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"There Never Was a Man Like Shane!":

A Study of the Sensitive Cowboy Figure through Jack

Schaefer's *Shane*

Treball de Fi de Grau / BA dissertation

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Abstract

The genre of the American Western has long been defined by the figure of the cowboy and his characteristic rugged individualism. A solitary, stoic, and often violent protagonist who embodied the ideals of the frontier masculinity—the epitome of the American symbol and myth (Levmore and Nussbaum 2014). Despite this set of marked traits, Jack Schaefer's *Shane* (1949) presents a cowboy who does not follow this tradition completely. Though Shane possesses the strength, skill, and mysterious past characteristic of the Western hero, he exhibits a deep emotional sensibility and internal struggle that his emotionless predecessors lacked. Schaefer's titular character serves as a prime example of the heroic solitary male; his final act of heroism saves the homesteaders but also represents the defeat against his nature and a past that he attempted to leave behind (Wilkinson 2014). Unlike many other Western heroes who openly embrace the violence that follows justice, Shane is deeply reluctant to partake in it. He is the embodiment of the lone, idealized yet tragic hero, self-sacrificing but doomed to never truly belong anywhere.

The present dissertation aims to discuss the traditional portrayal of the cowboy hero and his characteristic masculinity within the Western genre and how *Shane* offers a compelling vision of the aforementioned figure, presenting a character whose solitude and avoidance of violence is a mark of strength, but also a product of a troubled past, leading to a sensitivity that sets him apart from the popular Western hero.

Keywords: Jack Schaefer, *Shane*, cowboy, Western, tradition, masculinity.

0. Introduction

The Western hero has largely been regarded as one of the most enduring and mythologized figures of American popular culture. Taking on various forms, from the gunslinger of dime novels to the honor-bound hero of Western literature and cinema, he has long embodied the ideals of rugged individualism and indisputable masculinity, as well as physical prowess and a personal code of justice often at odds with the local law. The masculinity and roughness that characterized him frequently signified that there would be little to no inner conflict or emotional vulnerability, since this could have been conceived as a weakness. These traits have been etched into the communal perception of the figure through the likes of popular and easily recognizable characters, like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood's roles in film, which heavily cemented the idea that the heroism of the cowboy had to always be performed through actions, not introspection.

It is within this long tradition that Jack Schaefer's *Shane* (1949) disregards the common misconception of emotional vulnerability being akin to weakness. Though the novel follows many of the conventions present in numerous previous works of the genre—the classic tale of the mysterious stranger who rides into town and becomes the protector of its defenseless people from the corrupt landowner trying to steal their property—, the way in which Shane's heroism is exhibited sets him apart from his predecessors. Far from the emotionally numb protagonist that dominated the Western, Schaefer is not afraid to show Shane's deep emotional conflict, hesitation, and ability to form meaningful human connections with those around him. His dynamics with the Starrett family reveal that he is a man shaped, as well as haunted, by violence. He is gentle, well-spoken, and polite, traits that were more often than not absent in previous protagonists but that are pivotal for the themes of the novel and Shane's character.

The present dissertation aims to explore Shane's divergence within the Western tradition and his relevance as a cowboy hero who is not defined by his skill with his gun, but by the inner turmoil that guides his moral compass and makes him avoid violence when it is possible. Schaefer dares to challenge the myth of the hero as an unemotional tool for justice, presenting instead a more human version of masculinity. To do this, the following sections will provide a brief contextualization of the traditional Western hero and how his myth was built, considering the historical background of the cowboy, his relevance regarding the myth of the frontier, and how this shaped what the Western hero would become. The following section deals with the figure of the cowboy in literature, paying attention to his figure was first introduced into it and his development through it. Next, the dissertation will delve into *Shane*, providing specific moments of the book where Shane's emotional turmoil and avoidance of violence are best perceived by the reader. After, the topics of violence and masculinity are discussed, as they are two of the main traits that characterize the Western hero, and where Shane differs from such. Lastly, a section is dedicated to the legacy of Schaefer's novel, providing three examples from film and videogame where Shane's influence is explicit or very direct. The entirety of this dissertation uses works by various scholars familiar with the American Western to support the arguments given, such as Richard Slotkin, John G. Cawelti, William W. Savage, and Henry Nash Smith, among others.

0.1. The origin of the myth: hero of the frontier

When discussing the figure of the cowboy, it is crucial to understand that the real life cattle worker identified as such had little in common with the cowboy hero of myth, as well as understand how such a poorly paid worker became the American icon he is now.

As Henry Nash Smith explains,

> American readers of the national magazines had long been familiar with Mexican *rancheros* and *vaqueros* in California and Texas, but the American hired man on horseback did not become a celebrated figure until the range industry spread northward from Texas over the Great Plains in the early 1870's. In this decade the term "herder" was as likely to be used as the classic name of "cowboy", and it usually called up the image of a semibarbarous laborer who lived a dull, monotonous life of hard fare and poor shelter. (Smith 109)

The frontier that had once been a defining characteristic of the American nation greatly contributed to the myth of the folk hero, as his conceptual birth was deeply rooted in it. This frontier, considered a meeting point between civilization and savagery, was a wild space of physical hardship where the values of rugged masculinity and self-reliance could be reinforced, and where the American character began to take shape. This aspect of American history largely contributed to the myth:

> (…) transportation didn't reach southwestward at the beginning, and most settlers with a Western glint in their eyes originally looked on the vast unpeopled plains as the Great American Desert, and therefore to be avoided.
>
> Into this enormous region, larger than all of the lands east of Mississippi, came riding the Texas cowboy (…). The forbidding desert (…) turned out not to be so forbidding after all when the right type of man, the cowboy, came along (…). (…) the cowboy had shown that this West had riches to plumb, fabulous wealth to yield to the hardy and adventurous, the sort of "risk-with-profit" that has always appealed to Americans. (Frantz and Choate 10-11)

In 1890, the United States Census of said year had declared that the frontier had ceased to exist. Based on demographic data, the frontier line had been defined as areas with a population density of fewer than two people per square mile, so by then, as settlers, railroads, and expanding towns had spread across the West, the distinct line of advancing settlement had essentially disappeared: "Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line" (qtd. in Turner 1). Three years later, in 1893, American historian Frederick Jackson Turner presented his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" before the American Historical Association, in which he formulated the "frontier hypothesis", which would become the single most influential interpretation of the American past. Turner defended

that the American frontier was the key force in shaping the country's character, institutions, and democratic values, thus distinguishing it from European nations, and argued that the continual westward expansion compelled settlers to adapt, innovate, and develop uniquely American traits, such as rugged individualism, self-reliance, and democratic egalitarianism ("The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization" 4). He considered the closing of the frontier, stating that America faced a turning point in its national development: "The frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history" (38). Therefore, when the frontier that had strengthened the country vanished, many Americans feared that the nation would be weakened in consequence (Moore, *Cow Boys* 233). It is at this point that the image of the historical cowboy as the brave man who tamed the frontier, driving his herds into the desert and proving that life could prosper there (Frantz and Choate 18), becomes highly relevant, as the traits Turner had considered to be deeply American corresponded with the characterization of what would become the popular Western hero:

> The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (37)

President Theodore Roosevelt played a major role in shaping the image of the cowboy and its heroization, as his efforts helped transform the historical laborer into the popular national hero: "Roosevelt promoted this cowboy ideal in many ways: he bought a ranch in Dakota Territory and often visited it, worked with cowboys while there, portrayed himself as a cowboy, and wrote articles about the cowboy as the embodiment of American values and a hero" (Stoeltje 50). He brought to the public the idea that cattlemen and cowboys were "virile specimens of masculinity Easterners would do well to emulate"

(Moore, *Cow Boys* 233), as they had shown endurance, stubbornness against defeat, and a strong desire for victory, which "go to make up the essential manliness of the American character" (233). As the frontier began to close in, the working cowboy turned into a spectacle, rather than a serious laborer: William "Buffalo Bill" Cody—who had also become a symbol of the Wild West, "for he had touched nearly every frontier of the Great Plains during his career, being a freighter, Indian scout, Indian fighter, soldier, buffalo hunter, and cowboy" (Frantz and Choate 122)—was also highly responsible for presenting the figure of the cowboy in a positive light through his Wild West shows, in which he narrated marvelous stories of his exploits and adventures (many of which also became dime novels, with him as their protagonist), and later adapted into a performance akin to those of traveling circuses that were popular at the time. The biggest reason for his success was that he "tapped into white middle-class anxieties about the influx of immigrants, the end of the frontier, and the decline of masculinity by presenting an image of unique American white male virility existing in the West" (Moore, *Cow Boys* 234).

0.2. The cowboy in literature

One of the earliest instances of the Western hero (not yet identified as a cowboy) in literature came from the *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1850), written by James Fenimore Cooper, the hero of which was Natty Bumppo—also known as Hawkeye—, a symbol of the frontier hero who stands between the clashing worlds of civilization and savagery and adopts a code of honor rooted in personal morality rather than law (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 16). After Cooper, the figure of the Western hero became a symbol of anarchic freedom, leaving realism behind to embrace idealization. Following the rise of the Beadle Dime Novels—a series of cheap paperbacks published by Erastus and Irwin Beadle in 1860—some of the most notorious characters of this time were popularly known frontier

personalities, such as Kit Carson, Calamity Jane, and Deadwood Dick, who embodied the principle of the self-made man, characteristic of the Western hero:

> He possesses to a high degree such characteristic skills as riding and shooting; and that at the same time he is eligible for romantic attachments. (…) Such a hero, presumably humble in his origins and without a formal education or inherited wealth, "confirmed Americans in the traditional belief that obstacles were to be overcome by the courageous, virile, and determined stand of the individual as an individual." (Smith 100)

The Beadle dime novels had a crucial positive impact on the figure of the cowboy, as they "promoted widespread acceptance in an incredibly brief time" (Frantz and Choate 145), which helped improve his public image, considering that before being celebrated as the brave frontiersman, the reputation of the cowboy was not the best, and his character was often associated with recklessness (Savage 19) and a generally uncivilized demeanor. He became the main figure of the Western literary genre when William C. Patten, a member of the Beadle and Adams publishing house, began writing about him with great interest, placing the focus on him in his literary stories: "Patten's men were men of action, risking their necks in turning stampedes and resisting theft in chasing rustlers. They were men of honor and integrity, nature's noblemen" (Fantz and Choate 147).

It was not until author Owen Wister published *The Virginian* (1902) that the American cowboy gained recognition from Eastern readers. The novel, considered "the first Western novel to be accepted seriously" (Frantz and Choate 12) and "commonly viewed as a genesis text of the genre" (Ulmer 80), signified an elevation for the status of the cowboy in fiction, as "for most long-time readers of the Western story, the Virginian has become the final apotheosis of the range rider" (Frantz and Choate 158). The protagonist of Wister's book possessed the traits that defined the traditional hero; he was virile, healthy, honest, gentle, fun-loving and gallant. He presented a positive image of

the cowboy, for he was a gentleman and a defender of women, representative of masculine ideals and restraint.

Franz and Choate very rightfully remark that "Among all the frontier children of the Old West, the cowboy proved the most irresistible, and it is this folk character that fiction writers have enshrined in more pages of print than any other figure in the history of Anglo-American folk life on this side of the Atlantic" (70). Moore remarks that cowboys, who read dime novels and participated in Wild West shows, defended the image of the mythic cowboy that was taking shape: "(…) by the 1920s, when most cowboys began writing their memoirs, their defense was to embrace the myth of the dime novel heroic and genteel cowboy and claim it as reality, ironically glorifying middle-class ideals of masculinity in the process" (*Cow Boys* 232).

1. The Western hero archetype

William Savage presents a short yet precise description of the traditional cowboy hero: "He represents rugged individualism in beer commercials, unadorned masculinity in cigarette advertising, and ultimate heroism in fiction and film" (3-4). The cowboy has certainly become a staple of North American folklore, to the point of becoming an immortal myth and the image of peak American masculinity. In film, where he was most widely represented and popularized, and where "[the motion picture industry] exploited him and sharpened the myth to a fine point" (Munden 110), characters such as the ones often played by actors John Wayne and Clint Eastwood became very representative of the Western protagonist archetype, presenting traits such as rugged individualism, imposing masculinity, and the representation of frontier values: "When John Wayne rides into town, the film's audience knows to expect rugged individualism rather than legal arguments or other niceties. For many years, the iconic American man was self-sufficient, at home on

the frontier, and more often than not a man of few words" (Levmore and Nussbaum 1).

The traditional portrayal of the cowboy hero very often included stoicism, mastery over

a wide range of practical skills, remarkable marksmanship, and a general predilection to

aid those less fortunate. Usually, the stories in which the Western hero appeared followed

a set of rules:

> Throughout the 1920's, 1930's, and 1940's, the cowboy hero with his six-shooter prominently displayed and often used would save the heroine's ranch from the crooked foreman, would see that the little people got the water they were entitled to, would establish the innocence of the heroine's uncle, would hunt down the murderer of his father, or would rescue the heroine from runaway horses, from stagecoaches stalled in flooded streams, and from various and sundry evil men. More often than not he would also marry the heroine. (Boatright 136)

Frantz and Choate offer a brief description of the fictional cowboy, pointing out

many of the traits seen in Western media:

> Ideally the American cowboy was a superb horseman, which as a fact he was; an expert of the fast draw and the use of a Colt revolver, which he might have been; a dead shot with a Winchester; brave beyond question; always on the side of justice, even if that justice be a bit stern at times; the defender of virtuous women; the implacable foe of the Indian; and a man to whom honor and integrity came naturally. As such he has been depicted in fiction (…). (72)

Kenneth J. Munden's own explanation of the traits that conformed him heavily agrees

with the previous one. Both indicate his skilled horse-riding, his expertise with the gun,

his braveness, his role as protector of women, enforcer of the law, as well as his hostility

towards Native Americans. He was honorable, so any character who opposed him

immediately became the "bad man" (112). Similarly, Jacqueline Moore's view of him

accentuates the freedom characteristic of his mythical image, putting emphasis on the fact

that it only applied to the fictional character, since the same could not be said about the

historical worker, who was often exploited.

> The masculine cowboy hero depicted in film and literature is usually a figure straddling the frontier between civilization and the wilderness, sometimes siding with the townspeople against the wilderness and sometimes with the equally mythical noble Indian savage against civilization. Whether he accepts or rejects white society, his manhood is clear, and often superior to those of the so-called respectable men around him. In real life, the historical cowboys in the early cattle

industry did not conform to movie cowboy masculinity, nor did their employers and the surrounding townspeople share this image of the manly cowboy.

> The iconic cowboy is independent, unaffected by society's suffocating rules and etiquette; free to go where he wants, when he wants; and answers to no man but himself. His is a life of high adventure on the trail, fighting off Indians and desperadoes, performing physically daring feats on a daily basis, and protecting women and children from harm. (*Cow Boys* 13, 14)

With these descriptions, one can formulate a conclusive description of the traditional Western hero and the traits that characterized him. Firstly, he was a horseman of high skill, free to go wherever he pleased and therefore independent. He is adventurous, and not a stranger to shootouts, in which he displays great mastery over his gun. More often than not, said confrontation would be against a Native American enemy, who would oppose the virtues of the hero. Violence against the enemy performed by the hero is always justified, considered deserving and just. He is undoubtedly manly, a representative of rugged individualism, frontier values, and a protector of children and virtuous women.

2. *Shane*

When Jack Schaefer wrote *Shane* in 1949, which was first titled *Rider from Nowhere* in 1946, published in three parts in the *Argosy* magazine, and later expanded into a novel, the Western genre was highly relevant in both literature and film. John Wayne was very popular during this time, reinforcing the collective ideal of the rough and solitary man-of-action through cinema. It seems curious, then, that Schaefer would step away from the tradition and write his leading protagonist to have such a clashing personality, with Shane dealing more with restraint and self-sacrifice rather than American frontier values and bravado.

Using the 1892 Johnson County War in Wyoming as background, which pitted settlers against cattle ranchers, *Shane* is set in 1889 and is narrated by young Bob Starrett, son of settler Joe Starrett and his wife Marian Starrett, who own a farm in the

aforementioned state. The summer of that year, a mysterious outsider named Shane, traveling alone, rides into their valley. He ends up befriending the family and staying to work as a farmhand for Joe. Shane finds himself in the middle of the settlers' dispute with Luke Fletcher, a local cattle driver who wants to expand his herd on the land of the homesteaders. In order to discourage them from protecting their place, Fletcher uses intimidation and violence; the reader learns soon enough that the pervious farmhand Joe had hired had been beaten up and forced to flee by Fletcher's boys. Inevitably, Shane is directly involved in the conflict, and must go back to his old gunslinging ways to protect the family that had taken him in. It is obvious that he had tried to leave his violent past behind, and yet Shane wields his gun one last time to dispose of the dangerous threat that Fletcher's hired gun Wilson was. After a final showdown, in which he kills both Fletcher and Wilson, Shane, wounded, rides out of the valley in the same fashion he had come, having failed to defeat his own violent nature and forced to part from the tranquil life he had momentarily experienced with the Starretts, while Bob cries for him, unable to do anything other than simply watch him go. Years after its publication, in 1953, American director George Stevens adapted the novel into film, which will be discussed in a later section.

Shane is first introduced to the reader as a lone wanderer, intimidating yet polite. Bob Starrett's narration highly influences the way Shane is perceived, as he retells a series of events that happened during his childhood. From the first moment, Shane strikes the reader as a different kind of lone rider, who becomes a moral role model for the boy: "Seen from the first through the worshiping eyes of the boy [Bob], he is instantly recognizable as a special man, a hero. (…) The impression of latent gentility is confirmed by the quiet courtesy of his speech, the smoothness of his manners" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 397). One of his most striking characteristics is that he does not carry his gun as every

other cowboy used to do, this serving as a first instance to separate him from the average Western protagonist and signifying a willing avoidance of violence. The first time the reader is introduced to this aspect of him takes place in chapter II, when the trader Jake Ledyard attempts to sell an overpriced cultivator to Joe Starrett. Shane mentions that he had seen a cultivator for a much lower price, to which Ledyard responds, "Did anyone ask you to push in on this?" (Schaefer 23). Shane remains put, answers "No, (...) I reckon no one did", and does not say anything else. A greater insolence comes later, when Ledyard lashes out in anger, "Starrett! Are you going to stand there and let that—that tramp nobody knows about call me a liar? Are you going to take his word over mine? Look at him! Look at his clothes! He's just a cheap, tin-horn—" (Schaefer 24). Shane's reaction is remarkable:

> He was standing erect, his hands clenched at his sides, his eyes boring at Ledyard, his whole body alert and alive in the leaping instant. You felt without knowing how that each teetering second could bring a burst of indescribable deadliness. Then the tension passed, fading in the empty silence. Shane's eyes lost their sharp focus on Ledyard and it seemed to me that reflected in them was some pain deep within him. (Schaefer 25)

Not only does he not resort to violence in a situation where the traditional cowboy would have struck back, but he becomes aware of his seemingly unwilling reaction and quickly puts an end to it, reflecting an internal struggle tied to aggression that the reader constantly gets glimpses of throughout the book. Jesse Gerlach Ulmer has found significance in the events that follow: once Ledyard is out of scene, Shane grabs an axe and begins chopping away at the old stump in the Starrett's farm. At first, this could be understood as Shane simply repaying the family for their hospitality, as he himself says "A man has to pay his debts" (Schaefer 27). However, Ulmer has theorized that "the balance has to do with much deeper 'debts' accrued in a violent, traumatic past" (84). Gordon L. Iseminger, too, has pointed out a hidden meaning in the figure of the stump, arguing that its roots, stubborn and disruptive, symbolize "the difficulty Shane faces when trying to cut himself off from

his past" (qtd. in Ulmer 84). In Ulmer's words, "(…) for Shane, clearing the stump is a form of sublimation, a redirection of violent, socially unproductive energy into a more positive expression of masculine behavior" (84). It is not that violence is completely nonexistent in Shane—it is part of his being, of his very nature, but it is his continuous willing effort to suppress it that makes his characterization unique.

A similar occurrence happens in chapter VI, during the brief confrontation with Chris at the saloon. Upon being insulted ("This farmer drinks whisky! I didn't think these plough-pushing dirt-grubbers drank anything stronger than soda pop!" Schaefer 72), Shane simply acknowledges it in a calm manner ("Some of us do. (...) You've had your fun and it's mighty young fun. Now run home and tell Fletcher to send a grown-up man next time"), with the only way he acts on it being leaving the saloon with a soda pop. After this, one of the characters observes that "(…) He wasn't afraid of Chris. He was afraid of himself" (Schaefer 74). By now, the reader is aware of the fact that Shane is dangerous. Bob says so himself in chapter II:

> There were sharp hidden hardnesses in [Shane]. But these were not for us. He was dangerous as mother had said. But not to us as father too had said. He was a man like father in whom a boy could believe in the simple knowing that what was beyond comprehension was still clean and solid and right. (Schaefer 26)

Despite this reality, Bob is able to see that Shane is "clean and solid and right". One could argue that this is due to Bob being a child and thus being innocent, or perhaps the real significance lies in the fact that Shane's goodness and his heroic role are so undeniable that even an inexperienced child can come to such a conclusion. In the words of Joe Starrett, "I don't think you ever had a safer man in your house" (Schaefer 15).

Shane adopts the role of protector when he later chooses to partake in the violence he was trying to avoid, upon discovering that his avoidance has brought shame to Joe's name ("He did not mind what they thought of him (...) But he did care what they thought

of father" Schaefer 78). Showing resolution and a driven attitude, he goes straight to Chris

and braces for the fight. When another character retells the scene, a peculiar aspect comes

to light; after the altercation, "a sort of sadness (...) crept over him and held him" (Schaefer

84), and so Shane "tenderly cleared the blood from [Chris's] face. He felt carefully along

the broken arm and nodded to himself at what he felt". His gentleness prevails above all,

to the point of being able to see the good in Chris with eyes unclouded by hate ("Take

right good care of him. He has the makings of a good man" Schaefer 84). With this scene,

the novel not only focuses on Shane's reluctance to participate in violence, but on the

emotional toll it takes on him after as well—an emotional characteristic that one would

not find in the traditional Western hero. Anytime he is forced into aggressiveness by an

exterior force, Schaefer makes sure to keep the reader aware of the fact that Shane does

not enjoy it at all, and rather, it torments him. Marian Starrett is highly aware of this:

"Look what you've done just because you got him to stay on here and get mixed up in

this trouble with Fletcher! (...) I don't mean what you've done to Chris. I mean what

you've done to Shane" (Schaefer 85).

Through these significant moments, it becomes clear that Shane's character

diverges from the traditional Western protagonist, especially in regard to violence. Shane

not only enters the story unarmed, but he also willingly avoids violence until it becomes

necessary. It is significant to observe that the fictional violence of the Western was

separated into two kinds:

> In the traditional Western a very strong distinction was made between good violence
> (perpetrated by the hero) and bad violence (that used by the villains in pursuit of
> their evil aims). Moreover, the hero was usually portrayed as very reluctant to enter
> into violence. Of course, once he did, his skill in the shootout was glorified as not
> only an appropriate punishment for the villain but as the apotheosis of the hero's
> unique identity. (Cawelti 15-16)

Therefore, even when the heroic violence that Shane does exert would be considered

justified by both the rest of characters in the novel and the reader, Shane demonstrates

guilt and sadness, setting him apart from the traditional hero that would merely execute it and move on. The quotation above strongly resonates with Shane, as he too attempts to avoid violence, but when inevitably forced into it, he shows remarkable marksmanship and good fighting skills. The idea that violence is "part of the hero's unique identity" also comes in play: Forrest G. Robinson has described Shane as "a kind of bomb", who is due to explode sooner or later. This takes place during the second confrontation in the saloon, when Shane fights various men at once:

> He was standing there, straight and superb, the blood on his face bright like a badge, and he was laughing.
>
> It was a soft laugh, soft and gentle, not in amusement at Red Marlin or any single thing, but in the joy of being alive and released from long discipline and answering the urge in mind and body. The lithe power in him, so different from father's sheer strength, was singing in every fibre of him. (Schaefer 100)

Robinson considers this moment to be quite significant, explaining that "Here we are witness to the essential Shane, the man for whom it is natural and therefore desirable to break free of all restraints into an exuberant display of awesome physical power" (76). Once again, the reader is able to see that violence is ingrained into Shane's being and is a natural instinct of his. Now the previous quote "He was afraid of himself" makes much more sense, as it has been revealed what he is capable of when pressured enough, portraying a clear inner conflict between restraint and instinct:

> Shane is deeply divided. His pleasure in violence is countered by sadness and shame; his predatory instinct is in tension with an aversion to the consequences of struggle. Shane gives signs of an awareness of the contradiction within himself, and takes the view that is it rooted in the fixed foundation of his make-up. (Robinson 76)

Richard Slotkin has found great significance in the confrontation between Shane and Wilson, as the destiny of the valley comes down to this final showdown between two professionals who never belonged to either side of the dispute and were instead brought into it.

> Those who have the power to act have the responsibility to act, perhaps in the name of the community but if need be against the will of the community. Starrett himself acts on that principle when he puts himself ahead of the community and insists on going alone to confront Wilson. But Shane, knowing that Starrett cannot hope to beat Wilson, substitutes his own will for Starrett's and takes the burden of Starrett's fight on himself. (…) Once again the hero breaks the law (the code of fair play) and risks his standing with the community or family (…) in order to meet the responsibilities of the pre-eminently powerful man. (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 399)

Slotkin has also pointed out the importance of Shane's departure, arguing that the death of the antagonists "are sanctioned as acts of sacrifice, because Shane does not stay to enjoy the fruits of triumph" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 399). Indeed, he not only sacrifices the oppressors but also sacrifices himself for the newfound harmony of the valley to remain undisturbed. Shane's sacrifice reaches the aspect of love as well, since it is heavily implied that Marian and Shane have fallen in love ("… just as he always regarded her with a tenderness in his eyes he had for no one else" Schaefer 88), though this desire is never consummated and thus serves to reinforce the hero's nobility—though the affection is mutual, Shane deliberately chooses not to pursue Marian romantically, keeping their relationship chaste and respectful, unlike any other Western where the main hero would end up together with the female character in a common display of masculinity. In Martin Nussbaum's words, "the Western hero is a vanishing symbol of individualism in an age of togetherness and conformity" (qtd. in Cawelti 32); one could argue that it is because of this individualism characteristic of the hero that Shane is unable to find his place within the familial circle. The trait, usually seen as empowering for the Western protagonist, becomes tragic, dooming the self-sacrificing protector to abandon the community he fought for and helped restore, as he is painfully aware of his divided, unbeatable nature, an everlasting inner conflict between restraint and natural urges ("A man is what he is, Bob, and there's no breaking the mould. I tried that and I've lost" Schaefer 151). Once the antagonists have been defeated, there is no place for violence in the valley, and

therefore Shane—who is, too, violent by nature—must part, headed towards an uncertain future.

> Shane is never part of the community, and his superior values are not seen as belonging to the community. He is an aristocrat of violence, an alien from a more glamorous world, who is better than those he helps and is finally not accountable to those for whom he sacrifices himself. (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 400)

While the 1953 film leaves the ending open and allows the viewer to wonder whether Shane really survived Wilson's bullet or not, the book is more explicit, as one character states, "No bullet could ever kill that man. (…) Sometimes I wonder whether anything ever could." (Schaefer 154). This could be understood, however, in an abstract sense. Shane would not die, as he lives on in the hearts of the Starretts, especially of young Bob, who still looks up to him even after he is long gone. Shane is just as inspiring as the traditional hero, if not even more: "The spirit manifest in Shane's great sacrifice remains in the valley, and serves to bind the Starretts to their home" (Robinson 77). His influence is strengthened by Marian, who says "He's not gone. He's here, in this place, in this place he gave us. He's all around us and in us, and he always will be" (Schaefer 157)

2.1. Violence and honor

Unlike works where the traditional Western hero uses glorified violence, Schaefer's novel presents the idea that violence, whether just or not, never comes without negative consequence. After the fight with Chris, Shane "had lost the serenity that had seeped into him through the summer (...). He was restless with some far hidden desperation" (Schaefer 86). Perhaps realizing that, after all, he is not free from the violence that follows him, he attempts to find a justification for it: "(...) I gave him his chance. A man can keep his self-respect without having to cram it down another man's throat. (...) He could have called it off without crawling. He could have if he was man enough" (Schaefer 87). With a tradition like the 1950s Western, where masculinity and violence go hand in hand, the

idea that aggressiveness does not equal one's worth as a man is a breaking concept. As Shane puts it, a real man would know when it is necessary and when it is not.

Violence has always been an integral part of the traditional cowboy image, representative of the American nation that birthed him. As Moore points out in her article, "they were brave white men taming the frontier and blazing the path for more timid easterners to follow and settle. Their violence was necessary to move the country forward and was perhaps the sole reservoir of white masculinity in the late nineteenth century" (*Fighting* 30). Therefore, Shane openly avoiding it in scenarios where the average reader of Western stories would expect him to lash out diverges him from the path of his predecessors. Violence used by the popular cowboy was often a means of justice and was thus seen as heroic. However, this violence that anchored itself to the image of the Western protagonist did not come out of nowhere; it originated from the historical cowboys' line of work, but was also a means to measure one's manhood ("Physical violence was very much part of masculinity in the nineteenth century, especially in the South, where many of the cowboys and cattlemen originated" Moore, *Fighting* 31). In this society, violence began to be tied to one's honor, which men were very adamant on defending, causing it to bloom even further:

> In such an environment, a "culture of honor" is likely to develop, in which honor equates with the strength and power of a man to enforce his will on others, in other words, his status in society. In this culture, a man has to be ready to strike back at all times and must strike back at any insult, no matter how slight, or risk losing credibility.
>
> In the twentieth-century effort to rehabilitate the cowboy image, it was the concept of honor that most former cowboys stressed, ironically downplaying the violence itself. Charlie Siringo saw gun ownership as a sign of manhood. If a tenderfoot came to a ranch without a pistol, the cooks and other men in camp would not respect him. (Moore, *Fighting* 31, 35)

This strongly emphasizes the significance of Shane's unwillingness to carry his gun and purposely hide it in his bedroll. Despite this, he is still imposing and earns respect for himself, much before the first confrontation in the book takes place, and so Schaefer

highlights the fact that Shane's strength does not reside in his gun, but in himself as a whole.

2.2. "If he was man enough": masculinity in *Shane*

One could argue that this need for violence was not just rooted in the mythical image of the cowboy hero, but of the proud American man himself, along with his history: "Violence is central to both the historical development of the Frontier and its mythic representation. The Anglo-American colonies grew by displacing Amerindian societies and enslaving Africans to advance the fortunes of White colonists" (Slotkin, *Gunfighter nation* 11).

As shown numerous times throughout this dissertation, masculinity is, irrefutably, one of the core aspects of the Western hero. It is, as well, one of the few traits he shared with real life cowboys:

> We paint the history of the West, particularly Texas, in traditionally masculine terms. Men tamed the frontier, broke horses, subdued Indians, and dominated the landscape, forcing it to yield to their needs. The Old West made men. In the 1920s and 1930s, old-time cowboys looked back fondly to a time when "men were men and women weren't governors," and argued that the movie cowboys had been over "prettified."1 One chronicler from the 1940s went as far as to proclaim, "The history of West Texas is essentially the history of men." The cowboy has become an icon of Anglo masculinity to generations of Americans. From John Wayne to the Marlboro Man, Teddy Roosevelt to George W. Bush, men have been "cowboying up" to tame both literal and figurative frontiers, and to prove their manhood and that of their country. (Moore, *Cow Boys* 13)

Masculinity is also present in Schaefer's novel. Shane's view on masculinity is shown through significant moments, such as his quote after his fight with Chris, previously cited: "A man can keep his self-respect without having to cram it down another man's throat. (...) He could have called it off without crawling. He could have if he was man enough" (Schaefer 87). The last line holds significance, since here Shane is linking the concept of

masculinity, traditionally tied to violence and the defense of one's honor, to the exact contrary. For him, masculinity means restraint, to suppress the natural instinct that leads to aggression. The book dares, through Shane's morals, to propose the question of what it means to be a man in this sense, presenting the idea that the two notions—masculinity and violence—do not always come hand in hand, that one does not equal the other, and, as stated before, that being a man means that one must know self-restraint. As seen with the traditional Western hero, he is skilled, intelligent, and embodies the image of the self-sufficient, almost invincible gunslinger. He kills as many times as he needs to, and those deaths do not weigh heavy on his mind; they are just part of the process and remorse is notable only by its absence. However, when it comes to Shane, death affects him strongly. Deaths caused by him, be it directly or indirectly, heavily affect his psyche and emotions. Consequently, Shane bears a sense of guilt that his traditional counterpart did not. Even if his violence is justified and ultimately is what saves the homesteaders from Fletcher's control over them, he is not proud of his actions, as it signifies that he will never be truly free from the shackles of his violent nature, which he actively tries to suppress.

Interestingly, Ulmer theorizes that "Shane is presented in ways that depart from the notion of a hyper-masculine, primitive frontiersman. (…) what initially strikes [Bob] is the peculiar way Shane is dressed. (…) Shane is fashionable, a fact Bob's mother, Marian, infers through the many questions she poses to Shane" (76). Ulmer argues that Shane's willingness to answer Marian's questions regarding fashion, a topic considered traditionally feminine, whereas the typical masculine cowboy would refuse to do so, possibly sensing it as an attack to his own manhood, directly presents a different kind of masculinity that was unheard of within the Western genre. In fluently speaking Marian's discourse, Shane proves that he is confident in his own masculinity, and by later also talking to Joe about more "manly" topics, such as crops and farming, he demonstrates

that he "can speak across strictly gender-coded categories of behavior, giving him a flexibility that marks him as rare and special" (77). With this argument, Ulmer aims to prove that "Shane's characterization in the novel suggests a rather unusual portrait of the cowboy-hero, one that blends masculinization and feminization. In the novel, Shane is shown to practice a more flexible, open discourse, one that can move easily between masculine and feminine topics" (74), as well as that "Shane incorporates both masculine and feminine elements into his identity without generating any apparent paradox of conflict" (79).

2.3. *Shane*, the movie

Considering the success of Schaefer's novel, it is no surprise that years after its publication, American director George Stevens would go to adapt the story into a film in 1953. The movie received its own fair share of popularity, and though it was mostly faithful to the original novel, it did make a number of important changes.

To begin with, the novel is narrated entirely by the adult voice of Bob, who recalls his childhood memories. The tone emphasizes emotional nuance and internal conflict, whereas the film is more visual and action-oriented, focusing more on the showdown and dramatic tension, thus being much less introspective than the novel. Regarding Shane, in the novel he is a mysterious, polite, soft-spoken and emotionally sensitive character, whose inner torment regarding violence is the focal point of the story. In the movie, Shane is played by Alan Ladd, portraying him as more overtly heroic and understating his emotional complexity. Curiously, Schaefer was not very fond of Ladd being casted for Shane, as he considered his literary character to be a "dark, deadly person", and hoped he would be played by actor George Raft. It is also important to note the significance of Shane's wardrobe being changed:

Schaefer's Shane wears the fine clothes associated with high-toned gamblers like Doc Holliday in *My Darling Clementine*. Stevens preserves the distinction of class but gives it a different inflection by dressing Shane in buckskins, which make him seem a figure from America's buffalo-hunting frontier past, rather than a refugee from the urban future. (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 397)

When it comes to violence, one of the morally weighty central themes of the novel, it is downplayed in the film, as the emphasis falls instead on the dramatic choreography. Shane's reluctance to fight is shown, but Stevens does not delve into the emotional consequence of it as much as Schaefer does. Furthermore, in the initial shot of the film, Shane is carrying his gun on himself when he enters the Starrett's homestead and later aims it at Joey (Bob, who was renamed as such in the movie) when the boy makes a noise with his toy rifle, as if it were a PTSD response. This clashes with book Shane, who keeps it always hidden and only willingly carries it when he is heading to his last confrontation against Fletcher's hired gun Wilson. Besides, prior to the duel, in the film Shane dramatically wrestles Joe to save him from a certain death at the hands of Wilson, though book Shane merely knocks him unconscious with the back of his revolver. Therefore, one of the main differences is that Shane's avoidance of violence is not as prominent, and is rather downgraded in the film, despite being one of his major character traits.

3. **Legacy and influence: *Pale Rider* (1985), *Logan* (2017), and *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018)**

Shane is one of the most influential Western novels of the 20th century. As stated on the cover of the 2016 paperback Orion Books edition, it is "The classic novel that inspired a generation of storytellers". Furthermore, Cawelti has also regarded it as "the most popular of recent Westerns" (30). It is hardly surprising, then, that its legacy has reached diverse forms of entertainment, especially in how it helped define the figure of the silent, noble gunman.

In the ambit of cinema, Clint Eastwood stars in *Pale Rider* (1985), produced and directed by himself. The story takes place in California, where a group of prospectors is violently harassed by a powerful mining baron. In a very similar way to Schaefer's novel, Eastwood, playing the role of "The Preacher", rides into their remote town and takes the side of its defenseless inhabitants, becoming especially close with a widow and her teenage daughter. Once the showdown between Eastwood, the baron, and his hired gunfighters ensues, the protagonist disappears back into the mountains from which he came. *Pale Rider* has commonly been considered a homage to *Shane*, due to the multiple similarities both stories share. Shane's otherness that alienates him from the rest is accentuated in Eastwood's character, as "The Preacher" too is quiet and skilled with a gun, but ambiguously supernatural. The film also includes a scene of him and another character trying to crack a hefty boulder, no doubt taking inspiration from the novel's identical moment when Shane helps Joe dig up the big old stump. In both cases, the hero attempts to avoid violence but eventually gives in and makes use of it to defend the threatened townsfolk. Once the final confrontation is over, he rides off alone, while the child he had formed a close relationship with calls out to him.

Logan (2017), though not strictly belonging to the Western genre but still being Western-inspired, directly takes inspiration from *Shane* as well. It is a dystopian superhero film that follows Logan, more popularly known by his alias Wolverine as he looks after a deteriorating Professor X. The protagonist takes on the role of protector when the young Laura enters his life and he is forced to embrace his past violence to ensure her safety. Just like Shane, Logan is a reluctant hero who led a violent life but is now laying low. He becomes the guardian of a young child, and his journey comes to an end when he gives up his own life to protect her in an act of redemptive sacrifice. The film explicitly references *Shane* twice throughout its runtime, with the first instance showcasing the

main characters watching the ending of the 1953 film based on Schaefer's novel, and the second being Laura reciting its closing lines ("There's no living with a killing. There's no going back. Right or wrong, it's a brand. A brand that sticks…") at Logan's grave, further highlighting the parallel of the two heroes that, despite their flaws, die to give others a chance at a better, peaceful life.

When a genre such as the Western is as famous as it is, it is no surprise that it would enter other forms of entertainment besides literature and film. Rockstar Games' 2018 video game *Red Dead Redemption 2* gained immense fame upon release—$725 million generated within the first three days—and is widely considered to be the best one in the genre, having won over 175 Game of the Year awards and maintaining an active fanbase despite being 6 years old as of 2025. The game features Arthur Morgan as the protagonist, an outlaw with a violent past who sees the wrong in his ways and decides to redeem himself as best as he can through selfless acts of altruism. Arthur and Shane share a considerable number of similarities, both embodying the persona of the sensible cowboy whose vulnerability is a mark of strength rather than a weakness. The first and strongest resemblance between the two protagonists is that both men come from a violent past— explicitly stated for Arthur, whereas vaguely hinted at for Shane—, and yet they are guided by a personal moral code that does not align with the mentality of such a background and fills them with regret. Arthur seeks to become a better person and aids others as he slowly turns away from blind loyalty to the gang that raised him. In both cases, the audience can observe the vulnerable side of the protagonists, be it through Arthur's journal, where he writes down his thoughts and feelings after every major event in the game, or the constant sadness in Shane's eyes and his relationship with the Starretts. Arthur's journey ultimately ends in a significant sacrifice when he gives up his life and dies alone after a final shootout in order for his younger adoptive brother to have a chance

of living the quiet life, away from bloodshed, that Arthur could never achieve. Similarly, Shane is also pulled back into violence for the sake of the people he wants to save but is unable to stay with them and must go, alone and wounded, so they can enjoy a peaceful future that does not include him. Regardless of the protagonist abandoning his story, both men live on through the people they have inspired. For Arthur, it is his brother, who tries to live tranquilly with his family and leave his previous lawless life behind in an attempt to honor Arthur's last wish. For Shane, it is Bob Starrett, who saw him as a role model and built his perception of courage and justice around Shane's person and behavior.

4. Conclusions

There was a long process until the cowboy hero of myth became what he is popularly known as today. From the historical cowboys, who were little more than exploited farmhands, but that demonstrated their importance in American history when they proved that the frontier was not out of limits and successfully tamed it, thus inviting the rest of the nation to follow after them, to the first instances of the cowboy in literature, starting from the Beadle dime novels and finally gaining European recognition through Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. Through his literary development, the cowboy went from laborer to heroic icon, portraying a set of traits that were often found in protagonists within the Western genre, thus building a persona that embodied the rugged individualism, stoicism, marksmanship, braveness and honor typical of the frontiersman from which the hero was derived.

In this context of the American Western, where the previously stated qualities, among others, long dominated the genre and defined the heroic ideal, Jack Schaefer's *Shane* offers a significant divergence. Through his titular character, the novel emphasizes his human vulnerability through his inner conflict, which the reader sees glimpses of

throughout Schaefer's narration. While he retains many of the genre's traditional conventions, he is not merely a figure of action, but of introspection as well. Shane's most striking characteristic, as well as the one that differentiates him the most from his Western hero predecessors, is his emotional depth. Shane is heavily avoidant of violence, and when he is forced to embrace the past that he was attempting to escape from and return to his old gunslinging ways, he exhibits a deep inner turmoil that the usually emotionally numb cowboy hero was a stranger to. It does not matter that it is the antagonists who are on the receiving end of his violence—Shane feels a deep guilt every time, without fail, always lamenting that he had given them their chance to solve the problem peacefully before resorting to deadly action.

Through the works of various scholars, this dissertation has aimed to point out various aspects regarding Shane and his unique characterization. For instance, it is demonstrated that Shane does not lack the aggressivity of the traditional hero. He avoids it to the best of his ability, but it is part of him, a natural impulse that he is afraid of and profoundly uncomfortable with. Furthermore, through his demeanor around the Starretts, he mixes feminine and masculine elements in his speech, as he is able to discuss fashion (feminine topic) and farming (masculine topic) with Marian and Joe respectively with a fluidity that does not falter, thus providing a showcase of confident masculinity that is certainly a novelty within the genre.

In conclusion, Shane is set apart within the genre due to his presentation of his own masculinity, which does not follow the previous tradition, and his complex emotional response to violence, which eventually isolates him from the family that he fought to protect, thus presenting an individualism that dooms him to remain a lone wanderer despite his best wishes, embodying the figure of the tragic hero. Jack Schaefer's *Shane*

deals with self-restraint, nobility and loss, in contrast with the coarse grittiness and lack of emotion that was characteristic of the Western genre.

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