

**Aeneas in Apacheria:
Classicism in American Western Fiction
and Film**

by
Clifford M. Caruthers

I

The heroes in American literature and film are, as we know, generally one of two types—either the intelligent but naïve innocent who learns important truths about the community, or the experienced stranger with courage, knowledge, and authority who joins the community long enough to save it violently from impending danger.

For an analysis of the first type, we have long been indebted to R. W. B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955), which established convincingly that the “new men” of the New World—who monopolize the fictional worlds of Hawthorne, Melville, James, Twain, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Salinger, and many others—are intelligent but naïve “innocents.” These men have much to learn about a worldly, sophisticated, and frequently manipulative society. Lewis emphasized, for example, that in James's *The American*, Christopher Newman, the newly rich but naïve American, is no societal match for the devious Bellegarde family of the Old World. And Huck Finn, who rejects “sivilized” table manners on the first page of Twain's novel, has learned by the last page that he dislikes the morality of Mississippi Valley society far more. Our more prestigious critics, notably Carl Van Doren, have emphasized the desirability of the American protagonist's being a “learner” (471-75).

For a comparable analysis of the second type of American hero, we are indebted to John C. Shields' *The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self*, published in 2001. Shields' work jogs our memory about often-ignored classical influences in American fiction. Our early American writers, we should remember, were emigrants from England and Western Europe, well

educated for the most part, who knew Latin and Greek and generally looked to Homer and Virgil for their literary models. In addition to the “innocent” learner that Lewis has identified so convincingly in American fiction, the battle-weary but courageous demigod and survivor of Troy in the *Aeneid* is also a prominent American prototype, wandering about on his epic journey to fulfill his destiny. While Aeneas is a learner (especially during his journey to the Underworld), he is from the beginning of his saga a definitive superhero and leader, who must use violence to realize that destiny.

Allusions to classical literature were common in early American literature, from “Aesop’s bread-carrier” in Byrd’s *History of the Dividing Line* to America personified as the goddess “Columbia” in Wheatley’s “To His Excellency George Washington.” Though the evolution of romanticism and the divisive Atlantic Ocean diminished classical elements in nineteenth-century American literature, one need only recall Bret Harte’s Uncle Billy spouting “Parthian volleys” of profanity in “The Outcasts of Poker Flat” to note that such learning and such elements continued to exist. Classical allusions in twentieth-century American fiction are less common, though Faulkner’s parody of pastoral courtship in *The Hamlet* is memorable. More recently, the many Homeric echoes in the film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* remind us that the Greek and Roman classics are still an important part of our heritage.

However, contemporary demands for realism rather than idealism usually do not permit such superheroes as Aeneas to populate the pages of mainstream American literature. Failure--or partial failure--is more likely in life than total success. The modern reader and viewer feel that the Roy Hobbs who succeeds in the movie *The Natural* is less believable than the Roy Hobbs who fails in Malamud’s novel. Our modern “heroes” tend to be less powerful, less assertive Adamic types who must learn how to deal with the complexities of modern life--

people like Frederick Henry of *A Farewell to Arms*, Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman*, Bruce Pearson of *Bang the Drum Slowly*, or John Grady Cole of Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*. Indeed, critics often have debated whether they are heroes at all. Frederick Henry is a man to whom things happen, not one who makes things happen. At the end, he is powerless to prevent the death even of love. Willy Loman may sacrifice himself to gain financial advantage for his sons, but do we really believe that this windfall will bring them success? Bruce Pearson may typify how to live once one knows one will soon die, but is that role enough to make him heroic? And John Grady Cole, however much we come to admire his principles, ultimately accepts that he lacks the authority and power to sustain love in the face of the Mexican social order.

Even in history (and legend), our superheroes are few—Washington, Lafayette, Lindbergh, Colin Kelly, Eisenhower, Patton, Audie Murphy, and a handful of others. They do reappear prominently in American war novels such as Bernie Lay's *Twelve O'Clock High* (as General Savage), in Herman Wouk's *War and Remembrance* (as Captain Henry), or in other formulaic fiction set in times of crisis that demand great leadership. Though these leaders are less than perfect (as is Aeneas, at least until he completes his educational journey to the Underworld), they are dominating characters in the "John Wayne tradition."

II

Shields argues these fictional “demigods” derive mostly from classical origins and especially from Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Looking specifically at those fictional superheroes who perform their deeds during the settlement of the American West between 1860 and 1900, Susan Rosowski (in *Birth of a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature*) says more broadly that they originate from “a Eurocentric tradition in which Logos and the Word are aligned with creativity and generation. From the Greek Stoics to Christian doctrines, the Logos is associated with creativity and generativity and with the unfolding of an idea in manifold form as a world and meaning without end” (172).

Although Shields does not specifically discuss American Western superheroes, I suggest that he is correct in identifying Aeneas as their principal source. Because most of the early twentieth-century fictionists who wrote about such Western heroes knew some Greek and a good deal of Latin from grammar school and university studies, it is only logical that they should have turned particularly to the *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and especially *The Aeneid* to depict our “manifest destiny” to invade and settle the West. While sources for the mythic superhero are, of course, broader than Greek or Latin originals (see especially Lawrence, *Beowulf and the Epic Tradition*), our nineteenth and early twentieth century American writers were far more likely to have studied *The Aeneid* in Latin than to have read *Beowulf* in translation. When Owen Wister, for example, entered Harvard in 1878, he was required to pass exams in Latin and Greek, and his scores were high enough to place him in advanced courses. He was particularly adept in

Latin and ended his studies by writing *Dido and Aeneas*, a comic opera successfully presented in 1882 by the Hasty Pudding Theatricals (Payne 42).

Wister and his followers almost certainly used Aeneas as their prototype. Like Virgil's "great-souled" son of Venus who wanders from the ruins of Troy toward another violent destiny, the Western American hero emerges from an implied violent past to explore the western landscape and eliminate disorder along the way. The ruggedness of the epic Western landscape and the harshness and lawlessness of the Western way of life require that the Western protagonist be larger than life (Slotkin 175-83). He is The Virginian, Lassiter, the Ringo Kid, Hondo, Shane, Will Kane, and Jim McKay. He brings with him the experience, leadership, morality, and sense of duty that will save the community into which he wanders. While revealing little of his past (beyond what is obvious in his demeanor), he will join a community, partake of its values and troubles, and become a leader whose forcefulness and, ultimately, violent deeds will re-establish order. He may fall in love during his journey, though eventually he may dutifully leave the woman to continue his search to fulfill his destiny. Alternatively, this love relationship may cause him to settle down and live "happily ever after."

Though the Western hero is hardly a learned scholar, he represents, as Aeneas does, the Homeric "arete"--the ideal of nobility in both mind and action. He also is governed by his "pietas"--his sense of duty and proper behavior--and by his devotion to a "greater" than himself. Conflict within Aeneas is between private desires and public duty. It is Aeneas's duty, in Virgil's epic, to found the Roman Empire, though it may occasionally conflict with his desire to end his wanderings and be happy, for instance, with Dido, whose shores he leaves "unwillingly."

This "pietas" of Aeneas is firmly ingrained in the Code of the West, by which all American Western heroes must live. The Code demands that a man live and die by honorably and courageously facing his enemies. The Virginian must

shoot it out with Trampus, even on his wedding day. Lassiter must confront Bishop Dyer, to uphold the honor of his sister. Shane must oppose Jack Wilson, for the good of the community. Marshal Kane must face Frank Miller, and Jim McKay must rescue Julie from Buck Hannassey. Chivalry toward women also is an essential part of the Code.

Eloquence, however, is not part of this Code or of “pietas.” Aeneas can be somewhat eloquent when the occasion demands, but he is mainly a man of action rather than words. Unlike Odysseus, Aeneas does not depend on verbal skills to accomplish his ends. More often than not, his words seem rather inadequate, as when he attempts to defend himself against Dido’s accusations of insensitivity and deceit in not telling her he was readying his ships to leave Carthage. In an astonishingly unemotional (and male chauvinistic) tone, he stresses his duty to found the Roman empire, saying that if the gods had given him free will, he would never have left Troy, the home of Creusa, his first wife, who died in the aftermath of the War. This statement is hardly what Dido wants to hear (IV, 416-99). Aeneas is more tactful when he pleads forgiveness with Dido’s shade in the Underworld: “Unhappy Dido . . . , I swear by heaven’s stars, by the high gods, by any certainty below the earth, I left your land against my will, my queen. The gods’ commands drove me to do their will” (VI, 612-21).

Similarly, in the speech that Molly finds irresistible, the Virginian can say, “Once, I thought love must surely be enough And I thought if I could make you love me, you could learn me to be less--less--more yur kind. And I think I could give you a pretty good sort of love. . . . This is no country for a lady. Will yu’ forget and forgive the bothering I have done?” And Lassiter, when Jane Withersteen asks him to give up his guns, says, “Where would any man be on his border without guns? Where, especially, would Lassiter be? Well, I’d be under the

sage with thousands of other men now livin' an' sure better men than me. Gun-packin' in the West since the Civil War has growed into a kind of moral law."

Nevertheless, these articulate moments are exceptions to the rule. All these Western superheroes are, like Aeneas, men of deeds rather than words. Aeneas knows, as do the other superheroes, that words will never save the day. Action is the answer to injustice and other evils. As Jane Tompkins has pointed out in *West of Everything*, "the Western is at heart antilanguage." Eloquence is not what counts. Appropriate action is. "Doing, not talking, is what it values" (50). Hondo's advice on surviving in the West goes only as far as: "You do what you want to People learn by gettin' bit Don't trust nothin' too much." Susan Rosowski has also discussed in considerable detail the Western hero's "reluctance to use language" (157).

At the crucial moment, the Western hero will step forward, as Aeneas always does, to defend the community with force against force. In so doing, the Western hero will exhibit more than the usual heroism, courage, chivalry, and honor in confronting these forces. Though he may be wounded in a violent climax, (as Aeneas is by a stray arrow in the penultimate battle with the Latins), he will heal miraculously (as Venus heals Aeneas) and will continue his journey, or he will stay to fulfill his destiny as a leader in the community, (as Aeneas also does to establish the Roman Empire).

In creating characters like the Virginian, Lassiter, or Shane for their Eastern readers, Wister, Grey, Shafer, and other core Western authors again most likely looked to Aeneas as the ultimate prototype. Certainly, the epic settings, the exceptional courage and propensity to settle problems through violence, the quasi-inarticulate pursuit of the vulnerable lady, and the chivalric confrontation with forces that threaten the community in these formulaic sagas suggest origins in a single, well-known source.

Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902), which initiated many of the conventions that later American Western novels have emulated, establishes early in the novel an unmistakable Aeneas type. Listen to the narrator's initial description of his hero:

Lounging there at ease against the wall was a slim young giant more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back; a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat, and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge-belt that slanted across his hips. He had plainly come many miles from somewhere across the vast horizon, as the dust upon him showed. His boots were white with it. His overalls were gray with it. The weather-beaten bloom of his face shone through it duskily, as the ripe peaches look upon their trees in a dry season. But no dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength.

Wister's protagonist, a wanderer to the American West from Virginia in the aftermath of the Civil War, seems at first to be another Adamic innocent—unlearned and, until Molly, the schoolmarm, appears, untutored in the ways of the civilized world. The big issue in *The Virginian* appears to be whether the sophisticated woman from the East and the “innocent” Western cowboy can have a compatible, lasting romance. But the Virginian turns out to be a very apt pupil: “I know what yu’ mean . . . by sayin’ you’re not the wife I’d want. But I am the kind that moves up. I am goin’ to be your best scholar.” His point is one of the major themes in Wister's novel—that all people are of course not born equal, but the freedom of the American West allows the best men to rise to the top if they take advantage of their opportunities. The Virginian proves that he can lead men (justifying Judge Henry's trust), that he can outwit and outfight Trampas, and that he is ultimately the archetypal upholder of the Code of the West.

Wister, a Harvard-educated easterner who also wrote a traditional Ciceronian study of George Washington (*The Seven Ages of Washington* [Macmillan, 1907]), may have intended his Virginian to serve as a contrast to the Adamic protagonist depicted so prominently by his friend Henry James. Though

the Virginian is academically naive, he possesses an Aeneas-like intelligence and sense of duty and honor. He can even participate in the hanging of his irresponsible friend Steve, because rustlers must hang for stealing cattle, if order is to be preserved on a frontier where law enforcement officers are scarce.

As mentioned earlier, the Virginian is, like Aeneas, a man primarily of action, not words, though he can be persuasive (for example, when he spins fictional yarns about frog farms to keep the cowboys from following Trampus). Before he leaves Molly to face Trampus, he says, “Can’t yu’ see how it must be about a man? It’s not for their benefit, friends or enemies, that I have got this thing to do. If any man happened to say I was a thief and I heard about it, would I let him go on spreadin’ such a thing of me? Don’t I owe my own honesty something better than that?” He is less articulate when he replies to the bishop’s urging that he has given himself to Molly and therefore should not duel with Trampus: “Yes, I have given it to her. But my life’s not the whole of me. I’d give her twice my life--fifty--a thousand of ‘em. But I can’t give her--her nor anybody else in heaven or earth--I can’t give her my--my--we’ll never get at it, seh! There’s no good in words.” Melody Graulich points out that this is not a case of “stubborn male dominance,” but rather an insistence that he cannot give anyone else his essential “self”--an argument as legitimate for a man as for a woman (202).

Many other events, however, do reveal the Virginian’s (and Wister’s) “rationale for women’s subordination” (Mitchell 98). The plot of the novel balances on the gradual shift in the role of the Virginian from Molly’s pupil to her teacher, and the Virginian’s easy assertion that after marriage Molly’s place is at home leaves no doubt that he is a traditional nineteenth century male: “She shall teach school no more when she is mine.”

The Virginian cannot run from a gun duel, even on his wedding day. To do so would violate manly honor and would allow disorder to replace order in the

community. Ultimately, Molly must, and does, accept this fact. The conclusive shoot-out between Trampas and The Virginian establishes the traditional dramatic climax in Western fiction and, obviously, echoes the climactic single combat between Turnus and Aeneas in *The Aeneid*, as Virgil's climax in turn emulates the many single combats in the Greek epics.

In reality, the Virginian is the epitome of Homeric "arete" (Van Cromphout 95-96) on which Virgil modeled Aeneas. The Virginian ascends to this nobility by fulfilling his responsibilities to his "self," by eventually becoming the Judge's partner, and then by becoming an independent rancher. He establishes his empire as emphatically as Aeneas does. The Virginian's initial ignorance of literature and Eastern culture belies his leadership qualities and his awareness of the values of men in a violent world.

Another Aeneas figure is the gunman Lassiter in Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912). Grey, whose dominance in Western fiction is matched only by Louis L'Amour, also was college-educated, having earned a baseball scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania and obtained a degree in dentistry. Given the curriculum of the day, he had to have studied *The Aeneid* thoroughly, in Latin. In *Riders of the Purple Sage*, arguably his best novel, Grey depicts another courageous wanderer on an epic journey, in this case to find the abductor of his lost sister. Arriving just in time to rescue the cowboy Venters and ranch-owner Jane Withersteen from their Mormon oppressors, Lassiter takes on Jane's struggle against the Mormon leader, Tull, who by Bishop Dyer's decree is to marry Jane. This triangle recalls Turnus's engagement to Lavinia before Aeneas enters the picture.

In the process, Jane, like Molly, tries to convert this "gun-man" to pacifist ways, but Lassiter, like The Virginian, knows that guns and violence are necessary in the West: "Out here on this border it's the difference between a man an'

somehin' not a man." Oldring must die from Venters' guns, and Bishop Dyer must die from Lassiter's. Later, when Lassiter offers to give up his guns if Jane will leave Utah with him, Jane refuses, and the novel ends with appropriate violence as Balancing Rock comes crashing down on Tull, leaving Lassiter, Jane, and little Fay safe (if isolated) in a Garden of Eden.

Perhaps the most precise example of the Aeneas figure is Jack Schaefer's gunfighter in the 1949 novel and the subsequent movie--*Shane*. Though the parallels are not exactly one-on-one, no other Western narrative owes more to *The Aeneid* than does *Shane*, especially to the first half of Virgil's epic and to the climactic confrontation between Aeneas and Turnus. We should note that Schaefer, as an undergraduate at Oberlin College, majored in classical languages--Latin and Greek. Did he consciously model *Shane* on Aeneas's wanderings in *The Aeneid*? If so, in focusing on the first half of Virgil's epic, Schaefer would be reflecting the preference of modern scholars, who prefer the narrative of the wanderings of Aeneas in the first six books to the second half of the epic, which features battle after battle. (To Virgil's Roman audience, however, the conquest of Italy would naturally have been more interesting.)

When Schaefer's wandering hero with his mysteriously dark past enters the valley, Joe Starrett perceives him as "the most dangerous" of men, but as Shane displays honor, courtesy, and chivalry, he becomes, to those who are "in the right," the "safest" fellow in the valley. He is the leader who emerges when it is "my kind of fight." He encounters disorder and restores order, much as Aeneas does as the *de facto* "king" of Carthage during his affair with Dido (and later, as he leads the Trojans against the Latins).

Shane drifts to the Starrett family much as the winds of Aeolus blow Aeneas to Carthage. His fondness for the Starretts and for the homesteader life parallels Aeneas's contentment in Carthage, and Shane's understated love for Marian

echoes Aeneas's attraction to Dido, though Shane's friendship with Joe Starrett prevents any exploitation of this reciprocated love. As with Dido and Aeneas, neither Marian nor Shane is attracted to the other out of choice. "Unhappy Dido" loves Aeneas because Venus has compelled her to do so, and though Aeneas seems sincerely to love his Carthaginian paramour, he must choose "pietas" over passion and leave her to fulfill his destiny: "I follow Italy not of my own free will." Obviously, Marian's fate is much happier than Dido's, but we should recognize that Shane, when he rides away, still has his own Aeneas-like destiny to fulfill beyond the homesteaders' valley.

In the movie version, Marian echoes the attitudes of Molly Stark and Jane Withersteen by telling Shane that his guns have no place in the valley; Shane replies (to Bob in the novel and Marian in the movie): "A gun is just a tool. No better and no worse than any other tool Think of it always that way. A gun is as good--and as bad--as the man who carries it." Shane's statement is perhaps the most eloquent of all the justifications of the Western Code, though Shane also knows that words, however eloquent, cannot solve the conflict. Violence is necessary for resolution. Joe Starrett is wrong in thinking that he can negotiate with Fletcher (or Ryker, in the movie).

Shane does not want to leave Marian (and Joe and Little Joe), but he knows he must, as clearly as Aeneas knows he must leave Dido, out of his sense of "pietas." Indeed, the killing of Jack Wilson is certainly an act of "pietas," to clear away the guns from the valley. After the climactic single-combat with Wilson (similar to Aeneas's battle with Turnus), Shane rides away from the valley and from Marian, explaining (as Aeneas did when leaving Carthage) that it is his duty to leave, because "there's no living with a killer" and a gunfighter "can't beak the mold."

This climax of the 1889 Wyoming conflict between the homesteaders and the ranchers also in part parallels the close of the *Aeneid*. Note that though Shane is wounded (as is Aeneas before his battle with Turnus), he appears miraculously to be healed (as Venus heals Aeneas): “No bullet can kill that man,” a witness says.

Among other Western Aeneas prototypes is Will Kane, the departing town marshal in Fred Zimmerman’s 1952 movie *High Noon* (based loosely on John M. Cunningham’s short story “The Tin Star”). Like Jack Potter in Stephen Crane’s “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” Kane has taken leave of his lawman’s duties to get married. The monosyllabic Kane (played by Gary Cooper) is an experienced gunman who has “cleaned up” the town but now intends to go elsewhere with his young Quaker wife and perhaps run a store. Upon the news of outlaw Frank Miller’s imminent return for revenge, Kane stubbornly upholds his honor—and his sense of “pietas”—by insisting on staying to face what seems to be certain death against overwhelming odds, while the townspeople one-by-one exhibit cowardice and a lack of “pietas.” When Kane bluntly asks the church congregation for help, they turn him down by accepting the mayor’s rationalization that Miller will not threaten the town’s “progress” if Kane simply leaves. In the ensuing gunfight with Miller and his three friends, Kane’s wife, Amy, like Molly in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, at first rejects her lover for his determination to confront the challenge, but at the crucial moment, Amy returns and even shoots one of the villains herself. This action, so against her religious beliefs and so unusually “masculine” in the Western setting, partially redefines the traditional Western female role. In a sense, she participates in establishing the heroic virtue of “pietas.”

A further departure from convention is *High Noon*’s implicit condemnation of the community for its failure to uphold the Code of the West by not standing with Kane against the Miller gang. The final scene, in which Kane rejects the community by throwing his marshal’s badge in the dirt before riding off with Amy,

appalled John Ford, the famed director of Western movies. It also would have appalled Virgil, whose “pius Aeneas” typifies the Roman concept of dutiful respect for the gods, the country, the family, and the community. Kane’s final action is a perversion of the Aeneas myth. Because Kane’s unfaithful and undeserving community and friends have violated the “pietas” principle, Kane poignantly rejects both the community and “pietas.”

The Ringo Kid is the Aeneas prototype in John Ford’s 1939 masterpiece, *Stagecoach*, based on Ernest Haycox’s short story “Stage to Lordsburg.” The movie focuses on a cross-section of Western society brought together by their common need to go to Lordsburg--the chivalric southern gambler, the whiskey drummer, the alcoholic doctor, the dishonorable banker, the army wife, and the prostitute with the heart of gold. The monosyllabic Ringo (played by John Wayne) must defeat the Plummers in Lordsburg after having fought off Indians during the journey. Though Dallas echoes Molly by urging Ringo to run away from the Plummers, Ringo adheres to “pietas” and survives. His chivalry towards the prostitute Dallas (played brilliantly by Claire Trevor, who won an Academy Award for best supporting actress) evokes viewer sympathy for a poor woman’s plight in the West.

Hondo Lane, in Louis L’Amour’s *Hondo* (1953), is another of the Aeneas types who abound in L’Amour’s classic, though formulaic, Western narratives (Gale 30-31). In this novel, which John Wayne called “the best Western novel I have ever read,” Hondo is the typical Western gunman who knows the hostility of the American western desert, the values of the Apaches, and the ways of staying alive. L’Amour introduces him to the reader as “a big man, wide shouldered, with the lean, hard-boned face of the desert rider. There was no softness in him. His toughness was ingrained and deep, without cruelty, yet quick, hard, and dangerous. Whatever wells of gentleness might lie within him were guarded and deep.” His

struggles in the barren Apacheria to save Angie Lowe and her son are epic in stature. L'Amour, the best-selling author ever, led a nomadic life himself (see his *Education of a Wandering Man: A Memoir*).

Hondo offers us two antagonists—not only the savage Indian Silva but the noble Indian Vittorio, who is not only a fierce warrior and leader of men but also a man with great compassion for children. Also, L'Amour's heroines are mostly Lavinias rather than Didos: in the end, his distinctly inarticulate heroes will triumph through violent action and usually marry the heroines.

Yet another Aeneas type is (somewhat ironically) former sea captain Jim McKay in William Wyler's movie *The Big Country* (1958), based on the Donald Hamilton novel. If the structure of *Shane* resembles the first four books of the *Aeneid*, the Hamilton novel and the Wyler movie have epic qualities that reflect the entire Aeneas saga. McKay has traded the ocean setting for romance on the open range of the West. Though he refuses to participate publicly in the usual western initiations of the tenderfoot (riding the rogue horse, fighting the ranch foreman), we see very early that in reality he is only afraid of appearing ostentatious and that he has an abundant sense of "pietas."

In the course of breaking up with his possessive fiancée and preventing a range war over water rights, this seeming tenderfoot reveals his experience, courage, and good judgment by confronting his antagonist, surviving the ritual gunfight, and rescuing the schoolmarm he has come to love. Having rejected his "Dido," he will marry his "Lavinia," and will settle down on his new Texas ranch to found a dynasty in his "big country."

III

It should not surprise us that Hollywood chose to star Audie Mrphy, the most decorated soldier of World War II, as the superhero in so many of the “B” Western movies of the 1950s and 60s (though Murphy tarnished his image in later years with his playboy lifestyle and penchant for excessive gambling). But for at least two reasons, since that post-war period, the Aeneas-type hero that Murphy typified during the war and frequently portrayed in film has gradually almost vanished from our literature, and even from Western fiction and film.

The first reason for this near-disappearance is that the American public has become disillusioned by the revelations that so many of our later twentieth-century leaders have had feet of clay. The Vietnam War, Watergate, and more recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have ushered in a new era of cynicism, and the exposés of personal flaws in the lives of Nixon, John Kennedy, and Bill Clinton have only reinforced that skepticism. We admire and glorify the power of the John Wayne type, but at the same time, we have difficulty believing any longer in his reality. Our tastes in fiction and film reflect that disillusionment. Our Western protagonists have, since the 1960s, increasingly become anti-heroes or non-heroes, though most of them still elicit our empathy. They have some manly traits, but they lack the power to control destiny, and some even have villainous traits. As early as 1942, Walter Van Tilburg Clark’s anomalous *The Ox-Bow Incident* challenged the Western Code by demonstrating the horrors of hanging men who turn out to be innocent. This novel demonstrates what can happen when a community without heroes (or even anti-heroes) follows the guidance of the wrong leader. The novel obviously, at that time, implicitly criticized the German people for following Hitler

into World War II. And even in *High Noon*, the anti-pietas theme at the end perhaps suggests in 1952 the beginning of a perversion of the Aeneas myth.

The anti-hero was always around. Some of Zane Grey's protagonists were anti-heroes, like Monte Bellew in "Canyon Walls," who stumbles almost comically into bliss. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* features two anti-heroes (played by Paul Newman and Robert Redford). "If he [E.H. Harriman of the Union Pacific Railroad] would just pay me what he's spendin' to make me stop robbin' him, I'd stop robbin' him," Cassidy complains. The darker protagonists of director Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* and *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*) are world-weary, violent men who continually violate the Code of the West but somehow still elicit sympathy from the viewer. Another powerful Peckinpah movie, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, is not so much a depiction of depravity as a variant return to the Adamic figure (played by Jason Robards), who is gentler but ignorant, vulnerable, and naïve in his desire for success. He realizes too late that he needs his woman and that he cannot thwart the future.

Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) features an extremely dark anti-hero avenger who has earlier "murdered women and children." At Eastwood's masterfully ironic ending in the "billiard parlor," as William Munny stands over Little Bill and the other power elite of Big Whiskey, whom he has just outdueled, the Eastern Writer in attendance smiles, knowing he has at last found his true Western hero. When the dying Little Bill complains that he doesn't deserve his end, Munny cynically observes: "Deservin's got nothin' to do with it." Pietas in this Western movie is all but dead.

Earlier protagonists, like Canady in Clay Fisher's "The Trap" and Durante in Max Brand's "Wine on the Desert," are downright villains, though through the art of the author, we hope that they will somehow survive. On the other hand, the 1985 Larry McMurtry epic and subsequent mini-series *Lonesome Dove* has two

throwbacks to the Aeneas-type hero. Augustus McCrae and Woodrow Call may have rustled cattle and horses in their past, but both emerge as larger-than-life paladins of the West who honor their “lonesome doves” and the Code of the West and who ultimately defeat Blue Duck and the other savage villains whom they confront (though Augustus dies--bravely, of course--in the process).

The more recent movie *Open Range* (2003), based loosely on Luran Paine’s novel *The Open Range Men* (1990), features cattlemen “Boss” Spearman (Robert Duvall) and Charley Waite (Kevin Costner), who wage an 1882 range war for the right to free-graze cattle. In the movie, which develops the characters much more fully than the novel, Spearman is another Augustus-McCrae-type superhero, and Waite is a brooding anti-hero with a past as a killer. After one of the more sensational climactic shootouts in Western film, Charley realizes he cannot control Sue (Annette Bening) as most fictional Western heroes have traditionally subordinated their women. He asks her: “How’s this [marriage] gonna work if you don’t do what I say?” She laughs in response. Charley’s question is one The Virginian would never have thought to ask Molly, who would certainly not have laughed in reply. Sue’s laughter represents a significant elevation in the status of the Western woman within a genre that has always suffered qualitatively from the subjugation of its women to its male protagonists.

The second reason for the decline of the Aeneas-type hero is that we no longer conventionally study the Latin classics in our American school system. Latin is passé--a “dead language.” Though Bret Harte, Owen Wister, and Jack Schaefer might from their academic backgrounds recall Aeneas as the archetype of great heroes, most of the last two generations of American students have never read *The Aeneid* either in Latin or even in translation. Like the memory of the screen image of John Wayne, the knowledge of Aeneas is fading. The literature and film of the American West in recent years has clearly moved toward the more

“realistic” but flawed modern man, sometimes Adamic in his innocence and epiphanies and sometimes not. Cormic McCarthy’s well-intentioned protagonists in his *Border Trilogy* are no longer Aeneas-type demigods. They are heroic and chivalric on occasion, but John Grady Cole and Billy Parham lack the power to retain sweethearts, to protect the call of the wild, to defeat immoral authority, and generally to prevail over evil. Eventually, they die or drift away, unredeemed by any motherly Venus, and at their ends, they stoically accept their inabilities.

But most of the protagonists within the earlier tradition of Western fiction and film are Aeneas types developed by writers who knew the Latin prototype as well as they knew any historical American hero, and who saw Aeneas and his values as the perfect model for the Western hero during the epic settling of our West. In the formula fiction of the American West during last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, Aeneas thus found a particularly compatible home. The American Western epic does not, of course, replicate *The Aeneid* on anything close to a one-to-one basis, but it does parallel incidents, values, and other elements in Virgil’s epic as clearly as *The Aeneid* emulates occasional incidents and values of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

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Clifford M. Caruthers is a retired professor of English at Illinois State University He also is a former senior managing editor at Argonne National Laboratory (operated by The University of Chicago).