the Virginian; after several years' knowledge of him he remained utterly beyond me" (139).

The well-informed narrator also has other blind spots. On certain occasions the narrator, while remaining on the heterodiegetic level, temporarily discards his omniscient-like quality and claims ignorance in specific areas, areas in which he earlier has been highly confident. After describing Molly's character extensively, for instance, he suddenly refuses to speculate about her reasons for not marrying a wealthy suitor: "I cannot be certain, because I have never been a girl myself," he explains (68). Another example of the narrator's odd moments of limitation is presented at the Swinton Barbeque. Here he talks at length and in great detail about the various events taking place at the barbecue, a party he himself did not attend, peering into the private conversations and emotions of everyone present, women as well as men, until the moment when "a ladies' caucus was organized in a private room, – no admittance for men" (88). At this point the narrator suddenly acts as if he himself had been present as a character, stressing how he, as a man, can only surmise what the ladies were

doing in that room. During the equally private meeting between the Virginian and his good friend Lin McLean, however, from which he was also excluded, the narrator knows and can tell all.

To identify a convincing pattern in the shifts between the two narrative levels, as well as in what looks like unsystematic variations of narrative omniscience, appears to be a hopeless task. What comes across as a random style, may in fact serve as an effect in itself. By adapting his narrative role to each individual situation, the narrator has complete control of how every topic is presented. The changes in narration allow a subtle manipulation of the reader by presenting every setting according to the point of view which best serves the narrator's agenda. Further, the variation in voices and angles makes it difficult to pinpoint the narrator, and to question his authority or access to "the truth." More importantly, however, the narrator's detailed control of each event also blurs the border between the Eastern character's cultural viewpoints and those of the Western characters. It becomes evident that all information provided to the reader has been through an editorial revision performed and controlled by the narrator, who as we know is Eastern. We can thus not be certain how realistically the various Eastern and Western cultural identities are depicted. Their representation is one which fits into the frame of the narrator's projected image.

The narrator reveals his Eastern voice not merely through the events and voices of the plot, however, but also through his "bookish" and educated manner of describing them. The story is told using fairly advanced language, and the novel's density and slow pace places it closer to Eastern "high literature" than to Western dime novels. The narrator-character, although personally experiencing fairly adventurous and frightening episodes, distances himself from the action as he hides behind serious language and dry comments. His grammar is immaculate, and his story is constructed in a way that indicates an earnest attempt to

capture the reality of the era. Only when quoting other characters does the narrator allow the local color to enter, either in the form of broad accents or, occasionally, as a tall tale:

> "It's not a brave man that's dangerous," continued the [card-] dealer. "It's the cowards that scare me." He paused that this might sink home. "Fello' came in here las' Toosday," he went on. "He got into some misunderstanding about the drinks. Well, sir, before we could put him out of business, he'd hurt two perfectly innocent onlookers. They'd no more to do with it than you have," the dealer explained to me.
>
> …and that's why I never like to be around where there's a coward. You can't tell. He'll always go to shooting before it's necessary, and there's no security who he'll hit. But a man like that black-headed guy is (the dealer indicated the Virginian) need never worry you. (30)

In episodes like this the narrator-character adds an atmosphere of the Wild West which contrasts with his own serious narration and allows the Western myth a presence in the setting of the plot. By quoting others instead of personally telling the tales, the narrator-character is safe from any questions regarding their truthfulness, as well as of harm to his personal image. In the same manner as his own, he also ascertains the Virginian's image as he portrays a hero-figure who abstains from any big talk or bragging of personal accomplishments. In order to convey the Virginian's heroic feats and still retain the image of him as a humble character, he adds other voices to the story whose apparent sole purpose are to make the hero's reputation known. These are typically local characters he meets during his travels who share tales and rumors about the hero, affirming the narrator's romantic image of him. The example presented above is taken from an episode where the narrator, during a visit to the local saloon,

overhears a guest asking the card-dealer how dangerous the nature of the Virginian might be. The dealer, "with admiration," exclaims that the Virginian is a brave man, and thus, based on the criteria spelled out in the above quotation, not anything that "need never worry you." With a smile he adds: "and there's another point why there's no need to worry about him: *It'll be too late!*" (30). In this fashion the gunslinger side of the Virginian is introduced, a side otherwise not much exposed during his friendly encounters with the narrator-character.

Another feature of the narrator's linguistic strategies is his way of connecting new Western practices with familiar Eastern concepts in order to explain and understand them. This way he merges East and West, applying, or perhaps imposing, Eastern language onto Western elements. In the crowded sleeping house, for example, he compares the norms and customs of the sleeping arrangements with those one would find on the seating habits in a railroad train (23), and while waiting to see how the Virginian's gamble turns out, he explains the excitement he is feeling as similar to the trembling sensation one gets when the cap of a camera is about to be removed (33). Interestingly, the Virginian also makes comparisons in a similar fashion in order to express himself, but in his case he uses Western practices as his points of reference. Thus he mirrors and reverses the practice of the narrator. An example of this is when the cow-puncher offers the narrator one of his rare compliments. Looking him over amiably the hero-figure remarks "you put up a mighty pretty game o'whist yourself" (107). In this case the card game reference is not meant literally but serves as a metaphor marking intelligence. The game of whist is a card game "played with brains" as the Virginian states it.

Framing the Hero

Interestingly, the narrator-character is not the only unnamed and elusive character in Wister's novel. The novel's main hero-figure is in a similar fashion never introduced by name, and, as

it turns out, the hero-figure and the narrator-character mirror each other to some extent. The Virginian has, like the narrator, been given a new nickname, and thus a new identity, in the West. Although the cowboy's primary nickname, “the Virginian,” similarly to “the tenderfoot” narrator serves as a constant reminder of his place of origin, his background or origin is no more a part of the novel’s focus than that of the narrator. Like the narrator the Virginian's depicted identity is centered on his existence in the West, and what life he might have outside of the frontier environment is only vaguely hinted at. This causes, in much the same manner as with the narrator, the character of the hero-figure to come across as a bit of a mystery. The unknown background of the hero-figure is reflected in the way the various characters of the hero’s local community, in lack of any concrete information, make up their own individual nicknames for the cowboy inspired by his outwards features, such as his physical appearance, his position, or by his Southern drawl. The most commonly used substitutions for a given name are “the Southerner,” “the tall man,” and “the black haired man,” all of them adjectives that describes how the hero-figure differs in comparison to your average Western ranch-hand. Hence Wister’s novel has created a hero who stands out from the crowd, although it is peculiar that the Western hero is identified through his variations from the typical Western.

The Virginian’s lack of a proper name does, however, fit in with the Western local community of cow-punchers, a small group of young men who are generally known by short and often curious nicknames. This practice seems to distinguish them quite effectively from the members of the Eastern aristocracy, as wealthy landowners and businessmen tend to be addressed in a more conservative manner. As a man without a family name or a title, the hero blends in with the workers rather than the rulers. The narrator has thus, by allowing his hero to be nameless, positioned him outside of the Eastern elite even before the fictional plot has been properly introduced.

Other effects of depicting an unnamed hero include the possibility to lead the narrative focus beyond the figure of the hero. An unnamed character can more easily be considered to speak for a wider group of people and, therefore, to represent a certain culture or way of life. Whereas a named hero-figure tends to be celebrated as a singular epic hero, the hero-figure known by vague nicknames might be entitled a metaphoric function to a much larger extent. Consequently, in addition to the Virginian's primary function as the traditional hero-figure of the story, his ambiguous identity also makes it easier to consider him as a representative of the West in general.

The narrator consistently refers to the hero as the Virginian, which is also the title of the novel, and this makes the link between the hero and the Southern state unavoidable. A Western hero-figure identified by his Southern heritage is fairly unconventional, and various efforts have been made to explain the idea behind this rather interesting twist. Robert Schulman claims in his introduction that the Virginian bearing the name of his region "suggest[s] the affinity between the values and codes of the South and those of Wister's Anglo-Saxon West" (ix). He points to the racist values expressed throughout Wister's writings and claims that Wister, through *The Virginian*, has attempted to fictionally create a romantic image of a mythic, "all-white Anglo-Saxon West" (x). This explanation seems probable considering the historic period in which Wister was writing. Patricia Nelson Limerick, in *The Legacy of Conquest*, describes the American West at this time as "the point where Indian America, Latin America, Anglo-America, Afro-America, and Asia intersected" (27). In this "important meeting ground" of different racial and ethnic origins, languages, religious beliefs and cultural heritages, the West showed a diversity surpassing any other region of the US (27). It is thus not unreasonable to assume that race and racism have a presence in the literature of this time, and that these ideas and attitudes also color the narrator's account in *The Virginian.*

The motive behind the hero-figure's background is, like most aspects in Wister's novel, fairly ambiguous and open to interpretations. Shulman observes that throughout *The Virginian*, Wister is at the same time criticizing and affirming the Eastern values he acquired in his own patrician upbringing (xxi). This general ambiguity and ambivalence towards the West seems to influence every aspect of the story, including the way the hero-figure is presented. The narrator is, as noted, intrigued with the mystery of the Virginian, and takes an almost obsessive interest in the cowboy. The Eastern novice's captivation with the Western hero, and all that he represents, is evident in the way he devotes all his attention to the cow-puncher whenever the two of them are present in the same setting, studying and interpreting the man's every move, constantly trying to decipher his body language or the look on his face. In spite of this, the narrator is never able to feel quite at ease in the cowboy's company. His fascination seems to border on curiosity and awe as he compares the Virginian to exotic and dangerous animals, describing his graceful movement as akin to "the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if muscles flowed beneath his skin," and his rapid and explosive character with similes such as "like a sudden snake" (11) or metaphors such as "a Bengal tiger" (154). Like a city boy would be transfixed by a wild and rare animal, the narrator-character is drawn towards the Western hero-figure. Seemingly unable to decide whether his hero is a savage or a gentleman, he makes notes of how, in moments where the Virginian is caught off guard, his face turns "savage for that fleeting instant" before returning to his usual controlled self (155). These shifts in temperament, the ambiguous nature, the unknown heritage, and the namelessness of the hero allow him to be studied through several hundred pages without the narrator ever really piercing the mystery of the character.

In fact, the hero-figure's ambiguous nature might actually be enhanced by the narrator's lengthy and meticulous observation. The narrator is, as it were, forced to compensate this lack of background information by adding more speculative interpretations.

The reader's knowledge in regard to the Virginian's character is consequently as limited as that of the narrator. This limitation allows the hero to keep an air of mystery around him, which, in turn, makes him decidedly more fascinating, to the narrator and the reader alike.

Another effect of the limited point of view is that it allows the young narrator's adolescent and admiring descriptions of the Virginian to form the image of the Western hero. It is, according to McVeigh, this "formularization of the cowboy character, in terms of speech, manner, dress and skills, that lie at the heart of what the Western would become in the twentieth century" (39). The narrator meticulously shapes the Virginian's romantic image as he describes the hero-figure's handsome looks, his excessive skills and the grace of his movements at great length. The hero is presented as "a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures" (12), and his beauty is always connected with masculinity and ferocity as is evident from the effect he has on the narrator: "In his eye, in his step, in the whole man, there was something potent to be felt, I should think, by man or woman" (16). The Virginian is, to quote Tompkins, portrayed as "the sexiest thing on two legs. Tender on the outside and fierce underneath, infinitely patient and gentle toward the good people and ruthless toward the bad, the hero is irresistible" (139).

The dream-like depiction of the cowboy-hero allows for speculations as to the nature of the narrator's feelings towards the Virginian. Is the narrator in love with the hero? It would be easy to argue thus from his own accounts of how he had "never seen a creature more irresistibly handsome" (164), how the Virginian "seemed to radiate romance" (91), and how the Virginian's "mind took one of those particular turns that made me love him" (56). He even makes the comment, during a description of the Virginian's courtship of Molly, that "had I been a woman, it would have made me his to do what he pleased with at the spot" (167).

Regardless of whether the narrator's interest springs from love or merely admiration, it seems fairly safe to conclude that his judgment and detachment as an observer is

questionable. His favoritism of the Virginian seems to be highly influential on the way he frames the narrative, and raises the question of whether it is the West or the Western hero he is really promoting in his narrative. Interestingly, the narrator's admiration of the hero-figure has also survived the reflective hindsight of the older narrator. Having editorial authority, the narrator is granted complete power to decide which voices and episodes are allowed in the story. He therefore makes a deliberate choice when he lets the image of the hero remain unchallenged by other voices or accounts. Throughout the story all renderings of the Virginian are positive and amiable, with the sole exception of opinions voiced by the story's villain Trampas. Then again, Trampas, the one character in the story who speaks ill of the Virginian, is dramatically killed by the hero in a final shoot-down. This event serves as the dramatic climax of the plot, and with his final act of heroism the Virginian has not only proved his worth, but he has also, literally, silenced the criticism.

Still, though evidently functioning as an extra incentive, there is more to the West that captures the narrator than the hero-figure alone. The narrator is so charmed by the Western society that he assents to all of its practices and conventions, even in cases where these practices diverge from his native set of values. The East, on the other hand, seems to be referred to merely as an illustration of how bad things could be. After tasting what life in the West has to offer, he has little but negative associations towards his native lifestyle:

> At noon, when for a while I had thrown off my long oilskin coat, merely the sight of the newspaper half crowded into my pocket had been a displeasing reminder of the railway, and cities, and affairs. But for its possible help to build fires, it would have come no farther with me. (245)

The East has by this time become nothing more than a “displeasing reminder” for him of everything he has left behind in order to seek the open sky country. In this manner, Wister's novel seems to be well in tune with what later became the formula Western. The narrator consequently depicts the West as anti-East, offering a contrast which highlights and intensifies the romance of the West. This is evident, for instance, in the cast of characters presented. With the exception of the villain, the most unlikable characters in the story are those living in the East. Molly’s strictly traditional and self-absorbed relatives back in New England makes her “new family” in Bear Creek seem exceptionally open and friendly in comparison. Whereas Molly is misunderstood by her Eastern relatives, frequently receiving letters with harsh lectures and reprimands, she is met with overwhelming support from her new community in the West. It seems that the “good” characters from the East, such as the schoolmarm Molly and the narrator himself, are all trying to escape Eastern society. The novel’s most resourceful Eastern characters seem to be those who got away, who chose to leave the civilized world behind, while those characters who are too narrow-minded to leave the East, such as Molly’s family, are not worthy of the possibilities the West has to offer. Thus the novel builds on the notion of the West as a host of the characters who have proved themselves the most deserving only. One might say that *The Virginian’s* West is intended as a meeting ground for the elite of the American youth.

The Tenderfoot’s Transition: From Skeptic to Enthusiast

The narrator-character's very first impression of the New World is fairly disagreeable as he arrives weary and disoriented, only to discover that his trunk with all his possessions is missing:

> …the East-bound [train] departed slowly into that distance whence I had come. I stared after it as it went its way to the far shores of civilization. It grew small in the unending gulf of space, until all signs of its presence was gone save a faint skein of smoke against the evening sky. And now my lost trunk came back into my thoughts, and Medicine Bow seemed a lonely spot. A sort of ship had left me marooned in a foreign ocean; the Pullman was comfortably steaming home to port, while I – how was I to find Judge Henry's ranch? Where in this unfeatured wilderness was Sunk Creek? … My trunk – I discovered myself still staring dolefully after the vanished East-bound… (15)

Cultural biases are established as the Easterner stares unhappily after his departing escape-route and decides that he is stranded in "a forsaken hole" which is, to his "newly arrived eyes, altogether horrible" (12-14). Further, his first meeting with the Virginian leaves him fairly uneasy about the gunman and his intentions:

> To see his eyes thus fixing at me and his thumb still hooked in his cartridge-belt, certain tales of travellers from these parts forced themselves disquietingly into my recollection. Now that Uncle Hughey was gone, was I to take his place and be, for instance, invited to dance on the platform to the music of shots nicely aimed? (15)

As we see, while still a stranger and an ignorant traveler, the narrator-character is struck by the gunman side of the Virginian and the roughness of the town. He overtly demonstrates his own prejudices, embracing the romance and the stereotypical image made famous by the Wild West shows and the popular dime novels. At this early stage of the story the narrator-

character, with all his inexperienced imagination and preconceptions, is the leading voice in the story, and the romantic stereotypes he portrays answers the expectations of readers of Westerns. As noted in chapter one, the Western's tradition of compulsory elements, that is to say a certain formula, is such an integrated part of the genre that readers would react with disappointment and confusion were they to be absent from the story. *The Virginian* is, however, a denser novel than the adventure stories written before it, and as such needs to balance the romance and sentiment with deeper material. By following the narrator-character's personal development and integration into the West, the storyline satisfies the obligatory Wild West romance during its initial sections before commencing on more thoughtful explorations of the Western society. Consequently the novel combines sentiment and realism in the manner which merited *The Virginian's* legacy as the first modern Western. Effectively this style allows the reader, initially, to become intrigued by the Western romance, and, further on in the story, to be educated by elements of realism and philosophical reflections around controversial contemporary topics.

The narrator recovers quickly from his initial skepticism, regarding both the gunman and the Western society, as he realizes that his prejudices are false. The Virginian, in spite of his impressive gear and grave look, conducts himself in a highly civilized manner. The narrator's instant relief over this discovery is evident in his exclamation that "it was so pleasant to be easy with a large stranger who instead of shooting at your heals had very civilly handed you a letter" (16). Before long he has also arrived at the conclusion that the local store he initially found appalling turns out, after a closer inspection, to be a place which "would have been a good store anywhere." All in all, at the day's end he is so comfortable with his new Western environment that, as he claims, "not an anxiety remained" in his thoughts (25).

Not only has the narrator changed his general attitude from disapproval to enthusiasm within minutes; he has also made the realization that he desires to become a part of the local

society, to be included and accepted as one of them. The Western cowboys are, however, not equally easy to impress as he himself has proved to be, and the tenderfoot narrator, in spite of a hard-won success in befriending the Virginian, is never accepted as anything other than an outsider in their company. During that first day in Medicine Bow he gets his first sense of this outsiderness which will eventually become an integrated part of his identity. Meeting the Virginian's best friend, Steve, he describes how "Steve looked at me and looked away – and that was all. But it was enough. In no company had I ever felt so much an outsider. Yet I liked the company and I wished that they would like me" (18).

The narrator eventually discovers that strangers, and particularly Easterners, need to work hard to earn friendliness, respect and inclusion in the West. With growing fascination for the Virginian, he continuously tries to be friendly in his jovial Eastern manner, but the Western hero politely and firmly sets a bar to every approach. After several days traveling together with the cow-puncher the narrator observes:

> He had not once sought my society on his own accord; his distaste for what he supposed me to be (I don't exactly know what this was) remained unshaken. I have thought that matters of dress and speech should not carry with them so much mistrust in our democracy; thieves are presumed innocent until proven guilty, but a starched collar is condemned at once. Perfect civility and obligingness I certainly did receive from the Virginian, only not a word of fellowship. (41)

This is an experience that he shares with other Eastern guests as well. The visiting New Yorkers, for instance, take great interest in the Virginian, having heard romantic stories of his successful dealings with disloyal and rebellious workers. Their enthusiasm, however, is met

with the same emotionless politeness and lack of interest from the Virginian as the narrator-character experienced in the initial stages of his relationship with the hero. By the time of the New Yorkers' arrival, though, the narrator has managed to become "thorough friends" with the Virginian, proudly announcing that the cowboy finally has "dropped the 'seh,' and all other barriers between us" (62). The mentioned episode between the Virginian and the new Easterners thus illustrates how the narrator's social status in the Western environment has advanced, and how far the tenderfoot's social skills have assimilated and adapted to the Western society. Observing the new Eastern guests, the bookish Eastern narrator for the first time notices how Eastern social customs appear from a Western perspective. He has arrived at what Bakhtin refers to as the ideal position for a cultural observer, on the border, and in-between, the cultures he studies, seeing them both from an outside perspective.

It turns out that, in spite of his extensive clumsiness and lack of skill regarding Western activities, the narrator has a number of innate qualities which play to his advantage in the Western society, and help him in his pursuit to blend in. Natural reflexes which allow him to grow silent and emotionless in the face of danger, or in encounters with unknown elements, save his reputation on several occasions. A lack of emotional display is a central part of the formula Western as silence is essentially intertwined with notions of control, Tompkins explains. Remaining silent is a way to demonstrate control over one's own feelings and physical boundaries. By holding back emotional reactions, one sets a protective boundary between oneself and the world, and to open up this boundary by any outward expression of emotion, she claims, would be to open oneself up for vulnerability (56). Though by no means a Western hero-figure, the narrator still, by acting in accordance with the local norm, gains more respect from the cowboys as he demonstrates calmness under pressure and embodies a general attitude of silent contemplation.

Furthermore, the narrator's intelligent and observatory nature allows him to learn from his own mistakes, and to quickly identify central aspects of the new culture he immerses himself in. As we have seen in an earlier example, even in his first tenderfoot days the narrator compares well with the other strangers, showing more adaptive behavior and understanding of the local culture. His "notorious helplessness" concerning all things practical, though, is not something he easily sheds. It seems that although he has the intelligence to cover up his mistakes, he chooses to deliberately display them in public. Mrs. Henry, his hostess on Sunk Creek Ranch, tries for a while to shield him from this humiliation, and from the ridicule his blunders earns. He explains how she gives up, however, when she discovers his own attitude:

> …when she found that I was inveterate in laying my inexperience of Western matters bare to all the world, begging to be enlightened upon rattle-snakes, prairie-dogs, owls, blue and willow grouse, sage-hens, how to rope a horse or tighten the front cinch of my saddle, and that my spirit soared into enthusiasm at the mere sight of so ordinary an animal as a white-tailed deer, she let me rush about with my firearms, and made no further effort to stave off the ridicule that my blunders perpetually earned from the ranch-hands, her own humorous husband, and any chance visitor who stopped for a meal or stayed the night. (52)

In spite of his awareness of the way his attitude and behavior make him the center of ridicule, the narrator still lays his "inexperience … bare to all the world." Embracing this role as a helpless stranger, he is bestowed with his new identity: "I was not called by my name after the first feeble etiquette due to a stranger in his first few hours had died away," he explains,

and adds: “I was known simply as 'the tenderfoot,'” and “I was introduced to the neighborhood (a circle of eighty miles) as 'the tenderfoot'” (52). Hence he is awarded his Western name and, as discussed earlier, begins to shape his identity around it. As “the tenderfoot” he consistently stirs up cultural clashes and highlights cultural differences. By allowing himself to appear helpless and naive, he also invites others to step in as teachers or mentors, and the manner of his attitude makes him easily approachable to anyone with something to teach. The way he values new knowledge and experience above personal vanity proves to be a useful attitude for a cultural observer to have.

Another advantage he has as an observer is his ability to keep an open mind towards most things new and unfamiliar. As we have seen, already during his first night in Medicine Bow the narrator manages to display a positive attitude towards the roughness of the town and appreciate the adventure he is embarking on. And although an Eastern tenderfoot by reputation, he quickly becomes a Westerner by heart, if not by practical skills or habits. This is evident when, after his first visit to Sunk Creek Ranch has ended, he bids his farewell to the Judge with the exclamation: “I'll be very homesick” (62). Apparently the Western ranch has already become more of a home for him than the East which he returns to. As he explains, “No lotus land ever cast its spell on a man's heart more than Wyoming had enchanted mine” (62).

As the story progresses, the narrator’s tenderfoot clumsiness gives way to a fair improvement in skills and a greater degree of independence. Initially the Judge, by his assessment that nothing could prevent the narrator from getting lost in the wilderness as it was “not uncommon for [him] to saunter out after breakfast with a gun and in thirty minutes cease to know north from south,” ordered the Virginian to escort him, or to “play nurse” as the narrator describes it (52). This arrangement proved to be a great strain for the hero-figure as the humiliation of it was “eating into his untamed soul,” which did not serve well with the

narrator's hopes of friendship and inclusion. As the narrator's skills increases though, his relationship with the Virginian evolves from duty to companionship. Starting as student and mentor, the narrator and the hero-figure grow more equal as the story evolves, gradually discovering how they each have something to teach the other. In the final sections of the novel the narrator has become self-reliant enough to embark on long horse-back excursions alone, and we see an example of how the manner of their time together has changed in the following episode where the narrator meets up with the Virginian out in the wilderness by invitation rather than by arrangement:

> And remembering my Eastern helplessness in the year we had met first, I enjoyed thinking how I had come to be trusted. In those days I had not been allowed to go from the ranch for so much as an afternoon's ride unless tied to him by a sting, so to speak; now I was crossing unmapped spaces with no guidance. The man who could do this was scarce any longer a "tenderfoot." (246)

But in spite of the narrator's increased skills and, consequently, new level of independence, he never proclaims thorough assimilation into the West: "I realized there was about me still a spice of the tenderfoot," he states after his successful lone ride through the wilderness. This way he affirms that his identity as an outsider is a permanent feature, and he substantiates this point by never changing his nickname and remaining positioned outside of the events, observing and evaluating while the others around him play the main parts.

It also seems as though his scope of cultural observation grows in proportion with his new skills. The cultural elements and topics he addresses in the narrative plot evolve from initial descriptions of elementary aspects of everyday Western life, towards more abstract

meditations over moral positions in the West. Thus it is safe to say that the narrative grows along with the narrator-character. As his understanding widens, his story also gains more depth. The personal development of the narrator is a necessary feature in terms of the practical framing of the story as, in order for the narrator to explore weightier aspects of the Western mentality, he needs to have the understanding and the practical skills to participate in more serious events. By remaining helpless, and thus under the protective guidance of the Virginian, he would not be able to stumble over the secret lynching party, for instance, and witness first-hand the moral struggles and personal justifications involved in this act. It could thus be argued that it was necessary for the advancement of the plot that the narrator-character found his independence and discovered the West for himself in the end.

Chapter Three: Cultural Encounter and Romance in the West: The Hero and the Schoolmarm

> "New Hampshire was full of fine young men in those days. But nowadays most of them have gone away to seek their fortunes in the West. Do they find them, I wonder?"
>
> "Yes, ma'am. All the good ones do."
>
> (Owen Wister, *The Virginian* 326)

In a novel where cultural representation is interconnected with the central characters, the way in which these characters come across is vital to the image of the West as a region with distinct cultural values and customs. Wister's novel therefore adds another layer to the cultural discussion when it portrays the two leading characters as unconventional representatives for their inherent social roles and regional cultural traditions. The cowboy hero is not an archetypal cowboy – or hero – and the fair "spinster" behaves more like a Western hero-figure than an Eastern dame. How then, can the two of them serve as convincing embodiments of the West and the East in a discussion of cultural ideology? If both of them stand out from the crowd as unique individuals, how, then, might they represent a group, or in this case, a region and its culture? This chapter is an analysis of the hero and the heroine and how the two, through the images painted of them by the narrator, add to the multi-layered complexity of the region of the West as depicted in the novel.

An Unlikely Hero

The most peculiar aspect of *The Virginian's* Western hero-figure might be the fact that he is no Westerner at all, but, rather, as his nicknames keep reminding us, a "Southerner" from Virginia. The author himself might shed some light on this when he, in his 1902 preface, explains that "Wyoming between 1874 and 1890 was a colony as wild as was Virginia one hundred years earlier." As Wister has named his undisputed hero after the state of Virginia, we might assume that the patrician lifestyle and proud history of this Southern state were admired by the author. From a historical perspective, Virginia, housing the first English colony of Jamestown, was the beginning of what became the United States. Hence the hero-figure's cultural heritage serves as a tribute to the history and development of Anglo-Saxon America, which, also, relates well with Shulman's reading of Wister's inclination towards an Anglo-Saxon West, as noted in chapter two. It also reveals the author's Eastern mindset and his patrician background: In spite of all the romance the West has to offer, the hero-figure has a civilized and historically honorable origin.

As the Virginian comes from a far more civilized and advanced region than the Wyoming he currently inhabits, his name and presence might foreshadow developments and transitions about to occur. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Virginian left the noble South in search of a better life, thus replacing the comforts of civilized society and historical family ties with a life of hard labor and uncertainty. The hero-figure's effort to escape the civilized world and to seek the lifestyle of the open sky country illustrates the novel's escapist inclination towards the freedom of the West. However, if the Western values of freedom and equality are what the novel wishes to promote, one might question why the novel ends with the cowboy-hero becoming Judge Henry's business partner and "an important man, with strong grip on many various enterprises" (327), and lives his adult life as what Schulman calls a "vernacular patrician gentleman" (xxv).

As the story begins, though, the Virginian is introduced as a true child of the frontier. With no family history to speak of, the hero-figure has travelled the American frontier since the age of fourteen, drifting from state to state, and, as a true cowboy-hero, "Everywhere he had taken care of himself, and survived; nor had his strong heart yet waked up to any hunger for a home" (43). Making his saddle blanket his home, and his horse his family, the Virginian is what the narrator terms a "son-of-the-soil." He is "one of thousands living and drifting thus" in the Western region, doing ranch work and enjoying the freedom of coming and going as it pleases him (43). With his lifestyle and spirit he could pass for a cowboy character out of William Cody's Wild West Show, a character who, as noted in chapter one, became the premier symbol of the American West (see McVeigh 34). Where the Eastern characters in the story draw strength from a family name, the Virginian's strong point is his practical skills, experience and self-reliance. Though not born in the Western frontier environment, he clearly personifies the Western hero, who endorses the cultural codes of the West.

In spite of this, the Virginian does not constitute what we might consider a conventional Western hero. In many ways he comes across more like a Southern gentleman than a Western ranch-hand of humble background. His characteristic Southern drawl and Virginian cultural heritage are only some of the features which distinguish him from his fellow cow-punchers. As noted earlier, the hero-figure is, in his local Western community, essentially recognized by features which set him apart from the others around him. His impressive frame and handsome looks receive a great deal of attention, from men as well as women, and most striking of his features is his "very black head of hair." The narrator, not yet acquainted with the hero, notes how the Virginian's black head stands out in the crowd as it "was the first thing to notice now, if one glanced generally at the table where he sat at cards" (31). In his customary amiable and enthusiastic fashion, the narrator immediately finds an agreeable link between the cow-puncher's looks and his playful manner, and thus connects

the hero's black hair with his devilish charm and his boyish tendency towards mischief. Stating that the Virginian's black head "justly fits him," the narrator witnesses, along with a highly appreciative audience of the Virginian's fellow cowboys, how the hero plans and executes a plot of deception "like a true and (I must say) inspired devil" (31).

The Virginian might seem devilish in his youthful pranks, but the presence of a black-haired character from Virginia still dictates speculations concerning the notion of race. The question of the Virginian's origins and background, whether he might be a black man in white cattle-land, is repeatedly addressed but is disregarded or dismissed by the local community. The man in question never responds to any such comments, and rather veils himself in the unapproachable silent manner which is his custom regarding most private matters:

> "Can't do nothing with niggers or Chinese. But you're white alright." The drummer suddenly returned to the Virginian with this high compliment. The cow-puncher had taken out a pipe, and was slowly rubbing it. The compliment seemed to escape his attention, and the drummer went on. (22)

By simply ignoring any discussion about his racial or ethnic background, the Virginian continues to mask himself in his customary aura of mystery and ambiguity. The uncertainty around his ethnicity ties in with the vagueness of every other part of the hero's background. He seems intangible in every aspect save his day-to-day achievements. The few breadcrumbs of information the Virginian tosses the narrator-character are in the shape of observable actions and displays of attitude. What the narrator and the local community see is a dark-haired cowboy who sings Jim Crow songs and ignores other men's curiosity on the subject. Eventually the reader is informed that the hero is indeed of European descent, which ties in with the novel's general attitude of Anglo-Saxon supremacy (see Schulman xxi-xxii, xxix,

Campbell 219, White 621-22), but the hero's ancestry is presented in his letter to Molly's Eastern family only, and not to the local Western community: "I am of old stock in Virginia. English and one Scotch Irish grandmother my father's father brought from Kentucky" (243).

Effectively the hero-figure's enigmatic personality, in combination with the appealing nature of his character, makes the Virginian a remarkably fascinating hero-figure, not only for the infatuated narrator-character, but also for the reader. Therefore, the novel portrays a hero-figure who is too intriguing and complex to grow tedious or one-dimensional over the span of the storyline. By arousing an interest in the hero-figure as a character, the novel indirectly boosts the interest in the Western lifestyle as well, as the two are connected. In order to solve the mystery of the hero, one needs to solve the mystery of his lifestyle.

Interestingly, the persona of the Virginian seems to be equally puzzling to all characters in the story, Western as well as Eastern. It is not merely the Easterners who find him intriguingly strange as even his fellow cowboys appear to struggle in their attempt to understand the hero. Embodying a curious mix of masculine toughness and feminine tenderness, the hero is able to pick flowers for sick ladies, cradle babies in his arms, and dig a grave for a dead chicken without anyone thinking less of him. Where most fictional hero-figures actively parade their masculinity and dominance, dependent on an image of male toughness in order to gain respect, the Virginian is remarkably comfortable in his own skin. It seems there is no need for him to prove his masculinity as his natural confidence, his looks, and the manner of his character leave no doubt that he is "a man that is a man" (172). He is also a man who is brave enough to cry openly over the memory of his dead friend, a friend who might even have been a male lover (see Tompkins 150-53, Kollin 242-43), and complex enough to swear that he would hang this friend all over again if that was the right thing to do (256-60).

His curious mix of toughness and tenderness makes Molly exclaim to her great-aunt in

Bennington, after showing her a picture of him as a rough rustler, that “he's not a bit like that. Yes he is exactly like that” (172). And it is this complexity and ambiguity within the Virginian's character that leads Molly to “stand in front of her lover's likeness, gazing upon it with both love and shrinking,” terribly confused and ambivalent about her feelings for the hero (285). As she grows more accustomed to the man, as well as to the ways of the West in general, she gradually learns to accept the different and unpredictable sides of both the hero himself and the lifestyle he represents:

> Sometimes when he was at work with their horses, or intent on casting his brown hackle for a fish, she would watch him with eyes that were fuller of love than of understanding. Perhaps she never came wholly to understand him; but in her complete love for him she found enough. (323)

In Molly's case it seems that her understanding and affection for the Virginian is connected with her attitude towards the West in general. To her Eastern mind, the Virginian serves as a genuine Western hero-figure and a prime representative of a culture and a way of life completely different from her native environment. Through the eyes of an outsider she sees him much the same way as her fellow Easterner, the narrator, does, as “a person who wears a big pistol and rides a big horse” (92). As discussed in chapter one, Diana Taylor’s theorizing about the “the second face of culture,” stresses that the “forms, symbols or aspects of cultural identity [which] become highlighted” in the encounter with foreign cultural elements reflect how the community recognizes and sees its own cultural identity (Taylor 91). If applied to the level of character, it is interesting to note how the Virginian parades around in his “leathern chaps and jingled spurs with obvious pleasure” and comes across as one who is “boyishly proud of his wild calling” (53). To a stranger such as Molly, this outward display of cultural

symbols is a clear indication of his cultural position. She validates her assumptions concerning the Virginian's role in the West with the statement that “the cow-puncher had lived like his kind,” effectively categorizing “his kind” as the Western cow-punchers (222).

The Virginian's fellow cow-punchers, however, seem to have a slightly different view of the Southerner. Though greatly respected and appreciated for his skills and accomplishments, the Virginian is never really depicted as a part of their group. While the other men sleep “rolled in their blankets beneath the open and shining night” (37), the Virginian goes to great lengths in order to acquire a bed for himself, exhibiting a finer taste for comfort than your average cowboy. He demonstrates a number of traits and interests more associated with a gentleman than an outdoor ranch-hand, as we see, for example, when he masters the rare skill of knowing how to dance at social gatherings, waltzing better than most members of the Eastern aristocracy. He also takes great pride in personal grooming and demonstrates a keen eye for clothes and fashion, a kind of attention which would normally be mocked in cattle-land. Furthermore, he shows an interest in the literary works of Shakespeare and, as it turns out, he has read several of Shakespeare’s works even before his private tutoring from the schoolmarm begins – though it is unclear when and how he has done this as there is no climate for bookish activities midst his fellow cow-punchers.

Among the silent and sturdy cowboys, fancy words are generally scarce. Nonetheless, in spite of his infamous Southern drawl, the Virginian can offer fierce competition to any character, educated or otherwise, when it comes to eloquence. During his short encounter with an unpopular missionary, for instance, the fairly uneducated cow-puncher manages to beat the preacher at his own game, “using some of the missionary's own language” to drive him away (162). Revealing an innate talent for academic reasoning, the Virginian succeeds in shifting the power structure and, remarkably, bests the preacher by demonstrating a greater understanding of the biblical truths and arguments than the missionary himself. After this

moment of academic triumph, however, the Western hero-figure quickly relapses back to his conventional cow-puncher manners. In what seems like a compensation for his previous bookish behavior he now talks and acts, according to the narrator, “quite as if he had been ten years old” (164), grinning guiltily and being pleased with himself at the same time:

> The Virginian gave a joyous gulp. He now came and sat down on the edge of my bed. “I spoke awful good English to him most of the time,” said he. “I can, yu'know, when I cinch my attention tight on to it. Yes, I cert'nly spoke a lot o' good English. I didn't understand some of it myself!” (165)

It thus seems that the Virginian is able to do whatever he wants to do, and pose as whoever he wishes to be, whether it be an educated gentleman or a no-nonsense cowboy. He embodies the rare combination of simultaneously possessing the skills and mindset required for the lifestyle of civilized society and that of a Western ranch-hand. It simply depends on what he “cinches” his “attention tight on to.”

Interestingly, the Virginian, in spite of his exceptional possibilities to choose between the higher and lower levels of Western society, positions himself on the border between them. On the one hand, regardless of his apparent preference for comfort and intelligent conversation, there are few indications of the hero-figure attempting to identify with the Eastern cattle-kings. Instead of asserting a personal image of academic intelligence, or of signaling ambition for a rise towards the more prominent social circles, the Virginian dresses proudly in cow-puncher clothes and speaks the rough language of the ranch-hands. On the other hand, he also distinguishes himself from the community of the simple cow-punchers with his fairly gentleman-inspired manner and classy habits. Consequently, their reception of him varies from idolization of his accomplishments to social exclusion. Fellow cowboy

Scipio yells enthusiastically “Rise up, liars, and salute your king!” throwing his arms around the Virginian and exclaiming “Oh, I'm in love with you!” after witnessing one of the hero's convincing triumphs over his arch-enemy Trampas (135). Only moments earlier, however, the Virginian sat alone outside of the train’s caboose because it was “lonesome in there” with his outfit of men (112).

It is not quite clear though, whether the black-haired, mysterious hero-figure is socially excluded from the group of ranch-hands, or if he deliberately isolates himself. Nevertheless, he seems to be quite comfortable with his life on the fringes of Western society, outside and in-between classes and groups which traditionally have been in conflict. As he falls outside of conventional categories, he earns the right to represent no one and everyone. Or, said in a different way, he does not necessarily promote any particular group or social class of the Western community more than others, as he moves between them and both belongs to – and does not belong to – the groups in question. He speaks for no one but himself, and at the same time he is able to speak for everyone. This ambiguity and possibility of different interpretations about his role and position in society are well in line with every other aspect of the hero-figure’s character. To the community of the Medicine Bow area, though, he is accepted for who he is, simply “the same not overangelic comrade whom they valued and could not wholly understand” (75).

From a cultural perspective the Virginian's positioning in society – and, more importantly, his unconventional manners and interests – adds another layer to the novel's depiction of cultural clashes. It seems that the cultural conflict zone between East and West does not only emerge in encounters between the Virginian and Eastern characters, but also, interestingly, within the character of the Virginian himself. As a merger of qualities generally associated with the gentlemanly East and the pragmatic West respectably, the Virginian serves as a transcultural person even before the Eastern characters have begun to spread their

influence in Sunk Creek.

The Virginian's unconventional conduct necessitates a critical discussion around his role as a cultural voice in the narrative representation of East and West. If the Western hero is a transcultural hybrid, how can he be treated as a representative of the West? Interestingly, the Virginian defends his position as a Western hero-figure with his excessive skills at displaying qualities associated with this figure. Though he is not originally Western, he surpasses the other cowboys in all matters connected with the ranch-hand lifestyle, thus proving himself worthy of being considered a true representative. Furthermore, the Virginian promotes the ideology of the West, not because he knows no better, but because he has chosen to do so. In his deliberate choice of the Western ideology, he is able to follow it with a stronger conviction and more accurate justification than a character born into it. As noted earlier in relation to the narrator, one needs to see a culture from the outside in order to notice its distinguishing qualities. As a converted immigrant the Virginian has perceived, learned and adapted to the customs of the Western region. Consequently, Molly and the narrator-character may justly lean on the Virginian as a Western mentor and as a representative of the Western lifestyle.

The Hero and the Heroine as Mirror Images

Interestingly, the Virginian is not the only unconventional figure in Wister's novel. The Eastern schoolmarm, Miss Molly Wood, plays the part of the fair maiden who wins the hero's heart. As touched upon earlier, Westerns come with expectations of certain generic elements, and these generic elements are essential in the way Westerns tend to be constructed. The presence of a love interest for the hero-figure is among these "obligatory" elements, which makes Molly Wood strategically important in the plot. Her presence allows the Virginian the prospect of a happy ending and provides him with that extra surge of motivation and sense of purpose needed for a hero to fulfill his heroic obligations.

Furthermore, Molly serves as a convincing representative of the Eastern established society in terms of background and descent. Her lineage goes in a straight line back to a war hero by the name of General Stark, who appears to have "battled so bravely as to send his name thrilling down through the blood of generations of schoolboys" (66). Her ancestry is supposed to have awarded her with invitations to join "any number of those patriotic societies of which our American ears have grown accustomed to hear so much," exemplified by "the Boston Tea Party, the Ethan Allen Ticonderogas, [and] the Green Mountain Daughters" (66). Molly takes no interest in invitations such as these, but she strongly identifies with her ancestors, and particularly with the General's wife, Molly Stark, whose name she also shares. We are told that her "most precious possession – a treasure which accompanied her even if she went away for only one night's absence – was an heirloom, a little miniature portrait of the old Molly Stark, painted when that far off dame must have been scarce more than twenty" (66). As a woman the same age, Molly's greatest pride is in her physical resemblance to the ancestress, which she studies meticulously, her looking-glass in one hand and the portrait in the other. Hence, Molly's devotion to her Eastern heritage is unmistakable. She identifies herself as a Stark rather than by her real surname Wood, and she is very conscious about making choices "worthy of the Starks" (see 67, 171, 210).

Still, though equipped with the name, look and position of a member of the Eastern aristocracy, Molly does not come across as a predictable New England "spinster." The narrator makes this evident from his first descriptions of her, when he states that, "Miss Mary Stark Wood was not a usual young lady" (66). In many ways she acts and thinks in a manner more associated with men than with ladies, and it is apparent that she cares less about convention than practicality. More interestingly she seems to possess a number of traits and habits generally associated, not only with the male population at this time, but also with the hero-figure himself.

When we first hear of Molly she is only twenty years old, and about to set out on an adventure few women of her age and stature would imagine themselves embarking on. In reference to her traveling alone into the unknown, the narrator comments:

> Now, it is not usual for young ladies of twenty to contemplate a journey of nearly two thousand miles to a country where Indians and wild animals live unchained, unless they are to make such journey in company with a protector, or are going to a protector's arms at the other end. Nor is school teaching on Bear Creek a usual ambition for such ladies. (65-66)

Unusual as it might have been, Molly Wood traveled alone into the unknown, not heeding the disapproving comments made about her in the society of Bennington, New England. A practical and hard-working person, she had been known to break conventions before, "so that mother might keep on living in the old house" (48), taking up various kinds of paid employment. Miss Molly Wood proved to be more concerned with providing for the family than with her inherited role as a society girl as we see in the narrator's description of her:

> Instead of thinking about her first evening dress, Molly found pupils to whom she could give music lessons. She found handkerchiefs that she could embroider with initials. And she found fruits she could make into preserves. That machine called the typewriter was then in existence, but the day of women typewriters had as yet scarcely begun to dawn, else I think Molly would have preferred this occupation to the handkerchiefs and the preserves. (67)

Even though still a young girl, Molly was thus both industrious and open-minded. Unlike most proper young ladies at the time she possessed a "rigid determination neither to be a burden to her mother nor to give in to that mother's desires" (71).

Much of this "rigid determination," strength and individuality Molly draws from her ancestress Molly Stark, whom she refers to as "Grandmother Stark," indicating that their likeness goes beyond physical resemblance alone. In situations and moments where Molly displays extraordinary nerve she appears to have "Grandmother Stark shining in her eye" or "flashed awake deep within [her] spirit" (see 72, 90). As the narrator explains, "If the ancestors that we carry shut up inside us take turns in dictating to us our actions and our state of mind, undoubtedly Grandmother Stark was empress of Molly's spirit…" (71). Consequently, Molly Wood carries her Eastern heritage with her constantly, both physically and spiritually, to such a degree that it forms an integrated part of her identity. So when Molly left home to seek her own freedom and fortune, equipped with little else than her renowned determination and "a craving for the unknown" (71), the young Eastern lady is still mindful of who she is and where she comes from.

In spite of her designated role and heritage, Molly thus behaves in many ways more like a Western hero-figure than a prototype of the hero's feminine love interest. On her journey west she revealed no sadness or fear of leaving home, but "sat bravely up in the through car, dwelling upon the unknown" (72). Later, when the horses ran off and dragged the stagecoach "down to the bottom of a gully," Molly "sat mute and unflinching beside the driver," impressing him to such an extent with her bravery that he "invited her earnestly to be his wife during many of the next fifteen miles" (72).

In addition to her bravery, her independence and her craving for adventure, Molly shares the cowboy's habit of hiding her emotions. This is, as noted earlier, an important survival skill in the West. Just as she appeared unflinching when the stage ran off the road,

her innate reaction to most horrors and concerns is one of silent composure. When she decides to leave the Virginian behind and go back to Vermont, for example, only the redness in her eyes and cheeks and the unnecessary kicks she gives the horse reveal the real extent of the hurt and anger she feels (213-14). Her emotional reserve mirrors the way the real hero-figure, the Virginian, is described by the narrator as "so silent in his volcanic wrath that I did not perceive it" (147). Just as Molly gives away her anger in her face, the narrator describes how he witnessed the Virginian's composure slip only slightly in a situation where the hero had good reason to feel frustration. Regardless of the unreasonable criticism he received, merely a flicker of the hero's real anger was apparent through his eyes:

> Balaam was ready to be very disagreeable now. Suddenly he perceived the date of the Judge's letter. He held it out to the Virginian, and struck the paper.
>
> "What's your idea of bringing this here two weeks late?" he said.
>
> Now, when he had struck that paper, Shorty looked at the Virginian. But nothing happened beyond a certain change of light in the Southerner's eyes. And when the Southerner spoke, it was with his usual gentleness and civility. (187)

A real Western hero-figure does not lose face by losing his temper. In this respect the Eastern schoolmarm appears to follow the Western norm well.

In addition to her calmness in the face of danger, as well as her lack of emotional display, the newly arrived lady also mirrors a Western hero's custom of not speaking out of turn. She does not, for instance, talk to anyone about her worries, a point particularly evident in the section where she discovers that the Virginian has been a member of the local lynching party. This comes as a considerable shock to the Eastern girl and she finds herself questioning

her lover's character: “These were hours of darkness indeed to Molly Wood” but, nonetheless, “she spoke of it to nobody; she kept her misery to herself” (278). Unable to sleep, Molly avoids her helpful neighbor’s attempts at engaging her in conversation, and, instead, chooses to cope with her emotions by spending long moments staring at her lover's photograph – silently and alone (279).

Furthermore, Molly follows the Western code of silence in more ways than just in the face of emotional misery. She also earns respect among the ranch-hands with her habit of not engaging in idle talk or gossip. This becomes obvious to the Virginian on the day of the Swinton barbeque when he learns that she has not told anyone about the circumstances of their first meeting, a fact he is both surprised and fascinated by. Later that day the schoolmarm’s stature grows even higher in the eyes of the hero during a conversation he has with his old friend Lin. Here the friend confesses an attempt he made to kiss the attractive schoolmarm, an endeavor which failed utterly and lead to a rather sharp rejection. On the question of why the Virginian had not learned about this earlier, Lin praises the silent nature of Molly Wood:

> “Mrs. Taylor, she guessed something was up, but she didn't tell.”
>
> “Miss Wood did not tell?”
>
> “Not she! She'll never open her head. She can take care of herself, you bet!” (84)

In this example the schoolmarm proves yet again her capacity to mirror the Western hero-figure.

Just as Molly refused to admit to her guardian, Mrs. Taylor, the treatment she had received, the Virginian himself chose not to inform his boss, Judge Henry, about the various

instances of injustice he experienced on the ranch. The unfair treatment of the Virginian becomes particularly evident during the growing friction between the hero-figure and the foreman at the time, a conflict which eventually leads to the Virginian's short-lived disappearance. Emphasizing the Western code of silence, the narrator claims that a fair amount of research was needed in order to discover the reasons behind the cow-puncher's sudden leave of absence as “not much was said, to be sure; the Virginian seldom spent many words on his own troubles” (63). But the narrator gradually discovers that due to some jealousy of the Virginian on the part of the foreman, the hero-figure “found himself continually doing another man's work, but under circumstances so skillfully arranged that he got neither credit nor pay for it” (63). The Virginian would not, however, as the narrator phrases it, “stoop to telling tales out of school” (63-64). Rather than informing his employer about what was going on, the Virginian's “ready and prophetic mind devised the simple expedient of going away altogether,” calculating that Judge Henry would “gradually perceive there was a connection between his departure and the cessation of the satisfactory work” (64). The good Judge does indeed show a great appreciation of his employee's way of handling the situation once he discovers what has occurred: “I'm afraid he is pretty nearly as shrewd as I am” he claims amiably, and thus accentuates the Western principle of “taking care of yourself” rather than accepting the help or support of others (64). This is a principle that, as we have seen from her encounter with cow-puncher Lin, Molly Wood also abides by.

However, though Molly shares a number of traits with the Western hero-figure, she does not share the Western mindset when it comes to law and order. It is hard for the Eastern woman to grasp that in the West freedom and independence exist beyond the boundaries of civilization, and, that in order to follow one’s moral standing, actions unsuitable to a civilized society might become both appropriate and necessary. She is, as noted, appalled by the “Code of the West” and its tradition of vigilante justice. She is also unable to appreciate the way

fundamental values and qualities in the Western society are based on a man's autonomy, self-discipline, and, most importantly, his honor. Her lack of understanding is evident when she begs the Virginian to run away rather than to face a final shoot-down against Trampas. "It is not too late yet. You can take yourself out of his reach. Everybody knows you are brave," Molly pleads to her lover. Her appeal has little effect on the hero, however, as his only reply is the simple but unmistakable phrase "I must stay here" (308). The Eastern girl then chooses a more direct line of argument and addresses the moral aspects behind a gunfight: "shedding blood in cold blood … Why, it's what they hang people for! It's murder!" she exclaims. At this the cowboy lets go of the girl and declares sternly "don't call it that name" (308). From this we gather that what is regarded as murder in the civilized East has a different label in the West. For his part the Virginian ascertains his position as a true Western hero-figure as he explains, "I work hyeh. I belong hyeh. It's my life. If folks came to think I was a coward— … My friends would be sorry and ashamed, and my enemies would walk around saying they had always said so. I could not hold up my head again among enemies or friends." Molly, at this point blatantly referred to as "the New England girl" by the narrator, argues that "There is a higher courage than fear of outside opinion," insisting that it takes more courage to go one's own course (309).

The discussion has now reached the fundamental level of the Western value system, the question of personal autonomy and self-respect, and the Virginian finally breaks his customary silence and explains the Western line of reasoning to his Eastern bride:

> "I am goin' my own course," he broke in. "Can't you see how it must be about a man? It's not for their benefit, friends or enemies, that I have got this thing to do. If any man happened to say I was a thief and I heard about it, would I let him go on spreadin' such a thing of me? Don't I owe my own

> honesty something better than that? … What men say about my nature is not just merely an outside thing. For the fact that I let 'em keep on sayin' it is a proof I don't value my nature enough to shield it from their slander and give them their punishment…" (309)

Molly, however, has during her lover's justification "grown very white," and to his repeated question "Can't you see how it must be about a man?" the Eastern lady declares her own ideological stance:

> "If I ought to, I cannot. To shed blood in cold blood. When I heard about that last fall, – about the killing of those cattle thieves, – I kept saying to myself: 'He had to do it. It was a public duty.' And lying sleepless I got used to Wyoming being different from Vermont. But this" – she gave a shudder – "when I think of to-morrow, of you and me, and of— If you do this, there can be no to-morrow for you and me." (309-10)

Just as the final shoot-down functions as the climax of the story-line's action, the quarrel between the Virginian and Molly is the climax of the story's depiction of cultural conflicts. Here the cowboy and the schoolmarm establish their absolute limits regarding cultural ideology. At this fundamental level, the true limits of the transcultural process they are undergoing are tested and established. For all their transcultural changes and mirroring qualities, at the end of the day the Virginian remains the Western voice as Molly Wood is the Eastern.

All in all, Molly Wood has, as we have seen, proved that she serves her role as an Eastern presence in the West, but that she is anything but a typical "tenderfoot" when it comes

to the Western day-to-day social norms and behavior. Ironically, though, the otherwise self-sufficient schoolmarm tends to act like a stereotypically helpless girl on occasions where the Virginian is around. We see this, for example, when after an impressive journey with no signs of panic, Molly finally breaks down and screams feebly as the hero-figure rescues her from a flooded river, “her wits” suddenly being “stock-still” (73). After the Virginian's departure, however, she cannot seem to understand why she had “behaved so unlike herself” (74). In the eyes of the Virginian, therefore, she is not the brave, unflinching girl that the stage coach driver wanted to marry, as much as a fair maiden who hysterically clung to him as he rescued her out of the stagecoach that had stranded in a fairly shallow river. His first impression of her is that of a ”little, little girl” with pretty hair and a handkerchief with dried flowers (81). Peculiar as this sudden shift in Molly's character might be, it allows her to play her part as the hero's ladylike love-interest. Her helplessness in the Virginian's presence permits him to be an unchallenged hero-figure, and by her giving him an opportunity to save her, the Virginian gets to demonstrate his masculine and heroic nature. In a way we might say that Molly fulfills her role as the hero's partner by allowing the Virginian to play his part as a hero.

The Hero and the Schoolmarm: A Transcultural Union

The pattern of having the couple perform contrasting designated roles based on their inherited cultural conventions, is central to the plot during the early stages of the story. In spite of their similarities in character, the two of them find opposite arenas to excel in their skills. Molly masters the bookish field related to the Eastern interest in education and civilization, while the Virginian demonstrates the practical skills required by the Western lifestyle. During their time spent together, however, the hero-figure and the schoolmarm gradually begin to merge their allegedly binary spheres. The Virginian's training in the art of reading and writing eventually allows him to surpass Molly in her own domain, analyzing novels and writing letters with

seemingly more ease than his teacher: “at this set task in letter-writing, the cow-puncher had greatly excelled the schoolmarm!” (240). On the other hand, Molly proves her worth as a Western hero-figure when she rescues her lover from the painful death of Indian attacks. On the Virginian's plea that she should leave him where he lay wounded so the Indians would not get her too, Molly reacts like the young woman we were introduced to at the beginning of the story:

> She glanced at him with a sort of fierceness, then reached for his pistol, in which there was nothing but blackened empty cartridges. She threw these out and drew six from his belt, loaded the weapon, and snapped shut its hinge. (217)

Armed like a Western cowboy, she also starts to talk like one: “Listen, friend', she said. 'Nobody shall get you, and nobody shall get me. Now take some more brandy” (217). In an interesting reversal of roles the hero-figure suddenly starts a rambling speech while the lady is calm and quiet: “With his eyes watching imaginary objects, he rode and rambled, and it was now the girl who was silent, except to keep his mind from its half fixed idea of the sorrel” (219). In a genre where Easterners are reproached for their alleged chatter and Western men are supposed to be strong and silent, the rambling Western cowboy and the silent Eastern schoolmarm represent an unmistakable swap of customary roles.

Nevertheless, even while playing the part of a hero, Molly allows the Virginian to consider her a helplessly frightened girl as a means to get him to safety. After he appears lost to fever dreams, for instance, she rouses him by claiming to be scared of the Indians and asking him to help her: “A gentleman does not invite a lady to go out riding and leave her,” she says, playing on his heroism and sense of duty (219). However, her inclination to appear

fragile is not extended to the company of any other character besides the Virginian. She does not, for example, allow the doctor to share the perception of her as delicate or feeble and grows “acid” in her reference to him after his scolding phrases concerning “the arrogance of strong nerves in slender bodies” (224).

In a letter addressed to Molly's mother the Virginian later sums up Molly's actions that day, and thus illuminates the cultural mixture of skills she applied, some of which she learned growing up in the established society of Vermont, while others were recently gained from her association with the Western ranch-hands. The Virginian explains:

> She did not know what Indians would get her too but I could not make her leave me. I am a heavy man one hundred and seventy-three stripped when in full health. She lifted me herself from the ground me helping scarce any for there was not much help in me that day. She washed my wounds and brought me to with her own whiskey. Before she could get me home I was out of my head but she kept me on my horse somehow and talked wisely to me so I minded her and did not go clean crazy till she had got me safe to bed. The doctor says I would have died all the same if she had not nursed me the way she did. (243)

The Eastern schoolmarm here demonstrates the same virtues that Theodore Roosevelt has characterized as the true virtues of the Western character: “self-reliance, honor, loyalty, and determination” (McVeigh 16). She also appears to carry her own whiskey, a habit one would imagine being fairly uncommon among young ladies of her class and background. On the other hand she shows great feminine solicitude, nursing skills, and the ability to comfort the man she loves. And in-between her heavy lifting and acts of bravery she applies what might

be characterized as verbal cunning, a skill most likely developed during her adolescence in Eastern society. This is apparent in her “wise talk” when the Virginian was “out of his head,” where she demonstrates her skills and intelligence in strategic coaxing and manipulation with words. In a subtle manner Molly manages to trick the young man to follow her lead while still allowing him to believe they are acting according to his own plan. To accomplish anything using words rather than action is frowned upon in the West, and it is thus unlikely that Molly has picked up this skill from the cow-punchers on a Western ranch.

As the couple grows increasingly accustomed to each other, they gradually merge their different spheres as well. As these spheres in many ways represent their binary cultural backgrounds, the young lovers' transformation might be interpreted as a process of transculturation, whereby the East and West merge along with the young couple’s opposing roles in society. We see the result of this continuing transformation, for instance, as the cow-puncher, who earlier hid his books from fear that his fellow ranch-hands might see them, now forgets his old reservations concerning Eastern bookishness and engages in lengthy analytical discussions about novels and poems along with his schoolmarm:

> Molly now burst into a luxury of discussion. She leaned toward her cow-puncher with bright eyes searching his; with elbow on knee and hand propping chin, her lap became a slant, and from it Browning the poet slid and toppled, and lay unrescued. For the slow cow-puncher unfolded his notions of masculine courage and modesty (though he did not deal in such high-sounding names), and Molly forgot everything to listen to him, as he forgot himself and his inveterate shyness and grew talkative to her. (229)

Even though the cowboy hero “unwittingly spoke himself out to her in these Browning

meetings" in a non-Western manner, so to speak, this new change in the hero-figure's conduct is not given away by outside appearance. Mrs. Taylor, who would occasionally peep through the window "to see if she was needed," saw nothing but "the rosy alert girl, sweet as she talked or read to him; and he, the grave, half-weak giant among his wraps, watching her" (230). From the outside the couple thus still appears as stereotypical representatives of their Eastern and Western cultural roles; she bookish and outgoing, he silent and grave, recovering from his battle-wounds.

But the gradual process of transcultural change has also brought the bookish Molly out of the schoolhouse and into the open plains of the Western landscape. By outward appearance, the couple might look as though they have kept their old roles, but Molly Wood has by now become an experienced rider:

> Many rides had taught their horses to go side by side, and so they went now: the girl sweet and thoughtful in her sedate gray habit; and the man in his leathern chaps and cartridge belt and flannel shirt, looking gravely into the distance with the level gaze of the frontier. (295)

Long rides into the wilderness have at this point become a natural activity for the schoolmarm. Just as the Virginian has grown talkative during their educational discussions, she has gotten accustomed to the silent code of the West: "during the next several miles he was silent, and his silence was enough for her" (298). During this quiet ride through the open Western landscape, the Eastern woman is affected by the hypnotic effect of the Western atmosphere. Untamed nature and the sounds of the wilderness cure her lingering home-sickness, and make her forget her Eastern home in favor of her new Western home: "Vermont sank away from her thoughts, and Wyoming held less of loneliness" (298). The mythic and

spiritual space which is the Western wilderness has effectively taken away her worries and cleansed her mind.

The couple's gradual merging of cultural traits finally reaches its symbolic peak with their marriage. This institutional act illustrates the degree to which the transcultural process has progressed. As discussed earlier the process of transculturation involves both gain and loss. With his proposal of marriage, the cowboy hero-figure validates that he is willing to give up the freedom he experienced as a cow-puncher in favor of family life. The Eastern schoolmarm, to whom marriage has always been her intended future, confirms the influences that the West has had on her when she chooses her new bode as the location for their wedding, even though this means that no-one from her Eastern background will participate:

> Not Vermont, but Wyoming should be her wedding place. … Those vows should be spoken and that ring put on in this wild Cattle-Land, where first she had seen him ride into the flooded river, and lift her ashore upon his horse. It was this open sky which should shine down on them, and this frontier soil upon which their feet should tread. (286)

In Molly's case, it seems that her biggest loss as a consequence of her transcultural union with the Western hero is giving up her Eastern ties, illustrated in the story through her mother's absence on her wedding day. Though determined in her choice, she clearly mourns the loss of her old world: "She closed her eyes and saw Vermont: a village street, and the post office, and ivy covering an old front door, and her mother picking some yellow roses from a bush" (290).

As the couple starts their new lifestyle, it is one which merges and transcends what used to be the binaries of East and West. Like their friends and neighbors around them, the young couple breaks the old contradiction implied in the idea of creating a civilized home in

the Western wilderness. Their transcultural union comes as a result of the changes they have each undergone during the span of their courtship. For Molly the biggest transformation is her submission and acceptance of the attraction she feels towards the West. Allured as she is to the Western environment, her biggest battle has been to relinquish her conviction that the Eastern way is the measure of what is right, good and civilized. Her gradual release of the East is interconnected with her gradual acceptance of the Virginian as her initial rejection of the Western hero was, essentially, also a denial of the West and its values (see Campbell 223). Molly's final acceptance of the Virginian's marriage proposal therefore shows how far she has come, and how much her attitude towards the West has changed. As the narrator states: "Thus did her New England conscience battle to the end, and, in the end, capitulate to love" (314).

Molly's personal transformation is also thoroughly scrutinized during her temporarily visit back in the East, and the jury of prying relatives conclude that she has, indeed, "changed very much" (170). Critical as they are towards their girl's new life in the West, they still admit that, "That horrible place seems to agree with her" and that, in fact, they have "never seen her better" (172). Hence, the novel's fundamental notion of the West as a regenerative space is further manifested. Even the fiercest critics, in this case the conservative Eastern middle class, cannot deny that the Western environment has the ability to make one "better."

The most obvious transcultural transformation, however, has occurred in the lifestyle and spirit of the hero-figure. The Virginian is initially associated with the perpetual restless drifting of the Western cowboys, as is evident in his aversion for the Eastern concept of "settled places" and a more permanent "home" than his saddle blanket. This youthful attitude finds perfect conditions on the frontier, where the rootless lifestyle gives the hero the experience he needs to be at ease in any company and equal to any situation that might arise in the Western atmosphere (see Campbell 222). But the Virginian, like the Western frontier, eventually grows up and matures. And like the Western region, the hero's rite of passage

involves a pull towards a more rooted way of life. As with all heroes in a Bildungsroman, the Virginian must "leave his wild wanderings behind for marriage, responsibility, and social authority," Neil Campbell explains in "Wister's Retreat from Hybridity" (222). As the cowboy takes up his education and courtship of the woman he loves, the pattern of constant traveling alters into a more static routine. This also coincides with his promotion to foreman on Judge Henry's ranch, a hierarchical rise which for the first time awards him with his own living space. All of a sudden the drifting cowboy inhabits a permanent "home" and a work title with fixed responsibilities. As the environment changes around him, the Virginian also changes his priorities, and, step by step, his lifestyle transforms from free to grounded. He has moved from woman to woman until he meets Molly, and then he "stopped" as he puts it. He has moved his "home" between random dwellings until he "settled down" in the foreman's residence on Judge Henry's ranch, and, finally, he has moved between different kinds of work until he broke free from the rootless Western lifestyle all together and purchased land on which to start his own business. This happy ending of the Virginian's search for a new life is a move which brings established society back into the life of the hero. It appears that Wister's West serves more like a stepping stone towards material success than a romantic society of freedom and open plains.

At this point the skills and values that the Virginian has acquired during his former nomadic lifestyle have, through his transcultural development, been modified into a new product, or, at least, been given a new direction. Based on the same Western principles of hard work, thrift, and self-respect, the Virginian's efforts have, at the "end" of the process, been redirected towards the Eastern idea of settlement, permanence and commerce. As Campbell states, "The nomadic, bachelor West is over, the housed, married West is established" (227). And at the heart of the transcultural process, the Western hero and the Eastern schoolmarm live happily ever after.

Conclusion

So powerful is the mythic image of the American West, as it is promoted by Owen Wister and the Western genre he initiated, that its arch-images have come to embody the West, and real Westerners model themselves after fictional representations. The cultural notion of the West defines for all Americans, Westerners and others alike, what the Western experience means. The imagined West is a West taken out of historical context and made timeless as the mythic aspect of the West makes the lessons from the past relate to the present as well. As a result, we get the notion that "How a cowboy acts in myth is how an American male should act regardless of time or place," Richard White explains in *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own:" A History of the American West* (616). The mythical West is a nationally rather than a locally imagined space, and the Western has used and abused local traditions and shaped local myths to its own liking, aided in its mission by an explosion in mass media, a substantial Western migration, and a vast and resilient readership (White 619-20). Not only has Wister's classic image of the West survived, but in the year 2000, a hundred years after the novel was created, *The Virginian* sold over sixty-five hundred copies (see Graulich xiii). It is evident that Wister's classic Western still holds a position in twenty-first-century American culture.

The issues and problems that the Virginian faces in the novel, issues such as land use, tenure rights, race relations, and the use of violence in the defense of private property, are still central topics of the West's evolving identity. The politics of today are inspired by the fictions of the past, as Susan Kollin explains in "Wister and the 'New West'": "…the most powerful arguments have tended to come from the cultural level, where they are based in ideas shaped by a nostalgia for a mythic Western past" (239). The Western frontier, as a geographical place, had reached its end at the turn of the twentieth century, but, as Frederick Jackson Turner

stated in his 1893 frontier thesis, the product of the frontier experience remains (see McVeigh 25). The legacy of *The Virginian* has continued to embrace the notion which Wister, along with Roosevelt and William Cody, sought to promote: the Western territory was, and still is, the embodiment of the finest that America has to offer.

Though labeled "the classic Western," *The Virginian* promotes an ambiguous and inconsistent West. A personal believer of the West's recuperating effect, crediting, as noted, the advancement of his own health to the Western ranch experience, Wister produced a novel which embodies the regenerative and escapist fantasy of the romantic West. His imagined West has its own "code" where freedom and independence exists on the border of the American society, acted out by young, sturdy men without stable connections to family or civilization. But though *The Virginian*'s imaginary West appears, in many ways, as an escape from adult responsibility and the grim reality of life, Wister's novel also reveals that it is created by a highly educated man from an aristocratic background, as traces of his conservative upper-class values are transparent through the surface of the story. The result is an ambiguous moral ideology which both criticizes and asserts the values of the author's refined Eastern upbringing.

The West, as portrayed through the novel, is an appealing but rather impossible idea. The narrator's amiable portrait of the Western society is full of conflicting values brought harmoniously together in what Cawelti calls "a literary exemplification of the principle of having your cake and eating it too" (229). The characters, events and setting of *The Virginian* appear quite realistic on the surface, but, after a closer study, one finds that they are shaped by moral idealism, channeled through and presented by Wister's narrator. Through his editorial and narrative power, the narrator quite skillfully creates a world where things work out as he wishes, without giving the impression of being overtly artificial or contrived. The Virginian, for example, comes across as both a romantic hero and the opposite of one simultaneously: he

is far from chaste and pure, but he is still a gentleman with a remarkable integrity; he is a fearless and violent killer, but he is also a gentle lover and good friend; and, symbolic for the novel's ideology, he is both a supreme individualist and a dedicated agent of the Western community (Cawelti 229). In his construction of the cultural value system of the Western environment, the narrator brings together ordinarily incompatible things, balancing nostalgic conceptions of the fabled West with Eastern traditionalism. As a result, the novel presents an environment which combines a longing for less rigidly defined social roles with conservative social politics, the yearning for freedom with greater responsibility, a democratic society with elitism, social equality with social hierarchy, and nonconformity with a strong sense of community. The cultural conflict between the West and the East is portrayed, as Campbell notes, as:

> dialogues between movement and stasis, nature and civilization, migration and settlement, and hybridity and essentialism, and at the heart of the dialogues is the figure of the eponymous hero, an outsider circling around within the novel's space, moving from the margins to the center until he is married and belongs at its social center. (220)

The path of "the eponymous hero" towards the center of the novel's space follows the transcultural development of the West and the increasing conservative influence from the East. All the central characters in *The Virginian* start out as outsiders in the West, the Western cowboy-hero being no exception, and they have all gathered in the Western territory as an escape from a background and a role which they are not right for. Consistent with the novel's criticism of urban American society, they are not contented in the civilized world, as no "good" characters would be, but as they arrive in the old West neither of them really fits in

there either. What saves them is not the influence of the romantic Western society, which the narrator advocates, as much as the new transcultural developments which occur around and within them, transforming the old West into a West based on Wister's ideological ideals. As the romantic West reaches the right amount of Eastern influence, the former outsiders move from the margins and into the social center of the Western community. We see this gradual transformation from outsider to a more integrated part of society in regards to all three of the central characters, but most strikingly in the case of the hero-figure. The Virginian is a popular figure when the narrator-character first meets him in the rough Western country, but it is in the new transcultural community that he is able to accomplish his dreams and reach his full potential.

The Virginian's journey towards the new version of the West is also the longest as compared with the other two main characters; however, his starting point is that of a romantic and rootless cowboy, drifting on the borders of society (quite literally) with nothing but aversion for civilized society. As much as Wister's narrator idealizes the youthful cowboy version of the Virginian, the novel's conservative moral code requires the Western territory to mature from a playground of young men towards a more conservative and stable society. The cowboy-hero follows the development of his Western surroundings, grows out of the past "wild west," and begins a new life increasingly associated with the settled East. This development attests to the fact that *The Virginian* is, essentially, an Eastern novel, narrated by an Eastern voice and written for an Eastern audience. From the character's increasing happiness as the story progresses we gather an underlying principle that the romantic West is fun for a time, but eventually a happy ending is one where the West opens up for Eastern influence.

Central among these Eastern influences is the prospect of material success and social position. *The Virginian* depicts a West where a vast variety of peoples from all kinds of

backgrounds arrive, but where only the best men are able to master the rigorous demands, and, as a result, earn the right to become leaders and rise above the masses. This is "equality" in the sense that every man has an equal possibility to prove his worth, regardless of his former place in the Eastern society, and, thereby, to shape his new social position from the personal qualities he embodies rather than from his ancestry. The result is a Western society with just as rigid social divisions as those one would find in the East, the difference being the criteria which a man is judged by. Hence, the hero, who starts out as one of numerous prank-playing cowboys, surpasses his former friends due to his innate superiority. As the only one from his group of ranch-hands, he manages to become "an important man, with a strong grip on many various enterprises, and able to give his wife all and more than she asked or desired" (327). He is the new kind of aristocrat, a man who has climbed the social ladder, not due to his name (as he does not have one), but due to his supreme work-ethic, intellect, individualism, and innate honorable decency. As he himself explains: "I am the kind that moves up" (100).

The new version of the West is a society with capitalism and social hierarchy, like the East, but the ideological difference is that the businessmen of the West have, unlike their "corrupt" and dishonest Eastern counterparts, redeemed themselves through their natural virtues and thus proven their right to rule. Interestingly, these redeeming natural virtues are essentially founded on violence, but, as noted in chapter one, "death is a thing much cleaner than vice" (31). The difference, it seems, between an authoritative businessman in the West and the collectively despised business society of the East, is that the leaders in the West possess the "right" kind of qualities. They are no less ruthless, but they have, through the Western experience, proved and enhanced their innate honor and decency which, in turn, make their use of violence appear acceptable and even appropriate.

Though increasingly influenced by a chosen assortment of Eastern values, *The*

Virginian's West remains, for all intents and purposes, defined in opposition to the way of the East. Wister's narrator evidently favors some Eastern values but not the East in general. The sense of escapism and the social criticism of modern civilized society are always present. The way of the West is at all times sovereign to its Eastern counterpart, as is evident from the way the central characters act during their time in the region. The Western way is to learn from life rather than books, to follows norms above rules, and to value practical skills above general knowledge. The Western hero embodies this philosophy innately and succeeds because of it, serving as an example for the two Eastern characters. That his approach is favored above the ways of the bookish Easterners is evident from the way he outshines them, as well as in the immense esteem they hold for him.

The Virginian has attended the school of life, earning his living since the age of fourteen, "and that's from old Mexico to British Columbia," and has done this in such a way that he has never needed to steal or "begged a cent" (174). His skills and qualities have been shaped by the Western existence, and contrast the fine education of Molly and the narrator-character, as do his behavior and attitude. We see numerous examples of this difference in attitude and behavior throughout the story. Whereas the narrator-character writes in his diary as a way of sorting through his jumbled thoughts, the Western hero prefers to talk quietly to his horse in order to clear his mind of his troubles (262). While the narrator-character is too busy asking questions and articulating his enthusiasm to notice dangerous snakes in the desert, the hero stays silent and perceptive and, acting rather than talking, slays the danger (140). Furthermore, while the schoolmarm is delighted with academic indoor work, the hero-figure applies it only for purely practical purposes: "Education enveloped him, it may be said. But there was none in his eye. That was upon the window, looking far across the cold plain." (175). Hence, as the narrator-character retorts to the Virginian: "No doubt we're not made the same way" (257).

The novel's preference of the West is also evident through the way in which the Easterners, with their impressive schooling and heritage, are granted a secondary role in the story as well as in society, whereas the Western hero rises up as the supreme leader. The Western experience outshines the Eastern book learning, as is illustrated through the cowboy Scipio's reprimand to the narrator not to "travel so much alone – not till you've learned more life" (139). In this cultural clash, the bookish narrator with his Eastern education is outweighed by an uneducated man, who, for his "twenty odd years were indeed a library of life" (140). The school of life is thus superior to any institutional education, but, be that as it may, the road towards acquiring these valued skills is a strenuous one. As noted in chapter one, the role of a true Western hero is never painless, and as the Virginian lays out to Molly the path that has lead him towards the man he has become, he concludes that it has allowed him to know "a great deal more" than she, with her sheltered life, ever will, but, as he says, "I'd not want yu' to know what I know" (174).

As Wister's narrator separates the West from the East, he also separates the purity of the unspoiled, newly settled territory from the urban problems of civilized American society. He makes an effort to highlight the binaries between the opposing regions' respective cultural ideology, lifestyle, value system and norms, and thereby keep the West free from associations with the "vice" of the Eastern cities. However, the transculturally developed Western territory where the hero and heroine eventually settle down and find their place in society is no longer in genuine opposition to the East. As Wister's narrator reaches his ideal West, the region has relinquished some of its most fundamental contrasts to the East. The society in which the Virginian finally gets to "move up" and thrive is by no means a new East, but neither is it the old West. It is a transcultural space encompassing the "best of two worlds," where Wister's ideal of a region, where the finest youth of America gather and serve as a model for the rest of the nation, is fulfilled. Hence the novel is escapist and conservative at the same time.

Most importantly, however, it is not only the novel's setting which is transculturally transformed, but also the three major characters, and above all the leading hero-figure. During the span of the novel the Virginian turns into a character who embodies the best qualities of the romantic West, but who directs his abilities in a progressive and forward-thinking direction. His personal development is evident at the end of the story when he reveals a new open-mindedness towards the most desirable influences from the civilized world. As he explains to his bride:

> "Why, I've been noticing. I used to despise an Eastern man because his clothes were not Western. I was very young then, or maybe not so very young, as very – as what you saw I was when you first came to Bear Creek. A Western man is a good thing. And he generally knows that. But he has a heap to learn. And he generally don't know that. So I took to watching the Judge's Eastern visitors." (324)

With a Western hero who has fulfilled his ambitions and ensured himself a prosperous future, the novel also ends on a positive note for the West: "Their eldest boy rides the horse Monte; and, strictly between ourselves, I think his father is going to live a long while" (327). We gather that though the world is changing, the West will prevail.

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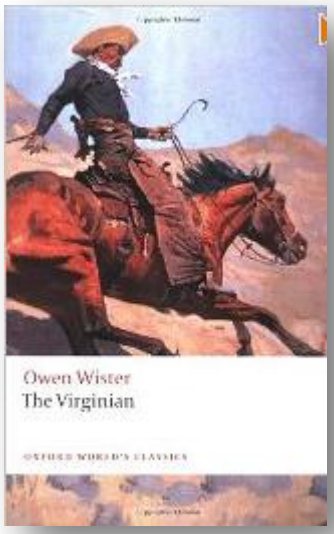
Appendix

1. The Oxford World's Classics edition of *The Virginian*.

   Cover illustration: detail from *The Cowboy* (oil on canvas, 1902) by Frederic Remington.



2. The Signet Classics edition of *The Virginian.*

   Cover illustration: *Autumn on the Hudson River* (oil on canvas, 1860) by Jasper Francis Cropsey.