

Westerns: Creating the American West

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Since the beginning of the American movie industry, westerns have been seen as a defining genre of American film. They have created an image of the American West that has been ingrained in all Americans. However, there is a vast difference between the reality of the West and the image of the West that comes from the movies. Westerns educate the public about the West with inaccurate information. They often weave just enough history into their plots that they seem real. By combining history with fiction they can rewrite America's past in a way that pleases the audience. This process creates a mythical West that never really existed. While westerns teach values like honor and responsibility they also create stereotypes that live on even today. One of the stereotypes that westerns perpetuate is gender. Western films have strict gender roles. Women are confined to play the refined lady, the helpmate or the bad woman, while men are either the cowboy hero or the villain. Western films have created a mythical West with specific gender roles.

Historians have looked at the relationship between western films and history since the beginning. They quickly recognized that there was a difference between the West in reality and in film. In her 1930 article, "Honesty or Hokum - Which Does the Public Want?" Elena Boland recognizes that the 1930 film, *Billy the Kid*, was not historically accurate.¹ She focuses on the end of Billy the Kid's life which was rewritten in the film to please the audience. Her article shows that by 1930, people were already realizing that westerns were rewriting history and that the audience was not concerned with accuracy. In 1952, Jean-Louis Rieupeyrou wrote, "The Western: A Historical Genre." He reveals the strong connection between history and the western and at the same time looks into the stereotypes that westerns create.² Rieupeyrou looks at the

¹ Elena Boland, "Honesty or Hokum - Which Does the Public Want?," in *The American West on Film: Myth and Reality*, ed. Richard A. Maynard (Rochelle Park: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1974), 81.

² Jean-Louis Rieupeyrou, "The Western: A Historical Genre." *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 7, no. 2 (Winter, 1952): 117.

roles for men in westerns. He believes that men fit into two categories; they are either made into heroes defined by morals or they are villains.³ However, he only examines the limitations that gender roles force on men in westerns. He does not include women in his examination. It has only been in the last thirty years that the women's roles in westerns were more closely examined. In his 1995 article, "The Scarred Woman Behind the Gun: Gender, Race, and History in Recent Westerns," William Luhr recognized that some people counted more to westerns than others.⁴ Women are not as valuable to the genre as cowboy heroes are. In 2003 Wendy Chapman Peek agreed with Luhr in her article, "The Romance of Competence," by arguing that, "In Westerns, then, the most important thing is to be a man".⁵ The men are the dominant force. They have control over everything. The men control the finances, the property and they make the decisions. The power of the western to create myths and stereotypes has been investigated over time. Historians have recognized that as westerns continue to depict strict gender roles they also perpetuate the myth of the West.

Westerns depict a romanticized image of the West. Their west consists of generalizations instead of reality. At the same time, westerns often have a close connection with history. According to Jean-Louis Rieupeyrou, "American movie makers soon recognized the use they could make of contemporary history so closely bound to the lives of many theatergoers".⁶ People live vicariously through the adventures of others. Those adventures make their lives seem more exciting. Westerns include historical people so the adventures became even more real. Filmmakers used aspects of history to attract the attention of American society. As a result, films

³ Rieupeyrou, 128.

⁴ William Luhr, "The Scarred Woman Behind the Gun: Gender, Race and History in Recent Western," *Bilingual Review* 20, no. 1 (Jan-Apr 1995): 41.

⁵ Wendy Chapman Peek, "The Romance of Competence," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 210.

⁶ Rieupeyrou., 117.

often incorporated well-known western figures into their plot lines. Jesse James, Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid, Doc Holiday and General Custer became icons of the West through film. Those people had exciting lives that would captivate the audience. Although their stories are only partially true, westerns became seen as educational.⁷ American people connect to westerns through the stories of their heroes and became indoctrinated in the mythical west. Western myth formed out of the connection between history and film, and westerns became the instructors of western history.

Westerns contribute to the myth of the West by teaching it as history to society. The problem with westerns is that they often teach a false history to a society willing to take their word for it. The popular image of General George Armstrong Custer is an excellent illustration of the power that films have in educating society. According to Paul Hutton, "Most of the conventional information or misinformation about Custer comes from elements of popular culture rather than scholars".⁸ Custer has become a legend through western films that were based on his myth rather than reality.

The majority of the Custer myth began with Libbie Custer. She wrote several books about her late husband and closely guarded his memory. In her three biographies of him, she showed him as a devoted husband and dedicated soldier.⁹ She also monitored other writings about Custer. In 1908, Edward Godfrey rewrote his article, "Custer's Last Battle," at Libbie Custer's request. In the original version Godfrey blamed Custer for The Battle of Little Bighorn.¹⁰ Libbie constantly worked to control how her husband was remembered. Only after

⁷ Rieupeyrou, 119.

⁸ Paul A. Hutton, "From Little Bighorn to Little Big Man: The Changing Image of a Western Hero in Popular Culture," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (Jan 1976): 19.

⁹ John Phillip Langellier, *Custer: The Man, the Myth, the Movies* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2000): 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

her death, was Custer more closely examined.¹¹ Westerns like *Santa Fe Trail* (1940) portrayed Custer as a hero even when historians were showing him in a more negative light. Filmmakers were focused on pleasing their audience, not on being historically accurate.

They Died With Their Boots On is an example of how westerns can redefine the image of a historical person. It was made in 1941 and is an extremely positive portrayal of Custer. Errol Flynn plays a likable and honorable Custer. The film glorifies him and glosses over any questionable decisions and actions. He is shown as a dedicated husband and also an idealist who fights because he believes in what he is doing. Custer is a sympathetic soldier who follows his code of honor. In the film, his dying declaration is his hope that the United States government will give the Indians the Black Hills back.¹² There is no mention of him wanting glory or massacring Indians; instead he is shown as a dedicated soldier who was very fair with the Indians. The film teaches society that George Armstrong Custer was a hero who gave his life for his country.

In *They Died With Their Boots On*, Olivia DeHavilland plays Libbie Custer as a woman devoted to her husband. She is Custer's support system in this film. She completely gives up her pampered lifestyle in order to accompany her husband when he is transferred out west. Their relationship is portrayed in very traditional terms. He is very gentle and chivalrous towards her and she is always submissive and supportive of him. She believes in him and never questions his motives. Even in the end, when he leaves to fight what would become the Battle of Little Bighorn, she does not stop him. She does not want him to go but she is sure that he knows what he is doing so she supports his decision.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *They Died With Their Boots On*, produced by Hal B. Wallis, directed by Raoul Walsh, 139 minutes, Warner Bros. Pictures Inc., 1941, DVD.

The time period is also important because the film was released during World War II. *They Died With Their Boots On* (1941) could be seen as a propaganda film. Through films the West was portrayed as the defining aspect of America. It was a place of democracy and renewal. By indoctrinating people with the myth of the West, the film represents Custer as an example of what the government wanted Americans to be: dedicated soldiers willing to make sacrifices for their country. *They Died With Their Boots On* portrays Custer positively because it had its own agenda. It defined Custer as an example of the perfect soldier. It tells Americans that they should be willing to give their life for their country, just like Custer did. Also Custer wanted to give the Indians their lands back. The film is saying that it is wrong to take lands from other people. *They Died With Their Boots On* is reacting to Germany and Japan taking over Europe and Asia and is teaching that it is wrong.

After World War II, society and Hollywood were more aware of social problems and the hero image of Custer was re-evaluated.¹³ Custer had a new role in western film: the villain. *Little Big Man* (1970) reflects Custer's revised image. It provides an Indian perspective of the Battle of Little Bighorn and depicts Custer as the enemy rather than the hero.¹⁴ This film sympathizes with the Indians. Custer is played as almost a caricature of himself. His mannerisms are exaggerated to make him seem even more out of control. The film also uses music to set the tone. The cavalry music becomes the theme song for the bad guys. The Indians devastation of the Seventh Cavalry is justified by the terrible deeds that the white Americans have done to them. Throughout the film, the Indians were being unfairly attacked by the cavalry. At The Battle of Little Bighorn, Custer appears almost maniacal. He seems to go crazy during the battle when he realizes his fate.

¹³ Hutton, 38.

¹⁴ *Little Big Man*, Produced by Stuart Millar, Directed by Arthur Penn, 139 minutes, 20th Century Fox, 1970, videocassette.

His insanity seems to be another way to avoid blaming Custer entirely for The Battle of Little Bighorn. *Little Big Man* still puts the fault on Custer but the ending still leaves it up to the audience. They have the power to decide that Custer was not-guilty by reason of insanity.

In *Little Big Man*, Dustin Hoffman plays Jack, a white boy who is captured by the Cheyenne and spends many years with them. After being picked up by the cavalry he is turned over to Reverend Pendrake to receive a Christian upbringing. Mrs. Pendrake, played by Faye Dunaway, initially seems to be a refined woman but she is really a bad woman. They welcome Jack into their house in order to teach him Christian beliefs. However, she greets him inappropriately by kissing him on the lips and giving him a bath. They tell him that he is there to learn Christian values but at the same time she is trying to seduce him. She is not as pure as she seems. Mrs. Louise Pendrake later becomes Lulu and the next time Jack sees her she is no longer pretending to be a refined lady; she has become a prostitute. Even though this film was made in the 1970s, it still limits women's roles to good women or bad women. Mrs. Pendrake is either a good Christian wife or a prostitute.

Westerns have become more critical of Custer over time because they are forced to deal with a more socially aware audience. Part of the reason the audience has become more critical is that society now has access to instant news. It no longer relies on word of mouth or news that has been delayed. Today's audience receives news as it happens and can even watch it with their own eyes. As a result, the audience receives a more accurate version of the news. When they watch films that include historical information, they expect a higher degree of accuracy. It is more difficult for the audience to watch westerns that whitewash Custer's image. Westerns after World War II tend to market Custer as more of a villain like in *Little Big Man* (1970). Instead of showing Custer more accurately as a man who was both good and bad, films still judge Custer to

be one or the other. Westerns that show Custer negatively still educate people in the myth of the west -- they have just changed Custer's role. There has not been a pro-Custer feature film in the last ten years.¹⁵ Custer has only been seen in a few television shows and TV movies. It seems that he now represents a side of America that the audience does not want to deal with. He no longer represents a hero. As a villain, he has become almost an embarrassment to Americans, and America as a whole may no longer want to be reminded of him.

Little Big Man came out in 1970 when the United States was involved in the Vietnam War. It was produced at a time where Americans were dissatisfied with their government. It is essentially an anti-establishment film that uses the cavalry as the symbol of the government. The government makes false promises to the Cheyenne and the cavalry attacks them over and over without cause. Throughout the movie it refers to Cheyenne Indians as the Human Beings while the whites seem to be the savages. The Indian leader, Old Lodge Skins, continues to try and find a peaceful way to live with the whites. By the end of the film, he recognizes that there is no hope for Indians. The whites will keep coming and the Indian way of life will not survive. He tells Jack that he is going to die because he wants to die on his own land and the Indians will never be able to stop the whites. He has given up the idea of peaceful coexistence. The film suggests that it is time for Americans re-examine their beliefs. Nothing in the film is what it seems. Custer and the cavalry may or may not be the good guys. Mrs. Pendrake seems to be a refined lady but she is not. The Indians who are supposed to be the villains may not be. When this film came out, Americans were already distrustful of their government. There was still controversy over the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. They were also questioning the

¹⁵"Custer Character Name Search," *The Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/Find?select=Characters&for=george%20custer> (accessed May 12, 2006).

motives for getting involved in Vietnam.¹⁶ *Little Big Man* is encouraging society to pay attention and look for ulterior motives. It connected with audiences by drawing on its anti-establishment message and society's feelings about the Vietnam War.

Westerns even have the ability to turn outlaws into legends by rewriting their history and making them a part of the myth of the West. Westerns like *Jesse James and Billy the Kid* not only glamorized outlaws but they also changed their story in order to make them more sympathetic to the audience. According to George N. Fenin and William K. Everson that trend in filmmaking, "Sought to prove that virtually all of the West's more notorious badmen had been forced into a life of crime".¹⁷ The films rewrote history to make the murders the outlaws committed seem justified. The 1930 film *Billy the Kid* is an important example of this. The ending of the film was changed after it was previewed because the audience did not want to see Billy the Kid die.¹⁸ The film reflects the turmoil of the Great Depression. The audience bonds with Billy the Kid because he is fighting the establishment. It is a difficult time and the audience is responding by not only supporting the underdog but also encouraging filmmakers to rewrite history so that Billy the Kid can win. The director of the film, King Vidor, said, "We had to go back through the entire story, changing it is so that it would appear justifiable that he should not die".¹⁹ The film is marketed as the life of Billy the Kid. However, the entire film has been rewritten to please the audience. People who watch *Billy the Kid* are actually being educated in the myth of his life. The film completely glosses over the brutality of Billy the Kid who was a cold-blooded murderer.²⁰ The legend of Billy the Kid that westerns create is important to the

¹⁶ Paul S. Boyer, et al. *The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People*, 5th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 913-917.

¹⁷ George N. Fenin and William K. Everson, *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), 241.

¹⁸ Boland, 81.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Boland, 80.

audience. According to Jenni Calder, "The legend...tames him...and...makes it possible for small boys to rig themselves out in western gear and weaponry and re-enact the fatalities of the frontier".²¹ Billy the Kid had to become a part of the western myth because society wanted to be a part of his adventure.

Both the 1927 and the 1939 version of *Jesse James* follow the same trend. Essentially, Jesse James became a folk hero through these movies because the westerns show him as a more modern-day Robin Hood. According to Fenin and Everson, in the 1927 film, "No bank robberies of any kind are shown, and in fact the only crime that Jesse commits in the entire film is a mild stagecoach robbery".²² Westerns are made with the audience in mind and the audience is more inclined to be interested in the myth and legend than reality.

Westerns form stereotypes for the West by confining men and women to certain roles. Westerns assign specific roles for each to play. According to William Luhr, "The Western is about men. Women exist in male terms, as a part of men's stories".²³ This is partially the result of men being western writers. Also women occupied the subservient role in society when westerns started to be made in 1903. Very few women were portrayed as being independent in westerns. Westerns do not emphasize that it often took the combination of the men and the women working together as a team to survive. Although women worked with their husbands on the land and raised their families, westerns often portray them as damsels in distress. Fenin and Everson see women in the pre-1930s western as the film's, "motivation: it was her cattle, or ranch, that was being stolen by the villain".²⁴ Starting in the 1930s, cowboy heroes could fight the establishment that let them down during the Great Depression. The cowboy hero had a strict

²¹ Jenni Calder, *There Must Be A Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and in Reality* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1974), 194.

²² Fenin and Everson, 154.

²³ Luhr, 41.

code of honor that they lived by. As a result, the cowboy becomes an updated version of the knight in shining armor and women are often unrecognized for their role in the West. According to Susan Armitage, "The gender bias underlying the western story has led us to believe that the West was built by stalwart men and incidental, unimportant women".²⁵

Women and men perceived the West differently. The women had a more realistic view of the West. While the men were more focused on the opportunities and the adventures that the West represented, the women recognized its dangers.²⁶ Tensions between men and women often become focus points of western film. In the films, the West is the place where men can be independent and free. Women bring civilization from the East and impose it on the men's West.²⁷ Conflict rises between the men and women because the men feel that the women are invading their territory. The story behind westerns seems to be the clash between men and women which is really independence versus civilization. Independence is much more important to the western because it is the definition of the West. Women do not belong in the West of the westerns because they inevitably bring civilization with them.

Many historians divide roles for women in westerns into two groups: good women and bad women. Good women are submissive, refined and know their place in society. Bad women are often represented by prostitutes or harsh independent women. Susan Armitage labels those roles and adds a third. She sees three stereotypes for women in westerns, "The refined lady, the helpmate and the bad woman".²⁸

²⁴ Fenin and Everson, 209.

²⁵ Susan Armitage, "Through Women's Eyes: A New View of the West," in *The Women's West*, eds. Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 7.

²⁶ Anne F. Hyde, "Cultural Filters: The Significance of Perception," in *A New Significance: Re-envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996): 183.

²⁷ Robert Warshaw, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," in *The American West on Film: Myth and Reality*, ed. Richard A. Maynard (Rochelle Park: Hayden Book Company, Inc., 1974), 65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

The refined lady is the symbol of civilization. She is the bridge in between independence and community for the cowboy. Tensions will form between the refined lady and the cowboy hero when he must use violence to make a stand. The woman does not understand that violence is inevitably a part of the cowboy's life.²⁹ This idea comes from seeing women as civilizers that interfere with the independence that men in westerns desire. According to McDonough, "These women try to force the man to act against his personal code of honor."³⁰ The cowboy hero has no choice but to follow his code and will often lose the girl because of his decision.

In *High Noon* (1952), Amy is the refined lady.³¹ She is a Quaker who marries the town marshal, Will Kane, at the beginning of the film. After he resigned as marshal and as they are getting ready to leave town the news comes in that the villain, Frank Miller, is on his way there. Miller wants to take revenge on the people he feels are responsible for sending him to prison. Kane and Amy leave the town quickly. However, Kane is unable to abandon his town so he turns around and heads back to help protect it until the new marshal arrives. Amy can not understand why he would return to the town and is upset by the violence in his life. Her religion is against using violence. She believes that the town is not his responsibility anymore because he has resigned. She accuses him of trying to be a hero. Kane is not trying to be a hero; he just feels it is his duty to protect the town. It is his code that brings him back there not his job. Amy forces Kane to choose between her and his code and he chooses the code. He cannot compromise his code; instead Amy ends up compromising her code. In the end of the film, she returns to Will during his confrontation with Miller and his gang and kills one of them. She failed to change

²⁹ Warshow, 65.

³⁰ Kathleen A. McDonough, "Wee Willie Winkie Goes West: The Influence of the British Empire Genre on Ford's Cavalry Trilogy," in *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in film, Television and History*, eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 106.

³¹ *High Noon*, produced by Stanley Kramer, directed by Fred Zinnemann, 84 minutes, Republic Pictures Home Video, 1952, videocassette.

Will and instead she is forced to accept his life of violence and even become a part of it. In the end, Amy conformed to find a place in Will's life. As a result, unlike many other westerns Kane still manages to ride out into the sunset with the girl at the end of the film.

In *The Searchers* (1956), Mrs. Jorgensen, played by Olive Carey, is also treated as a refined lady. When a fist fight breaks out between two of the guys, Ethan Edwards, the cowboy hero played by John Wayne, pushes her into the house. As he closes the door on her, he reminds her not to forget that she is a lady.³² Apparently she is capable of helping take care of the farm and the family while the men are gone for more than five years, but she is too much of a lady to witness a fist fight. Although she should be classified as more of a helpmate, Ethan sees her as a refined lady who needs to remember her place in society.

As westerns evolve over time, the story remains about the men but the women have an increased role. This is a reflection of the increasing rights and opportunities that opened to women in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s. Westerns acknowledged the growing roles for women in reality by increasing the prevalence of the helpmate role in westerns. In *Rooster Cogburn* (1975), John Wayne helps the woman, Eula, played by Katherine Hepburn; track down the men who killed her father. In the process he loses his job but in the end she is responsible for getting his job back.³³ In a gunfight she picks up a gun and helps him fight. Eula is the helpmate and even has the ability to fight alongside the cowboy hero.

A more recent example of the helpmate role can be seen in *Crossfire Trail* (2001) where the cowboy hero and the woman save each other. At the end of the film, Rafe, the cowboy hero played by Tom Selleck, comes into town to avenge the death of his friend but when he gets to

³² *The Searchers*. Produced by Merian C. Cooper. Directed by John Ford. 119 Minutes. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1956. DVD.

³³ *Rooster Cogburn*, Produced by Hal Wallis. Directed by Stuart Millar, Universal Pictures Inc., 108 minutes, 1975, videocassette.

town he finds out that the villain has taken Ann Rodney played by Virginia Madsen. From that point on he becomes focused on rescuing her. When Rafe is about to be killed by the villain, Ann saves him by shooting the villain.³⁴ The climax of the film actually involves the woman coming to the rescue of the hero.

The bad woman is commonly portrayed as a prostitute. The prostitute is the opposite of the refined lady. Like the cowboy hero she is on her own and independent. Robert Warshow argues that, "Those women in Western movies who share the hero's understanding of life are prostitutes".³⁵ Only prostitutes understand the cowboy's life is a life of violence.³⁶ They understand that if the cowboy hero gets involved with a refined woman he will end up giving up his entire way of life because she will force him to compromise his code. This can be seen in *High Noon* with the Mexican woman, Helen, who owns the store. She smiles when she sees Kane and Amy coming back into town because she knew that his code would not allow him to leave. When Kane comes to see her, she tells him that if he is smart he will get out too. He says that he can't, and she says I know. She understands why Kane has to face Frank Miller because she has a better grasp of his code. She is a more independent woman and she is not as sheltered from the reality of life like Amy is so she understands that violence is necessary sometimes. Helen realizes that Kane can not avoid the confrontation because he is a cowboy hero.

Helen is an interesting character to contrast with Amy. Helen can take care of herself. In fifty five minutes she manages to sell her store to Mr. Weaver and get out of town. Mr. Weaver tells Helen that she has been real decent with him all along and he seems genuinely surprised that she was an honest partner. He recognizes that she is a bad woman and notes that her actions were

³⁴ *Crossfire Trail*, Produced by Michael Brandman, Directed by Simon Wincer, 95 minutes, Warner Home Video, 2001, videocassette.

³⁵ Warshow, 66.

³⁶ Ibid.

better than what he expected. When Helen meets Amy, she criticizes her for leaving town because she can not understand why Amy is not supporting her man.

The movie *Stagecoach* (1939) shows the two extreme roles of women in westerns. Mrs. Mallory represents the good, refined woman and Dallas is a prostitute so she is the bad woman. Dallas is only on the stage because she was forcibly removed from the town. The film shows many instances where the two women are treated differently based on their role in society. When thirsty, Mrs. Mallory is given water from a silver cup while Dallas is not worthy of the cup so she must drink from the canteen.³⁷ Mrs. Mallory is a good woman and society treats her that way while Dallas is forced to earn respect through her actions.

Westerns assign limited roles for men in the West as well. The men fall into one of two roles: the hero or the villain. There are not many examples of the main character in a western being a just a regular guy. Not all men in the West were cowboy heroes or villains. There were homesteaders, farmers and merchants in the West too. However, in westerns, regular guys are usually being helped by the cowboy hero as in *Shane* where the gunfighter helped save the farmer's family.

While the cowboy hero is motivated by his moral compass, the villain is commonly focused on wealth and power. The plot of most western films involves the hero confronting the villain with either society or a woman as the heroes' motivation. Custer is an example of how western stereotypes limit gender roles for men by forcing them into two groups. While westerns once forced the image of cowboy hero onto Custer, now they have made him the villain.

Villains do not follow the code of the cowboy. They are focused on the acquisition of money, land and power for their own sake. They are not interested in helping others. They are in it only for themselves and what they can get out of the situation. Villains are willing to use any

means necessary to gain wealth and power. Unlike cowboy heroes, they use violence to exploit and terrorize society not protect them. The villain's crimes may range from bullying or terrorizing someone to robbery and murder. The villains' roles do not seem to change over time. For example in *Crossfire Trail* (2001), Bruce Barkow kills Ann Rodney's husband and forces her to marry him because he wants her oil rich land. In *Shane* (1953), the villain wants to force the settlers off so he can have the grazing land. The most dramatic stereotype westerns create is the cowboy hero. The cowboy hero is the man who lives by his morals following Gene Autry's "Cowboy Commandments". These commandments include, "A cowboy never takes unfair advantage, never betrays a trust, always tells the truth, is kind to people..., is free of racial and religious prejudice, is always helpful..., is a good worker, respects womanhood... and is a patriot."³⁸ Through westerns, cowboys became the symbol of the West.

The cowboy hero does not need formal law because he knows the right thing to do and he does it regardless of the risk or consequences of their actions. Wendy Chapman Peek sees westerns, "As a genre that focuses on conflicts that must be resolved with limited or no support from an institutionalized legal system".³⁹ It took a long time for there to be a formal system of law in the West. Westerns connect with an audience because the hero must decide how to act on his own. At the same time, westerns also have an anti-government theme. The cowboy hero is not only alone in his fight but he is often forced to fight because of the actions of his government. For example, in *High Noon*, Kane feels that it is his duty to protect the town because the new marshal has not arrived yet. His government let him down by not having the

³⁷ *Stagecoach*, produced by Walter Wanger, directed by John Ford, 96 Minutes, Warner Home Video, 1939. DVD.

³⁸ David Pierson, "Turner Network Television's Made-for-TV Western Films: Engaging Audiences through Genre and Themes," in *Hollywood's West: The American Frontier in film, Television and History*, eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 289.

³⁹ Peek, 214.

new marshal arrive on time. Kane is then forced into a confrontation Miller which ends up being a life changing event for both him and Amy.

High Noon (1952) reflects its Cold War time period. The town does not come to Kane's aid and even Amy abandons him for a while. The people in the town believe he is causing the confrontation by not leaving. They are afraid and do not want to get involved so Kane is on his own. This film was written by Carl Foreman during the anticommunist investigations. America was dealing with The Great Fear and people were afraid to be identified as communists. While writing the film, Foreman was asked to testify at the House Un-American Activities Committee and by the end of the year he was blacklisted in Hollywood.⁴⁰ The story of Will Kane reflects what was going on in the writer's life. Foreman was accused and abandoned by his friends much like the way Will Kane was. Kane was also blamed unfairly for being the cause of the problem and then left to deal with the situation on his own. People did not want to be identified with Foreman or Kane because they did not want to end up labeled or punished with them.

Westerns are popular because they provide a place to escape to where good will always triumph over evil.⁴¹ Cowboys are hard working independent men who constantly rescue society. They are good men who always do the right thing and fight evil in the form of outlaws or Indians. Cowboys are obligated to help the women and save society. According to Fenin and Everson, "The hero has been presented as an archangel without wings, a superman whose main interest on this earth is to redress wrongs"⁴²

The cowboy hero usually lives outside of the community and although many of them try to rejoin society, their way of life often forces them back into an independent lifestyle. They are

⁴⁰ John H. Lenihan, *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 119-120.

⁴¹ Michael F. Blake, *Code of Honor: The Making of Three Great American Westerns* (Lanham: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003), xiii.

loners who come to the rescue because it is their job. A good example of this comes from *Shane*. Shane is a gunfighter trying to escape from his past and make a new life. By the end of the movie, he has been forced to return to his previous life of violence in order to protect the homestead family he has become friends with.⁴³ Shane is a prime example of the cowboy hero and the lifestyle they are forced to live. He leaves town at the end of the film after killing the villain. He helps rid the town of the villain but he does not get to stay and enjoy the peace. Jane Tompkins argues that although the audience and the little boy, Joey, both want Shane to stay, but his role in the gender system forces him to go into exile.⁴⁴ The hero leaves at the end of the film because he has to bear his burdens alone.⁴⁵ Blake also looks at *Shane*; he believes that Shane sacrifices himself not only to save the family but also to pass on his cowboy commandments to Joey.⁴⁶ Shane can not stay because he would put Joey's family in constant danger. He wants Joey to use violence as a last resort not as a way of life. In order for that to happen Shane has to leave.

Over time the cowboy hero has gotten more complex and the situations have become less black and white. The line between hero and villain started to become blurred in the late 1950s. As a result, the cowboy heroes and the villains are no longer completely good or evil. *Shane* (1953) is a good example of this. Shane is the cowboy hero of the film but he is also a gunfighter who has killed people. He is trying to reform but he can not escape his dark past completely. In *The Searchers* (1956), the cowboy hero, Ethan Edwards, may be the scariest person in the film. He is obsessed with finding his niece but he thinks he needs to kill her because he believes she

⁴² Fenin and Everson 30.

⁴³ *Shane*. Produced by George Stevens. Directed by George Stevens. 117 Minutes. Paramount Pictures, 1953. DVD.

⁴⁴ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 128.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴⁶ Blake 135.

has been ruined by the Indians. It is not until the very end of the film, that he makes the decision to bring her home instead of killing her.

Unforgiven (1992) is the best example of the blurring of the line between the cowboy hero and the villain. William Munny, played by Clint Eastwood, is a retired gunfighter who decides to take one more job because his pig farm is failing and he needs the money.⁴⁷ He did not understand that this job will cause him to revert back to a being bad guy. He was going to kill for money but when the villains kill his friend he becomes focused on vengeance. At the end of the film, he kills an unarmed saloon owner. After that he can no longer be a cowboy hero because he has killed an unarmed man. At the same time, he jeopardized his life with his kids because his actions have forced him back into a life of constant danger. From the very beginning of the movie, Munny has been on the line between the cowboy hero and the villain. He has been a bad guy but he is trying to be good. At the end he can no longer be a cowboy hero so he is forced to just be a villain.

The ultimate cowboy hero is John Wayne. He appeared in over two hundred movies in a career that spanned over fifty years. He epitomizes everything that we believe the cowboy hero to be. According to President Jimmy Carter, Wayne's, "ruggedness, the tough independence, the sense of personal conviction and courage – on and off the screen – reflected the best of our national character".⁴⁸ John Wayne's westerns illustrate how the cowboy hero role has changed. In 1939 John Wayne played Ringo Kidd, in the film *Stagecoach*. Ringo is the basic cowboy hero. He is looking for justice and is willing to use violence to get it. At the same time as this film was made, real-life gangsters are emerging. Society is enamored with them and the idea of

⁴⁷ *Unforgiven*. Produced by Clint Eastwood. Directed by Clint Eastwood. 131 minutes. Warner Bros. Pictures, 1992. Videocassette.

⁴⁸ Gary Arnold and Kenneth Turan, "The Duke: 'More Than Just a Hero,'" *Washington Post*, June 13, 1979, quoted in Clyde A. Milner, Anne M. Butler, and David Rich Lewis, *Major Problems in the History of the American West*

their exciting lives. It is the idea of being independent and taking what you want. Ringo wants his own justice. Society did not get it for him so he has to do it himself. His actions in this film seem to be necessary because he is bringing the villain to justice. Society does not see him as a bad guy so his actions seem justified. Ringo treats Dallas, the "bad woman," as a refined lady. He follows the cowboy code and treats her as an equal from the beginning. She does not have to prove anything to him because he treats her with the respect he gives all women. Although he recently escaped from jail, Curly, the marshal, trusts Ringo, and even gives him a gun so that he can help fight the Indians that are attacking the stage. It is Curly's job to bring Ringo in, but he allows him to have his confrontation with the villain and then helps Ringo and Dallas get out of town at the end. Ringo rides off into the sunset with the girl because he followed his code. He killed the villain but he is not going to jail because society sees the killing as justified.

In *The Searchers* (1956), John Wayne plays a much darker cowboy hero. As Ethan Edwards, he is more complex than Ringo because he is not all good. He is not as devoted to the cowboy code as Ringo. Ethan is racist and mean. He leads a group out to find his niece, Debbie, who was captured by Indians.⁴⁹ Ethan wants to save her from the Indians but he has also seen other recovered captives that were so damaged that it was doubtful that they would ever live a normal life again. He is afraid that that could happen to Debbie too. As a result, he is even willing to kill her if that is the only way to save her. The audience can feel Ethan's anger and frustration. They worry throughout the whole film that he is going to kill her. It is not until he picks her up and holds her at the end that they realize that he is going to take her home. Ethan takes Debbie home, but he is still set apart from the family. When he returns with Debbie, he remains outside of the house, one step removed from civilization. Like Shane, Ethan does not

(Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 528.

⁴⁹ *The Searchers*. Produced by Merian C. Cooper. Directed by John Ford. 119 Minutes. Warner Bros. Pictures,

have a place in society. He does not belong inside with the family because his cowboy hero lifestyle will always keep him from rejoining society.

While men's roles in westerns have changed over time, women's roles in these movies have stayed relatively the same. Even though women's roles in the world have increased between the 1930s and today, there are only minor changes for women in westerns. Women have more opportunities to be helpmates. They may have a little more screen time and occasionally get to save the cowboy hero. This can be illustrated by looking at *High Noon* (1952) and *Crossfire Trail* (2001). There is almost a fifty year difference between these two films but the women's roles are very similar. In both films, the women oppose violence but are forced to use it in the end to save the men. In *High Noon*, Amy helps her husband by killing one of the villains and in *Crossfire Trail* Ann has to kill the villain before he kills Rafe. The outcomes of films would have been much different if the women had not helped. In *High Noon*, Amy helps Kane defeat Miller. Without her help, he may not have won. In *Crossfire Trail*, Rafe would have been killed if Ann had not shot Bruce Barkow. In both films, the men will not be riding off into the sunset alone. The women have moved a step closer to them by using violence. They have been transformed from refined women into helpmates.

Westerns still resonate with people today. People go see westerns because they provide an escape to a simpler time. A time where the good guys and bad guys are easily recognized. Westerns are especially comforting when Americans are dealing with the complicated task of identifying an unrecognizable enemy. During times in history when Americans have felt uneasy they look to escape to movies that are more black and white. Westerns provide a villain that is relatively easy to identify. This is especially true in the early westerns when villains often wore black. Westerns make people feel safe. When the world becomes overwhelming people seem to

turn to the security that western films provide. Many times they become popular after wars. People are looking to a return to more traditional values and the independence that westerns allude to. They do not want to deal with outside problems anymore and may even be looking for the cowboy hero to come in and solve their problems for them. Westerns also allow the audience to channel their anger into an acceptable outlet.

After World War II, Americans returned home with a desire to find security. The West seems like a natural refuge because it is withdrawn from the rest of America. Events that happen outside of the West seem far away and not as dangerous. The West gives people the illusion of safety because it seems to be distant from everything else. Westerns were a way for people to return to their past and be safe. The West that is pictured in westerns is a place where they could be independent and find isolation and security from the outside world. The government promoted the West as the pinnacle of America during the war. When the war was over, Americans not only moved West but they latched on to westerns to reconnect with the West, and to reclaim the secure and simple life they once had.

Westerns have an uncomplicated plot. They tend to focus on a problem that is solved by the end of the film. People find western films comfortable to watch. The characters are familiar and we know what to expect. Good will triumph over evil; the cowboy hero will save the day and the villain will be punished. Even the rigid gender roles can be soothing. In today's society, gender roles are much more flexible but they can also be more confusing. Even in westerns were the lines are more blurred like *Unforgiven*, the men are still the dominating force and women are primarily on the sidelines. Men and women do not always know what to expect from each other. In westerns, the roles for men and women are black and white. Guys will be strong and take care

of things and women take care of the home and the children and be safe. For example, in *The Searchers*, the women stay home while the men search for Debbie.

Westerns educate society in the myth of the American West. They rewrite history by judging historical figures and then defining them through the stereotypes that they have immortalized. Through the myth, westerns give society specific expectations for each gender. Men become either heroes or villains and women are good or bad. Over time, society has become more aware that westerns are not portraying an accurate image of the American West and that key players, like women were being left out. Each time period has looked deeper into the gender stereotypes that westerns create and how that compares to the reality of the West. The audience, in general, goes to see westerns to be entertained not educated. They enjoy the myth of the West. They are not worried about the historical accuracy of the western because they just want to enjoy the movie. People find westerns reassuring because gender roles in westerns are more clear cut and life is slower and simpler.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Pierson, 291.

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