HEROES ON HORSEBACK: TEACHING THE WESTERN AS POPULAR LITERATURE

By Sandra M. Bennett

The Western, and the idea of Frontier out of which it was created, is perhaps the most basic of all American myths. Virtually all of our literary and cultural products have been influenced and shaped by the idea of Frontier: of limitless space and opportunity, of always being able to start over, Out There, beyond the last settlement, on the Frontier.

The importance of this concept to American thought was first completely articulated by Frederick Jackson Turner in his landmark essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in 1894. In it, Turner postulated that the idea of free land had been the primary element in the development of Americans' ideas about themselves and others. Our institutions, he said, had been continually shaped by their need to adapt to the changes of expansion involved in exploring and developing a continent. Turner saw history as evolution: in the Old World, expansion necessitated war or colonization; in the New World, the native peoples were so overmatched for the most part that expansion was relatively effortless and unimpeded.

The model of American culture, Turner believes, had been formed in the original colonies, but changed again as each section of the country reached a level of development and political power. American social development continually begins over again at the frontier, in Turner's model, as the meeting place of savagery and civilization generates the forces which have dominated our culture from the beginning.

The literature which rose out of the circumstances and conditions described by Turner has been among the most enduringly popular in the history of American letters. From Bradford's Of Plymouth Plantation and Byrd's History of the Dividing Line through the works of Cooper, Whitman, Owen Wister, Mark Twain, to the prolific Louis L'Amour, stories of exploration and adventure in the wild country have fascinated American readers.

The teaching of the Western as a popular literary form, then, is so obvious as to need no justification. The Western, like science fiction, gothic romance, the occult, detective fiction, and books on running, is available to the most casual book buyer at drugstores, supermarkets, and discount marts in any city or town. The issue facing the teacher of the Western, then, is not to popularize the material, but to deal with the popularized misconceptions about the material, its origins and significance.

One approach to this problem is to deal with the Western first as myth. This approach allows the teacher to deal with the material as an expression of common cultural experience, and thereby create a setting for it in the minds of the students, many of whom have never seen a cowboy, a horse, or a home on the range. Every American thinks he or she "knows" about the West, and students are no exception. Haven't they seen John Wayne movies on TV since they were children? Haven't they watched reruns of The Big Valley and Gunsmoke and The Virginian? Haven't they seen a rodeo? Of course they know about the West.

In beginning a class in the Western, then, the teacher can first deal with this issue by explaining the difference between popular conceptions of the West and the historical reality of hardship, death, illness, bloodshed, and violence which made up the lives of most of the people who explored and settled the frontier. A segment of Alister Cooke's America called "Domesticating A Wilderness," shown on videotape, serves to illustrate this very well, containing as it does photos of genuine pioneers and cowboys, and the grubby, uncomfortable places where they lived.

What, then, is the myth of the West? It is the myth of white, English-speaking, moderately literate people whose recurring dream is moving on, finding a better place somewhere else, starting over, starting fresh. The frontier is always just beyond where we are. For example, while there were numerous black cowboys in the West, particularly after the Civil

War, they didn't fit into the lily-white myth of the Western cowboy, and so it has only been in recent years that their lives and stories have been explored. A myth is an expression of a people's understanding of their common experience, and the West has been adopted as the common experience of Americans, even those who have never crossed the Hudson, let alone the Missouri.

A good basis from which to begin a discussion of the literary expression of this myth is Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land, either assigning parts of the book as readings for students or using the materials and ideas he presents as a basis for discussion of the novels and stories to follow.

Smith is particularly useful in developing the idea of the Western hero, which is a recurring theme in virtually all Westerns. In the second section of Virgin Land, "Sons of Leatherstocking," Smith traces the development of the Western hero from the early frontiersman figure popularized by Cooper through Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, down to the more contemporary heroes of writers like Wister. Smith's discussion of Cooper's ambivalence about the Leatherstocking figure can be extended to create a background for analysis of other hero figures who are caught between civilization and savagery, between the need to survive and the need to maintain a distance from cruelty and violence, between the conflicting values of the frontier and the settled parts of the country.

Smith also deals with several other generalized figures, such as the mountain man, the cowboy hero, the heroine, and the bad woman, all of which turn up repeatedly in Western fiction. Another myth of the West, the ideal of the "Garden of the World," is also outlined by Smith, and provides material for exploring the pioneer experience, as exemplified by the works of Cather and Garland.

The reading list for such a class should be designed to demonstrate as wide a range as possible of styles, subjects, and experiences relative to the West. Short stories from a collection edited by Durham and Jones called The Western Story,

which is divided into sections labeled "Fact," "Fiction," and "Myth," make a good starting place to illustrate the differences.

In the "Fact" section, students can read from the works of Theodore Roosevelt on the North Dakota cattle country, Douglas Branch on cattle drives, Emerson Hough on the work of the cowboy, and Donald Jackson on the disappearing West. In this section of the class, the teacher can emphasize historic and geographic perspective, so that the "when" and "where" aspects of the Western experience can be clearly articulated. As the suggested reading materials illustrate, the primary focus of the class will probably be on the West of the 19th century, although some of the novels may take place in the early 20th.

Some stories from the Durham-Jones collection which are especially useful to demonstrate various forms of the Western myth and the Western hero are: "Tennessee's Partner" (Harte), "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (Crane), "Canyon Walls" (Grey), "State to Lordsburg" (Haycox), and "The Tin Star" (Cunningham). These last two stories are the basis for the films Stagecoach and High Noon respectively, and the films can be shown in conjunction with the stories to illustrate the evolution of the Western from print to visual images. Another film which can be used successfully in this way is The Ox-Bow Incident.

Max Brand's "Wine in the Desert," Luke Short's "Top Hand," Donald Hamilton's "The Indian Well" can also be used to explore various aspects of the development of the Western hero. Each story shows a man in some form of extreme experience, in the course of which he must make decisions about his own survival and that of others. The decisions range from the self-destructive cruelty of Brand's central figure to the unselfish willingness to sacrifice Short shows in young Johnny McSorley. This gamut of Western heroes and their adventures leads naturally into the "Myth" section of the book, in which the class can deal with T. K. Whipple's "American Sagas" and Robert Warshow's "The Westerner," in which he compares the Western hero to that other popular creation of American folklore, the urban gangster.

Other materials, consisting of several novels, may be arranged chronologically or thematically according to their content. Thus in the unit called "The Splendid Wayfaring," students read A. B. Guthrie Jr.'s The Big Sky, perhaps the quintessential mountain man novel, and certainly the one to which all subsequent versions of this particular myth owe much of their substance.

The next unit, "Go West, Young Man," focuses on The Virginian. Students are interested to discover in this novel the origins of the strong, silent cowboy with the "Aw shucks" personality, the prissy schoolmarm, the walkdown in the street, and the expression, "When you call me that, SMILE." These and other features of Wister's novel demonstrate how the materials of many of our own deeply-rooted conceptions about the West originated in a literary form.

Clark's The Ox-Bow Incident serves as the center of the unit "Frontier Justice," illustrating as it does the "modern" Western, concerned with moral choices and involving the reader in a stark, pitiless world of harshness and cruelty, with no clearly defined heroes or heroics.

Two highly visible Western writers who have also been enormously popular are Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour. There are many similarities between them, one of which is their concern with the theme of self-realization on the part of the hero through a series of initiation experiences, always involving killing or the choice of killing. A novel by each of these writers is assigned for the unit "Spectre of the Gun," in which what John Cawelti calls "The Six-Gun Mystique" is explored. Either Grey's Arizona Ames or Nevada, in tandem with L'Amour's North to the Rails, can be used in this segment of the class.

In each of these novels, the evolution of the central figure is centered around the question of violence and gunplay, and the ways in which Arizona, Nevada, and Tom Chantry respond and develop illustrate various literary attitudes toward that central Western symbol, the gun. Some interesting stereotyped ideas about the role of women in the Western can also be

explored through these writers, both of whom are intensely traditional in their treatment of women.

The basically trivialized and minimally portrayed woman of the frontier seen in most Western novels can be counteracted by assigning Willa Cather's O Pioneers! It will probably be the favorite book of most of the women in the class, depicting as it does an heroic and fully developed woman as the protagonist. In the figure of Alexandra Bergson, students are permitted a glimpse of the reality of the pioneer woman's experience. This segment of the class, "The Garden of the World," is given over mostly to discussion of Western women in general, with particular focus on the farm women who contributed so overwhelmingly to the success of the westward movement on the agricultural frontier.

Finally, the class turns its attention to another neglected figure, the native American. Two books which work well in this segment are Frank Waters' The Man Who Killed the Deer and Thomas Berger's Little Big Man. The former is a disturbing look at the clash between the culture of the Taos Pueblo Indians and the world of the white man, as personified in Martiniano, a young man educated in a white man's school who is trying to find himself in the world of the pueblo. It illustrates dramatically some basic misunderstandings about Indian life and culture which have been perpetuated by the popular Western.

Berger's book, on the other hand, is a farcical odyssey in which Jack Crabb, the short, cowardly protagonist, plays in turn myriad roles available to a 19th century man in the West, including that of Lakota Indian. Jack switches back and forth from white to Indian (adopted by the tribal chief after being captured from a wagon train) during the course of the novel, and Berger's obvious sympathy for the Indian way contrasts with the way in which whites Jack meets regard the Red Menace of the frontier. The humor of the book shows yet another way to respond to the Western myth, and Berger creates a kind of panoramic look at the whole concept which wraps the term up

nicely.

The use of videotapes is another way of visualizing some of the issues raised by the books. Episodes from Little House on the Prairie and The Oregon Trail, illustrating pioneer dilemmas, Gunsmoke, showing the role of the law, and Star Trek can be used. One Star Trek episode called "Spectre of the Gun," places five members of the Enterprise crew in a situation which appears to be Tombstone, Arizona in 1885. They must fight the notorious Wyatt Earp and his gang at the OK Corral. The episode is useful for illustrating that the symbols and clichés of the Western are so ingrained in our culture that they can even be used in a space opera with the confidence that the audience will understand them without explanation. An episode of Battlestar Galactica, which was a spaceman version of Shane, could be used in the same way. Since the Western has been the subject of so many approaches on film, radio, and TV, the use of audiovisual material in a course on the popular Western seems mandatory.

Luckily, the choice of material for a class like this is fairly broad and easily available in paperback form, although some classics, such as Butcher's Crossing, Apache, and The Rounders, are out of print, as well as such fine works by Larry McMurtry as Hud and Leaving Cheyenne. Some alternative works to those already mentioned might be Andy Adams' Log of a Cowboy or Manfred's Lord Grizzley, Guthrie's These Thousand Hills, Richter's Sea of Grass, Durham's The Man Who Loved Cat Dancing, or Fisher's Mountain Man, La Farge's Laughing Boy or The Ordeal of Running Standing by Fall, or Ike Blasingame's Dakota Cowboy, Edward Abbey's The Brave Cowboy, Jack Schaeffer's Shane or Monte Walsh. The works of Cooper, while seminal to the development of the Western, may be too dense stylistically for a class of this type.

In each case, the approach to the Western as a literary genre should be based on the same concerns which motivate the study of more classic forms. These include point of view, plot and character development, style, treatment of symbols and

themes, etc. The matter of style is generally not a serious problem, since most Westerns are written in a style easily accessible even to the student who is not a prolific or proficient reader. The same is true of plot development, which is usually straightforward and requires little if any exposition.

Such devices as point of view, however, may require a formal approach. A particularly good work for illustrating this is The Virginian. Wister, in writing this classic Western, was drawing on his experience when, as a tenderfoot from Pennsylvania, he has his first glimpse of Wyoming and conceived a lifelong passion for the West. Appropriately, he casts his narrator in the same role, and deals with the characters and situations, at least initially, from the perspective of the uninitiated tenderfoot. The question of why he uses this device rather than an experienced narrator can illustrate vividly the use of point of view and what it allows the writer to do that would otherwise be closed to him. For example, if Wister assumed, as he must have in 1902, that the majority of his readers would be Easterners, he was writing to a specific audience, most of whom could be projected to be as naive about the West and western habits as Wister's narrator. This enables the author to explain things about the habits and activities of the ranch through the device of his narrator's ignorance, and thereby also convey the information to his readers.

This is an extremely simple example, but the principle can be extended to more complex works, such as The Ox-Bow Incident, in which Clark chooses for his narrator, or point of view, Art Croft, a non-heroic, ordinary cowboy, whose ambivalent responses and inability to make moral choices are reflective of the whole tone of the book and open up the ethical issues to many more approaches than would be possible with a more fixed or committed narrator. In each work selected, the choice of narrator, or the choice to have no narrator except the omniscient author, is an important literary concern.

The issue of character development in the Western can probably be handled most effectively by focussing on the

Western hero, his portrayal and development. The "hero" in this case can be defined by discussing the classic models, as well as the more modern concepts suggested by current fiction and media heroes the students may be familiar with. The focus in each of the books mentioned is on a particular person, usually a man (except in O Pioneers!) who is given the opportunity to make important choices for himself and others, and who undergoes a series of initiatory experiences on his way to self-realization. In each case, the students can be drawn into discussion of how the particular character develops, and how this is reflective of the overall concept of the hero. The Western hero has no particular features which distinguish him from heroes of other myths, and from this certain conclusions can be drawn about the development of the hero figure in a culture as it is reflected in a particular literary form.

Students should be encouraged, through class discussion and essay questions on exams, to deal with the general concerns and overall effects of the materials in some of the ways mentioned. The Western provides for many students who have minimal contact with literature a way to approach and understand the issues and concerns which seem to them so mysterious and often uninteresting. The great advantage of teaching such popular forms is precisely this: that it opens up a world which has been closed and locked to students who have not developed their reading abilities or interests beyond an adolescent level. The Western, in most of its forms, deals with adult problems such as life and death, killing or surviving. It cannot be predicted that all or even a large percentage of the students who enjoy a course in the Western will go on to appreciate other types of literature, or even to read further in that area, but for at least some of them, the possibilities of further exploration are evident.

The Western: Suggested readings

Background:

Berry, Don. A Majority of Scoundrels.

Bogue, Allan G., et al, eds. The West of the American People.
DeVoto, Bernard, The Course of Empire.
Durham, Philip and Everett L. Jones, eds. The Frontier in American Literature.
Fussell, Edwin, Frontier: American Literature and the American West.
Gregg, Josiah. The Commerce of the Prairies.
Irving, Washington. A Tour on the Prairies.
Josephy, Alvin M. The Indian Hertiage of America.
Neihardt, John G. A Cycle of the West.
The River and I.
The Splendid Wayfaring.
Osgood Ernest Staples. The Day of the Cattleman.
Richmond, Robert W. and Robert W. Mardock, eds. A Nation Moving West.
Smith, Henry Nash. Virgin Land.
Stewart, George R. The California Trail.

Texts:

Berger, Thomas. Little Big Man.
Cather, Willa O Pioneers! or My Antonia.
Clark, Walter Van Tilburg. The Ox-Bow Incident.
Durham, Philip and Everett L. Jones, eds. The Western Story.
Grey, Zane, Arizona Ames or Nevada.
Guthrie, A.B. Jr. The Big Sky.
L'Amour, Louis, North to the Rails.
Waters, Frank. The Man Who Killed the Deer.
Wister, Owen. The Virginian.