From “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner,” by Robert Warshow, reprinted in Nachbar, Jack, ed. *Focus on the Western*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974.

If there is a woman he loves, she is usually unable to understand his motives; she is against killing and being killed, and he finds it impossible to explain to her that there is no point in being “against” these things: they belong to this world.

Very often this women is from the East and her failure to understand represents a clash of cultures. In the American mind, refinement, virtue, civilization, Christianity itself, are seen as feminine, and therefore women are often portrayed as possessing some kind of deeper wisdom, while the man, for all their apparent self-assurance, are fundamentally childish. But the West, lacking the graces of civilization, is the place “where men are men”; in Western movies, men have the deeper wisdom and the women are children. Those women in the Western movies who share the hero’s understanding of life are prostitutes (or, as they are usually presented, barroom entertainers) -- women, that is, who have come to understand in the most practical way that love can be an irrelevance, and therefore “fallen” women... in Western movies, the important thing about a prostitute is her quasi-masculine independence: nobody owns her, nothing has to be explained to her, and she is not, like a virtuous woman, a “value” that demands to be protected. When the Westerner leaves the prostitute for a virtuous woman -- for love -- he is in fact forsaking a way of life...

What does the Westerner fight for? We know he is on the side of justice and order, and of course it can be said that he fights for these things. But such broad aims never correspond exactly to his real motives; they only offer him his opportunity. The Westerner himself, when an explanation is asked of him (usually by a woman), is likely to say that he does what he “has to do.” ... What he defends, at bottom, is the purity of his own image -- in fact of his honor. This is what makes him invulnerable... The Westerner is the last gentleman, and the movies which over and over again tell his story are probably the last art form in which the concept of honor retains its strength.

Why does the Western movie especially have such a hold on our imagination? Chiefly, I think, because it offers a serious orientation to the problem of violence such as can be found almost nowhere else in our culture. The values [of a Western] are in the image of a single man who wears a gun on his thigh. The gun tells us that he lives in a world of violence, and even that he “believes in violence.” But the drama is one of self-restraint: the moment of violence must come in its own time and according to its special laws, or else it is valueless. There is little cruelty in Western movies, and little sentimentality; our eyes are not focused on the sufferings of the defeated but on the deportment of the hero. Really, it is not violence at all which is the “point” of the Western movie, but a certain image of a man, a style, which expresses itself most clearly in violence. Watch a child with his toy guns and you will see: what interests him most is not (as we so much fear) the fantasy of hurting others, but to work out how a man might look when he shoots or is shot. A hero is one who looks like a hero.

From filmsite.org on western genre:

Western heroes are often local lawmen or enforcement officers, ranchers, army officers, cowboys, territorial marshals, or a skilled, fast-draw gunfighter. They are normally masculine persons of integrity and principle - courageous, moral, tough, solid and self-sufficient, maverick characters (often with trusty sidekicks), possessing an independent and honorable attitude (but often characterized as slow-talking). The Western hero could usually stand alone and face danger on his own, against the forces of lawlessness (outlaws or other antagonists), with an expert display of his physical skills.

From High Noon: A Film Review by James Berardinelli:

High Noon contains many of the elements of the traditional Western: the gun-toting bad guys, the moral lawman, the pretty girl, and the climactic gunfight. But it's in the way these elements are blended together, with the slight spin put on them by Zinnemann and screenwriter Carl Foreman, that makes *High Noon* unlike any other Western. Audiences in the early '50s were drawn to the theater by the promise of a Gary Cooper film. Many viewers left confused, consternated, or vaguely dissatisfied, because things didn't play out in the expected way. It is rumored that John Wayne criticized *High Noon*'s ending as being "un-American."… The typical Western was a story of great heroism and derring-do. *High Noon* highlights much of humanity's base nature.

Many have called *High Noon* more of a morality play than a Western, and, in some ways, that's an accurate description. Aside from the primary plot thread, there are other quandries to be considered. Amy must choose between her dearly-held peaceful beliefs (which she adopted after her brother and father were killed) and standing by her husband. It's easy to be non-violent when there's no price to pay. Harvey Pell must decide between ego and friendship. *High Noon* places many facets of human nature under the microscope, and therein lies the complexity in a seemingly simple idea. The deeper one looks, the more *High Noon* has to offer.

From Roger Ebert's 2002 review of Unforgiven:

William Munny is a chastened man, a killer and outlaw who was civilized by marriage. Thus "Unforgiven" internalizes the classic Western theme in which violent men are "civilized" by schoolmarms, preachers and judges. When he talks about his wife, Munny sounds like a contrite little boy, determined not to be bad anymore.

…This process takes place against a full sense of the town's life. The screenwriter, David Webb Peoples, ignores the recent tradition in which the expensive star dominates every scene, and creates a rich gallery of supporting roles. Here his models are the Western masters like John Ford, who populated their movies with communities. Richard Harris plays English Bob, a famous gunfighter who now lives off his publicity and is followed everywhere by W. W. Beauchamp (Saul Rubinek), a writer for pulp Western magazines; after Munny is in a gun battle, Beauchamp scribbles furious notes, and wants to know, "who'd you kill first?"

Also important in the town is the madam, Strawberry Alice (Frances Fisher), who has raised the bounty and wants revenge for the mutilation of her girl Delilah (Anna Thomson). Skinny Dubois (Anthony James), owner of the bar and brothel, has more practical concerns: He paid good money for Delilah, and wants compensation; in the half-tamed West, some men now appeal to the law instead of settling things themselves.

From the Rolling Stone review of Unforgiven:

Eastwood's sixteenth film as a director is best understood as demythology. He's had a hell of a time shaking the Terminatoron-horseback image he created in the Sergio Leone spaghetti westerns of the Sixties, starting with *A Fistful of Dollars*. He came closest in 1976 by directing and starring in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, about a brutal avenger who wins back his humanity. Now, in *Unforgiven* -- which darkens and deepens the themes developed in *Josey Wales* -- Eastwood dissects an aging outlaw's struggle to make his redemption stick. The film is brutally comic in debunking the faux heroics that made Eastwood a star and also politically timely in showing how past sins can wreak havoc on the best intentions.

from the chapter on Unforgiven in John Saunders, The Western Genre:

Who exactly, we wonder, is unforgiven? Is it the two cowboys whose initial cruel action precipitates the narrative – one of whom at least seems in no real sense guilty – or is it rather, as William Munny grimly observes, that "We all have it coming?" In interview Eastwood claimed that the film was intended as 'a statement about violence and the moral issue of it,' the characters bound by the consequences of their behavior: 'everything they have done is having repercussions.'

Beauchamp… raises questions about the relationship between fact and legend, another item in the film's deconstructive project. English Bob has in fact made his mark by shooting 'Chinamen' for the railway, and his exploits are less glamorous than the legend implies. The themes of sex and violence and fact and legend come together in Bill's revisionist account of one such exploit in a Wichita saloon which he witnessed – the shooting of Two-Gun Corcoran.

The Founding of Civilization
As the Bridling of Masculine Desire

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Of the various genres of fiction, one of the most popular in America has been the frontier story, which tells about characters who establish and protect outposts of civilization. Typically, the outposts of civilization depicted in these stories -- whether they are space stations, ranches, towns or forts -- exist in a sea of dangerous nature that can close in at any time. Just as typically, they are threatened from within by characters who seem to have a little too much in common with the raw nature on the outside.

The classic frontier story of America, of course, are Westerns, which depict the conquest of nature and the establishment of towns and ranches in the West in the last part of the 19th century (even if it is now largely replaced by stories about the conquest of space). The nature that is conquered in Westerns isn't the feminine and engulfing nature of jungle movies, with its promise of hidden treasure somewhere in the interior. Instead, nature in Westerns is a masculine force; it is an open plain that extends as far as the eye can see. It offers few if any mysteries; only danger from forces that are stronger and tougher than oneself.

The theme of Westerns, in many ways, springs from this setting: it is about the conflict of man against wild, masculine, nature, and of good men against wild men. In other words, it's about the bridling of masculine desire. In the battle with nature, the men capture and break horses and cattle, in a conflict of control and strength versus wild power, and they ritually reenact this civilization-founding act in rodeos. They subdue and destroy "wild" Indians, the children of the land who they are replacing. In addition, the good men stand up to, subdue, and kill wild men with unbridled desires, who get drunk, rob, threaten, make noise, steal and kill by nature.

Westerns include a number of prototypical settings where this theme can unfold. The most important are the towns, full of dust and dirt, wooden boardwalks and rawhide, laid out with straight lines and wide main streets. The male characters who run around this setting are adorned, as we all know, with phallic symbols: pointy boots and badges; tall rounded hats; horses that extend out from between their legs; and guns that dangle down ready to be drawn out, stiff, to pierce flesh and destroy opponents in violent face-to-face caricatures of the act of sex.

The towns have a number of prototypical settings within them, each of which plays a role in the larger theme. There are the main streets, sheriff's offices, general stores, churches, homes for townsfolk, ranches and stables, and the doctor's offices where grimacing, unbathed, men are patched up after being shot, with a shot of whiskey to make it less excruciating.

When they aren't out subduing nature, many of these men can be found in the richest symbolic setting in the town -- saloons -- which are carnival-like places of mirth and music where civilized comforts are put into play to serve the unbridled desires of wild men. In the saloons, the men find a setting of civilization that suits their character. They drink to excess and lose control. They gamble their earnings on Lady Luck, and get in shoot-outs over petty insults and marked cards. They laugh uproariously, make noise, and indulge in interior-destroying brawls and gunfights that spill out into the streets. They waste their money on drink and on women who are objects of desire, there to be pursued and subdued like most everything else. Then they sleep it off upstairs.

Saloons are places of civilization dedicated to playing to the wildness of masculine nature. Not too wild, though, because then the good men have to reassert control.

Another prototypical setting are the plains and rocky hills, which are outside the towns and outside the law. This is generally the place of maximum danger, because no law imposes itself on desire. Nevertheless, townsfolk and other civilized people have to travel through these domains to get between the various towns and ranches, and they do so with wagons and horses, or they take some of the comforts of civilization with them, with stagecoaches and trains. This is also the place where hard men sleep on the hard ground and get into shootouts amid boulders and rocky cliffs. Whoever they are, all face the danger that Indians, "outlaws" and rattlesnakes will make off with various combinations of their purse, their virtue, their life or their scalp.

There are also the ranches, which are smaller outposts of proto-civilization in which each owner is a law unto him or herself. And there are the mines in the hills, with deep (but masculine) bowel-like tunnels where clumps of gold treasure can be dislodged and scooped out.

But, as noted, even life in the islands of proto-civilization, the towns, isn't safe since wild nature is perpetually threatening to flood in or break out from within. Indians invade. Cattle rustlers and brawlers come to town, get drunk and make trouble. Lust for money, women, power and revenge: untamed aggression and general wildness, are always just below the surface.

Westerns also include a number of primary character types, which tend to be associated with particular settings. As noted, there are the wild men, who are something like the wild land, with its stallions and Indians although, unlike these, they are typically petty and lacking in nobility. They do have a rule though, at least when they are in the towns: when in a gunfight, each side is to be given a chance to face the other and draw, so the best man wins. Of course, they break this rule all the time.

Second, there are the overly civilized and feminized townsfolk, including the mild-mannered store clerks and the disapproving lady churchgoers, who are not to be confused with the masculinized frontier women in jeans who shoot their rifles through the window when the Indians surround the house.

Third, there are the good but still tough men, with and without badges, who are the primary civilizers. They partake of both worlds. They are civilized in the sense that they respect other people's rights and have bridled many of their desires. But they also typically partake of the wild world, of saloons and drinking, horses, guns and cards. They use the toughness they derive form their masculine virtues to civilize and tame the men who are driven by unbridled masculine desire.

Third, there are the Indians. (What is being discussed here, of course, is fictional Indians, as they are depicted.) The Indians may add a hint of mystery and embody masculine virtues even as they are also a partly feminine symbol with their long hair, adornments, mysterious ways, and mystical religion, including their mystical tie to the land. When they are depicted as savages who kidnap and scalp, they are symbols of a more primitive form of desire, one that exists before conscience.

Like all fiction, Westerns are a parable of the self. They allow audiences (or computer game players, theme park riders, et al) to participate in a world modeled after masculinity, which is rough, hard, powerful and free. They are like football games, leather bars, and the world of Tim the Tool Man, where feminine influences are excluded or minimized, so men can revel in, and confirm, their masculinity, and shore up their defenses against the real threat: femininity.

At the same time, Westerns give audiences a chance to feel what it is like to bridle this power and put it in the service of good. Here, perhaps, the towns are each person's ego, amid a sea of unbridled aggressive and sexual desires. The sheriffs and other civilizers are the psychological defenses and conscious will that keep the wild nature found in the rest of the mind at bay. The psychological defenses (the civilizers) keep unbridled desires from erupting into the ego (the towns), and the ego, in general, keeps expanding its domain into the wild frontier. In other words, Western are a Freudian parable about the ego subduing and replacing the Id. As Freud said: where Id was, there shall ego be.

This parable lets audiences have it both ways, which is what happens when people design their own worlds. On the one hand, they get to covertly identify with, and enjoy, the violence and wildness of the villains. On the other, they enjoy the legitimate violence of the heroes, and of standing up for what is right. They get masculinity, violence, power and morality, on horses, all culminating in a happy ending, which isn't a bad deal.

The creators of Westerns obviously didn't make all this up to express our states of mind. They found something in the world that could express a set of fantasies in themselves and their audience, about the founding of civilization, the bridling of masculine desire, and the connection between the two. They then accentuated the characteristics that suited the fantasy.

Of course, Westerns can also be read as a story about our society, whatever society we live in, since barbarism is always waiting to erupt among people, and good "men" have to marshal their courage to protect civilization. And they can be read as a mythical version of our history. Here, the Indians represent the land's distant past. The uncivilized men its more recent past. The civilizers its present. The shopkeepers and others represent the more civilized and less masculine future.

Of the more distant future, when the West would become an image in a wilderness of images, there is already a hint of that, as well, in the newspaper people who glorify and reinvent the gunslingers to sell the public exciting fictions. In portraying these reporters and writers, the people who create television and movies are showing us themselves in their own stories -- people who invent a virtual West so it can settle in the West of each audience member's semi-bridled imagination.

source: www.transparencynow.com/west.htm