



## The Western

by Eric Patterson

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The Western is a distinctive American narrative genre that has developed over more than two centuries and now is recognized and consumed worldwide. Its most familiar expressions are in literature, popular fiction, film, and television, but it also is important in painting, photography, music, sport, and advertising.

Heroic Western narratives have served to justify transformation and often destruction of indigenous peoples and ecosystems, to rationalize the supposedly superior economic and social order organized by European Americans, and particularly to depict and enforce the dominant culture's ideals of competitive masculine individualism.

The celebration of male power, beauty, and homosocial relationships in Westerns is compelling to many readers and viewers. Although the form of masculinity idealized in the Western is in opposition to the majority's stereotypical constructions of male homosexuality, both man-loving men and those who claim to reject same-sex attraction have found a great deal of interest in the narrative.

### Development and Form of the Western

The national fantasy of the Western has its roots in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the wars between Native Americans and European colonists. It developed during the rapid westward movement of settlers and the continuing conflict with native peoples after the American Revolution.

Building on the careers of actual frontiersmen, particularly Daniel Boone, white Americans constructed an ideal image of the pioneer hero that articulated what they wanted to believe about themselves. This heroic ideal was widely expressed in the popular press, oratory, painting, sculpture, and popular lithographs.

The most important early statement of the heroic Western ideal was by James Fenimore Cooper in his five "Leatherstocking" novels [*The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841)]. Although his novels are set on the older frontier east of the Mississippi, Cooper established patterns of continuing importance in the development of the Western: his pioneer hero is an agent of white society, defending women, who are constructed as embodying civilized values, but he resists domestication, which would limit his individual freedom, and his strongest bond is with another male, the Mohican warrior Chingachgook.

In the period after the Civil War, popular dime novels, which were published in huge numbers and were very widely read, developed a related narrative form dealing with adventure on the Great Plains, in the Rockies, and in the Southwest, and began the idealization of the cowboy.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show and similar popular entertainments dramatized representations of cowboy life and battles with Native Americans, anticipating the popularity of Westerns in motion pictures.



The cowboy member of the Disco group The Village People wears a costume derived from those found in the Hollywood Western to create an instantly recognizable hypermasculine persona. This image created by Flickr contributor Jackie from Monmouth County, New Jersey appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 License.

Artists such as Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell also developed a rich tradition of Western painting and sculpture in the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century.

Owen Wister defined the cowboy hero further in his highly popular novel, *The Virginian* (1901), which helped shape the evolution of heroic Western narratives in the movies as the medium emerged. Later popular Western adventure fiction such as the novels of Zane Grey, Max Brand, Luke Short, Jack Schaefer, and Louis L'Amour also strongly influenced the development of movie and then television Westerns. Emotionally intense relationships between men characterize many of the popular Western novels of the twentieth century and the movies and television series that often were based on them.

In the twentieth century the cowboy became the most widely recognized American cultural ideal of manhood, the subject not only of popular fiction, movies, and television shows, but also of country and western music and of advertising campaigns, particularly that for Marlboro cigarettes.

For many Americans, their ideals of masculinity still are expressed by the roles John Wayne played in John Ford's series of classic Westerns.

Contemporary artists have continued the tradition of Western painting: for example, in the work of photorealists such as James Bama, who paints beautifully detailed depictions of working cowboys and rodeo cowboys, and in the luminous watercolor "cowboy landscapes" of Texas artist Brad Braune.

In the new millennium, Western motifs are omnipresent: just about every week, huge television audiences watch the daring, dangerous competition of Professional Bull Riding; Western clothing is widely popular, particularly in the West and South; and some politicians, such as George W. Bush, continue to invoke Western imagery and rhetoric. Indeed, shortly before he ran for President of the United States, Bush--perhaps imitating Ronald Reagan--purchased a ranch to cast himself as a cowboy.

Film critics repeatedly have proclaimed the death of the Western, but this is belied by the popularity of movies such as James Mangold's 2007 remake of Delmar Daves' 1957 film *3:10 to Yuma*.

### **Male Intimacy in American Western History**

As contemporary historians of the American West have shown, popular Western narratives depart in many significant ways from what is known about the actual history of the frontier.

Most fundamentally, to present white Americans as defending themselves against Indian aggression erases the record of deliberate destruction of Native American cultures and rationalizes the process of imperial conquest. In addition, the idealized adventures of the cowboy hero of literature and film are very different from the actual experience of men in the cattle industry, who worked hard for low pay, often for absentee owners. The development of the American West was shaped far less by lone adventurers on horseback than by those with capital to invest.

Also, the usual representation of the cowboy hero as a white man distorts the racial history of the West: according to historians who have studied the social and economic history of the cattle business, a substantial number of those employed as cattle workers in the later nineteenth century were African American, and many others were of Mexican background, part Indian, part Spanish.

The image of the cowboy hero also probably distorts sexual attitudes and behavior. Social historians who have studied male work communities, such as those of loggers, miners, sailors, and transient hoboos who did seasonal agricultural work, have found that male-male sexual relationships were relatively common and accepted, and have speculated that such communities may have attracted men who desired intimacy with

men.

While there is little direct evidence about sexual relationships among men working in the cattle business in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, memoirs, records of observers, and photographs show that cowboys lived on intimate terms with each other. They slept in close quarters in bunkhouses and on the range, bathed together, and shaved and groomed one another. They also socialized together, holding stag dances where men danced with men.

Viewers today are startled by the affectionate gestures in late nineteenth-century photographs of cattle workers. In these photographs men pose with their arms around each other's shoulders or their hands resting on each other's thighs. Exactly what degree of intimacy such gestures signified to these men is difficult to know, but, given the evidence of the relative frequency of sexual relationships in other male work communities, it is likely that such relationships occurred among cowboys as well.

### **The Cowboy Hero**

Following Cooper's construction, in popular Western narratives the cowboy hero often confronts enemies, particularly Indians and outlaws, who threaten the white agricultural and commercial society expanding across the frontier. He is commanding in his competence, knowing and controlling not only his weapons, his horse, and the men he leads and opposes, but also the landscape, which he assists American society in dominating.

However, he himself is a highly individualistic figure who frequently is depicted as having to struggle to direct his violent skills in ways that will protect the dominant society. Often he is shown as having learned his abilities from his adventures with Indians or as being a gunslinger or even an outlaw.

While ultimately he usually protects white society, sometimes he is presented as being so concerned to maintain his own freedom that he ends up escaping the very social order he validates; especially in Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s, he often is depicted as an anti-hero whose intense individualism makes him a rebel.

Sometimes he settles down with a woman, endorsing the family and gender structure of the society, but often he remains undomesticated, continuing on his way alone or with a male sidekick. Whatever happens, the main tradition of the Western narrative presents the cowboy hero as exemplifying the resolute independence that many Americans like to think is characteristic of the self-made man of the American Dream.

### **Homosociality in the Western**

Although the heterosexuality of the hero of Western narrative usually is taken for granted, the frequency with which he is presented as retaining his independence from women suggests considerable ambivalence about the responsibilities of heterosexual domestic relationships.

His most significant relationships are with other men: the rivals and enemies he must confront and overcome; other, weaker men he must lead and defend; and the sidekick who often accompanies and assists him. While some Westerns may feature significant relationships between the hero and a woman, all of them necessarily feature intense interactions between him and other men.

Fundamentally, the Western is a drama of male conflicts, betrayals, alliances, and commitments. Probably the only common form of entertainment that focuses as exclusively on intensely dramatic homosocial male relationships is the war narrative. Both forms present stories of anger, vengeance, violence, devotion, and

sacrifice among men from which women may be entirely absent.

Westerns may center on characters who operate alone, in contrast to war stories, which necessarily tend to concentrate on group relationships between men, but ever since Cooper defined the basic construction of frontier adventure narrative there has been a pattern in which the hero is allied to a male sidekick. Usually his position is clearly subordinate to that of the hero.

Following Cooper, some narratives make him a man of color, and thus, given the racist assumptions operative in the Western tradition, of inferior status; others make him a weaker, or older, or comic character.

Particularly in the twentieth century, due to the construction and propagation of medical-legal categories condemning homosexuality, Western narratives depicting a sidekick scrupulously avoid implications of physical intimacy between the hero and his companion. Still, such narratives often nevertheless portray passionate commitment between two men, especially when, as often occurs, the sidekick is injured or dies assisting the hero, thus enhancing the hero's desire for revenge against his enemies. Many narratives depicting a Western hero and his sidekick may be seen implicitly as male love stories.

While in many Westerns the hero does not settle down but departs from the community and so maintains his individual freedom, in some the elimination of the sidekick facilitates the integration of the hero into the property-owning white community, replacing the relationship with a male friend with one with a woman.

In Wister's *The Virginian*, for instance, the title character is obliged to hang his best friend, Steve, because Steve has become a cattle rustler. By the end of the novel, Steve's elimination allows the Virginian to marry the schoolmarm and to join the community whose property laws he has enforced.

However, Wister's perspective on intimacy between men in this seminal work is interestingly ambivalent. Despite the novel's overt endorsement of heterosexuality and marriage, readers often are struck by the continual implications of male intimacy, including erotic attraction. The narrator, an Easterner, rhapsodizes about how handsome the Virginian is, and, startlingly, even stresses his sexiness by imagining himself as a woman who would be eager to be the Virginian's bride. Though the hero marries the schoolmarm, the narrator is pleased to succeed Steve as his sidekick.

### **Homoeroticism in Classic Western Movies**

Unsurprisingly, the explicit homoerotic admiration in Wister's narrative tends to disappear in the four film versions of his novel (1914, 1923, 1929, and 1946; there also was a television series, 1962-1971, and a television movie, 2000), but still, his title character usually has been presented as an archetype of masculine attractiveness. Probably the best movie version was Victor Fleming's of 1929, which helped to make the stunningly handsome young Gary Cooper a star. Cooper was perfectly cast as Wister's "slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures."

The Western was one of the first Hollywood genres to develop, and a rich array of directors and actors specialized in Westerns in the silent period. During the 1930s Hollywood made large numbers of low-budget "B" Westerns, but fewer big-budget "A" Westerns were produced until toward the end of the decade, when the appeal of such films was demonstrated. An impressive group of actors, directors, writers, producers, and other filmmakers emerged who developed the genre and brought it to its peak in the 1940s and 1950s and into the early 1960s.

As the first big star of Westerns in talking pictures, Cooper's persona and acting helped to define the construction of the cowboy hero. He was able to play a variety of roles, but his performance in two big Westerns in the early phase of his career indelibly associated him with Western roles, which he continued

to play until his death in 1961.

The first was Cecil B. DeMille's extravagant saga *The Plainsman* (1937), which improbably but entertainingly brings together Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, Buffalo Bill, and General George Armstrong Custer. The second was William Wyler's *The Westerner* (1940), based loosely on the Johnson County Range War and the legendary Judge Roy Bean. In both, as in *The Virginian*, Cooper presented an impressive masculine presence, combining strength and agility, straightforward boyish charm, and remarkable grace and beauty.

Many of the great movie Westerns focus on intense relationships between men. One of the best examples is *The Big Sky* (1952), starring Kirk Douglas and Dewey Martin, directed by Howard Hawks, who had a particular sensitivity for depicting affectionate male bonds, especially in all-male group situations (as in his great World War II film, *Air Force*, of 1943).

Set in the early 1830s, *The Big Sky* presents Douglas and Martin as Kentucky backwoodsmen who become inseparable pals, sharing drinking, fights, imprisonment, and other adventures, and who lead a fur-trading expedition up the Missouri by keelboat to do business with the Blackfoot and to return Teal Eye, an Indian princess, to her father. Amid the scenery of the Grand Tetons, the film presents their struggles with river pirates and hostile Crow warriors, through which they are sustained by their camaraderie and mutual commitment.

But of course their bond cannot last, and eventually the developing rivalry between them over Teal Eye is resolved when the Martin character marries her. Still, much of the film concentrates on the playful masculine affection of the two male leads, both of whom are young and athletic and flatteringly attired in frontiersman costumes. Martin sports an especially memorable pair of leather pants.

Sometimes the strong connections between comrades in Westerns are presented as involving rivalry and violence, which, it is suggested, masks, or may even be a reaction against, affection. With his gruff, blustering presence, John Wayne was adept at conveying this sort of harsh, clumsy masculine commitment to other men.

Perhaps the most striking example is Hawks's *Red River* (1948). Wayne plays Tom Dunson, a combative rancher leading a cattle drive with his adopted son, Matthew Garth (Montgomery Clift), whom the Wayne character has raised in a kind of male family with his friend and cook Groot Nadine (Walter Brennan). Accompanying them is the Clift character's young friend, Cherry Valance (John Ireland).

The dangerous journey on the Chisholm Trail leads to constant conflict between the men, culminating in a final fist fight between Wayne and Clift. As they are watched by the woman they have met along their journey (Joanne Dru), she shouts to them to stop fighting because they "know [they] love each other."

Though they are not related by blood, the intensity of feeling between the characters played by Wayne and Clift is permissible since their relationship is constructed as approximating one between father and son. However, the homoerotic aspects of this strongly homosocial film are underscored by an amazing scene in which Clift and Ireland playfully take out their phallic six-guns and compare and admire their beauty and size.

A strong homosocial quality similar to that in *Red River* is evident in the cavalry films John Wayne made with John Ford at about the same time, such as *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950), where it is clear that, though Wayne's characters are demanding toward the men under him, it is because they are completely devoted to them.

The same pattern is evident in Wayne's role as Ethan Edwards in what may be his best film, *The Searchers*

(directed by John Ford, 1956), in which he constantly baits and argues with his handsome young part-Cherokee ally, Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter), even as he becomes increasingly committed to looking out for him. This "tough love" aspect of Wayne's persona in relationship to other men in fact may be one of the reasons for his wide and continuing popularity, though certainly few fans of the Duke would admit it.

The character actor Walter Brennan made a career for himself playing sidekicks, appearing in numerous Westerns and other genres as the main male character's grizzled, garrulous, but devoted pal. In addition to *Red River*, he plays such roles in Anthony Mann's *The Far Country* (1955), accompanying James Stewart in the adventures involved in bringing a cattle herd to Alaska, and in Howard Hawks's *Rio Bravo* (1959), where he sides with sheriff John Wayne against a cattle baron. Though the relationships of Brennan's characters with other men often were presented as intimate companionships involving friendly teasing, playful arguments, and mutual sacrifice, his age and comic cantankerousness always served to reduce any suggestion of erotic attraction with younger, handsomer stars.

Toward the end of the great phase of the Hollywood Western, Sam Peckinpah directed what many critics see as one of the best and most sophisticated meditations on male friendship in the genre, *Ride the High Country* (1962). Joel McCrea and Randolph Scott play two aging former lawmen, old friends, both retired and short of money, who join up again to escort a gold shipment through the Sierras. While the McCrea character sticks to his strong moral code, the Scott character is tempted to steal the gold.

They are accompanied on their journey by a young friend of Scott's (Ronald Starr), who is in on his plans, and then by a young woman (Mariette Hartley), who winds up needing their protection from a bunch of thugs. In the final shoot-out, the McCrea character is mortally wounded, but Scott, who regrets having been tempted to betray his friend and the code they lived by, assures him that he will see both the gold and the girl to safety. As in many Westerns, while women are significant, they are presented almost as a form of property to be protected, and the central issue is the bond, betrayal, and reconciliation of what amounts to a male couple.

*Ride the High Country* marks the end of Randolph Scott's career, which had begun in the 1930s. Handsome in a way that seemed stalwart and unimpeachably American, Scott specialized in Westerns, especially after World War II. Perhaps some of Scott's sympathy for such roles came from his own experience of strong relationships between men: there is substantial evidence that Scott was the lover of actor Cary Grant for many years, though both eventually married and apparently led heterosexual lives.

One of the classic Westerns of the 1950s, George Stevens's *Shane* (1953), employs the theme of a boy's hero-worship of a mature man to stress the appeal of the idealized masculinity of its central character. The boy, Joey Starret (Brandon de Wilde), is in awe of Shane (Alan Ladd), a former gunfighter hired to help on his family's little farm. Shane seeks to leave his past behind, but to Joey he's far more impressive than his own father (Van Heflin), and this tension is emphasized by the suppressed attraction between Shane and Starret's wife (Jean Arthur).

When a cattle baron and his sinister hired gun (Jack Palance) seek to drive the homesteaders from their land, Shane prevents Starret from being killed, and ultimately defeats the threat to the family, but leaves in order not to threaten it himself with his desire for Starret's wife.

In the famous final scenes, as Shane rides away, little Joey calls over and over to him to come back. The perspective of the little boy on the contrast between the striking Alan Ladd and the ordinary-looking Van Heflin is subtly suggestive of the desire one male can feel for another, particularly to gay viewers who, as boys, may have sought to rationalize their developing feelings for men by explaining them to themselves as a sort of hero-worship, which is acceptable in a homophobic society that rejects physical attraction to other males.

## **Homoeroticism in Television Westerns**

Many of the formulaic "B" Westerns and cowboy serials that Hollywood turned out in the 1930s and 1940s and many of the Western series on television in the 1950s and 1960s centered on a hero who commanded the unwavering support of a male ally. Some followed the pattern established by Cooper, and made the hero's sidekick a man of color, as in the hugely popular *Lone Ranger* television series (1949-1957), in which the Lone Ranger (Clayton Moore) was assisted by his loyal Indian friend, Tonto (Jay Silverheels).

Others, such as the television series *Wild Bill Hickok* (1951-1956), followed the model of Walter Brennan's film roles, giving the superbly handsome blond hero, Guy Madison, the companionship of the devoted but blundering, sometimes blubbing, Andy Devine, whose character's de-sexualized goofiness was emphasized by his name, Jingles B. Jones.

In the television series *Cheyenne* (1955-1963), as in many Westerns, the hero is a loner who has a series of adventures, sometimes rescuing women, but never becoming entangled. With his huge shoulders and arms, narrow waist, powerful legs, square jaw, and mane of black hair, Clint Walker was like one of Tom of Finland's muscle men come to life, though of course he played a character presented as the epitome of heterosexuality, despite his resolute independence from domesticity.

Though the more sophisticated stories of the television series *Maverick* (1957-1962) were directed at adults, and its leading male characters had flirtatious encounters with women, the show managed--by making its various leads, Bret, Bart, Beau, and Brent Maverick (respectively played by James Garner, Jack Kelly, Roger Moore, and Robert Colbert) all related--to present male relationships that were full of teasing irony that sometimes almost seemed like flirtation. As in many other Westerns, the intensity of male relationships could be acceptable if the men were presented as being relatives.

The television series *Bonanza* (1959-1973), while less consciously sophisticated than *Maverick*, also presented what amounted to an all-male family, with the adventures of Ben Cartwright (Lorne Greene) and his sons Adam (Pernell Roberts), "Hoss" (Dan Blocker), and Little Joe (Michael Landon), each of whom was half-brother to the others.

*The Wild, Wild West*, a television series (1965-1969) that was a cartoonish combination of the Western and the spy story, came closer to acknowledging the homoerotic aspects of homosociality in Westerns, providing the athletic hero, James West (Robert Conrad), a male companion of relatively equal stature, the specialist in weapons and disguises Artemus Gordon (Ross Martin).

Artemus was about his companion's age and was physically active and competent, but was presented in ways that would feminize him somewhat for American audiences, as an elegant dresser and a bit of an intellectual. Though there were plenty of glamorous female characters, rather intriguingly the series had West and Gordon traveling the country together on secret missions, sharing a private luxury railroad train, "The Wanderer," provided by President Grant.

## **Spaghetti Westerns**

The rapid cultural changes of the mid- to late-1960s and the 1970s deeply affected the Western. The traditions shaping Hollywood Western movies were unsettled by the innovations of a series of so-called "Spaghetti Westerns," relatively inexpensive films made abroad, mostly by Italian directors and companies, with minor or unknown actors, which usually were released in the U.S. a year or two after their distribution in Europe.

To reduce the amount of dubbing necessary, these films tended to use little dialogue, but often had brilliant music and presented their stark, violent plots with startlingly innovative direction. The most significant are those of Sergio Leone, particularly *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964/1967 U.S.), *For a Few Dollars More* (1966/1967 U.S.), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), which made Clint Eastwood a major star.

Eastwood had long experience in low-budget movies and had had considerable success on television in the series *Rawhide* (1959-1966), a conventionally formulaic story of the weekly adventures of Texas cattle drivers. As in many such Western narratives, the central characters formed a sort of all-male fictive family, headed by Eric Fleming as the trail boss, Gil Favor, assisted by Eastwood as Rowdy Yates, the "ramrod" or overseer.

With his lanky body, square jaw, deep-set eyes, and splendid head of brown-blond hair, Eastwood was reminiscent of cowboy heroes of the past and gained a considerable following, but nothing prepared his television fans for his reincarnation as Leone's silent, sinister Man With No Name.

While some American Westerns of the early 1960s, such as *Ride the High Country*, presented the cowboy hero as aging, disillusioned, and perhaps tempted to abandon the moral code that made him a man, they ultimately endorsed the traditions of heroism that had made Western heroes so admired. In contrast, Leone's *Dollars* movies attacked this heroic national fantasy, constructing American Westerners as they seemed to many Europeans, so individualistic and aggressive that they cared for nothing but getting rich at any cost.

Not only did Italian Westerns emphasize the individualism and materialism inherent in the capitalist fable of the Western, but they often highlighted its representation of homosocial bonds between men, revealing its darker side. This is evident in one of the best of the type, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, which presents the rivalry of three men searching for a lost treasure of Confederate gold. Blondie ("the Good," Eastwood) forms a humorously ambivalent, periodically sadistic, and potentially murderous alliance with the comical but sly Tuco ("the Ugly," Eli Wallach) against the ruthless Angel Eyes ("the Bad," Lee Van Cleef).

A less dark representation of the bond between a Western hero and his comical sidekick became a recurrent theme in the Italian Westerns made by the intensely blue-eyed Italian-German actor Terence Hill with his enormous pal, Bud Spencer, another European actor. Some of the best-known of these are *Ace High* (Giuseppe Colizzi, 1968), *Boot Hill* (Giuseppe Colizzi, 1969), and *They Call Me Trinity* (Enzo Barboni, 1971).

### **Buddy Westerns**

One of the films of the period that was most popular with American audiences, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969) is a celebration of male comradeship featuring two stars who epitomized the cool new masculinity of the 1960s, handsome dark-haired Paul Newman and gorgeously blond Robert Redford.

Though they form a triangle with Katharine Ross, who shelters and advises them during their adventures robbing banks and trains and escaping posses, the film centers on the humorous, almost flirtatious interplay between the two beautiful men, and a gay viewer cannot help thinking that Ross is included as a kind of cover to make the pairing of Redford and Newman acceptable.

An even more intense expression of this sort of buddy relationship marks Michael Cimino's *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot* (1974), which, though not really a true Western, makes explicit the homoeroticism so important in the genre. Set in contemporary Montana, it presents Eastwood as Thunderbolt, an ex-con bank robber who falls in with Lightfoot (Jeff Bridges), a lively, charming young grifter who clearly admires the older



man and craves his approval.

Somewhat as in *Shane*, the hero-worship of a younger for an older man is suggestive of male-male attraction, but here it is much more explicit, since both are adults. Bridges amuses Eastwood, joking and flirting with him, and wins his friendship. Ultimately Bridges winds up dressing in drag as part of a robbery scheme with two of Eastwood's untrustworthy former associates (George Kennedy and Geoffrey Lewis); he looks surprisingly convincing, and while the Eastwood character enjoys his feminine playfulness, it infuriates the Kennedy character, who winds up severely beating Bridges.

The suggestions of the sexual dimensions of the relationship between Eastwood and Bridges are intensified by the technique for breaking into banks that gives Thunderbolt his nickname: he blasts their walls down with a phallic Howitzer. Though there is one episode where they pick up female prostitutes, the affection between Eastwood and Bridges is so central that the film cannot permit it to continue, and so, after the two have outwitted Kennedy and Lewis, gotten all their money, and escaped in a big Cadillac convertible, the film ends poignantly with Lightfoot dying as a result of the earlier beating, leaving Thunderbolt silently grieving.

The film not only is significant and moving for its explicit homoeroticism, but also for forecasting the homosocial male action genre that tended to replace the Western in popularity from the 1980s on, the buddy cop film.

### **The Spectacle of the Male Body in the Western**

Though the majority of the millions of male viewers of Western movies, television shows, art, advertising campaigns, and rodeo competitions may be unable to acknowledge it, the fact that these displays focus visual attention on the bodies of strong, handsome men, showing them in costumes and circumstances that accentuate their muscularity and sensuousness, is central in making them compelling to audiences. For decades, Westerns have provided ostensibly heterosexual men with a socially acceptable opportunity to gaze at the beauty of other men.

Other action/adventure genres such as detective and spy films usually present their heroes in some version of the business suit, and war movies often clothe the male body in dull, utilitarian uniforms, unless set in earlier time periods when uniforms were more showy. In contrast, the Western hero's costume decorates his body and spotlights its eroticism: fitted, often colorful Western shirts stress the breadth of his shoulders, the strength of his arms, and frequently are worn open, with a bandanna at the throat, showing his neck and chest. Tight jeans show the muscular shape of his thighs and hips. Chaps, which protect the legs, often are fringed and highly decorated, and also direct visual attention to a man's thighs, crotch, and butt.

The Western hero also is permitted a high degree of display in his costume, which simultaneously is strikingly elegant and roughly masculine. His clothing includes materials such as leather and denim that not only are practical, but also connote masculine strength. Buckskin in particular is strong but also rich and supple, revealing the contours of the body beneath and the play of its muscles. Leatherwork often is elaborately decorated and combined with metal elements, especially buckles, spurs, and conchos, that are practical but also often are very finely, even extravagantly, crafted.

The Western hero is dressed for work and for fighting, but, unlike any other male figure in the culture, with perhaps the exception of a soldier in a dress uniform, is permitted to wear what amounts to a display of masculine jewelry.

Westerns not only present good-looking men in flattering costumes, but also find plenty of excuses for taking those clothes off, at least from the waist up. No other genre offers such a display of partial male

nudity, in particular charting the splendid landscape of the male chest, from Gary Cooper's lanky torso in the scene in which he confronts Dan Duryea in Stuart Heisler's *Along Came Jones* (1945), to the repeated episodes in which the young, tanned, beautiful Jeffrey Hunter bares his shoulders and chest in *The Searchers*, to Burt Reynolds taking a bath and showing off his hirsute pecs in Arnold Laven's otherwise unimpressive *Sam Whiskey* (1969), or to Clint Eastwood in a similar bathing sequence in his far more compelling, superbly sinister *High Plains Drifter* (1973).

Riding presents the hero in a posture of control and independence. Since ancient times, a man on horseback has represented male authority, and the cowboy on his horse demonstrates the belief that in America this kind of status is available to every man. His position not only subordinates those below, but also focuses their attention on his legs, hips, and crotch, stressing his muscularity and sexual dominance.

In Western movies, art, and other visual representations the heroic male body is dramatized in action. The cowboy hero is displayed as he rides through the landscape, tracks and hunts, dominates horses and other powerful animals, and confronts and fights with other men. Sometimes these battles are gunfights, but he often engages his enemies in fist fights that exhibit the power and beauty of the male body. These sometimes are succeeded by episodes depicting the hero's recovery, which not only demonstrate his resilience but also allow further displays of his beauty and strength. The hero's body is one of the central images of Western film, television, and other visual art.

During the Western's long period of greatest popularity, during the 1950s and 1960s, images of the beautiful cowboy were everywhere, not only in Westerns at the movies and in TV series, but on billboards and magazines and in television ads, particularly in depictions of the heroic all-male Western world of Marlboro Country.

Starting in the early 1950s, Philip Morris conducted a series of ad campaigns to change the image of Marlboros from an elegant ladies' cigarette to one for a broader market of male consumers, using the slogan "Where There's a Man, There's a Marlboro" and images of butch men, such as tattooed sailors and jet fighter pilots before finally settling on the iconic cowboy. There were no women in Marlboro Country, only Marlboro men, rugged and strong-jawed, riding the range clad in the fetishized masculine garb of boots and jeans, chaps and cowboy hats.

### **Women in Westerns**

In Westerns, women usually are presented in highly conventionalized ways, being constructed as objects of heterosexual male attraction and as signifiers of the values of home, family, and property that the Western hero defends.

But by the late 1940s, women in Westerns sometimes were constructed in more extreme terms, as avatars of intense male erotic desire, as in the presentation of Jane Russell (rumored to be wearing a special cantilevered bra engineered by the producer/director, Howard Hughes) in *The Outlaw* (1943), the billionaire's steamy re-telling of the story of Billy the Kid.

Westerns soon followed that hinted at even less accepted aspects of female sexuality. David Butler's 1953 musical, *Calamity Jane*, starring the impish Doris Day, presented its heroine playfully, and ultimately married her off to Wild Bill Hickock (Howard Keel), but was intriguingly suggestive of lesbianism. Until she gets a feminine make-over later in the film, Day is dressed in a form-fitting fringed buckskin shirt and trousers (not a skirt, like Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun* [1950], which helped inspire *Calamity Jane*), and she stomps around the set and lowers her voice dramatically, creating a charming, startlingly butch character.

Lesbian undertones are increased by the fact that in the middle part of the film, Calamity shares her cabin with a femme dance hall girl (Allyn McLerie). For many glbtq viewers, the most subversive moment comes

when Calamity, ostensibly in love with a man, sings the lovely, gender-unspecific song, "Once I Had a Secret Love."

In the same period another good actress, Mercedes McCambridge, made two Westerns that provided powerful depictions of unconventionally masculine women. The first, Nicholas Ray's brilliant, bizarre *Johnny Guitar* (1954), reimagines the Western in terms of a confrontation between powerful women over a handsome but largely passive man (Sterling Hayden, in the title role). As Emma Small, McCambridge, dressed in black and wielding a six-shooter, ferociously confronts the film's star, Joan Crawford, who plays Vienna, a saloon owner McCambridge despises.

The film strongly suggests the McCarthy anti-Communist witch hunts that then were at their height, as Emma denounces Vienna, accuses her of murder, and, without any evidence, coerces a posse into nearly lynching her. While McCambridge makes her character a relentlessly vindictive harpy, Crawford presents hers as a fascinating mix of femme and butch, dressed in lavish white skirts and then in cowgirl duds in the climactic shootout with her archenemy. For viewers knowledgeable about Hollywood history, the implications of sexual and gender difference are enhanced by the persistent rumors that both Crawford and McCambridge, though married to men, were lesbians.

McCambridge's other important Western role of the time was in George Stevens's *Giant* (1956), an epic tracing the shift from cattle ranching to oil drilling in Texas. She plays Luz Benedict, the loud, swaggering cowgirl sister of Bick Benedict (Rock Hudson), the heir to a huge spread in west Texas. When Bick brings home a beautiful bride (Elizabeth Taylor) from Virginia, the two women scrap, until Luz dies in a riding accident.

Her influence lives on, though, since she leaves a parcel of land, which turns out to be rich in oil, to her favorite, the family's ne'er-do-well handyman, Jett Rink (James Dean, in his final film appearance). The film's subversion of established gender constructions is less extreme than *Johnny Guitar*, but still, McCambridge provides a wonderful portrayal of a powerful, blunt, unconventional frontierswoman who can compete with men in just about everything.

Television also provided a depiction of a remarkable Western woman in the series *The Big Valley* (1965-1969), in the character of Victoria Barkeley, played by Hollywood actress, Barbara Stanwyck. Modelled on *Bonanza*, the series related the adventures of the Barkeley clan, proprietors of a big California ranch.

Led by indomitable matriarch Stanwyck, the family included characters played by Richard Long, Peter Breck, Linda Evans, and the strapping young Lee Majors. Like Crawford and McCambridge, Stanwyck was widely rumored to have had affairs with women; her marriage with Robert Taylor was believed to be a "lavender" one that permitted the two stars to safely pursue same-sex interests without scandal.

### **Man-loving Men and the Western**

Unlike members of other minorities, people who differ from the majority in sexuality and gender usually grow up in isolation from others like themselves, without support or guidance from family members who feel the same way. Until they indicate otherwise, young people are assumed to be heterosexual. Erotically charged visual images thus may play an important role in the realization that one is attracted to people of the same sex.

For young men growing up and realizing their attraction to other men, the displays of male faces and bodies sanctioned by American culture in entertainment and sports often unintentionally assist them in understanding their sexual orientation, and allow them the opportunity to admire other men, at least

clandestinely. For many young men, seeing beautiful men in Western movies or advertisements or rodeo competitions has helped them to understand that they desire men.

Undoubtedly, many man-loving men have played unacknowledged roles in creating the dominant culture's beautiful images of the heroic cowboy, and, not surprisingly, Western images also have been important in the explicitly homoerotic visual culture created by gay men.

### **The Cowboy in the Gay Subculture**

From the emergence of explicitly homoerotic commercial art just after World War II, gay artists have employed Western imagery. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, important physique photographers such as Bob Mizer of the Athletic Model Guild and Bruce of Los Angeles (Bruce Bellas) sometimes used cowboy props and themes, and Don Whitman of the Western Photography Guild in Denver focused his work on erotic images of "mountain men" in the rugged landscape of the Rockies.

In his oil paintings in this period, George Quaintance presented an extraordinary series of utopian images of the homoerotic romantic adventures of sensuously idealized young cowboys. Although Western images are not central to his work, Tom of Finland also presented some of his voluptuous muscle men encased in cowboy clothes.

While the Western images of Mizer, Bellas, Whitman, Quaintance, and Tom are substantially different, all use the heroic associations of the cowboy to construct homoeroticism in terms of healthy, natural masculinity. This construction intensified in the period of Gay Liberation, as gay men deliberately refuted negative effeminate stereotypes by creating hypermasculine styles of gender expression. Many gay bars used Western themes and names, and jeans and other elements of Western wear were combined in the styles of the macho clone.

When hypermasculine gay styles first penetrated the awareness of the majority in the late 1970s, it was in part because of the brief but spectacular success of The Village People--a disco band whose iconic masculine figures included a police officer, a construction worker, a soldier, a sailor, a biker, an Indian chief, and of course a cowboy. Mainstream audiences took an amusingly long time to realize that the group's imagery and songs reflected and appealed to a core gay male audience.

The importance of the cowboy in the erotic imagination of many gay men has been evident throughout the development of gay pornographic movies. The gay cowboy hustler has been a staple of both subcultural and mainstream representations of homosexuality, appearing in John Schlesinger's film *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) and Mart Crowley's play *The Boys in the Band* (1969; William Friedkin's film version was released the following year). Andy Warhol's "Western," *Lonesome Cowboys* (1968), filmed on a movie set in Arizona, subverts the Western genre with campy, effeminate parodies of the masculine cowboy stereotype.

The beautiful cowboy has continued to be a subject of explicitly homoerotic visual art. Beginning in the early 1970s, the important oil painter Delmas Howe has made such figures the subject of a remarkable series of paintings blending Western and Classical themes, *Rodeo Pantheon*.

While the gay subculture often is thought of as almost exclusively urban, people who differ from the majority in sex and gender have asserted themselves in rural areas as well. One of the major social and cultural organizations created by sexual/gender minorities in the rural United States and Canada is a vibrant network of gay rodeos, the International Gay Rodeo Association (I.G.R.A.).

Country and Western music also has many sexual/gender minority fans in both rural and urban areas. In the last several decades some Country and Western singers, such as Dolly Parton, Garth Brooks, and Willie

Nelson, have begun to address same-sex desire supportively, and some, such as k. d. lang and Jeff Miller, have identified as lesbian or gay.

### **Western Gay Fiction**

Perhaps the first explicitly gay Western novel was Richard Amory's erotic saga, *The Song of the Loon* (1966), whose popularity caused it to be followed by two sequels. These books and Andrew Herbert's 1970 film version of the first novel celebrate heroic Western masculine ideals, presenting passionate romantic relationships among frontiersmen and Native Americans.

Though not a Western, John Rechy's classic account of the urban gay underground, *City of Night* (1963), features cowboy hustlers among the various characters struggling to survive on the street.

More recently, passionate relationships between masculine Westerners have been the subject of the work of such fiction writers as William Haywood Henderson in *Native* (1994), Ken Shakin in *Real Men Ride Horses: Cowboys and Indians, Outlaws and In-laws, Mormons and Other Strange Bedfellows in the Pink Desert* (1999), and Michael Jensen in *Frontiers* (2000) and *Firelands* (2004.)

Henderson writes with subtle indirection and sophistication and subtly weaves in representations of his characters' memories and dreams, presenting the contemporary story of Blue Parker, a young Wyoming ranch foreman, who is competent, conventional, and respected, but who struggles with the intense attraction he feels to another young man, Sam, a hired man who works for him. Hostility and violence toward men who love men hold Blue back, but his situation is pushed toward a partial resolution by Gilbert, a Native American who understands himself as a latter-day berdache or "two-spirit."

Set in the New Mexican desert, Shakin's book is a collection of startlingly vivid, often witty stories, many informed by a strong sense of the history of the area and the cultural differences of those who live there, as well as their sexual and gender variations.

The two novels by Jensen are set in Ohio in its frontier period, at the end of the eighteenth century, and are based on extensive historical research and show a serious concern to reconstruct earlier attitudes toward sexually different men.

The first concerns the travels and gradual sexual self-discovery of John Chapman, the man who became "Johnny Appleseed." The second is a story of a young white man's exploration of his sexual and emotional needs in a relationship with a Delaware brave, combined with an account of his simultaneous adventures in confronting what the settlers believe to be the "wendigo," a supernatural monster dwelling in the forest.

Ronald Donaghe's *Common Sons* (2000), though not really a Western, is set in a small, homophobic town in rural New Mexico after World War II. It presents the touching and optimistic coming-of-age, coming out story of two ordinary young men who fall in love.

Since the mid-1990s, in part due to the development of new forms of Internet communication, there has been rapid development of the genre of male-male (M/M) romantic and erotic popular fiction. A number of M/M novels and story collections are set in the West, both in the past and the present. Interestingly, many of these M/M "cowboy romances" are written by and for women who identify as heterosexual. This field is growing at such a rate that the writers are too many to list, but some significant ones are Dave Brown, Chris Owen, Sarah Black, J.L. Langley, S. Bryan Gonzales, and Tory Temple.

### ***Brokeback Mountain***

And then there is the extraordinary achievement of *Brokeback Mountain*. First published in 1997 in *The New Yorker*, Annie Proulx's short story reached a wide audience, challenging stereotypes about homosexuality and making straight readers aware of the struggles of the many man-loving men throughout the United States who pass for straight, and in 2005 the film version made by Larry McMurtry, Diana Ossana, Ang Lee, and their associates brought Proulx's narrative to a huge national and international audience.

In both its forms, *Brokeback Mountain* in a sense "outs" the Western, obliging readers and audiences to recognize the centrality of masculine beauty and masculine love to the most important of American national narratives.

There are important differences between the two versions of the narrative, of course, but both raise related issues that are fundamental to the tradition of the Western. They both present masculine Westerners whom readers and audiences tend to perceive as "cowboys" (though they're actually shepherders), and both evoke the lonely, heroic splendor of the Rockies, familiar to everyone from Western fiction, films, and art.

The relationship of Ennis del Mar and Jack Twist starts off like the friendships of many working men in the West and elsewhere in America, with shared effort in work and shared enjoyment of drinking, storytelling, singing, and joking. But, as happens for far more American men than ever will admit it, friendship extends to physical play and physical attraction, and culminates in intense sexual passion. Rather than retreating in fear, the men share a mutual sexual bond during their summer together.

The story and the film thus indicate how deeply connected friendship and sexual and emotional attraction can be for many men, despite the artificial boundary that the dominant culture seeks to impose between the homosocial and the homoerotic. And both show that the intense bonds between men, so important in the Western tradition, are centered on a kind of attraction between men that most creators and consumers of the tradition almost never have been able to acknowledge.

Whereas the traditional Western presents the landscape as the object of conquest, penetrated, explored, and finally "civilized" through the efforts of white men led by heroic frontiersmen and cowboys, the spectacular landscape of *Brokeback Mountain* is a refuge from the constraint, repression, frustration, and hostility Ennis and Jack encounter as men who love men in what is supposedly "civilization." For both of them, heterosexual marriage is a mistake and a trap into which they're forced by fear and shame, and it not only hurts them and but their wives and children as well.

The story and the film are uncompromising in their presentation of the violence directed at men who love men and internalized by them. Indeed, they show that one fundamental source of the male violence that marks the Western may be the distrust and rage many American men are taught to feel toward attraction between men.

The story and the film not only locate male love in relation to the American tradition of the Western, but also place it in the originally European and now global tradition of the tragic romantic love story. Narratives of a love between a man and a woman so strong that it can challenge and overcome any prejudice between families, classes, or cultures, and indeed can overcome death itself, are familiar to everyone, and range from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1594) to James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997). Proulx and Lee and his associates have had the daring and brilliance to put love between two men on the same level, constructing it as a passion so powerful that, even after Jack is gone, the memory of him helps Ennis to "stoke the day," to stand what he cannot fix.

Commentators on the Western often have remarked the strong sense of nostalgia typical of the genre. It evokes the lost world of the old frontier, a time and place when many think men had more of the freedom

and independence that Americans believe makes a man a man. The two versions of *Brokeback Mountain* suggest that an unacknowledged source of this nostalgia for a lost sense of manhood in fact may be the yearning many men feel, but never can admit, for intense closeness to another man.

*Brokeback Mountain* is an elegy, in which one man, who loved another and was loved in return, but who then rejected him out of shame and fear, remembers and grieves over the loss of his friend. This approach not only relates *Brokeback Mountain* to the nostalgia typical of Western narrative, but also to the ancient tradition of masculine homoerotic poetry, which begins with the Greeks and Romans and extends through the Renaissance and the Romantics to contemporary gay writing.

Of course, for audiences today, this sense of nostalgia for lost male love is deepened even more by regret over the tragic accidental death of one of the two beautiful, gifted actors who ensured the greatness of the film, Heath Ledger. Though the Motion Picture Academy failed to bestow the Academy Award on Ledger (and Jake Gyllenhaal, and the brilliant film they helped to make), *Brokeback Mountain* stands as an extraordinary, enduring affirmation of the centrality of male love in the tradition of the American Western.

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