The Virginian Short Guide

The Virginian by Owen Wister

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Contents

Characters

The characters in The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains can generally be classified as either Eastern or Western, with a tendency on Wister's part to combine the contradictory values of each region in an occasional character.

When a synthesis occurs, the resultant character is uniquely multifaceted, with a personality of legendary proportions, as is the case with the Virginian.

As Richard Etulain points out in his critical biography of Wister, he was "the first notable writer to utilize the cowboy as a literary hero. The cowboy had appeared in a few dime novels but nearly always as a minor figure and frequently in an ungallant role." Unlike these unsavory literary predecessors, the Virginian is a homogeneous mixture of Eastern chivalry and Western bravado. A rare combination of aristocratic gentility and adventurous independence, he was the prototype for the much imitated Western hero, "the strong, but silent type."

From the beginning of the novel onward, he remains true to the narrator's first impression of him as "a man who knows his business," because he is uniquely skillful and outperforms the common cowpoke at nearly every task.

But the virtues which cause the Virginian to remain a breed apart from his peers are his innate qualities of confidence and modest reserve. He never brags about his conquests and detests any words of "direct praise" from others. Further, as John K. Milton points out, "when the Virginian changes from a soft-talking, gentle man into a brutal avenger, it is only because justice demands it." As illustrated in the final shoot-out scene, he faithfully doles out law and order, but never impulsively or indiscriminately. The enemy is indeed slain, but only after the Virginian has wrestled with his conscience and sincerely tried to avoid the final showdown. Literary critic James K. Folsom describes this important quality the Virginian passed on to future Western heroes as follows: "an insight whose success depends upon [his] ability to see more deeply into the meaning of circumstances than [his] opponents."

Wister clearly demonstrates that Trampas is the villain because he lacks this aforementioned heroic quality and performs heinous acts devoid of moral conscience. Trampas is introduced in the novel as a swaggering braggart who displays "in his countenance the same ugliness that his words conveyed." Trampas later murders his companion Steve in a callous and cowardly manner in order to gain sole possession of their previously shared horse. He shoots the luckless youth "from behind" and leaves him rotting on the open trail. It is important to note that Trampas, by all the laws of rational probability, should have won the famous gunfight at the end of the story because he undoubtedly drew his weapon first. But as Cobbs explains, Trampas lost the competition because Wister wished to satisfy his readers' innate sense of justice, and in doing so, he established a characteristic of the archetypal villain whose "incompetence is equated with immorality."

Similar to the Virginian, Molly also represents a synthesis of East and West, but the cultural blending process is an integral part of the story. At the beginning of the novel, Molly is portrayed as a snobbish Eastern schoolmarm who traveled westward in order to escape marrying an aggressive gentleman suitor. Upon settling in Wyoming, she is wooed by the Virginian and initially rejects him due to his wild and unpolished manner. Nevertheless, he continues to pursue her, and eventually she accepts her "cow-boy lover," who is civilized by her patient "schooling." At the same time, Molly learns from her eager and loving pupil a new respect for the rugged values of the West. Her marriage to the Virginian at the end of the story symbolizes the possibility of a symbiotic relationship between East and West through a harmonious blending of cultural values.

Social Concerns

A social dilemma that haunted early twentieth-century America was a growing tension between East and West.

This conflict was rooted in the cultural mores each region embraced. Eastern America was closely aligned with traditional European values of civil order, social restraint, and genteel intellectualism. Western America rejected these values and created a cultural matrix based upon rugged individualism, social freedom, and common sense skills.

The Virginian reflects the regional tension of this turn-of-the-century era through its characters. Wister stereotypes them as either Eastern or Western in personality and often places them in opposition to one another. At each confrontation, however, it is important to note that neither side wins and an agreeable compromise is generally reached between them. Like his contemporaries, Wister was unwilling to see one set of values survive to the exclusion of the other. Thus, The Virginian suggests a resolution to the conflict through a joining of Eastern with Western qualities.

Techniques

Wister's unique combination of characters and plot in The Virginian helped to establish the literary convention of the "formula Western," the components of which, according to Etulain, can be summarized as follows: "an idealized hero, the conflict between the hero and a villain, and the romance between the hero and the heroine — all set against the romantic background of the frontier West."

Over the years, many writers such as Zane Grey, Max Brand, and B. M. Bower have produced works which closely follow this formula, and these popular imitations have since contributed to what has become widely recognized as Western fiction. Because Wister's The Virginian was the first novel to combine these dramatic elements, it remains the touchstone of this still vigorous literary genre.

Themes

In response to advance criticism which charged that the novel was "episodic and fragmentary," Wister was prompted to change The Virginian's subtitle from A Tale of Sundry Adventures to A Horseman of the Plains. Perhaps this reflected an attempt on Wister's part to focus the reader's attention on the unifying theme of the novel, which appears to be the development of the character of the "horseman," the Virginian himself. According to Wister, he dramatically uses the Virginian "to picture an era and personify a type."

Wister's unnamed Virginian embod ies the spirit of Wyoming between 1874 and 1890, a turbulent era of transition from raw wilderness to elementary civilization. The Virginian symbolizes the West's initial resistance to the taming forces of the East and its inevitable surrender.

At the beginning of the novel, Wister portrays the Virginian as the epitome of freedom and rugged individualism.

A self-reliant bachelor, skilled at his frontier craft of roping calves and riding horses, he is endowed with a mysterious moral vision which allows him to recognize and defeat his enemies. Gradually, he is drawn to the Eastern values held by Molly Stark, who "tames" him with marriage and family responsibilities. By the end of the novel, he trades his freedom for an agreeable alliance with civilization by changing from a wild frontiersman to a genteel rancher. Thus, like Wyoming, he slowly accepts post-frontier society, with its inherent dependence on industrialism and the railroad.

According to Cobbs in his book on Wister, critics often fail to recognize a less apparent theme in The Virginian, the gradual maturation of the nameless narrator. In the beginning, the narrator is a bumbling tenderfoot, intrigued by the strangeness and strength of Western life. Under the Virginian's tutelage, he slowly overcomes his youthful vulnerability and successfully accepts nature's challenges on the open trails of Wyoming. By the end of the novel, the narrator is a mature and confident horseman who rides alone through the "unmapped spaces." When viewed on this level, The Virginian is a bildungsroman, a novel which concerns a young man's education and passage into adulthood.

Adaptations

The Virginian appeared at a time when much current literature was being revised for the stage and collectively contributing to the heyday of melodrama. Celebrated plays such as Rip Van Winkle and The Count of Monte Cristo were dramatized adaptations of popular literature.

Influenced by this era's fascination with melodrama, Wister seriously attempted to write a stage version of his novel but was hampered by his lack of expertise. After two years of producing unacceptable manuscripts, he asked his friend, Kirk LaShelle, who had completed other adaptations, to write a stage version of The Virginian. In 1904 this LaShelle-Wister collaboration appeared on Broadway with Dustin Farnum as the Virginian and continued for about four months. Criticism was mostly favorable, as indicated by these comments from the New York Times: "The accuracy of detail, and the consequent wealth of true atmosphere is the chief value of the play. In a large degree, Mr. Wister has brought the true West of twenty years ago to the stage."

Following this New York opening, the play went on the road for ten years and appeared sporadically until as late as 1928.

The Virginian was featured as a silent movie in 1914 with Dustin Farnum and later produced by Paramount as a motion picture in 1930 with Gary Cooper and in 1945 with Joel McCrea. A writer for Western Films comments that the 1930 version had "rich and excellent characterizations" and contained a final scene with a "walk-down shoot-out that climaxes the movie." He concludes by labeling The Virginian "the ultimate Western." On the other hand, the 1946 version was panned by the same writer as "a lethargic remake" which features a "watered down" plot and "muted humor with simplified characters." Consequently, it was rated a "reduced routine oater."

In 1964 The Virginian experienced a resurgence of popularity when it appeared as a 90-minute television series, starring James Drury as the Virginian and Doug McClure as Trampas. The series followed Wister's original formula Western technique. It was broadcast by NBC until 1969.

Literary Precedents

When writing The Virginian, Wister was a literary pioneer who sincerely wished to preserve authentic Western experience. As he explains, "This life I am trying to write about [does not] seem to me to have been treated in fiction so far — seriously at least. The cattle era in Wyoming is nearly over, and in the main unchronicled. . . ."

Unless one recognizes the dime novel, which clumsily portrayed the West as an area of lawlessness and danger, as Wister's source of inspiration, The Virginian has no legitimate prototype.

If viewed strictly as a regional novel, The Virginian could be considered a successor to the frontier novels of Bret Harte, Joaquin Miller, Ambrose Bierce, and Mark Twain. Collectively, these authors introduced the reading public to the American frontier, that area beyond the Mississippi River and the Middle Border. Other than these somewhat superficial connections with the regional novel and the dime novel, Wister's book lacks a literary predecessor.

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