

**HEARTS OF THE WEST:
SOME ASPECTS OF WOMEN'S ROLES
IN AMERICAN WESTERNS
1939-1969**

BARBARA HEHNER

**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of**

Master of Fine Arts

**Graduate Programme in Film and Video
York University
North York, Ontario**

June 1991



UNIVERSITÉ
YORK
UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

I recommend that the thesis prepared

under my supervision by

Barbara Ann Hehner

entitled

Hearts of the West: Some Aspects of Women's

Roles in American Westerns, 1939 - 1969

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

June 1991

Evan Wm. Cameron

Supervisor

Recommendation concurred in by the following

Examining Committee

Chair
S. Feldman

E.W. Cameron

S. Pyke

B. Godard

M. Lester

June 1991

Abstract

Many critics have asserted that women have no importance in Western films; indeed, that Westerns could dispense with women with no damage to their plots. This thesis disputes these assertions. Women play essential roles in the plots of many Westerns. It is true that most Westerns portray women only in those areas of their lives where their concerns and actions impinge on an important male character, but within this realm, they may be sensitively portrayed as complex human beings who display courage and wisdom. Further, they tend to articulate a consistent moral viewpoint, very much in keeping with current studies of how women make moral decisions.

The thesis next examines more closely some of the “types” of women shown in Westerns, and finds that they portray some groups with more respect than others. Minority women — Hispanic women even more than Native Americans — have been poorly treated in many Westerns. However, it is not true that only chaste white women are considered suitable partners for a Western hero. Westerns of the 1939-1969 period tend to show considerable tolerance toward white women who have been prostitutes, *if* they have come West seeking a fresh start in life.

The thesis then turns to a comparison of women in the real West and women in Westerns. Historical westerning women carried out a broader range of activities than Westerns have shown, and further, they were usually enmeshed in a complex web of relationships and responsibilities. Westerns usually prefer to portray isolated women — often widows or motherless young women — who will become completely dependent on the Western hero.

The thesis concludes with a detailed consideration of three films — *Angel and the Badman*, *Westward the Women* and *True Grit* — which deserve more critical attention for their unusually detailed and sympathetic portraits of women.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to my supervisor, Prof. Evan William Cameron, for his encouragement and for many fruitful discussions of my thesis topic; and to my readers, Prof. Seth Feldman and Malcolm Lester, for their supportive, helpful comments. Kathryn Schiff-Kearn, Graduate Programme Assistant, provided guidance about numerous administrative details, as well as moral support during the final stages of writing.

I would also like to thank Madeline F. Matz, Reference Librarian, and other staff of the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division of the Library of Congress, who efficiently arranged for me to view numerous Western films during a four-day marathon session in Washington.

My friend and fellow student in the Graduate Film and Video Programme, Linda Gorman, encouraged me to persevere, and several insightful comments she made helped me to define my topic. Elizabeth d'Anjou translated several French journal articles on the subject of women in Westerns that proved to be essential reading.

Finally, I must thank my husband Rick for his generous support, both emotional and practical. If he had not given up some of his own research time, I would not have been able to complete this thesis.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: WHY WRITE ABOUT WOMEN IN WESTERNS?	1
Chapter 2: THE WOMEN WHO MAKE WESTERNS WORK	11
I. WESTERN PLOTS: HOW DO WOMEN FIT IN?	11
II. WHAT ARE THE MORAL CONCERNS OF WOMEN IN WESTERNS?	41
III. CLOSEUPS OF SOME WOMEN IN WESTERNS	51
IV. CONCLUSION	64
Chapter 3: WOMEN OF THE REAL WEST AND THE REEL WEST	66
I. LOOKING FOR AN EDEN IN THE WEST	67
II. THE EXPERIENCE OF GOING WEST	79
III. WOMEN AND INDIANS	85
IV. THE WOMEN THEY LEFT BEHIND	92
V. SOILED DOVES AND GLITTERING GODDESSES	99
VI. WOMEN AT WORK	105
VII. WIDOWED MOTHERS; ORPHANED DAUGHTERS	110
VIII. CONCLUSION	117
A READING OF <i>ANGEL AND THE BADMAN</i>	118
A READING OF <i>WESTWARD THE WOMEN</i>	125
A READING OF <i>TRUE GRIT</i>	132
BIBLIOGRAPHY	139
FILMOGRAPHY	146
NOTES	149

Chapter 1

WHY WRITE ABOUT WOMEN IN WESTERNS?

The woman stands on the wooden sidewalk in the cold light of early morning. She is motionless, but her set face and her whitened fingers clutching her knitted shawl betray her tension. She is waiting . . . waiting for shots to ring out; waiting to know her man's fate, and therefore her own.

The woman looks out from the walls of the fort, her hand shading her eyes from the harsh sun. The breeze whips her hair and snaps her long white apron. She smiles bravely as she listens to the receding notes of a cavalry bugle. She is waiting . . . waiting to see which riders will return — the cavalry regiment in which her man serves or a band of Indians who will overrun the helpless fort. She is waiting while her fate is decided, out of sight and out of her control.

These are familiar images of women in American Westerns. The woman is frightened but resigned. She has used all her powers of persuasion to keep her man from harm, but something stronger than his love for her — a personal code, a sense of duty, something he can't even articulate — compels him toward a violent confrontation with another man or group of men, even if it costs his own life. Although her life may be profoundly affected by the outcome, a woman has no active role to play in such a showdown.

Because of such familiar images of passivity and resignation — for instance, Lilly Dollar (Dorothy Malone) standing on the sidewalk in *Warlock* (Dmytryk, 1959) and Philadelphia Thursday and Mrs. O'Rourke (Shirley Temple and Irene Rich) looking out from the fort in *Fort Apache* (Ford, 1948) — many critics and scholars who have written about Westerns have concluded that women are of no import in these films.

“In Western movies, men have the deeper wisdom and women are children,” wrote Robert Warshow in an early and influential critical essay on the Western.¹ Frederick Woods went further, arguing that the Western could easily dispense with women altogether: “Time after time, one can detach the females without endangering the structure of the main plot. The West is a man's world, and the women are relegated to mere decoration and distraction.”²

French film scholars who wrote enthusiastically about American Westerns in the 1960s and early 1970s often concurred with these views. Jean-Louis Bory wrote: “What is the woman in the Western? An accessory. Less important than the six-gun or the lasso, which take part in the hero's actions.”³

When, in the 1970s, feminist critics began to examine the way women were portrayed in films, Westerns did not seem to them to repay closer study. In her classic study *From Reverence to Rape*, Mollie Haskell mentioned Westerns only briefly, dismissing them as “all-male genre films.”⁴ In the nearly twenty years since her book appeared, hundreds of books and articles have re-examined the classic American film genres from a feminist point of view. But the Western has been virtually ignored. Only

two papers specifically about women in Westerns, by Cheryl Foote and Jacqueline Levitan, appeared in academic journals in the 1980s.⁵ Westerns — or the earlier critical consensus which grew up around them, asserting that these films had no interest in women — have apparently intimidated or repelled film scholars with feminist interests.

The lack of motivation to look closer is not surprising. There are several reasons to expect, even before watching the films themselves, that Westerns will have little to offer women.

Westerns have almost always been written by men, been directed by men and starred men. Of course, men have tended to dominate most Hollywood film genres, not just Westerns. But the male bonding among Western filmmakers seems more intense. Several of the most admired Western directors, including John Ford, Anthony Mann and Budd Boetticher, specialized in Westerns over a period of years, often in close collaboration with a favoured writer and male star. Of John Ford's fourteen Westerns during the 1939-1964 period, six were scripted by Frank S. Nugent and nine starred John Wayne. (They also featured familiar, recurring faces from Ford's "stock company" of supporting actors.) Of Anthony Mann's eleven Westerns, five in a row (made between 1950 and 1955) starred James Stewart; three of these were scripted by Borden Chase. Between 1956 and 1960, Budd Boetticher directed seven Westerns starring Randolph Scott, four of them written by Burt Kennedy.

There is no comparable collaboration between a director and a female star, although both John Ford and Delmer Daves made more than one film with the same leading lady. For most directors, the situation was

as Mollie Haskell described it for Howard Hawks:

Men like . . . Wayne appeared over and over again, accumulating character lines, gaining resonance with familiarity, being allowed to grow old. But . . . his women stars appeared only once, carrying the implication that having once served, a woman had had her day and, like the aftermath of a love affair, was now “used.” ⁶

Women were generally excluded from the creative process behind the camera. They did not direct Westerns and they rarely wrote them. Leigh Brackett, one of the exceptions, wrote the screenplays for three Howard Hawks Westerns as well as some of his other films, but Hawks seems to have dealt with the anomaly by thinking of her as an honorary man. When asked by interviewers what contributions Brackett had made to the characterization of the relatively active and feisty “Hawksian woman,” Hawks replied, “Oh, very little. Leigh is a very fine writer, who writes much better about men than she does about women. A great deal of the stuff that's in there came from me. . . .She *wrote* like a man.” ⁷

With the exception of Barbara Stanwyck and, to a lesser extent, Maureen O'Hara, well-established female stars appeared only rarely in Westerns. In the 1950s and 1960s, aging male stars, even those such as Robert Taylor and James Stewart who had established their careers in other genres, found a haven in Westerns. In these films, their deepening facial lines gave them an appropriately weathered frontier look, while the leading women of these films were usually much younger actresses at the beginning of their careers. As Brian Garfield, himself a writer of Western novels and screenplays, put it:

Too many actresses were wasted in routine rancher's daughter roles throughout the eighty years of Western filmmaking. . . . The rate of attrition among actresses in Westerns was grim; the working life-span of a Western leading lady was traditionally only a fraction that of the hero, and male stars like Wayne, Fonda, McCrea, Scott and Stewart survived successive generations of female co-stars. ⁸

The imbalance of pairing very young actresses with relaxed veterans is both cause and effect. The leading lady roles were probably given to newcomers because they did not seem meaty enough to appeal to stars. And, in turn, the youth and professional inexperience of such actresses could have the effect of weakening the moral position their films called upon them to represent. Simply in visual terms, should someone who looks as authoritative as Gary Cooper/Will Kane be swayed by anything that a delicate and almost child-like Grace Kelly/Amy Kane says to him? Kelly herself was aware of the problem on the set of *High Noon*, the first film to give her a leading role. "When I look into [Gary Cooper's] face, I can see everything he is thinking," said the chagrined 22-year-old actress of the 51-year-old film veteran. "But when I look into my own face, I see absolutely nothing. I know what I'm thinking, but it just doesn't show." ⁹

In addition, however inexactly and at times anachronistically, Westerns do seem to portray a particular historical time and place: most commonly the trans-Mississippi West, roughly from the 1840s to the 1890s. This has been described by many historians as a period when white middle-class women — more than their pre-Industrial Revolution forebears and more than their twentieth-century descendants — had a very circumscribed place in the world. They had lost their role as manufacturers of essential

goods for their families. They were seen as doll-like ornaments of the home, gentle moral beacons to their children, but both intellectually and physically inferior to the men who controlled their lives. Wouldn't it be a matter of "historical accuracy," then, to decorate Westerns with shrinking, delicate women who could play no active role in the story?

These, then, are three discouragements for someone embarking on a study of women and Westerns: first, a weight of critical opinion that women count for little in Westerns; second, a Hollywood genre dominated, on-screen and off, by men's creative contributions; and third, Westerns' recreation of an historical period when women apparently had little scope for independent action.

Why, then, am I still attracted to the subject of women and Westerns? Of course it is appealing to explore a landscape untrammelled by earlier scholarly footprints. But there are other compelling reasons to look more closely at the subject of women and Westerns.

First, although it is a fact that Hollywood Westerns were made by men with relatively little creative input from women, apart from their appearance on the screen, this does not mean that there are no complex, sensitively portrayed women characters in Westerns. Harriett Hawkins wrote that the creative necessity of portraying characters as individuals, of giving them names, of making them seem *alive*, gives them a subversive power, whatever the creator's ideology:

Through their actual portrayals of individual women, differing works of art may, whether in intent or in effect, dramatically and/or emotionally serve to challenge, deconstruct and ultimately defy the ideological orthodoxies that they might at first glance seem designed

to uphold. Although this phenomenon has tended to go unnoticed by male critics, it has perhaps inevitably seemed of obvious importance and of special interest to women young and old, while watching films or reading novels inside or outside the classroom. 10

Using the specific example of critical writings about *The Bostonians*, Hawkins goes on to argue that male critics have, because of their own biases, proclaimed Basil Ransom's marriage to Verena to be a "triumph of normality and morality," while textual evidence can be presented which suggests Henry James was much more equivocal about the match.

A similar point could be made about much of the critical writings about Westerns. As Jon Tuska writes in *The American West in Film*, "Most of what has been written about the Western film has been written, at least in English, by men who cherish the fantasies embodied in these films and who, therefore, resent any effort at dispelling these fantasies." 11 Such critics are simply not interested enough to look closely at the women in Westerns, so that an extra overlay of critical indifference obscures them. For instance, they simply don't write about *Westward the Women*, *Angel and the Badman* and other Westerns which give large roles to women, and in which the woman's point of view prevails.

These problems of critical emphasis can occur even when no evaluation appears to be taking place. This was brought home to me most forcefully when I read Will Wright's summary of the plot of *Broken Arrow* in *Sixguns and Society*. 12 Wright tries to state, as simply as he can, what happens in the film. Yet only three sentences of the account deal with Tom Jeffords' Apache wife. When I saw the film, it seemed to me that the

tragic romance between Jeffords and Sonseeahray (Wright does not name her, although her name is heard over and over in the film) was central to the plot of the film. The interesting point here is that Wright seemed unaware that his description of “what happened” in *Broken Arrow*, was, more narrowly, his weighted description of what interested him (or fitted his system of classifying Westerns, which will be discussed further in Chapter 2).

Tuska's avowed aim was to root out politically incorrect attitudes in Westerns and expose them to his withering scorn: he was on a search and destroy mission. My aim is otherwise. I think of this thesis as a journey of exploration, from which I will bring back snapshots rather than trophies. What are the women in Westerns like when you take the time to look at them in all their variety? What do they say (is anybody listening?) and what actions do they take? I have found, for instance, that the moral concerns of women are presented in a surprisingly consistent way in Westerns, and that the viewpoint is very much in keeping with contemporary studies of how women make moral decisions. All of this is the subject of Chapter 2 of this thesis.

In recent years, historians have turned their attention to the specific experiences of American women during the years of westward expansion. Using letters, diaries and other first-person accounts these women left behind, the historians have found a very different West from the one that studies of male westering experiences have made familiar. An elaborate web of female life and concerns is revealed in these studies: the hazards of pregnancy and childbirth, the struggle to keep children healthy and safe on

the trail, the necessity of leaving mothers and sisters behind and forging new female support networks.

Although there have been numerous studies comparing the real West (primarily as men experienced it) with the myths presented in Western films, no one has yet looked at women of the West in the same way. Yet the contrast between real and movie women is fascinating; as just one example, it brings into sharp focus the peculiar isolation of most Western heroines, especially from their own sex. Why is it that they tend to be motherless daughters or widows with sons rather than daughters? This and other critical questions raised by comparing history with film are considered in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

To accompany the images of women in Westerns at the beginning of this chapter, here are two other, less familiar images from Westerns of the same period:

The woman, desperately driven to save the life of her husband, trapped in a mine cave-in, leads a rescue team of four men up a steep and winding mountain track. Suddenly her horse shies: just ahead of her, the mountainside has washed away, leaving a yawning chasm. Without hesitating, she guides her horse back a few feet to get a running start, and then makes the jump across the gap to safety. The men look at each other nervously: if she can do it, they can — they hope. One by one, they follow her lead.

Garden of Evil (Hathaway, 1954)

Inside a covered wagon which cannot afford the time to stop, a woman is about to give birth to her first child. Several women who have befriended her on the journey are helping her. Suddenly, one of the wagon wheels breaks and the wagon lurches sideways. Several women rush toward the wagon and brace it so that it is held level. Their strained breathing is in rhythm with the cries coming from inside the wagon, as if all the women were giving birth to this child together. They do not let go until the baby is safely delivered.

Westward the Women (Wellman, 1952)

Note A: *The BFI Companion to the Western*, published in 1988, estimated that some 7,000 Westerns had been made since *The Great Train Robbery* in 1903. To provide a manageable body of work for this thesis, I have limited my study to American-made Westerns of the period 1939-1969. I also eliminated serials and other “B” Westerns, and the “hybrids”: musical Westerns such as *Annie Get Your Gun*, “modern” Westerns such as *Hud* and comedy Westerns such as *Cat Ballou* and *My Little Chickadee*, although I included a number of Westerns with a strong comedic thread, such as *True Grit*. A complete list of the films I watched while preparing this thesis is provided in the Filmography.

Note B: Wherever possible, I have used the specific names of Native American groups in referring to them in this thesis, if the film in which they appear identifies them. In my own general critical or historical commentary, I have frequently used the term “Native American.” However, in the contexts of the film stories themselves, the limitations of whose point of view I am attempting to analyze, I have used “Indian,” the term the films use.

Note C: Footnotes are grouped at the end of the thesis.

Chapter 2

THE WOMEN WHO MAKE WESTERNS WORK

I. WESTERN PLOTS: HOW DO WOMEN FIT IN?

In fact, a woman is always added to the story, because without a woman the Western wouldn't work.

— “Entretien avec Anthony Mann”
(*Cahiers du Cinéma*, March 1957) ¹

What counts is what the woman [in a Western] provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.

— “Entretien avec Budd Boetticher”
(*Cahiers du Cinéma*, September 1963) ²

At first glance, these two directors of critically acclaimed Westerns of the 1950s seem to contradict each other. Mann seems to be emphasizing the importance of women in Western films, while Boetticher sounds dismissive. In fact, though, both directors are defining women characters as mere plot devices, someone “added to the story” to “make the hero act the way he does.”

What I have found, in the Westerns I have viewed, is a continuum in women's involvement in the action. At one end are what the French critic Alain Garel calls “absent/present”³ women, by which he means women who are merely invoked by the hero or who appear only briefly to set the plot in motion. In the mid-range are more or less stereotyped spunky ranchers' daughters, refined ladies from back east, and sultry dance hall girls who are, indeed, at least as important for the actions they provoke as for “who they are, in themselves.” Yet even within this group, because of a skillfully written script, or the director's sympathy for the character, or the strength of the actress playing the role, these women may be so interesting in their own right that the Westerns in which they appear become *about* them as well as being about men. At the other end of the continuum are a handful of Westerns in which women, the moral viewpoint they represent, the choices they must make and the actions they initiate, seem to dominate the film.

There are certainly many Westerns in which the hero is spurred to action by an “absent/present” woman. This is especially true of revenge Westerns, in which the hero goes on a bitter, violent search for his unseen or briefly seen wife's murderers (often rapists-murderers), as in *The Bravados* (King, 1958) and *Last Train from Gun Hill* (Sturges, 1958). Commanche Todd (Richard Widmark) is first seen on a homicidal rampage, killing three men before the opening credits are finished in *The Last Wagon* (Daves, 1956). It is only at the end of the film that we learn what provoked his rage: the murder of his sons and the rape/murder of his young Indian wife. Howie Kemp (James Stewart) becomes a vengeful,

mentally unstable bounty hunter after his (never-seen) sweetheart steals his land while he is away soldiering in the Civil War in *The Naked Spur* (Mann, 1952).

More rarely, mothers set the plot in motion. The four *Sons of Katie Elder* (Hathaway, 1965) are reunited by their mother's death. In *Jubal* (Daves, 1956), the title character's aimless, wandering life began when, as a terrified child, he fled the wicked mother who tried to drown him. "I've been running ever since, I guess" he later explains.

It is interesting that two of the most critically admired American Westerns, *Red River* (Hawks, 1948) and *The Searchers* (Ford, 1956) begin with women who fall into Garel's absent/present category. It is yet another mark of the skill with which these films were made that these briefly seen women are so moving, and that their wistful presence seems to hover over the rest of the films in which they appear. Both of the women haunt characters played by John Wayne, cast (by the two directors who used his talents best) as an angry, solitary man tormented by unspoken regrets.

Red River begins with a flashback to the days of Tom Dunson's youth, when he leaves a wagon train to claim some ranch land. He refuses to let his sweetheart, Fen (Colleen Gray), accompany him, although she clings to him, begging passionately to be taken along:

I know you have work to do, Tom, but I want to be part of it. I love you. I want to be with you. . . .I'm strong. I can stand anything you can.

It's too much for a woman.

Too much for a woman? Put your arms around me, Tom. . . .Do I feel weak now? I don't, do I? Oh, you'll need me. . . .You'll need what a woman can give you to do what you have to do. . . .Listen with your head and your heart, too. The sun only shines half the time, Tom. The other half is night.

I've made up my mind.

Perhaps the most painful aspect of this exchange is that Fen first offers herself as an equal companion, with the courage to share any adversity with Tom. When he rejects the possibility that a woman could be such a companion, Fen, in desperation, stresses her erotic attractions — and is still rejected. Soon after Tom abandons the wagon train, it is attacked by Indians and Fen is killed. Joan Mellen, in her study of Hollywood masculinity, *Big Bad Wolves*, writes caustically that the brief relationship with Fen “permits Wayne legitimately to remain without a woman for the remainder of the film without having to establish again, in some gratuitous encounter, his heterosexual credentials.”⁴ However, Hawks himself saw the rejection of Fen as both the key to Dunson's character and a vital plot element:

[Dunson] made a big mistake and lost the girl he was really in love with because of ambition and the great desire to have land of his own. Having made a mistake, it would make him all the more anxious to go through with his plans. Because a man who had made a great mistake to get somewhere is not going to stop at small things.⁵

The Indian kidnapping of Ethan Edwards' young niece, Debbie, is the motivation for the long, obsessive quest that gives *The Searchers* its name. Speculations about the absent Debbie's welfare continue through the long, bitter years that Ethan and Debbie's brother by adoption search for

her. In the late scenes of the film, Debbie (Natalie Wood), now a young woman, becomes a fleshed-out character in the story once more. But another woman, seen only at the beginning of the film, has an equally powerful effect on Ethan: Martha (Dorothy Jordan), his brother's wife.

Martha opens the door of a pioneer home at the very beginning of *The Searchers*, to welcome Ethan back from a long, unexplained absence. A number of small, wordless incidents, skillfully directed by Ford, make it plain that Ethan and Martha have long loved each other, without any possibility that their love can now be fulfilled. For example, a Texas Ranger comes upon Martha, lovingly stroking Ethan's coat, and turns his eyes away as if he has intruded upon something very private. Later, as Martha and her husband are getting ready for bed, Ethan steps out on the porch as if, J.A. Place observes,

he cannot bear the fact of their marriage, and then looks in through the door frame, to see them close their bedroom door behind them. The implication is that somehow their union makes him an outsider, not only from their house but from society itself. 6

Soon after Ethan has been reunited with his family, they are attacked by Indians in his absence. As he returns to the burning ruins of their home, it is Martha's name he calls out, not that of his brother or his nieces, and the offscreen horror of her mutilated body is reflected in Ethan's face, crazed with grief and outrage.

Many critics have written of the two models of masculinity held out by *Red River* and *The Searchers* — the implacable, aggressive father (in both cases played by John Wayne), and the “softer” surrogate son (Montgomery Clift/Matthew Garth and Jeffrey Hunter/Martin Pauley), who

is more willing to trust his emotions. The absent-present women define an important part of the difference between father and son, because while the fathers have only their memories for company, the sons are able to love and trust women and make plans to marry. Although these films show admiration for the physical courage and tenacity of Tom Dunson and Ethan Edwards, their behaviour is not endorsed as a model of manhood; instead, as Joan Mellen writes of Ethan's character in *The Searchers*, "the nature of frontier masculinity, repressed, celibate, and brutalized, is revealed."⁷

At the close of *Red River*, through the intervention of a woman (Joanne Dru/Tess Millay), father and son are reconciled, and hope is held out that, with his son's marriage, the father will indeed found the dynasty he has long dreamed of. At the end of *The Searchers*, much more uncompromisingly, Ethan can bring Debbie home, and can bring Martin back to his waiting bride, but cannot himself enter the doorway into family warmth and affection that Martha once held open for him.

So far, I have been looking at the influence upon Western plots of women who, although their presence may be felt throughout the film, are on screen very briefly. What are some of the ways that women function in Western plots when they are given a larger role? First, it is necessary to look at how these plots have been defined. It is a common complaint, from people who don't like them, that "if you've seen one Western, you've seen them all." However, even Western aficionados have tended to agree that there is a fairly narrow range of Western film plots, and several writers have tried to categorize them.

The most frequently cited “structural study” of the Western is Will Wright's in *Sixguns and Society* (1975). With some stretching, compressing and twisting, he managed to fit Westerns ⁸ into four main plots, which he also arranged (with some overlaps) chronologically: the classical plot, the vengeance variation, the transition theme, and the professional plot. He lists the “functions” of the classical plot as follows:

1. The hero enters a social group
2. The hero is unknown to the society
3. The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability
4. The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given a special status.
5. The society does not completely accept the hero.
6. There is a conflict of interests between the villains and the society.
7. The villains are stronger than the society; the society is weak.
8. There is a strong friendship or respect between the hero and a villain.
9. The villains threaten the society.
10. The hero avoids involvement in the conflict.
11. The villains endanger a friend of the hero.
12. The hero fights the villains.
13. The hero defeats the villains.
14. The society is safe.
15. The society accepts the hero.
16. The hero loses or gives up his special status. ⁹

In the “vengeance variation,” the hero again passes from being outside the society to receiving social acceptance and giving up his exceptional status. In revenge stories, however, the villains have harmed not only the society but the hero, and the hero, not altruistic as in the classical plot, is on a mission of vengeance. He must give up his revenge before he can be accepted into the society:

1. The hero is or was a member of society.
2. The villains do harm to the hero and to the society.
3. The society is unable to punish the villains.
4. The hero seeks vengeance.
5. The hero goes outside of society.
6. The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability
7. The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given special status.
8. A representative of society asks the hero to give up his revenge.
8. There is a strong friendship or respect between the hero and a villain.
9. The hero gives up his revenge.
10. The hero fights the villains.
11. The hero defeats the villains.
12. The hero gives up his special status.
13. The hero enters society. 10

Several critics have asserted that Wright's lists of functions are based upon a viewing of too few Westerns. Further, as Jon Tuska points out, "the actual plots of the films he selected to illustrate these basic plot points do not fit his categories at all without all manner of exceptions and unconventional interpretations."¹¹ Wright's functions seem particularly inadequate when the role of women in Westerns is under consideration. Although Wright doesn't mention women in his lists of functions, he is aware that Westerns have what he calls "heroines" and he alludes to them in his fuller descriptions of the plots of specific Westerns. However, with one notable exception (his discussion of Pearl in *Duel in the Sun*, which I will return to later in this chapter), he isn't very interested in the women, and this leads him to understate and simplify their role. In his list of functions, the heroines are not identified separately; they are lumped in with society, which leads to some serious distortions in his analyses.

For example, Wright places *Stagecoach* (Ford, 1939) in his “vengeance” category, because Ringo (John Wayne) seeks revenge on the Plummers for the murder of his father and brother.¹² In his analysis of the film, Wright runs into difficulty with function 8 of the vengeance variation, which states that “a representative of society asks the hero to give up his revenge.” Of course, in *Stagecoach*, it is Dallas (Claire Trevor), a prostitute, who asks Ringo to turn away from revenge. We have already seen Dallas being run out of society at the beginning of the film; she no longer has either the desire or the ability to be its representative. Wright, realizing he is on shaky ground, temporizes, “She [Dallas] is not exactly a member of society, but she is not outside society by choice, as is Ringo.”¹³

Furthermore, what Dallas says to Ringo is this: “Forget Lordsburg. Forget the Plummers. Make for the Border and I’ll come to you.” That is, she is not inviting Ringo to rejoin society, but daring him to leave it behind. (And she does in fact persuade him, but the threat of an Indian attack upon the stagecoach passengers keeps him from acting upon her advice.) At the end of *Stagecoach*, through the benevolent agency of Curly and Doc, who shared their hair-raising stagecoach ride, Dallas and Ringo finally head for the Border, spared, as Doc Boone ironically puts it, “the blessings of civilization.”

Many Western heroines, I would assert, dwell metaphorically “on the Border” between civilization and the wilderness. The relationship of the hero to an individual woman is often very different from his relationship to society as a whole. Yet Wright’s lists of functions systematically obscure

this, by including women in the general category of “society.”

It is true that most Westerns portray women only in those areas of their lives where their concerns and actions impinge on an important male character, and this is what critics usually seize upon when they criticize Westerns' treatment of women:

Unlike the hero, women characters have not exercised the scope of possibilities that Kites' definition of the Western suggested. They created no critical dilemma because their roles in the wilderness/civilization dialectic tended to be rigidly defined. . . Their characters tended to be predictable because, generally, women played a passive role in the Western. They were symbols, illustrations of the conflict that confronts the hero. 14

However, these critics often miss the fact that, within this realm of her relationships to men, the woman *may* be portrayed in a detailed and even psychologically astute way. The relationship (or the prospect of a relationship) with a man may be treated as an opportunity for her to make moral judgments, exercise choice, and free herself from certain easy assumptions or moral weaknesses of the larger society.

This time of receptivity to change and choice is often symbolized, for the woman, by a journey. There are many, many Westerns in which we — and the hero — first see the heroine as she drives a wagon in a wagon train (for example, Jennie in *The Last Wagon*, Ellen in *The Tall Stranger*, Marty in *Two Rode Together*) or as she steps from a stagecoach newly arrived from the East (Clementine in *My Darling Clementine*). Rarely has this woman come seeking the hero — but she intersects with him because metaphorically, and often literally, she is in the borderland between wilderness and civilization, seeking a change in her own life. In another

plot variation, as the French film critic Alain Garel pointed out, the hero and heroine may find themselves travelling together:

Journeys play an important part in the blossoming of . . . love. In fact, it has trouble developing in a sedentary situation. If the woman remains in one place, the hero — eternal wanderer — leaves his beloved behind. On the other hand, when a man and woman travel together, it is not uncommon for them to be drawn to one another . . . and for their love to develop fully by the end of the film. ¹⁵

Among the many examples Garel gives are Dallas and Ringo in *Stagecoach* and Travis/Ben Johnson and Denver/Joanne Dru in *Wagonmaster* (Ford, 1950). I would add *Garden of Evil* (Hathaway, 1954) and *Westward the Women* (Wellman, 1952) as examples of particularly harrowing journeys which give strong, courageous women the chance to show that they are in every way equal to the challenge and worthy of a Western hero's regard.

Wright's analysis of the Western in terms of opposition — weak and strong, outside and inside society — is an elaboration of ideas expressed by earlier scholars. Jim Kitses, himself influenced by Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, speaks of the “philosophical dialectic” of the Western, which at times sees the wilderness as a “Garden of natural dignity and innocence offering refuge from the decadence of civilization” and at times “as a treacherous Desert stubbornly resisting the gradual sweep of agrarian progress and community values.” ¹⁶ He goes on to set up a series of “antinomies,” or oppositions, in which what is perceived as morally good may reside in the wilderness in some Westerns, and in civilization in others:

THE WILDERNESS	CIVILIZATION
The Individual	The Community
freedom	restrictions
honour	institutions
self-knowledge	illusion
integrity	compromise
self-interest	social responsibility
solipsism	democracy
Nature	Culture
purity	corruption
experience	knowledge
empiricism	legalism
pragmatism	idealism
brutalization	refinement
The West	The East
America	Europe
the frontier	America
equality	class
agrarianism	industrialism
tradition	change
the past	the future 17

Kitses and Wright agree that the Western hero is “the man in the middle — poised between savagery and civilization, the Desert and the Garden.” ¹⁸

If, as I stated previously, there may also be a woman who is neither fully in civilization nor in the wilderness, but “on the border,” we might expect her to play a crucial role in helping the hero to find his way across the “shifting antinomies.” In fact, her love for him/his love for her can have a

transforming power that brings about a positive shift on either the vertical or horizontal plane of Kitses' grid.

Ordered from most complex (in terms of the time spent individualizing the woman and detailing her concerns), here are some of the ways I have found that women frequently function in the plots of Western films:

1. To be menaced/to need rescuing. This is usually the least complex role for a woman to play in a Western plot. Who she is, is of little interest — she need only be young, attractive, and in danger. It is a frequent plot device in B and serial Westerns; and in A Westerns, it is often the category in which the absent/present women are found (when, of course, they have needed, but failed to get, rescuing).

Even when the roles are larger, this is a category with little comfort for critics with feminist concerns, since these plots often emphasize the woman's helplessness and fear, and subject her to threatened or actual violence and sexual abuse. A particularly intense and harrowing example is Anthony Mann's *Man of the West* (Mann, 1958). Billy Ellis (Julie London) is a world-weary “saloon singer,” who encounters Link Jones (Gary Cooper), on a train. The train is held up by outlaws and in the fray they find themselves left behind on the tracks. Link leads her to what she hopes will be a safe haven, but it turns out to be a nightmarish den of thieves and killers, headed by the vicious Dock Tobin. To Billy's horror, Tobin is revealed as Link's uncle and adoptive father.

To save Billy and buy time to work out what he wants to do, Link falls in with the gang again, to the extent that he does nothing while they

force Billy to take off her clothes. (Lots of lewd dialogue here: “Start with the shoes.” “Do it slow, we got all night here.”) The camera, closing in tight on her trembling, reluctant hands unbuttoning her blouse, and on her tear-stained face, seems to become an accomplice in an assault not only on the character, Billy, but on actress London herself. Link does intervene in time to prevent her from stripping naked, and he later avenges her by stripping the clothes off the most perverse of her tormenters in her presence. But Billy is and remains a victim. (Later she is raped by crazed old Dock Tobin, who is, in turn, finally shot by his reformed “son.”) She is humbly aware that she is damaged goods (“The men I meet all think they have a right to put their hands on me”), and wistfully yearns for an impossible love with hero Jones, who she knows is married :

You know, it's funny, Link — in the last two days you've lost everything you ever lived for. And I found something I've wanted all my life. (She bows her head and rests it on his hands.) But what hurts is, I can't keep what I've found, can I?

You don't have to ask me that, do you? You know what I'd say.

Yes, I know.

The bleak misogyny of this film, which considers a woman who is not a virgin unworthy of a man who was once a killer (if he's played by Gary Cooper) was apparently not quite what director Mann originally had in mind:

AM: . . . I would have changed the girl completely, if I'd only driven hard enough. But I wasn't able to convince the guys who were producing. I eventually convinced Cooper, but by then it was too late. [If I'd had my way] she [Billy] would have been his wife. It would have been much more moving. Just imagine if the wife had

to do what she has to do. Then it becomes much more poignant; then he would fight to the death.

CW: And give greater power to the scene when he strips Jack Lord.

AM: Sure, if it had been his wife he was getting even for, it would have been terrifying. It would have been a great film. There was this evil, and a man trying to destroy his own evil. And that is why, if it had been the wife, it would have been much greater. 19

There would still, apparently, have been the buttons and the tears, but at least not the queasy feeling that the film is telling us “saloon singers” deserve to be humiliated and cast off.

Another significant way that women function in Western plots is:
2. To mark a man's passage to maturity. Many critics of the Western have asserted that women are necessary for one purpose only: to avoid the awful suspicion (or to cloak the awful truth) that Westerns are really about men in love with men. Some writers have asserted that virtually *all* heroines in Westerns function as what Jane Tompkins calls a “screen”:

The love affair [in *Gunfight at the OK Corral*] never goes anywhere because the person Wyatt Earp really loves is Doc Holliday. . . [Laura Dembo] is an alibi the movie supplies Wyatt Earp with so that his love for Doc won't mark him as “queer”. Female “screen” characters, who are really extensions of the men they are paired with, perform this alibi function all the time, masking the fact that what the men are really interested in is one another. 20

Similarly, Jean-Louis Bory refers to the woman in the Western as the “accessory” needed to “reassure the public” with “five minutes of making out.” 21

Leslie Fiedler, in his famous study, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, identified homoeroticism as a dominant and persistent strain in

American literature. He was particularly interested in the triangle of white man, dark man (sometimes Black, sometimes Indian), and refined white woman, often resolved by the white man's refusal to grow up and join the white woman's world of culture and restrictions. Instead, he chooses, as Fiedler puts it "the pure marriage of males . . . in which the white refugee from society and the dark-skinned primitive are joined until death do them part." ²² John Cawelti, however, points out that Fiedler's classic formulation (with a few exceptions like *The Lone Ranger*) is rare in Western films. Instead, a common Western plot pits a group of male buddies or a flawed best friend against the heroine in a contest for the hero's allegiance:

As we have seen, the concern for masculine potency and the representation of a conflict between civilized order and savage freedom also play a vital role in the Western. However, the formula Western usually attempts to resolve this conflict and evade some of its deeper implications. While there are Westerns in which the hero remains an outcast, it is more usual for him to move from the milieu of the masculine comrades into a commitment to the town and even into a romance. . . . In many Westerns an interesting resolution of this conflict is worked out. The woman in effect, takes over the role of the masculine comrades and becomes the hero's true companion. ²³

As Cawelti implies, the all-male group is treated, however fondly, as a stage the Western hero goes through on the way to a more mature relationship with a woman. The contest between the men friends and the heroine could be seen as an unequal one because the heroine always wins the hero at the final fadeout. But viewed from another angle, it could also be seen as an unequal contest because in many (but not all) Westerns the

losers are so much more interesting and take up so much more screen time than the winners.

When I speak of the woman as marking the man's passage to maturity, I mean something more complex and harder to pin down than a "screen" to diffuse anxieties about homosexuality. Although Jim Kitses touched on some of the oppositions involved in this plot function ("freedom/restrictions" perhaps, or "the past/the future"), it seems to me that he could well have provided another sequence of the following sort:

freedom	restrictions (this is, in fact, one of Kitses antinomies)
childhood	maturity
male bonding	marriage
homoeroticism	heterosexuality
sterility	generativity
death	life

As with Kitses' original grid, there is a shifting ideological play in my lists, in which what is perceived to be desirable may be located on the left or the right. In addition, as Kitses put it, "if we compare the tops and tails of [this] sub-section, we can see the ambivalence at work at its outer limits." ²⁴

In many Westerns, the tug of the all-male group from the past against a future of heterosexual felicity is played out in terms of the law. The hero, a former outlaw now rejecting his closest companion in crime, seems to be trying to "go straight" in more ways than one. In *The Law and Jake Wade* (Sturges, 1958), there is a severe imbalance between the attention accorded the flawed friend (Clint Hollister/Richard Widmark) and the fiancée (Peggy/Patricia Owens) in the battle for Jake Wade (Robert Taylor). Jake has left the outlaw life behind, but Clint, his old partner in

crime, believes that Jake has hidden \$20,000 in loot, and kidnaps both Peggy and Jake to force the latter to lead him to the money. Most of the tension in the film comes from the intensity of Clint's feelings for Jake, like those of a jilted lover. After a failed escape attempt, although Clint addresses the pallid Patricia (who makes no reply), his words are clearly for Jake's ears:

It must have been quite a shock to you, Miss, thinkin' you'd gotten away safe and all. 'Course, if Jake had been alone, it might have been different. But then, he wouldn't go without *you*, would he? Well, I was guilty of that kind of weakness myself once. [turning to Jake] Remember when I just couldn't bear to leave you behind? [back to Patricia] It took me a whole week to get it though my thick head that he'd run out on me.

The emotional peak of the film is a showdown between Jake and Clint at the site of the buried treasure in an eerie ghost town. Jake manages to get the drop on Clint, and takes the opportunity to send Patricia safely away. Then, instead of simply taking Clint in for the law to deal with, Jake stages what is clearly going to be a duel to the death. He begins by providing Clint with a gun, which he tosses a few yards away. Clint complains that if their roles had been reversed, he would have *handed* Jake a gun. "Well," says Jake grimly, "You liked me better than I like you." Clint scrambles for his gun, but in the final showdown, is slower on the draw than Jake, and Jake kills him. With Clint (and his outlaw past) dead, Jake rides off to a future with Patricia.

In *Garden of Evil* (Hathaway, 1954), the flawed friend, Fiske, is again played by Richard Widmark. But in this film, the interplay among the positions in the triangle is more complex, with the hero played by Gary

Cooper, and the heroine a formidable antagonist, played by a major star (Susan Hayward). Three Americans are marooned in a Mexican coastal village on their way to the California gold fields. They include the mysterious, self-contained Hooker (Gary Cooper) and the world-weary gambler, Fiske (Richard Widmark). Leah (Susan Hayward) rides down out of the hills and offers them \$2,000 apiece — which they accept — to go to the rescue of her husband, an engineer trapped by a gold mine cave-in. Leah immediately takes steps to establish mastery over her crew. Although she has a map to guide her through the arid, treacherous country which leads to the mine, she won't let any of the men see it, lest they rob her and make their way back to the coast. Throughout the journey, under constant threat of attack by Apaches (the gold mine is on their sacred land), and throughout the rescue itself, Leah is physically fearless and single-minded in her desire to save her husband.

All of the men except Hooker find it impossible to believe that Leah is simply what she seems to be: a strong and independent woman, ambitious but principled. Even her own husband, delirious and raving after his rescue, speaks of her as a temptress who came back only for the gold. Seeing how upset Leah is at her husband's allegations, Hooker makes it plain that he doesn't believe them and sees the problem in another light: “You pushed him too far — you made a coward out of him and he hates you for it. It could happen with any man.” Yet it is clear from Hooker's ease with her that he excepts himself from being threatened by her strength.

Although Fiske also looks at Leah admiringly, what he admires is what he takes to be her scheming nature. He reserves his real tenderness for his friend Hooker, and tries to warn him away from Leah. After Hooker protects Leah from an assault by the youngest, most hotheaded member of the rescue crew, Fiske says to Hooker:

It was very heroic. I admired you enormously. Some day, like Salome, she'll have you bringing his head on a frying pan.

HOOKER:

Or yours.

FISKE:

No, no, not mine, Hooker. Mine belongs to you.

On the return journey from the mine, everyone is killed by Apaches but Hooker, Fiske and Leah. By now, even the cynical Fiske can see, not only that he is losing Hooker to Leah, but also that she is genuinely courageous and thus a deserving partner for his friend. When the two men deal cards to see who will hold off the Apaches to give the other two a chance to escape, Fiske "cheats" to make sure that Leah and Hooker will get away. Leah protests, "You're not going to do this, either one of you. Not for me, you're not." Fiske retorts : "Who said anything about you? This is between us."

Fiske stays behind, while Hooker and Leah make it to safety. But when they hear Fiske's gun firing, Hooker leaves Leah and rushes back to find the Apaches driven off but Fiske fatally wounded. Hooker stays with him while he dies, and receives his male friend's blessing on a future life with Leah:

FISKE:

One thing I had against you, Hooker. You always knew so much.
You were even right about her.

HOOKE:

But not about you. You cheated me.

FISKE:

You came back to tell me? . . . Yeah, I cheated ya. . . . Go home,
Hooker. Build one somewhere. . . . Take her home.

After these words, Fiske dies, and the closing shot shows Hooker reunited with Leah and riding off into the sunset with her.

In *The Naked Spur*, Lina (Janet Leigh) is first seen as a pathetic waif in thrall to Ben (Robert Ryan), a manipulative criminal who plays on her fears of being abandoned and treats her like his personal slave, calling, "Do me, Lina," whenever he wants a back rub. Then Ben is captured by a neurotic bounty hunter, Howie Kemp (James Stewart), and his two unstable "partners." It is male bonding at its most primitive and lethal: the men are linked only by greed and a willingness to commit violence to reach their ends, and allegiances keep shifting as Ben tempts each of the partners to make more lucrative arrangements with him. Little Lina, who seems the most vulnerable, in the end is stronger than any of them. Whether weeping for her sick horse that must be shot, or nursing Howie after he has been injured, she stands for unselfishness and sanity; in fact, for life itself. In the end, Howie is not too far gone to recognize that Lina can save him.

In the final scenes of the film, Ben is dead, killed by Howie's partner Roy, but his body has fallen into a fast-flowing river. Since the bounty money can only be claimed with physical evidence, Roy leaps into the

water after the body and is drowned. In a frenzy, Howie drags on a rope to pull Ben's body out of the river. Then he wrestles with the corpse in a horrible, sodden embrace, as Lina watches in horror, imploring him to stop: "He's not dead if you take him back. He'll never be dead for you!" Howie replies hysterically, "The money, that's all I care about. . . .Maybe I don't fit your ideas of me, but that's the way I am."

Then Lina changes her approach. She says calmly "All right, if that's the way you want itI'll ride with you. I'll even live on that land with you." Howie turns from the horse on which he has been loading Ben's body and approaches Lina, sobbing "Why? Tell me why? I'm taking him back, I swear it. I'm gonna sell him for money." For answer, we see a closeup of Lina, looking young and pure, but also stronger and more resolute than we have seen her before. Her head is framed against a bright blue sky which doesn't match the overcast sky of the medium shots. This may have been simply an accident of the shooting schedule, but it works, because it suggests that Lina represents a hopeful and morally clear future, as opposed to the psychological turmoil in which Howie has been trapped. Lina doesn't need to say another word. Howie removes the body from his horse, and gets a shovel to bury Ben.

As *The Naked Spur* demonstrates, the woman's role in marking a man's passage to maturity is often closely linked with another plot function, which is:

3. To heal the hero in body and spirit. It is in this category that some of the most interesting women in Westerns can be found. The more individualized the woman is, and the more we come to know her as an

admirable character, the more effectively she can fulfil this plot function. Often, in films where the woman plays this role, the hero is first seen as an angry, violent loner. However, when he finally meets a woman who is intuitive enough to recognize him as suffering rather than dangerous (at least to her) he trusts her enough to unburden himself and let himself be comforted. Catherine Allen (Joan Hackett) nurses wounded Will (Charlton Heston), in *Will Penny* (Gries, 1967) and shows him an alternative to the comfortless, wandering life which is all the aging cowboy has ever known.

In *Jubal*, devoutly religious Naomi (Felicia Farr) is the first sympathetic and trustworthy person Jubal (Glenn Ford) has ever known. After opening his heart to her, he asks in some amazement, "Why am I talking to you? I've never talked like this to anybody in my life." Later, when Jubal is overwhelmed with remorse after shooting his best friend in self-defense, she does her best to comfort him : "Stop grievin' so deep, Jube dear. It wasn't as if you had killin' in your heart at all. All you wanted to do was stop him from killin'. . . .He knew you were grateful to him. He knew you loved him."

Felicia Farr, unusually for actresses, had a continuing professional association with director Daves, who cast her sympathetically in three of his Westerns, and often filled the screen with her expressive face, dominated by what Raymond Bellour called "her great, tired eyes." Bellour considered Daves the most romantic of the Western directors admired by the French auteurist critics, and singled him out for his "loving and unusual heroines. . . . who are all linked with one another — their tenderness, the silent depth of their feeling, astonishes. " 25

Farr's largest and most spirited role is in Daves's *The Last Wagon* (1956). As the film begins, Comanche Todd (Richard Widmark) is seen without food, water or ammunition in barren desert country, still wily and bloodthirsty enough to kill three men before himself being captured by Sheriff Harper. The vicious Harper drags him behind his horse and denies him food and water, until the two men encounter a wagon train of "god-fearing" settlers headed west. One of these wagons is driven by Jennie (Farr), accompanied by her pre-adolescent brother Billy (Tommy Rettig). Jennie is the first of the settlers to go to Todd's defence and insist that, even if he is a murderer, he must be fed and given water: "He's a human being — and you're treating him like an animal."

Jennie, clad in plain blouse and practical pants, is shown from the beginning to be different from the other settlers. Her concern for the prisoner earns her scorn from the more conventionally feminine teenager, Valinda (Stephanie Griffin). "She's washing his face," Valinda reports to her sister, "It *would* be her who'd throw herself at him. . . .She's an outsider. She doesn't have to care what people think."

By an unlikely chain of circumstances, four teenagers from the wagon train who have been openly hostile to Todd find themselves at his mercy when the rest of the settlers, with the exception of Jennie and Billy, are killed by Indians. Todd is the only one with the skills to take them through desert country. He is embittered enough to leave everyone behind but the two (Billy and Jennie) who have shown him kindness, but Jennie mediates, placating Todd and urging the others to accept Todd's leadership.

During the difficult journey, Todd shows himself to be a true Western hero in the Wright mode: he fights off the Indians with his special skills and protects the weaker members of the party, refusing to abandon them even when they have to stop to nurse snake-bitten Valinda. But it is Jennie who turns him away from bitterness; who leads him, in Kitses' terms, from savagery to purity, and from the desert to the garden.

Todd's humanizing is symbolized by his gradual unshackling — which is always associated with women. At the beginning of the journey, knowing Todd was the only one to lead them, Jennie freed him from the wheel to which he was shackled. Several days later, as Jennie sits with him, encouraging him to speak of his childhood and his dead wife, Todd finds a way to saw through the chain that links the two iron cuffs he is still wearing. Near journey's end, the recovering Valinda, now ashamed of her hostility to Todd, gives him the key she has been hiding, and he is finally able to free his wrists completely. A few hours later, he sits in the dark with Jennie, awaiting either a final Indian attack or rescue by the army. Inspired by his growing love for her, Todd transforms the actuality of their barren surroundings into the possibility of a new-world Eden:

Three days from here, we could take our choice — the bend of the Powder River, a quiet valley or a high place. There's a thousand waterfalls on the Powder, all making music. Along about now the grass'd be turning, making a singing in the wind.

But first, retaken by the army, Todd must stand trial. He defends himself by explaining that he killed the murderers of his Comanche wife and his children, but in his struggle to justify killing in a good cause, he angers the judge by drawing a parallel with the latter's deeds during the

Civil War. Then Jennie leaps up to make her own passionate entreaty:

All I've heard here is talk of killing, of the taking of life. . . . You say he took four lives. But isn't there anything in that bible about giving six lives back? . . . These others might be dead, if it weren't for him. When he could have saved himself, he saved us.

Billy and the others chime in with their support, after which the judge pronounces sentence: "As an alternative to hanging him, would you agree to take him into custody for as long as you both shall live?" Jennie's faith in Todd transforms a death sentence into a marriage ceremony. In the fadeout, a newly formed family of three rides toward the Powder River.

Tess Millay (Joanne Dru) of *Red River* performs *all* of the functions I have described above. She is, briefly, menaced by Indians (and rescued by Matthew Garth); she puts the seal on Matt's passage to adulthood, and she is a conciliator in her own unique, brash way, finally achieving with a six-shooter the reconciliation she first undertook with a flood of earnest words.

Andrew Sarris calls her "one of Hawks' admirably tough women," ²⁶ and minutes after we meet her, she has her first opportunity to display this toughness. Her shoulder is pierced by an arrow and Matt has to cut it loose, while, instead of whimpering, she keeps up her spirits with typically Hawksian banter. Her attraction to Matt is instant, fueled partially by her determination not to be underestimated by him. (He appears to have assumed, on very little evidence, that she is a "loose woman.")

Tess learns all she can about Matt's past from his saddlemates, but when she next sees him, to her surprise, their roles are reversed. It is Matt

who needs *her* solicitude, as she finds him trembling in the mist, having momentarily mistaken her for Tom Dunson, the estranged adoptive father who has vowed to kill him. Tess begins to practise an odd but effective brand of therapy on Matt, blending nervous chatter (“That’s why I’m talking because that’s the best thing to do when you’re feeling scared, just talk and keep on talking. . .”), sympathetic attentiveness and sweet seduction. Tess also shows herself to be gifted with genuine insight, since the underlying devotion between the two men is clear to her: “You love him, don’t you? And he must love you.”

Tess sets out to heal the breach. Her most powerful scene, which is also the longest scene in the film, comes when she intercepts the vengeful pursuer, Tom Dunson. Remarkably, most critics pass over this turning point in the film, so it seems worthwhile to examine it in some detail. From the moment he rides into her campground, she takes charge:

I’ll take care of Mr. Dunson.

How do you know my name?

We can talk about that later. Sit down.

Surprisingly self-composed in the presence of this man who has vowed to kill her lover, she smokes a cheroot, snaps playing cards onto the table, and mellows Dunson with plenty of food and liquor. Then, deftly, she leads the conversation into the realm of the emotions: her feelings about Matthew and Dunson’s feelings about him. Soon she has gotten under his defenses, calling up memories of his lost love, Fen. (To Dunson’s discomfiture, she is wearing a bracelet that Dunson once gave to

Fen, and which Matthew, who wore it for a long time himself, has now given to Tess.)

TESS:

You still intend to kill him, don't you?

DUNSON:

(Dogged, implacable) Nothing you can say or do. . .

TESS:

(To our surprise, easily cutting him off) I can say anything.

.....

DUNSON:

... Are you in love with him?

TESS:

I thought you'd ask that. Can a woman love a man who'd go off and leave her?

DUNSON:

Well, she — (disconcerted, flooded with guilty memories of Fen) — she should.

TESS:

I wanted to go with him. . . He said I wasn't strong enough to go. I wanted him so much that —

DUNSON:

(softly, quoting Fen) You felt like you had knives sticking in you.

Tired and a little drunk, Dunson finally lets down his guard enough to reveal how hurt and lost he is:

TESS:

Why did you want to have a son?

DUNSON:

Because I'd built something, built it with my own hands and I can't live forever. Can't live to see it grow. I thought I had a son. I haven't — and I want one.

TESS:

I'm sorry for you, Mr. Dunson. Very sorry.

Dunson then makes her a startling proposal — half of everything he owns for a son.

Anthony Easthope, in his interesting analysis of Dunson as the Old Testament God of fear, and Matt as the New Testament God of love, comments on this scene: “This full father (wholly self-sufficient masculine will) wants everything for himself, including all the women.”²⁷ There does seem to be an element of male jealousy here, but Dunson is no longer the all-powerful father we have seen in earlier scenes. For the first time, we realize, as he does, that he is aging and lonely, and no longer so certain that he is right in his judgments.

The stage is set for the final reconciliation scene, in which the two men pummel each other until Tess breaks it up by firing a gun at them. Smiling dazedly, Dunson counsels Matt, “you'd better marry that girl.” And then he gives Matt his final approval, drawing a cattle brand in the dirt that links his initials with Matt's. Some critics have objected to the “*deus ex machina*” aspect of the ending, but Tess's role in the scene is fully in keeping with the functions she has fulfilled from the first moment she appears.

Tess is Matt's reward for the decision to become his own man. (If he had followed the trail his father demanded, he never would have met her.) But she is also the healer who enables Dunson to let go of his bitterness and look forward, if not to children, then at least to grandchildren to further his dreams. In terms of my list of oppositions, Tess leads Matt from childhood to maturity and from male bonding to marriage. But it is her relationship to Tom Dunson that I find most touching, since she gives him a last, unexpected opportunity to make up for past errors. He believed that with his sweetheart long dead and his son estranged, he was doomed to sterility. Instead Tess offers generativity, and as Matt's intended bride, leads him away from a preoccupation with death to a renewed interest in life.

All of the women I have been discussing, even when their roles are large and relatively complex, are supporting players. Although I can't agree with Boetticher that Jennie and Tess "in themselves have not the slightest importance," it is true that they are shown helping the hero to fulfil his destiny, in the process abandoning the independent plans they had before they met him.

There are, however, a handful of Westerns in which women initiate the main events of the plot and act — although a man may give them aid — to fulfil their own interests. I consider these films at greater length in the readings at the end of this thesis: *Angel and the Badman*, *Westward the Women*, and *True Grit*.

II. WHAT ARE THE MORAL CONCERNS OF WOMEN IN WESTERNS?

I don't care what's right or wrong. There's got to be a better way for people to live!

— Amy Kane to Will Kane, in *High Noon*

As I read Will Wright's analyses of Western plots, I was struck by his seemingly eccentric response to *Duel in the Sun*. He identifies Pearl as the hero of a “classical plot” Western. However, he writes, her “special skill” is not with a handgun or another weapon: “her remarkable ability is not demonstrated in fighting but in sex.”²⁸ For Jon Tuska, Wright's wrenching of *Duel in the Sun*'s plotline to fit his sixteen functions was a mark of how useless his structural analysis was. For instance, Wright's final function states that the hero gives up his special status, which usually involves giving up his special skill. Pearl could hardly be said to do this, Tuska argues, since at the end of the film she dies.²⁹ But if your special skill is a mode of being, not doing, how can you give it up except by ceasing to be? Of course, the contrast between the man who acts and the woman who simply *is*, has been seen by feminists, with good cause, as an excuse for patriarchal societies to limit and control women's activities. Westerns have been criticized by scholars with feminist concerns precisely because, it seems to them, Westerns give women no scope to form moral judgments and act upon them.

Yet Wright, I think, is on to something. Men in Westerns are morally defined by whom they will kill/not kill. Women are defined by whom they will love/not love. In some films, such as *Duel in the Sun*, this is expressed in blatantly sexual terms: whom they will go to bed with/not go to bed with. But usually it is played out in more idealistic terms. For instance, consider two of the films which are the subject of case studies at the end of this thesis. In *Westward the Women*, a group of brave pioneers, all of them women, head west; however, they are not going to conquer the land but to forge new relationships. *True Grit* is a revenge Western in which it is a woman (a very young one) who seeks revenge. However, unlike the isolated men in revenge Westerns, who seem to tremble on the brink of irredeemable savagery, this heroine immediately acquires a nurturing quasi-family with a daddy and a big brother.

In fact, there is a remarkable consistency in the moral choices women are shown making in Westerns, and these are very much in keeping with the findings of Carol Gilligan. In her ground-breaking study of moral development, *In a Different Voice* (1982), Gilligan provides both a summary of previous studies of human psychological development and the results of her own empirical studies of how college-age women make moral choices.

Gilligan concludes that most previous studies, based as they were on studies of boys and men, persistently and systematically misunderstood women's psychological growth and their view of what is important in life. She begins by looking at some of the earlier theories of human maturation which have "implicitly accepted male life as the norm." 30

For example, Lawrence Kohlberg has developed a six-stage model of moral development. For Kohlberg, the highest stages (stages five and six) of moral development are shown when his interview subject adopts a perspective outside that of his society, in which he identifies morality with justice (fairness, rights, the Golden Rule), with recognition of the rights of others as these are defined naturally or intrinsically. The human's being right to do as he pleases without interfering with somebody else's rights is a formula defining rights prior to social legislation. 31

At the more immature stage three, on the other hand, "morality is conceived in interpersonal terms and goodness is equated with helping and pleasing others." 32

Kohlberg interviewed both male and female students, but female students, who tended to speak in terms of responsibility to others, were categorized by him as being stuck at level three, a much lower level of maturity. "Herein lies the paradox," writes Gilligan, for the very traits that traditionally have defined the 'goodness' of women, their care for and sensitivity to the needs of others, are those that mark them as deficient in moral development. In this version of moral development, however, the conception of maturity is derived from a study of men's lives and reflects the importance of individuation in their development. 33

Women's moral judgments will always be devalued, Gilligan argues (and women themselves, knowing that the dominant culture devalues them, will easily lose confidence in the validity of their point of view), unless the stages of their moral development are defined in a different way.

When one begins with the study of women and derives developmental constructs from their lives, the outline of a moral conception different from that described by Freud, Piaget, or Kohlberg begins to emerge and informs a different description of

development. In this conception, the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract. The conception of morality as concerned with the activity of care centers moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships, just as the conception of morality as fairness ties moral development to the understanding of rights and rules. This different construction of the moral problem for women may be seen as the critical reason for their failure to develop within the constraints of Kohlberg's system. Regarding all constructions of responsibility as evidence of a conventional moral understanding, Kohlberg defines the highest stages of moral development as deriving from a reflective understanding of human rights. . . .the morality of rights differs from the morality of responsibility in its emphasis on separation rather than connection, in its consideration of the individual rather than the relationship as primary. 34

Gilligan cites, as an alternative model for women's moral development, the work of Jane Loevinger, who proposes a fifth "autonomous stage" of women's ego development, "where autonomy, placed in a context of relationships, is defined as modulating an excessive sense of responsibility through the recognition that other people have responsibility for their own destiny." (This contrasts with an earlier moral stage in which the woman is so anxiously aware of the necessity of preserving relationships and pleasing everyone that any assertion of her own needs is extremely difficult.) The woman at Stage 5, in this model, "has a feeling for the complexity and multifaceted character of real people and real situations." 35 That is, although she can come to see that self-abnegation is not necessary for a moral life, she will still be acutely aware that one's acts do have consequences for other people.

Gilligan concludes:

Whereas the rights conception of morality that informs Kohlberg's principled level (stages 5 and 6) is geared to arriving at an objectively fair or just resolution to moral dilemmas upon which all rational persons could agree, the responsibility conception focuses instead on the limitations of any particular resolution and describes the conflicts that remain. . . .³⁶

Women in Westerns, as I have said, display a fairly consistent approach to moral judgments. If an action threatens the web of relationships that is essential to these women — and particularly their primary relationship with a man — they will argue against it passionately. This often puts them at odds with the Law (by which I mean the occupation of law enforcement, whether community- or self-appointed) and the Army, both of which place duty above personal happiness, and which justify violence in support of principals of justice that are held to be universal and unswerving. (“What makes soldiers great is hateful to me,” Army wife Kathleen Yorke/Maureen O'Hara tells her son in *Rio Grande*).

However, Western women themselves will take up arms in some circumstances: to save their honour (the decision about whom to love, as I have said, is crucial to the Western woman, and she will fight desperately against any attempt to take that decision away from her); and to save their loved ones. Thus Callie (Lee Remick) in *These Thousands Hills* (Fleischer, 1959) shoots Jehu (Richard Egan) before he can kill Lat (Don Murray), the love of her life. Miss Cora (Jeannette Nolan) begins by counselling the other women of *Fort Petticoat* (Marshall, 1957) to lay down their arms because “the Lord was plain enough in his commands about violence and bloodshed.” But when the Indian attack comes, and she sees the women

who are her closest friends begin to fall around her, she takes up her rifle to defend them. She doesn't abandon God, she simply modifies her interpretation of His message to suit present conditions (adopting “. . . a more contextual mode of judgment,” as Gilligan puts it!): “The good Lord let me know that if there's something worth fighting for, a body better fight.”

Feminist film critics have seen it as distressing that Amy in *High Noon* is made to go against her own beliefs. Seen in relation to Gilligan's work, though, her moral struggle with her husband and the moral decisions she makes begin to look different. *High Noon* opens with Will and Amy's wedding. However, their happiness is immediately threatened by the news that outlaw Frank Miller, whom Will had sent to prison, is on his way back to town. Amy urges Will to leave the town behind, since his job as Marshall has ended, but a short distance out of town, he turns the wagon around, over Amy's objections. Amy, who has clearly only known Will a short time, is still in the dark about what's wrong.

AMY:

Please, Will, if you'd just tell me what this is all about.

WILL:

I sent a man up five years ago for murder. He was supposed to hang. But up North they commuted it to life. Now he's free. I don't know how — anyhow, it looks like he's coming back.

AMY:

I still don't understand.

WILL:

He was always wild and crazy. He'll probably make trouble.

AMY:

But that's no concern of yours, not any more.

WILL:

I'm the one who sent him up.

AMY:

But that was part of your job. That's finished now. They've got a new Marshal.

Will goes on to express his belief that Miller and his gang would pursue him and Amy if they left town, reiterating over her repeated protests that he must stay. He says that he'll swear in some deputies to help him, adding, "Maybe there won't be any trouble." Amy's voice, which has been anxious and pleading, takes on an angrier tone:

AMY:

You know there'll be trouble.

WILL:

Then — it's better to have it here. I'm sorry, honey, I know how you feel about it.

AMY:

Do you?

WILL:

Of course I do. I know it's against your religion and all, sure I know it.

AMY:

But you're doing it, just the same. Oh Will, we were married just a few minutes ago. We've got our whole lives ahead of us. Doesn't that mean anything to you?

WILL:

You know, I've only got an hour and I've got lots to do. Stay at the hotel until it's over.

AMY:

No, I won't be here when it's over. You're asking me to wait an hour to find out if I'm a wife or a widow.

They arrive at an impasse, Amy stating that she'll leave town on the noon train if Will won't go with her; Will repeating that he must stay.

This dialogue is an almost textbook example of the mutual incomprehension which must result when the man conceives of morality as (in Gilligan's words) "the understanding of rights and rules," while the woman sees it as "the understanding of responsibility and relationship." When Amy asks for an explanation of the emergency, Will tells what he thinks is the essence of it: Will rightly sent a murderer to jail and he has wrongly been set free. But Amy is still baffled, unable to figure out what this has to do with Will, now. Now, it seems clear to her, he has a personal responsibility to her, to the marriage vows they have pledged together. But when Amy alludes to this relationship, it's Will's turn to be baffled. When Amy asks, "Doesn't that mean anything to you?" it is as though Will doesn't hear her. His mind is already racing ahead to a consideration of how he will carry out the law.

The turning point in this conversation, when Amy's position hardens, comes when Will condescends to her by denying the obvious likelihood of violence. He compounds the insult by saying that he understands that it is "her religion and all" that makes her oppose his stand. But this treats her beliefs as an abstraction and ignores her fear for him; we don't really find

out what Amy's personal code is until she talks to another woman, Helen Ramirez (Katy Jurado).

Helen is the other carefully drawn woman in *High Noon*, and like Amy, she is given some intelligent things to say. She is a woman with a past; she has been Frank Miller's lover as well as Will Kane's, but the film treats her respectfully, showing her to be a shrewd but scrupulously honest businesswoman.

Amy, still unable to understand what is driving Will, and confused when she sees her husband visiting Helen, decides that perhaps Will is staying out of affection for Helen. This, at least, is a reason that fits with Amy's conception of morality as embedded in relationships. Yet, when she visits Helen, Helen tells her she is wrong. "Then why is he staying?" Amy asks helplessly. "If you do not know, I cannot explain it to you," Helen replies. This is usually taken by analysts of *High Noon* to mean that the more experienced Helen is reproaching Amy for her lack of understanding. But it could mean something more subtle: "Kane is acting in terms of a moral code that is different from ours. There's no point trying to put it into words." And perhaps also there is the unstated implication that when Amy has more experience of men, she'll be more tolerant of the ways that their thinking differs from that of women.

Although their conversation begins in embarrassment and suspicion, the two women come to communicate more clearly than Will and Amy were able to. It is to Helen, not Will, that Amy expresses the heart of her opposition to violence: it doesn't come from the formal "rules" of her religion, but from the personal experience of seeing her father and brother

gunned down. And Helen shows some sympathy and understanding when Amy explains this. Finally, Helen says: "If Kane were my man, I'd never leave him like this. I'd fight. "

AMY:

Why don't you?

HELEN:

He is not my man. He's yours.

To Helen, it is clear: definitions of what is "right" must be decided in a context of relationships. In the end, when it will clearly save her husband's life, Amy does take up a gun and kill a man. But just as she accepted an existing structure of beliefs primarily because she hoped it would help her to make sense of crushing personal loss, she will not put an abstract codification of morality above the immediate and very specific threat to Will, her husband. Amy kills to preserve the ties of love.

In her study of women's roles in American films, Mollie Haskell deplored the absence of moral struggles in which women were engaged: "We can understand that the range of action open to women is limited, reflecting their limited operations in real life. But why have they so rarely experienced the moral dilemmas of real women?"³⁷ It isn't, in fact, uncommon for women to find themselves in moral quandaries; the probable reason that this is passed over by film scholars is that the woman's viewpoint is not *privileged*: she can rarely bring anyone else, especially the hero, to share her point of view. *Angel and the Badman*, considered in detail later in this thesis, is highly unusual in this regard. The heroine, like

Amy Kane in *High Noon*, is a Quaker, but far from changing her mind about her code of non-violence, she converts a gunfighter to her beliefs.

III. CLOSEUPS OF SOME WOMEN IN WESTERNS

The Western is often faulted for its simplistic division of women into two categories: “good girls” (schoolmarms, rancher's daughters), and “bad girls” (dance hall girls and prostitutes). However, the Western is simply continuing a romantic literary tradition at least as old as the Arthurian romances of the Middle Ages, in which two women, representing the moral choices the hero must make, are placed in opposition. One is a chaste maiden, one is a temptress; one is virtuous, the other sinful or at least morally weak; one is deserving of a knight's love, and the other is not. Frequently, too, the maiden is fair and the temptress is dark. (As Jenni Calder has pointed out, the Western provided a third option: the heroine with red hair, which connotes “spirit without vice, virtue without insipidness.”³⁸ Certainly the feisty roles played by Maureen O'Hara and Susan Hayward fit this description.)

By the nineteenth century, as Jay Macpherson observes, “we meet [this opposition] everywhere, from Scott through George Elliot to Hardy. . . .The fair one will often be the more angelic and spiritual . . . the dark one, on the other hand, inclined to be physical, passionate and exotic, is often a predestined victim or lady of sorrows.”³⁹ In Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819), for example, the fair Anglo Saxon Rowena is contrasted with the dark “Jewess,” Rebecca. Both women love the knight, but the novel makes it clear that Rebecca is ethnically disqualified from winning

him. Adapting Scott's romantic opposition (and its racist underpinnings) to a North American setting, James Fenimore Cooper contrasted pure and delicate Alice with dusky and passionate Cora in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826).

This racist version of feminine duality is extremely common in Western films. Frequently a genteel blonde heroine is contrasted with a Mexican or Indian woman. As Ted Sennett succinctly phrases it, "As if meting out punishment for any hint of miscegenation or act of racial intermarriage, young Indian women or women of Spanish or Mexican descent frequently end up in a pine box before the film's end." ⁴⁰

Although much has been written about the misrepresentation of Native American cultures in Westerns, Mexicans have been presented with even less dignity and respect. John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946), for example, offers a classic contrasting pair: Clementine (Cathy Downs) and Chihuahua (Linda Darnell). The Chihuahua character is demeaned in every possible way. She has a jokey name, more suited to a pet than a woman, and she is ridiculously dressed in no known historical mode, more like a player in a Carmen Miranda movie than like the other soberly dressed characters. Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) speaks to her contemptuously, threatening at one point to "send her back to the reservation." Yet she seems to be Mexican, not Apache. The thoughtlessly racist attitude to this character is shown by the fact that no one collaborating on the film thought the distinction had any significance. The only important point to be made was that she was not fair-skinned, not "white." Later, Wyatt threatens to take her over his knee and spank her,

and later still, he tells another man to “make sure the wildcat stays in her room.”

Chihuahua is shown to be ignorant, cowardly, spiteful and jealous, and then she is punished for these sins several times over. She loses Doc Holliday, her lover; she is shot; and then, in the film's most unpleasant scene, she is operated on by Doc, with Clementine as his nurse, without anesthetic (and, inexplicably, without the slug of alcohol that fortifies the wounded in other Westerns.) Finally she dies, offscreen.

Meanwhile, Clementine, the lady from back east, is treated with deference and courtliness. No sooner does she arrive in Tombstone than Wyatt arranges to be shaved and perfumed by the local barber. Wyatt is Clementine's gallant escort in the famous dance scene on the foundations of Tombstone's new church. For critics who revere this film, and almost certainly for director Ford, the dance symbolizes hopefulness and the coming of civilization. But it is a white civilization with no room for women like Chihuahua.

Hispanic women are often seen in supporting roles as pillowy-bosomed taverna dancers in such films as *The Alamo* (Wayne, 1960) and *Garden of Evil*. Other films, however, provide more positive images. Helen Ramirez loses Will Kane to virginal blonde Amy in *High Noon*, but retains her dignity: the film portrays her as an honest businesswoman and an astute judge of character. *Two Rode Together* (Ford, 1961) is unusual in that it matches dark and fair heroines with two men who split the qualities of a Western hero between them. Blonde Marty (Shirley Jones) is paired with idealistic (and even blonder) Lieutenant Jim Gary (Richard

Widmark). High-born Mexican Elena de la Madriaga (Linda Cristal), who has been a Comanche captive, is paired with cynical (but in the end, chivalrous) Sheriff Guthrie McCabe (James Stewart). Jon Tuska comments on these pairings, “The Jim Gary character . . . is given from among the settlers a virginal heroine. . . . [while] McCabe, who has consorted with whores, is thenceforth paired with Cristal. Ford's formula was reinforced: moral outcasts belong together.”⁴¹

“Moral outcasts” seems the wrong phrase, as it would be for the similar pairing of Dallas and Ringo in *Stagecoach*: these characters are *social* rather than *moral* outcasts. They are rejected by “respectable” society, but the film's sympathies are with them. There is no feeling, by the end of *Two Rode Together*, that Marty and Jim occupy a higher moral plane than Guthrie and Elena — in fact, there is some evidence for the opposite view. Guthrie is more pragmatic than Jim, and more harshly outspoken. But Jim is revealed as naive and conventional in his moral code, whereas Guthrie is genuinely thoughtful and empathetic. Jim and Marty's relationship is marked by coy dithering and ineffectiveness: Marty fails to recognize one of the released captives as her own brother, while Jim fails to save him from a lynch mob. In the meantime, Guthrie goes about protecting Elena and trying to reintegrate her into white society. His concern about Elena's clothing contrasts interestingly with Jim's concern about Marty's (more about this in Section VII of Chapter 3). Jim is simply concerned that Marty dress “properly,” whereas Guthrie wants Elena to change out of Indian clothes with a specific goal in mind: to make her less vulnerable to the stares and gossip of the narrow-minded whites at the fort.

The bland Jim and Marty take the easy path, since neither has to sacrifice anything to be together. Guthrie, seeing that the white world mistreats Elena, and tired of its delusions and hypocrisy himself, embarks on a brave journey with her, away from society.

While critics of Westerns usually lump Mexican and Indian women together in their comments (as Ted Sennett did in the passage quoted above), in truth the two groups are portrayed quite differently. Mexican women are often treated as sexually overcharged trollops (even the more dignified Helen Ramirez has a considerable past), while Indian women are more likely to be presented as angels in buckskin. The nobly suffering Elena, perhaps because of her long Comanche captivity, is the exceptional Mexican who falls into the latter category.

Although there are sometimes “treacherous squaws” in small roles, such as the Indian wife who betrays everyone in *Stagecoach*, Indian women are rarely shown as temptresses and plotters; in fact, they are frequently portrayed as unusually brave and loyal. As Jacqueline Levitan summarizes the situation, “History has proven Indian culture to be a dying culture. Positive portrayals do not threaten the status quo because no matter how positive the portraits, history will not revive the Indian way of life.”⁴² But if these paragons have a white rival, no matter how vapid, their dark skin is enough to doom their hopes.

In Delmer Daves's *Drum Beat* (1950), Toby (Marisa Pavan) is shown to be a leader of the Modoc people, an influential speaker who persuades the men to negotiate with “renegade” Indian Captain Jack. At the meeting itself, impatient with the lack of progress, she leaps into the fray,

challenging Jack, "Be a man, Jack. Talk peace, not killing." But in her conversation with the white hero of the film, John McKay (Alan Ladd), she is submissive. (She also speaks stilted English, but it is one of the flaws of this film that the Modoc speak stilted English even to each other.)

Take me for your woman. If you do this, no Modoc could kill you. I have much love for you, very much. . . .make me your woman tonight. . . .I will make you very happy. I will do all those things that you would wish me to do as your woman. . . .Would you like this?

Toby, I'd be a liar if I said no.

Then say yes!

Thanks, Toby — but I can't, just to keep from getting shot —

Is it because of the white one there?

A little, maybe.

John has just met a blonde Easterner, Nancy Meek, and Toby, for all her bravery and virtue, doesn't stand a chance. However, she continues to look out for John's welfare. When he is shot and seems to be dead, and one of Captain Jack's men approaches to scalp him, Toby tries to prevent it. The man strikes her head with a rock and kills her. When John revives, Toby is dead beside him.

Toby's death is a close copy of one that occurred in the same director's *Broken Arrow* (1950). Here the Apache maiden has no rival, except for white society as a whole, which the hero is willing to abandon for the sake of her love. *Broken Arrow*, a great commercial and critical success when it was first released, is usually cited by film scholars as a

turning point in the history of the Western because of its sympathetic treatment of Native Americans. It tells the story of of a peace-seeking white man, Tom Jeffords, who negotiates a truce with Apache leader Cochise. Jeffords falls in love with, and is given permission to marry, a young woman named Sonseeahray (played by Debra Paget — Indian heroines were always portrayed by white actresses in the 1939-1969 period). However, both bigoted whites and a group of renegades led by Geronimo are shown working to destroy the treaty, and in one skirmish, trying to protect a wounded Jeffords, Sonseeahray is killed. As in *Drum Beat*, he revives to find her dead beside him. Finally, lasting peace arrives, and as Jeffords rides off alone, we hear his voice-over. “As time passed, I came to know that the death of Sonseeahray put a seal on the peace.”

Broken Arrow has the sweetness followed by tragedy of Romeo and Juliet in an American Western setting, and was taken in this spirit by its first viewers. More recent critics such as Jon Tuska, for whom the measure of a Western's worth is its historical accuracy, have been much harder on the film: “the film was filled with nonsense [such as] . . . the idea of a blood brotherhood symbolized in a wrist-cutting ceremony.”⁴³ (It is actually, less drastically, a thumb-cutting ceremony.) He ignores all the aspects of the film which he might be expected to find more politically correct, such as Sonseeahray's stature as a healer, and the non-macho character of Tom Jeffords. “I'm sick and tired of all this killin',” Jeffords says, words that are usually spoken by Western women. Like John Dunbar in *Dances with Wolves* (which owes a large and unacknowledged debt to *Broken Arrow*), he humbly enters Sonseeahray's world, learning her

language and customs rather than expecting her to learn his. As he reassures Cochise, “I will do all things expected of a husband here.”

Maryann Oshana raises a more difficult issue about films portraying white man/Indian woman romances than mere “historical accuracy”:

The couples are happy, secure, and either living among the respective Indian tribes or in the mountains. However, during the course of the film, either the cavalry, evil whites, or vengeful Indians descend and the woman is killed. It is always the woman who is killed and the man who must face the world alone. . . .the woman is punished because of the relationship with a white man even when they are living among the Indians. 44

Oshana also points out that the rape/murder of an Indian wife is often the starting point for a revenge Western. This relates in an interesting way to my earlier discussion of how women function in Western plots. The death of the absent/present Indian woman puts the plot in motion, and later a white woman turns the hero away from his bitter course of vengeance and heals him. But there is also a suggestion that the white woman marks a more mature phase in the hero's life: that “playing Indian” was a childish stage he had to go through, analogous to the all-male gang. Perhaps Sonseeahray has to die for the same reason that flawed male friends such as Clint Hollister and Jim Fiske do. Although this attitude to white-Indian relationships clearly has a racist aspect, it becomes less clear that it's sexist.

White women sometimes die in Westerns, too, and it is interesting to look at the situations which usually lead to their deaths. It is notable that, while there are many loathsome villains in Westerns, as in *Shane* or *Man of the West*, it is a rare Western that shows a truly evil woman. Oftentimes a woman will be suspected of being a scheming femme fatale, as in *Garden*

of *Evil* or *Escape from Fort Bravo* (Sturges, 1953), but by the end of the film will show herself to have been unfairly maligned.

Station West (Lanfield, 1948) is a very odd film that deliberately blends elements of film noir (including its leads, Jane Greer and Dick Powell) with the Western. The mysterious “Charlie” (Greer), sister to the spoiled and scheming noir women, “runs a town,” and is always seen indoors, watched over by a hulking body guard. Lieutenant Haven (Powell) arrives in town incognito to investigate the murder of two soldiers guarding a gold shipment. Charlie is behind the thefts, and at the same time she is trying to seduce Haven, she is trying to arrange for his murder. She finally dies in his arms, hit by a bullet meant for Haven. *Station West* is an interesting experiment, but the two genres war with each other: the dialogue isn't snappy and cynical enough and the suspense isn't taut enough for a successful film noir, and the characters are too amoral and physically inert for a Western.

Jubal has a noirish love triangle, with Mae (Valerie French) trying to free herself from an older, unattractive husband (Ernest Borgnine) by tempting the new young foreman (Glenn Ford). Mae, of course, loses the hero to a more virtuous woman, and dies at the end of the film for her transgressions. However, Mae, unlike the black widow spiders of film noir, doesn't scheme to kill her husband (although he is killed), and her dissatisfaction with her situation seems more pitiable. When Mae says wistfully that the ranch is “10,000 acres of loneliness for a woman,” we can see that this is true and sympathize with her. (I discuss the meaning of women's isolation in Westerns further in Section VII of Chapter 3.)

As I discussed in Section II of the present chapter, men in Westerns tend to be defined by whom they will or will not kill. (Will Wright carefully lays out the steps by which the hero makes the decision to be violent in his lists of functions.) Since the hero and the villain tend to be the most violent men in a Western, it is a crucial distinction. Further, as I also noted, Western women tend to play out their moral dilemmas in terms of relationships rather than violence, making choices about whom they will or will not love. If they love the wrong man (an outlaw), it shows that their moral judgment is flawed. Just as villains are doomed to die for being violent in the wrong ways (killing unarmed men, or women, or children; or killing armed men who were defending the rights of any of the foregoing), women who mistakenly love and aid these men may well be doomed to death or at least misfortune.

Because they are so memorably strong-willed and so often caught in the crossfire in the final reel, it is somewhat surprising to notice that Barbara Stanwyck's "maverick queens" (in *Forty Guns* and *The Maverick Queen*, for example) aren't seen killing people or robbing banks or trains, or, in fact, doing anything worse than loving the wrong man (an outlaw killer). Jessica Drummond, the "high-ridin' woman with a whip," in *Forty Guns* (Fuller, 1957) is one of the most powerful women in Westerns. Her actions and emotions are on such a grand scale that they verge on the ridiculous, but compact, straight-backed Barbara Stanwyck as Jessica is too vivid a presence to be laughed off.

Everywhere Jessica rides, all in black, astride a white horse, forty armed men follow behind her. When she sits at her hugely long dinner

table, the men dine with her, like Queen Elizabeth I and her courtiers. And rather like Queen Elizabeth, her powerful position seems to corrupt ambitious men who are morally weak. In an effort to please her, they ruin or even kill her enemies. If she finds out, she pulls strings to protect them from the law — but then she banishes them. One former lover, the sheriff she installed, is so devastated when she writes a cheque to “pay him off” and be rid of him, that he hangs himself on her front porch.

Jessica has two weaknesses: her devotion to her degenerate brother, Rocky (John Erickson) and her growing love for lawman Griff Bonnell (Barry Sullivan). In the end, she is caught between them, when her brother uses her as a shield. Director Fuller wanted Griff to shoot right through Jessica and Rocky, but the studio demurred. Instead, almost as shockingly, Griff wounds her, and as she falls, shoots the brother dead. She recovers, to run desperately after Griff's wagon, calling his name, as he leaves town.

The most disappointing feature of Barbara Stanwyk's “maverick queen” roles is that she inevitably becomes, as Ted Sennett puts it, “a female Samson shorn of her considerable power by her involvement with men.”⁴⁵ The situation isn't made any more palatable by the fact that her leading men were uncharismatic actors, such as Ronald Reagan and Barry Sullivan (twice, and he also played drone to Claudette Colbert's milder queen bee in *Texas Lady*), who seem no match for her forceful personality.

Film scholars who have written of the Western often claim that “dance hall girls” (by whom they mean just about any woman who seems to have an extensive sexual past), are likely to come to a bad end, citing over

and over again the deaths of the characters played by Marlene Dietrich in *Destry Rides Again* (1939) and *Rancho Notorious* (1952). They ignore her similar role in *The Spoilers* (Enright, 1942), where she ends up, perfectly healthy, in the arms of hero John Wayne. Similarly, Cheryl J. Foote, in her survey of women's roles in Westerns, wrote of *Stagecoach*: "John Wayne immediately became synonymous with the hero of the Western. The character type Trevor portrayed, however, did not catch on. . . . American society was not ready to accept as a suitable partner for the American hero a woman who had been sexually active."⁴⁶ This is outrageously inaccurate, because women like Dallas, women with a past who are given a chance to live a new and better life, are very common in Westerns of the 1939-1969 period. Writers who are quick to dismiss the Western as a "regressive genre"⁴⁷ should at least be aware that it was commonplace in them, long before other genres seemed ready for it, for women who were clearly far from virginal to be "rewarded," nevertheless, by the hero's love and esteem, *if they showed a desire to change their lives*. As I argued in Section I of this chapter, the women in Westerns are often shown on a journey. When one of the prostitutes in *Westward the Women* is asked sternly, "Why do you want to go to California?" she replies with fervent sincerity, "We want a change."

In *The Guns of Fort Petticoat*, hero Hewitt (Audie Murphy) has a conversation with a prostitute who has shown herself to be as brave and warm-hearted as any other woman in the fort:

LUCY:

Wonder what it's like to have a kid of your own?

HEWITT:

Way to find out. Settle down.

LUCY:

Me? (Laughs incredulously).

HEWITT:

New country, new life, why not?. . . I knew a shoemaker once who became a violinist.

By the end of the film, Lucy is embarked on her new life, having resolved to raise the daughter of a slain defender of the fort.

In *The Tall Stranger* (Carr, 1957), Ellen (Virginia Mayo), the heroine who has had many men in her life but never a husband, resolves to go west for the sake of her son. As she explains “. . . the boy was getting old enough to be hurt by what was being said about him. That's when I got the strength to look for a new life, a good life.” She soon finds love with hero Ned Bannon (Joel McCrae), who cares nothing about what she has been in the past, only about what she wants to be in the future.

There are occasional bleak Westerns like *Man of the West*, already discussed, in which a woman's desire to change is overwhelmed by the weight of her past. But there are similar bleak Westerns about men who are overwhelmed in a similar way, such as *The Gunfighter*. They are greatly outnumbered by Westerns which are optimistic about the possibility of change, in which men forsake their violence, and women their promiscuity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Women are essential to the plots of many Westerns. In the simplest cases, they are unseen or briefly seen, but motivate the hero's actions. This is particularly common in Westerns with a revenge theme. Earlier analyses of the Western, including Will Wright's, tend to understate the woman's role because they do not distinguish women from society as a whole. I argue that Western heroines are more venturesome, and are helpful to the Western hero because they can meet him in the "borderland" between wilderness and civilization, and help him find his way from one to the other. Women commonly mark a man's passage to maturity by offering a potentially fruitful alternative to the sterility of the all-male gang; they may also function as healers of the hero's body and spirit.

It is interesting that Westerns show women's moral concerns to be very similar to those uncovered by Carol Gilligan in her study of women's moral development, *In a Different Voice*. Whereas men tend to conceptualize morality in terms of competing rights, emphasizing the primacy of the individual; women tend to conceptualize morality in terms of conflicting responsibilities, emphasizing the importance of the relationships among human beings.

Westerns follow a centuries-old literary tradition in presenting women in opposing pairs: fair and dark, virtuous and sinful. Often, in Westerns, the "dark lady" is Mexican or Native American, and she pays with her life for loving the white hero. However, white women are often

treated with more compassion, even if they have a “sinful” past. As long as they have resolved to make a fresh start in the West, they are eligible to win the hero's love.

Chapter 3

WOMEN OF THE REAL WEST AND THE REEL WEST

*. . .Whether the wilderness is real or not depends on
who lives there.*

— Margaret Atwood,
The Journals of Susanna Moodie

In comparing the experiences of real women of the West with those portrayed in films, one is not dealing simply with historical “reality” versus modern myth-making. The settling of the American continent was always the subject of myth and fantasy, even while it was occurring. And, because white people settled the continent in stages (or invaded it, looking at events from the point of view of Native Americans), moving roughly from East to West, there were always Easterners who had no first-hand knowledge of pioneer experiences and had never seen an Indian or a log cabin.

These Easterners, some of them contemplating a move to the West, some simply fantasizing about it, were an eager audience for captivity accounts (especially popular in the eighteenth century), and later for dime novels and plays about “the wild West,” and later still for Wild West shows. In 1903, when Wild West shows were still touring, *The Great Train Robbery* was filmed. Whatever inaccuracies Westerns have perpetuated about the American West, it seems well documented that they did not

originate them. In fact, it is arguable that the “west of the imagination” always had a more powerful hold on Americans than the actuality of the raw frontier, because wherever that frontier was located, only a minority of Americans had direct experience of it. Therefore, there seems some justification for Peter Homans' assertion that “the Western . . . was originally written in the East by Easterners, for Eastern reading. It really has very little to do with the West.” ¹

For me, the interesting question about Westerns and the historical West is not only: What is real and what is imagined? but also: How does gender change *both* the imaginative and the actual experience of going West?

I. LOOKING FOR AN EDEN IN THE WEST

American middle- and upper-class women of the mid-nineteenth century lived, as Glenda Riley puts it, in a world “radically altered from that of their grandmothers — or even of their mothers — where a woman's labour had often been critical to family survival. ” ² To fill the void, the “doctrine of domesticity,” preached from the pulpit and in the pages of the newly popular women's magazines, maintained that women “were absolutely crucial as guardians of morality and virtue.” ³ According to this doctrine, women should not seek paid employment or political participation, but should be content to reign supreme in their natural sphere, the home, functioning as “a living Gospel” (as one fervent writer put it) for their husbands and children. Riley argues that the reason the doctrine was attractive even to many well-educated women was that it

seemed to compensate them for the limits that were placed on them.

As a logical extension of this mode of thought, many publications urged women to go west, not simply as settlers, but as “moral missionaries.” Many women were susceptible to the idea that it was their duty to bring Christianity and the three R's to the Indians. The idealistic young Quaker teacher in *Cheyenne Autumn* (Ford, 1964) is a woman in this mould. Deborah (Carroll Baker) has no doubt that she is doing good when she teaches Cheyenne children, trapped on the arid southwestern reservation that is their prison, to read and write in English.

When his people are betrayed yet again by the American government, though, a Cheyenne leader rebukes her: “There will be no more school. . . .The white man's words are lies. It is better that our children not learn them.” Having raised this important issue, the film never really comes to grips with it. Deborah replies, “It is not the words, but who speaks them,” which seems to miss the point. The Cheyenne leader is talking about cultural genocide, whereas Deborah (and the film) seem to take the view that assimilation is inevitable, and the only problem is to make sure that the Cheyenne are taken care of by whites with kind intentions rather than ruthless ones.

Deborah, whose commitment to the children is deep and sincere, goes with the Cheyenne people on their epic journey north to their ancestral lands, even though she thinks their desperate action is wrong. She goes because she thinks that otherwise “her children” will not be properly cared for, which seems a somewhat racist assumption, since Deborah is not as culturally equipped to survive in open country as the Cheyenne are.

Annette Kolodny analyzed the way eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American women imagined the West and portrayed it in fiction in her groundbreaking study, *The Land Before Her: Fantasies and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. She suggests another reason why women might have been attracted to the West. In the cities of the East, middle- and upper-class women were essentially kept idle; in their fantasies of the West, they would have a chance to perform real work in the domestic sphere: work that was essential to their family's physical well-being, and work that was respected.

Few Westerns give women the chance to articulate the particular attractions of being useful in the West. However, *Drum Beat* (Daves, 1955) is an exception. The well-to-do Nancy Meek (Audrey Dalton), first seen in a reception room at the White House as an intimate of the President's daughter, travels west to live with her aunt and uncle. When she finds that they have been murdered, she resists the urgings of frontiersman John McKay (Alan Ladd) to return east. As she explains herself: "I came out here because I wanted to be what they call a pioneer woman. . . .I wanted so much to help my aunt and uncle — to mean something to somebody. I wanted to be wanted." After she's made the decision to stay and work her aunt and uncle's land, she clarifies her feelings further. "I've just learned something — why women in the West seem happier than women back Eastit's knowing they're needed. If a woman's needed, if she knows she's wanted — I'm going to stay. I think I can be needed here. (Looking ardently into Johnny's eyes.) I hope I can be."

One problem for nineteenth-century women trying to imagine what the move to the West could mean to their lives was that men had already defined westward expansion in a way that seemed to exclude women. As Annette Kolodny puts it “By the time European women began to arrive on the Atlantic shores of what is now the United States, the New World had long been given over to the fantasies of men.”⁴ And what purple fantasies they were! Over and over, male writers described the ravishment and conquest of the “virgin land.” Captain John Smith praised New England for “her treasures hauing yet neuer beene opened, nor her originalls wasted, consumed, nor abused.”⁵ In the mid-eighteenth century, Roger Wolcott wrote of the discovery of the Connecticut River in terms of a mariner who “press(es) upon the virgin stream who had as yet/Never been violated with a ship.”⁶ Kolodny traces such imagery through to the mid-nineteenth century, encompassing Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, mountain men and plainsmen, and in literature, such figures as Cooper's Leatherstocking:

Adhering to the underlying fantasy components, the myth of the woodland hero necessarily involves a man (as Natty Bumppo calls himself) “form'd for the wilderness” and a quintessentially feminine terrain apparently designed to gratify his desires. ⁷

The more sinister and destructive aspect of seeing the land as a virgin awaiting conquest was the desire to execute that conquest by transforming the land on a huge scale. In *Crazy Horse and Custer*, Stephen E. Ambrose describes the Ohio of Custer's youth as a place where the need to “clear the land” reached a frenzy of destructiveness, trees girdled or burned long before the land on which they stood was needed for farming, and left standing with stark, bare limbs where once there was a green

forest.⁸ At the same time, native birds and animals were being hunted to extinction. When a feeling of disappointment and disgust took over — when the fresh virgin had become defiled in men's eyes — then, in order to restore the fantasy, it was necessary to move farther west to unspoiled territory and start the process again.

Looking at the imagery used by women writers when describing journeys to the West and the experience of making a home there, Kolodny found that “massive exploitation and alteration of the continent do not seem to have been part of women's fantasies. They dreamed, more modestly, of locating a home and a familial human community within a cultivated garden.”⁹ She also offers the interesting observation that women seem to have approached the settlement of the western prairies with greater psychological ease than the settlement of earlier frontiers, because the treeless, wildflower-strewn plains resembled a vast natural garden. Here, human beings did not have to rip a home out of the forest.

One of the most poignant moments in any Western comes in *The Unforgiven* (Huston, 1960), when Mrs. Zachary (Lillian Gish) is forced to confess that her daughter Rachel is really a Kiowa child stolen from her own people. By this time, Mrs. Zachary knows that much tragedy has come from her deception. She relives the day when her own baby died, and how, while her “breasts were still hurtin' with all that milk,” her husband brought her “a beautiful little Indian baby.” Then she stops to pick fretfully at a houseplant, and says, in an exhausted voice, something that at first seems inconsequential: “If only we could raise some decent flowers

instead of these scrawny things. I wish we could raise nasturtiums — then we could have a yardful like when I was a girl.” In fact, she is summing up what she perceives as the bitter failure of her life: that, despite her best efforts, she could not transform the desert into a garden. She could not make things grow: not the beautiful flowers of a gentler country, not the beloved child of her body. Her efforts to find substitutes have led to murder and the dissolution of her family.

In *The Land Before Her*, Kolodny considers a sub-genre of nineteenth-century domestic fiction by and for women that she calls “the novel of western relocation.” These novels, of great interest to women who were thinking about going west, featured “a frontier Eve” in a “simple lilac print dress” who travelled westward to begin a new life. The creative dilemma for the writers of these novels was how to “insert a domesticating Eve” into “the same terrain already imaginatively appropriated by ‘the most significant, most emotionally compelling myth-hero’ of American culture, the isolate American Adam” (that is, Cooper’s Leatherstocking and his woman-shunning woodsman and mountain man successors). The solution was to “bring Adam out of the woods and into the town,”¹⁰ when the heroine persuades him to give up his solitary life and become part of a settled community, often as a farmer. However, Kolodny concludes:

Looking back over American literary history, however, the Adams and Eves of the domestic fictions appear anomalous. Their figures are no longer familiar to us, and — except in the degraded version of the cowboy reluctantly tamed and married by a civilizing schoolmarm — their story seems to have left no lasting imprint on our shared cultural imagination. An Eve who would cheerfully, and on her own, make a home of a “bivouac in the wilderness” and an

Adam who would just as eagerly seek to create a home in that same wilderness — these are the figures of an American paradisaal myth that never took hold. 11

Kolodny, so thorough in her literary research and so astute in her analyses, may not have seen many Western films, since longing for a wilderness Eden (by both men and women) sometimes plays a powerful role in them, and not simply in the “degraded version” she dismisses.

I have already written in Chapter 2 of the roles that women typically play in Western films, and how their influence may turn the hero away from loneliness, bitterness and a preoccupation with revenge and death toward heterosexual love and generativity. Often their love is explicitly linked with the idea of finding or establishing a paradise in the wilderness. For example, after Comanche Todd falls in love with Jennie in *The Last Wagon*, he imagines a life with her in a fertile Eden so benevolent that the elements need not be kept out:

TODD:

Me, I could never stand bein' in a house. Walls creakin' and windows squeakin'. Things rattlin' all night long — 'taint natural.

JENNIE:

But folks have to have houses — a roof over their heads.

TODD:

The sky can be a roof. Like now.

JENNIE:

But in winter —

TODD:

Have you ever been in a wickiup? Made of willows — smells real sweet. Easy to build, too. Anyplace — wherever you want to be.

Come spring or summer, you can move on, if you've a mind to.

JENNIE:

That's not permanent, though.

TODD:

As permanent as you want. For years . . . months . . . or just a night.

The appeal to a woman to accompany a man to a natural Eden that needs no tilling is relatively rare. More commonly, the Western hero in love will haltingly confess to a woman that he has a “spread” somewhere which he has not yet cultivated, but which would yield a good life for a man and a woman working together. Ringo's words to Dallas in *Stagecoach* seem to distil this longing for Paradise to its purest essence: “I still got a ranch across the Border. It's a nice place . . . a real nice place . . . trees . . . grass . . . water . . . a cabin half-built . . . a man could live there . . . and a woman.” By contrast, one of the Western's clearest expressions of despair about lost love comes in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (Ford, 1962), when a much older John Wayne, as Tom Doniphon, sets fire to the house he was building for the sweetheart who left him.

In *Drum Beat*, images of agricultural fertility are used to generate considerable erotic heat between a woman who has taken up farming, and the buckskin-clad “Indian fighter” whom she wants to persuade to share her life. As they stand close together in the twilight, Nancy tells John that she'll need a good man for her farm.

JOHN:

Someone who could do everything around the place?

NANCY:

Yes, he'd have to be good at everything. (*She kisses him.*) Have to know how to plough (*kiss*) . . . plant seed (*even more passionate kiss, after which she shakily utters her final word*). . . harvest (*most passionate kiss of all*).

The most detailed working out of the Eden myth, though, comes in *How the West Was Won* (Hathaway, Marshall, Ford, 1962). Most analysts of Westerns have agreed that this film is unsatisfying, both because it proved once and for all the technical limitations of the Cinerama process, and because, although it has numerous impressive set pieces (shooting rapids on a raft, a buffalo stampede), it has no dramatic cohesion. A crucial aspect of the latter problem seems to have eluded them, however. *How the West Was Won* begins as the story of two sisters, Eve and Lilith Prescott, and their westering experiences. However, the film largely abandons the sisters when the Civil War breaks out, and with them the freshness of its point of view. It turns to the much more familiar story of Eve's son Zeb, who as cavalry officer and lawman does everything we would expect of such a hero without ever rising above the clichés.

The first half of *How the West was Won* is unusual for its interest in pioneer women and how the experience of going west appears to them. Eve (Carroll Baker), the older sister, is presented as a dreamy romantic, influenced in her view of herself as a pioneer by the very kind of romanticized writing about a new Eden described by Annette Kolodny. At the family campsite, she reads aloud to her scoffing younger sister:

EVE:

Theirs was a poignant partin' in the forest. The handsome young backwoodsman carved two hearts on the tree trunk. Then from ten paces he hurled a knife at the junction of the two hearts. . . . That was for love, deep divine love, he said . . .

LILITH:

There ain't no sense to you, Eve. You want to be a farm wife, but you don't want to marry a farmer.

Soon after, Eve meets up with the man of her dreams, a mountain man (James Stewart) who appears at their camp, paddling a birchbark canoe piled high with furs. Her conviction that this romantic loner — much older than she is and an admitted “sinful man” — is meant for her is so strong that she breaks down his defences:

EVE:

How pretty do I look to you?

LINUS:

Ain't you bein' just a little bit forward?

EVE:

Well, we're headed upriver and you're headed downstream.
There's no time to get these questions answered.

In the morning, Linus is gone, but Eve is calmly confident that he will return, showing her sister a heart that Linus carved on a tree to please her. “You got a grown man to do *that*?” gasps Lilith incredulously. Although Linus breaks away from her once, he finds her again a short time later, now a broken-hearted orphan struggling with Lilith to dig their parents' graves. This time he stays, to take up farming on the land where Eve's parents are buried.

But Eve's story doesn't end here, as it does in other Westerns that make use of Edenic elements. We see Eve again, some twenty years later, living on a poor dirt farm, worn beyond her years, hands trembling with eagerness as she opens a treasured letter from her sister, Lilith. Restless Linus has not remained with her and her son is about to go off to war. Eve has paid dearly for her romantic fantasies: her "isolate American Adam" could never be domesticated, and her poor farm looks nothing like a garden.

In Hebrew legend, Lilith was Adam's first wife, but because she refused to bend to his will, she was expelled from Eden and became a demonic creature of the air. She is referred to as "the night hag" in the Revised Standard version of the Bible (Isa. 34:14).¹² But on the frontier, *How the West was Won* suggests, bold, independent Lilith (Debbie Reynolds) is likely to have a more rewarding life than pliant Eve. Although many Westerns feature heroines who seem fearless and self-sufficient, they are often "tamed and domesticated" by the last reel. Lilith, however, remains true to her own unsentimental goals: to make a lot of money and to avoid being saddled with children and domestic chores.

We first see her as a tart-tongued teenager. While Eve sets her sights on Linus, Lilith sits in the background, mischievously singing an anti-marriage folksong:

When I was single, Went dressed up so fine
Now I am married, Go ragged all the time.

Of course, in the end, this is a prophetic description of what happens to her sister.

After her parents' deaths, Lilith becomes a music hall star in St. Louis with many wealthy admirers, until (in her words) “an old goat” leaves her a gold mine in California. She joins a wagon train heading west to claim her fortune. The wagon master (Robert Preston) is soon courting her, in terms that would be irresistible to more conventional Western heroines — he has a “spread” and wants to install her there in domestic bliss, raising a large family. Lilith is appalled, and turns him down.

Hearing of the gold mine, a gambler named Cleve van Valen (Gregory Peck) tries to assure her of his undying love, but Lilith isn't fooled for a minute. Nevertheless, she falls in love with him, because he's a money-hungry rascal much like herself. When they find that the gold mine is played out, Cleve abandons her, and she returns to entertaining to earn a living. Eventually she and Cleve are reconciled on a riverboat where she is singing and he is gambling: he proves his love by “throwing in a winning hand” to pursue her and propose to her.

In the final episode of the film, we are reunited with Lilith, now a feisty septuagenarian widow, with her fine San Francisco house and furnishings being auctioned out from under her. She refuses condolences: “We made and spent three fortunes together. What's so sad about that? If he'd lived longer, we'd have made another.” She heads for the southwest to join her nephew Zeb, and in one of our last glimpses of her, still resolutely undomesticated, she is teaching Zeb's young sons how to play poker.

II. THE EXPERIENCE OF GOING WEST

I have, to this point, been exploring some of women's imaginative responses to the West, as they were expressed in the nineteenth century, and remnants of these responses which can be found in many Western films. Also available for study are the unadorned records, not of what women dreamed of finding in the West, but of what they actually did find. What did the westward journey seem like to the women who survived it?

Many excellent studies of westering women's experiences have been published in recent years. What is fascinating is that, while the bare facts of the journey — the routes, the vehicles, the length of time for travel — remain the same as in earlier historical studies that stress men's experiences, the hazards of the journey and the daily texture of life seem surprisingly different when seen through women's eyes. I would like to examine some of these differences, and also consider the way most Western films tend to overlook or distort them.

Between 1840 and 1870, some half a million people made the westward overland journey to Oregon or California. Whether they took the northern or the southern route from the Missouri River, they covered over 2,000 miles in mule- or oxen-drawn covered wagons (often smaller and meaner looking than the billowing white "Prairie Schooners" of the movies) which could only travel about fifteen or twenty miles a day. There were treacherous rivers to cross, mountain ranges where early snows could trap travellers, and long stretches of desert. ¹³

The travellers were well aware that they were participants in an historic event, and over 800 of their diaries and letters describing life on

the trail have been preserved in U.S. archives. Many of these were produced by women, but it is only in recent years that feminist scholars have given them close study.

While great numbers of single men went west, either unmarried or leaving their wives and children behind, nearly all the women who made the journey were married and travelling with their husbands and often with children. In fact, when Lillian Schlissel studied 103 women's diaries of the journey, she found that 20 percent were either pregnant or gave birth during the journey. "For women who were pregnant," she writes, "the overland crossing could be a nightmare. One never knew for certain where labour might begin: in Indian Territory, or in the mountains, or in drenching rain." ¹⁴ Childbirth is seldom mentioned in the men's diaries, even when we know from other sources that their own wives gave birth on the trail. Women's diaries, by contrast, are full of such entries, not only about births in their own families, but about births in other wagons, and the state of the mother's and baby's health.

For women who were travelling with small children, there were other challenges and fears: that children would be lost among the hundreds of people and animals which made up the lumbering train, that they would fall off the wagon and be crushed, that they would sicken and die, especially when there was no clean water to drink, or when all the bedding and clothing had been drenched in a rainstorm. Sandra Myres quotes one diary entry about a young child who was actually left behind at a rest stop because everyone thought she was in someone's else's wagon. Fortunately, the following wagon train found the child wandering on the prairie and she

was reunited with her family.¹⁵ And what mother would not feel a sympathetic ache in her arms when reading the dairy of Sarah Butler Yorke, who had to “hold my baby all day to keep her from falling out of the wagon.”¹⁶ Sarah's arms supported a squirming toddler, in a lurching wagon, for four months!

In another way, the diaries of men and women are dramatically different:

As ritual caretakers of the sick and dying, the women saw the real enemies of the road as disease and accident. . . .The women . . . carefully noted the cost of westward movement in human life. Whereas men recorded the death in aggregate numbers, the women knew death as a personal catastrophe and noted the particulars of each grave site, whether it was newly dug or old, whether of a young person or adult, whether it had been disturbed by wolves or Indians. ¹⁷

Lest the women seem overly negative and timid about the hazards, it is instructive to look at the numbers compiled by John Unruh. He calculates that about 10,000 people died on the overland trail between 1840 and 1860. Most of these died of cholera. About 300 died crossing rivers. A considerable number died in shooting accidents, since virtually all the men were armed for fear of Indian attacks, and many were inexperienced in the use of weapons. The irony is that relatively few settlers died in Indian attacks: Unruh totes up 362, less than 4 percent of the settlers who made the journey in those twenty years, and also notes that settlers appear to have killed 426 Indians during the same period. ¹⁸

Schlissel speaks of how the overland journey played a positive role in the life cycle of young men: “the adventure took on the colour of some

dramatic rite of passage to mastery and adulthood.”¹⁹ As we have already seen in Chapter 2 of this thesis, “individuation” is seen by psychologists who use male life experiences as a model to be an important stage of development. However, as Gilligan and others have documented, the same craving to cut emotional ties does not seem to occur in young women. In fact, most of the women whose diaries Schlissel examined were at a stage of life — pregnant or coping with young children — when a parting from their mothers and sisters was most painful to them. Their diaries record the severance with “anguish, a note conspicuously absent from the diaries of men.”²⁰

Surprisingly few Westerns have made the overland journey by covered wagon their main subject. Perhaps this is because the journey was a group experience rather than the exploit of an individual. Further, it was, even for the men who made the journey in the spirit of adventure, essentially a story of plodding endurance rather than of heroic action. From the period 1939 to 1969, I have seen only three: *Wagon Master* (1950), *Westward the Women* (1952), and *The Way West* (1967). However, wagon train episodes form part of the story of many Westerns, including *Jubal*, *The Tall Stranger*, *The Last Wagon*, *How the West Was Won*, and *Red River*.

Except for *Westward the Women*, which focuses on the rigours of the journey for women and the ways they help each other (see my reading of this film), few Westerns give more than passing attention to the experiences recorded in westering women's diaries. The harried mothers,

bouncing along on the wagon seat with their children, all dressed in sunbonnets and calico, are extras in a primarily male-oriented drama.

Three Godfathers (Ford, 1948) even manages to turn the greatest challenge to a pioneering woman's courage — giving birth on the trail — into a story of *men's* bravery and sacrifice. Wagon train births were almost always overseen by “the ritual caretakers,” in Schlissel's phrase, and when necessary women who scarcely knew each other would give aid, knowing that they might soon need such comfort themselves. However, in *Three Godfathers*, the plot is manipulated so that a woman is giving birth completely alone, until three outlaws come upon her. She conveniently dies, leaving them to struggle with boyish incompetence with the baby's basic care. Although the film is usually seen as a charmingly sentimental tale, ringing the changes on both the story of the three wise men and the prodigal son, it also manipulates the biblical elements to aggrandize the men. In the Bible, the wise men simply attend on Mary and the Christ child; but in *Three Godfathers*, the men replace the mother.

In general, wagon train Westerns prefer the unencumbered woman who is available for a romance with the hero. Sometimes she is travelling alone (as in *How the West was Won*, *Red River*, *Wagon Master*), sometimes with a son or younger brother old enough to take care of himself (*The Tall Stranger*, *The Last Wagon*). Although such women were relatively rare on the overland trail, there is a certain truth to the spirited way they are portrayed. Sandra Myres, for example, describes four “dead-eye Dianas” who were crack shots and kept a whole wagon train well supplied with antelope meat.²¹ Lillian Schlissel found that young women

were the most likely to enjoy the journey and exult in the relative freedom of the trail. She quotes one diarist who is thrilled with the sense of power that driving a team of oxen gives her, and another who argues with her mother about whether she should wear cast-off men's clothes for their practicality.²² These adventurous, self-confident young women were sisters to whip-cracking Lilith (*How the West Was Won*) and practical, pants-clad Jennie (*The Last Wagon*).

The Way West gives the most complete picture I have seen of the entire journey west from staging area in Independence, Missouri all the way to Oregon. The film seems to have taken great care with many of the details. Most of the wagons are pulled by oxen, not the horses that many westerns show, and there is an eccentric mix of vehicles, with some emigrants travelling in much greater comfort than others. Even the Sioux are treated reasonably accurately: they speak their own language and make friendly, if somewhat rambunctious, overtures to the settlers (correct for the 1840s setting of this film, when whites were not yet perceived as the enemy). They are even willing to negotiate the proper punishment when a white man murders one of their children. But the treatment of women in this film is particularly unpleasant.

In an early scene, we see a newlywed couple in their wagon. Johnny Mack (Michael Witney), is eager to make love to his new wife, Amanda (Katherine Justice), but she refuses him, explaining that she is afraid that she will become pregnant on the trail, and begging him to wait until they get to Oregon. The film gives no sympathy to her fears, treating them as evidence of her selfishness and also as the first signs of her mental

instability. Johnny is then “taken advantage of” by a young girl named Mercy (Sally Field in her first film role), who is always shown smiling lewdly and flaunting her body. While returning from a tryst with Mercy, Johnny panics and shoots what he thinks is a wolf but turns out to be a Sioux child. The Sioux threaten to attack unless the murderer is punished, so Johnny must be hanged. His wife rushes forward, calling his name, to try to give him an alibi, and he scornfully rebuffs her: “Johnny — *that’s* my name, ain’t it, Amanda. It’s good to hear it for once.”

Thus the film explicitly blames Amanda’s failure to fulfil her wifely obligations (and Mercy’s sluttish allure) for all the misfortunes that follow. The film endorses John’s judgment that his wife has “iron corsets in her skin,” while Mercy is “hellfire and sin.” Willing or not, these women just never get it right!

III. WOMEN AND INDIANS

There are actually several Westerns about wagon trains that do *not* feature Indian attacks, including *The Tall Stranger* and *Wagon Master*.

Nevertheless, there is a reasonable expectation that when you see a long shot of a wagon train making its vulnerable way across a vast expanse of open ground, with hills in the background, you will soon see a band of whooping Indians gallop down from those hills to attack the wagons.

Even when the main plot of the film is about something else, a perfunctory Indian attack is often included, featuring long shots of generic Indians riding suicidally around and around the circled wagons, interspersed with medium shots of them and/or their horses biting the dust,

after which the remaining few ride off, utterly thwarted in their obscure aims. The other form of Indian attack is the chase after a fleeing wagon or stagecoach, in which the Indians fire only at the passengers (sometimes fatally injuring minor characters, or hitting leading players high in the arm or shoulder), while never firing at the horses, which would bring their quarry to an abrupt halt. No wonder Native Americans have protested that Westerns make them look stupid.

The “Indian attack” is so common a motif in Westerns that it is a shock to discover, as I reported earlier in this chapter, that more than twenty times as many westward travellers died of disease as were killed by Indians. In *Women and Indians on the Frontier*, Glenda Riley points out that nineteenth-century Easterners making the journey west were just as misinformed by sensationalist writing about “bloodthirsty redskins,” as twentieth-century filmgoers have been. Because of their exaggerated fear of Indians, they actually made the journey more dangerous for themselves:

On the trail they joined with so many other travellers that parties became unwieldy and often created difficulties in locating campsites, water, and grass. However, it was generally thought to be better to experience the problems of a train that was too large than to take the chance of being overpowered by unfriendly American Indians. But, as Lavinia Porter [a westering woman] pointed out, the warmongering attitudes and actions of train members could actually create more danger than they deterred. After remonstrating in vain with hostile train members, she and her family, fearing retaliation from the Indians whom the migrants had abused, left the train to attempt the journey on their own. Their experience was instructive: not only were they never bothered by Native Americans, but one travelled with them for three days as a guide. 23

Riley repeats many stories that would be funny if the outcome had not been so serious. Panicked settlers, alert to every noise and unused to the weapons they were carrying, exacted a fearsome toll on livestock, fellow travellers, and occasionally actual Indians whose intent was friendly. (In this regard, *The Way West*'s depiction of Johnny Mack, firing wildly into the darkness, seems tragically accurate.)

Both Sandra L. Myres and Glenda Riley dispute the much-quoted idea, expressed for example by Leslie Fiedler in *The Return of the Vanishing American*, that white women and Native Americans were naturally at odds, because "women represented the world of civilization as opposed to the natural free world of the Indians."²⁴ Indians and white men could have been friends, this line of thought goes, if the arrival of white women, and the tensions they caused, hadn't poisoned the relationship. As one historian cited by Myres analyzed it, once women were present, white men had to fight Indians (even though they didn't wish to), "to protect women from their own sexuality."²⁵ "It is interesting to discover," Myres continues, "that the opinion that all women hated and feared Indians was a view held primarily by men."²⁶

Since Westerns, as I discussed in Chapter 1, were primarily created by men, perhaps we should not be surprised that they are in keeping with the theories cited above by Myres and Riley. By the evidence of Western films, the relationship between whites and Indians was poisoned, more than anything else, by a fear of miscegenation. As we have seen in Chapter 2, an Indian woman, no matter how pure and noble, will probably die if she

falls in love with a white man. However, a relationship between an Indian man and a white woman is even more taboo.

In *Cattle Queen of Montana* (Dwan, 1954) and *Devil's Doorway* (Mann, 1950), an attraction is delicately hinted at, but it is unthinkable that it could come to anything. "Good Indian" Colorados (Lance Fuller) is fond enough of Sierra Nevada Jones (Barbara Stanwyck) to arouse the jealousy of a Blackfoot woman who loves him and considers Sierra her rival. Later, this woman is caught in the crossfire of a gun battle, apparently paying with her life for having such forbidden thoughts. As she dies, Sierra cradles her, murmuring "you were so wrong" (i.e. in her suspicions). In *Devil's Doorway*, Civil War hero Broken Lance (Robert Taylor) is doomed to die for his efforts to bridge white and Indian cultures, but before he does, he comforts the white woman with whom he has *almost* had a romance: "Don't cry, Orrie — a hundred years from now it might have worked." The threat implied by these interracial near-romances is further diffused by having white actors portray the Indian men.

Many Westerns (such as *Union Pacific*, *Stagecoach*, *Winchester '73*, and *The Unforgiven*) include a scene in which white men are on the verge of shooting white women, or handing them guns to shoot themselves. "I know about that last bullet," says Lola/Shelley Winters solemnly in *Winchester '73*. We know about that last bullet too, of course — it is to save the white women from a fate worse than death if they are taken alive by the Indians.

Annette Kolodny argued that the “captivity story” is the oldest indigenous American literary form ²⁷, and certainly stories of white women captured by Indians have a long and lurid history. There were such captives, of course, but their experiences have been distorted in such a way as to “pander to the basic white male desire at once to ravish and deplore, vicariously share and publicly condemn, the rape of white innocence,” ²⁸ as Leslie Fiedler put it. He was discussing eighteenth-century writings, but could just as well be discussing a scene in *Two Rode Together* (Ford, 1961). Returned Indian captive Elena de Madriaga (Linda Cristal) faces a roomful of whites and satisfies their vulgar curiosity about her life with the Comanches. While the film allows film viewers to deplore the racism shown by the whites, it also gratifies their desire to imagine the lascivious details:

. . .if the truth will quiet your unspoken questions, I give it gladly. For five years, I was the woman of the Comanche Stone Calf. He treated me like a wife. The work was hard, the scoldings frequent, and occasionally he beat me. I did not bear him any children. I know that many of you regard me as a degraded woman. Degraded by the touch of a savage Comanche — by having to live as one of them. You said, why did I not kill myself —

Elena breaks off, weeping, and Guthrie McCabe (James Stewart), her protector, finishes, “She didn’t kill herself because her religion forbids it. Sometimes it takes a lot more courage to live than to die.” The implication seems to be that, had she not been Catholic, suicide would have been an appropriate response to her situation.

Both *Two Rode Together* and Ford’s earlier *The Searchers* (1956) depict women in supporting roles as captives who have been driven

completely mad by the experience. Debbie (Natalie Wood), the captive who inspires the long quest in *The Searchers*, is unusual in that she does not wish to return home, but this, too, is treated as a kind of madness which should not be respected. Debbie is taken back from the Comanches against her will, and the film considers this second kidnapping fully justified.

Trooper Hook (Warren, 1957) takes a less hysterical view of the plight of the returning Indian captive. Cora Sutcliffe's (Barbara Stanwyck's) highest priority is her son, who has an Indian father. Her concern for his welfare gives her the strength to cope with bewildering changes in her life. The film suggests that if the Army hadn't rounded up the Apaches, and forceably separated her and her son from them, she would have fared quite well as an adoptive Apache. Returned to the white world, her self-esteem is intact, but, as she astutely says of the white men who stare at her, "They hate the Indian for what they themselves might have done, but they hate me even more." (This is, of course, precisely the dynamic that Fiedler was discussing.) The Indian father, who escapes and pursues her, values the son more highly than he does Cora; on the other hand, Cora's white husband wants her back, but rejects her son. However, Cora proudly believes that she deserves a man who can accept both her and the boy, and the film provides her with one: Sergeant Hook (Joel McCrea), the man assigned to escort her home. Both the unsuitable husbands are conveniently killed off, so that Hook, who values Cora and doesn't presume to judge her, can claim her in the closing scene.

Using the diaries, memoirs and letters of nineteenth-century women as evidence, both Myres and Riley present a very different picture of white

women's relationships with Indians from that depicted in most Westerns. They cite the frequent cases of white women who, far from being driven mad by the experience of living with the Comanches or the Sioux, freely chose this life when they were later given the opportunity to return to white society. In the less drastic circumstances under which most white women encountered Native Americans, Riley asserts that women's relationships with them tended to be more harmonious than white men's. For one thing, the division of labour tended to give the men a more adversarial role:

It was the men who were responsible for cutting paths into the Indians' domain. They pushed wagons, people, and stock over the trails; seized native hunting grounds; and fended off Indians who might choose to resist such incursions. . . .In addition to child bearing and care, [women's duties] centred around supplying food and clothing for their families. . . .Women routinely bartered, traded, and entered into acts of mutual assistance. In other words, in their attempts to provide food, clothing, and other commodities for those people who depended on them for succour, women often formed relationships of mutual support with Indians. **29**

Riley goes on to report the surprising fact that when women were part of westering expeditions, they (and not the men) were primarily responsible for trading with Indians. ³⁰ I have not seen a single Western which depicts women carrying out this function.

Based on her study of primary sources, Riley asserts that white women who initially were fearful or antagonistic toward Native Americans were likely to change to more favourable attitudes as they came to know these people better. (Riley excludes from this generalization women in areas of settlement, particularly Texas, where there was bitter warfare

between whites and native groups.) Further, she says that the women were more likely than white men to visit Indian villages and to be invited into homes. In general, they were more interested than their men in the cultural details of native life, especially Indian women's practical knowledge of food gathering and preparation, herbal remedies, and so forth.

Riley marshals ample evidence that even army wives, who might have been expected to hate and fear the people who put their husbands' lives in danger, often became surprisingly sympathetic to the Indian cause:

Army wives serve as a particularly good illustration of how white women grew to understand American Indians as their contacts with them increased and improved. Army women lived every minute under the threat of attack and the possibility of losing their husbands. . . . Therefore, their goodwill, affection, and sympathy toward native Americans are rather surprising. Despite the death of her first husband, killed in the Fetterman "massacre," Frances Carrington expressed sympathy for the Indians who had been forced to give away the hunting grounds upon which their lives depended. 31

Later, Riley quotes Carrington again, writing of her time at Fort Laramie: "it had become apparent to any sensible observer that Indians of that country would fight to the death for home and native land, with a spirit akin to that of any American soldier, and who could say that their spirit was not commendable and to be respected." 32

IV. THE WOMEN THEY LEFT BEHIND

Many of the army wives who lived in the West during the period of conflict with the Plains Nations, including Frances Carrington, left records

of their experiences. The memoir of Elizabeth Burt is particularly fascinating because she was in so many ways exactly the kind of steadfast wife whom John Ford valorized in his cavalry trilogy.

Elizabeth was the wife of Andrew Burt, a career army officer whom she met when she nursed him during the Civil War. Over the next forty years, she made a home for him at isolated forts all over the American west, from Fort McDowell in Arizona to Fort Missoula in Montana, and including Fort Laramie at the time of Custer's defeat by the Sioux and Cheyenne. In 1912, Burt wrote a memoir for her family. By then, she was describing a time already vanished, almost unimaginable to her well-to-do grandchildren, when the Plains Indians still lived free in their own country, when rough army quarters had no indoor plumbing or running water, and when the transcontinental railroad was still under construction. (The Burts usually lived well west of the railhead). Yet this time, so unfamiliar to her offspring, is startlingly familiar to moviegoers. Anyone who has seen *Fort Apache* has no trouble visualizing the following scene:

We wives who were left behind knew the inevitable danger to all in the field. With aching hearts we watched the soldiers march away while the band played, "The Girl I Left Behind Me." So many times have I listened to that mournful tune played when a command marches out of the garrison to take the field. This time we knew so well there was to be fighting to the death. . . . To this day when I hear that air, tears come to my eyes. 33

Yet Burt does not dwell on the waiting and the fear. Although she was devoted to her husband and speaks of him lovingly and proudly throughout the memoir, it is *her* memoir, and she tells of her own adventures. She once took her children (one a new-born baby) on a

journey of 800 miles across the plains in early winter to reach her husband at a remote posting. She and her sister and her youngest child were almost captured by Plains Indians when they went outside the stockade of Fort Smith to see a beautiful field of flowers. (Annette Kolodny would understand this impulse.) On another occasion, she fended off with aplomb and tact what she understood to be a Sioux leader's offer to buy her baby son. Even when she was not dealing with extraordinary occurrences, her life was busy and full: bearing and raising three children in frontier conditions; trading and bargaining for fruit, vegetables and household goods that were always in short supply; planning dinners and parties for visitors and single officers; supervising servants when she had them; and socializing with other women, including her unmarried sister who lived with the family.

Most cavalry Westerns are indifferent to the question of what women's lives were like once the men marched out the gate, or at least fail to imagine them with much verve. The listless *A Distant Trumpet* (Walsh, 1963) features rival dark and fair heroines who have no activities at all: their only entertainment seems to be devising veiled insults for each other as they wait to see which of them Lieutenant Hazard will choose for his wife.

Only John Ford seems interested in the lives and activities of the women at western forts. *Fort Apache*, in particular, gives as much time to the women as to the men and shows an appreciation for their contributions to the community. The rituals and formal patterns of the non-commissioned officer's dance, orchestrated by Mrs. O'Rourke (Irene Rich), are given as

much weight as the military manoeuvres of the soldiers. Further, there is as much esprit de corps among the women as among the soldiers. The women respond quickly to newcomer Philadelphia's (Shirley Temple's) despairing comment that "we haven't even got a coffee pot," and under the guidance of Mrs. O'Rourke, they generously piece together comfortable quarters for her and her father by lending a chair, or curtains, or dishes.

In *Fort Apache*, the women value each other for their personal qualities ("In time of trouble, we call on Mrs. O'Rourke"), whereas the men are divided by the formalities of rank. Mrs. O' Rourke confidently welcomes Philadelphia into the O'Rourke home and encourages her son Michael (John Agar) to court her, whereas both Colonel Thursday (Henry Fonda) and Sergeant-Major O'Rourke (Ward Bond) feel that the match is unsuitable because of what O'Rourke calls "the barrier between your class and mine." Yet the women's view of what is appropriate eventually prevails, when Philadelphia and Michael O'Rourke are married.

Just as young Michael O'Rourke has soldier "uncles" who look out for him, Philadelphia Thursday has a group of older women who help her settle in. In fact, Ford's Westerns often feature steadfast older women who provide wisdom and kindness for the younger ones. (One of the fascinations of Elizabeth Burt's memoir is her development from lieutenant's nervous young bride to unflappable wife of the commanding officer.) Sometimes the older woman's courage seems to be defined by male military standards, as when *Fort Apache's* Mrs. Collingwood, with her husband's transfer in her hand, refuses to call him back from a dangerous mission, even though the other women urge her to do so. But at

other times, Ford shows an appreciation for a different kind of courage, as when Mrs. Allshard (Mildred Natwick), the major's wife in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), says “Oh, the army. I planted twenty-four gardens the first ten years of our marriage. I've never stayed long enough to see a single bloom.”

Ford's *Rio Grande* focuses on another test of women's courage: the strain that military life puts on a marriage. The film is as much devoted to the drama of Cavalry Colonel Kirby Yorke's gradual reconciliation with his estranged wife, Kathleen, as it is to his military exploits. Kathleen (Maureen O'Hara) answers her son's question about what kind of a man his father is by saying, “A lonely man — a very lonely man. ” And the film shares this view, showing Kirby (John Wayne) walking alone as his troopers sing around the fire in the background. As J.A. Place describes it:

Kirby, who has no place in their circle (isolated by his rank and his own sense of alienation) walks alone by the Rio Grande. As we watch him in long shot, the expanse of the river and surrounding empty land dwarfing him, night falls and further cuts him off from any contact or connection with his own family. There is a closeup of his face expressing all his suffering and loneliness. **34**

This, we realize, has been his life for fifteen long years, since as a Union officer he burned his southern wife's plantation, and she left him. In the film's present they are reunited but not reconciled; in fact, they are further divided by a new dispute. Kathleen wants to buy their son, Jeff, out of the army, and Kirby wants Jeff to stick with his commitment. To Joan Mellen, the struggle between husband and wife is clearly one-sided: “O'Hara is quickly overwhelmed by Wayne's strength, manly courage, and stoicism.” **35**

It is true that Kathleen has to learn to accept that she cannot make Kirby put his personal loyalties before his devotion to duty. However, Kirby also has to learn to respect Kathleen's values, which put love of friends and family first. For instance, although Kirby refuses to help Kathleen use influence to get Jeff out of the army (and, indeed, Jeff himself is determined to stay), the father does pull strings to assign Jeff to escort duty for a convoy of women and children, rather than sending him into battle. Kathleen says fervently, "He'll hate you — but I love you for it."

Each gesture of rapprochement by one spouse is followed by a gesture from the other, until they gradually achieve a compromise that leaves them both their dignity — but not their foolish pride. Joan Mellen misses the subtleties of the scene in which Kathleen does the laundry, seeing it as her return to her proper domestic sphere.³⁶ Rather, Kathleen is ritually humbling herself, by doing something that an officer's wife would never normally do. As the historical record makes clear, military forts had laundresses to do this work, which, because it involved handling men's clothing, including their "unmentionables," was considered not quite proper. Hence Sergeant Quincannon's discomfort at handing over to Kathleen his ragged longjohns. And Kirby goes through humbling rituals of his own, with both his wife and his son. He comes courting Kathleen like a callow young lieutenant, in a white suit and carrying a bouquet of flowers. Later, when he is wounded, he turns mastery of the situation over to his son, first by asking Jeff to pull the arrow out of his chest, and later

by admitting that he needs his son's help to get on his horse. By the time Kathleen and Kirby have reconciled, both have had to come to terms with their human frailties.

Very early in Elizabeth Burt's memoir, she speaks of her determination not to be separated from her husband: "The long, weary separation of the late war . . . had determined me henceforth never to be left behind." ³⁷ Her sense of decorum forbids any allusion to physical passion between her and her husband, but one can certainly feel it in some of the desperate and dangerous journeys she made just to be with him. From the Custers, celebrated contemporaries of the Burts, we have something more direct: a famous letter that "Autie" wrote to his wife, "Libbie" from an army outpost: "Come as soon as you can. I did not marry you for you to live in one house, me in another. One bed shall accommodate us both." ³⁸ In her own memoirs, Elizabeth Bacon Custer wrote delicately of the tensions in army forts with few women and many single men:

It was pretty solemn business when the detail came to either of the two officers whose wives were with them [to fetch them for 24 hour guard duty]; but when they obtained permission to bring their wives to the regiment, it was with the understanding that their presence should not interfere with any duty. . . we three women made as little trouble as possible. With a whole camp of faithful soldiers who, no matter what they did outside, would never harm their own, the wives were perfectly safe. ³⁹

"No matter what they did outside." This is the closest any of the nineteenth-century army wives come to acknowledging what they must surely have known: that where there were soldiers, there were bound to be

prostitutes. Prostitutes flocked to towns near army posts, or if there were no towns close enough, they set up camp outside the walls. In *A Distant Trumpet*, a garish wagonload of prostitutes, referred to by the fort doctor as “a hog ranch on wheels,” arrives at Fort Delivery and lures the soldiers out. Lieutenant Matthew Hazard (Troy Donahue) scares them off with cannon fire. In real life, however, army officers usually turned a blind eye. In fact, there were probably women acting as prostitutes within the fort walls. Anne Butler, in her study of prostitution in the West, concludes that the numerous unmarried “laundresses” at frontier forts were often providing more than clean shirts. The colonel's lady also learned to turn a blind eye.

V. SOILED DOVES AND GLITTERING GODDESSES

Nowhere is the gap between Western films and Western reality greater than in the portrayal of prostitutes. Indeed, during most of the 1939-1969 period that this thesis considers, prostitutes were never explicitly identified as such, nor were those mysterious rooms at the top of the staircase in the saloon ever used for sexual encounters. In addition, as I discussed in Chapter 2, Westerns of this period were usually more interested in women who may have prostitution in their pasts, but in the film's present, are trying to put that behind them. Heroines like Mrs. Miller and Ella Watson, who are frankly practicing their trade, were still in the future. Instead, we were given “dance hall girls,” wearing a costume that instantly identified them: low-cut dress of some shiny material (floor length for mature women and short with fishnet stockings for younger ones), a flower or a

feather in their hair, and lots of make up. (There is an equally recognizable Mexican subcategory which features an off-the-shoulder peasant blouse and a flounced full skirt with a very cinched waist. These women even have a prescribed *walk*, with arms akimbo, and much swinging of hips and shoulders.)

All of these outfits seem to be the creation of costume designers, since the old photographs of Western prostitutes in Anne Butler's book on the subject show them either in Victorian underwear or clothes that (perhaps only to an undiscerning twentieth-century eye no longer able to pick up subtle fashion cues) look no different from those of a respectable working-class woman of the same period. In fact, the only thing Hollywood seems to get right about prostitutes is that they were a part of every Western community. However, Hollywood is simply following a long tradition of obscuring the sordid details.

In her study of prostitutes in the American West, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery*, Anne Butler points out that she found many earlier histories of the "wild and woolly frontier days" to be unreliable sources. Without careful examination of the evidence, they seemed too quick to celebrate a period of high-spirited rowdiness in which "the town madam" and her "girls" were having as good a time as anyone, and making a lot of money as well. In fact, many American western towns such as Virginia City, Nevada, glamourize their nineteenth-century prostitutes as part of their appeal to the tourist trade.

Butler turned instead to old police records and newspaper accounts, which told a very different story of disordered and pathetic lives. Many

prostitutes were alcoholics and drug addicts, arrested again and again while their clients went free. Most were so poor that they could not pay their paltry fines, and were forced to work them off in jail. When they married, it was often to gamblers and petty criminals whose lives were as unstable as their own. They were frequently beaten by these men, and also by their customers. Many became mothers at some stage of their careers, and since few could scrape together the money to send their children away to school or more settled relatives, their daughters often followed them into the trade when they were as young as eleven.

While cities like Denver and San Francisco had fancy “parlour houses” for prosperous men to visit, with beautiful furnishings and flocked wallpaper, most small communities did not. The elaborate operation run by Belle Aragon (Annelle Hayes) in a dusty little town in *Two Rode Together* (Ford 1962) seems pure fantasy. Even Butler acknowledges that there were occasional madams like Belle, shrewd entrepreneurs who were able to parlay prostitution into a profitable business, but not in towns where they must sell sex to soldiers like Jim Gary (Richard Widmark), who is poorly paid and always broke. There were also occasional prostitutes of refined appearance and manners, like Julia Bulette of Virginia City, who offered a semblance of home life by entertaining men in their own tidy houses. Callie (Lee Remick), whose scrubbed face and ruffled dresses proclaim “ingenue” rather than “fallen woman,” in *These Thousand Hills* (Fleischer, 1958) seems modelled on this kind of prostitute.

Butler makes the point, obvious as soon as one thinks about it, that in western towns the customers of prostitutes were mostly miners, cowboys

and soldiers who had little money, so prostitution was almost never a lucrative trade practised in luxurious surroundings. Still, to work in a brothel of any kind, even a board shack, usually provided better, safer working conditions than a prostitute's other options: plying her trade in a crib or on the street. Crips, Butler explains, were "common throughout frontier communities . . . small structures, usually clustered together in an alley or along a roadway. Some were flimsy shacks with only space for a cot and a chair. . . .The accessibility, lack of protection, and bleak locations of the cribs made this category of work just a step above the lowly streetwalker." ⁴⁰

During much of the period of which I am writing, censorship prevented films from depicting prostitutes openly. However, I do not recall a film even from the franker 1960s that shows one of the ubiquitous cribs. Edward Buscombe wrote of brothels in Westerns, "few were as realistically sordid as the one at the back of Kate's saloon in *Ride the High Country*." ⁴¹ On the contrary, Kate's establishment seems to me the most prettified and unreal element in the film. The mining town is convincingly makeshift, dirty and comfortless, including the bedraggled tent that one of the Hampton brothers designates as "Honeymoon House" for poor, innocent Elsa (Mariette Hartley). Kate's customers, the scruffy, drunken miners, are believable inhabitants of such a place. Kate herself is hugely fat and has a loud, braying voice. But even she assembles a fantastically elaborate purple evening ensemble to wear to Elsa's wedding. And the three prostitutes who act as Elsa's bridesmaids are pure Hollywood in this miserable setting: pretty, healthy and perfectly groomed. The rooms

themselves are just as cosily unreal, with flowered wallpaper and flowered quilts on the beds. In a real Western town of this type, "Honeymoon House" would have been the brothel.

Virtually everything that Western films show about prostitutes was untrue for most of them: that they were beautiful and beautifully dressed, that they enjoyed their work, that they were prospering and in control of their lives. Jon Tuska calls "the notion of the merry, comely" prostitute "the most vicious of patriarchal stereotypes, because it is the most inaccurate and callous, not only on the frontier, but no less since then."⁴² Yet there were a group of women in the West who came far closer to fulfilling the male fantasy of the beautiful, sophisticated, sexually alluring female than the prostitutes did. These were the actresses.

The spirited women who became travelling entertainers in the West have been strangely neglected by Hollywood, although their stories seem ready-made for the movies.⁴³ Some, like Lola Montez, were exotic Europeans whom enterprise or misfortune brought to isolated western communities dazzled by their worldliness. Others, like Lotta Crabtree, were native-born. Many of these women, as their portraits and contemporary accounts reveal, were beautiful and resourceful, and, if they were not gifted performers by conventional standards, they made up for it with daring, exuberance and (sometimes) teasing sexuality.

Lilith's professional career in *How the West Was Won* seems to take some of its details from the career of Lotta Crabtree. Lotta was born in a small mining town in California and was on stage, dressed in green knee britches and doing an Irish jig, while still a child. Like Debbie Reynolds'

portrayal of Lilith, working the mining towns with saucy songs and dances, Lotta sang and danced and clowned with great energy. Sometimes she was deliberately provocative, wearing skimpy costumes and smoking a cigar onstage, but all with such a guileless, cheerful air that respectable women as well as men enjoyed her performances. Like Lilith, she had wealthy lovers who helped her make a fortune from the gold fields. But spunky as Lilith is shown to be, Lotta was even more independent and shrewd — perhaps too much so for the comfort of male writers and directors, who have not made a film of her life. The fictional Lilith's gold mine is worthless and she gives up her career for Cleve van Valen, who eventually leaves her with little money. Lotta never married, and when she retired at the peak of her career, she was worth four million dollars, all of which went to charity after she died.

Denver (Joanne Dru) in *Wagon Master* (Ford, 1950) represents travelling theatre at its most destitute, stranded in the desert with her frowzy companions from a medicine show, all of them helplessly inebriated because they have nothing to drink but elixir. At the other extreme is the legendary English actress Lily Langtry, whose beauty obsesses the corrupt Judge Roy Bean (Walter Brennan) in *The Westerner* (Wyler, 1940). Bean only achieves his goal of seeing her when he is dying, and as his vision clouds, she seems to be a shimmering goddess floating in a mist.

Heller in Pink Tights (1960) is the only Western made by famed “women's director” George Cukor, and perhaps the only Western it is possible to imagine him making. It is the story of a travelling theatre company, always on the run from unpaid bills. Its flirtatious, calculating

star is Angie Rossini (Sophia Loren), “the toast of every settlement from Cheyenne to Virginia City” as the opening credits put it. Although most of Angie's story is fictional, the most flamboyant element is not: her performance in “Mazeppa.” This drama, based on a poem by Byron, featured her as a Tartar prince “condemned, in the climactic scene, to ride forever in the desert stripped naked and lashed to a fiery, untamed steed.”⁴⁴ The daring Angie, in tights and relatively modest Victorian underwear, reenacts the prince's plight, strapped to the back of a horse which then gallops right out of the theatre. For twenty years, an actress named Adah Isaacs Menken performed this stunt, immortalized in a theatre poster still on display in the Piper Opera House in Virginia City, Nevada. Adah's luck finally ran out in 1864, when her leg was injured as her horse carried her into a stage set. Complications set in, and she died soon after, at the age of forty-three.

VI. WOMEN AT WORK

The historians who have examined the lives of real women of the West have uncovered a broad range of occupations. The editors of *So Much to Be Done*, for example, present the diaries and letters of many early Western entrepreneurs. These include a respectable woman fallen on hard times who eked out a living by going door-to-door, selling pictures of American presidents and their families; another who started a successful pie business; and several who augmented their husbands' intermittent or nonexistent earnings in the gold fields by running boarding houses.

Anne Butler came upon one woman, Martha Maxwell, who made a handsome living in 1870s Wyoming as a taxidermist. However, Butler's main research interest, Western prostitutes, led her to focus primarily on the ways that poor and uneducated women could earn a living on the frontier, usually by turning their domestic skills into ill-paid work as laundresses, waitresses, cooks, milliners and dressmakers.⁴⁵ Westerns usually pay little attention to struggling working-class women, but *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* is an exception. In an unusual reversal of Western conventions, the leading male character is an educated Easterner, and the heroine is an illiterate waitress whom he teaches to read.

Sandra Myres, whose book *Westering Women* tends to accentuate the positive aspects of women's experiences, stresses the greater economic opportunities that women of ability and ambition could find in the West. She points out that most western states allowed women to own land in their own names, and that, for example, in the Dakotas in the 1880s, one-third of the land was held by women. She describes women ranchers who went on roundups and cattle drives, and, in some cases, became very wealthy. In Helena, Montana and other towns, women often owned up to 80 percent of the housing stock, either as private dwellings or hotels and boarding houses. Their economic clout could translate into a powerful voice in their communities' affairs.⁴⁶

Although they faced some opposition, Myres asserts that women in law and medicine had less difficulty establishing themselves in burgeoning western communities than they did back east. But the most common occupational choice for educated women was to teach school. Even

Myres's generally positive tone falters when she considers the unenviable lot of frontier schoolteachers, including pay so low that they had to “board around” with various members of the community; poorly equipped, one-room schoolhouses; and a great age range of pupils, including rowdy boys who were sometimes older and bigger than the teacher.⁴⁷ Yet, despite the fact that they were at the mercy of the communities which hired them, they were also respected for their knowledge and treated with deference.

“Schoolmarm” is such a common description of the women in Westerns (usually contrasted with “dance hall girls”), that it is a surprise to find relatively few of them. At the end of *My Darling Clementine* (Ford, 1946), Clementine announces her intention to become a schoolteacher, but she is never seen in the classroom. In fact, when portraying teachers, Westerns tend to focus on the occasions when the civilized order they represent is disrupted. Thus, in *The Gunfighter* (King, 1950), we first see Peggy (Helen Westcott) sitting defeated in her classroom after her pupils have run into town to stare at a renowned gunfighter, Jimmy Ringo (Gregory Peck). Her situation is made all the more painful because, unknown to her community, the gunfighter is her husband and the father of her child. In *Cheyenne Autumn*, no sooner do we see Deborah's delight in her Cheyenne pupils' progress than they are withdrawn from school by their angry families.

Pauline Kael's hostile review of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Hill, 1969), reaches its peak of indignation over the words put into the mouth of Etta Place, a schoolteacher who is never seen at work:

I'm twenty-six and I'm single, and I teach school, and that's the bottom of the pit. And the only excitement I've ever known is sitting in the room with me now. So I'll go with you, and I won't whine, and I'll sew your socks and stitch you when you're wounded, and anything you ask of me I'll do except one thing: I won't watch you die. I'll miss that scene if you don't mind. . . .

Kael retorts: "It's clear who is at the bottom of the pit, and it isn't those frontier schoolteachers, whose work was honest." **48**

On the other hand, *The Big Country* (Wyler, 1958), which also does not show the classroom, stresses the respect that teacher Julie Maragon (Jean Simmons) receives from her community. Her quick mind and her tart tongue give her power over her physically imposing but slow-witted enemy, Buck Hennessy (Chuck Connors) :

BUCK:

You know, Julie, I can just picture us together out on the big muddy. The lamp lit. You cookin' and me eatin'. Happy as two little dogies at a waterhole.

JULIE:

(Flatly) I'm enchanted.

BUCK:

That's another thing I like about you, teacher. All them words you know.

Although Buck later seems on the point of forcing his attentions on her, Julie manages to talk her way out of the situation, and we can see that Buck, intimidating bully though he is, is in awe of her refinement and intelligence.

The contrast between the man who has brute force on his side and the woman who has a superior mind on hers is given a more romantic

treatment in *Texas Lady* (Whelan, 1955). Gunslinger Jess Foley (Gregory Walcott), who scatters men from his path like frightened chickens, is attracted to newspaper owner Prudence Webb (Claudette Colbert). While visiting Prudence's office, Jess asks her if she will teach him to read, but she treats his request as a line that he feeds gullible women to win their affections. He becomes so embarrassed that she thinks she has found him out. Later, though, Prudence learns from her lawyer that it is true Jess cannot read. When she finds out that he is vulnerable in this way, she, in her turn, becomes attracted to him.

In *Westering Women*, Sandra Myres describes the work of an actual newspaperwoman of the Old West:

She read proof, corrected legals, kept the books, managed foreign and domestic advertising, wrote want ads, addressed single wrappers . . . prepared stories about weddings and commencements, and penned fitting obituaries. . . .She . . . entered into the clamour of political campaigns . . . 49

I sought out *Texas Lady* because it promised to be a rare Western that focused on a woman entrepreneur. Alas, although Prudence makes fiery speeches about “the triumph of the people,” and the corrupt cattlemen who run the town are seen conspiring to get rid of her, not a single issue of her paper is shown being published in this poorly constructed film. In fact, it is fairly standard in Westerns that “cattle queens” are never actually seen running their ranches and schoolteachers are never seen teaching. Perhaps this is not surprising. As Robert Warshow wrote in his influential essay about the Western, “the Westerner is, *par excellence*, a man of leisure. Even when he wears the badge of a marshall or, more rarely, owns a

ranch, he appears to be unemployed.”⁵⁰ In real life, a woman linked with such a shiftless man would have to work twice as hard, but in the West of the Imagination, perhaps the only suitable heroine for such a hero is a woman as mysteriously idle as he.

VII. WIDOWED MOTHERS; ORPHANED DAUGHTERS

Most writers who have considered the role of women in Westerns have looked only at their relationships with heroes, and have claimed that women are diminished by these relationships. As I have tried to show throughout this thesis, I feel that many women in Westerns display strength, courage and dignity — and sometimes even a sense of humour — in their relationships with men. Where the Western shows itself to be a genre largely dominated by a male viewpoint is in the way these films tend to pare away every *other* interest a woman might have in her life.

All the historians of Western women whose work I have read stress the bonds among frontier women. Further, they describe the way many of these women functioned in a busy, productive domain that was quite separate from that of men, even if they were married. The editors of *So Much to Be Done* point out that on cattle ranches, the homefront was operated for months on end by women, while the men were miles away herding cattle. During the gold rush, women ran boarding houses and other lucrative business while their men panned for gold. Western families tended to be much larger than modern American families, and it was common for several generations to live together. It was also common,

once past the initial homesteading phase, for families of even moderate means to employ servants. What all of this adds up to is that most women of the West spent little time alone. Yet lonely and isolated women — and particularly women cut off from female companionship — are common in Westerns. The satisfying result of this isolation, from a male point of view, is that any Western hero who happens by is likely to find a woman eager to focus her attention and affection on him.

The theme of a woman's helplessness and dependency cannot be taken much farther than it is in the early scenes of *The Hanging Tree* (Daves, 1959). Elizabeth Mahler (Maria Schell) and her father are Swiss immigrants on their way to the gold fields of Montana. Their stage is attacked by outlaws and everyone but Elizabeth is killed. She is left alone in a strange country without a single relative or friend. By the time she is found, she is suffering greatly from exposure and has been blinded by the sun. Doc Frail (Gary Cooper), himself an outsider to the community, takes her in and cares for her. Delirious, her eyes and hands bandaged, calling for her father and desperately clutching a water canteen she refuses to give up, she is one of the most pathetic heroines a Western has ever offered. Even when the bandages come off, Elizabeth's eyesight is poor for a time. She is so timid that Frail must coax her to cross the room, and finally to step outside. No wonder she says, "Doctor, I cannot see you yet, but I love you for everything."

Interestingly, the conflict between Elizabeth's growing strength and Frail's need for her to remain dependent becomes an explicit issue in the film. Elizabeth asks Frail, "Are you afraid of me because I'm well now?"

and the film strongly suggests that the answer is yes. Frail not only removes her from his house, which we could attribute to a sense of propriety, but also tries to force her to return to Switzerland. She refuses, and takes up her own mining claim. We soon see her as a canny, determined businesswoman, making financial deals and doing hard physical work to construct a sluice.

Frail, obsessed by Elizabeth and needing to control her (his first wife betrayed him with his brother and committed suicide when she was discovered), undercuts her independence by secretly financing her operation. Elizabeth, meanwhile, believes her “grubstake” was advanced to her by a local businessman because she had antique jewellery for collateral. Worse, as Frail's “secret” leaks out, the townspeople assume that Frail is supporting Elizabeth in return for sexual favours, and turn against both of them. When Frail brutally murders one of the townspeople who tried to rape Elizabeth, they rise up against him and are about to lynch him. The rope is already around his neck when Elizabeth arrives with bags of gold and the deed to her mine, with which she bribes the townspeople to release Frail. So, from being one of the most pathetically dependent of all Western heroines, she advances to being one of the most assertive.

It is common for Western heroines to be widows with sons who are about eleven or twelve years old, or unattached young women with preadolescent younger brothers; for example, in *Hondo* (Farrow, 1953), *The Last Wagon*, *The Tin Star* (Mann, 1957), *The Tall Stranger* (Carr, 1957), and *Will Penny* (Gries, 1967). (These women never seem to have daughters or younger sisters, with whom they might be involved in

interests and activities that bore, baffle or otherwise exclude men.) When the lone hero meets such an incomplete little family, his own vulnerability and need are downplayed, and the heroine's need for *him* is stressed. These films take it for granted that the boy needs a father figure to teach him such manly skills as: how to swim (*Hondo*), how to set a snare (*The Last Wagon*), or, more prosaically in *Will Penny*, how to gather buffalo chips (that is, dried buffalo droppings for fuel).

In most of these films, the men have no sooner met the sons than they are advising the mothers about what these boys need, and scoffing at the women's concerns for safety and education. Thus Hondo Lane (John Wayne at his most overbearing) advises Angie Lowe (Geraldine Page at her most fluttery) that "kids learn by doing," when she tries to stop her son from petting a fierce dog. In *The Last Wagon*, when Jennie protests that if she goes with Comanche Todd, her younger brother will miss schooling, Todd replies, "He'd have more than he'd ever find in books — the lastin' kind." Todd's examples include: "the meanin' of the seasons. The sun, the moon. Friendship. Real things." All of these he apparently considers to be unavailable in the town of Tucson, where Jennie and her brother had intended to live.

Only *Will Penny* seems resolutely different. As Will (Charlton Heston) watches Catherine (Joan Hackett) go over a reading lesson with her son and sing with him, his face is filled with longing and admiration. He is ashamed of the fact that he cannot read and write, and he knows no songs. Although Will's heart warms to "the Button" and his mother, and he is happy to share his practical outdoor skills with them as they spend their

first winter on the frontier, he humbly says that he is too old and ignorant to become a permanent part of their family.

When Western heroines are not widows without daughters, looking for men to raise their sons, they are often orphaned (or at least motherless) daughters. These young women include Mollie Monaghan/ Barbara Stanwyck in *Union Pacific* (DeMille, 1939), Mike/Anne Baxter in *Yellow Sky* (Wellman, 1948), Elsa Knudsen/Mariette Hartley in *Ride the High Country*, and Marty/Shirley Jones in *Two Rode Together*. They often have boyishly cropped hair and sometimes boyish names. As Ted Sennett describes them:

In most cases, the young Western heroine exudes gentility, although curiously she becomes less genteel when she is somebody's daughter. The annals of movie history are studded with the spunky, impertinent offspring of ranchers, railroad men, and other western tycoons. Clad in trousers and ready and eager to ride along with the men, they ultimately surrender to domesticity and marriage. 51

Sennett makes no further comment on these young women, but the films seem to be making the excuse for them that, if they had mothers to train them, they wouldn't behave in such an "unfeminine" way. Thus, when the hero meets such a young woman, it falls to him, rather than another woman, to educate her in the proper feminine role, which is usually presented as one of deference to him.

In *Two Rode Together*, for example, Marty's practical jeans and workshirt are solemnly presented as a psychological problem that Lieutenant Jim Gary must cure. Marty explains how guilty she felt when her younger brother was kidnapped by the Cheyenne, and how she tried to replace him in her father's life. She goes on: "I used to pray to be changed

into a boy. At times I still do. Climb trees, throw rocks, go fishing.” Gary asks earnestly, “Is that why you wear these clothes? Won’t go to dances?” Soon *he* is asking her to dances, and Marty responds to this “therapy” by putting her hair up and changing into demure gingham dresses.

As *Union Pacific* begins, Mollie Monaghan seems to have an ideal life. She is strong and practical; she is warm and loving to her friends (as when she invents an imaginary letter from home to comfort a dying man), and she has an interesting job, as postmistress for the Union Pacific Railroad.

Then she is given words to speak to Jeff Butler (Joel McCrea) which seem false to everything we have seen of her honest, direct character:

MOLLIE:

You probably think I’m an outrageous flirt. Didn’t you never know that flirtin’ gets into a woman’s blood like fightin’ gets into a man’s? Now a girl begins coquettin’ to discover if she has the power. Then she goes lookin’ — like a fighter after a bully — for the hardest man to conquer. It’s never the man she wants — it’s the pleasure of bringin’ him to her feet.

JEFF:

Then the right man comes along and gives her the spanking she deserves.

MOLLIE:

Ah, that’s the man she dreams of.

Perhaps this dialogue takes its particular sourness from the fact that it trivializes what (as I wrote in Chapter 2) Westerns usually respect: that the women in Westerns tend to define themselves morally by whom they

choose to love. Love is not to be taken lightly by an honourable woman, any more than violence is by an honourable man. No wonder Mollie has soon lost her sparkle, involved in a hand-wringing love triangle with stern, self-righteous Jeff and shifty gambler Dick Allen (Robert Preston). Long before the fadeout, we may feel that whichever man wins, Mollie certainly loses.

Marty, Mollie, and their more mature motherless sister, Sierra Nevada Jones in *Cattle Queen of Montana*, had real-life prototypes in the West. In *Westering Women*, Sandra Myres offered ample evidence for her statement that “the frontier, like the trail, tended to blur sex roles.”⁵² She cites many accounts of women and girls who cleared land, built houses, and dug wells. She quotes a ranchwoman who boasted, “I had learned to ride when I was almost a baby. I began to help herd the cattle at the age of ten. When I was in my early teens, I began riding the ‘line.’ ”⁵³ Not only were such untraditional activities not considered a problem by the Western communities in which these women lived, they were proudly carried on into marriage and passed on to their daughters:

“I was said to be a good driver of horses,” said one woman. “At any rate, when in my buckboard my husband who was on horseback, unless I wanted him to, could not pass me.” Bragged another, “The men never doubted my ability to do most anything.” Other women, too, spoke of their men's pride in their accomplishments, and it is clear that many of them enjoyed their outdoor work. . . . Carrie Dunn remembered of her mother that “She was a neat and efficient housewife, but repairing fences, searching for livestock or hunting were always legitimate excuses to take her out.”⁵⁴

VIII. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have compared the historical record of Western women's experiences with the way they have been portrayed in Westerns. According to Annette Kolodny, nineteenth-century women dreamed of going west to plant a modest garden rather than to conquer and transform the land.

Westerns of the 1939-1969 period frequently portrayed this wish for a new-world Eden, but not always with a happy outcome. However, with a few exceptions, these Westerns showed little interest in portraying the broad range of experiences which women actually underwent when they travelled to and settled in the West. Although, as I discussed in Chapter 2, the traditional Western often gives scope for women to be brave and make moral decisions, it is a rare Western in which they do so outside the context of their relationships with men. In order to highlight the importance of such relationships, Westerns tend to portray unusually isolated women.

A Reading of *Angel and the Badman*

Credits:

Angel and the Badman (1947), b/w, 100 minutes

Producer: John Wayne; Director-Screenplay: James Edward Grant;

Leading Players: John Wayne (Quirt Evans), Gail Russell (Penny Worth); Harry Carey (Wistful McClintock); Bruce Cabot (Laredo Stevens); Irene Rich (Mrs. Worth); John Halloran (Thomas Worth); Tom Powers (Dr. Mangrum).

Synopsis:

Quirt Evans arrives at the Worth family farm, badly wounded, demanding to be taken to the telegraph office to file a land claim. The Worths, pacifist Quakers, help Quirt file his claim, then take him into their home to care for him. While he is recovering, he and daughter Penny fall in love. She begins to convert him to more peaceful ways, and he proposes to her. However, Quirt is tracked down by outlaw Laredo Stevens and his gang, who want to steal Quirt's land, even if they have to kill him. Laredo has another reason for wanting Quirt safely dead: Quirt once vowed to kill Laredo for slaying Quirt's foster father. The outlaws attack while Penny and Quirt are out for a ride in a buckboard, driving them over a riverbank. Quirt rescues Penny from drowning and, leaving her with her family, rides to town to call Laredo out. Penny pursues him and persuades him to hand over his gun. Laredo tries to shoot Quirt but is himself shot by Marshall McClintock. Penny and Quirt ride off to a peaceful future together.

John Wayne, perhaps more than any other American actor, is identified with a model of masculinity (as well as bellicose political views) that came under attack from many quarters by the end of his career. For example, Donald Spoto, in *Camerado: Hollywood and the American Man*, wrote

scathingly:

Audiences have not asked performances from John Wayne. He's quite simply been asked to *be*. To ride, or to stand, or to stride, hugely, through a film. It's unlikely that women have ever really taken him seriously as a screen presence — he's never been a romantic figure, and there's not much social charm there. He's really some kind of protean force, and a very nearly grotesque one, at that.¹

Angel and the Badman is a difficult film to square with Spoto's comments. It was Wayne's personal choice, written and directed by a close friend, and the first feature film he produced. Yet it is a highly romantic Western, with at least half a dozen passionate clinches between hero and heroine, and many more scenes that alternate wordless closeups of the two gazing longingly at each other. It is also the only Western I have seen in which the hero is fully converted to the heroine's pacifist viewpoint, and her views are shown to be right.

The film works hard to counter the usual iconography of the Western by consistently associating Quirt's gun with weakness and folly. In the opening scene, Quirt, almost fainting, waves his gun woozily at Thomas Worth, trying to demand a horse from him. His gun is useless, because self-possessed Thomas is not afraid of him; and unnecessary, because the Worths are quite prepared to help him get to the telegraph office. When the Worths have put Quirt to bed and summoned the doctor, no one is able to quiet the delirious man. Thomas, with sudden insight into what Quirt needs to settle down, fetches Quirt's gun (which he carefully unloads). As soon as it is placed in his hand, Quirt, like a baby given a pacifier, subsides into peaceful sleep.

Much later in the film, when he is already well on the way to embracing Penny's non-violence, Quirt goes on a berry-picking expedition with her, unarmed at her request. They are set upon by Laredo's gang and almost killed, but lest we think that Penny was wrong and Quirt should have been armed, we hear Laredo saying just before the attack: "I know him, he's got a gun all right, I know him." These two men have a long history of violent interaction, and it is Laredo's *fear* of Quirt's violence that precipitates the attack.

In the film's closing scenes, Penny is believed to be dangerously ill after her plunge in the river. However, by sheer force of will, she brings her fever down and demands that her parents drive her to town. She gets to Quirt just in time to save him from shooting Laredo, whom he has already called out. The long looks they give each other as Quirt hands over the gun to Penny show that they know what is at stake — he might be killed for upholding pacifist beliefs. Quirt turns to face his enemy, his empty hands open. Before Laredo can fire, Marshall McClintock (who has been trailing Quirt throughout the film, trying to pin various crimes on him) kills Laredo. He then informs Quirt that if Quirt had shot Laredo, McClintock would have arrested him and seen him hang. So Quirt, by letting the law take care of his problems, instead of using his gun, is saved. Saying that he's now going to become a farmer, Quirt rides off in the back of the Worth wagon, holding Penny in his arms. His gun drops into the dust. A townsman tries to return it, but the Marshall stops him. "Only a man who wears a gun ever needs it," he says, underlining the theme of the film.

Penny is the picture of innocence and gentleness, modestly dressed and delighting in domesticity. In a typical image from the film, she is shown bottle-feeding a lamb, while Quirt looks on admiringly. But just as Quirt, who looks strong, is shown to be weak and confused, Penny, who looks weak, is shown to be strong-willed, firm in her beliefs, and bravely outspoken and direct. When she realizes that she loves Quirt, she tells him so, and he is taken aback, saying, "I didn't think religious people were quite so sudden and direct." Penny replies, unembarrassed, "Well, it's the way I feel, and it would be dishonest to say anything else."

Penny is given the chance to explain her pacifist beliefs to Quirt, not, as in many Westerns, so that they can be overwhelmed but so that, in the course of the film, they can be validated:

QUIRT:

You mean nobody can hurt you but yourself?

PENNY:

That's a friend's belief.

QUIRT:

Well, supposing somebody whacks you over the head with a branding iron — wouldn't that hurt?

PENNY:

Physically, of course. But in reality, it would injure only the person doing the act of force or violence. Only the doer can be hurt by a mean and evil act.

Later, she makes it clear that she is emotionally prepared for the way her beliefs might be tested. Quirt is talking about the showdown he thinks must come between him and Laredo. Penny says that it would be even worse if

Quirt won the battle than if he lost it:

QUIRT:

You mean it would be worse if he goes down than if I go down! . . .
Oh, I know, I'd be a guy with a marked soul.

PENNY:

(Quietly) Don't make it sound so crude, Quirt. You see why — then
I couldn't love you.

As we see at the end of the film, she is ready to act on these beliefs.

One of the many unusual features of *Angel and the Badman* is its picture of Penny as part of a happy family, and, in particular, as a daughter whose mother provides a strong and loving role model. As I discussed in Section VII of Chapter 3, it is unusual to see heroines with families. (In my notes on *True Grit*, which follow, I point out the strength Mattie derives from her family, but her family life is disrupted and has to be reconstructed, while Penny's is not.) There is a scene early in the film in which Penny, starting to fall in love with Quirt, asks her mother to tell her once again how she met Penny's father. As Mrs. Worth happily reminisces (she met him when she nursed his injuries, so there is a parallel with her daughter's experience), the two women move about the kitchen, gracefully carrying out their domestic tasks, crossing each other's paths in an intricate dance, but never getting in each other's way. It is an effective demonstration of the harmony in which these two women live. Although expressions of concern sometimes cross the Mother's face (will her daughter's heart be broken by this stranger?), it is a pleasant aspect of this film that both parents have confidence in their daughter and support all her decisions.

Irene Rich, who plays Mrs. Worth, was a very appealing presence in the following year's *Fort Apache*, but her character in this film has even more charm, as her warmth and air of competence are augmented by a quick intelligence and sense of humour. She knows just the right poultice for her neighbour's neck boil, and she makes prize-winning donuts, but she also loves a good debate. The family doctor (another surprising and unstereotyped character, who comments in passing that he studied medicine in Europe) loves to stop by to argue moral questions with her:

DOC:

... I had a friend [who] drew portraits of people and made them resemble the animals they reminded him of. He'd have drawn [Quirt] as a coiled cobra.

MRS. WORTH:

(laughs) Oh doctor, your analogy's terribly imperfect, and your naturalism's faulty. Cobras don't coil! — Oh, but doctor (as he gets up to leave) we're so fond of you. And we respect you so greatly. We're sure that you will finally realize that realism untempered by sentiment and humanity is really just a mean, hard, cold outlook on life, a frightened outlook.

DOC:

(good-humouredly) I stand defeated. . . . But don't hesitate to call on me any time you need help.

In scenes like this, we can see the ways that Penny resembles her mother, and the strength she derives from her example. In *In a Different Voice* (a study of women's moral development discussed at length in Section II of Chapter 2), Carol Gilligan reports on a study of men's and women's very different fantasies about feeling powerful: “men represent powerful activity as assertion and aggression [but] women in contrast portray acts of

nurturance as acts of strength.”² *Angel and the Badman* is highly unusual in depicting the process by which a man of violence comes to value and adopt another way of being strong, shown to him by a woman.

A Reading of *Westward the Women*

Credits:

Westward the Women (MGM, 1952), b/w, 118 minutes
 Producer: Dore Schary; Director: William A. Wellman; Screenplay: Charles Schnee, based on a story by Frank Capra; Leading Players: Robert Taylor (Buck); Denise Darcel (Fifi Danon); Henry Nakamura (Ito); Lenore Lonergan (Maggie); Marilyn Erskine (Jean); Hope Emerson (Patience); Julie Bishop (Laurie); John McIntyre (Roy Whitman); Renata Vanni (Mrs. Maroni); Beverly Dennis (Rose).

Synopsis:

Roy Whitman has founded a flourishing ranching area in a California valley, but he realizes that it can't become a real community unless he provides wives for his men. He hires the misogynist scout, Buck, to help him bring a wagon train of women back to California. Buck and Roy go to Chicago together, where Roy interviews and signs up 140 women. The women begin the journey eagerly and with more competence than Buck expected. Tired of Buck's tough rules, the men he hired to take the train across the plains decide to desert, but the women carry on. They show themselves to be so strong and courageous that Buck is forced to change his preconceptions about them, particularly about Danon, a prostitute who is determined to transform her life. When the women arrive in California, they assert their right to choose the men who will be their husbands.

As can be seen from the synopsis, *Westward the Women* tells a simple story, and director Wellman shapes it in a straightforward way, just as if it were a more conventional story about male heroics. These women are treated as people, with a full range of human strengths and failings, and a full range of human emotions. Yet because this was a story about women,

critics of the day didn't know quite what to make of it. Bosley Crowther's discomfort is typical. He called it a "blithely uneven Western, part weeper and part burlesque." Denise Darcel is "just a little too hootchy-kootchy to sell belief in the ruggedness of dames," while of Robert Taylor, he writes, "his toughness is as clear and brittle as a pane of glass." Crowther concludes: "Wellman . . . hasn't got much authority from his cast, but he has got several humorous moments from them, and that's the best to be expected from the film." ¹

Westward the Women is notable for its consistent tone and its respectful treatment of all its characters. "Weeper" is apparently Crowther's word for films that consider *women's* trials and sufferings, even if they are shown to be stoically enduring them. If by "burlesque" Crowther means that the film spoofs the Western genre, he is wrong — the idea that women going west on their own is by definition ridiculous is his, not the film's.

Denise Darcel's character, Danon, is a prostitute. For the first brief moment we see her, she is dressed in tarty taffeta. However, when she sees Roy turning down some other painted ladies, she and her friend Laurie go away and return in plain dark clothing, to help convince Roy of their seriousness. "Why do you want to go to California?" he says in a stern voice. There's a closeup of Danon's face, scrubbed and earnest: "We want a change," she says fervently — and the film shows that she means it. From that point until she reaches California, we see her in plain work clothes, often dusty or muddy, with no discernable makeup. She's in love with Buck, and makes that plain, but she is given no sly double-entendres to

speak, and there is not a single exploitation shot of her body (or of any of the other women's) in the entire film. The mere fact of her French accent may have been enough to trigger Crowther's "hootchy kootchy" response. As for the remark about Robert Taylor: how can you countenance a film in which a tough man learns that women are his equals, Crowther seems to be saying, unless you can explain it away by putting the quality of his toughness in doubt — a real man, perhaps, could have kept these women in line.

Because it is a modestly budgeted film with only one major star (who has not since become a cult favourite) and because it received uncomprehending reviews like Crowther's when it first appeared, *Westward the Women* has slipped through the floorboards. It deserves to be better known, and especially to be reassessed by film scholars with feminist interests.

Over and over — at least twenty times in the first fifteen or so minutes of the film — we hear the phrase "good women" uttered by Roy or Buck. Roy says it with almost religious intensity, while Buck is much more cynical.

Before leaving for Chicago, Roy promises his men:

They'll be *good* women — make sure you'll be good enough for 'em. Make sure you treat 'em with patience, understanding, honesty. They'll be your fortune. Make sure you make it a *good* fortune — for yourselves, for them, for the children they'll bear you.

Buck, meanwhile, says cryptically, "There's only two things in this world that scare me, and a good woman's both!" But by the end of the film, after

spending four months on the trail with the women, Buck is even more fervent than Roy (who has not survived the journey) in his instructions to the waiting men: “These are good women, *great* women — make sure you're man enough for them. Make sure you treat 'em right.”

What is a good woman, according to *Westward the Women*? As we have seen, a good woman can be a reformed prostitute like Danon. She can also be a pregnant schoolteacher with no husband, like Rose. She can be a woman who is larger and more muscular than most men, and past her youth, like Patience. She can be a spitting, two-fisted sharp-shooter like Maggie. She can be a dark-skinned immigrant with a young son in tow, like Mrs. Maroni. They are all good women because they have the initiative to sign up for the journey and the strength and courage to survive it. They are good women because they share their skills with each other, and because they encourage and comfort each other.

There are many scenes showing the women struggling with recalcitrant mules, or straining on heavy ropes, and not the slightest suggestion, so common in other Westerns, that women trying to do men's work is “cute.” We hear their mingled voices as they go about their work, giving instructions to each other or rounding up their animals, and they have a tone of no-nonsense authority that is rarely given to women in films. They are neither strident nor coy, but simply competent human beings getting the job done.

A comparison with the superficially similar *Guns of Fort Petticoat* (Marshall, 1957), which is also about women taking over the tasks of men and braving dangers, highlights the temptations to which the creators of

Westward the Women did not give way. Buck's equivalent in *Guns of Fort Petticoat* is Hewitt, an officer who trains a group of women to defend a fort against Indians. They are shown as cutely feminine and incompetent as they struggle with male tasks, and Hewitt is breezily condescending. For example, when the women drop to the ground to fire their guns, one has her behind wiggling cartoonishly in the air. Hewitt orders her to flatten out, commenting, "You're just asking for a bullet in the back of your lap, and it's a hard place to tie a bandage." Once again, there is a pregnant woman, but this time only Hewitt notices her plight and looks out for her. Nevertheless, she is punished, the first one slain when the attack comes.

Hope Emerson plays similar characters in the two films, but her strength and leadership qualities are undercut in the later one. She "drills" the women (which seems a stupid waste of time) as if she were an army sergeant, always referring to them as men. Although she is supposed to be experienced with a gun, she almost blows off her arm with an overcharged weapon. How different this buffoonery is from *Westward the Women*, where Patience uses her strength to carry Rose, or to drive a wagon down a steep cliffside after someone else has just died in the attempt.

In *Westward the Women*, the women's courage is first emphasized back in Chicago, when Buck outlines the hazards of the journey — rain, hail "as big as eggs," wagon breakdowns, prairie fires, sandstorms, dust storms, alkali water, no water, cholera, Indians, drownings, stampedes, stupid accidents. These are very much as the historians of the West have outlined them, but the film, for dramatic effect, makes the odds even worse than they were in reality. Buck says one in three of them won't make it,

which is much higher than Unruh's statistics (quoted in Section II of Chapter 3). However, none of the women leaves the room. Only a few of the women identify themselves as being able to handle horses and mules, and only two say they can shoot — but when Buck scornfully tests their skills, they turn out to be sharpshooters who can hit the eyes of a small portrait on the wall.

But this is not a film about the individual “special skills” that Will Wright identified in Western heroes. The film emphasizes that the women are strong *as a group*, (whereas it is Buck's weakness that he is a loner), and it is very much an ensemble piece, with a large number of characters given their due. At the emotional beginning of the overland journey (shot much like the beginning of the cattle drive in *Red River*), we are given a sequence of low-angled shots of the women (emphasizing their heroic status) as each shouts eagerly “All set!” And they are all set, to Buck's amazement: the few women who knew how to handle the teams have taught the others well. Much later in the film, in the wake of an Indian attack, Buck (who was absent at the time), asks how many are dead. In a sequence of shots, various women proudly and firmly call out the names of the dead comrades beside them. Buck then proposes that they turn back. Again the women are shown in turn, shouting “Not me!” “Not me!” until their voices echo around the canyon.

The most striking and unusual of the women's group activities is the delivery of Rose's baby, which I described in detail at the end of Chapter 1. After the baby boy is born, the women pass him around, with everyone getting a chance to hold him. Because they have all supported Rose

emotionally and in the end quite literally, by holding up her wagon, the baby in a sense belongs to all of them.

When the women are just a few hours away from the California valley where they will settle, they refuse to go further until they've had a chance to wash and put on more attractive clothing. However, this isn't to be taken as a sign that they are slipping back into a submissive role. When the women arrive in town in their finery (partially pieced together by Buck from table cloths, bandanas and other items provided by the eagerly waiting men), Patience speaks for all of them:

You can look us over but don't think you're going to do the choosing. All the way from Independence I've been staring at two things. One was this picture [in Chicago, Roy had provided pictures of all the men waiting for wives] and one was the rump of a mule — and don't ask me which was prettier! This picture got me across and I got this picture across — and nobody chooses here but me.

What is even more pleasantly offbeat about all this is that the men, dressed in their best, are shown to be pleased as the women step forward, match the pictures they're carrying to the faces in the crowd, and select their future husbands.

A Reading of *True Grit*

Credits:

True Grit (Paramount, 1969), colour, 128 minutes

Producer: Hal B. Wallis, Director: Henry Hathaway; Screenplay:

Marguerite Roberts, based on the novel by Charles B. Portis; Leading Players: John Wayne (Rooster Cogburn); Glen Campbell (La Boeuf); Kim Darby (Mattie Ross); Jeremy Slate (Emmett Quincy); Robert Duvall (Ned Pepper); Dennis Hopper (Moon); Jeff Corey (Tom Chaney).

Synopsis:

Fourteen-year-old Mattie Ross sets out to bring Tom Chaney, the man who killed her father, to justice. She pays for the services of the meanest marshall she can find, Rooster Cogburn, even though he's a heavy drinker and seems past his prime. A Texas Ranger named La Boeuf joins their manhunt, because Chaney is wanted in Texas for additional crimes. Chaney links up with an outlaw named Ned Pepper. When the trio catch up with Pepper's gang, Mattie wounds Chaney but is kidnapped by Pepper. Rooster and La Boeuf kill the outlaws and rescue Mattie, but only at the cost of La Boeuf's life. Mattie, bitten by a rattlesnake, is saved by Rooster, who gets her to medical care in the nick of time. When Mattie is recovered, she and Rooster have a quiet, affectionate parting, before Rooster rides off alone.

True Grit was one of the most financially successful Westerns of all time. After nearly forty years in the saddle, this was the film that finally won John Wayne an Oscar, and the novelty of seeing him play a one-eyed "fat old man" overshadowed any other aspect of the film at the time of its release. Sydney Kaufmann's comment was typical: "Readers may remember it as a book about a girl," he wrote, "but it's a film about John Wayne." ¹ Although Wayne gives an expert performance, he is matched

every step of the way by little-known Kim Darby. More than twenty years after its release, it is possible to see that *True Grit*, despite the fact that two men got higher billing, is, indeed, a film about a girl. It is Mattie's resolve which drives the plot and Mattie's goals which are fulfilled. As she puts it at one point, when Rooster tries to send her home, "I'm going. And not because you say I can't, and not because you say I can. I paid good cash money to be here, and I'm on my own business."

Something Mollie Haskell wrote in *From Reverence to Rape* seems to me relevant to Mattie's character and actions in *True Grit*, although Haskell was writing about her childhood fondness for Margaret O'Brien: "she was independent, but not alone. She was spoiled and petted, but as a child, not a woman; she had not yet entered the sexual arena. . . .For me, and without my realizing it, these were the years of presexual freedom."² Mattie is far more self-possessed, competent, strong-willed and outspoken than most Western heroines who are older, and it may be that this is only permitted because the film defines her as a child, as if she were even younger than her teenage appearance. When she first negotiates with Cogburn, he says grumpily that he's giving her his "children's rates," and later takes to calling her "baby sister." When she wants to join him in his pursuit of the outlaws, Cogburn protests, "I can't go up against Ned Pepper's gang and try to take care of a baby all at the same time." Similarly, the amusingly whiny villain, Tom Chaney, complains loudly, "Everything happens to me. Now I'm shot by a child." A minute before, not taking her seriously, he had actually been telling her how to cock her antique gun. Paradoxically, because Mattie is always described as a child or a baby, she is free to be

assertive and competent without being taken as a serious threat to men's masculinity.

Nevertheless, Mattie is a force to be reckoned with, from the first time we see her. Despite her youth, Mattie is her father's accountant, and he can't go on a horse-buying trip without getting funds from her. Although we can see her great affection for her father, we can also see that she thinks he's a poor horse trader, and he knows she thinks so.

Later, starting out on her journey to avenge her father's death, she is extremely careful with her money, and a very tough negotiator. When her boardinghouse landlady says sweetly, "Have some more biscuits, dear," Mattie replies tartly, "At the rate of 25¢ per meal, I might as well. . . .Can't see 25¢ for a little flour and grease." We soon see her arranging the resale of the horses her father had bought, holding out for more than he had paid and insisting on cash. When the horse trader at first refuses her, she threatens him with a visit from the formidable-sounding lawyer Daggett. This is a threat she also uses on Rooster Cogburn, because she thinks (unjustly, as it turns out) that he is considering taking her money without carrying out her wishes. Near the end of the film, when it appears that Mattie might be dying, she actually dispatches Daggett (who, in person, is a meek little man) to deliver the money she owes to Rooster — and, through her lawyer, demands a receipt.

Mattie is the female hero of a revenge Western, and the fact that she is female changes everything else about her mission. In a typical revenge Western, the male hero is an outcast, seething with bitter emotions, sometimes (especially in Mann's Westerns) on the verge of a mental

breakdown. Often he is only rescued from savagery at the end of the film, most commonly by a pure young woman.

Mattie is nothing like this. First, she never endorses violence as a way of life. Mattie is forever invoking the law, although not as an abstract force, but in terms of particular lawmen she feels will meet her immediate needs. Thus, she wants Chaney tried in Fort Smith, because she believes, after seeing him watch a public hanging with evident satisfaction, that the judge in Fort Smith is a hanging judge. She wants to hire Rooster because she's heard he's the meanest of all the marshalls: "I hear you're a man with true grit," is the way she puts it.

When she comes upon Chaney unexpectedly, she wounds him with her father's gun. Shocked and elated at the same time, she shouts, "You killed my father when he was trying to help you," as if to justify to herself as much as to him her outburst of violence. After all, Chaney seemed on the verge of shooting her when she fired. Further, from a conversation that Mattie and Rooster have at the end of the film, it seems that the gun may have gone off when she didn't intend it to. While she is his captive, Ned Pepper teases her, "Most girls like little playpretties, but you like guns, don't you?" Mattie replies coldly, "If I did, I'd have one that worked." This seems to sum up the very strict limits she puts on her use of violence.

Second, in this unusual Western, female characters are shown to be as embedded in family and community as real Western women commonly were. (See Chapter 3, and particularly Section VII, for more on this subject.) We first see Mattie surrounded by family. Although her father is

soon killed, she still has a mother, a younger brother, and a baby sister, as well as a black family employee whom she refers to as her friend and treats with courtesy. For the remainder of the film, when introducing herself, she is likely to list the name of her county and the names of all her family members, besides her own. Her feelings of rootedness, of other people depending on her, seem to feed her self-confidence and courage.

But there is a sense in which, for the task she has set herself, her connection to her birth family is not enough. Mattie is made of sterner stuff than her parents, and seems in some ways to be the head of the household even while her high-minded but naive father is alive. (He is cheated into buying geldings for breeding stock!) When Mattie resolves to track her father's killer, she asks the employee to take her father's body home and explain to her mother that she won't be back for a while. When the employee protests that Mrs. Ross won't like it, Mattie replies: "Mama knows I can take care of myself. And tell her not to sign *anything* until I get back."

But Mattie is never alone. She finds a replacement father in Rooster Cogburn, who, in many ways, is closer to her in nature than her own father was. The horse trader, shaken by Mattie's toughness, is the first to point this out: "I would not be surprised to learn that [Cogburn's] a relative of yours." Rooster himself, at first reluctant to have Mattie along, soon notices the resemblance. Watching in admiration as Mattie fords a river to catch up with him, he says proudly, "She reminds me of *me*." La Boeuf, too, is eventually won over, playing protective big brother to her.

Mattie values the connection among human beings very highly, and has a strong sense of what they owe each other. When the outlaw Moon is dying, Mattie asks him whether he has any relatives to be informed, and she makes sure that money from the sale of the outlaw's horse is sent to his kin. She is concerned that Rooster's only family seems to be a Chinese friend and a cat named General Sherman Price, and she quizzes him about his relatives one night as they sit by the campfire. Rooster sheepishly admits that he once had a wife who left him:

ROOSTER:

"Good-bye, Reuben," she said, "The love of decency does not abide in you."

MATTIE:

Did you have any children?

ROOSTER:

There was a boy. Nola taken him with her. He never liked me anyway. A clumsier child you'll never see than Horace.

Apparently Rooster's real child is much less like him than his "adopted child," Mattie. At the end of this film, when they have come through a great deal together, and Rooster has saved Mattie's life, Mattie offers him a place in her family, to which he conditionally agrees. She points out all the plots in her family's burial ground, and adds:

MATTIE:

I would like you to rest beside me, Rooster.

ROOSTER:

Now Sis, that place should be for your family . . . your husband, kids.

MATTIE:

You have no kin. . . .Now where else would you end up; in some neglected patch of weeds?

ROOSTER:

Well, I just might take you up on that offer, Sis . . .

In closing, I would like to point out that *True Grit* is one Western which, *pace* the French film critics such as Jean-Louis Bory who assert that a woman is worth less than a horse, clearly prizes a woman's life more highly. When Rooster must get urgent medical care for snake-bitten Mattie, he rides a horse to death in the effort, and then struggles onward on foot with Mattie in his arms. It's an impressive and shocking image for the strength and desperation of Rooster's love for her

Bibliography

1. Studies of the Western Film

- Astre, Georges-Albert and Hoarau, Albert-Patrick, eds. *Univers du Western*. Paris: Editions Seghers, 1973.
- Bataille, Gretchen M. and Silet, Charles L.P. *The Pretend Indians: Images of Native Americans in the Movies*. Ames, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1980.
- Bazin, André. "The Western, or The American Film *par excellence*," "The Evolution of the Western," and "The Outlaw." *What Is Cinema?* Vol. II. trans. Hugh Gray. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971.
- Bellour, Raymond et Brion, Patrick, eds. *Le Western: Sources, thèmes, mythologies, auteurs, acteurs, filmographies*. Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1969.
- Bitsch, Charles and Claude Chabrol, "Entretien avec Anthony Mann." *Cahiers du Cinema* 69 (March 1957), pp. 2–15.
- Bluestone, George. "The Changing Cowboy: From Dime Novel to Dollar Film." *Western Humanities Review* 14 (Summer 1960), pp. 331–337.
- Blumenberg, Richard. "The Evolution and Shape of the American Western." *Wide Angle* 1:1 (Spring 1976), pp. 39–49.
- Bogdanovich, Peter. *John Ford*. London: Studio Vista, 1967.
- . *The Cinema of Howard Hawks*. New York: Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art, 1962.
- Browne, Nick. "The Spectator in the Text: The Rhetoric of Stagecoach" in Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods, Volume II*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 458–475.
- Buscombe, Edward. "The Idea of Genre in American Cinema." *Screen* 11:2 (March–April, 1970), pp. 33–45. Reprinted in *Film Genre Reader*. Barry Keith Grant, ed. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986, pp. 11–25.
- . "Critics on The Searchers." *Screen Education* (Winter 1976), p. 50.
- Buscombe, Edward, ed. *The BFI Companion to the Western*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1988.

- Calder, Jenni. *There Must Be a Lone Ranger: The Myth and Reality of the American Wild West*. London: Abacus, 1976.
- Cawelti, John. "Cowboys, Indians, Outlaws: The West in Myth and Fantasy." *American West* 1 (Spring 1964), pp. 28–35, 77–79.
- . "The Gunfighter and Society: Good Guys, Bad Guys, Deviates and Compulsives — A View of the Adult Western." *American West* 5:2 (March 1968), pp. 30–35, 76–78.
- . *The Six-gun Mystique*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971, rev. ed. 1985.
- Cook, Pam. "The Western." Pam Cook, ed. *The Cinema Book: A Complete Guide to Understanding the Movies*. New York: Pantheon Books/The British Film Institute, 1985, pp. 64–71.
- Fenin, George N. and Everson, William K. *The Western: From Silents to the Seventies*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.
- Folsom, James K. "Western Themes and Western Films." *Western American Literature* 2:3 (Fall 1967), pp. 195–203.
- Foote, Cheryl J. "Changing Images of Women in the Western Film." *Journal of the West* 22 (October 1983), pp. 64–71.
- Ford, Greg. "Mostly on Rio Lobo" in Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods, Volume I*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 344–354.
- Garfield, Brian. *Western Films: A Complete Guide*. New York: Rawson Associates, 1982.
- Garel, Alain. "Trois genres sexistes? La femme dans le western, le cinéma fantastique, le film érotique." *Ecran* 28 (August–September 1974), pp. 55–71.
- French, Philip. "The Indian in the Western Movie." *Arts in America* 60:4 (July–August 1972), pp. 32–39.
- . *Westerns*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1973.
- Hardy, Phil. *The Encyclopedia of Western Movies*. Minneapolis, MN: Woodbury Press, 1984.
- Henderson, Brian. "The Searchers: An American Dilemma" in Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods, Volume II*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- Hitt, Jim. *The American West from Fiction (1823–1976) into Film (1909–1986)*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland, 1990.

- Kael, Pauline. "Review of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*." Reprinted in *Deeper into Movies*. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1973, pp. 6–7.
- Kaminsky, Stuart M. "The Genre Director: Character Types in the Films of John Ford." Ch. 11 in *American Film Genres: Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film*. Dayton, OH: Pflaum, 1974.
- Kitses, Jim. *Horizons West*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1969.
- Lenihan, John H. *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film*. Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1980.
- Lovell, Alan. "The Western" in Bill Nichols, ed. *Movies and Methods, Volume I*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 164–175.
- Maynard, Richard A., ed. *The American West on Film: Myth and Reality*. Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Co., 1974.
- McBride, Joseph, ed. *Focus on Howard Hawks*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972.
- McDonald, Archie P., ed. *Shooting Stars: Heroes and Heroines of Western Film*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Nachbar, Jack. "A Checklist of Published Materials on Western Movies." *Journal of Popular Film* 2:4 (Fall 1973), pp. 411–428.
- , ed. *Focus on the Western*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974.
- . "Seventy Years on the Trail: A Selected Chronology of the Western Movie." *Journal of Popular Film* 2:1 (Winter 1973), pp. 75–83.
- Oshana, Maryann. "Native American Women in Westerns: Reality and Myth." *Film Reader* 5 (1982), pp. 125–131.
- Palmer, R. Barton. "A Masculinist Reading of Two Western Films: *High Noon* and *Rio Grande*." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 12:4 (Winter 1984–85), pp. 156–162.
- Parish, James Robert and Pitts, Michael R. *The Great Western Pictures*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1976.
- Parkinson, Michael and Jeavons, Clyde. *A Pictorial History of Westerns*. London: Hamblyn, 1972.
- Parks, Rita. *The Western Hero in Film and Television: Mass Media Mythology*. Ann Arbor/London: UMI Research Press. 1982.

- Pilkington, T. and Graham, Don eds. *Western Movies*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1979.
- Place, J.A. *The Western Films of John Ford*. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1974.
- Pye, Douglas. "Genre and Movies." *Movie* 20 (Spring 1975), pp. 29–43.
- . "Genre and History: Fort Apache and The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance." *Movie* 25 (Winter 1977–78), pp. 1–11.
- Roth, William. "Where Have You Gone, My Darling Clementine?" *Film Culture* 63–64 (1977), pp. 153–163.
- Sarf, John Michael. *God Bless You, Buffalo Bill: A Layman's Guide to History and the Western Film*. East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses and Cornwall Books, 1983.
- Sarris, Andrew. "Death of the Gunfighters." *Film Comment* 18:2 (1982), pp. 40–42.
- Schakel, Sandra Kaye. "Women in Western Films: The Civilizer, The Saloon Singer, and Their Modern Sister" in McDonald, Archie P., ed. *Shooting Stars: Heroes and Heroines of Western Film*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987.
- Self, Robert T. "Ritual Patterns in Western Films and Fiction" in *Narrative Strategies: Original Essays in Film and Prose Fiction*. Sydney M. Conger and Janice R. Welsch, eds. Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University Press, 1980, pp. 105–114.
- Sennett, Ted. *Great Hollywood Westerns*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990.
- Seydor, Paul. *Peckinpah: The Western Films*. Urbana, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1980.
- Stowell, Peter. *John Ford*. Boston: Twayne, 1986.
- Tavernier, Bertrand. "Entretien transatlantique avec Budd Boetticher." *Cahiers du Cinéma* (July 1964), pp. 1–18.
- Tompkins, Jane. "West of Everything" in Derek Longhurst, ed. *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- Tuska, John. *The Filming of the West*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976.
- . *The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985.
- Wicking, Christopher and Barrie Pattison. "Interview with Anthony Mann." *Screen* (July/October 1969), pp. 32–54.

- Willis, Donald C. *The Films of Howard Hawks*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975.
- Wilmington, Michael. "Nicholas Ray's Johnny Guitar." *The Velvet Light Trap* 12 (Spring, 1974), pp. 20–25.
- Wood, Robin. *Howard Hawks*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1968.
- Woods, Frederick. "Hot Guns and Cold Women." *Films and Filming* 5 (March 1959), pp. 11, 30.
- Wright, Will. *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975.

2. Historical Studies of the American West

- Ambrose, Stephen E. *Crazy Horse and Custer: The Parallel Lives of Two American Warriors*. New York: Meridian Books, 1986. (First published 1975.)
- Butler, Anne M. *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Mercy: Prostitutes in the American West 1865–90*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.
- Goetzmann, William H. and Goetzmann, William N. *The West of the Imagination*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986.
- Mattes, Merrill J. *Indians, Infants and Infantry: Andrew and Elizabeth Burt on the Frontier*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988. (Originally published 1960.)
- Moynihan, Ruth B., Armitage, Susan, and Fischer Dichamp, Christiane. *So Much to Be Done: Women Settlers on the Mining and Ranching Frontier*. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1990.
- Myres, Sandra L. *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience: 1800–1915*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1982.
- Riley, Glenda. *Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1825–1915*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1984.
- Schlissel, Lillian. *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*. New York: Schocken Books, 1982.
- Zauner, Phyllis. *Those Spirited Women of the Early West*. Sonoma, CA: Zanel Publications, 1989.

3. Studies of Men's and Women's Roles in Films

- Easthope, Anthony. *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture*. London: Paladin Books, 1986.
- French, Brandon. *On the Verge of Revolt: Women in American Films of the Fifties*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1978.
- Haskell, Molly. "Howard Hawks Masculine Feminine." *Film Comment* 39 (March–April 1974), pp. 34–39.
- Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2nd. edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Mellen, Joan. *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.
- Mellen, Joan. *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film*. New York: Horizon Press, 1973.
- Neale, Steve. "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema." *Screen* 23:3–4 (September/October 1982), pp. 2–16.
- Rosen, Marjorie. *Popcorn Venus*. New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1973.
- Spoto, Donald. *Camerado: Hollywood and the American Man*. New York: New American Library, 1978.

4. Literary Studies

- Benét's Reader's Encyclopedia*. Third Edition. New York: Harper and Row, 1987.
- Hawkins, Harriett. *Classics and Trash: Traditions and Taboos in High Literature and Popular Modern Genres*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990.
- Fiedler, Leslie A. *Love and Death in the American Novel*. 2nd Edition. New York: Dell Books, 1969. (First published by Stein and Day in hardcover, 1966.)
- . *The Return of the Vanishing American*. Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein and Day, 1968.
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Land Before Her: Fantasies and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630–1860*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

Macpherson, Jay. *The Spirit of Solitude: Conventions and Continuities in Late Romance*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982.

5. In a Class By Itself

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Filmography

1939

Stagecoach d. John Ford
Jesse James d. Henry King
Union Pacific d. Cecil B. DeMille

1940s

The Westerner d. William Wyler, 1940
The Spoilers d. Ray Enright, 1942
The Outlaw d. Howard Hughes, 1943
My Darling Clementine d. John Ford, 1946
Duel in the Sun d. King Vidor, 1946
Angel and the Badman d. James Edward Grant, 1947
Fort Apache d. John Ford, 1948
Three Godfathers d. John Ford, 1948
Red River d. Howard Hawks, 1948
Station West d. Sidney Lanfield, 1948
She Wore a Yellow Ribbon d. John Ford, 1949
Yellow Sky d. William Wellman, 1949

1950s

Wagon Master d. John Ford, 1950
Rio Grande d. John Ford, 1950
Broken Arrow d. Delmer Daves, 1950
Devil's Doorway d. Anthony Mann, 1950
Winchester '73 d. Anthony Mann, 1950
The Gunfighter d. Henry King, 1950

Bend of the River d. Anthony Mann, 1952
High Noon d. Fred Zinneman, 1952
Westward the Women d. William Wellman, 1952

Shane d. George Stevens, 1953
The Naked Spur d. Anthony Mann, 1953
Johnny Guitar d. Nicholas Ray, 1953
Escape from Fort Bravo d. John Sturges, 1953
Hondo d. John Farrow, 1953

Drum Beat d. Delmer Daves, 1954
Apache d. Robert Aldrich, 1954
Garden of Evil d. Henry Hathaway, 1954
Cattle Queen of Montana d. Allan Dwan, 1954
River of No Return d. Otto Preminger, 1954
Broken Lance d. Edward Dmytryk, 1954

The Far Country d. Anthony Mann, 1955
The Man From Laramie d. Anthony Mann, 1955
Texas Lady d. Tim Whelan, 1955

The Searchers d. John Ford, 1956
Jubal d. Delmer Daves, 1956
The Last Wagon d. Delmer Daves, 1956
The King and Four Queens, d. Raoul Walsh, 1956
Maverick Queen d. Joseph Kane, 1956
The Fastest Gun Alive d. Russell Rouse, 1956
Backlash d. John Sturges, 1956

3:10 to Yuma d. Delmer Daves, 1957
The Tin Star d. Anthony Mann, 1957
The Guns of Fort Petticoat d. George Marshall, 1957
Forty Guns d. Samuel Fuller, 1957
Trooper Hook d. Charles Marquis Warren 1957

Man of the West d. Anthony Mann, 1958
The Big Country d. William Wyler, 1958
The Law and Jake Wade d. John Sturges, 1958
These Thousand Hills d. Richard Fleischer, 1958

The Horse Soldiers d. John Ford, 1959
The Hanging Tree d. Delmer Daves, 1959
Rio Bravo d. Howard Hawks, 1959

1960s

Cimarron d. Anthony Mann, 1960
The Unforgiven d. John Huston, 1960
Heller in Pink Tights d. George Cukor, 1960

Two Rode Together d. John Ford, 1961

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance d. John Ford, 1962
Ride the High Country d. Sam Peckinpah, 1962
How the West Was Won d. Henry Hathaway, John Ford, George Marshall,
 1962

A Distant Trumpet d. Raoul Walsh, 1963

Cheyenne Autumn d. John Ford, 1964

Will Penny d. Tom Gries, 1967
The Way West d. Andrew V. McLaglen, 1967

True Grit d. Henry Hathaway, 1969
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid d. George Roy Hill, 1969
Death of a Gunfighter d. "Allen Smithee" (Robert Totten and Don Siegel),
 1969

Notes

Notes for Chapter 1

1. Robert Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962). Reprinted in Jack Nachbar, *Focus on the Western* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 48.
2. Frederick Woods, "Hot Guns and Cold Women," *Films and Filming* (March 1959), p. 30.
3. "Que c'est la femme dans le western? Un accessoire. Moins important que le pistolet ou le lasso, qui participent du geste du héros." Jean-Louis Bory, "Femme," in Raymond Bellour and Patrick Brion, eds. *Le Western: Sources, thèmes, mythologies, auteurs, acteurs, filmographies*. (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1969), p.143.
4. Mollie Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. 2nd edition. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 22.
5. Cheryl J. Foote, "Changing Images of Women in the Western Film," in *Journal of the American West* (October 1983), pp. 64-71, and Jacqueline Levitan, "The Western: Any Good Roles for Feminists?" *Film Reader* 5 (1982), pp. 95-108. There is one book chapter on the subject of women in Westerns, providing a short and rather superficial survey: Sandra Kaye Schakel, "Women in Western Films: The Civilizer, The Saloon Singer, and Their Modern Sister" in McDonald, Archie P., ed. *Shooting Stars: Heroes and Heroines of Western Film*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 196-215.
6. Molly Haskell, "Howard Hawks Masculine Feminine," *Film Comment* 39 (March-April 1974), p. 39.

7. Michael Goodwin and Naomi Chase, "An Interview with Howard Hawks," *Take One* 3: 8 (Published March 1, 1973, but designated as issue of Nov.-Dec. 1971), p. 19.
8. Brian Garfield, *Western Film: A Complete Guide* (New York: Rawson Associates, 1982), p. 85.
9. Quoted by James Spada, *Grace: The Secret Lives of a Princess* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), p. 64.
10. Harriett Hawkins, *Classics and Trash: Traditions and Taboos in High Literature and Popular Modern Genres* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 87.
11. Jon Tuska, *The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 263.
12. Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 77-78.

Notes for Chapter 2

1. "En fait, on ajoute toujours une femme dans la ballade, parce que sans femme un western ne marcherait pas." Carles Bitsch and Claude Chabrol, "Entretien avec Anthony Mann," *Cahiers du Cinéma* (March 1957), p. 6.
2. "Ce qui est important, c'est ce que l'héroïne a provoqué, ou bien ce qu'elle représente. C'est elle, ou mieux, l'amour ou la peur qu'elle inspire au héros, ou encore le souci qu'il a d'elle, et qui le fait agir d'une certaine manière. La femme elle-même n'a pas la moindre importance." Bertrand Tavernier, "Entretien transatlantique avec Budd Boetticher," *Cahiers du Cinéma* (July 1964), p. 11.
3. "C'est l'absence-présence de la femme qui est facteur de l'action masculine." Alain Garel "Trois genres sexistes?: La femme dans le

- western, le cinéma fantastique, le film érotique,” *Ecran* 28 (August/September 1974), p. 57.
4. Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 176.
 5. Howard Hawks, interviewed by Peter Bogdanovich in *The Cinema of Howard Hawks* (New York: Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art, 1962), p. 27.
 6. J. A. Place, *The Western Films of John Ford*, (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1974), p. 163.
 7. Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves*, p. 226.
 8. Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1975). Wright has sometimes been criticized because he considered so few Westerns: only those which grossed over \$4,000,000 in the years 1931 to 1972. Another obvious weakness of his survey is that he didn't adjust for inflation, so that his list of box office successes has too few films for the earlier years and too many for the later. Finally, he was forced to leave out four films that were “embarrassing to his categories” — including *Fort Apache* and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*! Nevertheless, as of 1991, Wright provides the only detailed model for the analysis of Western film plots.
 9. Wright, *Sixguns and Society*, pp. 48-49.
 10. Wright, *Sixguns and Society*, p. 69.
 11. Jon Tuska, *The American West in Film: Critical Approaches to the Western* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), p. 14.
 12. Wright's need to fit *Stagecoach* into one of his categories leads him to overstate greatly the role of revenge in the story. It seems clear that *Stagecoach* isn't “about” revenge in the same way that, for

example, *Nevada Smith*, *The Bravados* or *Last Train from Gun Hill* are.

13. Wright, *Sixguns and Society*, p. 67.
14. Jacqueline Levitan, "The Western: Any Good Roles for Feminists?" *Film Reader* 5 (1982), p. 96.
15. "L'itinéraire joue un rôle considérable pour l'épanouissement de cet amour. En effet, il se développe difficilement dans la sédentarité; et si c'est le cas, le héros, éternel errant, repartira en laissant l'aimée. Par contre, lorsqu'ils voyagent ensemble, il n'est pas rare qu'un homme et une femme soient attirés l'un vers l'autre . . . et que leur amour s'épanouisse pleinement en fin de film." Alain Garel, "Trois genres sexistes?", p. 58.
16. Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), p. 10.
17. Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 11.
18. As summarized by Rita Parks, *The Western Hero in Film and Television: Mass Media Mythology* (Ann Arbor/London: UMI Press, 1982), p. 57.
19. Christopher Wicking and Barrie Pattison, "Interview with Anthony Mann," *Screen: The Journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television* (July/October 1969), p. 51.
20. Jane Tompkins, "West of Everything" in Derek Longhurst, ed. *Gender, Genre and Narrative Pleasure* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 25.
21. ". . . il faut les cinq minutes de roucoulade rassurante" Jean-Louis Bory, "Femme" in Raymond Bellour and Patrick Brion, eds., *Le Western: Sources, thèmes, mythologies, auteurs, acteurs, filmographies*. (Paris: Union générale d'éditions, 1969), p. 144.

22. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 2nd Edition (New York: Dell Books, 1969), p. 202.
23. John Cawelti, *The Six-gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971, rev. ed. 1985), pp. 62-63.
24. Kitses, *Horizons West*, p. 11.
25. "... toutes liées entre elles, les heroines tendres et singulières de Delmer Daves ... leur tendresses, la sourde profondeur de leur sentiment bouleverse." Raymond Bellour, "Femme: Theogony," in Raymond Bellour and Patrick Brion, eds. *Le Western: Sources, thèmes, mythologies, auteurs, acteurs, filmographies*, p. 152.
26. Andrew Sarris, "The World of Howard Hawks," in Joseph McBride, ed. *Focus on Howard Hawks* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 54.
27. Antony Easthope, *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (London: Paladin, 1986), p. 21.
28. Wright, *Sixguns and Society*, p. 42.
29. Tuska, *The American West in Film*, p. 10.
30. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 6.
31. Lawrence Kohlberg, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Childhood and Moral Development Revisited," in *Collected Papers on Moral Development and Moral Education* (Moral Education Research Foundation, Harvard University, 1973), cited in Gilligan, *A Different Voice*, p. 20.
32. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, p. 18.

33. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, p. 20.
34. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, p. 19.
35. Jane Loevinger and Ruth Wessler, *Measuring Ego Development* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1970), p. 6, cited by Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, p. 21.
36. Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, p. 22.
37. Mollie Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2nd. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 203.
38. Jenni Calder, *There Must be a Lone Ranger: The Myth and Reality of the American Wild West* (London: Abacus, 1976), p. 171.
39. Jay Macpherson, *The Spirit of Solitude: Conventions and Continuities in Late Romance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 152-153.
40. Ted Sennett, *Great Hollywood Westerns* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 205.
41. Jon Tuska, *The American West in Film*, p. 58.
42. Jacqueline Levitan, "The Western: Any Good Roles for Feminists?", p. 108. She is summarizing an argument originally made by John Cawelti in *The Six-gun Mystique*, pp. 37-38.
43. Jon Tuska, *The American West in Film*, p. 243.
44. Maryann Oshana, "Native American Women in Westerns: Reality and Myth," *Film Reader* 5 (1982), p. 128.
45. Ted Sennett, *Great Hollywood Westerns*, p. 208.

46. Cheryl J. Foote, "Changing Images of Women in the Western Film," *Journal of the West* 22 (October 1983), p. 68.
47. Georges-Albert Astre and Albert-Patrick Hoarau, *Univers du Western* Paris: Editions Seghers, 1973, p. 135.

Notes for Chapter 3

1. Peter Homans, "Puritanism Revisited," in Jack Nachbar, ed. *Focus on the Western* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 90.
2. Glenda Riley, *Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1825-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), p. 3.
3. Riley, *Women and Indians on the Frontier*, p. 3.
4. Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasies and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 3
5. John Smith, "A Description of New England; or, The Observations, and Discoueries of Captain John Smith (Admirall of that Country) in the North of America, in the year of our Lord 1614," quoted by Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. 3.
6. From Roger Wolcott's *Poetical Meditations* (1725), quoted by Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. 3.
7. Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. 5.
8. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer* (New York: Meridian Books, 1975), pp. 22-27.
9. Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. xiii.
10. Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, pp. 223-224. The phrase in single quotation marks about the "myth-hero" is quoted by Kolodny from

Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Myth of the American Frontier* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 21.

11. Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. 224.
12. Information on Lilith from *Benét's Reader's Encyclopedia*, Third Edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), p. 569.
13. Facts and figures about the overland journey in Edward Buscombe, "Immigrants," an essay in Edward Buscombe, ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1988), pp. 116-117.
14. Lillian Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schoken Books, 1982), p. 13.
15. Sandra L. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience: 1800-1915* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), p. 129.
16. Quoted in Ruth B. Moynihan, Susan Armitage, and Christiane Fischer Dichamp, *So Much to Be Done: Women Settlers on the Mining and Ranching Frontier* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press), 1990, p. 232.
17. Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, p. 15.
18. John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Great Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West 1840-1860*. (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979), cited in in Edward Buscombe, "Immigrants," an essay in Edward Buscombe, ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1988), pp. 116-117.
19. Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, p. 106.

20. Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, p. 14.
21. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, p. 132.
22. Schlissel, *Women's Diaries of the Westward Journey*, p. 84.
23. Riley, *Women and Indians on the Frontier*, p. 117.
24. Riley, *Women and Indians on the Frontier*, p. 16.
25. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, p. 38.
26. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, p. 38.
27. Kolodny, *The Land Before Her*, p. 6.
28. Leslie A. Feidler, *The Return of the Vanishing American* (New York: Stein and Day, 1968, p. 93). I think Fiedler may be unduly harsh on his own sex in ignoring the kind of sexual frisson women might derive from captivity narratives, which, as Koldny points out, they certainly did read. But a discussion of the female psychosexual dynamics involved in watching Westerns is too big, and separate, a topic for this thesis to consider.
29. Riley, *Women and Indians on the Frontier*, p. 167, 169.
30. Riley, *Women and Indians on the Frontier*, p. 172.
31. Quoted by Riley, *Women and Indians on the Frontier*, p. 151.
32. Quoted by Riley, *Women and Indians on the Frontier*, p. 207.
33. Merrill J. Mattes, *Indians, Infants and Infantry: Andrew and Elizabeth Burt on the Frontier*. (This is the annotated edition of Elizabeth Burt's memoir.) Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988. (Mattes edition first published in 1960.)

34. J.A. Place, *The Western Films of John Ford* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1974), p. 149.
35. Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 184.
36. Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves*, p. 184.
37. Mattes, *Indians, Infants and Infantry*, p. 21.
38. Ambrose, *Crazy Horse and Custer*, p. 247.
39. Quoted by Anne M. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-90* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), p. 126.
40. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery*, p. xviii.
41. Edward Buscombe, "Prostitution," in Edward Buscombe, ed. *The BFI Companion to the Western*, p. 204.
42. Jon Tuska, *The American West in Film*, p. 232.
43. The details of the careers of Lola Montez, Lotta Crabtree, and Adah Isaacs Menken come from Phyllis Zauner, *Those Spirited Women of the Early West* (Sonoma, CA: Zanel Publications, 1989.)
44. Zauner, *Those Spirited Women*, p. 44.
45. Butler, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery*, pp. 1-3.
46. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, Chapter 9, pp. 238-270.
47. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, pp. 248-249.

48. Pauline Kael, *Deeper into Movies* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1973), pp. 6-7.
49. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, p. 265.
50. Robert Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Western" in *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), quoted in Jack Nachbar, *Focus on the Western*, p. 46.
51. Ted Sennett, *Great Hollywood Westerns* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), p. 206
52. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, p. 160.
53. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, p. 162.
54. Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience*, p. 163.

Notes for A Reading of *Angel and the Badman*

1. Donald Spoto, *Camerado: Hollywood and the American Man* (New York: New American Library, 1978), p. 220.
2. David C. McClelland, *Power: The Inner Experience* (New York: Irvington, 1975), cited by Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 167.

Note for A Reading of *Westward the Women*

1. Bosley Crowther, Review of *Westward the Women* (originally published January 1, 1952), in *The New York Times Film Reviews 1913-1968*, vol. 4 (New York: New York Times and Arno Press, 1970), p. 2579.

Notes for A Reading of *True Grit*

1. Quoted in review of *True Grit* in *500 Best American Films to Buy, Rent or Videotape* New York: National Board of Review of Motion Pictures/Pocket Books, 1985, p. 456.
2. Mollie Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. xii.