

American Literature of the Old West: Owen Wister's *The Virginian*

Introduction

It is generally understood that while *The Virginian* is a romance novel, it carefully incorporated the themes of masculinity, vigilante justice, the educated easterner and landscape. The protagonist is simply called the Virginian, introduced and described as an American cowboy, setting a standard for positive image of the previously rowdy vision of cowboys.

The Virginian is Owen Wister's (1998) novel dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt who was his friend. The story tells about a traveler from Wyoming, a Westerner who comes to the place to be met by the Virginian, the host. Sent by the judge to fetch the guest, the Eastern dweller opens the entire new world to the visitor. Learning about the hospitable people of the West, their traditions and habits during a night stay and a number of peculiar details as the Virginian and the guest plan to travel to the judge's place, the reader feels more and more sympathy and friendliness for the Virginian.

Discussion

The general idea of masculinity portrayed in *The Virginian* is born out of "social Darwinism" and coupled with manifestation of the lead character's destiny. The Virginian cowboy is a quiet, reserved man, strong, muscular, individualistic, and followed the honor code of the "Good Old West". Owen Wister (1998) developed this gentlemanly cowboy character out of the vision of a wild and free cowboy whose adventures readers of all ages enjoyed in 1903-1960 in literature and films. The Virginian was easy to talk to and quite civilized. He had a way with people, both old friends and new acquaintances. According to Madsen (1988, p. 126), "One of the most powerful contributions made by the Western to the ideology of American exceptionalism was the ability to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate claims to such things as

power, land, water, women.” Kim Newman (199) also observed that with the advent of American civilization, there was the rise of law and order and establishment of community values. Hence, the Western people, as embodied in *The Virginian*, focus on conquest. As Madsen (1998) remarked wisely,

Cavalries conquer the Indians, pioneers conquer the wilderness, lawmen conquer outlaws and individuals conquer their circumstances. But with each conquest, another stretch of territory, whether geographical or philosophical, comes under the hegemony of the United States of America. (p. 12)

Madsen (1998) observed that in *The Virginian*, the narrator represented a new kind of American, i.e. an independent person, noble of spirit, and following the call of his honor, courage and sense for justice. In addition to his moral superiority, the Virginian has a physical ability to back up the people sharing his ideas and create the relationships that can pass the toughest time-testing. For Madsen (1998), Wister's hero, the Virginian possesses healthy self-discipline, knowledge, skill, ingenuity, resourcefulness, and perseverance. He can handle the demands of the wilderness, and possesses incredible ability to cope with the moral and spiritual demands of the nation, as Madsen (1998) explains.

Robinson (1996), on the other hand, emphasizes certain dilemma concerning responsibility in *The Virginian* behind the story of an honest and open cowboy.

Robinson (1996) observed that there are moments the Virginian ponders on questions which he may also provide the answer to. One of the specific issue Robinson (1996) dwelt on is the Virginian's marriage, since, in fact, he had been bantering about marriage, wife and kids to Uncle Hugley right from the start of the novel. It is not clear if the cowboy actually should be avoiding marriage or responsibility altogether, since, the Virginian admitted that marriage and lighting are two things that he cannot fully understand and would take him by surprise (Madsen, 1998, p. 191).

In his honeymoon, the Virginian contemplates about responsibility and compares himself to an animal rolling in the sand and returning to innocence, according to Robinson (1996, p. 41). While Robinson (1996) linked this portion of the text to honeymoon and death, as a romantic novel, it would be reasonable to suggest that the Virginian may only want to escape and forget about everything else, except to cherish the moment of being with his bride-new wife. Being the romantic and educated man that he is, allegory to the sand and the animal is Wister's way to describe how the Virginian feels himself as very much a part of nature and his environment. Here, Robinson (1996) suggests that,

In acknowledging this urge to retreat from "experience," he does not raise the prospect of irresponsibility as an alternative. Instead, his implicit wish is to return to innocence, but to a variety of innocence that verges sharply toward oblivion. It is not from knowledge that the hero shrinks, but from consciousness itself; and the implicit trajectory of this impulse bears him toward death, the final respite from the toils of thought. (p. 42)

While Robinson (1996) may be right in his observation, I would like to add and insist on the importance of the moment when the Virginian asked for that retreat. It is clear that Robinson (1996) is right to mark the issue of responsibility, as there is much to expect from a person such as the Virginian. Thus, for what he may consider as stolen or rare moments, he can get lost to enjoying a marital bliss. This is, of course, in conflict with the masculine, independent and strong image of the Western cowboy. Already, Robinson (1996) noted the contrast about a cowboy retaining a single status as compared to the Virginian who preferred to finally settle down. Robinson (1996) put these ideas in the following way: "It is part and parcel of the cowboy's culture to be suspicious of marriage. He regards matrimony as all that is artificial, constraining,

corrupting and hypocritical in civilization" (p. 43). The image of "masculinity" is challenged, however, which is why the novel has explicitly been considered a romantic one (Mitchell, 1987, p. 68).

Another contention of masculinity in *The Virginian* concerns the sexual aspect of people's lives. A man is supposed to be expected of "wide sexual experience [...] as the healthy overflow of youthful high spirits, (while) a similar sexual readiness in women is viewed as unnatural, unclean, corrupting" (Robinson, 1996, p. 32). It was implied in the novel that the cowboy hero has had his way with the landlady in Medicine Bow so that the Eastern narrates that "this silent free lance had been easily victorious," according to Wister (1998, p. 36), against the landlady viewed with "impropriety lurked noiselessly all over her. You could not have specified how; it was interblended with her sum total," as Wister (1998, p. 33) put it.

This double standard, however, has been maintained in many societies for a long time until the advent of feminism in the early 1960s so that this kind of moralizing in the novel is no longer questionable but reflects the period's kind of societal views. Another issue noted by Robinson (1996) when it comes to masculinity was the so-called "vocabulary of warfare" (Robinson, 1996, p. 44) and suggesting the characteristics that would describe Molly as a "shrewd, ruthless warrior in unequal combat with an earnest, unknowing victim, lends very substantial confirmation to the suspicion and fear lodged in the various stereotypes of women in *The Virginian*" (Robinson, 1996, p. 44).

This, however, gives the woman a seeming upper-hand on the situation of which men at that time were wary about being bewitched. Feeling as if engaged by the women they fell for, men face a challenge which they are to fight, even if it is against their will. Women at that time were suppressed, the society patriarchal, therefore, it was understandable that knowledge about women's thoughts and feelings, and the

challenges they may experience seem a treacherous process for men who made them underdog.

An interesting observation of Robinson (1996), however, is the “unannounced” competitor of Molly who himself is the Eastern Wyoming narrator. Since the very beginning, the narrator spoke not like a man in describing the “handsome” Virginian. Robinson (1996) notes, “there is nothing guarded or demure in the remarkable intensity and specificity of the narrator's expression of romantic ardor” (Robinson, 1996, p. 46).

In several cases, he continued his struggle and maintained a seeming physical attraction that could not be satiated or ever consummated. Thus, he has caused indirect envy of Molly, informing an outsider (the reader) of her scheming. It is important to mark that the author did not take into account the peculiarities of the society at that time. After all, in all courtships of all time, man and woman engage in an unknown battle that grip them like no other.

Vigilante Justice

The issue of lynching as seen by the larger cattle outfits is presented in this novel as an idea of justice carried out in the Old West, attributed with social Darwinism. Vigilante justice is both a societal response to needs that are not met. In the case of the ranchers, vigilante is the desired protection from thieves as well as restoring the justice that the ranchers have been striving for since they were deprived of their lands.

Individual heroism is a focus of many Western novels. An individual is superior to the laws and institutions as compared to the civilized East. A Western man defies power and bureaucracy prevalent in the twentieth century United States culture. For instance, Madsen (1998) noted that the Western preferred expansion of territories, liberty, democratic leveling, national identity, the work ethic, white superiority, and restrained violence (Madsen, 1998, p. 131). Here, it is expected that the protagonist has an

admirable ability to control his anger, and can stand up to for violence when needed (Bratcher 1962, p. 189). He has been made an ideal American who is innately noble and not necessarily from birth. He is expected to work, fight and kill following the code of fair play and not through cunning and duplicity (Madsen, 1998, p. 131).

Robinson (1996) noted the spiritual burden of the Virginian in his gun battles. "Life is war; regeneration is frequently to be found in violence. The struggle for survival, or "equality," finds its purest, most dramatic (and exciting) expression in combat to the death between two men – the duel" (Robinson, 1996, p. 44). For the combatants, the code is amoral and fair as well as legitimate. For cowboys, they are inclined to sustain the ethos to take care of their own (Bratcher, 1962, p. 190), and there is the seeming indifference to injustice that surrounds the Virginian, thus, he is burdened. It is remarkable that Robinson (1996) wrote, "this obligation to remain passive in the face of what is regarded as necessary or inevitable is the source of deep melancholy in *The Virginian*" (Robinson, 1996, p. 45). He was forced to rationalize using Darwinism in order to maintain his sanity about the bloody injustice that surrounds him about the deaths of the innocent and the weaklings.

Lynching Trampas, the outlaws' leader, and his friend Steve has become another problem the Virginian deals with. While it is a pleasure to execute Trampas, it was entirely different for Steve who either became incompetent or turn into a plain outlaw. Civilian contribution, here through the Virginian, has been sanctioned by the judge himself who declared that where the arms of the law fail to reach them, then, vigilantism is favored.

Educated Easterner

Wister incorporated the aristocratic character of the Virginian to a frontier cowboy. These traits add depth to the image of a cowboy to create a character that the

New England aristocrat would identify and empathize with (Kuenz, 2001, p. 102). This entails a character on the frontier who is above ignorant but capable of critical thinking. Madsen (1998) observed that in *The Virginian* the narrator noted how easily the Virginian ropes a wild pony. He rescued her future bride teacher Molly Wood from a flooded stream. He has a mastery of the landscape that allowed him to anticipate and read the signs of life in the wilderness. This knowledge led him to track down the thieves providing the novel's adventure.

In their marriage, the Virginian brought his bride into the mountains for their honeymoon (Madsen, 1998, p. 128). Morally superior, the Virginian is fair to everyone, old and young, aristocrat or peasants. So much like the standard Western, the Virginian dramatizes the fight for justice: against cattle and horse thieves, bullies and outlaws, bankers and empire builders like the railroad and cattle barons (Madsen, 1998, p. 131).

Aside from being able to write his own letters as well as read classics, the Virginian is a man who engages in business, thus enabled to further his properties and material possessions (Kuenz, 2001, p. 112).

Landscape

The novel uses descriptive landscape to captivate and get attention of readers. The use of landscape helps to explain the rugged behavior and actions of the characters. It was evident that the frontier was a means by which masculinity was obtained. Madsen (1998) has observed how the Westerner has an affinity for nature and the wilderness, she wrote, "the landscape is something to read and for those who are literate, nature is legible" (Madsen, 1998, p. 125). Through the eyes of the narrator, the frontier is described in detail including the mountains far and shining, the sunlight, the infinite earth, the air as the fountain of youth. However, this is challenged as the

buffalo, the wild antelope, and the horseman pasturing thousands of cattle no longer become a part of a present.

Madsen (1998) noted the *Virginian's* preference of the wilderness for his honeymoon. He has made the mountains safe for his bride Molly. Madsen (1998) wrote that the mountains "represented as the spiritual home of men like the *Virginian*, and his honeymoon in the wilderness is a testament to his final triumph over human and natural adversaries" (Madsen, 1998, p. 128). For the *Virginian*, the wilderness belongs to him by moral right and spiritual union.

Conclusion

The Virginian successfully portrayed and introduced a flawed but acceptable protagonist in the form of a western cowboy. The novel reflects two standards in its narrative: the Wyoming narrator's and the prevailing societal norms. These are betted out against the *Virginian's* own personal conflict and beliefs as he practices what he has learned throughout his lifetime to adjust, maneuver, conform, rebel, and eventually accept the things that he could not do something about against his will.

The theme of masculinity reflects the prevailing notions of a romanticized hero, gallant, gentle but strong, educated although working well. Vigilante justice is portrayed in *The Virginian* as an acceptable and rational reaction of the civilians who become helpless against thugs and thieves who played with their properties and lives. As the judge himself acknowledged, where the law fails to serve the constituency, civilian vigilance becomes a necessity.

The educated easterner is a characteristic that Wister opted to inject in the character of the cowboy as a move to widen his readership and acceptance of the hero. A cowboy is previously known only as cattle ranch helpers or keepers who engage in gambling, gun battle and other "macho" stuffs that are no longer acceptable in a

civilized society. It is, therefore, necessary to inject an improved, thereby civilized hero that people can empathize with, especially the literate public.

The use of landscape description is a necessary element of *The Virginian* to further engage the reader to the surrounding and the environment that the protagonist dwells and moves about. This helps the reader appreciate and understand the logic about his thoughts, his actions, his investment and his world in general.

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