

the gunfighter and
the hard-boiled dick
some ruminations
on american fantasies
of heroism

john g. cawelti

The thriving little frontier settlement is suddenly beset with outlaws. Coming out of nowhere they viciously attack, beating the citizens and killing the old sheriff. Desperately the citizens gather in the church. After prayer for divine guidance, a debate breaks out between those who would leave the town to the outlaws, and those who think they should tough it out. The braver element prevails and the townspeople determine to stay. They petition the governor for a new sheriff. In the nick of time, a heroic figure, beautifully dressed in fringed buckskin and riding a magnificent stallion rides out of the desert. With his help the townspeople successfully defend themselves against the outlaw bands until, in a final confrontation, the hero exposes, tracks down and outshoots the corrupt politician who has tried to drive the people out and take over their land. With law and order restored, the hero leaves a grateful townsfolk behind and rides off into the desert (and the sunset) with his faithful partner.

Sound familiar? It should, since with minor changes this could be a plot description of any of a hundred Western films ranging from an episode of the Lone Ranger, through John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*, George Steven's *Shane* and Fred Zinneman's *High Noon* to Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter*. Actually the film I was more or less following in this summary is Mel Brooks' total send-up of the Western, *Blazing Saddles*. The hilarious effectiveness of *Blazing Saddles* depends to a considerable extent on the way in which it follows through the Hollywood archetype of the Western hero, with certain incongruous details that enable Brooks to keep his audience in stitches while he reduces the great myth of the Western gunfighter to a shambles.

The fact that the new sheriff in *Blazing Saddles* is black constitutes the most pervasive burlesque of the mythic tradition. Though there have been a few black heroes in Western films, particularly of more recent vintage, the heroic lawman of the Hollywood myth has traditionally been white in more than his hat. However, Brooks did not create the satire of *Blazing Saddles* simply by setting a black man in a traditionally white heroic role. It is not just his blackness, but his style that makes Cleavon Little's portrayal of the new sheriff so incongruous with the tradition. The external characteristic of blackness and Little's more subtle qualities of manner, attitude and gesture expose to our sense of the ridiculous certain basic assumptions that have always dominated the portrayal of the Western lawman-hero in American films.

First of all, there is the fact that the Western lawman is almost never presented to us as a man of law. Though the vast majority of Western films work toward that climactic moment in which a heroic figure redeems the law by destroying the outlaws who would deny it, this character is rarely a man of the law by profession or career. In *Blazing Saddles* this convention is burlesqued by making the new sheriff a black railroad worker who is dragooned into serving as sheriff in order to save his skin. Even in *High Noon*, one of the few films in which a professional sheriff plays the role of hero, the action takes place after the sheriff has determined to retire from office. In most Westerns, the heroic lawbringer is not a sheriff or marshal at all, but a cowboy, a reformed outlaw or a mysterious gunfighter. In the list of 106 representative Western films from 1903-1966 which I assembled for the appendix of *The Six-Gun Mystique*,¹ only eleven clearly and unmistakably have professional sheriffs or marshals as heroic protagonists, and in several of these the hero is not a sheriff at the beginning or ending of the film. Most Westerns do have a sheriff or marshal present as a minor character, but he is likely to be old and helpless, confused or corrupt; often enough he has been suborned by the outlaws or by the evil tycoon.

The hero's ambiguous relationship to law embodies, among other things, a traditional American notion of individualism. The Western hero acts out the myth that society and its organized processes of law, however necessary, are incapable of bringing about true justice. Society and law exist, not as a fountainhead of what is just, but as a set of rules controlling the action of individuals who are the true source of morality and justice as well as of injustice. Because the law is only a set of shifting rules it can readily be bent by those who are strong or unscrupulous enough to do so. Thus, for Americans, the individual who can mold society and the law to his own ends is as much admired as condemned. There seems a slight edge of contempt in our attitude toward the conscientious and law-abiding citizen as if there were some weakness or impotence that prevented him from acting aggressively for himself.² On the other hand, Americans are clearly not prepared to extend this view of individualism to its logical conclusion of a war of all against all, for there

are other, different values which are also important to us, in particular the ideals of equality and community. These, too, must somehow come into play if justice is to be accomplished. The grasping tycoon, the egocentric rancher, or the lawless outlaw—favorite Western villains—may be partly justified in their ignoring of the law, but when their aggressions threaten the community or harm the innocent farmers, something must be done. The community must be redeemed and the unjust individualist purged. In the Western, society's law cannot do this, since it has not yet been established, or has broken down. At this point, the hero must appear, and he must have the same aggressive force and skill in violence that the villain commands. To carry out his mission, he must be a lawman, not a man of society's law which is useless in such situations, but obedient to an inner code of his own—"a man's got to do what a man's got to do"³—which happens to coincide with the need of the community. Thus his act of aggressive violence is legitimated, the excessive individualist threat to the community is purged and the ultimate harmony between individualism and justice is mythically reaffirmed.

These considerations indicate why the sheriff-hero of *Blazing Saddles* comically exposes the Hollywood myth of the lawman not only through his blackness but through his style. The black sheriff of *Blazing Saddles* is a supercool dude; he is elegant and urbane, a connoisseur of fine wines and good food; he is sensuous and erotic and something of a dandy; he prefers trickery to an open fight; most shocking of all he is even—perhaps—just a wee bit gay in his inclinations. These characteristics of style, so antithetical to the tight-lipped austere dignity and puritanical rigor of Gary Cooper or John Wayne, provide a mocking commentary on the traditional myth of the lawman. But why does the supercool style undercut the myth so effectively? I think because it exposes the degree to which the role of heroic lawbringer as portrayed in the Western is a construction of fantasy, and thereby self-contradictory and even absurd. Because of his function as a superior man of violence, capable of purging whole bands of outlaws, the mythical lawman has to be a heroic outsider like the Lone Ranger; after all, if we felt it appropriate for the community to do the job through its duly constituted legal agencies, there would be no need for the myth in the first place. However, having invented this potently aggressive hero to symbolize the ideal individualist, we also need to be assured that he is using his force in a just and moral fashion for the benefit of we, the people. Consequently, though he is trained and dedicated to killing, the heroic lawman must also be a man of great restraint and morality, even gentleness. He must be an outsider, but also in a very deep sense one of us. This, I think, is why the blackness of the sheriff in *Blazing Saddles* constitutes such a comic shock. The hero must be wonderfully potent, but also ascetic and pure in his habits; he must avoid erotic entanglements in order to put his whole force into his moment of violent redemption. In comic contrast to this image of Western heroism, Mel Brooks' sheriff is richly sensuous and obviously

interested in sex. Finally, though the Hollywood lawman is characterized by his austerity toward the opposite sex, there must never be the slightest question of his total and unquestioned masculinity. Even if he prefers the company of men and horses, and is something of a dandy, we must never see a hint of effeminacy or homoeroticism. This, too, becomes an object of mockery in the running commentary of gay gestures and jokes in *Blazing Saddles*.

That the heroic Western marshal was so ripe and hilarious an object of parody in *Blazing Saddles* suggests how important he has been as a figure in the American imagination.⁴ In fact, we can probably go so far as to say that, at least in the period of his peak popularity—the late fifties and early sixties—the Western hero was considered by many to be the archetypal American. Unfortunately, the more archetypal a heroic figure becomes, the more he is likely to mean a great variety of things. In a complex, pluralistic society, popular heroes and their myths probably perform an important integrative role by providing common objects of vicarious identification and admiration for people with very diverse attitudes and backgrounds. However, for the mythical hero to function in this way, he must be susceptible to many different kinds of interpretation; he must be, in effect, a container into which various meanings can be poured without breaking or changing the basic shape of the container. The Western hero is clearly a figure of this sort, since he has been the inspiration not only of a great variety of interpretations, but of a number of different versions.⁵ For example, in his recent book on the subject, Philip French suggests that the Westerns of the last two decades can be classified into fairly distinctive “Kennedy,” “Johnson,” “Goldwater” and “Buckley” versions of the basic Western story.⁶ Whether or not one agrees with this particular anatomy, the Western obviously encompasses a considerable ideological range and, depending on the perspective of the viewer, can be seen as expressive of either conservative or liberal attitudes, sometimes simultaneously. Indeed, the doughty John Wayne, survivor of so many imaginary gunfights, has managed in recent years to become something of a cult figure among young radical movie fans without changing in any significant degree the reactionary stance he has taken on most public issues. This is presumably because in his various roles as Western hero he transcends political controversy and embodies something that is at once vaguer and more archetypal.

Because of this archetypal or mythical dimension, the Western is extremely difficult to interpret in specific ideological terms. One reads the various critics who have attempted such interpretations and tends to agree with all or none of them. Each interpreter makes a more or less persuasive account of what the Western is all about, but it seems very difficult to demonstrate that one interpretation is more correct than another except in the case of individual works. We can more or less arrive at a consensus about which lines of interpretation are relevant to Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, Jack Schaefer's *Shane* or Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man*,

but when it comes to the Western myth as a whole, which somehow includes these three very different works along with several thousand others, it is increasingly difficult to be specific about just what it means. The more versions of the Western myth our inquiry includes the more difficult it is to state what political or social attitudes if any are implied by its popularity. One solution to this problem is to take a broad structural approach to the analysis of the myth, seeking to define those basic elements and relations that are invariably present in all versions of the Western. This is the method I attempted in *The Six-Gun Mystique* where I tried to describe the basic opposition of pioneers and outlaw-savages mediated in some fashion by the hero which permeates all instances of the Western I am familiar with. However, while this did provide a useful framework for viewing the Western as a popular artistic genre, and also suggested some interesting speculations about the cultural meaning of the Western myth, the treatment remained at a high level of generality, and I was never fully satisfied that I had clearly established the cultural significance of the basic structural elements. In particular, I found it difficult to separate the cultural and artistic imperatives involved in the creation of Westerns, to be sure which themes were present because they embodied important cultural meanings and which were simply part of the conventional artistic structure.

In this paper, I propose to approach the inquiry into the cultural significance of the Western in a slightly different way by attempting to sort out the most important cultural themes of the Western as they relate to another genre of contemporaneous popularity. My basic assumption is that those elements or patterns which we find in two or more related but different popular genres reflect basic cultural themes. In other words, when a certain kind of character, or situation or pattern of action appears in more than one mythical structure, we have grounds for believing that this pattern is of basic cultural importance and not simply the reflection of the attitudes of a particular creator. I have chosen for this purpose the popular genre commonly known as the hard-boiled detective or private eye story.⁷

Many previous scholars and critics have noted the relationship between the hard-boiled detective and the Western hero. Lewis Jacobs, in his *Rise of the American Film*, comments on the gangster cycle of the 1930s—which is one type of the hard-boiled story—as an urban version of the Western. Robert Warshaw, in his two brilliant essays “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” and “The Westerner,” draws similar comparisons. But neither of these writers, nor anyone else so far as I am aware, has attempted to make a systematic comparison between these two genres as a basis for discovering the cultural themes which they may embody. That is the purpose of the following discussion. The results, as the reader will doubtless note, cannot be considered definitive. Even when one has established common patterns between two popular genres, it is difficult to be sure of their relationship to popular attitudes. Moreover, when two literary

genres have much in common, it seems likely that the artistic imperatives of a certain kind of story are as influential in shaping similarities in character and theme as the expression of cultural attitudes. Thus, the results of our comparison remain in the area of the speculative and the possible. Nonetheless, I would argue that there are enough differences between the hard-boiled detective story and the Western to suggest that the similarities are at least in part the result of a cultural need to represent the same fantasy in different garb. In addition, there is much to be said for the point that when a culture creates and consumes so much literary material of the same fundamental sort, it is expressing something about itself. Tentative as they are, the results of this comparison suggest the existence of a tradition in American popular culture which is worth further investigation.

At first glance, there are a number of striking differences between the hard-boiled detective story and the Western. For example, the setting of the two genres is almost antithetical. The Western takes place on the edge of the wilderness or in a frontier settlement and with the exception of a distinctive subgenre in the present time—such films as *Lonely Are the Brave*, *The Misfits* and *Bad Day at Black Rock*—represents a historic moment in the past. The private-eye genre is almost always set in the city and takes place in the present. In line with this difference in setting, the cast of characters in the two story types seems at first to bear little relationship to one another. The Western centers upon the sort of people likely to be found in the rural West: ranchers, small-town merchants and farmers, a banker, possibly a doctor and a newspaper editor, the sheriff, the schoolmarm, the dancehall girl, the boys down at the saloon and, of course, a complement of outlaws or Indians to generate the excitement and danger of the plot. The hard-boiled detective, on the other hand, typically has to thread his way through the manifold social levels and complexities of a modern city: rich businessmen, mobsters and their gangs, the district attorney and the police, the middle-class and, sometimes, bejewelled glamour girls and women of the night. For example, within the first few chapters of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* private investigator Philip Marlowe encounters the millionaire General Sternwood and his two wild and beautiful daughters, a pornographer named Arthur Gwynn Geiger, a cheap hoodlum and his moll, a seductive bookstore salesgirl, an old friend from the district attorney's office and a miscellaneous cast of policemen and grifters. Such a variety of types is impossible in the simpler environment of the Western. The pattern of action also differs from genre to genre. The hard-boiled detective is, above all, involved in the investigation of a crime, and the climactic point in his story usually revolves around the unmasking of a criminal or a conspiracy, while the Western is generally a tale of conflict—between townspeople and outlaws, ranchers and rustlers, cattlemen and farmers, or pioneers and Indians—leading to a shootout between the hero and the antagonist which resolves the conflict, usually through the destruction of

the antagonist. Beyond these contrasts in setting, character and action, the Western and hard-boiled detective genres have innumerable differences in symbolic detail: horses vs. cars; six-shooters and winchesters vs. .45 automatics and tommy guns; boots, spurs and chaps vs. business suits; smoke signals vs. telephones, etc. Finally, there is frequently a contrast in narrative structure between these two genres. The hard-boiled story is usually a first-person narrative, told to us by the detective-hero, while the Western almost never adopts this form of story-telling.

Underneath these many differences, however, there are certain fundamental patterns which the Western and hard-boiled detective stories have in common, which, if our initial assumption is correct, embody important American cultural themes. First of all, the two heroes have very similar characteristics. Each is a skilled professional man of violence, and, while the hard-boiled detective story ends less often in a shoot-out than the Western, the hero is always prepared for this eventuality. However reluctant he may be to use them, he is skilled with guns and fists. This connection between hard-boiled detective and Western heroes becomes even more obvious when we compare the American detective with his English counterparts like Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Lord Peter Wimsey or Mr. Campion, who possess great powers of inference and deduction, but are almost never called upon to engage in violent confrontations with guns. In America, even the relatively pacifistic Lew Archer knows how and when to handle a gun, while the more vehement and vengeful Mike Hammer usually climaxes his investigations by shooting the criminal. This readiness for violence is one important common characteristic of hard-boiled detective and Western heroes, but they also share another aspect of their persona: reluctance to use their skills in violence, which is often related to a sense of ambiguity about their involvement in the situation in which they find themselves. These are typically heroes who do not initiate their heroic actions. Instead, they are forced into them.⁸

The hero's reluctance seemingly results from two aspects of his situation. First, as a skillful man of violence his actions are likely to bring about someone's death. Consequently, his involvements cannot be entered into lightly. Secondly, the hero has a penchant for becoming committed to other persons in such a deep emotional and moral fashion that his actions not only affect the lives of others, but have a deep impact on himself. The model of these circumstances is the situation of Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. Sam is initially drawn into the case when a woman asks him to investigate the disappearance of her supposedly missing, but actually fictitious sister. This has become a favorite opening for the hard-boiled detective story. For example, the recent film *Chinatown* begins when a woman impersonating the wife of an important Los Angeles official asks the detective to secure evidence of the official's supposed liaison with a younger woman. As in the case of Sam Spade, this initial mission is purely a matter of business for the detective. He has no per-

sonal interest or concern in the outcome of the case, except as a matter of doing his job. However, this apparently insignificant initial mission is soon revealed to be a cover for much more serious and dangerous complications which gradually draw the detective into a web of emotional and moral commitments. Sam Spade finds himself falling in love with the woman whom he must, in the end, expose as a vicious killer. Something of the same sort happens to Polanski's J. J. Gittes as he moves from a purely businesslike connection with the case to a deeply personal involvement with his client. The same sort of commitment typically occurs in the case of hard-boiled heroes as different as Philip Marlowe and Mike Hammer.

This is one of the structural features which most sharply differentiates the American hard-boiled hero from the English ratiocinative detective protagonist. Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Dr. Gideon Fell who typify this brand of detective story generally retain a rather cool detachment from their clients, focusing their energies on the unravelling of intricate puzzles through inference and deduction from clues. The private eye, on the other hand, either becomes more personally interested in the crime or has such an interest from the very beginning. In Mickey Spillane's *I, the Jury* one of the detective's friends is murdered while Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* begins with a friend as one of the prime suspects. In this respect, the private eye resembles the Western hero much more than the classical detective. Though the Westerner is only tangentially involved in detection, he is characteristically caught up in a violent action through personal involvement that he cannot escape. One of the common motives ascribed to Western heroes is revenge. Just as Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer sets out to avenge the murder of a close friend, John Ford's Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine* accepts the job of marshal in Tombstone in order to avenge the murder of his younger brother. In other instances, like Jack Schaefer's *Shane* or Anthony Mann's *The Far Country*, the hero is reluctantly drawn into violence to protect a group of people for whom he feels a moral responsibility.

Whatever the specific motives may be, and these can range from a desire for revenge to a feeling of moral obligation toward a particular group or community, the hard-boiled and Western heroes are usually characterized as having a personal code of morality which transcends both the written law and the conventional morality of society. This code appears to be both a matter of style and of moral behavior. In terms of style, the most obvious similarity between Westerner and private eye is their laconic, understated and tough manner of speech. These heroes are men of few words. Above all, they rarely attempt to justify or explain in words the morality of their actions, as if prepared to stand or fall by actions alone. Or to put it another way, these heroes are so unwilling to submit their behavior to the judgment of others that they refuse to give any explanation or justification for what they do. Only those who themselves participate in the code really understand why the hero does what

he does, and these do not need to put it into words. Sometimes, on climactic occasions, the hero is forced to explain himself, as when the heroine of Wister's *The Virginian* threatens to leave the hero forever if he fights the villain Trampas, or when Sam Spade feels he must explain to Brigid O'Shaughnessy why he is going to turn her into the police. But, even in these circumstances, the hero usually finds that words are not very satisfactory and finally resorts to gnomic generalization like "A man's got to do what a man's got to do," or "I won't play the sap for anybody."

Even when, as is generally the case with the hard-boiled detective genre, the story is told to us by the hero, we still retain the impression of a man of few words, who is willing to tell only the smallest portion of what he knows and feels. The narrative tells us with great precision what the detective does and where he goes and, in the case of skillful writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, is studded with humorous and lyrical observations about the people he encounters and the places he visits. But he rarely comments directly on his feelings, his motives and his moral judgments. Even Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, the crudest and most overtly moralistic of the private eyes, tends toward a style of tough, if garish, understatement, while in the case of more sophisticated writers like Raymond Chandler, the detective's narrative style holds so much back that we are often unclear through the middle of his stories just why he is carrying on his investigation in the way he is. No doubt this is partly a result of the need for mystification about the detective's inquiry which characterizes any mystery story, but in the hard-boiled story the enigma extends beyond keeping the reader in the dark about the facts of the crime to the point where he is also forced to guess at the motives and morality of the detective, a situation that rarely arises in the classical detective story.

Because the hero's code is so personal, it is difficult to analyze it into component elements. Like all heroic codes, it places strong emphasis on a concept of honor. Yet this is not the traditional aristocratic conception of honor, or the epic principle of glory, both of which require a social validation. For the epic hero it is of primary importance that his deeds become part of the legend of the tribe so that the memory of his glory will be preserved from generation to generation. For the aristocrat, honor involves preserving and adding to the greatness of his family name. However, hard-boiled and Western heroes are preeminently private persons, as is perhaps appropriate for the heroic archetype of a democratic society. They spring from no noble lineage, but are, in effect, self-made men. Instead of seeking publicity for their deeds, they seem more inclined to resent even the temporary local fame their acts inspire. Here we see another dimension of the laconic, tight-lipped style. Where the Homeric hero loves to tell of his feats of valor, this American figure seems to seek instead the deepest recesses of individual privacy. Like the Lone Ranger, once he has accomplished his mission, he prefers to ride off as quietly as possible. It should be noted, that in this, as in a number of other respects,

there are important differences between earlier and more recent avatars of the Western hero. Wister's Virginian parlays his heroic accomplishments into a position of importance in society, as do many other Western protagonists of the early twentieth century. However, since the development of the hard-boiled hero in the early thirties, the Western hero has become increasingly alienated from the society for whose sake he performs his deeds, just as the hard-boiled detective is more commonly criticized than applauded by the society in which he operates. Thus, the concept of honor espoused by hard-boiled detective and Western gunfighter is a very personal and private thing. He fights, as Robert Warshaw puts it, to maintain the purity of his image of himself, rather than to gain social prestige or status.⁹

Other aspects of the hard-boiled and Western hero's code include great physical courage and endurance as well as highly-developed skills in the use of guns and in hand-to-hand combat. These heroes are extremely tough and dangerous men, a toughness that they frequently manifest as much in their ability to endure physical punishment as to shoot quickly and with great accuracy. The hard-boiled detective is knocked out and beaten up regularly before he arrives at the solution to the mystery. Similarly, a bruising fist fight is almost *de rigeur* for the Western hero, though he usually accomplishes the final shootout through his skill at the fast draw. In fact, it has become increasingly common in Westerns to subject the hero to an extended ordeal and even, on occasion, a considerable humiliation, before he finally defeats his antagonists. The tough-guy hero, then, must always be prepared for violence, because this is what he expects of his world.

The hero's code cannot be considered in complete isolation from the world which he inhabits. We noted earlier that the Western and hard-boiled detective genres had quite different settings, one usually taking place in the contemporary city and the other on a past frontier. However, beneath the surface these settings have two fundamental characteristics in common. They are on the edge of anarchy, and within their societies, legitimate authority tends to be weak and corrupt. The wildness of the Western town is obvious enough, since it is typically on the edge of a wilderness where there is nothing but savage Indians and outlaws. At any time an Indian attack, an outlaw raid or a gunfight down at the saloon may erupt and it is far from certain that law and legitimate social authority will suffice to restore order and bring about justice. This is the conventional Western situation which *Blazing Saddles* burlesques because it is the archetypal moment of our Western fantasies. But essentially the same situation exists in the hard-boiled detective story despite its more recent urban setting. For the hard-boiled detective confronts a situation in which as, Raymond Chandler puts it:

Gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities . . . a world where . . . the mayor of your town may have condoned

murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising.¹⁰

For Indians and outlaws the hard-boiled detective story substitutes gangsters; for the frontier, the dark and dangerous streets where no man or woman can go in safety. Legitimate social authority is even more obviously weak and corrupt in the typical hard-boiled detective story, for it usually turns out that the rich and respectable pillars of society are implicated with the criminal underworld, while in relation to this corrupt alliance of wealth and criminal power, the police and the courts are either weakly incompetent or actively on the take. In Westerns this corrupt alliance is sometimes represented as a tie between an overbearing and tyrannical rancher who hires outlaws to run out the homesteaders, between a greedy Indian agent and a group of militant warriors, or between a dishonest banker or railroad tycoon who uses hired killers to take away an honest farmer's land. Occasionally, as in *High Noon*, the entire town is too cowardly or avaricious to confront the outlaw gang. In other cases, there is a basic conflict between the good townspeople and the saloon crowd who favor a wide-open and lawless society. But despite these variations, the Western town and the city of the hard-boiled detective story are places of lawlessness, violence and inadequate social authority. Indeed, the kinship between the two genres was clear from the very beginning of the hard-boiled detective story, since Dashiell Hammett's first major hard-boiled novel, *Red Harvest* was actually set in a Western city not far removed in time from its days as a frontier mining settlement.¹¹ Moreover, in terms of the characterization of the hero and the portrayal of the weakness and corruption of social authority, the Western and the hard-boiled detective story have been growing more similar in recent decades. In his style and manner, in his cynicism and the moral ambiguity of his conduct, the western hero played by Clint Eastwood in so many recent films bears a far greater resemblance to Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade than he does to Tom Mix and W. S. Hart.

Against the lurid background of a savage and corrupt society, the hero's code stands out as a beacon of disinterested morality. Because of his readiness for violence, his skepticism and his unwillingness to play the sap for anybody, the hard-boiled hero is a figure capable of moving freely "down these mean streets" and surviving.¹² Yet as a man with a profoundly personal sense of honor and feeling of obligation to his role, this figure is never content with remaining a mere survivor. Reluctantly, but inexorably, he finds himself drawn into the quest for justice.

When the hero becomes committed to the cause of some other individual or group, the problem of his moral relationship to his code and to society becomes more complex and ambiguous. Because society is presented as wild and corrupt, its law and police machinery are at best inadequate and at worst unjust. The hero's code, however, rests primarily on a personal sense of honor and rightness which is outside both law and

conventional morality and, being primarily concerned with the individual's own image, does not contain a clear conception of the social virtue of justice. Thus, the hero appears in the rather paradoxical position of one who acts outside the law in order, supposedly, to more fully uphold it by bringing a just retribution to those society is unable to expose and punish. This paradoxical and ambiguous act—the stepping outside of the law in order to make manifest a more perfect justice—is, I should say, the central myth shared by the Western and hard-boiled detective genres, and, as such, suggests the existence of deep-lying moral and cultural patterns in American society.

One of the most striking things to me about this myth of the hard-boiled, bitter and reluctant hero moving through a corrupt and chaotic society is the degree to which it seems, at first, to be at odds with the generally optimistic, moralistic and progressive tone of the mainstream of American popular culture. Where do Sam Spade, Mike Hammer and Shane fit in the procession of Horatio Algerish self-made men of nineteenth century popular novels and plays, or the noble, dedicated and problem-solving doctors, lawyers and teachers who provide much of what passes for heroic action on our television screens? How does the corrupt and decaying society of the hard-boiled hero relate to that sense of the “smiling aspects of life” and the faith in progressive individual and collective betterment which seemingly characterized the popular vision of America at least until the 1960's? Of course, scholars like Leslie Fiedler have long argued that the mainstream of American literary creation has been more dominated by a pervasive gothic pessimism and an overpowering sense of evil than by optimism and a sense of boundless American potentiality for good.¹³ Still earlier, D. H. Lawrence argued from his reading of Cooper that the true American soul was not the dauntless civilization-bringing pioneer but a bitter, alienated hunter—“hard, stoic, isolate, and a killer.”¹⁴ But such a vision of America has seemed more characteristic of major writers like Hawthorne and Melville or of alienated intellectuals such as Henry Adams than of our popular mythology.

It is possible that the hard-boiled detective and the more recent Western gunfighter represent something new in American popular mythology. The hard-boiled detective story, the gangster saga and the new tougher style of Western hero exemplified by the gunfighters of the 1940's and 1950's developed around the time of the depression and World War II. If, as most historians believe, the depression created large-scale disillusion and skepticism about American society, while World War II and the atomic bomb generated a still deeper global sense of insecurity and anxiety, it probably makes sense to see in the hard-boiled protagonist a collective fantasy of a heroic figure who is defined by the world of violence, corruption and anarchy he inhabits, capable not only of personal survival but of imposing at least a modicum of his sense of rightness and order on that world. Thus, one might see the emergence of the hard-boiled hero as the adaptation into popular formulas of the more ambigu-

ous vision of the world developed earlier by writers in the pessimistic and critical literary tradition of naturalism. That the early stories of Hemingway seem to be one major source of the style and ethos of the hard-boiled detective writers does argue for this view, suggesting that with the impact of depression and war, the more despairing naturalistic view of life so brilliantly articulated by Hemingway came to seem more plausible and exciting to the general public than the optimistic religious and moralistic vision which characterized most nineteenth century popular genres.

Yet the special power of the hard-boiled hero may also depend on deeper sources in the American past than the particular anxieties and doubts of the twentieth century. The theme of the violent hero and the quest for salvation through violence certainly reaches back through American history to the seventeenth century myths of Indian captivity. As Richard Slotkin has recently demonstrated in *Regeneration through Violence*,¹⁵ the sense of an evil and corrupt culture (the Indians) tempting the individual to throw over the austere morality of his code (Christian civilization) was a threat felt so deeply and ambiguously in the Puritan imagination that it could be resolved only in fantasies, or actualities, of destructive violence. Perhaps the deepest source of the twentieth century fantasy of the hard-boiled detective lies in the Puritan sense of pervasive evil to be overcome only by the most sustained and austere self-discipline, and, in the final sense, by an act of violence. In this connection, the Puritan's extreme embodiment, or perhaps perversion would be a better word, was in the act of detection, both in sniffing out his own sins and in the hunting and destruction of witches, which might be viewed as one historical prototype of the hard-boiled detective story. Like Sam Spade, such witchhunters as Cotton Mather ruthlessly pursued the tiniest clues until they had uncovered and proven the guilt of the evil women who had become the chief source of sin through their trafficking with the devil. Many of the most striking hard-boiled villainesses—Brigid O'Shaughnessy of *The Maltese Falcon*, Carmen Sternwood of *The Big Sleep* and Charlotte Manning of *I, the Jury*, for example—have a witch-like aura and must be captured or destroyed by the detective to prevent the corruption of others.¹⁶ Moreover, the witch hunt situation also contains in embryo another social theme of the hard-boiled hero saga—the failure of a secularized law to cope with pervasive evil and corruption. In the Puritan community in its earlier phases, moral, religious and secular law were one and the same. In the twentieth century Western and hard-boiled detective story, this is, of course, not the case. The secular law has become separated from the moral law and the function of the detective or gunfighter is to enforce the moral law in the face of the weakness and corruption of the secular law. The difficulty of moralizing the law is one major source of the isolation, loneliness and frustration of the hard-boiled hero and in this, he differs from the witchhunter, who, like the vigilante, was not a lone individual but the agent of an aroused community.

Possibly, then, the Puritan witchhunter was the first example of that

image of the ruthless pursuer of transcendent crimes who would later develop into the hard-boiled private eye and the gunfighter. In any case as this figure developed in the nineteenth century, he no longer had the explicit religious overtones of the witchhunter. Cooper's Leatherstocking and the Daniel Boone legends on which he was based added a number of new dimensions to the conception of an American hero. The Leatherstocking hero was more completely separated from society; he was of obscure origins; and he possessed great skills in violence and woodcraft. One particularly haunting version of the Western hero—the Indian-hater who so fascinated major writers like Melville and Hawthorne—seems in his peculiar isolation and despair, as well as in the obsessive nature of his commitment to the destruction of evil, to be even closer in spirit to the contemporary hard-boiled detective than the more benevolent Leatherstocking.

By the later nineteenth century, the myth of the heroic tracker and hunter, able to move through a corrupt and chaotic world without being sullied by that corruption, had evidently become part of the legend of the American city, for the occasional memoirs of later nineteenth century police detectives often include characterizations of the detective which bear a striking resemblance to the later fictional figures of Hammett, Chandler and Spillane. For example, George S. McWatters, a New York police detective from 1858 to 1870 remarks in his memoirs that

[the detective] is as bad in these days as was his prototype, St. Paul in his, 'all things to all men' but like him he is defensible, in that his rogueries and villainies are practiced for other people's salvation or security; and aside from the fact that the detective, in his calling, is often degraded to a sort of watchman or ordinary policeman, to help the big thieves, the merchants, etc. protect themselves from the small thieves, who are not able to keep places of business . . . his calling is a very noble one, and a singularly blessed one, inasmuch as it is the only one which I call to mind, by which hypocrisy is elevated into a really useful and beneficent art.¹⁷

Such a statement seems to imply that the mythos of the heroic tough-guy, who is prepared to use all the dirty tricks and amoral and lawless skills he knows to accomplish justice in a corrupt society, was already well developed by the 1880s. I would speculate further that this hard-boiled ethos had very important cultural consequences at the end of the nineteenth century by providing a dramatic self-image for a number of the muckrakers. Lincoln Steffens, in particular, not only tells us that he learned his new view of the basic corruption of American society from his association with police detectives, but until his later conversion to socialism, Steffens' conception of the heroic muck-raking reporter seems to be another version of the lone hunter who prowls the mean streets of the corrupt city and immerses himself in its evil ways in order to expose the deeper crimes which the law prefers to ignore. It certainly seems no

accident that the world through which the fictional detectives of Hammett, Chandler and Spillane hunt their evil prey seems very close to the shameful cities of the muck-rakers with their corrupt alliances of business, politics and crime.

Thus, the particular resonance which the myth of the hard-boiled hero carries for our time, may well have an even deeper source than the special anxieties of the twentieth century. If, as I suspect, the hard-boiled hero, the gunfighter and their worlds of evil and corruption are contemporary versions of a myth of the isolated hero in a pervasively corrupt society, these images underline a strain of pessimism and despair in the American tradition which has been a part of our popular as well as intellectual culture. This strain is certainly a different one than the complex of ideology and feeling ordinarily associated with the popular vision of the American Dream and it suggests that there may have always been doubts about the American Dream among the public as well as among more sceptical intellectuals. Indeed, one of the most perceptive observers of American life in the early nineteenth century, de Tocqueville, gave a striking characterization of

that strange melancholy which often haunts the inhabitants of democratic countries in the midst of their abundance, and that disgust at life which sometimes seizes upon them in the midst of calm and easy circumstances. . . . In democratic times enjoyments are more intense than in the ages of aristocracy, and the number of those who partake in them is vastly larger; but, on the other hand, it must be admitted that man's hopes and desires are often blasted, the soul is more stricken and perturbed, and care itself more keen.¹⁸

Further analysis of these contemporary genres and their relation to earlier expressions of similar mythical patterns may reveal to us more precisely some of the ways in which Americans have tried to articulate and fantasize about feelings at odds with the public celebration of the American dream of continual social progress and self-improvement.

University of Chicago

footnotes

1. J. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1971), 110-113.
2. Every Western has its contingent of decent law-abiding citizens who eschew violence and depend on the law to secure justice. They are nice, but foolish, and they invariably need the violent hero. The same thing is true of the hard-boiled detective story. Even in the situation comedy, the kind of foolish terror which the good citizen feels when confronted with the law is a perennial source of comedy, as if those who accept the rule of law are somehow ridiculous. One discovers, I think, the same sort of attitude in the ambiguity which American parents so often demonstrate when confronted with that classic situation of the bullied child. Should the child be advised to use violence on his oppressor or to turn the other cheek or to seek justice either from his peers or an authority such as the teacher. Most parents seem to feel their child is a little foolish and even contemptuous if he refuses to "stand up," i.e. to use violence, in pursuit of his interests.

3. The *locus classicus* of this Western cliché is Owen Wister's *The Virginian* where the hero asks his genteel law-abiding schoolmarm sweetheart "Can't yo' see how it must be about a man?" *The Virginian* (1902). In the Houghton-Mifflin edition (Boston, 1968), 288.

4. It may also suggest that he is a little past his prime, though this is not necessarily the case, since parody and burlesque do not invariably indicate a loss of power in the object or figure being satirized. The Western hero was richly burlesqued by Bret Harte and Mark Twain in the later nineteenth century, long before he became one of the central figures of twentieth century film and television.

5. Some indication of the diversity of interpretations the Western myth has inspired can be found in Jack Nachbar, ed. *Focus on the Western* (Englewood Cliffs, N.Y., 1974).

6. Philip French, *Westerns* (New York, 1974), 28-42.

7. The hard-boiled detective story has not received as much attention as the Western until recently, but there are a number of useful studies including the essays on the hard-boiled genre in David Madden, ed., *Tough-Guy Writers of the Thirties* (Carbondale, Ill., 1968), George Grella, "Murder and the Mean Streets: The Hard-boiled Detective Novel," *Contemporaria*, I (March 1970), 6-15; John Paterson, "A Cosmic View of the Private Eye," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 36 (August 22, 1953) 7-8; Philip Durham, *Down These Mean Streets a Man Must Go* (Chapel Hill, 1966); William F. Nolan, *Dashiell Hammett: A Casebook* (Santa Barbara, California: McNally and Lofton, 1969); and most recently William Ruehlmann, *Saint with a Gun: The Unlawful American Private Eye* (New York, 1975). I have also profited from a recent University of Chicago doctoral dissertation on Ross Macdonald by Ms. Johnnine Hazard and from the essays by Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," Ross Macdonald, "The Writer as Detective Hero," and Dashiell Hammett, "Memoirs of a Private Detective" which have been reprinted in a number of places.

8. Some qualification of this generalization needs to be made. Spillane's Mike Hammer and his more recent descendants such as "The Enforcer," "The Destroyer" and "The Butcher" are far less reluctant with their violence than Philip Marlowe, Lew Archer and the Continental Op. Similarly, in the case of the Western, there are heroes with little of the gentleness and reluctance displayed by Gary Cooper in *The Virginian*, *Man of the West* and *High Noon*; Alan Ladd in *Shane*; James Stewart in *Destry Rides Again*, *The Man from Laramie* or *Winchester 73*. In general, the less sophisticated a version of the myth, the less ambiguity there is about the hero's violence. Undoubtedly, this reflects some difference in the level or segment of the public at which a particular version of the myth is directed. It probably also reflects differences in meaning of the myth for different subgroups within the culture but we need more information about the social and psychological makeup of audience groupings to deal adequately with these differences.

9. Robert Warshow, "The Westerner," in *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, N.Y., 1964), 89-106. Warshow also deals brilliantly with some of the central themes of the present essay: the hero's reluctance; the sense of melancholy and defeat that accompany his deeds; the peculiar concept of honor.

10. Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," in Howard Haycraft, ed., *The Art of the Mystery Story* (New York, 1946), 236.

11. The television series "Have Gun: Will Travel" was an interesting reversal of the *Red Harvest* situation. There, a Western hero showed all the characteristics of a hard-boiled detective. Still more recently, in the film *Coogan's Bluff* and its television spinoff "McCloud," a cowboy lawman is translated from the West into New York City where he encounters a typical hard-boiled social setting. Such variations suggest that the Western and the hard-boiled detective genre may evolve into some kind of a synthesis, though at the present time they still retain a fairly distinct generic differentiation.

12. The quotation is from Chandler's essay "The Simple Art of Murder."

13. Cf. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York, 1966).

14. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Garden City, N.Y., 1951), 72. The original hardcover edition was published by Viking in 1923.

15. (Middletown, Conn., 1973).

16. This figure of the *femme fatale* or bitch-villainess, so common to the hard-boiled detective story, rarely appears in the Western. This may reflect both a generic difference and a difference in mythic tradition which appeals to slightly different audiences.

17. George S. McWatters, *Knots Untied: Or Ways and By-Ways in the Hidden Life of an American Detective* (Hartford: Burns and Hyde, 1873) as quoted in an unpublished paper "Beneficent Roguery: The Detective in the Capitalist City," by John M. Reilly of the State University of New York at Albany, to whom I am indebted for this and other related quotations.

18. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1954) II, 147.