

# THE STRUCTURE OF MYTH & THE STRUCTURE OF THE WESTERN FILM

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## The Structure of Myth

A myth is a communication from a society to its members: the social concepts and attitudes determined by the history and institutions of a society are communicated to its members through its myths. One of the tasks of this study is to examine this assertion. To do so, it is necessary to discover the meaning of a myth and to find out how a myth communicates its meaning. Like any communication, a myth must be heard (or viewed) and interpreted correctly; this means that myth must have a structure, like the grammar of language, that is used and understood automatically and through which meaning is communicated. In this chapter, I shall present a theory of the structure of myth and discuss how abstract social ideas are established in and communicated by this structure.

My discussion will rely to a considerable extent on the structural studies of Claude Lévi-Strauss. In fact, the idea and inspiration for my study of the Western comes almost entirely from his work. His analysis of tribal myths is primarily responsible for current anthropological interest in cognitive and structural approaches to myth and ritual. Since I cannot agree completely with his ideas on myth, however, I will develop a somewhat different theoretical perspective. Essentially, I will be less concerned with structure and more concerned with order and communication. Lévi-Strauss demonstrates exhaustively the existence of a formal, conceptual structure in tribal myths for the purpose of proving that this structure is inherent in the human mind.

[ . . . ]

My interest, however, is not to reveal a mental structure but to show how the myths of a society, through their structure, communicate a conceptual order to the

From Wright, W., 1975, *Sixguns and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 46-25, 29-58.

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members of that society; that is, I want to establish that a myth orders the everyday experiences of its hearers (or viewers) and communicates this order through a formal structure that is understood like language. Thus, there is an important difference of emphasis between the concerns of my study and those of Lévi-Strauss. Lévi-Strauss wants to discover the meaning of a myth in order to exhibit its mental structure, while I want to exhibit the structure of a myth in order to discover its social meaning. [...] To do this, to relate myth to the ordinary responsibilities of people who act and must understand their actions, we need a theory that attempts to explain the interaction between symbolic structures and the possibility of human action. For such a theory, we can turn briefly to the literary analysis of Kenneth Burke, who suggests that certain basic aspects of human communication are determined by the use of symbols.

[...]

Burke interprets the characters of a narrative as representing social types acting out a drama of social order. In this way, interaction – such as conflict or sexual attraction – is never simply interaction between individuals but always involves the social principles that the characters represent. Thus, a fight in a narrative would not simply be a conflict of men but a conflict of principles – good versus evil, rich versus poor, black versus white.

This interpretation of narrative seems particularly appropriate to myths, and I will adopt it as a working hypothesis for my analysis of the Western. However, Burke's analysis is essentially literary, since he presents no systematic method for discovering the ideas of social classification and order inherent in narrative works. [...] Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, utilizes a well-thought-out method of analysis and offers a remarkable amount of data to support the validity of his method. Therefore, an adroit merger of the theoretical insights of Burke with the methodological suggestions of Lévi-Strauss might provide an appropriate framework for an analysis of myth and social action.

[...]

Lévi-Strauss's method is to look for the structure of myth in terms of binary oppositions. An image of something (a man, say) is structurally opposed in a myth to an image of something else (a jaguar, say). In this way the sensible differences between things (like man/not like man) become symbols of conceptual differences (culture/nature). An image of a character (man) in a myth does not come to represent a concept (culture) because of any inherent properties of the image, but only because of the differences between it and the image or character (jaguar) it is opposed to.

[...]

[According to Ferdinand de Saussure] – 'concepts are . . . defined . . . negatively by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what others are not'. The word 'jaguar', for example, has meaning because it separates

those things that are jaguars from those things that are not. Thus, every symbol divides the world into two sets, those things it does refer to and those things it does not. Distinguishing jaguars from everything else does not tell us much about jaguars, however. If we distinguished them from all other animals, or even from all wild animals, we would know a great deal more about jaguars; that is, the domain that a symbol divides influences the meaning of the symbol.

[ . . . ]

Similarly, when an image of a thing becomes a symbol, we know more about what it does mean if we know exactly what it does not mean. This is because the symbolic meaning created by an assumed dichotomy of images is determined only by the differences in the images; their similarities are irrelevant. When a man is contrasted to a jaguar in a myth, this can represent humanity as opposed to animality, culture as opposed to nature. The symbolism is derived from their differences. As things, they have many similarities – alive, carnivorous, earth-bound – but these are unimportant in a binary structure of meaning. Clearly, if the jaguar were opposed to an eagle instead of a man, it would no longer represent nature but probably earth as opposed to sky, or perhaps even humanity as opposed to gods. The important point is that if a man, a jaguar, and an eagle were contrasted in a tertiary structure, the meaning of each image would be far less obvious and general. In this case, an understanding of the symbolism would require much more knowledge of the particular qualities of each character involved. Specifically, it would require the interpreter to recognize the similarities as well as the differences between the characters, since for an image to be a symbol its meaning must be unique. This means, of course, that when three or more characters are structurally opposed, their symbolic reference becomes more restricted and obscure because of the fine distinctions required; thus, their interpretation becomes more difficult. On the other hand, when two characters are opposed in a binary structure, their symbolic meaning is virtually forced to be both general and easily accessible because of the simplicity of the differences between them.

This explains the prominence of binary structure in myths. In literary works by individual artists – such as novels or dramas – the desire is usually for complex, realistic characters in situations that challenge social attitudes. For this purpose, a binary structure is not appropriate. But myth depends on simple and recognizable meanings which reinforce rather than challenge social understanding. For this purpose, a structure of oppositions is necessary. The Western is structured this way, and, as we shall see, it presents a symbolically simple but remarkably deep conceptualization of American social beliefs.

[ . . . ]

Of course, more than two characters can appear in a myth. But when three or more characters do appear, they appear as contrasting pairs, not as coequal representatives of alternative positions. In the classical Western, a typical cast would include a wandering gunfighter, a group of homesteaders, and a rancher. Instead of representing

equally valid, conflicting oppositions with each pair of homesteaders, a contrast. The rancher, who is set on another level or axis: the opposition to the rancher's settlement. In this way, the generality of the myth is rather complicated symbolically on one axis and contrasted types and resolutions of the heroic and tragic situation and equally opposed.

In this study, then, I want to make explicit the analysis, however, will only be *in*. The opposition of elements to understand how myth presents we must know what they mean or the story.

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My method of narrative is to a single list of shared elements that describe either a scene or that example, the statement 'The hero fights' statement 'The hero fights' is unknown to the social gunfighter' would not. The functions are generic, not such as Shane or the Riders stories. Also, the characters. The generalized characters in a film, all of whom will refer to 'the villains' action.

equally valid, conflicting life-styles, these characters would be presented as pairs of oppositions with each pair having a different meaning. The gunfighter is opposed to the homesteaders, a contrast representing individual independence versus social domesticity. The rancher, who is settled and domestic like the farmers, is opposed to them, but on another level or axis: the farmers represent progress and communal values in opposition to the rancher's selfish, monetary values – a contrast between good and bad. In this way, the generality of the binary structure is maintained, while the possibility for rather complicated symbolic action is created. Each two characters are identified on one axis and contrasted on another; this structure permits interaction between social types and resolutions of conflicts between social principles but prohibits the more realistic and tragic situation of all three characters being equally good, equally domestic, and equally opposed.

In this study, then, I will examine the basic oppositions of characters in the Western in order to make explicit the conceptual reference inherent in this structure. This analysis, however, will only tell us what the characters *mean*; it will not tell us what they *do*. The opposition of characters creates the conceptual image of social types; but to understand how myth presents a model of appropriate social action between these types, we must know what they do, how they act. This is the narrative dimension of the myth, or the story.

[...]

Now social action requires interaction, and interaction takes place in the story of a myth, not in the structure of oppositions. Thus, in order to fully understand the social meaning of a myth, it is necessary to analyze not only its binary structure but its narrative structure – the progression of events and the resolution of conflicts. The narrative structure tells us what the characters do, and unless we know what they do, we can never know what they mean to people who not only think but act.

[...]

My method of narrative analysis will be to reduce the stories in a set of similar films to a single list of shared functions. These functions will be one-sentence statements that describe either a single action or a single attribute of a character. Thus, for example, the statement 'The hero fights the villains' would be a function, while the statement 'The hero fights and defeats the villains' would not be. Similarly, 'The hero is unknown to the society' would be a function, but 'The hero is unknown and a gunfighter' would not. The characters whose actions and attributes are described by these functions are generic, not specific – that is, the functions do not refer to particular heroes, such as Shane or the Ringo Kid, but to the role of the hero as a character in all the stories. Also, the character referred to by the functions need not be only one individual. The generalized character in a function can be, and often is, a group of characters in a film, all of whom share a single meaning in an opposition. Thus, a function will refer to 'the villains' or 'the society' as a single character with respect to structural action.

This method of narrative analysis is a liberalized version of a method originated by Vladimir Propp for the analysis of Russian folk tales. His tales were much simpler than the Western, and he restricted his functions to descriptions of actions, whereas I have included attributes; moreover, his tales were folk, popularized and standardized by many retellings, whereas my tales are films – stories based on a social myth, but created by specific individuals for popular acceptance and never changed or standardized by public retelling. From a study of folk tales, Propp showed that the functions that characterize a set of stories occur in a rigid, unchangeable order; in each tale every function – that is, every action – must appear in exactly the same sequence. But this approach is unnecessarily restricting, for it is easy to recognize a set of essentially similar stories with slightly differing orders of events. The order of the functions that characterize a Western plot will not always correspond exactly to the order of events in a particular film; in fact, some functions, such as ‘The hero fights the villains’, may occur more than once in some films.

[ ... ]

### The Structure of the Western Film

[ ... ]

### 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: [ ... ] the other plots – vengeance, transition, professional – are all built upon its symbolic foundation and depend upon this foundation for their meaning.

[ ... ]

#### Shane

*Shane* is the classic of the classic Westerns. It was directed by George Stevens from a screenplay by A.B. Guthrie, 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, Jean 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 that the Rikers arrive to take the land and they need all the water. Shane suddenly reappears. He is wearing a gun. He gives a final warning, then kills the family, the Rikers.

The next day, Shane is killed by one of Riker's men. Eight farmers in the valley are introduced, but only one, Sunday, all the while, enters the saloon named Chris. Riker kills him. Starrett convinces Shane to go and sends for a gunfighter.

The gunfighter kills Riker once more and forces one of the farmers to leave one of the farms. Starrett convinces Shane and Riker sends for a gunfighter. Shane asks Shane to go. In the barn Chris kills Shane into a trap. Shane kills the farmer to stop the trap. After saying goodbye to the woman she shares, Shane kills him. Then he goes into the darkness.

I will now attempt to analyze four other classic Westerns [ *Country* ] a list of functions that characterize these films. The functions will be optional. The order in which they appear in different places will be somehow estranged. The villains through analysis, we can identify the villains. This

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 unnerved, when Shane suddenly reappears and announces to the Rikers that he is a friend of Joe Starrett's. 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 on 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 for ever, into the dark mountains, while little Joey Starrett shouts after him to 'come back.'

[ . . . ]

I will now attempt to extract from these stories [Wright has given plot summaries of four other classical Westerns, *Dodge City*, *Canyon Passage*, *Duel in the Sun*, *The Far Country*] a list of functions that describe common actions and situations. This list will characterize these five films as well as the other classical Westerns on the list. Not all the functions will apply to all the films; most of them will, but a few, as we will see, may be optional. More importantly, the functions need not occur in the stories in exactly the order in which I will list them. Some occur more than once in certain films and in different places in the narrative [.] . . . ] Each film is the story of a hero who is somehow estranged from his society but on whose ability rests the fate of that society. The villains threaten the society until the hero acts to protect and save it. Thus, for analysis, we can reduce each story to three sets of characters: the hero, the society, and the villains. This is possible because each of the latter groups is undifferentiated – that

is, the members of society always share common interests and have no internal conflicts, and the villains always share common interests and have no internal conflicts, except over money. Each group of characters, then, acts essentially as one with respect to the other group or the hero, and therefore we need only consider these three basic characters for a general description of the action.

In each film the story opens with the hero coming into a social group, a fledgling society consisting of families and elderly people with a settled, domestic life. In *Shane*, the hero rides into the valley and meets the farmers – specifically Starrett, his wife and son [.] [ . . . ] Thus, our first function can be:

1. *The hero enters a social group.*

In each film the hero is a stranger to this society. Shane is so much a stranger that he has no last name and no past. [ . . . ]

2. *The hero is unknown to the society.*

In three of the five films, the town discovers that the new arrival is a skilled gunfighter. Shane gives himself away when he twice reaches suddenly for his gun in reaction to unexpected noises after he arrives at the peaceful Starrett farm. Later, in a scene that is not mentioned in my summary, he demonstrates his fast draw and accuracy while giving Joey, Starrett's son, a shooting lesson. Finally he proves his ability in the climactic gunfight. [ . . . ]

3. *The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability.*

As a consequence of this ability, the society recognizes the hero as a special and different kind of person. Shane, after revealing himself as a gunfighter, is first suspected by Starrett; then, after he confronts Riker, he is respected by Starrett, admired by Marion, and worshipped by Joey. He is thought to be different by the other farmers – some suspect him of being a gunfighter – because he is the only man in the entire valley without an understandable reason for being there. He is not a farmer, but he is farming. He does not want land, and he refuses an offer from Riker for much better money. Thus, he is an enigma, who is given a special standing in the community. [ . . . ]

4. *The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given a special status.*

Another consequence of the hero's ability – or, to be exact, of the recognition of that ability by society – is that society does not fully accept the hero. Shane is immediately distrusted by Starrett, and then later, when he tries to avoid a fight, he is accused of being a coward by the farmers. When he tries to rehabilitate himself by picking a fight, the farmers are upset by the fight and try to ignore it, mumbling 'This is bad, this is bad.' Even Marion, after Joey's shooting lesson and Shane's attempt to explain to her that a gun is just like any other tool, tells him, 'This valley would be better off if there were no more guns left in it, including yours.' This means Shane himself, so, as his expression tells us, he is chastened and ashamed. Joey, who is Shane's strongest defender, turns on him and exclaims, 'I hate you,' when Shane uses his gun to knock out the boy's father. Perhaps the strongest indication in any classical

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acceptance of the farmers. He tells Joey, who begs him to stay, that he is leaving because 'there is no living with a killing', but we know, from Starrett's comments about his wife and Shane as well as from their tender and restrained parting, that Shane is really leaving because of the love that has grown between him and his friend's wife, a love that is only indicated after he has put on his guns and decided to fight Riker. [ . . . ]

15. *The society accepts the hero.*

Our last function describes the hero losing in some way the special status he has had in the society. What this means is that he is no longer either willing or able to take the role of special person that was conferred because of his unique ability. Shane leaves, relinquishing his newly acquired position as the deadliest man in the valley. There is no law for a hundred miles, and he could, of course, stay in the valley and maximize the rewards of his power and the farmers' gratitude; but he gives up his status as gunfighter and savior and chooses instead the dark night and the cold mountains. [ . . . ]

It [the society] 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 Western, though not among the five we have discussed.

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 explicit the conceptual or classificatory meanings of these characters by revealing the oppositional structure of the Western myth; we must understand how the

different characters and their opposition are.

The code, in which the characters are vividly of characters, there are two of the characters, will be treated separately: the hero from the society who are inside society and the hero and the society are, as we shall see, similar to the inside/outside of society but are always

The inside/outside of the film begins as Shane is alone – he is with the Starretts, you where you're born. Then, as though I know one thing. 'I got our roots down'

This kind of code have families, children he's got nothing to ride back into the Shane has no last name a playing child or him with the wilds buckskins, Starrett symbolically attempt immediately starts a

ifferent 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 typing 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; the 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.

[...]

The inside/outside opposition is coded at one level, in *Shane* as in most classical Westerns, through the contrast of wandering, unsettled life with domestic, established life. The film begins as Shane rides out of the mountains and across the valley in scenes that are crosscut with views of the Starrett farm, its garden, fences, cows; smoke is rising from the chimney as Joey plays, Marion cooks, and Starrett cuts down a tree. Shane rides up to the farm and immediately tells Starrett, 'I didn't expect to see any fences around here.' Then, a minute or two later, 'It's been a long time since I've seen a Jersey cow.' Shane is alone – he has no family, no friends, and no ties. When he is having dinner with the Starretts, using 'the good plates, an extra fork', Starrett says, 'I wouldn't ask you where you're bound,' and Shane replies, 'One place or another, someplace I've never been.' Then, as though to make the point absolutely clear, Starrett comments, 'Well, I know one thing. The only way they'll get me out of here is in a pine box. . . . We've got our roots down here. . . . It's the first real home we've ever had.'

This kind of coding can be observed throughout the film. The other farmers also have families, children, possessions; and they seem to distrust Shane for this reason – he's got nothing to lose; he doesn't fit in their world. At the end of the film, Shane rides back into the mountains alone. The same opposition is coded at other levels – Shane has no last name; he grows nervous and jumpy at ordinary domestic sounds, a playing child or a wandering calf; he wears buckskins, clothing that identifies him with the wilds and is worn by no one else in the film. When he first appears in buckskins, Starrett distrusts him, and afterward Shane changes into farming clothes, symbolically attempting to join society; but when he again dons his buckskins, Starrett immediately starts a fight with him, indicating again their basic difference.

The Riker brothers and Wilson are somewhat indeterminate on this opposition, yet clearly more inside than outside. They obviously do not share the values of the farmers, but if we agree to leave values for the good/bad opposition, then these villains are mostly inside society. The Rikers are ranchers – settled, with large amounts of land and cattle, and with important social responsibilities (an army contract, many hired hands, and so on). Rufus Riker, the owner and leader, is old and grizzled; he was fighting Indians when Starrett was a child. There is in *Shane* a sort of mini-opposition between the old society and the new society; but for our purposes the Rikers, old or new, are more identified with society than not. Wilson, like Shane, is a wandering gunfighter and thus could also be identified as completely outside the society. That he is not serves to reinforce the split between Shane and the society. Wilson is from Cheyenne, which, together with his last name, gives him more of a background and a home than the hero has; he comes to town wearing a black hat, a black, buttoned-down vest, a striped shirt, and black armbands, looking exactly like a gambler from the city who is out of place in the wilds of the isolated valley.

[ . . . ]

In the classical Western, the good/bad opposition repeats some of the social imagery of the inside/outside dichotomy; but since it is aimed more specifically at the difference between the society and the villains, it is more explicitly concerned with values. The opposition of good versus bad does not depend entirely upon a difference of values; the existence of a second coding of the distinction between good and bad will become important in the analysis of the professional plot, when the difference in values has virtually disappeared. But the explicit coding of good and bad is between the social, progressive values of the members of society versus the selfish, money values of the villains. The decent citizens are committed to taming the land, raising families, and bringing churches, schools, business, and law to the West, a commitment repeated in virtually every classical Western. The villains, however, are committed to personal gain by any means and at any cost, usually at the cost of progress, decency, and law. In *Shane*, the conflict is not between ranching and farming but between community progress and individual exploitation of the land. This is most clearly stated in a discussion that takes place after the burial of Torrey, the farmer killed by Wilson. Two of the farmers, Howells and Lewis, have given up and are about to leave the valley. When Starrett tells them they should stay, Howells asks 'What for?'

[Wright then quotes an exchange between Starrett, Lewis and Shane:

Starrett informs Lewis that this is a settled community, a town with churches and a school. Lewis adds that it also has graveyards.

Shane then intervenes to suggest that they should stay for the sake of the happiness of their families and for the community they are building; they should not walk away from these opportunities.

Starrett then adds to Riker, adding that 'C remains unconvinced

This states the condition and money.

The second coding is more important than the first. It differentiates those people who separate the villain from the obviously committed hero. The first ride up to the town of his way to speak of a 'giant dinner'. On the store – Shane is seen never quarrel, say and making small quarrel among them insulting someone. never give or receive his fixed, evil smile

This nice/not nice it seems, can only be while, as in *Bend* but this always prevents villains begin and sympathetic and not due to this nice/not derived from the society, making it possible the distinction in values

A third opposition the villains with the city that makes him numbers as well as carry guns and have combine into a fight as convincing typically, the settle plump or comic manner

The farmers in less in the face of

Starrett then adds that there is too much here to give up. They must stand up to Ruff Riker, adding that 'God didn't make all this country just for one man like Riker'. Lewis remains unconvinced: 'He's got it though, and that's what counts.')

This states the conflict clearly: the farmers want community, Riker wants domination and money.

[ . . . ]

The second coding of the good/bad opposition is more subtle and perhaps even more important than that of social as opposed to selfish values. This coding, which differentiates those people who are kind and pleasant to others from those people who are not, separates the villains from the society, and it makes it possible for the hero, who is not obviously committed to churches and schools, to be considered as good. When Shane first rides up to the Starrett farm, he is friendly and pleasant to Starrett; he goes out of his way to speak kindly to the boy; and later, he compliments Marion on 'an elegant dinner'. On many other occasions – at the farmers' meeting, at the dance, at the store – Shane is seen to be friendly and nice. Similarly, the farmers and their wives never quarrel, say nice things to each other, and are often seen visiting one another and making small talk. The villains are never nice or friendly to anyone. They don't quarrel among themselves, but they are always complaining, bragging, threatening, or insulting someone. They seem to have and need no friends, they never relax, and they never give or receive human comfort. Wilson, in particular, only speaks to be sinister; his fixed, evil smile makes him a caricature of inhumanity.

This nice/not nice coding is true throughout the classical Western. Western villains, it seems, can only be cruel, unpleasant, or sly, never friendly and charming. Once in a while, as in *Bend of the River* or *Vera Cruz*, the villain starts out friendly and nice, but this always proves to be deceit and manipulation, not real kindness. Usually, the villains begin and end mean and nasty [ . . . ] in the classical Western, no villains are sympathetic and no heroes or members of society are unsympathetic, a fact that is due to this nice/not nice coding of the good/bad opposition. This coding is not derived from the social values versus selfish values distinction but is simply added to it, making it possible for the hero to be on the good side of an opposition even after the distinction in values has been lost.

A third opposition, between the strong and the weak, contrasts both the hero and the villains with the society. The hero is a gunfighter; he possesses some special ability that makes him capable of defending himself. Similarly, the villains are strong, in numbers as well as in fighting ability. The society is remarkably weak. They seldom carry guns and have no fighting skill. Though they are usually numerous, they never combine into a fighting group to defend their homes and families. To make their weakness as convincing as possible, the social group rarely contains young, healthy men; typically, the settlers or citizens consist of women, children, and elderly, middle-aged, plump or comic men.

The farmers in *Shane* are unusually young and healthy, but they are virtually helpless in the face of violence. They continually complain that the only law is three days'

ride away. When one of their neighbors decides to leave after having his crops ruined, his fences cut, his animals shot, and his family scared to death, their only response is to wish him luck and have a picnic. Later, when another neighbor has been openly murdered by Wilson, their only thought is to get out as fast as possible. Shane tells them they should have nerve enough to fight for the valley, but they never get that nerve. Starrett convinces them to stay after they show a little anger at Riker's burning one of the abandoned farms, yet their disarray and weakness is shown in the ensuing discussion.

[Wright then quotes the discussion between Howells, Johnson, Starrett, Shipstead and Marion:

Howells warns that Riker has the power to burn more farms. Johnson counsels that they should stand firm against this threat.

Howells responds that doing so will bring only one outcome, more death and destruction. Starrett points out that the law is only three days' ride away. This is not seen as a solution.

All the men, with the exception of Starrett, cannot see a solution other than defeat by Riker. In the face of this defeatism, Starrett resolves to confront Riker.]

Of all the farmers, only Starrett shows some nerve. It is just assumed that he's going to do their fighting; no one offers to help him. But, as Marion says, he's taking on too much. This is made clear when Riker and his men first ride up to his farm. Starrett, together with his wife and child, stands with his son's gun — which turns out to be unloaded — defending his cabin. Morgan, Riker's brother, grins and asks sarcastically if Starrett's expecting trouble. At this, Starrett grimaces, looks embarrassed, drops his eyes, and lowers his gun. Then, just as Riker is telling the farmer that he could gun-blast him off his land right now, Shane appears beside Starrett wearing a gun. Now, in his steely-eyed presence, the Rikers are confused and unsure. They ride off, leaving only threats. At the end of the film, as Starrett prepares to ride to town to kill Riker, Shane — once again in buckskins and wearing a gun stops him, saying, 'Maybe you're a match for Riker, maybe not. But you're no match for Wilson.'

Shane, Wilson, and the Rikers are clearly strong. Shane is typed early in the film as a gunfighter by his quickness to draw at any unexpected sound. He beats up Chris and then holds his own against an entire saloonful of cowboys; later, he demonstrates his speed and accuracy with a gun during Joey's shooting lesson; and finally, he rides alone to town to fight for the farmers. The Rikers are strong because they have the numbers, fighting background, and Wilson, a hired gunfighter whom even the farmers have heard of and who, Shane tells us twice, is 'fast, fast on the draw'. In one interesting scene, Wilson and Shane study each other in the moonlight, saying nothing but seeming to circle one another like equally skilled foes preparing for the kill.

[...]

The fourth basic opposition is between wilderness and civilization. The social and class distinction within the valley, and responsibility and products of American civilization, they would try to bring to the wilderness/civilization distinction, sometimes, though not always, important because it is the only character who alone can be identified with civilization — various ways, through life as a trapper or as a farmer. The knowledge of the law belongs to the West. The East is always as a Western hero is felt and noble wilderness interesting Westerns because they have an eastern dude.

The east-west opposition is identified with the valley. Again, capped Teton Mountain so that once more the only character is the only character to the wilderness. The Teton mountains be seen at lengths that, when the road that faces the town to the same face seen against the mountain glow like a halo direction. In this instance, when the mountains are not seen; the town in close up, filling particularly the last the mountains tower

The fourth basic opposition of the Western myth is that between the wilderness and civilization. The difference between this opposition and the inside society/outside society distinction will become clear if by society we mean having roots, an occupation, and responsibilities, while by civilization we mean a concern with the money, tools, and products of American culture. The Indians become an easy test, for, as in *Broken Arrow*, they would typically be inside society (their own) but outside of civilization. The wilderness/civilization contrast is not as central as the other oppositions, and it is sometimes, though rarely, only vaguely present or missing altogether. But it is important because it serves to separate the hero from every other character. The hero is the only character who is both good and strong, and this fourth opposition explains how he alone can be this way. It is because he is associated with the wilderness, while all other characters – good or bad, weak or strong, inside or outside society – are associated with civilization. This identification with the wilderness can be established in various ways, through purely visual imagery or an explanation of his background – his life as a trapper or association with the Indians – or through the dramatization of his knowledge of the land and wildlife; the minimal requirement for the hero is that he belongs to the West and has no association with the East, with education and culture. The East is always associated with weakness, cowardice, selfishness, or arrogance. The Western hero is felt to be good and strong because he is involved with the pure and noble wilderness, not with the contaminating civilization of the East. Large-scale, interesting Westerns, such as *The Big Country*, have been financial disasters perhaps because they have made the error (with respect to the myth) of making the hero an eastern dude.

The east–west polarity in *Shane* is tacit, since no one is from the East, and Shane's identification with the wilderness is entirely 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 Starretts 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 villains – 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.

[ . . . ]

These four oppositions – inside society/outside society, good/bad, strong/weak, and wilderness/civilization – comprise the basic classifications of people in the Western myth.

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From Macherey, P.,  
pp. 165–240.