Six Guns

and Society

A Structural Study of the Western

by

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the oppositions in the Western should remain the same throughout our forty-year study, while the characters that symbolize these concepts may change their interaction as American society changes its institutions. And this is what we will observe: a history of four narrative stages, in which each stage presents its model of social action in terms of the same types of people.

The Structure of the Western Film

INTRODUCTION: THE FILMS

The Westerns with which this study is concerned are those that were among the top grossing films of the year they were released. The status of top grossing is awarded each year by Motion Picture Herald to films whose rental receipts in the United States and Canada surpass $4,000,000. In the accompanying list, I have given all the Westerns that appear in this category since 1930. After most of them, I have indicated how they are classified in this study with respect to the four types of Westerns that will be discussed: the classical plot, the vengeance variation, the transition theme, and the professional plot. All together, there are 64 films, 24 of which I have labeled classical, 9 vengeance, 3 transition, 18 professional, and 1, Chisum, both classical and professional. In the following chapters, I shall analyze in some detail a few films from each of these categories.

Some films, however, are exceptions to the classifications, and I would like to discuss these briefly. The Cowboys is in parentheses because the list of top grossers for 1972 has not yet appeared, though I am quite sure that this film will be on that list when it does. Also, Chisum has been labeled both classical and professional because strong elements of both plots are present in it, making it an interesting special case, a film clearly built around the mythical image of John Wayne. Finally, the films preceded by a star (*) are films that I have not been able to see recently and therefore cannot classify, though if memory serves, Colt 45, Hondo, and Cheyenne...
Autumn are probably classical while Gunfight at the OK Corral would be an early professional Western.

I have labeled five films C* and P*. These designations are intended to mean that these films are self-conscious parodies of their respective plots. Of the C*, Along Came Jones is quite early and its plot reproduces the classical story exactly, except that the usual strong hero is an inept gunfighter. The other three classical parodies appear in the late 1960s and successfully satirize the classical plot at a time when the professional plot has almost entirely replaced it as the theme of serious Westerns. The one professional parody is probably mislabeled, but it seems to have the same relationship to the professional plot as Along Came Jones does to the classical plot; the Cheyenne Social Club presents two self-seeking but inept heroes bumbling their way through a situation typical of the professional story, so that the drama and the action remain serious, not put on, and the comedy derives from the unlikeliness and yet success of the heroes.

Finally, there are four films that have no distinguishing labels and are mostly just embarrassing to my categories. The Charge at Feather River is an awful Western, which I refuse to consider since its commercial success was solely due to its big release as a three-dimensional film at a time when this gimmick was new and exciting. Fort Apache (1948) and She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1950) are solidly in the classical period yet seem to be an early blending of both the classical and the professional plots. The fourth film, Little Big Man, is another parody, satirizing at times both the classical and the professional plots; more accurately, it is an anomaly, an elaborate mixture of standard mythical ingredients combined into a lengthy comic epic of Western legends.

These then are the films that will comprise the data for this study. They are generally the best Westerns that Hollywood has produced, and many of Hollywood's finest directors are represented by them. Together, they exhibit both the substance and the history of a rich and vital social myth whose impact on American society cannot be doubted.

Top-Grossing Westerns of Each Year Since 1930
($4,000,000 or more rental in the U.S. and Canada)

1931 Cimarron - C
1937 The Plainsmen - C
1938 Wells Fargo - C
1939 Dodge City - C
Stagecoach - V
Union Pacific - C
1940 Deste Rides Again - C
1941 Northwest Mounted Police - C
1945 Along Came Jones - C*
1946 Canyon Passage - C
San Antonio - C
1947 Duel in the Sun - C
California - C
1948 Fort Apache -
1949 Red River - V
Whispering Smith - C
Yellow Sky - C
1950 Broken Arrow - T
*Colt 45 -
She Wore a Yellow Ribbon -
Winchester '73 - V
1952 Bend of the River - C
High Noon - T
1953 The Charge at Feather River
The Naked Spar - V
Shane - C
1954 Apache - V
*Hondo
Johnny Guitar - T
Saskatchewan - C
1955 The Far Country - C
The Man From Laramie - V
Vera Cruz - C
1956 The Searchers - V
1957 *Gunfight at the OK Corral -
1959 Rio Bravo - P
1961 The Alamo - P
North to Alaska - P
One-Eyed Jacks - V
1962 The Commandments - P
1964 Four for Texas - P
How the West Was Won - C
1965 Cat Ballou - C*
*Cheyenne Autumn
Sons of Katie Elder - P
1966 Nevada Smith - V
The Professionals - P
THE CLASSICAL PLOT

The classical Western is the prototype of all Westerns, the one people think of when they say, "All Westerns are alike." It is the story of the lone stranger who rides into a troubled town and cleans it up, winning the respect of the townsfolk and the love of the schoolmarm. There are many variations on this theme, which saturate Western films from 1930 to 1955, from Cimarron and the saving of Oklahoma to Vera Cruz and the saving of Mexico. The classical plot defines the genre, and, as we shall see, the other plots—vengeance, transition, professional—are all built upon its symbolic foundation and depend upon this foundation for their meaning.

For all its importance, however, the classical plot is not altogether easy to recognize. Neither, for that matter, are the other plots. Many films, from Stagecoach to Chisum, contain aspects of more than one plot, and the variations within any one plot are often so broad that they seem to defy any possible similarity. As far as I can tell, no analyst of films or of Westerns has until now noticed the structural changes in the genre that have occurred since World War II. In fact, even after undertaking this study as an avid fan of Westerns since childhood, I was unsure of exactly where to look for structural similarities and differences. I restricted myself to top grossing films, but even this smaller group was large and varied enough to remain puzzling for the purpose of structural interpretation. Many differences in content were apparent—railroad building, Indian wars, wagon trains, rancher barons—but the important differentiating factor proved to be the more abstract relationship between the hero and society. I found that, in the forty-year period from 1930 to 1970, there were four significantly different forms of this relationship, which seemed to change with time, particularly after the war. Concentrating on this relationship, it was not difficult to discover that each of the four forms appeared in a series of films that—for all their differences in content—had essentially the same plot structure. Furthermore, I found that the characterization of the heroes, society, and villains was essentially the same within any one plot structure, but was often quite different across the structures. After this, all that remained was to reveal, through investigation, the details of each plot structure and the conceptual meanings of the characterization within each. The evidence and the results of this investigation are what we shall now turn to, beginning in this chapter with an analysis of the classical plot.

My strategy will be, first, to give plot summaries of some representative films and, then, to use these summaries to derive a set of functions that will characterize all of the films of that type. After determining the functions, I will return to the films to see how the conceptual, or oppositional, meanings of each of the relevant characters are established. In the case of the classical plot, one film stands out as a kind of archetype, exhibiting with remarkable purity all the basic components of the classical Western. This film is Shane, which was made in 1953 by George Stevens and remains to this day one of the most successful and popular Westerns ever made. Because of its unusual representativeness and because it is generally well remembered, I shall begin this chapter with a summary of its plot; afterwards, I shall summarize the selected films in the order of their date of production.

But before I begin, I should say something about my method of selection. As the list indicates, there were at least eighteen classical Westerns released between 1931 and 1955. I have seen and studied most of these films, but to analyze them all here would be repetitive and boring to both the reader and myself. I cannot, however, simply claim that they are all essentially alike without some effort to examine supporting evidence. As a compromise, I have decided to select four or five films from each group—classical, vengeance, professional—for analysis and to concentrate on perhaps one or two. In this way, I hope to avoid repetition and at the same time, as it were, to demonstrate it. I have selected the films according to distribution over the period of time involved, differences in plot and popularity; in this way, I hope to choose films that are repre-
sentative, remembered well by the public, and as varied as possible within any single type. This method, I believe, will satisfy the demands of evidence and of readability. Furthermore, it will enable the reader, if he is still doubtful, to watch his television guide for a replay of one of the other films so that he can make his own investigation as a test of my analysis.

Shane

Shane is the classic of the classic Westerns. It was directed by George Stevens from a screenplay by A. B. Gumrie, Jr., based on the novel by Jack Schaefer. It was filmed in the Jackson Hole Valley, which is framed by the magnificent Grand Teton Mountains. In this film, Alan Ladd stars as Shane, Van Heflin as Starrett, John Arthur as Marion, Brandon de Wilde as Joey, and Jack Palance as Jack Wilson.

The story begins with Shane riding out of the mountains into a beautiful valley. He asks for water at the farm of Joe and Marion Starrett, who are friendly at first but then hostile, telling Shane to leave at gunpoint, as the Rikers ride up. Shane leaves and the Rikers arrive to tell Starrett to get off the land or be driven off. They have a ranch, and they need all the land for cattle. Starrett is indignant but unawed, when Shane suddenly reappears and announces that he is a friend of the Ritters. He is wearing a gun, and now the Riker brothers and their men are confused. After a final warning, they leave. Shane is invited for dinner, and after becoming friendly with the family, he is given a job on the farm.

The next day, Shane rides into the small town for supplies, is insulted in the saloon by one of Riker’s cowboys, and backs down, avoiding a fight. That night, the seven or eight farmers in the valley gather at Starrett’s to plan strategy against Riker. Shane is introduced, but one of the farmers accuses him of cowardice and Shane leaves the meeting. Sunday, all the farmers go to town together for strength, and Shane intentionally enters the saloon. He is insulted again, but this time he fights and defeats a cowboy named Chris. Riker offers him a job, he refuses, and all the cowboys in the saloon attack him. Starrett comes to his aid, and together they defeat the cowboys. Riker, in anger, sends for a gunfighter.

The gunfighter, Wilson arrives in town, and Shane recognizes him as a fast draw. Riker once more tries to buy out Starrett, but the farmer refuses. The next day, Wilson forces one of the farmers into a gunfight and kills him. The following day, Riker burns one of the farms. At this point, the farmers are ready to leave the valley in defeat, but Starrett convinces them to stay one more day. He decides to go to town and kill Riker, and Riker sends for him to talk. Marion, Starrett’s wife, pleads with him not to go and asks Shane to persuade him not to, but Shane refuses to interfere and goes to the barn. In the barn Chris, who has had a change of sympathy, tells Shane that Starrett is heading into a trap. Shane puts his gun, tells Starrett he is going to town, and advises the farmer to stay home. When Starrett refuses, they fight and Shane knocks him out. After saying goodbye to Marion, for whom he has a romantic attraction, which she shares, Shane rides to town. There, in the saloon, he beats Wilson to the draw and kills him. Then he kills the two Riker brothers. Wounded, he rides out of the valley forever, into the dark mountains, while little Joey Starrett shouts after him to “come back.”

Dodge City

Dodge City, the earliest of the films I shall discuss, was released in 1939, directed by Michael Curtiz, and starred Errol Flynn as Wade Hatton and Olivia de Havilland as Abbey Irving. It was the first, and perhaps the most popular, of the series of Westerns that Errol Flynn made for Warner Bros.

The opening scenes tell of the founding of Dodge City with the coming of the new railroad. Colonel Dodge and other eastern businessmen celebrate Wade Hatton, who more than any other man is responsible for the successful railroad and thus for the town. Hatton, former rail foreman, decides to go to Texas with his friends Rusty and Tex for a herd of cattle to bring to Dodge City. While he is gone, the town grows and Jeff Surratt moves in. He owns the saloon and tries to drive out all the other cattle-buyers. He murders Matt Cole, a farmer, and his men run the sheriff out of town. The good people of Dodge City despair.

Leading a cattle drive, Hatton also brings some new settlers to Dodge City, including Abbey Irving and her brother. The brother is wild, drunk, and Hatton has to kill him in self-defense. Afterward, Abbey hates Hatton. In town, the new townspeople do not know Hatton; but when he stands up to Surratt in the cattle auction, he stirs their curiosity and admiration. He agrees to sell his cattle to Jack Ort, but Surratt has Ort murdered so that Hatton will have to sell to him. Meanwhile, Hatton’s cowboys and Surratt’s men have a grand fight in the saloon. (This is the granddaddy of all saloon brawls, with dozens of men literally tearing the place apart.) The cowboys win and ride out of town, but Rusty, still in the saloon, is taken into the street by Surratt and his men to be hanged. By
marries Abbey after cleaning up Dodge and moves on to brighter horizons, since, as we are told, Dodge is no longer exciting enough for him to have a job there. Logan also leaves the town he has protected, possibly to return; but now he is broke and no longer a leading force in the settlement. Pearl, of course, dies, thereby surrendering her special sexual status. We are not told exactly what happens to Jeff after the fight, but there are enough hints for us to make a good guess. Ben, his older, murdered friend, was always trying to get him to settle down on a ranch or in Dawson. As Renée and his horse hold him up after the shoot-out, Jeff softly rings a little bell on his saddle horn that was earlier established as a momento and symbol of Ben; also, with the death of Rhonda, Jeff is left in the care of Renée, who promises to fix him up and who represents the good people of Dawson. So we are left with the feeling that he has turned the corner; now he cares for people, appreciates friends, and will marry and settle down in Dawson. If he does—or even if he doesn’t—Dawson is now like Dodge City. It no longer needs his special ability, and thus whether he stays or goes, he will inevitably lose his special status. This ending—the hero marrying and settling in the now peaceful community, becoming just like everybody else—is the most common ending throughout the classical Westerns, though not among the five we have discussed. This resolution is either explicit or implied in Wells Fargo, Union Pacific, San Antonio, Californio, Whispering Smith, and Yellow Sky, among others: 

16. The hero loses or gives up his special status.

This completes the functions for the classical plot, which I will list here for convenience.

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

These sixteen functions describe the narrative structure of the classical Western, which presents a dramatic model of communication and action between characters who represent different types of people inherent in our conceptualization of society. The characters who symbolize these social types are the heroes, the villains, and the society. We can make the concept of or explanatory meanings of these characters by revealing the oppositional structure of the Western myth; we must understand how the different characters are different, what their recurring or defining points of conflict and opposition are.

The code, in which these basic social concepts are represented by the characters, will vary from plot to plot; in the classical plot, probably because it is the prototype, the characters are vivid and their meanings clear. Just as there are three distinct sets of characters, there are also three basic oppositions, each differentiating between at least two of the characters, plus a fourth opposition that is less important structurally and will be treated separately. Perhaps the most important opposition is that separating the hero from the society, the opposition between those who are outside society and those who are inside society. This inside/outside contrast is fairly rigorous in its typology of the hero and the society, but it is rather relaxed in its treatment of the villains, who are, as we shall see, sometimes inside and sometimes outside. A second opposition is that between good and bad, a dichotomy that separates the society and the hero from the villains. Third, there is the clear distinction between the strong and the weak, which distinguishes the hero and the villains from the society. The fourth opposition primarily contrasts the hero with everybody else and is perhaps the typically American aspect of the Western—the opposition between wilderness and civilization; this opposition is similar to the inside/outside contrast but not identical. The villains may be outside of society but are always seen as part of civilization.

In order to demonstrate these oppositions and reveal the codes through which they are structured into the characters, I will comment on each of the five films already discussed, but I will concentrate on Shane and, to a lesser extent, on The Far Country. This restriction should allow for some analytic depth without undue repetition. Unfortunately, since so much of the coding is done through visuals—clothing, background, movements, expressions—the
visual. As the film opens, he is seen riding down from the mountains and then as a tiny speck against the immense wilderness of the valley. Again, at the end of the film, he rides directly into the rugged, snow-capped Teton Mountains, even though that is obviously not the way to leave the valley, so that once more he is visualized as at one with the vast wilderness. In fact, he is the only character ever filmed alone against the spectacular mountains, just as he is the only character to wear buckskins, a clothing style that clearly associates him with the wilderness. The Teton Mountains are used visually in Shane to reinforce an association of the wilderness with strength and goodness; this is done by never letting the mountains be seen at the same time as the villains and by always using the same mountains as background when Shane is with the farmers. This device is carried to such lengths that, when Shane and Starrett go to town from the farm, they go down the road that faces the mountains; but when the Rikers and Wilson come from the same town to the same farm, they arrive from the opposite direction, thus avoiding being seen against the mountains. In one moonlight scene, the snow-capped tips of the Tetons glow like a halo directly over the heads of the three Starrett and Shane. In another instance, when the farmers, the Rikers, or Wilson arrive in the town, the mountains are not seen; the town is filmed from the wrong angle or the saloon is simply seen in close-up, filling the screen. But the two times when Shane goes to town alone—particularly the last time, when he goes to destroy the village—the town is filmed with the mountains towering over the saloon, as though they were about to crush and devour it. In this way, Shane is strongly identified with the wilderness, while the others are associated with such artifacts of civilization as farms, buckboards, saloons, and stores.

Jeff in The Far Country is also, though less systematically, singled out for special imagery against the mountains, but his identification with the wilderness is more varied. Of all the people involved, good and bad alike, he alone suspects that the trail over the mountain is dangerous because of the possibility of an avalanche, and he turns out to be right. Everyone else in Dawson believes that the only route out of the town is back through Shagway, but Jeff finds an Indian who tells him of a way out on the river through the wilderness that Jeff decides to take.

In Dodge City, Patton is known to be a buffalo hunter, a trail guide, and an Indian-fighter. In the opening scene, he is shown to be a friend of the Indians, and he is visualized against the wide open spaces of the Kansas prairies. In the last scene of Duel in the Sun, Pearl is seen riding alone across the desert past a howling coyote; furthermore, she is half Indian, and this is a classic means

of associating a hero with a knowledge of, and love for, the wilderness. Finally, Logan is only weakly identified with the forests of Oregon. Although he leads the settlers against the Indians, he is not emphasized as having a special knowledge or ability in the wilderness. He does, however, profess to be "stuck on this Oregon," and he is the only character in the film, besides Lucy, who is ever seen leaving Jacksonville to travel through the forests; the photography and music of these scenes strongly reinforce the visual association of beauty, strength, and goodness.

These four oppositions—inside society/outside society, good/bad, strong/weak, and wilderness/civilization—comprise the basic classifications of people in the Western myth. In the next section, we shall see how the characters identified by these oppositions change their coding and their interaction slightly in order to create a new Western plot, which I call the vengeance variation.

**THE VENGEANCE VARIATION**

Of the ten films on the list of top-grossing Westerns characterized as vengeance plots, seven were released between 1949 and 1961, and only one before 1949. In order of appearance, the vengeance variation more or less follows the classical plot, since the films with the latter structure occur mostly between 1931 and 1955. The structure of the vengeance story further suggests that it develops out of and is a variation upon the structure of the classical plot, in which the conceptual distance between the hero and the society is no longer as simple and straightforward as it was in the classical version. Unlike the classical hero who joins the society because of his strength and their weakness, the vengeance hero leaves the society because of his strength and their weakness. Moreover, the classical hero enters his fight because of the values of society, whereas the vengeance hero abandons his fight because of those same values.

Thus, the vengeance variation indicates a change in the relationship between the hero and society, which seems to begin a steady deterioration that continues through the transition theme and the professional plot. To analyze this variation, I shall use only four films—Stagecoach, The Man from Laramie, One-Eyed Jacks, and Nevada Smith—and I shall limit myself to a relatively brief discussion since the vengeance structure is similar to, but less popular than, the classical structure.

**Stagecoach**

The 1939 film Stagecoach is quite an important event in the history
8. A representative of society asks the hero to give up his revenge.

Despite his determination, the hero always gives it up. Ringo agrees to forget the Plumbers and meet Dallas in Mexico; Lockhart tries to finish "what I came here to do," kill Vic, but he finds he cannot and lets him go; Rio decides to forget Longworth and take Louise away; and Max, after killing two men, does not continue his revenge but lets Fitch live:

9. The hero gives up his revenge.

Inevitably, though, the hero fights and defeats the villains. Because of the Indians, Ringo has to go on to Lordsburg and face the Plumbers. Lockhart fights Dave, captures him, and destroys the rifles before he decides not to avenge his brother. Rio tries to avoid Longworth, but before he can leave, he is captured, put in jail, and finally attacked by Longworth and forced to fight. Max fights and defeats all three of the men he has sought before he decides not to continue his vendetta:

10. The hero fights the villains.
11. The hero defeats the villains.

After the fight the vengeance hero, like the classical hero, gives up his special status and enters society. Like Shane, three of our vengeance heroes reject their status and power by leaving town: Ringo goes to Mexico; Lockhart goes back to Laramie, and Rio goes off to Oregon. In each case we know that they are going to change their ways, enter society, and settle down. Ringo takes Dallas to his ranch, intent upon marriage; Lockhart returns to his position of captain in the army and awaits the arrival of Barbara; and Rio, we are sure, has found meaning and value in Louise and will return for her and their child to start a new, respectable life.

Max Sand reveals little of his intentions, but he does throw away his gun as he rides off, which tells us that he is abandoning the life of a gunman and outlaw. Since this film is a sequel to the film The Carpetbaggers—based on the novel by Harold Robbins—and since Nevada Smith is a character who appears in The Carpetbaggers, those at least who have followed the book know that Max changes his name, goes to Hollywood, and becomes a cowboy movie star.

12. The hero gives up his special status.
13. The hero enters society.

This completes the functions for the vengeance variation, and once again, for reference, I will list them all here.

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

This narrative structure shares certain similarities with the classical plot, yet differs from it in important respects. These similarities and differences will occupy our full attention later, but in general we can say that in both plots there is movement of an estranged hero into society. Also in both, society is portrayed as weak and inadequate compared to the strength and competence of the heroes and the villains. But in the vengeance plot, society is no longer dependent upon the hero for survival and he is no longer directly involved with it. Rather, he is directly involved with the villains through his desire for revenge. Thus, in the classical plot, the hero tries to avoid the villains, while in the vengeance story he tries to avoid the society. In neither case does he succeed, but the image of society has changed somewhat. No longer is it primarily concerned with churches, schools, and progress; now the image stresses the ideas of forgiveness, marriage, and a peaceful, respectable future.

Thus, the coding of the inside society/outside society opposition depends less on a community of settlers, as opposed to personal values, than on an attitude of social
subplots that are classical in nature. In the Indian fight in Stagecoach, Ringo, Hatfield, Doc, and Dallas—the rejects of society—save Mrs. Mallory, her baby, Peacock, and Gatewood—the weak but respectable citizens—from destruction and, in return, they are forgiven and accepted as friends. Alas Wagoman—the enemy of the farmer, the owner and tyrant of the town—changes his ways because of the intervention of Lockhart and marries Kate, abandoning his selfish ambition and becoming a friend of the society. These classical subplots are not central, but their existence in the midst of a vengeance story reveals the essential compatibility of these two narrative structures. There is an interesting difference, however, for the vengeance structure rearranges the relationships of the classical characters in a way that moves them one step closer to the relationships of the professional plot. The only intervening step is expressed in the characters and relationships of the transition theme, whose narrative structure does not appear often but underlies some very memorable Westerns.

THE TRANSITION THEME

About 1950 three Westerns appeared in which the relation between the hero and society was significantly changed from the estrangement-acceptance pattern we have found in both the classical plot and the vengeance variation. These films—Broken Arrow, High Noon, and Johnny Guitar—share a similar narrative structure, and they can therefore be seen as prototypes of a third basic Western plot. Except for these films and one of the episodes from How the West Was Won, this structure does not occur again in any of the Westerns on the list of top money-makers. However, the new relationships introduced in these films do recur and in the sixties these relationships, only slightly altered, become the central aspect of our fourth and last Western narrative structure, the professional plot. These three films, then, will be interpreted as transitional occurrences of the myth—Westerns that, while remaining in the classical framework, present a significant reorganization of images and narrative and create new meanings that can only be fully expressed outside of the classical structure.

In many respects, this transition theme is almost a direct inversion of the classical plot. The hero is inside society at the start and outside society at the end. He still has his exceptional strength and special status; but the society, which was weak and vulnerable in the classical story, is now firmly established and, because of its size, stronger than the hero or the villains. Rather than being forced into fighting against the villains for the society, the hero is forced to fight against society, which is virtually identified with the villains of the classical story. Finally, the woman whom the hero loves no longer serves inevitably to reconcile him with the society; instead, she joins in his fight and his separation from society.

The four oppositions that we have found to be central to the Western myth—inside society/outsider society, good/bad, strong/weak, wilderness/civilization—also appear in these films, but there has been an important change in the relation of meaning to image in the opposition of good to bad. While the hero is still “good,” the conceptual weight of “bad” is now carried by the townspeople, or society, rather than by the villains. There are still villains—particularly in High Noon—but they seem to provide only a source of action, not a real threat to anything recognized as “good,” as in the other Westerns we have discussed. In Broken Arrow and Johnny Guitar, there are really no villains in the traditional sense, and the hero no longer finds himself protecting a weak society from the threat of a stronger group, the villains.

Though it was not the first to appear, we will consider High Noon first since its structure is closest to the classical plot.

High Noon

High Noon was directed by Fred Zinnemann, released in 1952, and starred Gary Cooper as Will Kane and Grace Kelly as Amy Fowler. The hero Will Kane is resigning as sheriff of Hadleyville in order to marry Amy Fowler. Just after the wedding, word is received that Frank Miller, Kane’s sworn enemy, has been released from prison and is expected on the noon train, where he will meet three of his old gang who have already arrived in town. Knowing that they have come to kill him, Kane’s friends pressure him to leave town quickly with Amy, and he does. But he immediately returns, arguing that it is his job to stay and also that he is safer in town where he can get help to fight Miller. Amy leaves him because, as a Quaker, she does not believe in fighting. Then, when Kane tries to find help, the entire town abandons him and he is left to fight the four men alone. The deputy Harve is the only man in town who is not afraid of Miller, but he refuses to help because he wants to be sheriff and thinks that, if Kane leaves and he as deputy has to face Miller alone, then he will be made sheriff. He even attacks Kane, attempting to beat him up and send him out of town, but Kane wins the fight.

It is noon, the train arrives, and the fight begins. Amy hears the shots, comes running back to help her husband, and together they kill the four men. As the townspeople gather in the street after the fight, Kane removes his sheriff’s badge and, in a gesture of contempt, drops it in the dirt. Then he and Amy ride out of town.

From this brief outline it is clear that the town is the hero’s real
villains alone, against heavy odds, though by defeating them he is also protecting the town. Thus we can say that in all three films the hero attempts to use his special ability to protect a weaker group from the threat of a stronger group, as in the classical plot; but now this effort by the hero results in his being rejected and threatened by society and in his own eventual rejection of that society.

When he leaves society, he takes a woman with him. In each of the three films, the hero is accompanied in his self-imposed exile by a woman. In High Noon and Johnny Guitar, the women make as definite a break with their society as do the men; Amy abandons her Quaker principles to fight for her husband, and Vienna, sharing the hero's role, kills the leader of the attack against her. In Broken Arrow, Jeffers's wife is already outside society—one of the town's enemies—and he finally joins her and the Apaches. She is killed, which drives him away even from the Indians, just as the other heroes are left outside all organized societies. In each film the woman joins and supports the hero's separation from civilization. She is no longer symbolic of the good and decent in society, as in the classical plot, nor is her love symbolic of the hero's acceptance into society. As in the classical plot, her love is a symbol of the hero's worth and goodness, yet it is given now because of his ability to fight against rather than for society. In the two films where the women survive, we have a definite sense that the heroic couple are better than society; they will give each other sufficient strength and support to continue their lives in a rich, loving relationship that is uncontaminated by the compromise, conformity, and cowardice of society. Jeffers is left alone, but, as he tells us over the image of him riding into the desert, his thoughts of his wife and her role in bringing peace will comfort him in his wanderings. The establishment of a self-contained heroic couple outside of society can be seen as an important stage in the transition from the classical to the professional plot.

The most fundamental transformation is probably the change of society, as a moral sign, from the "good" pole of the opposition to the "bad." As a result, the same opposition of images that represent "good" and "bad"—hero and society—can now also represent "inside" and "outside" society as well as "wilderness" and "civilization." This new ability of the myth to convey the same meanings with fewer images, and thus to give these images greater conceptual weight, permits a more simple but more intense narrative structure, basically a two-party rather than a three-party conflict. The movement of the classical hero from outside of society to inside is transformed into a movement from inside to outside. The woman, who was simply an aspect of society in the classical plot, now becomes a real heroine, fighting with the hero and sharing his exile.

It is perhaps somewhat impertinent to attach this much significance to three films. But, as we shall see in the next section, many of these changes appear in the professional plot, which is further removed from the classical plot than the transition theme but, in fact, seems to assume as a basic context the logical consequences of the transition theme. If we can say that the hero of these three films is the hero of the classical plot a few years later, after the town he saved has become secure and self-satisfied, then the hero of the professional plot is this same hero after he has disassociated himself from the society he once protected. The transition theme occupies a crucial if brief place in the development of the Western myth from the thirties to the seventies, from Cimarron to Butch Cassidy. Chronologically, these three films as well as the last big classical Westerns appear in the early fifties. Broken Arrow was released in 1950 and Bend of the River in 1951; High Noon in 1952 and Shane in 1953; in 1954, both Johnny Guitar and The Far Country were released. After this, both the classical plot and the transition theme virtually disappear from the list of top money-making Westerns, as the professional plot, with Rio Bravo in 1958, begins its almost complete domination throughout the sixties to the seventies.

A question remains as to why the transition theme, at least as a successful version of the myth, was so short-lived. If it was truly an important stage in the development of the Western myth, should there not be more instances of it? I cannot say precisely why there were not more films with this structure; but after an examination of the professional plot, I will put the entire sequence of Westerns into a more general social context, and then the significance of the brief transition theme should become clearer.

THE PROFESSIONAL PLOT

In many ways, the professional plot is similar to the classical plot: the hero is a gunfighter, outside of society, whose main task is to fight the villains who are threatening parts of society. But the relations between the different characters of the story have changed significantly. The heroes are now professional fighters, men willing to defend society only as a job they accept for pay or for love of fighting, not from commitment to ideas of law and justice. As in the classical plot, society is portrayed as weak, but it is no longer seen as particularly good or desirable. The members of society are not unfair and cruel, as in the transition theme; in the professional plot they are simply irrelevant. The social values of love, marriage,
family, peace, and business are things to be avoided, not goals to be won. As a result, the relations of the heroes, or of the villains, with society are minimal. Society exists as a ground for the conflict, an excuse for fighting, rather than as a serious option as a way of life. The focus of the professional plot is on the conflict between the heroes and the villains. Typically, both are professionals, and their fight becomes a contest of ability that is significant for its own sake. A concern with a fight between equals as a measure of special ability is an aspect of all Westerns, yet only in this particular version of the myth does the fight itself, divorced from all its social and ethical implications, become of such central importance. The final gunfight that climaxes such films as Shane or Stagecoach has become a battle extending throughout the film with skirmishes, strategies, and commanders. How the fight is fought is now the crucial issue, since the fight itself generates the values that replace the values of the society in the myth.

Corresponding to the transformation from a climactic fight between individuals to a battle between small armies is the transformation from the lone hero fighting his way into society to a group of heroes, each with special fighting ability, who combine for the battle. This group of strong men, formed as a fighting unit, comes to exist independently of and apart from society. Each man possesses a special status because of his ability, and their shared status and skill become the basis for mutual respect and affection. Thus, the group of heroes supplies the acceptance and reinforcement for one another that the society provided for the lone hero of the classical plot. This change in the focus of respect and acceptance naturally corresponds to an important change in the qualities or values that are being respected and accepted. The social values of justice, order, and peaceful domesticity have been replaced by a clear commitment to strength, skill, enjoyment of the battle, and masculine companionship.

The interaction of the heroes is based on a mutual acceptance of highly unfavorable odds and a common coolness, humor, and wit in the face of danger. Although these men are generally fighting for some social cause, as a group they separate themselves from society and have virtually no contact with it. The fight itself and, more importantly, the comradeship that the fight creates provide sufficient justification for their actions. Heroes in the professional plot have little or no interest in women except insofar as the women become part of the group. When one of the heroes does take an interest in a woman, she does not offer an alternative set of values—in fact, she usually takes part in the fighting—but she provides further proof of his strength and masculinity. This change in values is perhaps most apparent at the end of these films, when the fight is over. There is no sense of the heroes having won a new, peaceful way of life. Instead of marrying and settling down, they stay together as a group in order to maintain the relationships created by the fight. In some sense their victory has made a new and meaningful life possible, but this new life involves a special masculine society separate from, independent of, and a little better than the ordinary society of families and businesses.

We can use this general outline of the plot to consider briefly how the professional Western relates to the transition theme. Society in the transition theme is strong and bad; in the professional plot it is weak and irrelevant. In both cases, the values of society are rejected by the heroes, who define themselves in opposition to them. The disenchantment with the society of the classical plot begins in the transition theme, and the professional plot provides an alternative set of values to fill the vacuum. In the transition theme, the heroes by rejecting society are forced into an independent group—or couple—based on respect and affection. This is similar to the professional plot, with the difference that the group is a man and a woman in the former case and a group of men in the latter. The women in the transition theme fight with their men, as do the women in the professional plot. So, once again, there seems to be a progression, both logical and historical, from the woman as representing a social alternative to fighting and the hero’s way of life, through the woman as fighting with the hero, joining and supporting his way of life, to the woman as irrelevant to the heroes who form a masculine group based on their own values of skill and strength. The autonomous couple at the end of the transition manages to connect the social couple of the classical plot with the masculine group of the professional plot. It is from this perspective that the transition theme seems to have a significance beyond that appropriate to a form derived from only three really successful occurrences. Later, we will consider this possible progression with more care.

The narrative functions that comprise the structure of the professional plot are more concerned with characterizing the heroes than describing standard plot developments. The symbolic emphasis is no longer on the relationship of the hero to society but on the relationships of the heroes among themselves. The emphasis—the common core of the professional stories—is on the group of heroes and their prolonged battle; thus, the motivation for this battle, so important in the classical and vengeance plots, is now far less important. For this reason, the stories of these professional Westerns seem to vary much more widely than those of any previous set of films.

When I first approached the list of top-grossing films, even after
I had characterized the classical and vengeance films, the wide variation in the stories of the sixties made that period seem to represent an anarchic breakdown of a previously well-structured myth, just as the tonalities of modern music seem, on first hearing at least, compared to the harmonies of the classical composers. I recognized the implicit structure when I realized that all the films of the sixties, with only four exceptions (excluding three satires), had one thing in common, which had virtually never appeared before in Westerns—there was more than one hero. More than one character is alive and happy at the end, is fast on the draw and lovable; the multiple heroes get together and like each other. This is such a major change that, when I began looking for a structure based on this group of heroes, it soon became apparent. To illustrate this structure I have chosen five popular but quite different films—Rio Bravo, The Professionals, True Grit, The Wild Bunch, and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid—which I shall review in chronological order.

Rio Bravo

Rio Bravo was the first Howard Hawks Western since Red River. It was released in 1959 and starred John Wayne as Chance, Dean Martin as Duke, Angie Dickinson as Feathers, Walter Brennan as Stumpy, and Ricky Nelson as Colorado.

Duke, dirty and cowarding, needs liquor so badly that he is about to reach into a spitoon to retrieve a gold piece thrown there by the mocking Joe Burdett. Suddenly John Chance, the sheriff, kicks the spitoon away, glares at Duke with disgust, and walks menacingly toward Joe. From behind, Dude hits Chance with a stick and knocks him out. Joe laughs, and Duke swings on him; but Joe's friends stop Duke and hold him while Joe beats him. After many blows, another man touches Joe's arm to make him stop, and Joe draws his gun and kills the man. A few minutes later, in another saloon, Chance walks in, dazed and bloody, holding a rifle and telling Joe he's under arrest. One of Joe's friends gets the drop on Chance from behind; but Duke comes in, steals a gun from another man's holster, and shoots the gun from the first man's hand, telling Chance to do what he pleases. When Joe attempts to draw, Chance hits him with the rifle; then he and Duke take Joe off to jail. All this happens in the first ten minutes.

The next day, Pat Wheeler brings a wagon train of freight into town, only to be stopped at the edge of town by Duke, who is now wearing a gun and a badge. Wheeler, who recognizes Duke as the town drunk, is puzzled by his being sober and wearing a badge.

and wonders why he was stopped first by Burdett's men and now by Duke. They go into town and Chance, an old friend of Wheeler's, tells him that Nathan Burdett—Joe's brother and the large rancher in the area—has the town "so bottled up that I can't get Joe out or help in." Wheeler introduces Chance to Colorado, a young gunfighter who's riding guard for the wagon train. Then Chance reveals that against all of Burdett's men, he has only Duke, a drunk, and Stumpy, a lame old man, for help.

That night in the saloon, Wheeler is a little derisive toward Duke, and Chance tells him that, before Duke was betrayed by a woman two years back and became a drunk, he was one of the best men with a gun he had ever worked with. Wheeler offers himself and his drivers as help, but Chance turns them down because Wheeler is "not good enough" and the drivers would only be "well-meaning amateurs, most of them worried about their wives and kids" against Burdett's "thirty or forty men, all professionals, only ... worried about earning their pay." Wheeler then suggests Colorado—"he's good, real good"—and Chance asks the gunfighter if he wants to help. Colorado says he'd rather mind his own business. After this, Chance meets Feathers, a lanky gambler who's wanted on a bandit bounty because of her husband, a crooked gambler. She tells Chance her husband's dead; he tells her to get out of town on the next stage.

A few minutes later, Wheeler is shot and killed in the street because he offered to help the sheriff. Chance and Duke go after the man who did it, chasing him into a saloon full of Burdett's men. They go in to get him with Duke, the drunk, taking the lead; inside, they can't find the killer, and Duke is ridiculed. At the last moment, though, Duke locates and kills the man. Later, at the jail, Colorado offers to join as a deputy in order to avenge Wheeler, and Chance refuses. That night, Feathers protects Chance with a shotgun, without his knowledge, while he sleeps.

The next day, Burdett and his men come to town to see Joe. Duke, on guard, shoots and breaks the reins of one of Burdett's gunfighters as he tries to pass without surrendering his guns. In the jail, Chance tells Burdett that if he attempts to rush the jail, Stumpy will kill Joe. Later that night, Duke starts to break down under the pressure while Chance sits some more with Feathers, who again tries to protect him with a shotgun. The next morning, at the edge of town, Duke is surprised and captured and three men catch Chance unprepared. Colorado, showing his ability, saves Chance, who then rescues Duke. After this, Colorado joins the group in the jail, and Duke, upset and nervous, decides to leave. He suddenly regains his nerve, however, and Chance returns his clothes and guns from his old days as a deputy. Later, in the hotel, Chance and Duke are
only excitement" she's ever known. Rather than being an attachment to society, she leaves society to join them in an independent social group. Once in a while the three of them go into society to enjoy the fruits of their labor, but it never occurs to them to join society for good and become respectable. Thus we have the ninth function:
9. The heroes as a group are independent of society.

The remaining three functions simply state the climactic events of the plot. Sooner or later, usually repeatedly, the heroes fight the villains, and sooner or later they defeat them. This is obvious in Rio Bravo, The Professionals, and True Grit. The fight is evident in The Wild Bunch and Butch Cassidy, but the defeat is less so. The Wild Bunch all die; but they can be said to defeat the villains since they completely destroy the Army of Mapache, even though they are outnumbered by two hundred to four. Butch and Sundance do not destroy the Bolivian Army—though they certainly kill many times their own number—but they do defeat the superpose; that is, they escape, and they defeat the Bolivian bandits. Thus, though it is not finally true, it is true enough to argue that functions 10 and 11 apply even here:
10. The heroes fight the villains.
11. The heroes defeat the villains.

The last function describes the final disposition of the group of heroes—they stay together. After their job is finished, and they no longer need to stay together, they stay together. This may be strictly true of only two of our films, but it is true of most professional films: The War Wagon, El Dorado, Big Jake, and so forth. In these films, as in Rio Bravo and The Professionals, the heroes remain together when the film ends. Chance and his deputies get together back in the jail after the fight and kid each other; then Chance goes off to kiss Feathers while his friends laugh at him. In The Professionals, the four heroes ride happily back into the desert together. Although in True Grit, one hero dies and the other two separate, we sense that these two will keep in touch and get back together, at least in the cemetery. Perhaps my argument that the last function applies even to this film is not too convincing, but it becomes more convincing when you compare the ending of the film with the ending of the novel by Charles Portis. Most of the movie is very faithful to the novel, even the dialogue; yet in the novel LaBoeuf survives, takes Chaney back to Texas, and is never heard from again. Also, after Cogburn saves Mattie's life by taking her to a doctor, she never sees him again. She writes to him, and he never answers. Thus, in the film, a special effort is made to change the ending so that the group survives, if only in memory. Cogburn visits Mattie, and we see them together at the end. She wants them to be buried together, and he more or less accepts. Since LaBoeuf is dead and he is mentioned kindly, his absence does not make the group seem as incomplete as it would if he had indeed gone back to Texas.

Finally, in The Wild Bunch and Butch Cassidy, the groups perish. In order to include this ending, I will simply interpret function 12 to mean: the heroes stay together, whether living or dead. What the function really means is that the heroes do not part and go their separate ways, at least not without a great deal of effort to keep them together, as in True Grit. When the heroes die together, our impression is that this is their finest hour. By dying together as a part of the job, they prove that their greatest commitment is to the group itself. Even when facing certain death the Wild Bunch and Butch and Sundance are more alive, have more excitement, and share deeper feelings than would ever have been possible if they had abandoned the job, and the group, to become respectable citizens. Thus, dying together or staying together expresses the same group commitment, and either event supplies the final block for the narrative structure of the professional plot:
12. The heroes stay (or die) together.

Putting them together, we have the entire list of functions for this structure:
1. The heroes are professionals.
2. The heroes undertake a job.
3. The villains are very strong.
4. The society is ineffective, incapable of defending itself.
5. The job involves the heroes in a fight.
6. The heroes all have special abilities and a special status.
7. The heroes form a group for the job.
8. The heroes as a group share respect, affection, and loyalty.
9. The heroes as a group are independent of society.
10. The heroes fight the villains.
11. The heroes defeat the villains.
12. The heroes stay (or die) together.

This list illustrates the development in action and relationship between the heroes, the society, and the villains. The narrative interaction of the characters in the professional plot is quite different from their interaction in the classical plot; in order to grasp the meaning of this narrative difference, we must grasp the basic conceptual meaning of these characters in the professional plot.