

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Jon Lewis

This thesis employs the study of gender to demonstrate how recent Hollywood western films have constructed a hero that is reflective of contemporary beliefs regarding masculinity. Beginning with a New Historicist approach at studying gender, this work first considers the construction of masculinity in post World War II America and traces the evolution of the western hero's masculinity from its iconic state in the 1950's through its trial during second wave feminism, its rebuilding during the Reagan years, and its refinement within recent Hollywood films.

This thesis considers each period of western films as a representation and reflection of its current culture, and as a result ultimately argues that the western genre has recently endeavored to perpetuate the conservative cultural view that a marital union is the ideal in contemporary American society. In tracing the progression of masculinity in the western hero, through cultural and textual readings, this thesis concludes that today's paragon of the masculine western hero is more subject to domesticity and as such is more likely than its 1950s predecessors to accept marital living.

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Constructing Heroic Identities: Masculinity and the Western Film

by
Brad D. Foster

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of y thesis to any reader upon request.

Brad D. Foster, Author

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DEDICATION

This is for you,
Lindsay.

Without you, none of it even exists.

Constructing Heroic Identities: Masculinity and the Western Film

Chapter One

A cowboy will not submit tamely to an insult,
and is ever ready to avenge his own wrongs;
nor has he an overwrought fear of
shedding blood.
He possesses, in fact, few of the emasculated,
milk-and-water moralities admired by the pseudo-philanthropists;
but he does possess,
to a very high degree, the stern, manly qualities
that are invaluable to a nation.¹
—Theodore Roosevelt—

While the essential qualities of womanhood that tie women to domesticity
are nostalgically honored in Westerns,
femininity as a social force is represented
as a threat to masculine independence
and as the negative
against which individual masculinities are tested.²
—Edward Buscombe—

Introduction

Western films have long been a popular vehicle for portraying the masculine responsibilities of contemporary men. Though, as western genre scholar Edward Buscombe asserts, western films traditionally “propose a code of behavior that transcends gender,” over the years the genre has made obvious progression in relation to contemporary gendered issues.³ Whereas earlier films have generally made an “absolute and value-laden division between the masculine and feminine spheres,” recent western films have effectively managed to integrate the female character as a necessary part of the formula for winning the West.⁴

I begin my discussion on masculine representation in western film in the 1940s. Though earlier examples are both prevalent and ample for making my point, I

chose to limit my resources—as the decades immediately after World War II include some of the most popular and productive years for the genre. Westerns were prevalent during the 1940s and 50s, and it was during this period that the western genre experienced its most prolific decades of production. In the years immediately following World War II (1946-1949), westerns “comprised more than one-fourth (27 percent) of all films released. In 1948, a peak year to that point in the genre’s history, fully 30 percent of all Hollywood features were westerns.”⁵

Chapter one focuses on how Hollywood westerns reflect the cultural idea of what 1940s and 50s society defined as masculinity. After contextualizing what was known as the “breadwinning ethic” in 1940s and 50s, I begin my argument by situating the discussion on western films from the 1940s and 1950s by taking a quick look at the film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Though not a western, this film introduces the idea that within the 15 years following World War II the cultural norm for the masculine ideal in American society was primarily patriarchal. The film also sets up the idea that for the 1950s society to progress, the masculine ideal for men during the 1950’s had to accurately be conveyed to contemporary youth in order for manhood to continue its progress. As a result, western films became a venue through which these cultural ideals regarding masculinity could be conveyed to the public. The western films I discuss in this section support the notion that the western hero of the 1940s and 50s is one who is comfortable with his role as a protector and is an exemplar for American audiences—conveying the distinct impression that the breadwinning man in 1950s contemporary society should do likewise for his family. However, homes and families are not necessary for the western hero of the 40’s and

50's (the western hero of this era is uncomfortable and anxious when stuck indoors), because his "work" is what is most important to him. But just as the American man's primary concern during this era is to provide the means for his family's comfortable living, the western hero's primary concern is to perpetuate the survival of the family, to bring about civility, and to provide peace for those who find themselves under his care.

Chapter three begins by outlining the impact that second-wave feminism had on American masculinity in the 1960s and discusses how this change affected the era's western films. In general, men seemed to either become more accepting of the need for equality, or more opposed to the idea. In western films, however, only the latter of those two reactions was regularly depicted. Films throughout the 1960s and 1970s (exactly parallel to second-wave feminism) became markedly more violent and far less accepting of the domestic female in the West. The portrayal of the ultra-violent man in films from this era is a reaction against the idea that women should be given such equality within society.

My final chapter is a dialogue on western films from the 1980s to today. I start the section with a discussion about the near demise of the western genre in the early eighties and through examples from these films argue that as women continued to gain equality in America, men petulantly ceded their power while simultaneously mourning its loss. This lament is reflected in the 1980s westerns in the character of the aging hero in what are called "end of the West" films. To contextualize my argument I use the popular 1979 film *Kramer vs. Kramer* to introduce the idea that men began to realize the important responsibilities that came as a result of granting women more

equal rights. For example, as the second-wave feminism movement developed and women were more prevalent in the professional workforce, men began to cede some of the patriarchal responsibility that was established in the years immediately following World War II. As a result, men of this era began to enter new parental roles. There was a high divorce rate in America during the 1980s, and many fathers found themselves “in charge” of their children for varying amounts of time. The examples I make use of from *Kramer vs. Kramer* help to solidify the idea that men in the late seventies and early eighties often had to push the previously established bounds of masculinity in order to provide emotional as well as financial support for their children. From this point, I move on to discuss how this cultural change is reflected in western films primarily through two character types: the aged western hero, and the female character as western heroine. The old western hero in films from the 1980s is a reflection of contemporary men who ultimately mourn the past role the American man had established in the workplace but now had to come to terms with its loss. The female-as-hero films I discuss include highly capable women who fill the role of the western hero by stepping in to the boots once filled by the masculine American man. These films, though something of an unsuccessful effort to revitalize the western genre, are also an attempt to assert feminine capability in the face of continually changing societal gender norms.

The final chapter asserts that since the 1940s the western hero has become increasingly more domestic; and that masculinity in recent westerns comes to mean something different for what has traditionally been seen as the most macho of movie archetypes. I also argue that the contemporary western hero cannot comfortably live in

the space of the West without a domestic influence, and along with this argument I propose that contemporary western films support the notion that in order for contemporary society to survive (much like in the actual, historic society of the West), men need a domestic partner.

Chapter Two

Popular culture in the 1950's, on television as well as in films, stressed women content with domesticity while men dominated the world of work. It reflected a familial desire to recover older measures of success, and it certainly put a premium on the provider skills of many middle-class husbands.⁶
—Peter Stearns—

Setting Up the Cultural Icon: Post World War II American Masculinity

The breadwinner role of the American man was clearly defined in the years immediately following World War II. Men returned home from a rather taxing and arduous war campaign and wanted to settle into society by getting a job, getting married, and starting a family. The breadwinner figure became a masculine ideal for the post World War II society as young men returned home from battle as proven war-heroes to become heroes of the workforce and breadwinners at home. The masculine father figure was important to the 1940s and 50s society and was highlighted on television and film throughout both decades. Popular television shows regularly painted the picture of a family where fathers were less concerned with (and often less intelligent about) the actual parenting and discipline of their children than with providing for their family's physical or financial needs. The typical American man of the 1950s society felt a responsibility to provide for the family of which he was the head, and the western films discussed in this section support the notion that the ideal

man during the era is one who is in charge of his destiny and confidently in control of his life.

The western hero during this same period is a reflection of the ideal man during the 1940s and 50s; he is trusted, skilled in his profession, and depended upon for success. Much like his contemporary breadwinning counterpart, frequent time spent in the home is not necessary for the western hero of the 1940s and 50s. Indeed, the western hero of this era is uncomfortable and anxious when stuck indoors because his “work,” what is most important to him, is conducted outside the confines of the home. But just as there was a strong drive for the American man to be primarily concerned with being a strong father figure by providing the means for comfortable familial living, the western hero’s primary concern is also that of a fatherly role—one that perpetuates the survival of the family, brings about civility, and provides peace for those who find themselves under his care.

Masculinity and the Importance of the Breadwinner Role

Masculinity, as constructed in the post World War II era, was defined primarily by the emphasis society placed on the importance of the breadwinner role. In the introduction to her book *The Hearts of Men*, Barbara Ehrenreich describes the ideology that created the “breadwinner ethic” that was expected of men in the 1950s American society:

In the 1950s, ... there was a firm expectation (or as we would now say, “role”) that required men to grow up, marry and support their wives. To do anything else was less than grown-up, and the man who willfully deviated was judged to be somehow ‘less than a man.’ This expectation was supported by an enormous weight of expert opinion, moral sentiment and public bias, both within popular culture and the elite centers of academic wisdom.⁷

The man who elected to postpone marriage in post World War II America was marked as “suspiciously deviant” and virtually shunned by those who embraced the breadwinner role. Social scientists and psychologists in the 1950s society ardently supported—even proved, with varying degrees of “science”, that a man was immature if he could not “settle down,” if he remained “a vocational drifter,” or was unable to find work that did not suit his professed level of prestige.⁸ In 1949 sociologist Talcott Parsons took the breadwinner notion so far as to suggest that “it is perhaps not too much to say that only in very exceptional cases can an adult man be genuinely self-respecting and enjoy a respected status in the eyes of others if he does not ‘earn a living’ in an *approved* occupational role”⁹ (emphasis added). Not only is a man immature and incapable if he does not find work, but the work the breadwinning American man must find should be suitable, professional, and approved of by society.

So how did one become a “man” in 1950s society? In a textbook published in 1953 that was to be used in schools across the country for the next thirty years, psychologist R. J. Havinghurst “discovered” and published eight “developmental tasks of early adulthood” which included: “(1) Selecting a mate, (2) Learning to live with a marriage partner, (3) Starting a family, (4) Rearing children, (5) Managing a home, (6) Getting started in an occupation, (7) Taking on civic responsibilities, and (8) Finding a congenial social group.”¹⁰ As is evidenced by many of Havinghurst’s expert contemporaries, society placed much more pressure on the father of the family to fulfill role number six as opposed to numbers four and five—which were specifically reserved for wives and mothers during the 1950s. Any reversal or mistaken emphasis

placed on any of these roles, moreover, could lead to a breakdown of the familial norm—a norm that was highly prized in the competitive economy of the 1950s.

As a prime example of how the contemporary society of the 1950s accentuates the need for a strong fatherly figure, one of the decade's most iconic films, *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), explores the changes taking place in gender issues at the time. *Rebel Without a Cause* implies a cultural need for a father who will not only fulfill the breadwinner role but who must also be a strong disciplinarian capable of parenting his children in a manner that reflects the conservative norms regarding family in the 1950s. In the film, Jim Stark (James Dean) is a troubled teen in a new town. Though the focus of the film resides with the iconic Dean and the problems his character encounters, certain scenes between Jim and his parents give the overt message that this film is largely about the relationships which 1950s teens have with their parents rather than the relationships they create with their peers. The opening scene of the film sets up the notion that a lack of understanding exists between teens and their parents when a drunken Jim is picked up at the police station by his parents. Jim's overbearing and demanding mother focuses on Jim's delinquent behavior and frets that the family cannot relocate again in order to escape the plague of bad behavior that seems to follow her son. Trying his best to ignore his demanding mother, Jim tries to convey to his father that he merely wants to *see* an example of masculinity which he can then *follow*. But Jim's father, Frank Stark (Jim Backus), who is later found at home serving Jim's domineering mother tea while clad in his wife's ruffled yellow apron, cannot understand what his son needs. Later, while in a private conversation with a police lieutenant, Jim expounds on his troubles at home by

telling the officer that his father simply won't be a man. Beleaguered by his overbearing wife and officious mother, Frank Stark is simply, as Jim says, made into mush by the two women. Furthermore, Jim claims that his father's emasculated condition is the primary reason for his own rebellious ways.

In her 1949 "study of the sexes in a changing world," Margaret Mead opens by conservatively expounding on the gender confusion that was taking place in her contemporary society, shedding light on Jim's situation:

How are men and women to think about their maleness and their femaleness in this twentieth century, in which so many of our old ideas must be made new? Have we over-domesticated men, denied their natural adventurousness, tied them down to machines that are after all only glorified spindles and looms, mortars and pestles and digging sticks, all of which were once women's work? Have we cut women off from their natural closeness to their children, taught them to look for a job instead of the touch of a child's hand, for status in a competitive world rather than a unique place by a glowing hearth? In educating women like men, have we done something disastrous to both men and women alike?¹¹

Society had for so long operated within a structure that called for such stringent definitions of "maleness" and "femaleness," that when a change in traditional male and female roles was introduced, society did not understand how to react.

The 1940s society was one that had very clearly defined gender roles in the home, and in *Rebel Without a Cause*, Jim simply can't seem to reconcile the gap between what culture suggests his family life should be and what it actually is. Jim is a product of a patriarchal society, and his confusion throughout the film is a direct result of the mixed messages he receives from his parents regarding contemporary gender roles—his mother is domineering and demanding, his father soft-spoken and agreeable. Should Jim look to his mother in order to construct his teenage ideas of

masculinity? Shouldn't his father be more of an example of manhood? It isn't until the end of the film—when Jim's father stands up to his overbearing wife in front of Jim and resolves to be the masculine role model his son so needs—that Jim's reform becomes apparent.

I mention this example not to evoke the notion that 1950s parents generally considered that teens would be better off if only they could have parents who fill the social norms society had defined, but rather to highlight the emphasis that 1950s contemporaries placed on the important role a father should play in their society. Fathers needed to provide for their families, not just financially, but emotionally as well. Understanding what “masculinity” came to mean in the 50s (and accepting the personal role as a masculine, fatherly influence in the home) was a necessity in order for the 1950s family to survive.

To be a breadwinner in post World War II America was to be part of the masculine ideal set by that society; if a man were not involved in pursuing the breadwinning ethic he was considered “less than a man.” Ehrenreich notes that “if adult masculinity was indistinguishable from the breadwinner role, then it followed that the man who failed to achieve this role was either not fully adult or not fully masculine.”¹² That American men in post World War II society took seriously the invitation to be breadwinner is evidenced not only by high marriage rates following the war, but higher enrollment in college due to the introduction of the G.I. Bill (which allowed many individuals to obtain the first college degree in their family lines), which led to higher incomes and a higher number of families purchasing homes. This increased familial stability led to the nation's highest birth rate ever in 1957 (4.3

million births that year alone).¹³ Men embraced the breadwinner role and generally endeavored to give their families decent livings. It is no wonder, then, that popular culture reflected the breadwinner role in different ways. The western in particular focused on the paternal role of the western hero, and reflected 1940s and 50s ideals of masculinity in the heroic space of the West.

Reflections of Post-World War II Masculinity in the Western Hero

Breadwinning in America began to mean more to society than just the fulfilling of a role. Indeed, the breadwinner in post WW II America had become a representative symbol of what masculinity was. Fathers in America filled society's expectation and embraced the breadwinner role, but along with the acceptance of the breadwinning role came other responsibilities. Society couldn't survive if fathers in the 1940s and 50s did nothing more than provide the financial means for a family, as evidenced in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Popular culture in film and television during the 1950s generally suggests that fathers were less concerned about (and generally less capable of) being nurturing parents to their children than about providing financially for them, and often left the parenting to their wives—who were regularly depicted in popular culture as “far smarter than their husbands about family matters.”¹⁴ Fathers spent increasingly longer amounts of time outside of the home either deeply involved with their increasing responsibilities at work, or with the personal reward of leisure time.¹⁵ Young boys inevitably received instruction on how to be a man, but the message came more from Hollywood than it did from the mouths or actions of their own fathers.

In the 1950s the western was considered a “dependable mainstay of Hollywood film production,” and was also a stronghold of network television.¹⁶ Lee Clarke Mitchell, in his book *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, notes the pedagogical influence westerns had in shaping the masculinity of young boys and states that “persistent as this pedagogical impulse has been throughout the history of the genre, never was it so urgently pressed as in the early 1950s, the ‘golden age’ of the western, when fictional film, and television exemplars concentrated on teaching boys to become men.”¹⁷ If men were generally unavailable to their children as fathers, western films represented the ideal masculine figure as the western hero and thus filled the void left by the absent father.

Hollywood westerns of the 1940s and 50s connected the breadwinner ethic with society’s popular definition of masculinity to create a western hero that would be embraced by contemporary society. This western hero reflected the post World War II American masculine ideal in three ways: he provides protection for and enables familial living, he counsels the young while preparing them for adulthood, and, even more overtly reflective as a father figure in the 1940s and 50s, he spends his time away from any sort of traditional home because his “work” was what was most important to him. By reflecting the ideal masculine role of 1940s and 50s society in the western film, the western hero became a distinct symbol of American masculinity, filling the fatherly role left empty by the working breadwinner in post World War II America.

One of the most visible functions of the western hero in his breadwinning role in western film from 1946-1959 is to serve as a protector for the individual family.

During World War II men served as protectors for the collective family of America, and when these same men returned home and started families of their own, they protected themselves and their families by providing for them. Additionally, many of the World War II veterans lived through the woeful effects of the great depression, so providing basic needs for their families was an overt way to protect their family from the travails of poverty.¹⁸ Just as men in post World War II society labored to provide a physical space wherein raising a family could become a possibility, western heroes during the same era were primarily concerned with establishing a physical space where a civil family and society could thrive.

In western film the role of being a protector in the defense of familial living is filled in various ways. In many western films the hero clears the way for familial living as a lawman who has established peace in a previously violent town and whose continual work includes keeping the town safe. Among the many films that employ this type of plot structure are: *Along the Navajo Trail* (1945), *Abilene Town* (1946), *My Darling Clementine* (1946), *Four Faces West* (1948), *Rimfire* (1949), *High Noon* (1952), *A Lawless Street* (1955), *Man With the Gun* (1955), *The Proud Ones* (1956), *Gunfight at the OK Corral* (1957), and *Rio Bravo* (1959) among others. Furthermore, in films like *Code of the Saddle* (1947), *Blood on the Moon* (1948), *Stampede* (1949), *The Sundowners* (1950), *Untamed Frontier* (1952), *Shane* (1953), *Tribute to a Bad Man* (1956) and others, the hero is typically a farmer (or someone who sides with the farmers—often a gunman) fighting for the farmers' rights to cultivate the open range where the tyrannical ranchers and cattle-owners graze their herds. In these films, the hero rides the town or surrounding homesteads of the lawless others in order to provide

the means for society's peaceful living. Three particular westerns from the period—*Shane*, *High Noon*, and *The Searchers* (1956)—best represent how the western hero is a symbol of masculinity in the 1940s and 50s society who fulfills the role of a father-figure and makes peaceful family life possible.

One of the most popular western novels of all time, Shane, was written in 1949 and adapted to the screen in 1953. Though written at the height of the fervor surrounding the breadwinning man, Shane has withstood the test of time and has proven to be immensely popular—selling over 12 million copies to date and being translated into various foreign languages.¹⁹ As a film, *Shane* garnered six Oscar nominations (winning one), was nominated for and won various other film awards, and grossed over twenty million dollars in theaters.²⁰

The opening sequence of *Shane* clearly defines the principles that Shane will eventually fight for. In the picturesque landscape of Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Shane (Alan Ladd) rides out of the mountains and to the front door of the Starrett's homestead. Joe Starrett (Van Heflin) laboriously works in the sun while Mrs. Starrett (Jean Arthur) gazes out at the approaching stranger from a curtained window in her home where she is busy with interior household chores, and young Joey Starrett (Brandon De Wilde) watches with childlike, wide-eyed wonder as Shane approaches. After initial introductions between Shane and the Starrett family, another party rides up on the charming homestead, but this group is not so friendly. Leading the group is the local cattle baron, Riker (Emile Meyer) who rides with his hired hands. Riker informs Joe that due to a large cattle contract Mr. Riker has established, he will soon be kicking the Starrett's and other homesteaders off of "his" property. Joe stands his

ground and resolves not to leave his new home. Shane listens to the conversation and develops an understanding that the Starrett homestead stands for civility, the family unit, and a degree of personal honor for the Starretts and the other homesteaders in the area. As a result, Shane decides to help the homesteaders in any way he can.

In discussing the role of the family in western film, Lee Clarke Mitchell argues that *Shane* “revels in threats to the nuclear family to test the constraints that keep it in place.”²¹ Throughout the narrative, Shane conservatively defends the familial unit by “testing the constraints” that would keep this familial unit together. To this end he temporarily puts his gun away (along with his gunslinger past), dons new “sodbuster” clothing, buys a soda-pop from the bar in front of Riker’s men, and works with an ax and a shovel alongside Joe Starrett. However, when Shane realizes that leading a family by example and by quiet principle are constraints that are simply too weak when faced with a problem like Riker and his gang, he willingly submits to inevitable violent means.

Toward the end of the film, Shane facilitates the survival of the Starrett family—and, by extension, the homesteader society—in an unavoidable confrontation with Riker and his gang. Violence in the western film often paves the way for a civil society to exist, and, as is the case in *Shane*, no peace can exist between the settled and unsettled until one side eventually crumbles before the other.²² In his highly influential study of the western genre, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, John G. Cawelti notes that “the western landscape can become the setting for a regenerated social order once the threat of lawlessness has been overcome.”²³ As Cawelti notes, the western hero typically “shows an aversion to the wanton shedding of blood...killing is an act forced

upon him and he carries it out with the precision and skill of a surgeon and the careful proportions of an artist.”²⁴ In a way, the initially passive attitude of the western hero in the face of oppression ultimately justifies his violent action—especially when defending something as important to the 1940s and 50s society as the survival of the family.

In the closing scene, Shane single-handedly kills a famed hired gunman named Wilson (Jack Palance), Riker, and one of Riker’s thugs. Shane leaves the small town behind him and rides back into the landscape from whence he came—much to the dismay of young Joey, whose unheeded pleas for Shane to stay echo off the Teton mountain range. Though Shane may very well want to be a part of civil society, he simply *can’t*—because his responsibilities lie elsewhere. As 1940s and 50s culture clearly defined, the breadwinner of the home had a distinct responsibility to enable the survival of the nuclear family; consequently, Shane—as a representative father of the entire Starrett household, the other homesteaders, and the entire town—has a duty that prevents him from surviving in the very community he enabled. This is not to say that the typical father wasn’t welcome in his own home; rather, it reiterates the important principle that men could not shirk from their breadwinning responsibilities—lest they be considered “less than a man.”

Both *High Noon* and *The Searchers* reiterate the notion that the hero of the west, and, by extension, the man of the 1950s, lived by a certain “code” that directs their lives. This code, heavily influenced by the innate responsibilities that come with accepting the masculine breadwinning role, is defined by Cawelti, who asserts that:

Not only do the hero's ties of friendship motivate much of his behavior, but in most cases the great sense of honor and adherence to a highly disciplined code of behavior which sharply differentiates the hero from savages and outlaws springs from his association with the masculine group. The 'code of the west' is in every respect a male ethic and its venues and prescriptions relate primarily to the relationships of men.²⁵

Just as the western hero confines himself to a certain code, much of the motivation men generate within the breadwinning ethic is derived from the responsibility and fidelity they have developed toward others—be it the family they support, the bonds they have created as friends, or the validity of their word of honor. The “code of the west” in the myriad of westerns that have been released over the years vary somewhat in each film. For instance, in Don Siegel's *The Shootist* (1976), John Bernard Books (John Wayne) recites his personal mantra numerous times in the film: “I won't be wronged. I won't be insulted. I won't be laid a hand on. I don't do these things to other people, and I require the same from them.” In *High Noon*, for instance, the hero, Marshall Will Kane (Gary Cooper), lives by a similar, though unstated, “code of the west,” and fills the role of the fatherly protector by not running from what he deems as his responsibility—he won't allow others to be wronged due to an act of cowardice on his part.

In *High Noon*, where the viewer is required to meticulously account for the passage of time, an anxious Marshall Kane ineffectually tries to gather support to face the gang of Frank Miller, whom Marshall Kane had sent up to be hung not long ago. Throughout the film, Kane exhausts his means of rounding up deputies to help him and must face Miller's gang on his own. As is usual in a 1950s western, violence ensues, the bad men are killed, the town is saved from danger, and the western hero,

having fulfilled his fatherly role of providing protection, leaves the society to peacefully develop on its own. Granted, Marshall Kane leaves his society under much different circumstances than does Shane, mainly because the peace Kane has created seems to be more for himself than it is for the town that wouldn't lend him any support. However, in their actions both Shane and Marshall Kane enable peaceful living for a specific family—a family that is representative of society as a whole.

Another way in which the western hero acts as a father to society is through his tutelage of the younger generation. By 1957 instances of juvenile delinquency were on a steady rise in America, and society's growing concern for its youth became paramount. Lee Clarke Mitchell attributes the rise in delinquency to an underlying unease about adolescents who themselves felt as though they were a part of society that was "unprepared to accept them as adults."²⁶ Many movies from the era dramatize "adolescent aspirations as a panic about growing up," but "the western," Mitchell continues, "which achieved its greatest popularity during this period," was the "genre most successfully engaging the problem of the youth."²⁷ The new regime for parenting in post World War II America, which included the working father and the isolated mother, progressed from the traditional patriarchy and moved more toward what Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg call a "filiarchy," or a social system which is perpetuated by the benefits children receive from their parents.²⁸ Parents wanted to provide the best they could for their children, and in the face of an increasingly delinquent generation Hollywood sought to lend a hand. Movies like *The Wild One* (1953), *On the Waterfront* (1954), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), *Rebel Without a Cause*, and *High School Confidential* (1958) all try to postulate a solution to the

“problem of youth.” Westerns, though seemingly out of place in time, also offered possible solutions to society’s problem. In discussing a few of what he calls the “growing up” western films from the 1950s, Mitchell claims that:

The striking feature of these westerns, moreover, is that a genre given to celebrating the loner should now turn to the nuclear family. The cowboy’s choice as popular western hero was due in no small part to this freedom from family ties, his abandonment of domestic obligations at a time of their renegotiation. What forced the western to turn mid-century back to the family and its dynamics was the persistence, the salience, the sheer importance of Oedipal conflicts ... The popular success of the 50s westerns lay in their capacity to engage those conflicts, not by offering more self-consistent resolutions but by reproducing them in parables that were equally self-divided.²⁹

1950s youth faced an entrance into adulthood that was clouded by changing sexual structures and shifting gender roles—it was difficult for them to face these problems and difficult for parents to explain them. The western genre already employed a tutor that was respected by the younger generation, but by focusing on teaching the youth how to “grow up,” the western hero filled a new role in American society—that of the fatherly instructor.

Another example from *Shane* can serve well here. For instance, the entire story of *Shane* is told through Joey’s eyes, and the film makes clear that Shane is a father-figure for the young boy. From the first moment Joey watches Shane approach the homestead to the moment he begs Shane to stay, Shane teaches young Joey how to become a man. In Joey’s first lesson, Shane begins to work on removing a large tree-stump from the Starrett’s property. Joey watches as Shane models a biological picture of ideal masculinity (as Shane is working with his shirt off), but also learns that maintaining one’s resolve is an attribute highly prized in masculine circles. At Mrs.

Stark's suggestion to "hitch up a team" to remove the stump, Shane and Joe silently agree that "sometimes there ain't nothin' that'll do but your own sweat and muscle." At that, the two men continue their work without even the use of tools as they muscle the stump from its hold. In teaching Joey to work toward a fixed ideal in matters so inconsequential as removing a stump, Shane begins Joey's education on becoming a man. Later, in his instruction on how to use a real tool of manhood, a six-shooter, Joey is apprehensively instructed by Shane to leave guns alone. Shane cautions Joey that "A gun is as good or as bad as the man using it." However, Shane demonstrates his goodness by wielding his tool in the Starrett's defense, and as Joey watches Shane ride off into the night after gunning down the men who threatened the Starrett family, the message becomes clear that the responsibilities that come with being a man are not to be taken lightly, and that attaining manhood means more than simply growing older.

The fatherly instructor role of the western hero is also apparent in *The Searchers*. In a hunt for his niece, Debbie (Natalie Wood), Ethan (John Wayne) is joined by his nephew, Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter), who serves as the model youth to be instructed. Ethan had found Marty as an infant hidden under sagebrush after his parents had been massacred by Indians, and while Marty is at first shunned by Ethan for carrying the appearance of a "half-breed" (Marty is 1/8th Cherokee), throughout the course of the film Ethan fills a fatherly role for the young Marty as he teaches him how to grow into a man. Marty's first lesson comes after a brief battle of masculine will when Ethan elects to rest and feed his horse, to remain calm and at ease, under the pressure of an impending Indian raid on his brother's property. From experience

Ethan knows that the horses, tired and hungry, would never make it the 40 miles to his brother's property. As is typical of a hot-headed teen, Marty rides off in a cloud of fury toward the Edwards' property, both indignant toward Ethan and frustrated at his seemingly complacent attitude. Later that night Ethan and his friend ride past Marty (who is on foot, carrying his saddle as his horse had evidently given out) who receives the rebuke, "Next time you'll mind your uncle." Marty's rash decision had cost him precious time, and from that time forward Marty respects Ethan's advice and follows his orders word for word. In a later example, Marty and Ethan fight about whether to keep looking for Debbie after having spent months doing so—Marty wants to keep going and Ethan sees no use. Eventually, though he isn't happy about it, Marty resolves that Ethan is right and they take a much-needed break. By listening to and following Ethan's example, Marty learns to balance the masculine western hero's attributes of passion with restraint and begins to understand what it means to have resolve.

Perhaps the most significant lesson Marty learns comes only after Ethan himself realizes the important role of family life. At the climax of the film Ethan chases Debbie down a steep embankment until she falls to the ground. After he dismounts he grabs Debbie and holds her high above his head—almost as if in a gesture to throw her to the ground again. However, that gesture brings back a distinct memory from years ago when Ethan had lifted a very young Debbie high above his head in a loving greeting. Instead of killing Debbie, as Marty assumes he will, Ethan cradles her in his arms and lovingly says, "Let's go home Debbie." In this instance, Ethan manages to restore his familial tie to his niece after recognizing her for who she

really is—a member of his family rather than a pathetic Indian slave. In restoring Debbie to a family that will care for her, Ethan confirms to Marty the important role that family plays in society, in that each member of a family must be responsible for his or her part. As the representative father, Ethan has a duty to protect the family in any way that he can, and in this instance he protects Debbie from future abuse by her Indian captors. Marty recognizes the change in Ethan's attitude about who one's family is made up of and makes a connection about how important family really is. This realization allows for Marty to be able to settle down and get married, and by being invited into the representative "home" of manhood at the end of the film, it is apparent that Marty has learned an important lesson in the process of becoming a man.

The emphasis on fatherhood in western films from the 50s—whether through an external threat as in *Shane*, or internal mental development as in *The Searchers*—reveals, as Mitchell says, "a clear self-consciousness in the early 50s about domestic responsibility."³⁰ Young boys needed to understand what their future roles would entail as providers for their families, and in order to understand that responsibility they needed to be taught by individuals who knew about life—men who had experienced it. The western hero proved to be the perfect instructor to engage the much-needed discussion on disciplined manhood, and was aptly able to answer the key question "of how a boy is to become a man."³¹

A potential problem in comparing the western hero to the father figure during the 1940s and 50s is the simple fact that the western hero never seems to be an overt part of the family unit he so carefully protects—he almost always *leaves* the family at the end of the film. I am not suggesting that these instances are reflective of men

actually leaving their families in the 1940s and 50s, but the parallel is more conspicuously drawn when we consider the amount of time the post World War II American father spent away from the home. Due mainly to the construction of the breadwinning ethic, the home during the 1940s and 50s was a primarily domestic space—a space occupied by feminine influence and traditionally feminine-coded activity—and men were spending increasingly more time away from that space. Gender scholar Peter Stearns notes that by the 1950s “the extent to which men socialized with other men was being modified,” and that “the amount of time men spent in family was shifting, and with it family styles.”³² Stearns goes on to note that the changing family style included the fact that “men readily conceded power to their wives” as a change from the “Victorian paternalists” that fathers had been only twenty years earlier.³³ Men were gaining financial independence through their success at work and wanted to be rewarded for it, not by coming home to a loud and obnoxious family, but by spending leisure time away from the home. Ehrenreich concurs on this point and argues that in trying to gain relaxation away from home and family, men who had enjoyed financial success at work had generally drifted away “from their living rooms, dens, and even their basement tool shops,” only to find escape in “the great outdoors—the golf course” or “the fishing hole.”³⁴ Men were still fathers to their families’ end, they still provided for their families, but they were definitely not as much an integral part of raising a family as were their homebound wives. In a way, the supposedly highly conservative western films during the 1940s and 50s are actually much more radical in suggesting that a father-figure essentially lives outside the confines of the traditional family unit.

In many western films the western hero simply can't reconcile his style of life with that of a familial life. Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* rescues his niece from Indian enslavement, leads a hunting party in order to protect nearby homesteads, and serves as a masculine mentor for the young Martin, even writing him in as sole proprietor of his belonging in his will—all things that a father, were he present, would unquestionably do for his children. However, even though Ethan has more than proven his worth as a member of the familial unit, for some reason he cannot bring himself to be a part of it by the film's end. Ethan lovingly returns his niece, who is cuddled to his chest like an infant, to live with the family that Martin married into. In the telling final shot of *The Searchers*, the family unit moves from the front porch to the interior of the home. The camera moves inside the home with the rest of the family and frames Ethan in the doorway while he is situated as a part of the landscape on the exterior of the home. Ethan pauses in the doorway, gazes in on its occupants, and willingly turns away from them—preferring the rugged, independent outdoor life to which he has become accustomed. The door remains open until it is apparent that Ethan will not be returning to join the family and is then closed from the inside. Ethan has a choice to be a part of a family, a choice that is offered to all western heroes in films of this type, but because of his nature he simply cannot accept it.

Western films that include characters like Ethan, who simply are not comfortable with the idea of being kept confined to a home, set up the uncomfortable behavior of the hero far in advance of their choice to leave the familial unit behind. For example, in *Shane* the title character tries to be comfortable in the home—even hangs up his gun and changes his clothing to mix in—but his anxiety of being tied

down to a family is readily apparent. Shane sleeps in the barn, and he only enters the home for food or to conduct matters of business with other men. In *High Noon*, even though Marshall Kane intends to get married and settle down with his new wife, the only place he feels comfortable while indoors is when he is in his jail house. In many of the other places Kane visits during his efforts to round up a posse, the Marshall either conducts business standing in a door jam, or, if he actually enters the interior, the door remains open and Kane is very close to it. In *The Searchers*, when Ethan arrives in Texas to live with his brother, Ethan is obviously more comfortable on the front porch than he is in front of the hearth; he constantly moves through the interior space of the home quickly and can never seem to relax. These examples, and their comparisons to the 1940s and 50s American man, do not necessarily imply that men with families in the 1940s and 50s actually wanted to leave their families in order to live a freer life, or that they only stayed with their families because of the societal pressure to do so. They suggest instead that a certain tension developed when a man took on the breadwinning role. Men had a responsibility to reconcile that tension in some way, and the idea of a man who can be a part of both worlds seems ideal. The trend for western films to place a father figure as an individual who exists outside the family unit and who has no direct responsibility to that familial unit, somewhat compensates for the pressures men felt in the 1940s and 50s to adequately provide for their families—thus Ehrenreich's claim that among the ways men tried to escape from their familial responsibilities included immersing themselves in the "*fantasy world of Westerns*" seems a verity.³⁵

Chapter Three

The sixties, according to popular wisdom, changed everything.
 There was the black movement, the anti-war movement,
 the counterculture, the feminist movement
 and, not least of all,
 the quiet movement of women
 out of their homes and into the work force.³⁶
 —Barbara Ehrenreich—

Men Resisting Change: Second-Wave Feminism and Western Films from 1960-1979

The role of the breadwinning man in America reached its apex in the late 1950s, and it was then, one feminist author argues, that “with scant preparation, the nineteenth-century male culture crumbled.”³⁷ Toward the latter end of the 1950s, as the argument goes, American men began to “grow tired of their breadwinning responsibility,” and were “lured by the new consumer culture to want more leisure time.”³⁸ In addition, while discussing the role of the breadwinner and its relationship to the advent of second-wave feminism in the early sixties, Peter Stearns notes that “the baby boom and family-centered culture of the 1950s...certainly revived some older gender impulses—ultimately provoking the contemporary feminist movement in reaction.”³⁹ Men began to value their independence, and women began to take a more informed notice of the unequal balance of women vs. men in the workplace. Beginning as early as 1961, women began a mobilization process that would eventually lead to more equal treatment of women in public as well as in private life.⁴⁰ Second-wave feminism and the involvement or integration of women into the

professional world—a world which had previously been dominated by the traditional breadwinning man of the 1950s—had a huge impact on redefining masculinity for the American man. Western films throughout the 1960s and 70s—exactly parallel to the second-wave feminism movement—reflect one spectrum of reaction regarding masculinity during this era as they became markedly more violent and far less accepting of the domestic female in the West. In general, men’s reactions to second wave feminism during the 1960s and 70s became either more accepting of the need for equality, or more opposed to the idea—but in western films only the latter of those two reactions was regularly depicted.

In this chapter, I argue that the portrayal of the ultra-masculine, seemingly omnipotent, overtly narcissistic man in westerns during the 1960s and 70s is a reflection of a reaction against second-wave feminism. After providing a summary of second-wave feminism, I will provide a breakdown of what changes it brought about socially as well as politically during the 1960s and 70s. Following this, I discuss the changes that came to American masculinity because of the second-wave feminism movement, and how these changes are portrayed in western films from these two decades.

The New Woman of the 1960s: Second Wave Feminism

Second Wave Feminism began in the early 1960s and extended through the late 1980s. It is a movement largely concerned with issues of equality—specifically focusing on discrimination and oppression against women. Fresh out of a decade where American society was suffused with ideas of men working for the welfare of their families and women dutifully tending the home, women of the sixties noticed the

inequality that existed between the sexes and began to do something about it.⁴¹ So engrained in society were the structural ideas of a 1940s and 50s patriarchy that “employment want ads routinely listed jobs separately for men and women,” and not only was the labor force incredibly segregated, but women were habitually located “into a small number of lower-paid occupations primarily in the service sector.”⁴² In the late 1950s, married women could not obtain credit without a signature from their husband, and many employers had separate pay scales for men and women so that even if some women had the same jobs as men they were paid significantly less than their male co-workers. Working women in the late 1950s were often “subject to discrimination and openly accused of failing to be proper wives and mothers” because of the necessity or desire for added income for their family.⁴³

Post World War II affluence brought in more income to American families allowing more young women the opportunity to attend college and gain professional degrees. By the early 1960s the Baby Boom was on a precipitous decline as couples were marrying older than their 1940s and 50s counterparts and thus were more likely to postpone the raising of a family.⁴⁴ Women who had postponed their education in the 1950s re-enrolled at colleges and universities in order to finish their degrees, and millions of women began to recognize that “their ideological relegation to private life was increasingly intolerable,... they had no name for the phenomenon that linked their individual experiences” to one another.⁴⁵ A name for the oppression and “intolerable individual experiences” women felt in the early sixties came only when women began to band together in defiance of oppression against their sex.

The roots for women's mobilization can be traced back to 1961 and the formation of the President's Commission on the Status of Women. President Kennedy appointed Esther Peterson as the head of the Women's Bureau, and as head of the bureau Esther came up with the idea for the commission—appointing Eleanor Roosevelt as chair. The purpose of the commission was to reexamine women's place in “the economy, the family, and the legal system,” and the commission itself had been drawn from “labor unions, women's organizations, and governmental agencies.”⁴⁶ Women's issues came to the forefront of the political spectra after the commission published its report in 1963 when the President issued an order mandating that the federal civil service should hire for career positions “solely on the basis of ability to meet the requirements of the position, and without regard to sex.”⁴⁷ Congress later passed the Equal Pay Act in 1963 which made it illegal to set differing rates of pay for men and women regarding the same position or job. Governors in almost every state set up similar commissions to look into women's issues on a state level as well. In addition to governmental bills being passed in the United States, in 1963 the publication of a new and highly influential book by Betty Friedan entitled *The Feminine Mystique* had a profound effect on adding perspective to women's rights issues. The book was made up of interviews with women from contemporary society who questioned women's traditional roles, and overtly challenged the sexist structure of power which Friedan argues governs women's lives. The book supported various facts outlined by the commission report and became an immediate bestseller.

Women began to garner legal support from Congress in 1964, when Title VII of the Civil Rights Act was passed. Though primarily concerned with issues of “race,

religion, and national origin,” Representative Howard Smith of Virginia, a zealous supporter of segregation, allegedly attempted to kill the bill by suggesting that “sex” be added to list. Due to the extensive bipartisan efforts of two other representatives, Margaret Chase Smith of Maine and Martha Griffiths of Michigan, the bill passed and American women “suddenly had a potentially powerful and far-reaching legal tool.”⁴⁸

Actual organized mobilization among women had its initial start in 1966 with the founding of NOW (National Organization for Women) at a conference of State Commissions on the Status of Women. The organization was dreamed up somewhat informally (their first meeting was in a hotel room at the conference) but held firm to its statement of purpose, which was to “take action to bring women into full participation in the mainstream of American society now, assuming all the privileges and responsibilities thereof in truly equal partnership with men.”⁴⁹ NOW demanded full access for women on all levels within society, and demanded that the government enforce antidiscrimination laws—especially those that fell under Title VII.

With laws now in place, women were better poised to gain equality in America. However, even with specific laws in place that outlined women’s rights, activists were anxiously engaged in establishing equality in as many spheres as possible. For example, second-wave feminism also spurred and/or influenced a variety of other incidents including: (1) the rise of radical feminism during the 1970s, which was primarily concerned with the root idea that the oppression of women is a system of power at work in human relationships, (2) the inclusion of Title IX in the Education Amendments of 1972, which outlined equality in education, (3) feminist support to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment which states that “equality of rights

under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex,"⁵⁰ and (4) the decision of *Roe vs. Wade* on January 22, 1973 which was decided by the U.S. Supreme Court, and which included the decision to legalize abortion in all 50 states by stating that the right to decisions regarding one's reproductive system was consistent with a right to privacy under the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. Whether it came as a cause or as a result of the above, second-wave feminism radically modified the role of the female in American society in less than a ten-year period, and this rapid altering of what had been the societal norms of the 1950s created a fissure in contemporary society's definition of masculinity during the 1960s and 70s.

Feminist Zeal and the Hyper-Masculine Ideal: The New Western Hero

The western genre during the 1960s and 70s didn't share the ideals that second-wave feminism argued for, and when the genre did try to incorporate stronger female characters or overtly independent women as main protagonists, the films weren't as readily accepted by audiences as Hollywood producers had hoped.⁵¹ A film that has been labeled by western film scholar Edward Buscombe as the "nearest Hollywood has come to a feminist western," *Johnny Guitar* (1954) predates the beginnings of second-wave feminism by a few years but calls into question the very issues activists of the 1960s dealt with.⁵² The main protagonist in *Johnny Guitar*, Vienna (Joan Crawford), is seen as what Buscombe identifies as a "feminist ideal" throughout the film as she exists on equal terms with men and serves to civilize their roughneck ways through violent means—something of an inversion as women have traditionally been a civilizing influence on men in the western by encouraging them to

exercise their restraint toward violent tendencies.⁵³ Ahead of its time and occupying a space in a genre that was rather indignant toward its purposes, *Johnny Guitar* was an important western, but as a box-office failure the film likely discouraged producers to make more in the same mold.

Women's equality issues were at the forefront of society in the 1960s, and the western genre was not a place where feminist issues were traditionally portrayed. Buscombe has suggested that "one reason for the western's decline could be its resistance to the impact of social change," and this seems to be a likely reason for its near demise in the 1980s.⁵⁴ Buscombe's assertion could very well be the case, for the only other attempt to make what could be called a "feminist western" (*The Ballad of Josie* [1967]—a humorous story about a woman who independently sets up a sheep farm in cattle country which provokes a range-war) came just after the beginning of the second-wave feminism movement but did not have much success. The film, Buscombe notes, "attempts a blending of contemporary feminist issues (wife-battery, child custody, job discrimination) with historical material like prostitution and women's suffrage set against the characteristic trajectory of the western heroine from tomboy to wife."⁵⁵ However, the "feminist influence," as Buscombe argues, "sits uneasily with the western narrative,"⁵⁶ and audiences generally seemed to prefer that the role of the hero in the West be preformed by a male western hero.⁵⁷

Westerns enjoyed a productive period throughout the 1930s and 1940s, reaching their highest point of production in the 1950s, but production on western films have decreased in every decade since.⁵⁸ Because the western genre could not adequately incorporate the current issues American society dealt with, interest was

diverted to genres that did integrate those issues within their films. Though it is important to acknowledge how recent westerns have included current societal concerns and have succeeded in doing so, for the remainder of this chapter I plan to focus on how the once ideal masculine man (in western films of the 1940s and 50s) evolved into a reflection of a pessimistic society of men who reacted negatively to the feminist movement during the 1960s and 70s.

By the mid-1960s, the western genre was already working through the issues that second-wave feminism had presented to society. Westerns generally seemed to reflect a reaction to second-wave feminism in one of two ways: indirect indifference, or blatant resentment—ultimately reiterating the perceived necessity of a woman's dependence on masculine protection. For instance, some westerns from the early 1960s, before second-wave feminism really gained a great deal of momentum, include independent women who are of a firm mind, but who are ultimately incapable of establishing their freedom from men. In *Deadly Companions* (1961), Maureen O'Hara (Kit Tilden) tries to make her way across Indian Territory alone, but must be rescued by the heroic gunslinger Yellowleg (Brian Keith). Throughout the film, Yellowleg saves O'Hara from Indians, bandits, and starvation while following her (against her will) through the wilderness. *The Last Sunset* (1961) includes an independent mother, Belle Breckenridge (Dorothy Malone) who embarks on a grueling and dangerous cattle drive with her inept husband only to be saved from peril by her manly ex-lover. In *Mclintock!* (1963), cattle rancher George Washington Mclintock (John Wayne) is married to an independent, overbearing woman who, in the end, is publicly tamed by her intelligent and capable husband.

Western films had traditionally portrayed the western hero as being in control of the West with great success, and producers seemed adamant that the formula remain the same. However, the friendly, yet dangerous masculine father-figure western hero of the 1950s did not captivate audiences like he once had. Interest in the Hollywood western waned in the early 1960s, but with the growing popularity of the western genre abroad, and the growing high-quality production of foreign western films—especially those from Italy (which became known as “spaghetti westerns”)—American audiences found a new type of western hero whom they felt they could identify with in Sergio Leone’s trilogy known as “The Man with No Name.”

Director Sergio Leone loved the western genre and was fascinated with America as a child. In relating his fascination and subsequent disenchantment with his idealized version of the American man, Leone alludes to the attributes that make up the character of the so-called anti-hero so readily found in Leone’s films:

In my childhood, America was like a religion. Throughout my childhood and adolescence... I dreamed of the wide open spaces of America. The great expanses of desert. The extraordinary “melting pot,” the first nation made up of people from all over the world. The long, straight roads—which begin nowhere, and end nowhere—for their function is to cross the whole continent. Then real-life Americans abruptly entered my life—in jeeps—and upset all my dreams. They had come to liberate me! I found them very energetic, but also very deceptive. They were no longer the Americans of the West. They were soldiers like any others, with the sole difference that they were victorious soldiers. Men who were materialist, possessive, keen on pleasures and earthly goods. In the GIs who chased after our women, and sold their cigarettes on the black market, I could see nothing that I had seen in Hemmingway, Dos Passos, or Chandler. Nor even in mandrake, the magician with the outsized heart, or Flash Gordon. Nothing—or almost nothing—of the great prairies, or of the demi-gods of my childhood.⁵⁹

We can trace the development of the anti-hero through Sergio's remarks (above); there is no better description of the 1960s and 70s western hero than that of the "disillusioned ... demigods in a diminished landscape."⁶⁰ Years later Leone would put on film the very embodiment of what had "upset all [his] dreams" when he decided to direct the first western genre film that replaced the traditional role of the western hero with the more "materialist, possessive," and pleasure-oriented role of the anti-hero.

In his book *The American West on Film: Myth and Reality*, Richard A Maynard notes that "western films of the 1960s and 1970s have taken on a cynical, anti-heroic attitude toward the West," mainly due to the increased popularity of television, the decline of Hollywood "B" movies, and a more knowledgeable film-going audience.⁶¹ Whatever the case, Maynard argues, "the old-time cowboy picture seems to have finally lost some of its traditional appeal."⁶² The masculine hero in 1960s and 70s western films was a more violent, often narcissistic individual who was far more concerned with his own survival and existence rather than the survival and perpetuation of society (unlike his 1940s and 50s counterpart). The first film in the Leone trilogy, *A Fistful of Dollars* (1963), was a successful blending of the traditional western hero from the 1950s and the anti-hero of the 1960s and 70s westerns. As discussed in chapter one, the formula for constructing the western hero during the 1940s and 50s followed a tradition that was set up with films like *Shane* and *High Noon* where the hero was primarily concerned with three main goals: (1) to provide protection for society, (2) to enable familial living, and (3) to counsel the young while preparing them for adulthood. *A Fistful of Dollars* drastically altered that formula in the creation of the anti-hero—a hero who generally cares more for his own interests

than the welfare of those around him. The interesting twist with the character dubbed as “the man with no name” is that throughout the course of the film he supports both the 1940s and 50s definition of the high-minded hero while simultaneously restructuring the heroic model of the western hero for western genre films to come.

In the beginning of *A Fistful of Dollars*, a man without a name (Clint Eastwood) rides out of the mountains into a small Mexican village. Eastwood’s character is not given a name in the credits of the film and only once during the film is called “Joe” by a passer-by in the film—an appellation possibly projected from Sergio’s youth from when the American “G.I. Joes” were all called “Joe” by the Italians. The fact that the character has no name and is known only by a title given to a large force of men is important in identifying Eastwood’s character (whom I will refer to as “Joe”) with the “demigods” from Leone’s youth in his construction of the anti-hero. Much like in *Shane*, the first individual Joe encounters is a boy—however, unlike Shane (who immediately befriends little Joey), Joe witnesses the mistreatment of the little boy and his father, but does nothing to intervene. This initial introduction to the anti-hero both sets the tone for the remainder of the film (where it becomes apparent that Joe cares more for his own well-being than anything else), and sets up the irregular tension that exists between the anti-hero and the family. Throughout the course of the film, Joe’s sole interest seems to be garnering wages from the town’s competing crime bosses—the Rojos and the Baxters. Joe successfully pits the two groups against one another by killing men from both sides just to meet the demand of his need for money—one of the attributes that distinguishes the anti-hero from more

traditional heroes of the 1940s and 50s. Interestingly enough, however, the value Joe places on his earnings isn't as important as we are led to believe.

Ramon Rojo (Gian Maria Volonté), the leader of the Rojo gang, had held a woman hostage as his lover for many years—unwilling to let her visit her husband and child who Joe encounters in the opening scene. After a violent and uncontested shootout with her captors, Joe rescues the wife and mother, Marisol (Marianne Koch), returns her to her husband and child, gives all the money he has earned to the little family that had been separated by Ramon, and helps them to escape from the small town. Joe is then beaten nearly to death by the Rojo gang when they find out that he had helped the family escape, but remains true to his protection of the family by not saying a word about where they went. Providing protection (both physically and monetarily) for a family in need is a nostalgic glimpse of the traditional heroic roles western heroes filled in the 1940s and 50s where the hero gives all he can to enable the perpetuation of society. However, rather than happening at the end of the film, the rescue happens at the film's halfway point, and the remainder of the film focuses on Joe's escape from and subsequent revenge on the Rojo family. By focusing on the western hero as a quiet, honorable and concerned man in the first half of the film, and then redirecting the hero's motives as vindictive, narcissistic, vengeful, and excessively violent throughout the remainder of the film, Leone manages to bridge the gap between the modest, principle-oriented western heroes in films from the 1940s and 50s and the more overtly violent, arrogant western heroes who were a large part of western films during the 1960s and 70s. In this way, Leone manages to establish a new role for the western hero of the 1960s and 70s—that of the anti-hero.

The advent of the anti-hero role in *A Fistful of Dollars* is most often credited with having significantly altered the western genre—setting a pattern for many other films to follow. The anti-hero in the western genre generally assumes a lead role within the film and will carry out traditionally heroic acts (saving a family, killing the villain) within the narrative, but does so through methods or means that may not be considered honorable—and are often either dishonest or cunning. Films like *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), *The Shooting* (1967), *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), and *The Wild Bunch* (1969) all follow the pattern of the anti-hero laid out by Leone in *A Fistful of Dollars* and refine the role in the process. In other films like *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), *High Plains Drifter* (1973), and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) from the 1970s the anti-hero role continues on in either an extremist mode or a slightly subdued manner until the western hero was again forced to change in the late 1970s.

The role of the anti-hero typically called for a more violent and less forgiving lead character, but though fighting and hostility has always been a part of the western genre, violence began to assume a more obvious position in western films from the 1960s and 70s. The surge of violence in westerns during this era has been attributed to a variety of things, including an effort to be more historically accurate, the changing production codes for films, the effort to create more realistic special effects, the violence portrayed during the ongoing Vietnam War, and even arguments for the necessity of the role violence plays in the genre.⁶³ However, as alluded to earlier, I would like to postulate a theory that violence and the highly popular role of the anti-hero in the 1960s and 70s westerns is due mainly to the insecurities men felt about

their masculinity in the midst of shifting gender roles and changing social attitudes toward women during second-wave feminism.

Men Reacting...Badly

In her efforts to lend support for what she calls a “male rebellion” in the mid sixties, Barbara Ehrenreich cites a 1963 article in *Playboy* magazine entitled “Love Death and the Hubby Image.” The following mock want ad was published to begin the article:

TIRED OF THE RAT RACE?
FED UP WITH JOB ROUTINE?

Well, then...how would you like to make \$8,000, \$20,000—*as much as \$50,000 and More*—working at Home in Your Spare Time? No selling! No commuting! No time clocks to punch!

BE YOUR OWN BOSS!!!

Yes, an Assured Lifetime Income can be yours *now*, in an easy, low-pressure, part-time job that will permit you to spend most of each and every day as *you please!*—relaxing, watching TV, playing cards, socializing with friends!...

Incredible though it may seem, the above offer is completely legitimate. More than 40,000,000 Americans are already so employed...⁶⁴ (emphasis original)

The amazing new “part-time job” was, of course, being a housewife. In the article, writer William Iversen purportedly argues that because men work endlessly to give their families added comforts—even after their death through savings and life insurance—they are working themselves into an early grave.⁶⁵ Men, as Ehrenreich argues, had become fed up with the breadwinning role, and with the advent of second-wave feminism, women were demanding even more of men.

During the early seventies a right-wing view that men were being picked on or exploited by women during the second-wave feminism movement developed and was

supported by individuals like Ann Patterson, an anti-ERA activist who argues that “if you take away a man’s responsibility to provide for his wife and children, you’ve taken away everything he has. A woman, after all, can do everything a man can do. *And* have babies. A man has awe for a woman. Men have more fragile egos.”⁶⁶ Men in the late 1960s were apparently weaker than men of previous generations according to this right-wing ideology and were only “maintained” and kept in “working order” by the “constant demands and attentions of their wives.”⁶⁷ This tendency toward defining a soft and helpless masculinity is supported by men of the same era who argue that “no man could measure up” to the iconic portrayals of masculinity in popular culture, “not even John Wayne,” and even sought to excuse men from the responsibilities they were unable to manage in light of the shadow that traditional and pop culture definitions of masculinity had cast.⁶⁸ Men were reacting to second-wave feminism...but not in a very “manly” way.

The western genre is unique in that gender roles seem to have always played a vital function in the genre. Coincidentally, women’s suffrage in the United States directly parallels the rise and fall of the “Wild West” just after the civil war and through the early 1900s. For instance, the western genre was invented in 1902 by Owen Wister with the publication of his novel, *The Virginian*, at roughly the same time that the women’s suffrage movement was in its most heated period—from 1900, with the formation of a national headquarters for the National American Woman Suffrage Association, to 1918, when the 18th amendment was passed allowing women the right to vote. The immediate popular reception of Wister’s book, which led to many other novels about the American cowboy, was astounding. The popularity of a

novel which celebrated masculinity combined with the attention drawn toward feminist arguments in the early 1900s led cultural theorist Peter Gabriel Filene to observe that “feminism aroused such furious debate, less because of what men thought about women than because of what men were thinking about themselves. They dreaded a change in sex roles because at the turn of the century they were finding it acutely difficult to ‘be a man.’”⁶⁹ Men reacted against granting women more equal rights at the turn of the century primarily because they themselves felt threatened in what they had come to understand as their gender role. Likewise, Lee Clarke Mitchell parallels the successes and failures of the western genre through the years to the oscillating trends of the feminist movement, going so far as to argue that “the rise and fall [of the western genre’s popularity] coincides more generally with interest aroused by feminist issues,” and identifies these lagging moments in the western genre’s popularity as “moments when men have invariably had difficulty knowing how manhood should be achieved.”⁷⁰

Linking the Women’s suffrage movement at the turn of the century to second-wave feminism, Mitchell argues that “half a century later, much as the conventional polarities of manhood had altered, the difficulties of achieving an ideal of masculinity were just as exquisite, the ambiguities just as tantalizing.”⁷¹ Similarly, Peter Stearns, in discussing the complexities surrounding the existing tensions between defining masculinity during the feminist movement, argues that “for every current that suggested a softening of the male style or a modification of the importance of gender, some eddies moved in the opposite direction.”⁷² Though some men accepted, supported, and even fought for women’s rights during second-wave feminism, there

existed another group of men who sought to exert their authority over women through perhaps the most base means—neglect and violence.

Divorce rates in American during the 1930s, 40s and 50s had ever-increasingly inched upwards with the progression of time, but in the decade between the mid-sixties and the mid-seventies the divorce rate suddenly doubled.⁷³ Incidents of wife abuse and rape in America during the same time period increased dramatically, and though issues regarding women's equality were being challenged and met, it seemed that men were reacting to second-wave feminism more like children rather than men.⁷⁴ Stearns, much like Ehrenreich earlier suggesting that men wished to escape within the "fantasy" of western film during the 1950s, suggests that popular culture during the 1960s and 70s "reinforced a beleaguered masculinity."⁷⁵ Men wanted to see men *be* men on film—and the anti-hero in the western film fills that role of a disenchanted man's ideal of masculine perfection.

How did the anti-hero westerns define the ideal of manhood, then? Men have never been more in charge in a western film than in the anti-hero westerns of the 1960s and 70s. Rarely are women ever given a large role in the films, and if they are included, it is to be depicted merely as objects that exist for the pleasure of men. The men depicted in these films are highly capable individuals who radiate confidence—and who are always able to back it up. Because men during the 1960s and 70s were worried about how to define their own masculinity, they looked to the western genre as a means of escape and solitude—because living vicariously through the anti-hero in western film could make a man feel as though he were in some way a part of the idealized definition of contemporary manhood.

One of the aspects of the western film that made men feel “manly” was that the anti-hero in the western film was a individual who was solely in charge of his destiny. The anti-hero roamed the West only stopping to earn money, settle a debt, or exact revenge, and contemporary men enjoyed the idea of a man being able to control his destiny. A few plot outlines of some popular westerns from the era would be helpful here. Consider the sequel to *A Fistful of Dollars*, entitled *For a Few Dollars More*. Monco (again, more of a title than a name) (Clint Eastwood) is a bounty hunter tracking the ruthless El Indio (Gian Maria Volonté). Indio and his gang have a large price attached on their heads and Monco manages to kill them all after deciding to side with another bounty hunter—but not before robbing the bandits of the money they stole from a bank. Because Monco helps Mortimer (Lee Van Cleef), the other bounty hunter, exact his revenge on Indio, Mortimer lets Monco have all the money. Suddenly, Monco is a rich man—all because he controlled his own destiny. He individually made the decisions he thought were best and was rewarded as a result.

In *The Wild Bunch*, Pike Bishop (William Holden) leads a band of outlaws in a bank robbery. After a successful robbery attempt, Pike realizes that he had been set up to do the robbery, and as a result, the gang loses out and is duped into robbing bags of washers rather than bags of gold. After a near mutiny, Pike reasserts his authority as leader of the gang and demands they go south to look for another opportunity—as the botched robbery was supposed to be the last job they did. Pike continually makes decisions for the entire group—plotting other heists and cleverly evading the consequences—and eventually the entire group ends up getting rich. At the end of the film, as a salute to the solidarity they experience as a gang, Pike inspires his men to

stand for a just cause in the face of the ruthless General Mapache (Emilio Fernández). In the final showdown, Pike and his men are killed, but in facing the corrupt General Mapache, they are able to assert their individual authority over his—subverting all of the things they had previously carried out under the generals “orders.” In this instance, men who were in control of their destiny and weren’t “tied down” to other responsibilities made the decisions they deemed best. Other films employ similar plot lines as the anti-hero asserts his will over the authority of others—reiterating to contemporary audiences the need that a man has to be in charge of his own destiny.

Another characteristic of the western anti-hero that 1960s and 70s men found appealing is that men were the focal point of the film, and women generally existed only to fulfill their physical appetites. With the shifting gender roles and feminist issues at the forefront of the political spectrum during the 1960s and 70s, men wanted to feel as though they were the focal point of something and desired, like the western hero, to roam freely and do as they pleased—the only problem is that many men were married and had families.⁷⁶ That, however, soon changed.

As explained in the first chapter, marriage in the 1940s and 50s had largely been an expectation for contemporary society—a rite of passage to become a man. However, opinions about the importance of marriage began to shift in the late 1950s and continued throughout the mid-seventies. In *The Hearts of Men*, Ehrenreich cites an exhaustive study on American attitudes conducted by Joseph Veroff, Elizabeth Douvan, and Richard Kulka which spans the years from 1957 to 1976. The report includes a study of American society’s attitudes in 1957 toward men “who reject marriage as a way of life,” and Americans generally described them as being “sick,”

“immoral” or “neurotic” while only 37% viewed unmarried men “neutrally.” By 1976, however, the views had significantly changed with 51% of individuals viewing them neutrally, and 15% who openly approved of those who chose to live a single life. Ehrenreich’s argument is that men had rejected the breadwinning role and preferred to remain men by being single and thus more in charge of the outcomes of their lives.⁷⁷

The anti-hero of the era was never tied down to a woman, and reflected the playboy-like culture of the 1960s and 70s—which progressively allowed for single people to feel more comfortable in society. Indeed, marriage in the anti-hero westerns is definitely not the norm—and in fact, the singularity of the anti-hero in the western is celebrated as a return to masculine dominance. In his article “Masculinity as Spectacle,” cultural theorist Steve Neale discusses the “diverging images of masculinity [marriage, or not-marriage] commonly at play in the western,” and mentions that the anti-hero in 1960s and 70s westerns is a part of a narrative function that asserts that “the rejection of marriage personifies a nostalgic celebration of phallic, narcissistic omnipotence.”⁷⁸ In Leone’s *The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), the two anti-heroes of the film are celebrated for their ability to remain free of commitment, and continually assert their position as dominant, single men through their interaction with others. For example, in one scene Angel Eyes (Lee Van Clef) enters the familial settlement of a bandit-turned-farmer and enjoys a home-cooked meal while jeering at the man’s new family-oriented lifestyle. Angel Eyes has been hired for a kill, and the farmer tries everything to convince Angel Eyes that he should be allowed to stay alive—referring to his family, giving Angel Eyes the information he came for, and even paying him to leave. However, Angel Eyes is governed by his

word—a promise to “see the job through” and kills the farmer without warning (shooting him through the family dinner table, which is conveniently located at the hearth of the home). Angel Eyes then kills the man’s son and walks casually away from the home while the man’s widow faints in the kitchen. Because he has a wife and family, the farmer has something to live for, and his hesitation in thinking about his own death at the hand of a gunslinger only spurs the process. Angel Eyes and Blondie (Clint Eastwood) have chosen not to tie themselves down because the freedom and independence they have as single men enable them to exercise their dominance over others. Evidently, men who rejected marriage in the 1960s and 70s were in no sense rejecting a part of their masculinity (as 1940s and 50s culture wanted men to believe), but are, in actuality, reasserting their own dominance.

In Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch*, women in the film serve as nothing more than cooks and prostitutes—existing in the film merely to serve the wants and desires of the men who fill the anti-hero role. Alluding to the heterosexual nature of the anti-hero is a must in western films during this era simply to solidify the masculinity of the anti-hero in the contemporary mold of what society had deemed as “the norm” of masculinity. Sexual activity between the anti-hero and a woman, especially when the woman is a prostitute, situates the anti-hero as dominant—and the more women one has, the more dominant one is. For instance, in the *Wild Bunch*, the Mexican officer, General Mapache, surrounds himself with beautiful women who have left the poor villages of Mexico in order to be a sexual servant in his house. Outlaw brothers Lyle and Tector Gorch (Warren Oates and Ben Johnson) pass women between one another

and even argue over the price of a prostitute as a portrayal of their masculine dominance.

In another film, *High Plains Drifter*, the anti-hero, a surprisingly no-named individual known to the townsfolk only as The Stranger (Clint Eastwood), rides casually into a small town for a rest. After exchanging an encouraging glance with an attractive woman, The Stranger forces himself upon her. This instance, interestingly, is witnessed by some individuals in the town who do nothing to intervene—suggesting that the masculine aura The Stranger exudes is too much for even an entire town to handle. The single man in the western is always free to do as he pleases whether individually, or as the leader of a group; and the man who is in charge of his destiny is supposedly a more happy man.⁷⁹

The unnatural confidence and omnipotent ability of the male characters in 1960s and 70s westerns reflect contemporary man's desire to be more in control of their own lives—or more comfortable with the masculine role they fill. In discussing representations of the “powerful ideal male ego” in film, Steve Neale cites the Leone trilogy as an example that “is marked by the extent to which the hero's powers are rendered almost godlike.”⁸⁰ In the Leone films Neale refers to, Joe never misses a shot, and seemingly has an extra bullet or two in his six-shooter revolver. In one instance in *A Fistful of Dollars* Joe faces a group of six men while in an attempt to free Marisol and kills them all with only 5 bullets. In another instance, Joe manages to kill six Rojos with a loaded .45 and then frees his innkeeper friend, who is tied up and dangling from a rope, with a mythic seventh shot. “That seventh bullet,” says Mitchell, “is a neat touch, inserting No Name [Joe] in to a line of mythic marksmen

like the famous Freischütz, whose pact with the devil guides his bullets magically to their target.”⁸¹ By creating a hero who is seemingly omnipotent, and whose narcissistic personality is rather enviable, Leone not only altered the role of the hero in the western film, but also keyed in to the issues that spurred 1960s and 70s men’s general discontent with their own masculinity.

Because second-wave feminism drastically revised contemporary concerns regarding gender in the 1960s, some men grew confused as to what their masculine role would entail. For men on the right who weren’t as willing to accept a needed change in gender roles, western film became an outlet for those concerns. The role of the anti-hero in the western became an explicit reflection of the reaction which the conservative, traditional man had against arguments for feminine equality. Western film as an outlet for male dissatisfaction, however, is a trait that would not be long lasting. Spaghetti westerns and the role of the anti-hero were rather short-lived. But with the very popular films like *The Wild Bunch* and *The Shootist* (1976) that depicted an end to the West, western films reflected yet another aspect of the struggle contemporary men dealt with when trying to define their masculinity—for if the West were finally conquered, where would men drown themselves in their fantasies of grandeur?

Chapter Four

Though the Western has bequeathed such enduring American totems as Marlboros and blue jeans, its decline effectively redefined the masculine screen image.

There were no new heroic cowboys after Eastwood.

When Dustin Hoffman made a Western he impersonated an Indian.

Robert Redford played a notorious outlaw;

Warren Beatty, a failed pimp.

The Seventies gave us an entire generation of movie stars
who have never donned Stetsons.⁸²

—J. Hoeman—

Of all the misconceptions which have come to attach themselves to the Western,
none is more saddening or wrong-headed
than the notion that women
are unimportant in it.⁸³

—Blake Lucas—

The Aging West, the Ultra-Feminine Hero, and America's Altered Man: Westerns in the 1980s and Beyond

As discussed in the previous chapter, second-wave feminism spurred a reaction in western films that affected the view that conservative, patriarchal men had concerning their own masculinity in relation to changing gender roles in the 1960s and 70s. However, American society during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s began to accept the feminist-influenced change imposed in their lives, and the western hero during these years was portrayed as a pathetic, aging man who mourned not only the autumn years of his own life, but who also mourned the inevitable death of the old West he had become a part of. American men in the 1980s had come to terms with the fact that change was inevitable and they began to cede some of the patriarchal

responsibility that had been established in the years immediately following World War II.

In this chapter, I note that westerns during the 1980s largely focus on how the old western hero comes to terms with the fact that the West had reached its inevitable end—simultaneously mourning the past role the conservative, patriarchal American man had established in the workplace, but who now was forced to yield some measure of responsibility to the opposite sex. I also make mention of what I call the feminist western films of the 1990s and discuss how they include highly capable women figures as the western hero by constructing heroines who step in to the boots once filled by the masculine American man—reflecting contemporary gender movements and arguing for the more prominent role of women in American society. In the concluding section of this chapter I will discuss how these two types of western films eventually merge into what have been the most popular and most successful westerns in recent years while arguing that recent films incorporate society’s changing norms and conclude that masculinity comes to mean something different even for what has traditionally been thought of as the most macho of all movie archetypes, the western hero.

The Conquered West and the End of a Genre?: Western Films in the 1980s

As noted by this chapter’s epigraph, reception of the western genre film during and after the 1970s was nowhere near what it once had been—indeed, most western films from the era were complete failures financially, and if there is one thing Hollywood producers remember it’s a financial failure.⁸⁴ The genre may have never received a fair start in the 1980s due to the failure of Michael Cimino’s bleak anti-

western *Heaven's Gate* (1980), a result of Hollywood studios giving too much freedom to writer/director's during the New American Cinema's formative years.⁸⁵ Because of the massive financial failure of *Heaven's Gate*, *Bronco Billy* (1980), *The Long Riders* (1980), and *Tom Horn* (1980), producers balked at the idea of shooting a western as these four prominent films "were widely regarded by the industry as tests of the genre's viability, and their fate was interpreted as evidence of an exhausted market."⁸⁶ The new role of the western hero had already been solidified by earlier films like *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and *The Shootist* (1976), and though they were financial flops, *Heaven's Gate* and *Tom Horn* both used the role of aging western heroes—a character that would permeate most of the few western films produced during the 1980s. By utilizing the character of the aging western hero and by using modern technology as a part of mise-en-scene to denote the conquering of the West by eastern expansion, filmmakers effectively portray the conquering of the West—and by extension, reflect the lingering hesitation contemporary men had in relinquishing their patriarchal roles.

Though *The Wild Bunch* was the first western to explore the depths of sorrow that came to the aging western hero as a result of the conquering of the West, perhaps the best transition into the new role of the aging western hero is a character portrayed by John Wayne in his final role before his death. In *The Shootist* (1976), John Bernard Books (Wayne) is an aging gunslinger who is afflicted with a terminal illness. Books returns to Carson City where his old friend Dr. Hostetler (James Stewart) gives him the bad news—that he has only weeks to live. The realization that an end is near is unsettling to Books, and worse than the pain he suffers as a result of colon cancer is

the realization that he may die in a bed rather than by the gun of another man. Being an old gunman of the West, Books lives by the mantra, “I won’t be wronged. I won’t be insulted. I won’t be laid a hand on. I don’t do these things to other people. I require the same from them,” and has difficulty surrendering the freedom he had fought to achieve to something as intangible to him as an illness. The fact that Books is dying of a terminal illness is also relevant—Books’ death is synonymous with the ending of the Wild West, and the Wild West, like Books, had recently received a death sentence due to the pervasive and enveloping influence of eastern technology. It simply wasn’t until the late 1970s that the end of the West actually came within sight for filmmakers and could be portrayed on screen.

As discussed in chapter three, a conservative reaction to second-wave feminism spurred two decades of violence and omnipotent, narcissistic control from the masculine anti-hero in western film, but by the 1980s conservative thought had somewhat waned. Women were gaining more equality in the workforce, and the western hero had become a symbol for contemporary men who morosely ceded their power to women. The aging process for the western hero and the impending end of the “Wild West” is indicative of the hesitant, conservative surrender of power to women. Men in the 1980s knew that change was inevitable, but they endeavored to hold on to the idea of patriarchal control for as long as they could. The representation of the old man as masculine hero suggests not only that the West had reached its end, but that masculinity (as it had existed in past western representations) has become somewhat impotent due to the growing feminist movement. Regularly casting old men as the western hero in films throughout the 1980s implies that even though the

hero is still distinctly masculine, he is in a degenerating state and somewhat less capable than he had previously been as a youth.

Along with *The Shootist*, films like *Heaven's Gate* (1980), *Tom Horn* (1980), *The Grey Fox* (1982), *Barbarosa* (1982), *Once Upon a Texas Train* (1988), and the TV miniseries *Lonesome Dove* (1989) employ the role of the aging western hero who is in search of one last score to validate his life and justify his impending death. In *Tom Horn*, the title character is an aging gunman who is framed for a murder by a Wyoming cattle rancher. Horn (Steve McQueen) is found guilty and is hung at the end of the film, and while the film relentlessly moves toward the ominous conclusion, it never gives any sense of respite or victory—as the hero dies. In *History of the American Cinema* (Vol. 10): *A New Pot of Gold*, Stephen Prince identifies these types of westerns as the “end of the West” pictures. In these films, the aging hero is granted a death they deem worthy of their status as a cowboy in a West that was unfortunately becoming ever-encompassed by influences that hadn't existed in the past. Much like the title character in *Tom Horn*, Books in *The Shootist* faces his death confidently and with a quiet understanding that if his death were inevitable, he could at least die in what he deems an honorable way. With their deaths, the aging western heroes in these two films both mourn the passing of a West they had known, and accept the change that progress inadvertently brings—just as the conservative American man reluctantly came to terms with the changing social gender roles of contemporary society.

Another aspect of 1980s films that seem to ever hasten the demise of the Wild West is the presence of new technology. The presence of early model cars, trolleys, trains, or any other kind of machine overtly hints that the western space occupied by

the characters in the film is soon to be modernized and left bereft of the quaint essentials that made the American West such a distinct place. Buscombe notes that even the seemingly inadvertent placement of “a motor car on the screen became kind of visual shorthand for the encroachment of modern civilization.”⁸⁷ *The Shootist*, for example, is permeated by technology, including the use of early model cars and a trolley that runs through the city, only as a reminder to the aging Books that his time in the West is drawing to a close. Likewise, in an attempt to appear civilized in *Tom Horn*, Wyoming cattle barons throw a dinner party at their large ranch house and serve lobster instead of steak, cars drive past cowboys on horseback, and men wear business suits and carry pocketbooks rather than a duster and a six-gun. If the role of technology has replaced the role of the hero, what purpose does the aging hero really fill in the western—other than to be mourned?

In *Heaven's Gate*, Michael Cimino pays strict attention to the theme of conquering the West and includes such detail and dedication to the theme (one aspect leading to the financial failure of the film⁸⁸) that in an opening scene of the film Cimino depicts a bustling Wyoming city busy with immigrants and vagrants crowding the streets, consumers swarming local stores for the latest wares from Paris, trains unloading cattle for sale (as opposed to arriving at the end of a long cattle drive), open ranges divided by barbed wire and train tracks, and once open skies and mountainscapes that are now blocked by four-story buildings and tangled with telegraph wires. The hero of the film, James Averill (Kris Kristofferson), is anything but a traditional western hero as he rides in a carriage, wears a suit, and graduated from Harvard Law School. Progress is a good thing for the West; without it territories

don't become states, and territories don't receive support from the federal government. But experiencing growing pains can be an uncomfortable process. Just as the aging western heroes in the abovementioned films react morosely to their impending death or to the realization that the West simply isn't what is used to be, contemporary men silently mourned the loss of their conservative patriarchal ideals as these ideals were sacrificed to the women who justly challenged them for equal rights.

Buscombe notes that technology like trains and railroads are often used explicitly in the western to denote the impending doom of the "Wild West," and are sometimes used as symbols that represent the ushering in of a new age.⁸⁹ In general, any use of new technology—especially if its location is actually in the American West (like a car driving past a man on horseback—leaving the cowboy and horse in the dust) is often intended to be more a statement supporting American progress than a derisive action against the western hero. As a result, the presence of technology in western films often suggests that the western hero's reign as protector in the West is a thing of the past. The societies depicted in these western films seem to become more dependent on technological advances rather than relying on the hero as they had in the past, and any allusion to technology inevitably has an emasculating effect on the hero as they are seen as unneeded and ineffective within society. It is no wonder that the heroes in these films are often older and less capable than they were in their younger years. As evidenced by later, more successful western films in the 1990s and beyond, the end of the West can be alluded to, but should never actually occur in a film. Indeed, celebrating the myth of the West in the western film is one of its main reasons for success.

The end of the West had been in sight for the western genre ever since its invention, but the 1980s seemed for many to be at least a momentary death for the genre.⁹⁰ During the 1980s only 20 westerns ever made it to the screen—this compared to 114 during the 1970s, 121 during the 1960s, 241 during the 1950s, and 278 during the decade of the 40s.⁹¹ Production of western films in the 1990s increased slightly to 38 that made it to the theatres; lending support, in part, to what Buscombe claimed was one reason for the western genre's decline in the 1970's—that western film began to notice the impact of social change. Western films in the 1990s were more representative of what contemporary society's perceived gender roles entailed.

Big Boots to fill: Women as Western Heroes

The western hero of the 1980s was a broken, yet capable man trying to escape an inevitable future, and his contemporary counterpart was not much different. American men in the 1980s questioned their masculine role as a more distinct push for gender equality became the norm in the United States.⁹² Due to the disparity between men's goals and women's changing commitment, divorce rates by 1980 suggested that almost “one marriage out of every two was dissolving in the United States.”⁹³ As a result, the American man of the 1980s had to find a masculine role in which he could establish himself. Eventually, though mainly because of divorce and single-parent families, the contemporary man did find a masculine role to fill—that of a father.

One film that pinpoints the dynamic that occurred in many men during the early eighties was not actually a western. *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) introduces a masculine role that by default became necessary for many men in the 1980s to fill due to shifting gender roles. Dustin Hoffman plays the role of a family man who is

obsessed with successfully working his way up the corporate ladder. His wife (Meryl Streep) is an independent woman who is fed up with family life and leaves her husband and young son—eventually filing for a divorce. Reflecting on the high divorce rate in the 1970s and 80s, *Kramer vs. Kramer* explores the possibility of a man becoming more of what contemporary society considered a “mother” to his children—while still retaining his masculinity.

In discussing the evolving gender roles of men in the 1980s, Peter Stearns argues that too much pressure from those who are “attracted to feminist issues,” can cause severe anxiety for men who “cannot readily identify” with the relative standards of “family life.”⁹⁴ On the other hand, Stearns also notes that many men thought that adopting certain “female traits” could make men “better people” both “physically and mentally.”⁹⁵ Add these debates to the varied reactions to a broader acceptance of homosexual behavior, and it is no wonder that no solitary definition of ideal masculinity during the 1980s could sway one type of man to side with the other entirely. However, shifting societal roles demanded that men make changes on their own—and *Kramer vs. Kramer* portrays one of these possibilities as Mr. Kramer learns to care for his son in a way that he never would have learned had he continued on in his quest for financial success through his profession. Women moving into the work force throughout the 1980s and 90s became more of a norm for society, and as a result men learned that their masculinity would indeed remain intact even while taking on more maternal responsibilities in the home. As women became a larger part of the corporate world—entering a realm that had previously be reserved for men—it became almost necessary that their role be reflected in the western genre.

In contrast, and in reaction to, the impotent western films of the 1980s, there is an emergence of westerns starting in the 1990s that include highly capable women figures as the hero of the West. Examples of these films include *Bad Girls* (1994), *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1994), *The Desperate Trail* (1994), *The Quick and the Dead* (1995), *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1996), *The Rowdy Girls* (1999), and *Banditas* (2006) all of which endeavor to blend male and female roles by employing the use of a distinctly independent woman as the lead or as a supporting character. These hyper-feminine heroes begin to fill the void left by the once-masculine hero in the western genre.

The aim of the feminist western films during the 1990s is less an effort to obscure the contemporary definition of masculinity and more an effort to reflect a general societal acceptance of feminist issues. As support for women's rights and women's equality became overtly apparent and was more accepted by contemporary society, women's renewed role as newly empowered individuals was reflected through the western film in characters who were more in charge, more capable of exercising their will, and better able to lead when called upon to do so. This is important to understand when discussing masculinity because familiarizing oneself with the social reflections of contemporary gender roles enables a better understanding of what society generally considers as "masculine" and "feminine." So the drastic change that the western genre underwent during the 1980s and 1990s is reflective of the cultural changes regarding society's evolving definitions of "masculinity" and "femininity." For instance, placing a woman in roughly the same role that Clint Eastwood played in *Fistful of Dollars* (as with Sharon Stone in *The Quick and the Dead*), challenges the

hyper-masculine role of the western hero and is the perfect move for reflecting the role of the newly empowered woman in the 1980s and 1990s. Because the western hero had been on a patriarchal pedestal for so many years, the dethroning of that image allows women to assert their newfound freedoms and suggests that if a woman could displace the western hero in a traditionally masculine genre, then perhaps the contemporary woman could do anything as well as a man.

Sam Raimi's film *The Quick and the Dead* has many similarities in common with Leone's *Fistful of Dollars*—making Raimi's film perhaps the most strikingly reflective of the feminine struggle to cement gender equality. Much like Joe, the unnamed hero in *Fistful of Dollars*, Ellen (Sharon Stone), or “The Lady” as she is referred to, is shrouded in mystery as she rides in to town. Like Joe, Ellen has to gain respect from local men by demonstrating her prowess with a gun. In the most striking parallel to *Fistful*, the closing sequence of the film has the seemingly unkillable Ellen pitted against the sole crime boss of the town in a traditional showdown wherein the unnamed Lady emerges victorious. In *Bad Girls*, a movie similar to the “gang” westerns where men fight together as a part of a gang for a common goal, four ex-prostitutes become fed-up with their role and decide to fight against society with each other and for each other. The common bond that exists between the men in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* is reflected in the relationships the four women of *Bad Girls* share as they fight, kill, and take revenge for each other.

In another, purportedly more realistic (as it is based on a true story) portrayal of feminine influence in the “Wild West,” director Maggie Greenwald tells the story of Josephine Monaghan—a woman who passed herself off as a man in 1880s

Wyoming in order to escape the stigma of bearing a child out of wedlock. *Little Jo*, as she is known by the other men in the town, manages to live out her life as a sheep rancher—able to function on her own, provide for herself, and even stand up to men for their often brash and violent behavior. The film, as it was the first of the feminist western films to be released, seems less an effort to place women in the West as equal to or better than men (like most of the other feminist western films do) and more an attempt at constructing a serious revisionist view of women's dismal place in the West. In an interview about the film, director Maggie Greenwald comments on the placement of a feminist western in a traditionally masculine genre:

A male reviewer wrote of *The Ballad of Little Jo*, 'The film made me want to go home and watch *Bonanza*.' And I thought: You want to go back to the Western where there's no woman around telling these three guys that they're not okay ... that's where you want to go back to? Well you can't. It's over.⁹⁶

Greenwald was right, by the early 1990s that type of western was over. As the genre had practically died during the eighties, *The Ballad of Little Jo* seemed to at least breathe life into the western genre at roughly the same time that *Unforgiven* (1992) and *Tombstone* (1993) seemed to do the same thing, only *Little Jo* seemed to spark more of an immediate reaction in the genre than the others—spurring more interest from contemporary directors in the feminist western whereas *Unforgiven* and *Tombstone* endeavor to re-construct a masculine ideal within the space of the West.

The New Western Hero

Though the western genre throughout the 1990s was generally fueled by the feminist western films in an effort to reflect an acceptance of feminist influence in society, the most financially successful, and best-received westerns produced in the

years spanning the early 1990s through today both revived the traditional, code-oriented male western hero of the past and inculcated within him an ability to embrace contemporary societal gender roles. The role of the western hero in recent western films suggests that the conservative idea of men finally “settling down” is actually a possibility—even the ideal. Western heroes in recent films are far more likely to profess not only the desire to leave their violent life behind them, but are actually able to do so—unlike their predecessors in earlier decades. This is achieved in recent western genre films by portraying the hero as independent in many respects, but also in depicting him as a hero who is submissive to his desire to become domesticated by women—an instance that is at once gently suggestive of feminine dominion, but also evocative of an end to a West that is more accurately reflective of how the West was actually won. In films like *Unforgiven*, *Tombstone*, and *Open Range*, men are portrayed as masculine paragons who are now able to broadly move within a definition of masculinity that includes settling down, creating a home, and starting a family—not to mention involving themselves in activities traditionally reserved for women in western films. Miraculously, this is all accomplished while still remaining true to the independent spirit of the western hero.

In Clint Eastwood’s *Unforgiven*, William Munny’s (Eastwood) wife had died unexpectedly of tuberculosis, and the film takes on a melancholic tone as Munny’s dark and empty interior space is directly paralleled to the forlorn domestic space of his crumbling home. The film opens on Munny, “a known thief and murderer, a man of notoriously vicious and intemperate disposition,” as he is silhouetted against the sunset, burying the only person he ever loved. Munny had forsaken his violent life

for love and had married, been domesticated, and had even fathered two children. When questioned about his past violent life, Munny reverently tells a stranger who approaches him about a rather lucrative killing opportunity that “My wife, she cured me of that. Cured me of drink and wickedness.” Munny and his loving wife had built a home together set against the Western landscape. However, the domestic life without a wife, Munny discovers, is a difficult one to live. Scenes that take place within Munny’s home are drowned in darkness and shadow, and the interior space is bare, empty, and cold—mainly because the home without the presence of a woman is not an inviting space. *Unforgiven* provides an interesting look at marriage and family because in Munny’s life, the domestic presence of the home seems ultimately uninviting.

For example, another portrayal of an uninviting domestic space within the narrative of *Unforgiven* is the house that the Sheriff (Munny’s eventual enemy) is building. The Sheriff, “Little” Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman), is trying to create his own domestic space; the Sheriff works on his home, proud of the fact that he has built it all himself. His friends, however, observe that Sheriff Daggett is no carpenter—nothing is square, the roof is not waterproof, and the front porch is set on a slant. In *The Western Reader*, gender film scholar Janet Thumim mentions that “the shortcomings of Sheriff Little Bill Daggett/Gene Hackman’s carpentry, noted and condoned by his deputies, are measured against his competence in being a man.”⁹⁷ Throughout the film, Daggett is constantly “observed, recorded, analyzed, and questioned” with regard to his masculinity.⁹⁸ Daggett is a man, but doesn’t have the domestic presence of a woman in his life, and his rather *slanted* take on domesticity

consequently limits his understanding of law and order as he continually makes choices that lead to his eventual death. Just before being shot by Munny, Daggett tries to validate his actions by arguing, “I don’t deserve this—to die like this. I was building a house!” As if the Sheriff’s crooked perspective of domesticity could be any different from Munny’s dark domestic world; so Munny pulls the trigger and spares the Sheriff from a lonely life of domesticity without a woman.

Alternatively, Munny’s best friend, Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), is perfectly happy living in his frontier home and represents the ideal domestic life in the West. In welcoming Munny to his property, Ned introduces Munny to his wife and invites him inside to “get out of the sun,” making it apparent that the Logan home is a safe-haven from the harsh conditions existing outside. Ned and Munny drink coffee in a kitchen bountiful with food and flooded with light from outside. Compared to the dark, dungeon-like Munny dwelling and the crooked, leaky-roofed Daggett house, the Logan household seems like an actual home—because with a woman present, that is exactly what it is. Ultimately, the film emphasizes the importance of living just such a family life—so important that Munny forsakes violence a second time in order to return to his family.

Another western film that made a distinct mark in its portrayal of domesticating the western hero is *Tombstone*, which further explores the narrative of Wyatt Earp, his brothers, Doc Holliday, and the gunfight at the O.K. Corral. A specific example from the film which sets the hero up for domestication is found in the relationship between Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp. *Tombstone* ends rather untraditionally as Doc Holliday lies in a hospital bed dying from tuberculosis while

Wyatt keeps a saintly vigil. Caring for the sick or wounded is typically a woman's job in the western, and to have a man portrayed as regularly filling that responsibility is a somewhat emasculating act. Pertinent to this example, however, is the conversation that takes place in the hospital between Wyatt and Doc as these friends discuss Wyatt's future. Doc feels that he is near death and wants for Wyatt live a happy life:

Doc: What do you want, Wyatt?

Wyatt: Just to live a normal life.

Doc: There is no normal life, there's just life, ya live it.

Wyatt: I don't know how.

Doc: Sure ya do, say goodbye to me, go grab that spirited actress and make her your own. Take that and don't look back. Live every second, live right on through the end. Live, Wyatt, live for me. Wyatt, if you were ever truly my friend, or if ya ever had just the slightest of feelin' for me, leave now, leave now, please.

Wyatt: Thanks for always being there Doc.

This conversation between two men in which one encourages the other to live a life of domesticity—to settle down and marry in order to have a truly happy life—seems out of the ordinary at first, especially in a western; but the beginning of the film practically demands the ending.

Tombstone begins when the Cowboys (bad guys) invade a wedding party just outside of town, and kill the Groom, his best men, and a large number of the guests (including the priest) before settling down to enjoy the wedding feast that had been prepared for the newly married couple. This scene effectively deconstructs domesticity, and the entire film works to reestablish domesticity as the ideal. In her discussion on the importance of domesticity in *Tombstone*, gender studies scholar Lee Ann Westman describes wedding scenes in westerns as the “ultimate symbol of domestic values.”⁹⁹ If those domestic values are destroyed by an outside influence,

unruly men in this instance, it seems only natural that the order would later be restored—as in the eventual union between Wyatt Earp and his “spirited actress.” Though sentimental manly conversation between two masculine heroes is highly out of the ordinary for the western genre, a similar conversation takes place in *Open Range* when Boss (Robert Duvall) convinces Charlie Waite (Kevin Costner) to say a proper goodbye to a woman Waite obviously loves and whom he may never see again. These intimate conversations between men in the westerns of today—as opposed to earlier westerns where men relied on their actions (or, more specifically, their guns) to speak for them—portray the hero in a more sentimental light, and suggests that the nature of the recent western hero character is reflective of today’s contemporary man who is supposed to be more capable and socially able to be comfortable in a society that constantly moves in reaction to gender relations.

In her discussion on the western genre, Jane Tompkins describes the plot of a typical film as including “physical struggles between the hero and a rival or rivals, [which] culminates in a fight to the death with guns.”¹⁰⁰ Though Kevin Costner’s film, *Open Range* includes this specific western element toward the end of the film, the instances leading up to the climactic event are anything but what Tompkins would describe as typical. Not only does the western hero in this film possess a strong desire to right the wrongs impinged on a small town by a local cattle baron, but he also hints at his desire to leave his violent life behind, marry, and settle in to a domestic life.

Charlie Waite (Costner) is the hero of the film who falls in love with Sue Barlowe (Annette Benning)—the dutiful sister of a small-town doctor. In one scene, Sue is about to cook some breakfast for Waite, Boss (Duvall), and Button, their

hospitalized friend. As Sue leaves the small adjacent hospital room to change for the day, Waite makes his way into the foyer of the home and realizes that he and his partner have tracked in and inadvertently spread large clumps of mud throughout the entryway. Rather than be the “typical” masculine cowboy hero that he ought to be and take a stroll outdoors while breakfast is conjured, Waite uncharacteristically bends down inside the small frontier home, places himself in a position of submission, and cleans the entire foyer area, picking up the clumps of mud piece by piece.

This scene holds substantial meaning by itself, but it is actually paralleled by an earlier scene shortly after the Waite’s first visit to Sue’s home. In this instance, Waite is startled awake by Sue and he jumps up against a decorative table upon which lies Sue’s grandmother’s antique china tea set. The set falls to the floor of the foyer and is shattered. Waite, utterly embarrassed by the awkward situation he has created, leaves the interior of the home immediately and finds solace in the rain outside. The camera then cuts back to Sue who is bent in submission, carefully picking up the shards of china from her foyer floor piece by piece. Waite’s desire for domestic relationship with Sue symbolically emerges when Waite displaces Sue from her kitchen and removes his gun—and his overt tie to masculinity—in order to cook breakfast for the inhabitants of the house. Charlie Waite, like most western heroes, seems like a rough man with a violent past, but is actually a sincere man who wants to settle down and raise a family. The role Sue fulfills for Waite in *Open Range*, and the role Josephine fills for Wyatt Earp in *Tombstone* is an attempt to civilize the rough western hero who embodies the characteristics of the Wild West itself. Women in these films are a reflection of actual women in the West who effectively domesticate

the wild, violent man of the West—a role that had actually been expected of women in the late 19th century in a growing American West.

A Practical Solution to the “Wild West”

Because the West was so important to a young, growing America, it became apparent that in order for America to actually realize its dreams of “Manifest Destiny” the wildness, or violent nature, of the West would have to be tamed in some way. The completion of a railroad reaching from one coast to the other was a vital step in the process of ushering a civil society to the West, but by its completion in 1869 the so-called Wild West was practically in full bloom, and in an effort to placate the unruly surroundings William H. Bright, a political representative from Wyoming, introduced a territorial bill which legislators quickly adopted and passed.¹⁰¹ This bill held within it the literal beginning of the women’s suffrage movement of the late 19th century as it “deemed women morally superior to men in terms of innate sensibility and openly hoped a feminine influence would help civilize the still unsettled territory.”¹⁰² Men needed a feminine influence in the West if that society was ever to be considered civilized. Film scholar John Belton, in *American Cinema / American Culture* comments on this specific role which women fill in the Western film:

The status of women in the Western remains somewhat conventional and secondary, even when they have learned the codes of the West. More often than not, women represent the forces of civilization; they embody the values of family, community, education, domestication, and cultivation that inform the male hero’s transformation of the wilderness into a garden. In short, women serve as the agents of easternization.” If a woman is “westernized” through her encounter with the landscape, then her presence also serves to “easternize” it.¹⁰³

Indeed, the Western hero's eventual and inevitable acceptance of civilization, law, or domestication has been read by some scholars as an allegory for the effective placating of the West.¹⁰⁴ Even as recently as the 1990s many feminists have argued that "their goals were designed to civilize men as well as to advance women."¹⁰⁵ As exemplified by William Munny in *Unforgiven*, Wyatt Earp in *Tombstone*, and Charlie Waite in *Open Range*, recent western heroes need to have the calming influence of a domestic partner in order to be truly fulfilled as heroes.

Chapter Five

As past Westerns continue to haunt us
with narratives of foregone cultural crises,
the possibility persists that writers and directors will once again
find in the image of a man
with a gun,
sitting astride a horse,
silhouetted against an empty landscape,
the figure capable of engaging us in the midst of anxieties yet unimagined.¹⁰⁶
—Lee Clarke Mitchell—

Conclusion

Recent western films suggest that marriage—or at very least, securing a domestic partner—is the answer to solidifying one’s masculinity and enabling the survival of contemporary society. This instance provides an interesting and nostalgic glimpse back to a post World War II society that defined heterosexual union as the norm for society.¹⁰⁷ Without straying from the idea that this is indeed a conclusion to my argument, in closing I want to mention a few of the most recent western films that also support my assertion both to suggest that western films from current society actually continue the course of supporting traditional American lifestyles, and to explore options for the western genre in the near future.

After *Open Range*, which was released in 2003, there have been a few prominent additions to the genre. For instance, Ron Howard’s *The Missing* was released in 2003, and in 2005 there were four mainstream western-themed films released, including Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain*, David Jacobsen’s *Down in the Valley*, Tommy Lee Jones’ *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, and John

Hillcoat's *The Proposition*. *Seraphim Falls* was released in 2006, and one western directed by Andrew Dominik, entitled *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* is scheduled for release in October of 2007. Many of these films are classified as westerns, but because some of the films include only western-themed elements, many supporters of the genre have a hard time classifying them as western-genre films.¹⁰⁸ For example, *Down in the Valley*, *The Three Burials...* and *Brokeback Mountain* have somewhat contemporary settings and deal with many contemporary issues as opposed to other westerns that are traditionally set within a precise historic timeframe (anywhere from 1860-1900).¹⁰⁹ For my purposes, however, I don't discount any of these films as I consider all of them to lend varying degrees of support to my argument, but for simplicity's sake I will only briefly touch on a few examples.

Ron Howard's *The Missing* is set in 1885 New Mexico and portrays the circumstances surrounding the kidnapping of a young girl from her frontier medicine woman mother. Maggie Gilkeson (Cate Blanchett) diffidently enlists the help of her estranged father, Samuel Jones (Tommy Lee Jones), in an effort to find her kidnapped daughter. In regards of my argument, the film is interesting in that the role of the hero is somewhat split between Samuel and Maggie (aging hero *and* female-as-hero), but is less an attempt at an "end of the West" picture or feminist western, and more an effort to portray the important connection a family should have to each other. In this sense the title of the film refers to the missing little girl, the missing relationship that a grandfather has not had with his granddaughter, and the missing familial link that has been lost between two people as a result of some past, unfortunate event. Though the film is not directly arguing for incorporating a distinct marital partnership to exist in

order for society to survive, it does indirectly comment on the difficulties of raising a family alone—and also reiterates the important partnership of strengthening family ties as all methods of finding the young girl fail until all parties finally decide to work together.

Two films released in 2005 are only included on some lists as western films because they include western-themed elements and are a difficult fit for my particular argument, but suggest another possible direction in which the western film could be headed. David Jacobsen's *Down in the Valley* and Tommy Lee Jones' *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* both have contemporary settings and deal with contemporary issues while trying to remain somewhat true to the western genre. Both are interesting, however, as they both deal with the fidelity that exists between two people—a partnership. In *Down in the Valley*, Harlan (Edward Norton) is a delusional man who thinks that he is a cowboy hero—even though he lives in the present-day San Fernando Valley. The story centers on the relationship he develops with a young girl and her family, but highlights the need for trust between parent and child. This familial fidelity proves to be stronger than the illusionary bond of love Harlan creates with the young Tobe (Evan Rachel Wood) and her brother, Lonnie (Rory Culkin), as their father, Wade (David Morse) endeavors to keep the family together at all costs. In Tommy Lee Jones' *Three Burials*, fidelity is taken to a new level when illegal alien Melquiades Estrada (Julio Cedillo) is accidentally shot and killed by boarder patrol agent Mike Norton (Barry Pepper) who hastily buries him in the desert. Devoted friend to Melquiades, Pete Perkins (Tommy Lee Jones), decides to make good on a promise to bury Melquiades in his hometown Mexican village and enlists Mike's help

by kidnapping him, forcing him to exhume the body, and forcing him to help Pete deliver the body to Melquiades' family in Mexico. As mentioned earlier, the film seems more concerned with contemporary foreign policies between the U.S. and Mexico, but highlights the poignant relationship that two men can share even after death.

After an initial viewing, one may consider *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Proposition*, and *Seraphim Falls* as directly working against my argument that men need a domesticating influence in order to reflect the notion that society in the West will thrive, but a closer look suggests that these films serve to support my assertion. For instance, *Seraphim Falls* tells the story of the paralyzing effects that revenge can inflict upon an individual as the perceived villain, Carver (Liam Neeson), relentlessly hunts down the seemingly innocent Gideon (Pierce Brosnan). Throughout the course of the film heroic definitions are turned on their heads as the viewer discovers that Gideon is responsible for the death of Carver's wife and kids. While the film highlights Carver's unremitting anger for what Gideon had done, and accentuates Gideon's clever deception and continuous escape from Carver, the narrative ultimately reiterates the important, calming influence a wife and family can have over a man. Carver's wife and kids were accidental casualties of the Civil War; but had they not been killed, Carver would have continued living in the paradisiacal southern farm as he would have never had any reason to begin his quest for revenge.

On a very similar note, *The Proposition* highlights the barren landscape that envelopes a man's life when he endeavors to exist without the influence of a woman (much like with Eastwood's Character in *Unforgiven*). Outlaw Charlie Burns (Guy

Pierce) sets out to kill his brutally murderous older brothers in an effort to save his younger brother from a public execution. As the narrative unfolds, the film mourns the loss and lack of familial loyalty and highlights the futility of achieving desired means through violent measures. A melancholic tone pervades the entire film as all of the brothers, except for Charlie, meet a violent end. The film ends with a small glimmer of hope for Charlie, suggesting that through the horrible loss he has suffered he will, in some way, be able to find hope in a new life—one in which he becomes an honest man.

Contrary to popular belief during the 1950s, homosexuality does not necessarily mark an individual as “less than a man” in today’s world. As demonstrated in Ang Lee’s *Brokeback Mountain*, the term “masculinity” can take on any number of new meanings and still ring true for many of today’s men. For instance, Ennis Del Mar’s (Heath Ledger) masculinity is no less intact while he cries over his lost love than when he single-handedly thrashes two Hell’s Angels in defending the honor of his wife and children. Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) is no less masculine as he pines for a love that is honest than when he takes his son for a ride on a tractor at his work. Ultimately, while the film engages contemporary questions regarding masculinity, it is less concerned with acutely defining masculine tendencies than it is with concluding that attaining a domestic partner is equal to obtaining happiness—the real tragedy in the film is that Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist were neither able to secure their ideal domestic partner nor able to acquire a fullness of joy as a result of that union.

While all of the above-mentioned films are generally preoccupied with a variety of contemporary social issues as well, defining contemporary masculinity remains a focal point of many western films. The breadwinning ethic in the 1940s and 50s cemented in society's mind an ideal representation of masculinity. That western films are a primary outlet for communicating contemporary masculine ideals to American society from that era to today is an amazing tribute to the genre's endurance as a whole—and, as implied in the above epigraph, the trend will likely continue on from here. Though the transition was a rough one for the western genre during the 1960s and 70s—arguably coming close to demise in the early 1980s—the influences of second-wave feminism forced masculine ideals to evolve into the form of masculinity that is in place within contemporary society today. This is not to say that society's definitions of masculinity are better today than any variety of definitions that precede it, nor that contemporary society's definitions of masculinity will significantly change solely because of a certain western film, but rather that contemporary society is simply following suit in reflecting the ideal for masculinity in the popular western films of our time. In one respect it may be too hasty to predict that the trend of defining masculinity through the western hero will continue into subsequent generations, but on the other hand, as Lee Clarke Mitchell claims, “certainly the dilemma of masculinity is no less urgent in a world far more urban, bureaucratic, and technological than ever imagined (or feared) a century ago.”¹¹⁰ As a part of a world growing continually more aware and suspicious of qualifying gender distinctions, the notion of individuality has become a rather hackneyed expression. As a result, it is no

wonder that contemporary society has an indelible attraction to the idea that the western film can still be a fantastic venue for constructing heroic identities.

Appendices

Notes

- ¹ Qtd in William Savage Jr. *The Cowboy Hero*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1979. Pg. 96.
- ² Buscombe, Edward.. Ed. *The BFI Companion to the Western*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1988. Pg 181.
- ³ Ibid. 181.
- ⁴ Ibid. 181.
- ⁵ Schatz, Thomas. "Postwar Genres, and Production Trends," in *History of the American Cinema*, ed. Charles Harpole, 353-396, Vol. 6. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1997. Pg 371.
- ⁶ Stearns, Peter N. *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1990. Pg 161.
- ⁷ Ehrenreich, Barbara. *The Hearts of Men*. New York: Anchor Press, 1983. Pg 11.
- ⁸ Overstreet, H.A. *The Mature Mind*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1950. (Qtd in Ehrenreich, pg 18).
- ⁹ Parsons, Talcott. "Age and Sex in the Social Structure of the United States," in Clyde Kluckhohn and Henry A. Murray (eds.), *Personality in Nature, Society and Culture*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, Inc., 1949, pg 273. (Qtd in Ehrenreich, pg 19-20).
- ¹⁰ Qtd. in Ehrenreich, pg 18.
- ¹¹ Qtd in Ehrenreich, pg 22.
- ¹² *The Hearts of Men*, pg 20.
- ¹³ Feb 3, 2007, Numbers USA. Retrieved, 18 April, 2007 from: <http://www.numbersusa.com/overpopulation/decadegraph.html>
- ¹⁴ *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*. Pg 161.
- ¹⁵ *The Hearts of Men*. Introduction.
- ¹⁶ Lev, Peter. "Genres and Production Trends, 1955-1959," in *History of the American Cinema*, ed. Charles Harpole, 217-246, Vol. 7. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003. Pg 232.
- ¹⁷ Mitchell, Lee Clark. *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1996. Pg 190.
- ¹⁸ *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*. Pg 164-65.
- ¹⁹ July 3 1997. Lakewood Lore, Jack Schaefer. Republished from the *Lakewood Sun Post*. Retrieved, 18 April, 2007 from: <http://www.lkwdpl.org/lore/lore147.htm>.
- ²⁰ 2007. Internet Movie Database. Retrieved 18 April, 2007 from: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046303/>.
- ²¹ Ibid. 210.
- ²² Violence in the western is a subject that is extensively published on. See Richard Maynard's *The American West on Film: Myth and Reality*. Especially chapter four. See also, John G Cawelti's *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Also see Will Wright's *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. Also see Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier*, and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*.

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- ²³ Cawelti, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green U Popular P, 1984. Pg 41
- ²⁴ Ibid. Pg 59.
- ²⁵ Ibid. Pg 63.
- ²⁶ *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Pg 203.
- ²⁷ Ibid. Pg 203.
- ²⁸ Qtd in *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Pg 202.
- ²⁹ Ibid. Pg 206.
- ³⁰ Ibid. Pg 202.
- ³¹ Ibid. Pg 218.
- ³² *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*. Pg 164-65
- ³³ Ibid. Pg 165.
- ³⁴ *The Hearts of Men*. Pg 44.
- ³⁵ Ibid. Pg 44 (emphasis added).
- ³⁶ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*. Pg 99.
- ³⁷ Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*. Pg 165. Stearns is here referring to Barbara Ehrenreich's work on masculinity, *The Hearts of Men*.
- ³⁸ Ibid. Pg 165.
- ³⁹ Ibid. Pg 230.
- ⁴⁰ Evans, Sara M. "The Rebirth of Feminism," in *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now*. Alexander Bloom (ed.). Oxford U P: New York, 2001. Pg. 194.
- ⁴¹ Ibid. Pg 190-91.
- ⁴² Ibid. Pg 191.
- ⁴³ Ibid. Pg 191.
- ⁴⁴ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*, Introduction. See also "The Rebirth of Feminism," Pg. 192.
- ⁴⁵ Evans, "The Rebirth of Feminism," in *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now*. Pg 193-94.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid. Pg 194.
- ⁴⁷ From the official report, quoted in "The Rebirth of Feminism," in *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now*. Page 194.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid. Pg 195.
- ⁴⁹ Quoted in Evans, "The Rebirth of Feminism," in *Long Time Gone: Sixties America Then and Now*. Pg 196.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid. Pg 201.
- ⁵¹ Buscombe, Edward.. Ed. *The BFI Companion to the Western*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1988. See the appendix and compare the financial charts in the sixties to earlier films. The information is also available on the internet movie database (imdb.com).
- ⁵² Buscombe, Edward. Ed. *The BFI Companion to the Western*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1988. Pg 243.
- ⁵³ Ibid. 243.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid. 243.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid. 243

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- ⁵⁶ Ibid. 243.
- ⁵⁷ Buscombe, *The BFI Companion*. See appendix and compare financial charts in the sixties—most films have a strong masculine presence.
- ⁵⁸ Buscombe, *The BFI Companion*. Appendix, see also Prince, Stephen. Vol 10, “A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow” in *History of the American Cinema*. Ed Charles Harpole. Charles Scribner’s Sons: New York, 2000. Pg 309.
- ⁵⁹ Frayling, Christopher. *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London: 1981. Pg 67.
- ⁶⁰ Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Pg 239.
- ⁶¹ Maynard, Richard A. *The American West on Film: Myth and Reality*. Hayden Book Company, Inc.: Rochelle Park, New Jersey, 1974. Pg 93.
- ⁶² Ibid. Pg 93.
- ⁶³ Violence in the western is a subject that is extensively published on. See Richard Maynard’s *The American West on Film: Myth and Reality*. Especially chapter four. See also, John G Cawelti’s *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Also see Will Wright’s *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. Also see Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier*, and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*.
- ⁶⁴ Qtd in Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*. Pg 48.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid. Pg 48
- ⁶⁶ Qtd in Ehrenreich. Pg 162.
- ⁶⁷ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*. Pg 162.
- ⁶⁸ Qtd in Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*. Pg 164
- ⁶⁹ Qtd in Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Pg 152
- ⁷⁰ Ibid. Pg 152.
- ⁷¹ Ibid. Pg 153.
- ⁷² Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*. Pg 174.
- ⁷³ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*. Pg 120.
- ⁷⁴ Stearns, *Be a Man! Males in Modern Society*. Pg 175.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid. Pg 175.
- ⁷⁶ Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men*. Pg 48-49.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid. See chapters four and nine.
- ⁷⁸ Neale, Steve, “Masculinity as Spectacle.” Included in *Screening the Male: Exploring masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. Cohan, Steven, and Ina Rae Hark ed. New York: Routledge, 1993. Pg 14.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid. Pg 48-49.
- ⁸⁰ Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle.” Pg 12.
- ⁸¹ Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Pg 227.
- ⁸² Hoerman, J. “How the Western was Lost” in *The Western Reader*. Kitses, Jim and Gregg Rickman, Ed. Limelight Editions, New York: 1998. Pg 91.
- ⁸³ Lucas, Blake. “Saloon Girls and Ranchers’ Daughters” in *The Western Reader*. Kitses, Jim and Gregg Rickman, Ed. Limelight Editions, New York: 1998. Pg 301.
- ⁸⁴ Prince, *History of the American Cinema*. Vol. 10. Pg 309.

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- ⁸⁵ Lewis, Jon. Class Lecture, "New American Cinema." August 2006.
- ⁸⁶ Prince, *History of the American Cinema*. Vol. 10. Pg 309.
- ⁸⁷ Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western*. Pg 81.
- ⁸⁸ Prince, *History of the American Cinema*. Vol. 10. See chapter one.
- ⁸⁹ Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western*. See the section on "Railroads."
- ⁹⁰ Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Pg 257.
- ⁹¹ Films and TV. <http://www.filmsandtv.com/genre..php?gs=2000Western>. Accessed 14 May 2007. Last updated May 2007.
- ⁹² Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Chapter 6.
- ⁹³ Stearns, *Be a Man!* Pg 201.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid. Pg 237.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid. Pg 238.
- ⁹⁶ Qtd. In: Modelski, Tania. "A Woman's Gotta Do...What a Man's Gotta Do?: Cross Dressing in the Western." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 1997. Vol 22, no. 3. Pg 519.
- ⁹⁷ Thumim, Janet. "Maybe He's Tough, But He Sure ain't no Carpenter": Masculinity and In/competence in *Unforgiven*" in *The Western Reader*. Kitses, Jim and Gregg Rickman, Ed. Limelight Editions, New York: 1998. Pg 341.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid. Pg 341.
- ⁹⁹ Westman, "Domesticity on the Range." *Interdisciplinary Humanities*, Oct 2003, Vol 20 issue 2, Pg 77.
- ¹⁰⁰ Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 24. Esp. see the chapter on "Death."
- ¹⁰¹ For more on the myth of the Wild West see Richard Slotkin's *The Fatal Environment*, part VII, and *Gunfighter Nation*, especially part II.
- ¹⁰² Quoted in Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man*, Pg 116.
- ¹⁰³ Qtd. in Westman, "Domesticity..." Pg 73-79.
- ¹⁰⁴ See Jon Tuska, *American West in Film*. Here Tuska actually reacts against reading the Western as allegory, but does identify this common reading. Pg 28-29 and 35-38. See also Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western*, especially sections on women, railroad, guns, and violence.
- ¹⁰⁵ Stearns, *Be a Man!: Males in Modern Society*, Pg 170.
- ¹⁰⁶ Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Pg 264.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ehrenreich. *The Hearts of Men*. See the introduction and chapter 1.
- ¹⁰⁸ Films and TV. <http://www.filmsandtv.com/genre..php?gs=2000Western>. Accessed 4 June 2007. Last updated June 2007. Or see the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) which cross-categorize many of these films as a result of their versatility.
- ¹⁰⁹ Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. See the introduction or sections on technology including: Guns, Railroad, cars, etc.
- ¹¹⁰ Mitchell. *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and in Film*. Pg 264.

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