The Cultural Myth of the Cowboy, or, How the West Was Won

Jennifer Moskowitz
University of South Dakota
From the literary inception of what would eventually become the cowboy, his portrayal was not natural. Rather, it was as carefully constructed as Frederick Jackson Turner's social evolutionary settlement theory, set forth in his 1894 essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." So how did America come to the belief that the cowboy was uniquely American, and why was the belief necessary? The connection between the English knight of the Middle Ages and the American cowboy of the late nineteenth century provides answers to these questions, for the connection demonstrates the ideology underlying the mythologization of both icons. The archetypes were essential ideological and hegemonic elements in England's and America's paradigmatic cultural shifts as the countries moved toward nationalism, industrialism, and capitalism.

In his essay, Turner makes two significant rhetorical moves that contribute to the creation of Ernest Gellner's nationalist sentiment. First, he details the settlement pattern of the region in the West that he specifies as the frontier, immediately then declaring the frontier gone; and second, he asserts that the future of the country will be "decided in the West" (Turner 38). Turner writes of the "salt trail" as the natural evolutionary route of the settling of the American frontier. According to Jackson's theory, the animals followed the salt, the Native Americans followed the animals, the trappers followed the Native Americans, and so on until, decades later, the farmer arrived and the frontier was gone (24). Once the frontier is an historical relic, it can become a space for historical reconstruction through nostalgia for its existence. Thus, Turner's rhetorical moves open a space for the mythologization of the American West and one of its primary inhabitants: the American cowboy.

In the same way that Turner depicts westward movement as a natural social evolution, so have western writers portrayed the western hero very naturally as a man who sought "movement, isolation, change,…fresh beginnings," according to William Bevis' "Region, Power, Place" (29). Furthermore, in The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century, R.W.B. Lewis coined the term "American Adam" in reference to the cowboy and noted, "It is the birth of an archetypal, still finely individualized character, which [D.H.] Lawrence identifies as 'the essential American soul…an isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring man’” (104). Lewis claimed that the archetype – the American Adam – was "birth[ed] on American soil” and in the American imagination the late nineteenth/turn of the century cowboy came to be perceived as a uniquely American creation. Hence, the mythological construction of the cowboy, built on the foundation of the medieval English knight, was a crucial element in the creation of
nationalist sentiment in post-Civil War America.

A “nation” and all of its accompanying ideals does not occur either naturally or by accident. It is framed by design, according to Gellner in *Nations and Nationalisms* (125). Gellner contends that nationalist movements have specific requirements, such as “congruence” between the political/national system and social and cultural structures (125). He defines the conditions under which nationalist movements occur: “Nationalist sentiment is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the [nationalist] principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment. A nationalist movement is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind” (1). To put it in Raymond William’s terms, the knight and the cowboy are hegemonic cultural figures, meaning that they offer “adequate organization and interconnection of otherwise separated and even disparate meanings, values and practices,” and that they serve as “living resolutions – in the broadest sense, political resolutions – of specific economic realities” (7). The knight and the cowboy, as archetypes, evoke images of what the nation should be and appeal to disparate – and would-be warring – cultural factions and economic classes.

The nationalist movement in England, while certainly not completely evolved until much later, had already begun with the demise of the feudal system. Liah Greenfeld in *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* traces England’s progression from agrarian to pre-industrial society, which occurred between the late twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. F.L. Ganshoff writes that the societal infrastructure moved from the smaller cultures with self-governing qualities and specialized craftsmen in their respective fields; the country’s population became more mobile, with less identification to any one particular smaller culture (168). This mobility was essential to the “industrial, growth-oriented economy,” as was egalitarianism, according to Gellner (*Nations* 25). Carl Stephenson adds that a surge in commerce was part of the economic revolution between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries: the upswing included a population increase and developing towns with the “town-dwelling class” (bourgeoisie), both of which were instrumental in furthering a growing money economy (98, 104-05). Greenfeld summarizes the burgeoning sentiment:

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The social structure appeared for a time remarkably open. This was a period of self-made men, a spirit of adventure characterized the age, and ambition reigned supreme. No one seemed to be content with his own station in life, and everybody aspired to a higher status. (49)
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He argues that this period was the imperative precursor to the industrial society, and that
it was during this tumultuous period of disorganization that nationalism was born (86).

Gellner states that nationalism “imposes homogeneity,” in part to organize and structure culture; it therefore must be accompanied by hegemonic tools such as the iconic figure of the knight to symbolize and reinforce the dominant ideology (Nations 125, 140). Thus, out of the need for a specific representation of the desired shared culture the myth of the knight took root and flourished within the national imagination. The stories of the knights were essential to defining England as a nation. Painted as romantic purveyors of right, upholding chivalric ideals, and commencing on exciting, colorful quests, the knights appealed to all – aristocrat, merchant, and peasant alike. The timing of the overwhelming popularity of the knights’ tales strongly suggests that these tales, and more specifically, the knights depicted in them, provided England with a central icon around which to establish identity as a nation.

Historical documentation of English knights does not support the popular literary representation of the knight as a romantic, chivalrous figure. In actuality, knights, explained by Stephenson in Medieval Feudalism, were originally German warriors, valued only for “prowess,” or military ability, and even after transplantation to England by William the Conqueror in 1066, retained that fundamental valuation (2-5). The feudal system on the continent and in England, in reference to the role of the knight, was a complex political system that depended on the shared honor, protection, and supplies both given by the lord and expected from the vassal – i.e., the knight (Stephenson 20, 35; Ganshoff 86-94). The extent of their chivalry included only that the vassal (knight), accompanied by his ever-present and essential destrier (Stephenson 41-3) “support his lord on the battlefield and in other honorable ways” (22).

However, the knight’s portrayal underwent a change concurrent with the societal move toward industrialism and nationalism. In literature, he came to embody the desired attributes of the nation itself. Geoffrey of Monmouth’s The History of the Kings of Britain (c 1135), includes King Arthur and emphasizes the warrior-knight ideal. Geoffrey’s narrative already demonstrates a clear agenda – that of national pride, Christianity, and a strong judicial system. The author exalts the beauty and idealistic society of England, as in his account of Arthur’s plenary court (226-237), and although many of the earlier British kings described by Geoffrey are not Christian, his narrative builds toward the height of the country’s power under the Christian King Arthur, and hence, the glorification of the country as a Christian entity.
England’s self-conscious use of the knight continued with a depiction written by a French romance writer whose text was widely disseminated throughout England (in Matthews xx). Chrétien de Troyes’ *Arthurian Romances* more fully developed the idea of the knight and the knighting – chivalric – code, bringing it closer to the ideal. Indeed, after Chrétien, the knight moved into the courtly realm, as described by D.W. Robertson Jr. in *A Preface to Chaucer*. The knight was urged to be generous to all, particularly those who were noble and virtuous, but not to exclude the poor and needy. He was to practice humility, not criticize or be quarrelsome, avoid the wicked, indulge only in moderate laughter so as not to look foolish, have a command of the arts, keep company with those deserving, and have courage and perseverance in battle (415-17). By this time, any mention of warrior conduct was last on the list of chivalric virtues. Chrétien’s influence on Thomas Malory, author of *Le Morte D’Arthur*, is undeniable; in addition to his use of Geoffrey’s *The History of the Kings of Britain*, Malory used Chrétien’s four narrative tales, “Erec and Enide,” “Cliges,” “Yvain,” and “Perceval” heavily in his composition of *Le Morte*. (Matthews xvi-xvii).

Further romanticization of the knight continued over the next 350 years of societal turmoil in England, through such works as the Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian stories written sometime between 1215 and 1230, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in the last half of the fourteenth century, the *Stanzaic Morte Arthur* at the beginning of the fifteenth century, Malory’s Arthurian tales, first written in approximately 1470 and published as *Morte D’Arthur* in 1485 by Caxton, and others. Finally, some time between 1590 and 1596, Sir Edmund Spenser wrote *The Faerie Queene*. The work incorporated Queen Elizabeth I into the chivalric folklore, interesting because of the fact that the queen seems to have been extremely aware of the necessity of cultural homogeneity and encouraged the literary trend of using literature to shape the identity of the nation so long as it fit with her agenda. Of the stories of the knights, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* perhaps contains the most succinct description of expected chivalric qualities in its narrative of Sir Gawain’s adventure with Bercilak (the Green Knight) and his wife. The poem is a rich, detailed chivalric tale. Gawain exemplifies all of the elements of chivalry throughout, and, as J.J. Anderson explains, the poem itself is richly imbued with colorful descriptions of the “wider medieval ideal of chivalric life” (xix), specifically clothing, armor, castles, feasts, hunting, and the quest. Importantly, we gain a specific description of the knightly personality through a description of Gawain’s pentangle, which is the emblem on the shield Gawain takes on his quest. In an excerpt from the Borroff translation of the poem, the Gawain-poet
describes the pentangle:

For it is a figure formed of five points,
And each line is linked and locked with the next
For ever and ever, and hence it is called
In all England, as I hear, the endless knot.
And well may he wear it on his worthy arms,
For ever faithful five-fold in five-fold fashion
Was Gawain in good works, as gold unalloyed.
Devoid of all villany, with virtues adorned in sight.

On shield and coat in view
He bore that emblem bright,
As to his word most true
And in speech most courteous knight. (lines 630-39)

The fifth of the five fives followed by this knight
Were beneficence boundless and brotherly love
And pure mind and manners, that none might impeach,
And compassion most precious – these peerless five
Were forged and made fast in him, foremost in men. (lines 651-55)

From this description of Gawain himself and his pentangle the reader can infer the chivalric attributes explained by Robertson that are certainly not present in Stephenson’s description of the actual historical knight. It is also notable in the context of nationalist sentiment in England that the narrator makes certain to assure the reader that “all England” knows of the pentangle, which details the chivalric behavior.

In reference to Gawain’s chivalry, he is first described as “in speech most courteous,” and one may note that “courtesy” is an addition to the actual historic chivalric code, as well as the attributes of a “pure mind,” “manners,” and “compassion.” These are attributes of society, not a warrior class, and they imply certain codes of behavior toward those weaker in strength and women. In his Guide to English Literature, David Zesmer further explains this new aspect of knighthood:

Knighthood…was eventually glamorized into an elegant ideal called, after the French
*chevalier* (horseman, knight), “chivalry.” It was soon not enough for the true knight to be merely a capable horseman. He was expected...to exemplify courage, piety, generosity, and above all, “courtesy.” In theory, at least, chivalry was identified with virtue; and later, with increasing emphasis placed upon the protection of the weak, the chivalric ideal became as compelling in peace as in war. (91)

The texts that portray knights and knighthood demonstrate the knight’s burgeoning role as an archetype, one whose romanticized depictions served to mask violence, tumult, and extreme class stratification. The figure was shaped into a representation of qualities that were already priorities to certain cultural groups, creating a harmonizing hegemony. The narratives served an important function: the focus on chivalry and spirituality as national ideals brought together highly disparate groups, particularly since the knights themselves occupied a nebulous position in a clearly demarcated three estate social structure. In fact, part of what Chaucer addresses in the *Canterbury Tales* is the situation of the members of the “third estaat” who were actively seeking to carve a niche for themselves – a fourth estate. 1. He does this through an interesting and broadened use of the term and concept “nobility.” In the *Tales*, often those whom one might expect to have “nobility” do not. Conversely, those whom, because of social class one might not expect to have the quality, do. Chaucer, himself in a position that did not fit easily into the social strata, seems to have chosen as characters in the *Tales* those in similar, socially mobile positions, such as a merchant, a man of law, and a knight. Taken as a whole, all of the Arthurian narratives opened a niche of belonging for the knight and others like him. Furthermore, the adventures drew the members of the oppressed third estate, who participated in the courtly adventures of the knights and identified with the mythologized figures, thereby identifying with and participating in the country’s movement as well. Thus, the knight and his idealized qualities came to define ideal Englishness and to disseminate nationalist sentiment which in turn fueled English nationalism. Moreover, the figure began to open a new social class – a class much different from the landed (or at the opposite end, extremely poor), inherited, limited mobility classes that already existed. This opening and its emphasis on services and goods purchased – the beginning of capitalist economy – occurred at the moment of the country’s turn toward industrialism.

Similar to the tumultuous pre-industrial time period in English history, America after the Civil War was in a state of national upheaval and in desperate need of a unified image. The difference in America, however, was that instead of the move from agrarian to industrial occurring through time, the societies were concomitant and within the same geographical national boundaries. Post-Civil War America, with its desperate need for
reunification, contained both the angry national sentiment and the national pride that Gellner states are required for a national movement to occur. First of all, Reconstruction was brutal on the South. Humiliated by the loss of the war and occupied by Union troops and Northern opportunists, the economy in a shambles, and denied re-entry into national government until specific and punitive demands were met, the Southern states in the last third of the nineteenth century certainly qualified as angry and disenfranchised.

On the other side, fulfilling the pride and national satisfaction were the Northern states, whose economic and social structures had just been reinforced by the Union’s Civil War victory. Similar to England’s situation, included in those structures were such crucial elements as industry, mobility (both geographical and social), and education. Complicating this uneasy climate was the fact that the Southern agrarian society was the part of the country that most resembled America’s British roots, and by the late 1800s, Americans had no desire whatsoever to be identified with the British Empire. In the social structure, the decentralized states’ rights ideals, and the fief-like plantations, we can arguably trace the last vestiges of a resemblance to England’s feudal system. According to John Milton, author of The Novel of the American West, “America needed a heritage of its own, fully divorced from England” (34). Hence, the country needed a unifying, nationalist icon to move it beyond the ravages of the Civil War and the Englishness of Southern agrarian society into industrialism and capitalism.

How was such a sharply divided country to construct such a heritage? And, how did an American nationalist movement rise out of an existing English archetype, coming to be seen as uniquely “American”? Into the West rode the American cowboy, whose mythic figure and setting were equally significant and carefully shaped by authors, artists, and political figures. Indeed, ironically enough, if we look closely at Lawrence’s identification of the cowboy as “the essential American soul,” we find that the qualities ascribed to the cowboy are identical to those of the English knight. Thus, the two are related; in fact, the cowboy can be seen as the American incarnation of the knight. Similarities between the knight and the cowboy are undeniable and trace back to medieval influences on early western authors. For example, authors such as Owen Wister, Zane Grey, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark – leaders of the genre – had close ties to medieval literature that addressed the knights, their escapades, and the chivalric code. According to Darwin Payne’s biography, Wister, an accomplished pianist and composer, wrote compositions titled “Merlin and Vivien” and “Ivanhoe” (35), as well as an opera called Lady of the Lake (41). Furthermore, one of his short stories, “The Dragon of Wantley,” was compared to Mark
Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* by a reviewer from *Literary World* (Payne 131).

Furthermore, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, whose Master’s thesis was a study of Tristram, a knight from romance literature, was another classically trained musician. He was taught by his mother, whose teacher was professor and composer Edward MacDowell of Columbia University (Westbrook 24-25); among McDowell’s compositions were the “Roland Symphony” and “Lancelot and Elaine,” the lyrics of which were based on Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (“Edward Macdowell”). And Zane Gray, whose novels outsold all of the writers with whom he was an early twentieth century contemporary, such as Hemingway, Dreiser, and Fitzgerald, was also attracted to medieval mythology – the author himself wrote that among his favorite authors was Tennyson, notably the author of the Arthurian *Idylls of the King* (Ronald 5-8). These authors were clearly familiar with the literary medieval knights, and their knowledge and love of the folklore found its way into their depictions of the American cowboy, particularly since the cowboy would serve a similar purpose for America as the knight had served for England.

More than simply folklore comes through the literature, however. The knight as a representative figure of nationalism and capitalism carries over to the cowboy, for he occupies a position remarkably similar to the knight, and his movement from historical figure to literary and cultural figure is similar as well. Indeed, as with the medieval knight, the historical cowboy bears little resemblance to the literary one. Thomas Gasque explores the historical cowboy, finding that he was often Latino or black, and if Anglo was of a lower economic class (not simply a gentrified albeit poor, displaced Southerner, for example) (12-15). Milton, too, states that “Conveniently forgotten were the Mexican vaquero, the Argentinean gaucho, the Venezuelan llanero, and the Chilean buaso, also Americans in the broadest geographical sense of the term but considered cultural foreigners, if considered at all” (3). These groups were not part of the mythologization process, which was limited to the chivalric, Anglo cowboy who was, ironically, “American.” Moreover, again similar to the knight, the cowboy was a mercenary of sorts whose primary task was to protect the property (both animal and land) of the rancher for whom he worked. He was not by definition “chivalric,” did not have a “code” other than to protect what he was paid to protect (16-18), and believe it or not, did not necessarily play the harmonica by the fire on long, cold nights. A horse, though, was as essential to the cowboy as it was to the knight (18).
While the cowboy as representative of capitalism may seem problematic, since he is often seen as a romanticized, nostalgic figure of the Old West, a place that is generally considered agrarian, at the turn of the century and during the early twentieth century, the cowboy actually furthered American nationalism and the capitalist ideology that attended it in two important and interconnected ways. First, the cowboy supported nationalism through his existence in the neutral space of the West, which allowed him to create nationalist sentiment, fueling the nationalist movement that brought North and South together. The country needed a neutral setting in which to create new memories so that what Gellner and Ernest Renan call a “collective amnesia” (Gellner, *Culture 6*) could take over, thereby healing to some extent the divisions that existed in the country. Renan contends that “a shared amnesia, a collective forgetfulness” is required for a nation to form (qtd. in Gellner, *Culture 6*). America needed an icon that would draw attention away from contention between the two parts of the country. Part of that amnesia is the creation of new memories once order is restored – mythological memories that attend to the ideology of the power structure (7). Secondly, the cowboy furthered the beginnings of industrialism and capitalism through his connection with the English knight, from whom he drew much of his mythologization in both characterization and representation of the dominant ideology, capitalism. Similar to the knight, the cowboy managed paradoxically to remain seemingly aloof, solitary, and self-sufficient, while simultaneously domesticating both himself and the western landscape.

Those interested in the West as the location for Americanism, such as Frederick Jackson Turner, Owen Wister, Frederick Remington, and Theodore Roosevelt, were quick to capitalize on its possibilities. Roosevelt, for example, gave speeches such as “What Americanism Means,” delivered in 1893, and “Manhood and Statehood,” in 1901, the themes of which were “to lay the foundations of good citizenship as they must be laid” (“Manhood” 212-13). He proclaimed, “More and more as the years go by this Republic will find its guidance in the thought and action of the West, because the conditions of development in the West have steadily tended to accentuate the peculiarly American characteristics of its people” (208). Those “peculiarly American characteristics of place and people,” according to Roosevelt, were the “iron qualities that must go with true manhood” – the same qualities that Lewis later used in defining his “American Adam” – the “traits of daring and hardihood and iron endurance [that] are not merely indispensable traits for pioneers; they are also traits which must go to the make-up of every mighty and successful people.” The man of the West became for Roosevelt, and by extension the nation, the icon of the desired image of America.
Roosevelt was by no means the first to romanticize the “man of the West,” nor was this the first time the figure and his domain were used to deemphasize Englishness and to encourage American cultural independence. The cowboy figure arose out of long literary tradition of frontiersmen that informed his character. Richard Slotkin, in Regeneration through Violence, demonstrates the beginnings of the American myth by carefully tracing the early figure, focusing on the influences of John Filson’s creation of Daniel Boone in 1784 and, building on Filson, James Fenimore Cooper’s The Leatherstocking Tales (1823) (importance also noted in Milton 7-9, 84-87). Francis Parkman’s western travel writing, published as The Oregon Trail (1849) also contributed to the formation by deemphasizing British aristocratic heritage. In one of his journal entries Parkman describes beautiful pieces of furniture, “ancient claw-footed tables, well waxed and rubbed, or massive bureaus of carved oak” that he sees cast aside “because of the stern privations of the way” (72). Parkman surmises that they are heirlooms originally from England; thus the vignette evokes symbolic images of a British heritage that is not only unnecessary in the West, but in fact is an impediment and must be left behind in order to become truly western and therefore fully American. However, it is useful to note that the heirlooms are not only English, but also the possessions of the wealthy, titled, landed, inheritance-based class. Hence, it is just as much the repudiation of economic system as it is country, and both help to create a nationalist sentiment that can move away from English agrarianism toward American industrialism and capitalism.

Furthermore, early cowboy characters demonstrated the importance of the West as place. Wister’s novel The Virginian serves as a primary organizing figure of the myth, particularly in light of the book’s enormous popularity and Wister’s position in American culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Gasque asserts that “The Virginian because of its position in relation to other novels and the other forms of popular culture is the single most important influence on the popular image of the cowboy” (8). Letter exchanges among Wister, Roosevelt, and Remington demonstrate that Wister capitalized on his friendship and shared vision with Roosevelt’s ideology of the man of the West, and Remington’s conceptualization of the space of the West, offering the character of the Virginian to the mass reading audience. He compiled The Virginian in 1902 from the Atlantic Monthly cowboy tales and other short stories he had written, introducing his cowboy, the Virginian, who has taken his progressive nature and his traditional name to the West, building hegemony paradoxically by his name insofar as although it is clear that the character has cast off his Southernness, he retains the name
in order to bridge the cultural chasm between North and South in the only feasible location – the American West. The Virginian makes several comments about the fact that he has chosen to leave the South because there is nothing remaining for him. The “Virginian mountains could please no more” (64); and his family, still living in the South, cannot understand him as he is “broad gauge” while they are “narro’ gauge” (119). Referring to the West, the Virginian comments, “I could not live without it now,” he said. “This has got into my system” (63-4). And, although the Virginian and Molly travel to Vermont so that he may meet her family, they have no intention of staying and indeed, the Virginian looks out of place in a suit that he has had to purchase since he has nothing appropriate for the East.

Tetley, from Walter Van Tilburg Clark’s *The Ox-bow Incident* (1940), offers an example of another negation of the South, which was apparently necessary even almost a century beyond the Civil War, suggesting the need to continue the negation of the South and the affirmation of the West well into the twentieth century. The lynch mob in the novel, searching out a group of rustlers, has as its leader a man named Tetley, a Southerner. A former Confederate officer, Tetley is leader of the lynch mob – the antagonist of the text. He is placed in the villain’s position, and his Southern roots are negated in the same way that they are with the Virginian’s desertion of his home. The narrator’s description of him explains that Tetley wears his “Confederate field coat with the epaulets, collar braid and metal buttons removed, and a Confederate officer’s hat, but his gray trousers were tucked into an ordinary pair of cowboy’s shin boots” (124). Thus, he retains the geographical identification and reference to the divisive war without any suggestion of military honor. In addition, he wears a “flap holster, like a cowboy would never wear, which let show just the butt of a pearl-handled Colt. He didn’t have a stock saddle either, but a little, light McClellan. (124). Thus, his holster is worn incorrectly; his gun, with its pearl-handles showing, suggests negative aristocratic roots and is only for show. Also, his saddle is as inappropriate as his horse, which is compared to a “performing horse” (124). Even his home is a southern plantation (110-11). Clark’s text negates the Southern culture and places it in opposition to the desirable western culture, thereby eradicating it, particularly when Tetley’s son, Gerald, expected to carry on the culture, commits suicide at the end of the novel because of his feelings of hatred for his father and his inability to accept the lynching that his father has committed. Symbolically showing that the two cultures are not compatible and cannot coexist, Gerald is incapable of simply deserting his father as the Virginian deserts his home to assimilate into the western culture. Clearly the West as neutral space in which to create nationalist sentiment was essential to the nationalist movement in America at the turn of the century and after.
The cowboy similarly offered a character that could be, à la Renan and Gellner, filled with memories useful to the American cultural imagination. Fascinating it is that during the process of constructing the American icon, elements of the ideology behind the myth were obscured: the fact that the cowboy was a knight who had crossed the ocean and exchanged his sword and lance for a gun and the fact that, while a seemingly anti-capitalist figure, the cowboy represented capitalism. Given that Wister dedicated his enormously popular novel to Roosevelt, it should come as no surprise that Wister’s cowboys echo Roosevelt’s ideal man, a man expected to exude all of the strength of body and character that embodies the unique man of the American West. The narrator, a tenderfoot, makes this observation regarding the “cow-boys”:

Daring, laughter, endurance – these were what I saw upon the countenances of the cow-boys….Something about them, and the idea of them, smote my American heart, and I have never forgotten it, nor ever shall, as long as I live. In their flesh our natural passions ran tumultuous; but often in their spirit sat hidden a true nobility, and often beneath its unexpected shining their figures took a heroic stature. (28-29)

In addition to the “daring” and “endurance” that are part of “our” – meaning Americans’ – “natural passions,” the cowboys are noble and heroic. Wister takes great editorial pains in this passage to make certain that the reader realizes the Americanness of the cowboy by the way that the elusive quality “smote” the narrator’s American heart even as he utilizes the idea of “nobility” in a way that recalls Chaucer’s emphasis on an estate for those engaging in capitalist practices. The narrator, a man from the East who is certain to be proficient socially as well as economically since he has the means to travel, offers instead awed description of “true nobility” to the cowboys. Hence, not only does the narrator suggest to the reader that only an American will respond so strongly to the wonder of the cowboy, but also the cowboy inherently – in his spirit – embodies “true nobility,” meaning that he – and the capitalist ideal – should be held in the highest esteem. And the narrator’s first sight of the Virginian prompts this description:

Lounging there at ease against the wall was a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back; a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat, and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips….No dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength. (4)
The Virginian, always accompanied by his horse, Monte, to assist him in his work, is "a brave man" (27) clearly a strong leader, as evidenced repeatedly by activities in which he excels on the Judge’s ranch, such as his ability to lead the cattle drive (162), take over the foreman’s position (197), manage the other cowboys (234), and, ultimately, take part in the judgment of the rustlers, one of whom is a former friend (341).

These examples underscore both the Virginian’s connection to the medieval knight and his connection to capitalism. He is described in much the same way that Gawain and the Court are depicted at the beginning of SGGK: with youth, strength, and invincibility – all qualities of the ideal knight. Wister’s lexical choices of “splendor” and “nobility” are notable in that they are descriptive terms often used in reference to King Arthur’s court and the pageantry of chivalric festivals. Furthermore, the Virginian gains the respect of those around him and his position of foreman through his own industry – the Puritan work ethic. In fact, through his responsibilities as the foreman of the ranch, the Virginian proves himself to be part of the established network of government that is the ranch, even before he earns the position as the Judge’s partner. What is more, rather than the picture of the transient cowboy without a thought for the future, the Virginian banks his money and carefully surveys the area in order to purchase land that will be near water and the railroad. He is aware that the railroad will expand the community, to which he desires to contribute by marrying Molly, the teacher, and becoming a rooted member. The Virginian takes an active part in domesticating the cowboy and the West. All of these character attributes certainly point toward the country’s growing interest in wage earning through mass industry in opposition to solitary wandering, working just until one moves on. Indeed, that the Virginian is juxtaposed against a villain named “Trampas,” which evokes the wanderlust of a “tramp,” further underscores how domesticated the Virginian is. Moreover, the Virginian welcomes the banking industry, the railroad, the established cattle ranch – all components of the burgeoning American industrial capitalist system.

In the American cultural mythology, the cowboy stands firm as a “unique” representation of America – her people, her spaces, her cultural belief that America is a land of “the essential American soul…an isolate, almost selfless, stoic, enduring man” (Lawrence, qtd. in Lewis 104). While the phrase is problematic, the figure of the cowboy offers a myth that seems to substantiate the ideology behind it, which is certainly capitalist. In order to further capitalism as the dominant ideology, the country needed to cultivate an idealized self-image characterized by the individual, self-reliant, transient qualities of the western hero, no matter that upon further study the cowboy is not necessarily any of those things. The myth prevails and masks the violence of the West, class and racial unrest in
America, and capitalism’s control over American culture. William Bevis contends, “Capitalist democracy’ seems to many a natural yoking, and usually implies more, a ‘modern industrial capitalist democracy’ wed to ‘progress,’ as if economic liquidity were necessarily linked to political freedom, social mobility, and individualism” (25). Placing Bevis’ contention in the late nineteenth/turn of the century post-Civil War framework, then, undergirds the importance of the archetype of the western hero, an archetype which perseveres in contemporary American culture. America aspired to be unified, powerful, industrial, and capitalist, and Americans desired power and success. Therefore, if the western hero held the traits of individualism, self-reliance, and permanence, and if the future of the United States was to be finalized in the West, then Americans would revere the perceived capitalist tendencies of the western hero who managed to embody the desired image of nation for all Americans. Thus it is in the literature that the knight and the cowboy become romanticized archetypes furthering the dominant ideology through their hegemonic representations. And it is in western American literature that we paradoxically draw on and deny the medieval knight as we construct his mythsake, the uniquely American cowboy.

Notes

1. In brief, Jill Mann’s *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* sets forth the three medieval estates. The first estate was composed of the aristocracy, the second of the clergy, and the third of the peasant class. The position of women depended largely on the estate of the husband, as women were not, for the most part, assigned to an estate of their own volition. The possible exception to this is female members of the church, but even they were part of the second estate because of their attachment to male members of the clergy. To argue that *The Canturbury Tales* is a vehicle by which Chaucer commented on social change or the social climate is certainly not a new idea. It is, indeed, the premise of Paul Strohm’s *Social Chaucer*, Peggy Knapp’s *Chaucer and the Social Contest*, as well as articles about specific tales. In fact, Jill Mann argues in *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* that the *Tales* are written in a specific literary form – that of medieval estates satire – which allows Chaucer to comment on the stratification of societal estates through the pilgrims and their tale.

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2. Emphasis on the Puritan work ethic and Protestantism, both of which have been linked
to capitalism, is not accidental. Zane Grey, for example in *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) posited the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (in the novel they are referred to without fail as “Mormons”) and its individual members as the cruel, misogynistic antagonists.

3. Several later twentieth century dramas have worked toward demythologizing the West and the cowboy. Sam Shepard's play *True West*, for one, offers a stark and totally deromanticized vision of the West as geographical, economic, and mythic space. Also, Denis Hopper and Peter Fonda’s 1969 counter-cultural film, *Easy Rider*, also turns the paradigm of the cowboy on his mythic head.

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Works Cited


