



The Virginian Owen Wister

Online Information

For the online version of BookRags' The Virginian Short Guide, including complete copyright information, please visit:

<http://www.bookrags.com/short/virginian/>

Copyright Information

©2000–2005 BookRags, Inc. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994–2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994–2005, by Walton Beacham.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

Table of Contents

<u>Social Concerns</u>	1
<u>Characters</u>	2
<u>Themes</u>	4
<u>Techniques</u>	6
<u>Literary Precedents</u>	7
<u>Adaptations</u>	8

Social Concerns

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

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

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

Characters

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

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

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

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

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

more deeply into the meaning of circumstances than [his] opponents."

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

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

Themes

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

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

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

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

According to Cobbs in his book on Wister, critics often fail to recognize a less apparent theme in *The Virginian*, the gradual maturation of the nameless narrator. In the beginning, the narrator is a bumbling tenderfoot, intrigued by the strangeness and strength of Western life. Under the Virginian's tutelage, he slowly overcomes his youthful vulnerability and successfully accepts nature's challenges on the open trails

of Wyoming. By the end of the novel, the narrator is a mature and confident horseman who rides alone through the "unmapped spaces." When viewed on this level, *The Virginian* is a bildungsroman, a novel which concerns a young man's education and passage into adulthood.

Techniques

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

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

Literary Precedents

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

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

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

Adaptations

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

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

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

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

In 1964 *The Virginian* experienced a resurgence of popularity when it appeared as a 90–minute television series, starring James Drury as the *Virginian* and Doug McClure

as Trampas. The series followed Wister's original formula Western technique. It was broadcast by NBC until 1969.

The Virginian – Chapter by Chapter

Chapter 1 – 4 pp – Enter the Man

Arrival in Medicine Bow. Loses baggage. Meets Virginian – a man among men. Tall, handsome, soft spoken, good natured, humorous, Southern gentleman, come to pick up author.

Chapter 2 – 14 pp – “When You Call me That, Smile.”

263 miles to ranch, overnite stay, description of Medicine Bow, beds at boarding house taken, Virginian quite but volcanic, attractive to landlady, conversation with Easterners (Jews, drummer), . Intro to Trampas and facedown in card game.

Chapter 3 – 8 pp – Steve Treats

Virginian not looking for trouble but deadly fast. Fair to Trampas at cards after facedown. Psychs drummer out of his bed, drinks on Steve after V wins bet. Everyone to the bar, partying then respect for sick woman shuts it down.

Chapter 4 – 10 pp – Deep Into Cattle Land

Up early, provisioning. V leaves flowers for sick woman. Baggage arrives, off to the ranch. Uncle Hughey meets new bride. Landlady says farewell to V. Buck spooks but V is patient, expresses himself about someone who would abuse a horse. Rumor about Bear Creek building a schoolhouse and hiring a schoolmarm.

Chapter 5 - 3 pp – Enter the Woman

Discussion about Miss Molly Wood of Bennington VT. Letter read aloud. Spinster discussion.

Chapter 6 – 10 pp – Em’ly

Description of Judge Henry’s ranch, cowboys. The tenderfoot. Discussion about Emily the chicken and Vs interest in her. Author returns to the East.

Chapter 7 - 3 pp – Thru Two Snows

Letters to V and his replies. V leaves Sunk Creek but returns when Judge finds out that he can’t do without him. Steve turns to rustling. Schoolmarm on the way.

Chapter 8 – 4 pp – The Sincere Spinster

New England background of Molly Wood, character and attributes. Molly refuses marriage because she doesn’t love him. No other prospects and decides to leave for the West.

Chapter 9 – 5 pp – The Spinster Meets the Unknown

V singing Bang Bang Lulu. V good with kids, discussion of wives of Bear Creek and schoolhouse. Molly departs Bennington, travels to bear Creek. Rescued gallantly enroute by V. Beef prices up, prosperity. Enroute to Swinton BBQ and dance.

Chapter 10 – 10 pp – Where Fancy Was Bred

Swinton BBQ, cowboys all discussing schoolmarm. Trampas present. V faces him down over lies about schoolmarm. Schoolmarm playing it cool, V has a chance. He arranges for an intro to Molly, waltz. V switches out babies.

Chapter 11 – 9 pp – You’re Going to Love Me Before We Get Through

At Swinton BBQ. Baby exchange discovered, McLean gets blamed, V confesses and talks his way out. V goes to see Molly, - discussion of baby swap – states above, Molly accepts him, makes date for later time.

Chapter 12 – 7 pp – Quality and Equality

V reading books, trying to make time. Molly playing hard to get. V about to leave on trip.

Chapter 13 - 6 pp – The Game and the Nation – Act First

Eternal inequality of man. In Colonel Cyrus Jones restaurant talking about frog legs. Trampas enters. V is acting foreman to escort cattle to Chicago, then bring hands back. Discussion of Kenilworth. V heads to Chicago.

Chapter 14 – 5 pp – Between the Acts

Author takes stagecoach then Northern Pacific – missed train. V on siding train in caboose, headed west. Author gets on train, train pulls out headed to Rawhide. V kicks troublemaker off train. Scipio turns out to be COL Jones.

Chapter 15 – 6 pp – The Game and the Nation – Act Second

Train heads west to Rawhide with all in the caboose – Trampas, Scipio, V and author.

Chapter 16 – 18 pp – The Game and the Nation – Last Act

V spins tall tale about frogs, frog markets, etc. All the crew including Trampas realize through his story that there is nothing to be found in mining at Rawhide so they decide to stay on the train and go home to Sunk Creek. V has managed to hold his crew together through storytelling.

Chapter 17 – 4 pp – Scipio Moralizes

V doesn't talk for 9 days after the frog story. Tension between V and Trampas because story sucked Trampas in. V shoots snake beside author with Winchester.

Chapter 18 – 7 pp – Would You Be a Parson?

Nearing Sunk Creek, group meets a missionary heading to see the Judge. Trampas takes V's rope, V reclaims but tension between the two.

Chapter 19 – 4 pp - Dr MacBride Begs Pardon

Author relates V's masterful ability to keep crew together and stop mutiny. Missionary makes himself unpleasant. Molly hears all about V.

Chapter 20 – 5 pp – The Judge Ignores Particulars

V reports on trip to the Judge. Old foreman gone, V becomes foreman. Trampas SOL.

Chapter 21 – 11 pp – In a State of Sin

Bunkhouse rejoices at news of new foreman except for Trampas. Dr MacBride – missionary – shucks down the corn, condemns all cowboys to hell. V gets religion all nite and runs missionary out. V tries to make peace with Trampas. V and Molly go fishing.

Chapter 22 – 7 pp – “What is a Rustler?”

V doesn't see Molly since he becomes foreman. Molly goes east for holiday. Molly tell Aunt about V. Molly returns to Sunk Creek.

Chapter 23 – 7 pp – Various Points

V not making much progress during the winter. Working on education. Trampas leading Shorty astray. Conversation with Scipio over Trampas and Shorty leads to conclusion that they will both be gone in spring and then they both may need killing. V tries to save Shorty. 20 below zero.

Chapter 24 - 3 pp – Letter With a Moral

Letter to Molly because duty calls at first thaw and V can't go see Molly. Letter 20 days old when it gets to Molly. Molly conflicted. V arrives the next morning.

Chapter 25 – 10 pp – Progress of the Lost Dog

V sees Molly for 1 hour. Letter via Shorty from Judge to Balaam asking for return of horses. Balaam invites Shorty and V to dinner, topic is Indians off reservation. Shorty sells Pedro to Balaam the horse beater.

Chapter 26 – 11 pp – Balaam and Pedro

V and Balaam take horses back to Judge. Balaam rides Pedro to ground, V beats him. Traveling on, Pedro shies, Balaam shoots him by accident. V and Balaam separate, Indians in forest, they do not re-unite. Balaam returns home, Shorty gets news of his dead horse.

Chapter 27 – 21 pp – Grandmother Stark

Molloy is about to leave for good. Indians shoot V. Molly finds him, gets him to her house, nurses him back to health, finally falls for him.

Chapter 28 – 2 pp – No Dream to Wake From

V wakes up, tries to determine if his conversation with Molly was a dream. Gets out of bed to look at Granny pic, Molly finds him, gets him back to bed. He determines it was no dream.

Chapter 29 – 9 pp – Word to Bennington

V and Molly write letters to home about their engagement. Mom is horrified, spinster Aunt is thrilled. Aunt writes positive letter to Molly. V goes to far reaches looking for rustlers. Joined by author.

Chapter 30 – 8 pp – Stable on the Flat

Author joins V at creek fork on the way to the Wind River country in time to see Steve and his partner hang.

Chapter 31 – 7 pp – The Cottonwoods

Steve and Ed get hung. V and author discuss how they went on the way back to Sunk Creek. V bothered by having to hang Steve.

Chapter 32 – 12pp – Superstition Trail

V and author trail 2 hombres. V still obsessing about Steve. Make a dry camp, then continue to trail the next day. Discover Shorty murdered and bury him. Trampas has horse and disappears.

Chapter 33 – 9 pp – The Spinster Loses Some Sleep

Molly finds out about the lynching, horrified. Ms Taylor confronts the Judge about the situation. Judge talks to Molly and explains reason for lynching.

Chapter 34 – 4 pp – To Fit Her Finger

V and Molly set the date. Because family did not support her, she decided to get married in Wyoming. Honeymoon would be a month in the wilds of Wyoming, then a trip to Bennington. V finds out that Molly's stone is an opal. Wedding day is July 3rd.

Chapter 35 – 23pp – With Malice Aforethought

V and Molly go to town for wedding. Runs into Trampas on trail, shoots snake for practice. Molly and V talk about Trampas on trail. Trampas has been talking about V in town, enters bar. Trampas challenges V at sundown. Bishop tells V to inform Molly ASAP. Molly tells V the wedding is off if he takes on Trampas...V tells her if that is how it will be. V takes Trampas. Molly forgives V, they get married.

Chapter 36 – 11pp – At Dunbarton

Honeymoon on island. V accepted by Molly's family. Auntie accepts V. V weathers cattle wars by claiming land with coal and becoming an important man. Kids come along.

[Go Back to All BookRags Content on The Virginian \(novel\)](#)

In order to download the PDF or Word version of this Study Pack, you must navigate to each specific product. Please go back to the Study Pack and click on the product you wish to download. From there, click the download icon for PDF or Word.

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction and Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults on The Virginian

Characters

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

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

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

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

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

Wister clearly demonstrates that Trampas is the villain because he lacks this aforementioned heroic quality and performs heinous acts devoid of moral conscience. Trampas is introduced in the novel as a swaggering braggart who displays "in his countenance the same ugliness that his words conveyed." Trampas later murders his companion Steve in a callous and cowardly manner in order to gain sole possession of their previously shared horse. He shoots the luckless youth "from behind" and leaves him rotting on the open trail. It is important to note that Trampas, by all the laws of rational probability, should have won the famous

gunfight at the end of the story because he undoubtedly drew his weapon first. But as Cobbs explains, Trampas lost the competition because Wister wished to satisfy his readers' innate sense of justice, and in doing so, he established a characteristic of the archetypal villain whose "incompetence is equated with immorality."

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

Social Concerns

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

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

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

Themes

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

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

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

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

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

Techniques

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

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

Literary Precedents

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

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

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

Adaptations

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

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

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

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

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

Wikipedia on *The Virginian* (novel)

Dictionary of Literary Biography on Owen Wister

Name:

Dictionary of Literary Biography Biography

Owen Wister is most often thought of, not inappropriately, as a writer about the American West. Indeed, his stories and books were extremely important in establishing in the 1890s and early twentieth century the ideas held by the majority of people about Western life and landscape. He is often credited with establishing through his Western fiction the typical cowboy hero and villain, along with some other cowboy character types and certain basic formulas for involving them in cultural or moral conflicts, all of which became prevalent (usually with less success) first in twentieth-century popular fiction and later in movies and on radio and television. However, while his Western writing was his most important and most influential both on readers and on other writers, his Philadelphia and family heritages led to other successes for him in both fiction and nonfiction.

Wister was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania (a suburb of Philadelphia), and he remained primarily a resident of Philadelphia or its environs all of his life. The strong family ties and various cultural interests of the family of his mother, Sarah Butler Wister, the daughter of the famous actress Fanny Kemble and a minor writer herself, were to have strong influences upon his personality, interests, and tastes all of his life. His father, Owen Jones Wister, was a doctor and a member of a prominent family, so Wister grew up in somewhat genteel circumstances which in most ways hardly seem to anticipate his later interest in the frontier West. He attended, among other schools, a boarding school at Hofwyl, Switzerland (1870-1871), an English school while he was living with the family of his mother's sister (1871-1872), Germantown Academy (1872), and Saint Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire (1873-1878), where he published in the school magazine his first story and also poems and essays. After an unhappy boyhood, he attended Harvard University (1878-1882), from which he received an A.B. with honors in philosophy and English composition and highest honors in music. There he also made lasting and useful friendships with a number of people who were later prominent, most notably Theodore Roosevelt. Harvard was followed by a year in Paris to study composition and to explore possibilities for a career in music. Though Wister had obvious talent for and interest in music, his father's displeasure with his pursuing music as a career led instead to a job in 1883 at the Union Safe Deposit Vaults in Boston. After suffering increasing physical and emotional problems, Wister took his first trip west, to Wyoming, in June 1885 upon his doctor's advice. There he discovered a world which intrigued him; it greatly appealed to his rugged individualism, his beliefs in America's democratic potential and its preindustrial values, and his attraction to unspoiled nature, while at the same time he saw the beastiality which often so easily emerged on the frontier before the establishment of a more stable civilization. Although he attended law school at Harvard (1885-1888) and in 1889 became a

member of the bar affiliated with a Philadelphia law firm, Wister had found new life in the West and in the fiction which he began to consider his real career. He wrote more and more, usually about the West. He made many other trips to the West, almost yearly for nearly two decades, for either short visits or temporary residence, finally owning his own ranch. His first Western story, "Hank's Woman," was published in *Harper's Weekly* for 27 August 1892; and by 1893 he considered himself a writer, not a lawyer. On 25 April 1898, Wister married his second cousin, Mary Channing (Molly) Wister, who was a devoted wife and gave him a happy home until her death in childbirth in 1913, leaving him with six children. After her death his attention turned more toward Europe, where he traveled and visited relatives whenever he could. In fact, he was in Munich when World War I broke out in 1914. After the great success of *The Virginian* (1902), Wister's reputation as a writer was established. This and his extensive literary, musical, social, and political connections, allowed him to move in various circles of the well-known as much as he cared to. He occasionally participated in politics, on behalf of his friend Theodore Roosevelt and others of similar persuasion, and he was even an unsuccessful candidate for the Philadelphia city council in 1908. During World War I he actively encouraged American entry into the war through both speeches and writing, and following the war he was concerned about international relations. During 1912-1925 he was quite active as a member of the Board of Overseers for Harvard. As his literary career continued, his reputation grew and a number of other writers turned to him for encouragement, including the young Ernest Hemingway. When the uniform edition of Wister's writings was published in 1928, on the title page he proudly listed himself as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Membre Correspondant de la Société des Gens de Lettres (of France), and Honorary Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (of Great Britain).

Wister's writings are dominated by his Western fiction, mostly short stories published first in major magazines of his day and then collected in *Red Men and White* (1896), *The Jimmyjohn Boss, and Other Stories* (1900), *A Journey in Search of Christmas* (1904), *Members of the Family* (1911), *Padre Ignacio* (1911), and *When West Was West* (1928), or incorporated into *Lin McLean* (1898) and *The Virginian*. In this Western fiction his primary purpose was to record (and sometimes to interpret) the rapidly disappearing old West and the gradually emerging new, more settled West and to reveal the differences between them (especially in Wyoming, but also in many other parts of the West, including Arizona, Idaho, Montana, and northern California). He tried to capture the character and local color of the West through its people and settings and was especially interested in how these were affected by the encroaching values and ways of the East as civilization and frontier began to merge. The record provided is on the one hand realistic in its portrayals based carefully on actual events, customs, people, and places (as Wister's journals reveal) and on the other hand romantic in its fascination with strength of character and innate, often uninstructed goodness in the face of overt evil, false values, and natural difficulties. Its many vignettes of Western life are sometimes poignant, often humorous (sometimes at the expense of a tenderfoot like Wister himself), and usually sympathetic, particularly toward what Wister viewed as America's original potential, which he believed was still available in the West even though it was too often squandered or ignored elsewhere.

Wister's pen also produced verse, drama, burlesque and satire, comic opera, essays, biographies, including books on Grant, Washington, and Roosevelt (this final biography is also autobiographical), and prefaces and introductions, which showed the great variety of his interests, including hunting, music, education, public affairs, history, wines, and world literature (both ancient and modern). His trilogy of book-length essays (*The Pentecost of Calamity*, 1915; *A Straight Deal*, 1920; and *Neighbors Henceforth*, 1922) concerned with the coming and the aftermath of World War I was widely respected. It is not unusual to find in his other writings some degree of the same basic conservative-progressive themes and concerns as are invested in his Western fiction, especially as they pertain to his perception of the original promise of much of the United States and its people and the gradual degrading of the ideas of the Founding Fathers through rampant commercialism and crass values and behavior.

Wister wrote only two books which really should be considered novels. For example, *The New Swiss Family Robinson* (1882) is a burlesque of the original story; and *The Dragon of Wantley* (1892) is a playful medieval fantasy, ostensibly for children. *Philosophy 4* (1903), *How Doth the Simple Spelling Bee* (1907), *Mother* (1907), and *Padre Ignacio* are stories given separate book publication to take advantage of the popularity of Wister's fiction, all but *How Doth the Simple Spelling Bee* having appeared elsewhere earlier. *Indispensable Information for Infants* (1921) is a volume of short comic verses.

Wister intended *Lin McLean* to be a novel and referred to it as such, though most students of his work consider it a volume of stories. Although as early as 1893 Wister's journals showed his interest in writing a novel that featured Lin as a primary character, the book which appeared in December 1897 only brought together six previously published stories about Lin with not enough modification to make them fit together as episodes of a novel rather than as just a series of stories. Indeed, the six sections of the book retained the original titles of the six stories, and reviewers tended to see the book as another collection of Wister's stories or an overly episodic novel. In his preface to a 1907 edition of the book, Wister complained that its readers should have appreciated both the integrity of each episode and also how each was "a fragment of an underlying drama." This new edition is divided into twenty chapters in an attempt to emphasize his intention that the book be a novel rather than a collection of six stories, and this format was retained for the 1928 edition too. Despite Wister's intention, the book's inconsistency of tone, attitude, and point of view prevent it from working as a novel. However, with its gradually domesticated cowboy as the central character, its intention to emphasize a parallel ongoing drama of regional change and development as underlying theme, and its attempt to move from stories to the novel, *Lin McLean* was an important step toward his best work and first true novel, *The Virginian*.

The journal entries about a Lin McLean novel also mention one about the *Virginian*. Fortunately, by the time Wister got to the shaping of the latter, he had learned a lot from his not so happy attempt to create a novel featuring Lin. This time he also began with previously published stories (the earliest published in 1893), but he was now more successful because he not only recognized the problems he must deal with, but he also worked quite hard to solve them. Beginning with five previously published stories, Wister modified, rewrote, and added new material, creating a work which through its episodic plot still reflected its origins, but which is also consistent enough in characters, structure, approach, and intention to be a novel. While completing the book in Charleston, South Carolina, he wrote to his mother on 9 February 1902 of extensive "revision and interpolation," of cutting up the stories and pasting them together again with interpolations, of writing 20,000 words for four entirely new chapters: "Sometimes a page needs a change for consistency; sometimes it needs an addition for clearness and emphasis; sometimes it needs some elision; sometimes the style offends me and I rewrite it according to my present standard." A few months later, on 19 May, he wrote to Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes that he had attempted "to draw a man of something like genius--the American genius" and to do so through "action and manifestation"; and on 5 July he wrote to his mother that he also intended the book to be "the whole large picture of the era and manners" in which its hero existed. The result was a classic which established the romantic folk myth of the American cowboy. This myth has existed intact ever since and has generated a popular demand for Western stories. *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains*, dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt, was first published on 28 May 1902. The principal character, called only the *Virginian*, advances from cowboy, to foreman, to ranch owner, during which time he contends admirably with rustlers and with maintaining his own integrity. He also makes an enemy, the now typical Western villain, Trampas, whom he kills near the end of the book in a challenge show-down shoot-out in the middle of town. It is Trampas to whom the *Virginian* says near the beginning of the book, in response to an insult, the now famous line: "When you call me that, smile!" We also follow the hero through courtship of and finally marriage to Molly Wood, the schoolmarm come from Vermont to teach in the grade school at Bear Creek, Wyoming. The *Virginian* is not just any cowboy; he is a natural gentleman who believes in good times, responsible actions, and law and order; and he is handsome and also successful at anything he tries. He is Wister's ideal American hero. As he evolves toward "settling down," he also symbolizes the change from frontier, to region, toward statehood, of the West of the 1870s and 1880s against which he is faithfully portrayed. Molly represents the incursions of the East, which are welcome but require adjustments from the West. The *Virginian* is even more Wister's ideal after his admirable character has been not diminished but enhanced by such accommodations because he has not compromised any of what he holds dear. While Wister's fiction was an attempt to keep the old West from disappearing any further (and he felt it was far gone by 1902), he was historian enough to recognize and to present the inevitable change, at least symbolically in the ideal. The hero, the setting, and the book appealed to readers during a time of growing urbanization and industrialization when people longed for the independence, opportunity, beauty, and space represented by the disappearing frontier. Wister's book also appealed to American patriotism. The attributes of the book's central character could almost have been forecast from Wister's 1895 *Harper's* essay, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," which presents the cowboy as a modern knight of the plains. *The Virginian* was an instant success, requiring fifteen reprintings in its first eight

months; and it remained one of the steadiest sellers in American literary history, providing Wister with much money. By 1911 it had been reprinted thirty-eight times; by 1938 one and one-half million copies had been sold; and the estimate now is two million hardbound copies, with no record of the paperback sales--and it is still selling. It has been serialized many times and translated into several languages. Wister collaborated with Kirke La Shelle on the script and wrote the music for a dramatization that opened on Broadway on 5 January 1904 and ran for 138 performances. It was on the road for ten years and performed in stock for decades. At least four movie versions have been made, including two silents. The novel also provided the impetus for a television series.

Wister's publisher urged him to write a sequel, or at least another Western book to take advantage of the popularity of *The Virginian*. However, Wister did not wish to oblige. He wrote to his mother on 5 July 1902 that creating such an extraordinary character as the Virginian "only happens once, even to the great ones of the earth." However, he was even then thinking of another novel; and his next novel, *Lady Baltimore* (1906), has many of the same historical and social concerns as his first, but an entirely different setting--Charleston, South Carolina, called Kings Port in the novel. The novel's title comes from a type of cake, which the narrator enjoys and which plays a small part in the plot. Again Wister is concerned with the passing of a way of life (this time, that of old Charleston) which to him represents some of America's best potential. Here it is threatened by the crassness, materialism, and ignorance of the Northern nouveaux riches who try to intrude into a genteel world which is quite alien to them. Wister had access to the old families and homes of Charleston through relatives on his mother's side (Fanny Kemble had married a descendant of families that had been prominent in Charleston during the time of the American Revolution), and he had made several long visits there, beginning with one during his honeymoon in 1898 (and including one while he completed *Lady Baltimore*). Though Wister did not believe in living in the past, he did find in the principles, standards, manners, and charm of old Charleston society much that was worth keeping alive for the present; and his primary purpose in writing *Lady Baltimore* was to do that. In his book on Roosevelt, he called the Charleston he had hoped to capture and preserve in the novel "an oasis in our great American desert of mongrel din and haste." Although the reader of *Lady Baltimore* is always conscious of the old aristocratic Charleston ladies, the central characters of the plot are young. The male narrator is a stranger to Charleston but has the proper connections to open most closed doors (as did Wister). The plot of the book is not extensive but does provide an adequate frame for Wister's primary purposes of preservation and criticism in the face of rapidly approaching changes. The novel's hero, John Mayrant, is not nearly as well drawn or as important a character as the Virginian. Indeed, in the book he shares importance with the narrator, Augustus, the most important and most consistently and fully developed of the various stranger-narrators in Wister's fiction (all of whom remind one of their author). It is through Augustus that much of the novel's social criticism is provided. With him the reader follows the ins and outs of the engagement of Mayrant, a local young man of good family but uncertain wealth, to an outsider of questionable background and motives. Mayrant manages to escape to a more suitable marriage without violating social mores in the process. It is not enough that he has a good family background, he must renew the worth of that heritage through good conduct in this difficult affair. Through his elderly aunts are provided the standards against which he is measured. Their values also provide the contrast for the loose society and crass business dealings of the nouveaux riches, who lack real refinement and culture. Indeed, we really do not see the intruding, uncouth Northerners (called here the "yellow rich" or "the replacers") outside of Charleston and its shadow. A shorter version of *Lady Baltimore* was published first as a serial in the *Saturday Evening Post* between 28 October 1905 and 27 January 1906. The book (including a special edition of 200 numbered copies on Japanese vellum) was published in April. It was an immediate success both critically (even in culturally sensitive Charleston) and financially. A best-seller in this country and Canada for months, it was widely reviewed and often praised for its verbal portrait of old Charleston. In about two months, 50,000 copies were sold, providing Wister with over \$11,000 at a time when the sale of books generally was off. By the end of 1911 over 90,000 copies had been sold. The novel clearly demonstrated that Wister could handle non-Western subjects too, and because it had been conceived as a novel and had not been the outgrowth of previous short stories, it proved his ability to write fiction of novel length. Like *The Virginian*, it was read around the world, and it also helped Charleston's much needed tourist trade. In 1925 there was an edition of the novel for school use with notes and questions at the end. However, when Wister prepared the uniform edition of his works in 1928, he revised *Lady Baltimore* more than any other work, partly in response to some criticism from Roosevelt, but also in response to his own "dissatisfaction with some excessive statements, and with

dull, needless passages...." *Lady Baltimore* was a second peak in Wister's career during that first decade of the twentieth century which saw the height of his literary success.

As the century moved on, Wister felt less and less in step with literary developments, recognizing that his literary roots lay in the preceding century instead. However, his literary career, though not begun seriously until he was in his thirties, spanned more than forty years; and most of his books were successful critically, popularly, and financially and continued to be in demand. He was known to and respected by other writers, including Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, and William Dean Howells, to name only a few of those represented in his extensive correspondence. During his lifetime, certainly after *The Virginian*, he was regarded generally as an important American writer. He remains so today, though of the middle rather than the top rank. He was primarily a writer of short fiction, despite the fact that *The Virginian* and *Lady Baltimore* were his greatest successes. His fiction is more interesting for its entertainment and for its capturing of the past than for its techniques. His work has had little effect on the craft of fiction, except in providing enduring formulas of character and plot for the Western story. Certainly his most important and most enduring work is his Western fiction, which has been extensively imitated. However, some of its impact has been detrimental because of too often slavish imitation or use of the formula without either the historical or idealistic aspects which inform Wister's work. Certainly *The Virginian* will remain the classic Western novel. However, what is most worth notice in Wister's works is the distinct, acute, and pervasive sense of times and places in the now vanished American past which he captured and preserved so well.

Dictionary of Literary Biography on Owen Wister

Name:

Dictionary of Literary Biography Biography

Although best known for *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (1902), a novel often credited--if inaccurately--with being "the first Western," Owen Wister was in talent and predilection perhaps more a short-story writer than a novelist. He produced over sixty short stories, some of which provided the beginnings for his novels *Lin McLean* (1898) and *The Virginian*. All but a few of Wister's stories were about the American West, and, appearing in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's Weekly*, and *Cosmopolitan*, they helped to transform the region into a subject respectable enough for "quality" slick magazine fiction.

Wister was the only child of Sarah Butler and Owen Jones Wister. According to the writer's daughter, Fanny Wister, her grandparents' household in Germantown, Pennsylvania, was "intensely intellectual" and their relationship "temperamental." From a family of prosperous merchants, the father was a practical and hardworking country doctor known for his quick wit and temper. He once threw a beefsteak out the dining room window because it was not cooked to his liking. The writer's mother was the daughter of Fanny Kemble, a well-known actress and friend of such European celebrities as Sir Walter Scott, William Makepeace Thackeray, Robert Browning, and Felix Mendelssohn and of such Americans as historians William H. Prescott and John Lothrop Motley, naturalist Louis Agassiz, and writers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russell Lowell, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Sarah Butler was an intellectual who spoke several languages, played the piano well, translated the poetry of Alfred de Musset into English, and wrote unsigned articles for the *Atlantic Monthly*. She was, according to Fanny Wister, "very much aware ... she was a personage." Owen Wister's mother was the great intellectual force in his life, but her strong personality tended to overshadow his own.

Wister received a patrician education which included short stints in Swiss, English, and Germantown private schools. At thirteen he entered St. Paul's in Concord, New Hampshire. While there he wrote his first published story, "Down in a Diving Bell", which appeared in the school magazine. In 1878, after five years

at St. Paul's, Wister enrolled at Harvard, where he majored in music. During his university years he wrote both words and music for several college shows; had a burlesque novel, *The New Swiss Family Robinson* (1882), serialized in the *Harvard Lampoon*; and published a poem, "Beethoven", in the February 1882 *Atlantic Monthly*. He was elected Phi Beta Kappa and in 1882 graduated summa cum laude.

After spending the next year studying musical composition in Europe, where he was encouraged by Franz Liszt--a friend of his grandmother-- Wister returned home to keep a promise to his father that he would safely establish himself in a sound profession. He went to work with Union Safe Deposit Vaults of Boston. There, he told his mother, he did three things: acted as a receiving teller, ran up stairs, and compounded interest. The life was, he said, "not difficult but exceedingly monotonous." Socially he fared better. In 1884 he helped form a number of "undomesticated young men" dedicated to jest, romp, and Chianti into the Tavern Club, the first president of which was William Dean Howells. He also collaborated with a distant cousin, Langdon Mitchell, on "A Wise Man's Son", a novel not submitted for publication on the advice of Howells, who judged it too racy for the American public.

During this period of his life Wister grew restless and dispirited. His health began to deteriorate. Throughout the winter of 1885 he was depressed and tended to withdraw into himself. That summer he took the advice of Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a novelist and also a kinsman, and went west. His body responded well and, just as important, so did his imagination. The opening entry in his first western journal reads: "One must come to the West to realize what one may have most probably believed all one's life long-- that it is a very much bigger place than the East, and the future of America is just bubbling and seething in bare legs and pinafores here. I don't wonder a man never comes back [East] after he has once been here for a few years."

Wister did "come back," however; in October he enrolled at Harvard Law School, from which he graduated in 1888. He became a member of the Philadelphia bar in 1890. In the meantime he had continued his summer trips. For many years Wister followed a pattern of living in the East and taking holidays in the West. The notebooks he kept during those vacation jaunts reveal an increasing awareness of the literary possibilities of the regions he visited as well as a growing, and ever focusing, ambition to be the one to realize them. The moment at which dream became reality occurred one fall evening in 1891 as Wister was dining at his Philadelphia club with another young enthusiast fresh from the West. As he later wrote:

From oysters to coffee we compared experiences. Why wasn't some Kipling saving the sage-brush for American literature, before the sage-brush and all that it signified went the way of the California forty-niner, went the way of the Mississippi steam-boat, went the way of everything"... What was fiction doing, fiction, the only thing that has always outlived fact? Must it be perpetual tea-cups? Was Alkali Ike in the comic papers the one figure which the jejune American imagination, always at full-cock to banter or to brag, could discern in that epic which was being lived at a gallop out in the sage-brush? "To hell with tea-cups and the great American laugh!" we two said, as we sat dining at the club. The claret had been excellent. "Walter, I'm going to try it myself!" I exclaimed to Walter Furness. "I'm going to start this minute." Wister walked upstairs to the club library and spent the night writing most of "Hank's Woman". Once again taking the advice of Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, he sent it and another story, "How Lin McLean Went East", to Henry Mills Alden, former editor of *Harper's Weekly* and current editor of *Harper's Monthly*, who bought them both.

"Hank's Woman" (*Harper's Weekly*, 27 August 1892) is the story of an Austrian servant girl who, after being fired by her mistress at Yellowstone Park, makes the mistake of marrying a worthless American whose persecution of her for her religion drives her to murder. "How Lin McLean Went East" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, December 1892) describes a young cowboy's disillusioning trip to his boyhood home in Massachusetts, where he discovers that his mean-spirited, petit bourgeois brother is embarrassed by his western appearance and behavior. Artistically and intellectually, Wister never drifted far from the marks set by those stories. Most of his later fiction deals with conflicts of various kinds between East and West or between the forces of purification and degeneration within the West itself. In form and style nearly all of Wister's short fiction conforms to contemporary models of the well-made magazine story. The controlling narrative voice is always a cultured personality superior to his subject in civilized qualities. In a few framed stories this character is told a tale by a more vernacular narrator; in some third-person narratives the

personality is present only as the consciousness through which the action is filtered; in some first-person narratives he is a character in the story. Although less neatly structured than much contemporary periodical writing, Wister's stories are adequately plotted and proceed to fairly definite endings--whether those be neat resolutions, surprise twists in the manner of Frank Stockton or O. Henry, punch lines, or dramatically telling statements. More realistic in setting, situation, and characters than much rival fiction, Wister's work still tends toward the sentimental and, more frequently, the melodramatic. The latter was a characteristic he recognized: "Genteel critics in the East found these sketches `melodramatic,'" he once wrote. "Poor Sketches, how could they help it and remain truthful" Finally, despite some "risky" subjects, his stories lie comfortably within accepted bounds of decorum and convention. In spite of some grumbling, Wister never really challenged popular taste.

His early success gave Wister an artistic direction. He seriously set about becoming the "Kipling of the sagebrush." He read more studiously about the frontier; on his summer trips he hunted material with a vengeance. In 1893 Harper's proposed that he write them a series of western adventures, each "a thrilling story, having its ground in a real incident." Wister accepted. He then gave up his law practice and began the ten most productive years of his literary life. He wrote the stories which were to make up two collections, *Red Men and White* (1896) and *The Jimmyjohn Boss and Other Stories* (1900; retitled *Hank's Woman* as volume 3 of *The Writings of Owen Wister*, 1928), and those which he worked into the novels *Lin McLean* and *The Virginian*. He also produced an important essay, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, September 1895; collected as the preface to *Red Men and White* in *The Writings of Owen Wister*), which perhaps most clearly expresses the disquieting assumptions from which he evolved his version of the West. The cowboy was "not a new type," he wrote, "no product of the frontier but just the original kernel of the nut with the shell broken." The Wild West offered an opportunity for Anglo-Saxon blood to reinvigorate itself, for the manly spirit of adventure characteristic of earlier times to reawaken in modern men--that is, modern men of the proper racial stock. "No rood of modern ground," Wister said of America, "is more debased and mongrel with its hordes of encroaching alien vermin, that turn our cities to Babels and our citizenship to a hybrid farce, who degrade our commonwealth from a nation into something half pawn-shop, half broker's office. But to survive in the clean cattle country requires spirit of adventure, courage, and self-sufficiency; you will not find many Poles or Huns or Russian Jews in that district; but the Anglo-Saxon is still forever homesick for out-of-doors." Wister believed the tide of history ran against his ideal. The progress which had brought the electric light and "the ignorance of Populist politics" had also doomed the Anglo-Saxon West. He thought that he was, from the beginning, a writer of historical fiction; by 1895 the day of the cowboy had passed.

Red Men and White collected eight stories which had appeared in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* during the previous two years. In one way the volume was a significant success. Kipling liked it and sent Wister a brief poem celebrating Specimen Jones, a character in three of the stories. No doubt that pleased, or relieved, Wister; his volume definitely shows the influence of the British writer. The "Jones" stories--"Specimen Jones" (July 1894), "The General's Bluff" (September 1894), and "The Second Missouri Compromise" (March 1895)--deal, as does "Little Big Horn Medicine" (June 1894), with the difficulties encountered by the army in maintaining order on the far frontier. Wister's heroes are professional soldiers who struggle against renegade Indians, unreconstructed southerners, and the "Tommy Atkins Go Away" mentality of ignorant eastern bureaucrats. Three stories in the collection treat one of Wister's favorite subjects, women, who, with a few notable exceptions, appear most prominently in his work as either tramps or fools. In "The Serenade at Siskiyou" (August 1894) the ladies of a western town sentimentalize a young stage robber and murderer-- an act of injustice which exasperates the men of the community into lynching him. In "Salvation Gap" (October 1894) a degraded miner slits the throat of a prostitute who had exploited his infatuation with her and then tries to do "the manly thing" by saving her lover when he is accused of the crime. In "La Tinaja Bonita" (May 1895) a young American delirious with thirst and suspicion stabs the Mexican girl who loves him and then dies himself. Populist democracy, another favorite subject, is the target of "A Pilgrim on the Gila" (November 1895), in which a dishonest Arizona lawyer-politician successfully defends a gang of Mormon highwaymen by bribing a jury. The underlying point of this tale is the contrast between territorial realities and the image of Arizona spun out in congress by William Jennings Bryan. *Lin McLean*, though ostensibly a novel, is actually a book composed of six previously published stories. Taken together, "How Lin McLean Went East", "The Winning of the Biscuit-Shooter" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*,

December 1893), "Lin McLean's Honeymoon" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January 1895), "A Journey in Search of Christmas" (*Harper's Weekly Magazine*, 14 December 1895), "Separ's Vigilante" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, March 1897), and "Destiny at Drybone" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, December 1897) loosely relate how after his return from Massachusetts Lin McLean, a Wyoming cowboy, woos and wins Katie Peck, discovers she is already married to a rainmaker's assistant, adopts her runaway son, woos but does not win "an American virgin" of inanely high moral standards who considers him married to Katie Peck, unsuccessfully tries to revive Katie after she has taken a lethal dose of laudanum, and finally weds the right girl. The book's structure is problematical, particularly since all of the episodes do not have the same narrative point of view. Wister persisted in claiming that the book *was* a novel: that its episodic structure was the best means of communicating the cowboy's picaresque existence. Readers persisted in calling it an anthology of stories. No doubt to remedy the situation, in a later edition Wister divided the six episodes into twenty chapters.

In 1898 Wister married Mary Channing Wister, a cousin he had known since childhood and a descendant of William Ellery Channing, one of the founders of Unitarianism. They had three boys and three girls, and, according to Fanny Wister, Mary was the antithesis of Wister's mother: "Her house ran smoothly; her servants adored her. She kept her husband comfortable at all times, fending off annoyance and holding boring people at bay."

The years after this marriage were productive for Wister. His second collection, *The Jimmyjohn Boss and Other Stories*, appeared in 1900. Three of its eight stories--"Hank's Woman"; "The Promised Land" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, April 1894), which describes a pioneer family's encounter with Wild Goose Jake, a renegade selling whiskey to Indians, and what turns out to be the retarded son he has brought west to protect from society; and "A Kinsman of Red Cloud" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, May 1894), which portrays the cavalry's difficulties in capturing a murderous half-breed--had been written as part of the original contract with Harper's. Appearing in print for the first time were "The Jimmyjohn Boss" (retitled "The Boy and the Buccaroos" in volume 3 of *The Writings of Owen Wister*), which describes a nineteen-year-old foreman's proving himself as a handler of rebellious older hands, and "Napoleon Shave-tail", a mean-spirited story of an arrogant West Point graduate from "our Middle West where they encounter education too suddenly," whose adherence "to the book" results in the death of a veteran sergeant and an absurd military debacle. Much more interesting and successful are the three remaining stories in the collection. Two are satirical portraits of Sharon, a small southwestern town. "Sharon's Choice" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1897) describes an elocution contest in which two able performers--a girl who recites Charles Dickens's "Death of Paul Dombey" and a boy who does Mark Twain's "Blue Jay Yarn"--are defeated by an orphan raised by the patrons of a saloon. He captures the crowd's heart by rhythmically rattling through: "I love little pussy her coat is so warm/And if I don't hurt her she'll do me no harm...." The conventional sentimentalism of the story is nicely undercut and given a political edge by last lines which ask what sort of citizen the orphan will grow up to be: "For whom will he vote? May he not himself come to sit in Washington and make laws for us? Universal suffrage holds so many possibilities." "Twenty Minutes for Refreshments" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January 1900) relates the adventures of Wister's eastern narrator at a baby contest in Sharon. It is most remarkable for a portrait of Mrs. Sedalia Preene, a cultivated and strong-willed woman whose character and relationship to the storyteller may well have been shaped by family memories. The most unusual story in the collection is "Padre Ignacio" (published as "Padre Ignazio", *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, April 1900; published separately in 1911). It is, atypically, not about the cowboy West. Set in California in 1855, its title character is a highly cultivated Spanish priest whose encounter with a young Frenchman tempts him to leave his mission and return to Paris and the music he loves. In its celebration of things civilized, "Padre Ignacio" is more "European" than anything else in Wister's early stories. It also offers the first fully developed appearance of the civilized exile, a character prominent in his later work.

In 1901 Wister published two stories with eastern settings. "Philosophy 4" (*Lippincott's Magazine*, August 1901; published separately in 1903; collected in volume 8 of *The Writings of Owen Wister*), based on Wister's Harvard days, contrasts two rich, careless, and supposedly admirable students to their tutor, an impoverished, unimaginative, unattractive, and Jewish grind. "Mother" (first published in *A House Party*, 1901, a collection of stories by various authors; collected in volume 8 of *The Writings of Owen Wister*) is an

account of stock-market speculation written in imitation of Frank Stockton. No doubt most of Wister's creative energy was at this time being directed toward *The Virginian*. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* had previously published "Emily" (November 1893), the story about a hen who tried to hatch anything round; "Balaam and Pedro" (January 1894), the story of animal abuse which greatly upset Theodore Roosevelt, a friend since college; "Where Fancy Was Bred" (March 1896), the celebrated baby-switching episode; "Grandmother Stark" (June 1897), which dealt with the Virginian's wooing of Molly Wood; and "The Game and the Nation" (May 1900), the Virginian's tall tale of frog ranching. Like *Lin McLean*, the origins of *The Virginian* lay in short fiction. Wister was determined, however, that this time there would be no questions about the genre of his creation. He even turned to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) as a model to work from. He succeeded in his efforts. The book was a popular and, to an extent, a critical success, although not with his mother, who wrote to tell him that *The Virginian* was piecemeal, its last chapter superfluous, its heroine a failure, its morality doubtful, and that, all in all, it reminded her of Ouida's popular adventure fiction.

In defending himself, Wister promised his mother that his next effort would be "a very big book indeed." But in the following year he published only "How the Energy Was Conserved" (*Collier's Weekly*, 21 February 1903), a cavalry story which describes the trouble caused by a secretary of war whose Populist rhetoric undermines the necessary--and natural--discipline of an army post. In 1906 *Lady Baltimore*, a "Jamesian" novel set in South Carolina, appeared. Nothing followed for two years; then the *Saturday Evening Post* printed two Western stories: "Timberline" (7 March 1908) and "The Gift Horse" (18 July 1908). The *Saturday Evening Post* published another Western, "Extra Dry", on 27 February 1909, and the *Century Magazine* published "With the Coin of Her Life" in their June issue. An imitation of Silas Weir Mitchell which detailed the physical and mental deterioration of a young girl of good family, this story was collected in volume 8 of *The Writings of Owen Wister*. In 1911 the *Saturday Evening Post* published two more Western stories, "The Drake Who Had Means of His Own" (11 March) and "Where It Was" (22 April). In that same year all of these pieces except "With the Coin of Her Life" were gathered together with "Spit-Cat Creek" (first published as "The Vicious Circle", *Saturday Evening Post*, 13 December 1902) and "Happy Teeth" (first published as "The Patronage of High Bear", *Cosmopolitan*, January 1901) as *Members of the Family*. The soldier Specimen Jones reappears as a character in "How the Energy Was Conserved", which was retitled "In the Back". Scipio Le Moyne, a character in *The Virginian*, appears in all the rest. In some he might be called the hero; in others he is either an observer or the inside narrator of a framed story. Only three of the pieces in *Members of the Family* offer anything out of Wister's ordinary. "The Drake Who Had Means of His Own" slyly describes how a drake's arrogant behavior with two ducks teaches a henpecked husband the beneficial effect competition can have on a married man's situation. More interesting is "The Gift Horse". The subject of this story is lynching, which Wister had defended in several of his earlier works, most recently in *The Virginian*. In "The Gift Horse" the eastern narrative "I" so closely associated with Wister is threatened with hanging. Instead of a form of direct justice necessary in an unsettled country, the pending execution is here pictured as a terrifying farce motivated not by an Anglo-Saxon sense of the right but by the egotism of a rich rancher. "The Gift Horse" seems a retelling of some of Wister's earlier stories and perhaps suggests a reconsideration of old attitudes. The third notable work in the collection, "Where It Was", is a comic tale tinged with melancholy that reintroduces the exile. Here Wister portrayed a young easterner who because of intelligence, education, and maturity is out of place running a small store in the Northwest, and a pair cranky old forty-niners bound together primarily by their common experiencing of an era long passed.

After the publication of *Members of the Family* Wister stopped writing fiction for about twelve years. In 1913 his wife died in childbirth. In 1914 he traveled to Europe. He was in Munich at the outbreak of World War I and spent the next years urging that the United States enter on the side of Britain and France. In 1915 he published *The Pentecost of Calamity*, a long essay advocating intervention. Following the armistice, Wister spent part of every year abroad. He took his children to see the great cathedrals. He made the acquaintanceship of such writers as Lord Dunsany, E. F. Benson, and Joseph Conrad. He became a connoisseur of French wines and began a book on the subject. But, according to his daughter, he never talked about the West. In 1920 he published *A Straight Deal: or, The Ancient Grudge*, a defense of close Anglo-American relations, and in 1922, *Neighbors Henceforth*, an account of travels through France after its devastation in the war. Then in 1923 Wister began to write fiction again. In 1924 *Cosmopolitan* published

"Sun Road" (July) and "Captain Quid" (September), a story of a cavalry officer, his irrational wife, and tobacco. In 1926 the same magazine printed "Once Round the Clock" (July) and "The Right Honorable the Strawberries" (November). In October 1927 *Harper's Magazine* published "Safe in the Arms of Croesus", a story set aboard an Atlantic liner which contrasts the nonprofiteering heroism of a self-effacing Charles Lindbergh to the egotistical, self-advertising materialism of most Americans. In 1928 *Cosmopolitan* published four more Western stories: "Moulting Pelican" (May), "Little Old Scaffold" (June), "Lone Fountain" (June), and "At the Sign of the Last Chance" (February). In the same year all of the *Cosmopolitan* stories plus one too bold for the magazines, "Skip to My Loo"--in which a black panderer is shot by a Texan whom he has led to an assignation with his own wife--were collected in *When West Was West*, a volume created for inclusion in *The Writings of Owen Wister*. "Safe in the Arms of Croesus" gave its name to the eighth volume of the collected writings, which brought together Wister's few non-Western stories.

With two exceptions, the pieces in *When West Was West* are not among Wister's best work, but they are interesting in that the figure of the exile is prominent. The most arresting character in "Once Round the Clock" and "Little Old Scaffold"--two stories set in a Texas county dominated by a woman, the quack healer Professor Salamanca--is Col. Steptoe McDee, a Mississippian forced west by the Civil War. McDee is too polite, too intelligent, and too civilized for the barbarism of his new home. "The Right Honorable the Strawberries", a story about "going native" perhaps influenced by Joseph Conrad, concerns an English remittance man banished to America for a gambling scandal. Some critics consider this one of Wister's best works; it is perhaps another example of his retelling an old story and consequently reassessing an old idea--in this case the Anglo-Saxon encounter with the frontier. "Absalom and Moulting Pelican" (originally titled "Moulting Pelican"), which revolves around an elaborate joke involving an imbecile clergyman's belief that American Indians descended from the lost tribes of Israel, has as its hero Hugh Lloyd, a graduate of St. Paul's School and Harvard sent west to a region he calls "a vacuum" in order to learn the practical business of running a ranch. Characters stranded in time play roles in some of these stories as well. By the end of "Absalom and Moulting Pelican", Hugh's only companion is, for all practical purposes, the last Apache in Arizona. Sun Road, the central character in "Bad Medicine" (originally titled "Sun Road"), is a graduate of Carlyle Indian School who tries to remain true to the old ways of his tribe but becomes infatuated with having his picture taken by tourists at Yellowstone Park. He is killed by a geyser and leaves his son an orphan only half educated in their heritage. In "Lone Fountain", a remarkably passionate Wyoming variation on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860), Kenneth Scott, a self-educated American "natural child," falls in love with Nina Schmidt, a sensual and pagan European who worships the old Greek gods. Nina ultimately gives herself to a deity who appears to her in a Wyoming geyser; Scott then lives out his life beside the crevices of Mount Etna. The melancholy sense of exile in space and time which haunts *When West Was West* is most successfully realized in "At the Sign of the Last Chance", a genuinely moving story in which some old men--Wister's alter ego eastern narrator among them--sit around talking about times past. Then in conformance with an English custom one of them has read about in an 1885 magazine, they go out and bury the sign of their ghost town's saloon. The piece comes close to trite sentimentalism, but Wister controls its emotion well. "At the Sign of the Last Chance" is one of Wister's best stories as well as a fitting farewell to his West.

After the publication of his collected writings in 1928, Wister wrote no more fiction. He died in 1938 of a cerebral hemorrhage. Aside from a growing melancholy and perhaps a greater openness, Wister's short fiction showed little development over the course of his career. The ideas--or prejudices--which informed his earliest stories informed the last. His racist theories did not change; his anti-Semitism did not abate; his political assumptions remained constant. His first volume of Western fiction contained one story about irrationally silly wives, one about a tramp. So did his last. He mocked the excesses of democratic society in *Red Men and White*; he did the same in "Safe in the Arms of Croesus". In terms of form and technique little distinguished his early work from late. Wister refined what he had begun with; he did not experiment. His notebooks make clear that as he wandered through the West looking for material, he did not seek to assimilate or understand the region as much as he sought out those striking characters and incidents which fit his conceptions of what literature was and life ought to be. His search was in a sense a voyage more of justification than of exploration. Consequently his fiction did not reveal the West as much as it illustrated one static version of it. Early in his career Wister took the advice of Henry James to pay more attention to the look of landscape in his work. Indeed one of the real strengths of his fiction is the way it translates the

descriptive techniques of the painter into words. Unfortunately the debt seems to have stopped there; Wister's short stories do not suggest a writer trying, in James's words, "to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost." In fairness to Wister, however, it should be said that his stories are usually entertaining. His ideology never overwhelmed his art. He was a skillful and intelligent craftsman, and unlike most of his contemporaries who published in popular magazines, his work has stayed in print--an argument that it still has the power to please readers.

Today Wister is not considered a major figure in mainstream American literature. He would not be listed among important contributors to the development of the American short story. He is, however, still a writer to be reckoned with in Western American literature. Scholars in that field continue to try to fix the exact nature of his contribution and the extent of his influence. Taken together, two relatively modern statements perhaps accurately reflect the writer's current status. In 1960 Don D. Walker wrote: "Wister, I think it can be safely argued, was the first writer of seriousness and sophistication to use the cowboy imaginatively." In 1973 Richard W. Etulain declared: "Wister was a better yarn-spinner, a sketcher of episodes than a superb creator of character or a student of forms. He did not come to grips sufficiently with how a region could brand its unique ways into the hides of its natives. In several respects then ... Wister is a more important figure for the literary and cultural historians than he is for the student of American belles lettres."

Dictionary of Literary Biography on Owen Wister

Name:

Dictionary of Literary Biography Biography

The importance of Owen Wister to the literature of the American West--and, by extension, to the development of American literature in the twentieth century--cannot be overstated. *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (1902) lifted the frontier story out of the dime-novel category founded by Ned Buntline and Prentiss Ingraham and placed it securely in the mainstream. With *The Virginian* Wister fashioned both a native language and a national voice, characteristics sorely lacking in previous attempts to establish a literary culture independent from that of Europe. Most if not all of the staples associated with the western genre--fast-draw contests, the Arthurian code, and such immortal lines as "This town ain't big enough for both of us" and "When you call me that--smile!"--first appeared in this groundbreaking novel about one man's championship of justice in the wilderness. Wister's interpretation of the West as a place where few of the civilized concepts of social conduct apply separated his stories from the sensational accounts then popular. More significantly, his awareness of the frontier as something unique in the collective human experience helped to propel his country into a global contest of letters then dominated by Emile Zola and Count Leo Tolstoy.

Nothing in his early life heralded Wister as the founder of an entertainment industry that would launch the careers of artists as disparate as Ernest Haycox, William S. Hart, Willa Cather, and John Wayne. Born in Philadelphia on 14 July 1860 to Owen J. Wister, a physician, and Sarah Butler Wister, a socialite, Owen Wister early displayed talents that seemed to destine him for a career in music. He graduated from Harvard with honors in 1882, then studied musical composition in Paris, where he attracted the attention of Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner, but was forced to return to the United States for reasons of health. Several biographers cite a disagreement between Wister's mother, daughter of the flamboyant actress Fanny Kemble, and his father, a stolid professional man of old Pennsylvanian stock, over whether their son belonged in business or the arts for his subsequent nervous collapse.

If the accounts are true, the argument was a fortunate one. During his rest cure Wister made the first of fifteen visits to Wyoming, discovering there an infatuation with the West that would only strengthen with time. This, despite completion of a three-year course in law at Harvard and admittance to the Pennsylvania bar, would direct the course of his life.

According to his own recollections, Wister experienced his epiphany one evening in 1890 while dining in the aggressively eastern institution, the Philadelphia Club, with his friend Walter Furness. Discussing their mutual interest in the West, the pair concluded that while Theodore Roosevelt had written factually about the West and Frederic Remington had captured its essence upon canvas, the frontier remained bereft of a Rudyard Kipling to tell its story before it passed out of existence.

"Walter," exclaimed Wister suddenly, "I'm going to try it myself!" With that, he claimed, he raced upstairs to the club library and composed before midnight the greater portion of "Hank's Woman" (*Harpers Weekly*, 27 August 1892), his first western story.

The anecdote may be apocryphal. Entries in Wister's own journal indicate he had seriously considered basing fictions upon incidents he observed while hunting in Wyoming the previous spring. In any case, "Hank's Woman" was eventually published, along with a second story, "How Lin McLean Went East" (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, December 1892); Harper and Brothers paid him \$175 for both.

In 1898 Wister married Mary Channing Wister, a distant cousin. By this time his reputation as a chronicler of the West was well established, bringing him celebrity and official approbation upon the one hand and harsh criticism upon the other for the perceived failure of his writing to "uplift" the reader, much as high-profile artists of nearly a century later would be targeted for ignoring the burning political issues of the day. Some disapproval came from close to home. Sarah Butler Wister upbraided her son for the violent theme of "Hank's Woman," a censure that would hound the genre he created for many years after he had ceased to have anything to do with it.

Three story collections and his biography of Ulysses S. Grant made Wister a public figure by his fortieth year. Publication of *The Virginian* brought him international acclaim and the admiration of a new generation of writers who would re-create American literature in their own image, among them Ernest Hemingway, who knew and revered Wister. The latter's minimalist style and objective approach to narrative are found in Hemingway's seminal works.

The timing could not have been better for the appearance of *The Virginian*, Wister's magnum opus. The popularity in Europe of William "Buffalo Bill" Cody's touring Wild West extravaganza had tapped into an enthusiastic world market for border-country derring-do. Roosevelt, a longtime Wister associate (owing as much to their shared eastern aristocratic background as to their affection for the West), was in the White House, which provided a broad arena for support of the "strenuous life." And in 1903, the year following the debut of the book, Thomas A. Edison's fledgling motion-picture company filmed a jerky *Great Train Robbery* with rural New Jersey standing in for the prairie, inaugurating a love affair between Hollywood and the rowdy West that would continue into the turn of the next century. These were the peak years of Manifest Destiny, when pride in American achievement had reached a level not to be equaled until the victory over Japan in 1945. The book sold more than fifty thousand copies in two months.

The role played by Roosevelt in Wister's fortunes invites close scrutiny. Himself a prolific and immensely readable writer, the twenty-sixth president admired his friend's facility with fiction, accompanied him on protracted hunting trips through the plains, and called upon him to help deliver the vote in Philadelphia when Roosevelt made an unsuccessful bid for a third term in 1912--thus inventing the celebrity political endorsement. In his turn, Roosevelt escorted Wister from behind his desk into the national limelight, anticipating the marriage of politics, entertainment, and literature associated five decades later with John F. Kennedy's Camelot.

Ironically, at this time Wister's artistic energies began to decline. Much of his work after *The Virginian* was anticlimactic. In 1903 he adapted the book for the Broadway stage; the play received mixed reviews but success at the box office. (It formed the basis of the screenplay for D. W. Griffith's 1914 motion-picture version of *The Virginian*, the first of four cinematic versions of the by-then-familiar tale.) In 1907, inspired by the example of his presidential friend and incensed by the "bossism" he believed had seized control of the city of his birth, Wister competed with a machine candidate for a post on the Philadelphia city council but was defeated by a margin of nearly five to one. Although embittered by the hostile campaign, he continued

to involve himself in politics, stumping for Theodore Roosevelt five years later and risking arrest to speak out against Franklin D. Roosevelt's unlawful attempt to seize control of the Supreme Court in 1937. His own earlier failed bid for office had disillusioned him, however. When Woodrow Wilson defeated Theodore Roosevelt in the 1912 presidential election, Wister remarked to his intimates that he was relieved.

Wister wrote little after World War I, producing only one important work, *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship, 1880-1919* (1930). In 1911 Wister's death was falsely reported to the press, affording him the unusual opportunity to read his own obituaries and assess his career through the eyes of the world. (Both Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway had the same experience, as if death and resurrection were prerequisites to assuming the crown of Great American Novelist.)

Wister succumbed in 1938 to a cerebral hemorrhage at his summer home in North Kingston, Rhode Island, at the age of seventy-eight. Although he had lived to see *The Virginian* filmed twice and reprinted numerous times, including a deluxe edition containing an expanded dedication to Theodore Roosevelt and illustrated by both Frederic Remington and Charles Marion Russell, at the time of Wister's death the western genre was judged by pundits to have been exhausted by his many imitators. The following year John Ford's epic motion picture *Stagecoach* premiered to critical acclaim and packed theaters, inspiring hundreds of big-budget Hollywood westerns over the next four decades and also two remakes. John Wayne's laconic Ringo Kid was acknowledged in most circles to have been based upon Wister's *Virginian*. A television series employing Wister's title and major characters aired on the NBC network from 1962 to 1971, and as late as the mid 1990s the Western Writers of America, a professional organization, honored writers of significant contribution to its genre with a lifetime achievement award named for Wister.

The New Swiss Family Robinson: A Tale for Children of All Ages (1882) merits notice specifically because it is Wister's first published book-length work. A satire about life at Harvard based upon Johann Wyss's popular *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812-1813), it was collected from a series of articles Wister wrote for the *Harvard Lampoon* during his career as an undergraduate. But in spite of a complimentary letter from Twain, it received little critical attention. Like Hemingway's *The Torrents of Spring* (1926) and John Steinbeck's *Cup of Gold* (1936), *The New Swiss Family Robinson* is an atypical effort, a crucible for the removal of impurities left over from the author's adolescence, during which he played Robert Louis Stevenson's "sedulous ape" to writers of established reputation.

The stories collected in *Red Men and White* (1896) mark Wister's emergence as a western storyteller and are altogether more worthy of dissection than either *The New Swiss Family Robinson* or his sophomore publication, *The Dragon of Wantley: His Rise, His Voracity, and His Downfall: A Romance* (1892). Comprising eight tales previously published in *Harper's Weekly*, this anthology of his early frontier fiction continues to belie the oft-repeated canard that the western is racist and Eurocentric in nature. Uniformly the stories present a thoughtful, balanced view of alien cultures in collision.

Typical of this view is "Little Big Horn Medicine," in which the charlatanism of a war-loving young Sioux medicine man and the ignorance and chauvinism of the American government set the stage for tragedy. "A Pilgrim on the Gila" follows the adventures of a representative cross-section of the national "melting pot" stripped by physical hardship to the bones of its native prejudice. The latter story, the theme of which echoes Guy de Maupassant's "Boule-de-suif" (1880), is a more effective western adaptation of the French tale, which is set during the French Revolution, than either Haycox's much later "The Stage to Lordsburg" or the screenplay based upon it by Dudley Nichols for the film *Stagecoach*.

Although in his preface to the 1907 edition of *Lin McLean* (1898) Wister was mildly boastful about having invented a new structure for the novel by stringing together these stories about a young man's adventures out west into a single cohesive narrative, he overlooked a contribution far greater. In his cocky, wanderlustful hero he created an American type that would dominate literature for a century and influence thinking about the national character worldwide. Fictional protagonists from Hemingway's Nick Adams to J. D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield owe much to McLean, and it is difficult to place the popularity of film stars such as Clark Gable, James Dean, and Kevin Costner outside that matrix. Nathaniel Hawthorne's stodgy Puritanism was not capable of such a creation; Herman Melville's Billy Budd would have looked askance at it. The character

of McLean had to have come from the frontier, and it could be appreciated only by a canny easterner. McLean's combination of youthful arrogance and schoolboy charm was in its time unique. Today it is inseparable from the American mythology. Seven short years after Wister's death Adolf Hitler's Wehrmacht recognized in their fresh-faced Yankee conquerors a familiar frontier type from American films and fiction dubbed and translated into German. When during the 1980s Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev denounced President Ronald Reagan's truculence toward the U.S.S.R. as the tactics of a movie cowboy, he was in fact paying tribute to a Wister invention.

Two entries in *The Jimmyjohn Boss and Other Stories* (1900) are of particular interest to students of Wister as he approached his artistic maturity. "Hank's Woman" traces the cultural and religious differences of a miner and his new wife to their tragic outcome in a tough tent camp, and "Padre Ignazio" explores the opposite theme of religion as redemption through the developing friendship between a lonely pastor and a disenchanted drifter. Both stories exhibit an attitude of weary tolerance toward the foibles of an imperfect humanity which, when considered against the backdrop of the Victorian-Edwardian society in which they first appeared, are innovative and startling.

"Hank's Woman" was Wister's first attempt at western fiction. Although he revised it substantially between its initial publication in *Harper's Weekly* and its inclusion in this collection--among other things he interpolated the Virginian, partly to take advantage of the character's popularity--its sense of approaching doom and Wister's use of violence remained unchanged.

Hank, a feisty resident of a mountain mining camp, becomes increasingly disturbed by the Catholicism of his foreign bride, finally to the point of destroying the crucifix in their tent that she worships. Driven to madness by this act and the psychological bullying that leads to it, the woman slays her husband with an axe and, attempting to conceal the murder by pitching his body off a high cliff, falls after it to her death. It is an altogether different exploitation of violence than was commonly found in the dime novels of the period. In those, sanguinary acts were piled one atop another merely for melodramatic effect, as demonstrated by this apologia written by Buffalo Bill Cody to his editors:

I am sorry to lie so outrageously in this yarn. My hero has killed more Indians on one war trail than I have killed in all my life. But I understand this is what is expected of border tales. If you think the revolver and bowie knife are used too freely, you may cut out a fatal shot or stab wherever you think wise.

In Wister's hands the bloody denouement provides the inevitable full stop to the escalating emotional and psychosexual conflict between the principals of the story. Although he was roundly criticized in his own time for his recourse to violence, the acts themselves take place offstage. The dual effect is to distance the narrative from them while increasing their impact, just as Macbeth's murder of King Duncan somewhere in the wings of William Shakespeare's Globe Theater served to make that crime seem even more sordid and harrowing. This technique, employed to similar effect by Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, and Shirley Jackson, was to become a Wister hallmark long before any of them used it.

The coda of the story is as important as its climax. Declares Lin McLean: "all this fuss just because a woman believed in God." The Virginian replies: "You have put it down wrong; it's just because a man didn't." As originally published, "Hank's Woman" called for McLean to serve as the conscience of the story, but Wister, sensing the need for a "Greek chorus of an intelligence more subtle," gave these closing words to the Virginian when he revised the story, indicating that he was not just pandering to the public taste by adding a character that had worked itself more thoroughly into the mainstream.

Wister himself was more satisfied with "Padre Ignazio," in which a parish priest exiled to a California mission forsakes at last his homesickness for Europe in the knowledge that he has given comfort to another banished soul. A placid tale, more cerebral than vivid, "Padre Ignazio" was said to have compelled Remington to throw down his brushes in despair of illustrating it. Yet Wister considered it a greater success than "Hank's Woman" for its ability to maintain reader interest through introspection and dialogue rather than through conventional action. As a study in crises of conscience the story belongs less to the genre Wister is credited with having invented than it does to the character-driven school of a later day. His fascination with themes of psychological conflict at a time when Sigmund Freud's theories were unknown to

most Americans was rare for its time and was virtually nonexistent in the western fiction of the period. Here and in "Hank's Woman" Wister places behind him the rank sentimentality of his Victorian contemporaries to locate the voice he requires to tell the tale for which he will best be remembered.

The Virginian employs Wister's most effective device, the outsider-narrator observing for the first time a culture as alien to him as it presumably was to most of his readers. Onto its broad stage enter the archetypes that have remained with the genre ever since: the reluctant, laconic hero, admired by his companions, beloved of his woman, and feared by his enemies; the villain as Devil Incarnate; the virginal "schoolmarm," staunchly representative of American womanhood stranded in a wilderness; and the rancher-judge, wisely surveying Odinlike his Valhalla of heroes, sirens, and mischiefmakers. None of the players is a gunman by trade, little blood is shed, and perhaps the most wrenching passage involves a poultry suicide--that of the tragicomic Em'ly. But pioneer that it was, the book established most of the clichés with which Wister's literary heirs are still grappling.

Volumes have been written and academic careers built upon the sweeping changes that took place in the vast arena west of the Mississippi River between 1902 when *The Virginian* appeared and 1907 when it was reissued in a new edition. As the book went to press Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch were still in flight from Pinkerton agents sworn to their death or capture. Jim Younger, released with his brother Cole from a twenty-five-year prison sentence, shot himself to death that autumn in Saint Paul, Minnesota, less than fifty miles from the Northfield bank the botched robbery of which had been his undoing. Wyatt Earp was breeding trotters in California. Tom Horn, Indian scout and "regulator" for the big cattle interests in Wyoming, would hang the following year for the ambush-murder of a sheepman's fourteen-year-old son. Within five years the great ranching combinations would be broken up by federal edict, the open range crisscrossed with barbed wire, and the frontier itself so far removed from the new country that the book, praised initially for its vigorous portrayal of an ongoing phenomenon, was perceived in its new format as a historical novel. Wister's driving fear, that his subject was disappearing behind his scribbling hand, was no chimera.

This was a foreign land indeed, this frontier, though only a week's ride by rail from the home of its anonymous narrator. The abiding philosophy of the frontier--"A man has got to prove himself my equal before I'll consider him one"--as expressed by the Virginian (nameless as well, as if storyteller and storied hero occupy opposite sides of the same coin), vile insults deployed as endearments among close male companions, and in particular Judge Henry's brilliant, rational defense of lynch law in the absence of the statutory kind place Wister's setting on a plane ineffably distant from those modes of behavior referred to as civilized and make it peculiar to the New World.

The market Wister sought required a romantic love interest. Too often this requirement was a liability; because of the ironclad morality of the time much of its popular literature is saccharine and unreadable by today's cynical standards. Wister, however, manipulates the growing attraction between his hero and Molly Wood, the pretty young teacher newly arrived from the East, to hammer home the basic theme of cultures in conflict. This Socratic exchange is an example:

"All men are born equal," he now remarked slowly.

"Yes," she quickly answered, with a combative flash. "Well"

. . . "I used to have to learn about the Declaration of Independence. I hated books and truck when I was a kid."

"But you don't any more."

"No. I cert'nly don't. But I used to get kep' in at recess for bein' so dumb. I was 'most always at the tail end of the class. My brother, he'd be head sometimes."

"Little George Taylor is my prize scholar," said Molly.

. . . "Whos last"

"Poor Bob Carmody. I spend more time on him than on all the rest put together."

"My!" said the Virginian. "Ain't that strange!"

. . . "I don't think I understand you," said Molly, stiffly.

"Well, it is mighty confusin'. George Taylor, he's your best scholar, and poor Bob, he's your worst, and there's lots in the middle--and you tell me we're all born equal!"

Molly could only sit giggling in this trap he had so ingeniously laid for her.

The plot has become standard. Tension among ranchers near Medicine Bow, Wyoming, has been heightened by large-scale cattle rustling, which the Virginian, as the new foreman at Judge Henry's Sunk Creek Ranch, eventually traces to Trampas, one of the cowboys he supervises. Trampas inveigles Shorty, an honest cowhand, into joining the gang. "Trampas has got hold of him," declares the Virginian. The foreman and a posse track down and hang two of the rustlers, one a close friend of the Virginian, but fail to capture Trampas, who has murdered Shorty for his horse. Later, on the eve of the hero's wedding to Molly, the antagonists face off on the main street of Medicine Bow, and the Virginian shoots Trampas down. All of these elements are later lifted and exploited by writers of varying skill (perhaps none so blatantly as when Larry McMurtry appropriates the lynching-of-a-friend scene in his 1985 *Lonesome Dove*), but rarely with Wister's subtlety and restraint: "A wind seemed to blow his sleeve off his arm, and he replied to it, and saw Trampas pitch forward."

Readers accustomed to the Sturm und Drang of the conventional "horse opera" are frequently put off by the seeming aridity of Wister's prose. Despite his own early complaint to his mother, "As for style--what on earth is style? The only thing I know about it is that it's something I haven't got myself," his minimalism was influenced both by his admiration of William Dean Howells, another writer known for his plainness, and by his suspicion of the florid prose of Henry James, whom he was determined not to emulate. More than anything else, this decision to kill Trampas, made in cold blood, is what makes *The Virginian* still readable today--and aggressively still in print--when most of the other novels of the period are gathering dust in their original editions on antiquarians' shelves.

To a great extent, notwithstanding the first appearance of many of the mythic trappings that critics point to as adulterations of history, belief in the West of Wister's works is still prevalent. Events and characters in *The Virginian* are universally recognizable, and Wister's deceptively flat style may be found in the works of non-U.S. writers as diverse as Joseph Conrad and Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

The West that Wister knew, however, like Edith Wharton's New York, had ceased to exist everywhere but in fiction by the close of World War I. While the stories in *Members of the Family* (1915) vibrate with frontier adolescence, the characters in the significantly titled *When West Was West* (1928) are acutely conscious of the changing quality of their surroundings. Emblematic of the theme of *When West Was West* is "At the Sign of the Last Chance," in which the "citizens" of Drybone, once a lusty boomtown but now a weathered husk of boarded-up buildings and streets tangled with tumbleweeds, gather around a poker table to reminisce about the glory days of Drybone. At length, in a ceremonial act of farewell to a vanished way of life, they take down the sign of the Last Chance Hotel and bury it by the side of the creek that gave the town life. Sentimentally in the tale but pragmatically in life, Wister is interring the legend he did so much to create. He never again wrote fiction set in the nineteenth-century American West.

Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship, written though it was during Wister's decline, is compelling reading even today, which is more than can be said for most of the bloodless biographies produced by the academics of the time. Wister was a storyteller first and a historian second. (Fiction, he once declared, is "the only thing that has always outlasted fact.") Moreover, his is a personal account of a meteoric life, with all the naive enthusiasm of the two men's early association and the disenchantment brought on by Wister's own bitter experience with politics, though restored to proper perspective by time and reflection. As an account of

democracy in action, the biography is more seasoned than either *Ulysses S. Grant* (1900) or *The Seven Ages of Washington: A Biography* (1907), both of which Wister had written from the point of view of a political outsider. Many of the passages in *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship* apply as well to the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam world as they do to the society of the Square Deal and Prohibition. *Roosevelt: The Story of a Friendship* is among the first of the many sources consulted whenever anyone undertakes to write a new biography of Theodore Roosevelt.

Unlike his numerous imitators--among them the sentimental Zane Grey and heavy-handed Max Brand, tied as they are to their genre by their artistic shortcomings--Wister today occupies a place on the short shelf of American literature between Edith Wharton and Jack London. His studied view of a native phenomenon from the point of view of an open-minded outsider, his musician's ear and attorney's eye for the authentic and the unusual, and his plain style separate him from the sensationalism of a Buntline and the relentless crowd-pleasing of a Louis L'Amour, while his awareness that the details and the character types he attempted to preserve were vanishing assures him the historical importance of a George Catlin.

As is the case with Stevenson, reverence for Owen Wister has declined from the summit it reached at the time of his death. Historians frown at his use of mythology, and even a recent Wyoming tour guide includes a gentle apology for being forced to cite *The Virginian* among the state's contributions to literature. In many such cases the criticism is inspired less by the book than by the four films and one television series that have been based on it and that failed consistently to capture the philosophy of the book. If the importance of a work is evaluated by the number of people it reaches, *The Virginian* stands among the three or four important books this century has produced. By 1952, fifty years after its first publication, eighteen million copies had been sold, and it had been read by more Americans than any other book. It is included in *Masterplots: Digests of World Literature*, the standard guide in fifteen volumes, alongside Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). In 1987 the Western Writers of America named Wister to its Hall of Fame, joining James Fenimore Cooper, Edna Ferber, and Mark Twain. "*The Virginian*," wrote the editors of the ambitious multivolume series on the Old West published by Time-Life Books, "became more than a bestseller. It was the archetype that fixed the myth of the West."