

# Wagner, Wister, and Westerns

by Daniel Orsen

Owen Wister's 1902 novel, *The Virginian*, established many of the tropes and themes of that most quintessentially American genre: the Western. Replete with cowboys, simmering poker games, vigilante justice, and a shootout, *The Virginian* was adapted as a play on Broadway in 1904, as movie in 1914, 1923, 1929, and 1946, and as a TV series that ran from 1962-1971. Admittedly, *The Virginian's* cultural significance exceeds its literary merit, but it is nonetheless a very good book well worth the read.

Wister was a proud and committed Wagnerian, unlike his classmate at Harvard and dedicatee of *The Virginian*, Theodore Roosevelt, whom Alex Ross described as "a casual Wagnerian." Wister studied composition at Harvard and made pilgrimage to Bayreuth in 1882, where he presented one of his compositions to Liszt. When his health broke down in 1885, Wister followed Roosevelt's example and headed out West. But Wagner was never far from Wister; he had his mother send him his favorite Wagner scores and said of the Western landscape that "it all looked like *Die Walküre*."

Many of the iconic Western tropes created in *The Virginian* were ripped straight from the operas of Richard Wagner. There is of course is The Man With No Name, the mysterious, taciturn hero most memorably brought to life by Clint Eastwood in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Eastwood's nameless stranger was preceded by the titular character of *The Virginian*, whose name is never revealed to the reader and referred to throughout the novel only as "the Virginian" or "the Southerner." The Virginian's direct Wagnerian inspiration was Lohengrin (*Lohengrin*), the mysterious Swan Knight who saves maidens and duchies in distress, so long as no one asks him his name. The Virginian also takes after Siegfried (*Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*) in that both men are raised outside of the mass morality of civilization and religion; Siegfried was an orphan raised in the woods by the dwarf Mime, and the Virginian left home at the age of fourteen to fend for himself in the West.

The Virginian's love interest is Molly Stark Wood, a young woman with blue blood military ancestry who leaves Vermont because of "a spirit craving the unknown." Molly's Wagnerian analog is Brünnhilde (*Das Ring der Nibelungen*), the valkyrie who travels the world gathering the souls of worthy warriors who died in battle. Brünnhilde is also amply supplied with blue blood and military ancestry, being the daughter of the earth goddess Erda and Wotan, king of the gods and god of battle.

The Virginian and Molly's courtship bears two resemblances to that of Siegfried and Brünnhilde. First, Molly teaches the Virginian to read and write and exposes him to great literature,

just as Brünnhilde teaches Siegfried the magic power of the runes. Second, Molly is resistant to marrying the Virginian because of fear of sacrificing her “spirit that craves the unknown,” much like Brünnhilde laments the loss of her divinity and warrior prowess when awoken by Siegfried. If there is any doubt that Molly was consciously created a Western valkyrie we have only to look at her name; “Stark” is German for strong. With the character of Molly Stark Wood, Wister gave the Western its first Warrior Maiden - that sort of tough, adventurous woman who knows how to handle a shotgun as well as the guys.

These tropes are superficial compared to the conflict at the very heart of both the Ring Cycle and entirety of the Western genre: the conflict of the Pre-civilized and the Civilized, by which I mean those who establish and protect civilization, and those nourish and grow it, respectively. The conflict is that civilization could not exist without the Pre-Civilized, because that element is necessary to establish and maintain rule by Law, but as a society progresses and becomes ever more Civilized, the Pre-civilized find the laws and domestic bonds of the society they helped create constricting or pushing them out.

One of Wagner’s greatest dramatic accomplishments was the character of Wotan, in whom he embodied the whole conflict of the Pre-civilized and the Civilized. By sacrificing his eye (his natural, pre-civilized state) for the knowledge of the runes (writing - needed for contracts and civilization); and further more by offering Freya, the goddess of love and youth (natural, pre-civilized) to the giants as payment for Valhalla (civilization); and then by stealing the hoard of the Nibelungs which he offers as an alternative payment for Valhalla, Wotan commits the necessary acts of violence and sacrifices his own Pre-civilized nature to create laws and civilization. The tragedy that unfolds throughout the rest of the Ring Cycle is that Wotan is constrained by the law and civilization he created, and therefore unable to take the very actions needed to protect it and those he loves - so eloquently captured in Wotan’s final words to Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*: “Only one is destined to wed the bride,/ one freer than I, the god!”

In *The Virginian*, the Pre-civilized is symbolized by the Virginian and the Civilized by Molly. Not only does Molly travel out West (Pre-civilized) from the East (Civilized), she comes to be the first school teacher in Beer Creek, Wyoming - the school being a Western Valhalla of sorts, a symbol for families, community, and civic institutions. Before Molly can marry the Virginian, her “New England conscience” has to come to terms with the Virginian’s capacity to kill men, which he uses judiciously for the sake of justice where the Law has not yet reached. Whether or not Molly can understand his actions, she accepts them and acknowledges her need for the Virginian. For his part, the Virginian is

changed by his relationship to Molly, as shown by the nice suit he buys to visit her family, and a change visible to Molly on their honeymoon:

“She had seen destruction like sharp steel glittering in his eyes. Were these the same eyes? Was this youth with his black head of hair in her lap the creature with whom men did not trifle, whose hand knew how to deal death? Where had the man melted away to in this boy?”

This happy ending may be realistic, but it feels wrong because our myths, literature, and history overwhelmingly show us that the Pre-civilized and the Civilized do not live happily ever after. The pattern that emerged in Westerns is that the gun-slinger kills the bad guys and saves the town, but has always “got to be goin’ on.”

*Once Upon A Time in the West -*

Jill: Hey, you’re sort of a handsome man.

Cheyenne: But I’m not the right man. And neither is he.

Jill: Maybe not. But it doesn’t matter.

Cheyenne: You don’t understand, Jill. People like that have something inside...something to do with death. If that fellow lives, he’ll come in through that door, pick up his gear and say adios. It would be nice to see this town grow.

Harmonica: Now I got to go. Going to be a beautiful town, Sweetwater.

Jill: I hope you’ll come back someday.

Harmonica: Someday.

Cheyenne: Yeah, I got to go, too.

*Shane -*

Joey: I’m sorry, Shane.

Shane: You don’t have to be. You better run back.

Joey: Can’t I ride home with you?

Shane: Afraid not, Joey.

Joey: Please? Why not?

Shane: I got to be goin’ on.

Joey: Why, Shane?

Shane: A man has to be what he is. He can’t break the mold. I tried it, and it didn’t work for me.

Throughout his life and work Wagner was concerned with the creation of a German nation-state (which officially came to pass in 1871) and the artistic and cultural life of that future nation. He and many other German intellectuals saw it as a chance to start fresh and get it right. For Wagner, the Ring Cycle was his opera(s) addressed specifically to that future nation. The Western arose from similar conditions in America. After the Civil War and with half a continent yet to be settled, America was just beginning to become itself. This, I think, is why the Western, set in the era of Reconstruction

and Westard Expansion, has taken preeminence in the American mythos and become the nation's preeminent *in illo tempore*, or time before time, rather than a Revolutionary War or Colonial setting.

There can be no doubt that Wister recognized the relevance of Wagner's operas to America's cultural moment. Both the Ring and the Western genre were created by and for nations which were becoming themselves and needed to grapple with the same civilization questions, hence their profound synchronicity.