Language and Identity in *the Virginian*

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Owen Wister's novel, *The Virginian*, is often thought to have established the archetypical Western hero, the kind of hero we see in the novels of Louis L'Amour, Zane Grey and many other writers of Westerns. This hero is the Gary Cooper/John Wayne man of few words and violent actions who restores order out of chaos and brings law to society. He is the vigilante who with a clear sense of right and wrong destroys the evil in his world that good might prevail. Yet as Lee Clark Mitchell has pointed out in his article "'When You Call me That…":Tall Talk and Male Hegemony in *The Virginian,"* language, over and above the violence, is of central importance in shaping the outcome of the novel. However, re-reading the novel in this perspective reveals an even more crucial role for language, for The Virginian creates his identity and establishes his form of masculinity as much through language as through his physical prowess and violence. Thus, The Virginian is not a "yup" and " nope" hero like so many modeled on him but a man of many words skillfully used, and those words establish his identity which in the view of the novel is the identity needed to lead Wyoming and the world successfully into the future.

The view of The Virginian as a man of great physical prowess and violent action who controls and forms his world in this manner was a view fostered by the narrator. At the beginning of the novel when we first meet The Virginian, it is his ability to rope a horse that is the center of our attention.

> Then for the first time I noticed a man who sat on the high gate of the corral, looking on. For he now climbed down with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin. The others had all visibly whirled the rope, some of them even shoulder high. I did not see his arm lift or move. He appeared to hold the rope down low, by his leg. But like a sudden snake I saw the noose go out its length and fall true; and the thing was done. As the captured pony walked in with a sweet, church-door expression, our train moved slowly on to the station, and a passenger remarked, "That man knows his business." (13-14)

The narrator even seems drawn to the violence of the West because he finds that, compared to the Easterners who may be less violent but more dishonest and deceitful, the Western Cowboy is simple, more direct and honest in his approach to life even if that approach involves violence.

> I loitered here and there, neither welcome nor unwelcome at present, watching the cow-boys at their play. Here were lusty horsemen ridden from the heat of the sun, and the wet of the storm, to divert themselves awhile. Youth untamed sat here for an idle moment, spending easily its hardearned wages. City saloons rose into my vision, and I instantly preferred this Rocky Mountain place. More of death it undoubtedly saw, but less of vice, than did its New York equivalents. And death is a thing much cleaner than vice. (36)

The narrator is so enamored with the cowboys, he sees in them a "true nobility" and imagines their lives are epic.

> In their flesh our natural passions ran tumultuous; but often in their spirit sat hidden true nobility, and often beneath its unexpected shining their figures took a heroic stature. (36) Among these heroic figures is The Virginian, and his simple honesty and straight forward approach to life often involves violence. There are numerous examples of this in the novel, but the most famous is the showdown between Trampas and The Virginian during the card game.

There had been silence over in the corner; but now the man Trampas spoke again.

> *"And* ten," said he, sliding out some chips from before him. Very strange it was to hear him, how he contrived to make those words a personal taunt. The Virginian was looking at his cards. He might have been deaf.

> *"And* twenty," said the nest player, easily.
> The next threw his cards down.
> It was now the Virginian's turn to bet, or leave the game, and he did not speak at once.
> Therefore Trampas spoke, "Your bet, you son-of-a------."

The Virginian's pistol came out, and his hand lay on the table, holding it unaimed. And with a voice as gentle as ever, the voice that sounded almost like a caress, but drawling a very little more than usual, so that there was almost a space between each word, he issued his orders to the man Trampas: ---

"When you call me that, *smile*! And he looked at Trampas across the table. (30-33)

Later in the novel, this same behavior is evident when the Virginian makes Trampas say he is a liar after he has made a sexually suggestive remark about Molly. However, the narrator is clearly ambivalent about controlling one's world through physical prowess and violence.

This ambiguity is most clearly evident by the absence of what the narrator might have described but choose not to include. While we do see in one brief paragraph The Virginian's destruction of Balaam for his abuse of Shorty's horse Pedro, the more critical scenes of violence are barely described. These are the hanging of Steve and Ed and the final gun battle between The Virginian and Trampas.

When Steve and Ed are hanged, the narrator is in the area but not present. He has taken the railroad West to a small station then gone by horse into East Idaho to meet The Virginian.

> Across the Basin, among the secret places of Owl Creek, past the Washakie Needles, over the Divide to Gros Ventre, and so through a final barrier of peaks into the borders of East Idaho. There, by reason of his bidding me, I met him, and came to share in a part of his errand.
>
> It was with no guide that I traveled to him. He had named a little station on the railroad, and from thence he had charted my route by means of landmarks. Did I believe in omens, the black storm that I set out in upon my horse would seem like one to-day. But I had been living in cities and smoke; and Idaho, even with rain, was delightful to me. (271-272)

The errand, of course, is to hang Steve and Ed for stealing horses, but when the actual hangings take place, the narrator remains in camp shielding the reader from this violence.

> It was the other prisoner that I heard them next address, "You don't eat any breakfast, Ed."
> "Brace up, Ed. Look at Steve, how hardy he eats!"

But Ed, it seemed, wanted no breakfast. And the tin dishes rattled as they were gathered and taken to be packed.

> "Drink this coffee, anyway," another urged; "you'll feel warmer."
> "I reckon if every one's ready, we'll start." It was the Virginian's voice once more, and different from the rest. I heard them rise at his bidding, and I put the blanket over my head. I felt their tread as they walked out, passing my stall. The straw that was half under me and half out in the stable was stirred as by something heavy dragged or half lifted along over it. "Look out, you're hurting Ed's arm," one said to another, as the steps with tangled sounds passed slowly out. I heard another among those who followed say, "Poor Ed couldn't swallow his coffee." Outside they began getting on their horses; and next their hoofs grew distant, until all was silence round the stable except the dull, even falling of the rain. (282)

Again, when The Virginian kills Trampas in the shootout at the end of the novel, the description is very brief and limited, especially if we compare it to many Westerns and movies. Trampas has demanded that The Virginian get out of town before sundown, but The Virginian declines.

> "It is quite awhile after sunset," he heard himself say.
> A wind seemed to blow his sleeve off his arm, and he replied to it, and saw Trampas pitch forward. He saw Trampas raise his arm from the ground and fall again, and lie there this time, still. A little smoke was rising from the pistol on the ground, and he looked at his own, and saw the smoke flowing upward out of it.
> "I expect that's all," he said aloud.

But as he came nearer Trampas, he covered him with his weapon. He stopped a moment, seeing the hand on the ground move. Two fingers twitched, and then ceased; for it was all. (344)

Thus, we clearly see that the narrator is ambivalent towards violence. He is both attracted and repelled by violence, but consistently in the novel, he is attracted to language, and the use of language becomes central to The Virginian's identity.

There is also some fairness to the claim that The Virginian is a "yup" and "nope" Western hero, for he often uses silence or brief comment as a means of maintaining distance between himself and a stranger or unwanted person. As The Virginian and the narrator make the long trip to Sunk Creek, they ride in silence, or at times, The Virginian will offer a very limited reply to the queries of the narrator. However, the one point when The Virginian allows the narrator more into his world and shows greater confidence in the narrator is based on language when The Virginian and the narrator create a joke from a discussion of the effects of distance on the size of an object.

> "What effect," I inquired with a gravity equal to his own, "does this extraordinary foreshortening have upon a quart of whiskey?"
>
> "When it's outside yu', seh, no distance looks too far to go to it."
>
> He glanced at me with an eye that held more confidence than hitherto he had been able to feel in me. I had made one step in his approval. (48)

From this small bit of language play, the narrator gain admission to The Virginian's world. Hence, while The

Virginian is often a typical taciturn cowboy of fiction, it becomes clear as the novel progresses that language has a special magic that allows closeness to him that would not otherwise be possible. Still, the role of language in delineating the character of The Virginian is even greater than this.

From the beginning of the novel, Wister places special emphasis on language. When the narrator first arrives in Medicine Bow, he is very discouraged because his luggage is lost, and the trip to Sunk Creek is going to be much greater than he had imagined.

> My baggage was lost; it had not come on my train; it was adrift somewhere back in the two thousand miles that lay behind me. And by way of comfort, the baggage-man remarked that passengers often go astray from their trunks, but the trunks mostly found them after a while. Having offered me this encouragement, he turned whistling to his affairs and left me planted in the baggage-room at Medicine Bow. I stood deserted among crates and boxes, blankly holding my check, furious and forlorn. I stared out through the door at the sky and the plains; but I did not see the antelope shining among the sage-brush, nor the great sunset light of Wyoming. Annoyance blinded my eyes to all things save my grievance; I saw only a lost trunk . (14)

Then, he suddenly overhears The Virginian playing verbal games with Uncle Hughey, and this pulls him right out of his doldrums.

> Already I had forgotten my trunk; care had left me; I was aware of the sunset, and had no desire but for more of this conversation. For it resembled none that I had heard in my life so far. I stepped to the door and looked out upon the station platform. (15)

This is only the first of many verbal games The Virginian will play throughout the novel. He tricks the drummer out of his bed in a verbal ploy, and perhaps the most famous of his verbal exploits is the frog story he tells to defeat Trampas and return his crew safely to the Sunk Creek Ranch. However, the most humorous is when he literally drives the Reverend MacBride from the Ranch with his verbal play.

During the night after Dr. MacBride had delivered an especially oppressive sermon, The Virginian keeps the Reverend up most of the night claiming that he needs help in his state of sin.

> The Virginian's room was quiet and dark; and that Dr. MacBride slumbered was plainly audile to me, even before I entered. Sleep came to me fairly soon, in spite of the Doctor. I was wakened from it by my bed's being jolted---not a pleasant thing that night. I must have started. And it was the quiet voice of the Virginian that told me he was sorry to have accidentally disturbed me. I next made out that he was bending over Dr. MacBride. The divine at last sprang upright.

"I am armed," he said. "Take care. Who are you?"

"You can lay down your gun, seh. I feel like my spirit was going to bear witness. I feel like I might get an enlightening."

He was using some of the missionary's own language. (181-182)

All night, The Virginian plays a game with the Reverend using Dr. MacBride own language to keep him awake.

"I'm afeared to be alone!" said the Virginian's voice presently in the next room. "I'm afeard." There was a short pause, and then he shouted very loud, "I'm losin' my desire afteh the sincere milk of the Word!"

"What? What's that? What?" The Doctor's cot gave a great crack as he started up listening, and I put my face deep in the pillow.

"I'm afeared! I'm afeared! Sin has quit being bitter in my belly."

"Courage, my good man." The doctor was out of bed with his lamp again, and the door shut behind him. (182-183)

When morning comes, the Doctor finally figures out that The Virginian has tricked him with his own language. As the last session of wrestling with the devil is finished up, The Virginian makes a remark to Doctor MacBride that reveals the game.

"You'll be going to breakfast and the ladies, seh, pretty soon," said the Virginian, with a chastened voice. "But I'll worry through the day somehow without yu'. And to-night you and turn your wolf loose on me again." (183)

Dr. MacBride realizes he has been fooled and departs in embarrassment. Thus, we can see how language is important to the identity of The Virginian, for he often controls his world through language games rather than violence. Finally, of course, language is crucial in his courtship of and eventual marriage to Molly Stark.

Molly is a teacher and, therefore, formally educated while The Virginian has had little formal education; yet it is always clear in the novel that he possess a mind of a superior quality. As the courtship progresses, a leveling process begins to take place with Molly accepting the ways of the West while The Virginian learns to appreciate literature to which he has never been exposed. While we get to hear his homespun opinions of the great writers, the point of his reading is that language is crucial in his development as an eligible husband for Molly. Further, it is through language that The Virginian shows that his mind is equal to Molly's. This comes about significantly in their discussion of democracy, a discussion in which The Virginian lays a verbal trap for Molly.

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

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

"Maybe that don't include women?" he suggested.

"I think it does."

"Do yu' tell the kids so?"

"Of course I teach them what I believe!"

He pondered. "I used to have to learn about the Declaration of Independence. I hated book 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.

"Knows his tasks, does he?"

"Always. And Henry Dow comes next."

"Who's 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!"

She looked at him, puzzled by his tone. "It's not strange when you know Bob," she said.

"It's very strange," drawled the Virginian. "Knowin' Bob don't help it any."

"I don't think that 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 a lot 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. (111-112)

This way, through language, The Virginian establishes parity with Molly and proves himself to be worthy as a husband for her. Thus while it is true that The Virginian is a man of great physical prowess and violent action who controls and forms his world in this manner, it is equally clear that he is a man of language who more often than not manages his world through verbal play. Hence, his identity is established as much if not more so through language, and that language will be crucial to the future of Wyoming and the world where law will replace the gun.

References

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