

AMERICAN WEST: LANDSCAPE TO CHARACTER; ACTION AND METAPHYSICS

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ABSTRACT

The American West has always remained and continues to remain largely, a place of beginnings and no ends. The West is essentially a place of hope, a place of optimism, reflecting a hopeful vision of the future, in spite of the harshness, the brutalities, the destruction, the things which are a part of its history and its environment.

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INTRODUCTION

The very term “American West”, remained for quite some time a misconceived as well as the misinterpreted entity. The West, in American parlance, became synonymous with awesome expanses of cowboy territory, extreme climatic variations, deep canyons and above all, treasure hunts, gunfights and mindless violence. With the passage of time, as the literature of the West underwent a literary metamorphosis from the popular, the comic-strip type for the serious and elitist one, the West came to be recognized as the inspirational repository of a subtle, multidimensional and thought-provoking kind of writing. Amongst such writing, the West as myth, metaphor, and history has had a continuing influence on the American literary imagination. Writers, artists, and historians, have perceived its changing images from various perspectives. They have seen the images of the West in the physical landscape as well as in their mind, and according to Max Evans, “the behavior of people is closely related to the land and its climate”. This particular view gains credence when we see that in case of, for all those people who fled to the West, mostly in the nineteenth century, “nature with her sublime beauty and diabolic cruelty served as a psychiatrist’s couch, as it were, to heal their wounds, or else it offered an escape from the realities of society”. Thus, the west is not only a physical presence, but an attitude, a state of mind that represents a tension between an affinity to nature and a proximity to culture.

The West has been and continues to be a complex, role-playing matrix in American history, literature, and culture. As a place, a process, a direction, a form of society or a way of thinking, it has long been romanticized, idealized, observed and pictures of explorers, geographers, artists, writers, historians, philosophers, political theorists, and statesman of the Old and the New World. Around it, an intricate web of myths, legends, metaphors, folklore, history, and literature got woven right since the days of its exploration. Yet, the West continues to remain enigmatic with its dimensions, pervasiveness, and influence. No single interpretation has been able to cope with its multiplicity and its character has remained inexhaustible. Images of the West as either the Eden of the past or the paradise of the future, have continued to influence the immigrants to the New World. Reflectively beamed across a prismatic axis of cognition, the West becomes

the mirror of continental experience, and in the process has been viewed as, “the promised land, land of innocence, of rebirth, of freedom, of violence”. With its shifting geographical locations, vivid landscapes, unlimited bounties of nature and natural resources, the West has exercised a magnetic power and an enigmatic pressure on American life, literature, and character in ways that are multifarious, multidimensional and even puzzling.

Transcending the ordinary conceptualization in terms of a geographical location, the West becomes a process, a state of mind that remains vestigially American. In the words of Archibald Macleish, “the West is a country in the mind, and so eternal”. Macleish have given us a compelling definition, paradoxically making the West a real place as well, or a series of places, inhabited by real people. The West becomes a land without time, distant yet so close that it seems almost a part of the present. As early as the third century B.C, highly educated and urbane men wrote celebrations of simple, rustic life – almost life in a distant country and a remote time. Theocritus sat in Alexandria and wrote of Sicilian goatherds, and Virgil lived in Imperial Rome and wrote of shepherds in far-off Arcadia. Neither writer realistically described rural agricultural life; both were criticizing the vices, hypocrisies, and vanities of sophisticated society by the writing of men and women in an ideally innocent and pure environment. In identical fashion, the writer of western stories, describes a remote country resembling Arcadia, place simple truth and eternal facts, free of the complications and vices of civilization. Though the West may sometimes be arid and unfriendly, full of spiked cactus, inhabited by tarantulas and rattlesnakes, and as lonely as the serenades of its howling coyotes, still it presumably strips its hero of all that is inessential, false and corrupt. The cowboy becomes the central figure in American mythology, and more than the explorer, trapper, soldier, or homesteader, he represents, “America’s weltering experience to the popular mind”.

The Cowboy’s image as the archetypal individual of the West spans a wide spectrum of contemporary interest in films, novels, television, and music. Although this image bears little resemblance to the historical cowboy, it is important because it reflects many qualities – courage, honor, chivalry, individualism, traits with which Americans choose to identify their existential prerogatives. In fact, the American West is, “about the cowboy and his life of chasing cows on the range”. The Western cowboy hero “is an apostle of the most rugged individualism” confronting the vexatious problems of real life in the real region. Ostensibly the real American of the geographical west in his native land undergoes a mythical transcription only to emerge as the cowboy of Western literature and finally as the complex hero of the Western novel, who weaves around his Psyche a web of dreams, quests, and above all a psychological and metaphysical edifice. It is this edifice which serves as the launching pad for the Western fictional hero to embark upon an odyssey of individual reconstruction and self-affirmation.

From the earlier dime novelists to Owen Wister, from Zane Grey to Jack Schaefer, authors of Westerns have in spirit maintained that their narratives are essentially true – true of times and places that have only recently passed away or changed. The rich mixture of history and nostalgia in the works of these authors, together with a debt to centuries of literary tradition in pastoral, epic and romance, helps to account for the continuing popularity of the Western story. It is the Western novel only that talks about people all over the country. Southern writers speak for the South, Eastern Writers speak in the East, but “the West belongs to everybody and speaks for everybody”. It comes closer than the fiction of any other region to provide an index to America and the very texture of the American mind and imagination.

“Forty miles of water,

Forty miles to wood.

I’m leaving old Montana.

And I'm leaving her for good"

This verse has swirled like a devilish dusty whirlpool through the thoughts of many a rueful immigrant.

West is nature-oriented. The West came to be recognized geographically as a place of aridity as well as extreme climatic phases, and the novel of this region also came to imbibe certain qualities of the land in its very aesthetic, thematic and symbolic matrix. The Western novel has its literal beginnings in the Western landscape. The interior West aridity and openness are the major forces shaping writers and their work. It is a fabled land, and it is no wonder that nature, uncontaminated, seemed noble and brought out the nobility of man as well. Everything was so big that a man became concerned about his own brief life, sometimes treating it recklessly. With the passage of time, some of the landscape "has been laid waste, stripped, raped and scalped". Man's greed continues to attack the mountains and prairies for minerals, timber, grass, and water. A new madness, a new death, and perhaps a new God, seem intent on destroying the original beauty of the land. In spite of change and progress, the West is as much the same as it has always been and it is because of this that the Western novelist tries to amalgamate the past and present. The past only seems distinct, because much of it became legend and myth even as its events were taking place, but it has an immediate and pertinent reality as well, if only in the ghosts which haunt the imagination. The landscape is still distinguished by its variety and its size and in spite of increased irrigation, it continues to remain semiarid and consequently, somewhat harsh and even brutal. The West is all land. The Western novel, whatever its social implications and philosophical intentions, cannot escape from the land. The mythic quality of the west has become an enduring feature of American 20^m C life.

Thus, the history of the Western world is linked as the tradition of the American frontier, and it is no longer possible to say that the Western novel is divorced from the realities of the world –at – large. It is true, however, that this type of novel has little patience with the whims and fashions of metropolitan society, yet as a writer of the land, of primary passions, of conquest and search, this genre of fiction weaves a web of intoxication, amazement, and wonder in which the mind of the reader gets trapped in a labyrinthine context of transcendental musing and Adamic probes.

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