Critical Execution:
Examination of The Virginian and Riders of the Purple Sage as Formula westerns

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

This discussion of the critical approaches to popular fiction, specifically, Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* is intended to point out the short-comings of traditional literary criticism in popular fiction and cultural criticism in evaluation of literary merit and proposes the implementation of rhetorical criticism as a valid alternative in establishing merit in both culture and literature.

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The American West is dead, so we have been told, and has been since the frontier closed in the late 19th century. The passing of the American West did not go by unnoticed. Perhaps its demise at the hands of expanding industrialization was inevitable, but even easterners who had never even crossed the Mississippi River, who had only read and marveled at the cowboy adventures in books, felt the sadness of a lifestyle, both real and mythical, that would never roam free on the wide-open plains ever again.

Almost everyone at the turn of the century had an idealized vision of the American West. It was a vision fed by the literature that had come out of the West. With innovations in mass-printing, publishers exploited America's thirst for adventure with dime-novels and pulp westerns abundantly available at cheap prices.

Literature of the American West did not consist entirely of these dime-novels, but almost through sheer weight in numbers, these paperbacks did become embraced in the American mass popular culture, much to the chagrin of serious writers of the West who felt that the carbon-copy, hack-writing pandered to the lowest common denominator of the American public. The division between literary criticism and popular criticism was just beginning to appear.

Out of this charged atmosphere, The Virginian by Owen Wister was published in 1902 to a receptive audience. Ten years later, Zane Grey, himself a hack-writer for slick-covered publications, utilized many of Wister's ingredients in his Riders of the Purple Sage. These two books practically originated the formula western, becoming a bench-mark for future western fiction.
becoming a bench-mark for future western fiction and a target of literary criticism.

Wister and Grey's association with formula writing earned them a somewhat unsavory reputation as unfit progenitors of future Western literature. Although this "distinction" may be accurate, it is also unfair. As originators of the formula and not exactly blind followers of it, Wister and Grey, as writers of literature, fall on the dividing line between high and low culture designed by critics to separate the pulps from serious fiction.

One reason *The Virginian* and *Riders of the Purple Sage* created such a stir was that their original style of formula left critics in somewhat of quandary. Besides formal literary criticism, there was no acceptable basis for evaluation of works of popular culture. When popular criticism finally did become widely used, its emphasis was on the study of the conventions and components of the formula western to see what they say about our society and culture. While cultural study is fine for a socio-historical analysis, this critical approach does not present an argument for literary merit. An accurate, fair evaluation of popular western fiction must be found that circumvents the dichotomy of the strict and prejudiced principles of serious western novels and the study of pulp westerns as some sort of cultural phenomenon. Rhetorical criticism could prove to be a substantial alternative to literary and cultural criticism in the evaluation of popular western fiction such as *The Virginian* and *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

Most critics like to make a clear distinction between popular western fiction and the serious western novels, but setting up parameters for such definition is not an easy task.
According to Richard Etulain, defining the western is "like trying to shovel fleas through a barn door -- more escape than are captured" (75). However, a general description would be useful. Etulain describes the popular fiction western as "an adventure story, set in the West with major emphasis on action and romance. Its characters are nearly always controlled: that is, they frequently fit into "good" and "bad" categories and are rarely complex or ambiguous" (76). Geography seems to be the most important criterion encompassing all western fiction, serious and popular.

John Milton makes the distinction that the popular western is set in the West in order to "exploit a romantic and adventurous situation which becomes a commodity for sale in the mass market." He goes on to say that "the genuine, serious Western novel is set in the West because its author lives there, because it is a result of his own experience, because it represents the regional environment he knows best." Milton adds that the serious western novelist takes the West seriously while the popular western writer does not fully appreciate the West (2).

If Wister and Grey are to be placed in the category of popular western writer, Milton could not be farther off base. Both Wister and Grey spent time out West, and the region impressed upon them greatly a deep appreciation for the land. These sentiments are what prodded them to write literature about the western lifestyle and values.

Milton's disdain is common among the antipathetic attitudes of critics in regard to popular fiction. It seems as if they believe that any best-selling western that appeals to the masses is an exploitation of the West, not a celebration of it. Most critics and serious novelists feel that the reputation of serious
western fiction is sullied because of the general population's association of these novels with the western formulas. This attitude could very well be justified considering the formulas pervasive popularity. For example, The Virginian, a best-seller in 1902-1903, has sold well over a million copies. Grey was on the best-seller list from 1917-1925 with over 40 million copies of his books sold (Cawelti 2).

Most readers' view of the western was shaped by the popular fiction, but even the critics who look at the formulas from a cultural instead of a literary approach concede that the formulas are literarily inferior to serious novels.

As stated earlier, populist critics such as John G. Cawelti, the most highly regarded expert on popular fiction among his peers, believe that popular fiction should be studied as "cultural phenomena" rather than literary works. In the widely acclaimed book The Six-Gun Mystique, Cawelti claims:

...in analyzing a popular form like the Western, we are not primarily concerned with an individual work, ..., but with the cultural significance of the Western as a type of artistic construction. This is simply because the circumstances in which a Western is produced and consumed do not encourage the creation of unique individual works of art, but lead to the production of particular realizations of a conventional formula. Therefore the culturally significant phenomenon is not the individual work, but the formula or recipe by which more or less anonymous producers turn out individual novels or films (25).

This disinterest of the individual work of popular fiction does not allow books such as Riders of the Purple Sage to be judged on its own individual merits.

Don D. Walker in his essay "Notes Toward a Literary Criticism of the Western" questions the special concerns of literary scholars regarding popular westerns.
Walker diffuses quantitative analysis saying that the critical understanding of a novel has little or nothing to do with putting the work with fifty or a hundred other such books, perhaps even by the same author, and then abstracting statistically persuasive general meaning (88-89).

He also criticizes the stripping down of novels in order to label it as a certain formula. Walker argues that what finally matters is not which formula the novel follows, but what goes on within that structure as it relates to the particular work (89).

Walker concludes that with such preconceived stereotypes of popular fiction, the individual book is never given the critical chance to stand on its own literary merits (89). He feels that some popular western fiction can stand up to the standard principles of serious literature.

For example, one literary principle for which even James Fenimore Cooper was criticized by Mark Twain was the edict that fictional people should talk like real people. Both The Virginian and Riders of the Purple Sage take pains to create believable dialogue:

"'He ain' goin' to follow you while you're beatin' his haid,' the Southerner at length remarked" (Wister 236).

"'Look! ...Jane, them leadin' steers have bolted. They're drawin' the stragglers, an' that'll pull the whole herd'" (Grey 68).

From another less sympathetic critic, Milton considers some other basic elements of good fiction including significance of theme, plausibility, style, seriousness of intent, multidimensional characterization, illumination of the human condition and
its potential, and sense of place. In Milton's opinion, the western, as a genre, "Fails to meet the qualifications for literary fiction, for that fiction which strives to become significant in both theme and form. For this reason the western remains a subliterary genre in spite of its many fascinations" (39-40).

A detailed analysis of each of these elements as they pertain to each book would yield most of the weaknesses and only a few strengths. Grey would fare worse than Wister in such a comparison. As Loren D. Estleman notes:

True, Grey's characters are punched out of the same grade cardboard that new shirts come wrapped around. True, he borrows his plots from Victorian morality plays. He telegraphs his punches, mixes back-country dialect with the Queen's English, lingers over slight scenes in the manner of a starving dog licking a naked bone, while hurriedly dismissing key plot turns through a third party. But his books are read and reread by intelligent people in every country until the covers disintegrate (31).

Wister also has his weaknesses too, including consistent point of view, life-style authenticity, loose, episodic structure, and an inability to produce either a true dominance or reconciliation between Western and Eastern values to name a few.

With all of these criticisms, there is still no denying the success of the books. There must be a quality to these two books in particular that makes people read them aside from genre. Not all western formulas are this popular. Literary criticism is not interested in formula fiction at all, and cultural criticism is not interested in individual works, so another approach to evaluation is needed that could perhaps combine qualities from both approaches to come out with a system of criticism flexible enough to encompass popular fiction.

An alternative way to judge these books is through rhetorical
criticism. Karyn and Donald Rybacki define rhetorical criticism as "the analysis and evaluation of a rhetorical act" (8). In this case, the rhetorical act is fiction. The rhetorical act is a communicated message through verbal and visual symbols that attempts to influence an audience to behave or believe in a particular way as a consequence of experiencing the message (2). According to the Rybackis, analysis of a rhetorical act means "systematically accounting for who created it, what was created, and where it was presented. Analysis also means interpreting the rhetorical act by inquiring into how its verbal and visual symbols functioned." They write that this inquiry is guided by the chosen critical approach; the frame of reference that determines analysis of how the rhetor developed symbols, how they functioned in the message, and how they were used by the audience (8). They go on to mention that the evaluation of a rhetorical act makes judgments about the acts consequences. They write:

Evaluating a rhetorical act moves the critic from asking how its symbols functioned as rhetoric to asking how well they functioned and why. Rhetorical acts are commonly evaluated on the basis of their success or failure in gaining results, conveying probable truth, representing ethical behavior, and being aesthetically pleasing. The approach selected for doing criticism affects the focus of evaluation because each approach emphasizes making a judgment in a different way (8).

The variations of rhetorical approaches to criticism are numerous and allow for a great depth of literary and social scholarship.

The main difference between rhetorical criticism and literary or cultural criticism is individual intent. Does the author succeed at what he hopes to accomplish? Is the accomplishment accepted by the audience? Rhetorical criticism measures the success in...
success of the communication and its relevance.

Rhetorical approach takes into consideration that Wister was both progressive and primitivistic in his approach to The Virginian, and while the progressive nature is firmly established at the end of the novel, thereby reaffirming a distinct nature of American values, the genre impression is one of getting back to communicating with nature. The rhetorical approach asks for Wister's true intention in writing the novel. Most critics say that the book is a comparison between Eastern and Western values. Since Wister does not succeed in either proving Western dominance or merging the two sets of values into a credible system, we can determine that Wister's attempted intention was a failure. And that the marriage of Molly and the Virginian is one of plot convenience than one of ideological synthesis.

On the other hand, Wister was also interested in preserving the values of the West, and by his imaginative set of characters and situations, he has influenced an entire genre to accomplish his dreams that the West would never be forgotten. This is a success that few could imagine, and rhetorically speaking every book that has been influenced by Wister carries out his goal.

For Grey, the rhetorical consent could be viewed as pure entertainment with social consciousness that serves more as a point for human melodrama. The socio-political message of the dangers of the authoritarian, fundamentalist Mormonism is overshadowed by the complex plot machinations necessary for the melodrama. Grey's attempt at socio-political rhetoric is a bust. As a nostalgic entertainment, Riders of the Purple Sage is a huge success. Grey's flow of prose is poetic and flow of action is driving. Grey's background in slick publications gives each
chapter a cliff-hanger that gives momentum to both plot and story flow. Grey's repetition of theme and characterization produces a popular mythology that reaches an audience on an archetypal level such as that of the Virginian or a Shane. Lassiter and Jane Witherspoon are larger than life for easy association with the audience. The poetry, action, pace, and characters stay with the audience and carries over into a mythological pantheon. In this regard, audiences are addicted to Grey's formula for romance and adventure in the West.

In William W. Stowe's essay "Popular Fiction as Liberal Art," he writes:

Popular fiction is by nature neither bad art nor good, neither progressive nor repressive. It has its distinctive cultural function, which it may fulfill well or badly or not at all. At its best, it gives narrative form to cultural and social values, in order not simply to affirm them but to open a hypothetical space for their manipulation and criticism. It is rarely revolutionary, since its purpose is to strengthen the prevailing culture by keeping it limber. It is not reactionary, either, since it provides for oppositional thinking within the received cultural framework. It is instead liberal in the best sense of that unfashionable term: it offers its readers the occasion to affirm or to modify or to reject some of their culture's conventional values and structures (660-661).

This could be the best endorsement for rhetorical criticism around. The failure of the literary or cultural approaches to criticism to fully debate the merits of the popular western fictions on a larger scale opens the way for rhetorical criticism to encourage further scholarship in all works of literature.
Working Bibliography


