

3-1-1995

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### Recommended Citation

Hall, Kenneth E. (1995) "*The Old Gringo* and the Elegiac Western," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 23: No. 2, Article 13.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol23/iss2/13>

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## **The Old Gringo and the Elegiac Western**

Kenneth E. Hall

The opening of *The Old Gringo* (1985), by Carlos Fuentes,<sup>1</sup> sets in place the chief organizing principle of the novel, the narrated memories of Harriet Winslow, an unmarried schoolteacher from Washington, D. C., who, the reader discovers, once came to Mexico to instruct the children of the rich *hacendado* Miranda family and there became embroiled in the Revolution. Her contacts with the *villista* general Tomás Arroyo and the Old Gringo polarize her experiences between an apparent infatuation with Arroyo and an attempt to substitute the Gringo for her lost father. In her memories of the incidents which led her to place the body of the Old Gringo in her father's empty tomb in Arlington, an elegiac tone—one of mourning for lost experience as well as a questioning of the value of that experience—is clearly discernible. Like the heroine of a classic Western film such as *The Virginian* (1929), Harriet, as the “Eastern schoolmarm” character type, confronts the heroic Westerner, in this case “doubled”<sup>2</sup> into the figures of the Old Gringo and Arroyo, and in the process re-examines her own preconceptions about civilization.<sup>3</sup> She becomes conscious of her marginalization from the society around her, as an intellectual woman who questions her past and present. One concern of the discussion here will be the importance of the female perspective in the elegiac Western narrative: rather than a mere foil or pretext for the hero's actions, the female character serves a critical function in clarifying the degree and nature of the hero's loss of relevance in present-day society. The heroic figures themselves, the Old Gringo and Arroyo, can lay strong claim to kinship to the heroes (and villains) of Western film and fiction. Equally larger-than-life and ironically viewed, the Old Gringo has the superhuman marksmanship and courage of classic Western heroes such as the Ethan Edwards of John Wayne or the Shane of Alan Ladd. But he carries about him a cynicism and world-weariness which, though mirroring his real-life source in Ambrose Bierce, yet recall the elegiac musings of the aging gunfighters J. B. Books of *The Shootist*, Steven Judd of *Ride the High Country*, and Pike Bishop of *The Wild Bunch*.

The term “elegiac Westerns” has been applied by popular culture and film critics such as Michael Marsden and John Cawelti to Western films which are characterized by a quality of lament for the passing of the hero, and by extension, of the heroic age of the American West.<sup>4</sup> These Westerns share the central element of a frequently poetic treatment, anywhere on a scale from ironic to tragic, of the myths and heroes of the Old West as cultural icons whose time has passed, usually with some indication of the influence of technology on their passing. They share the quality of nostalgia found in the literary Western as typified by Zane Grey and Owen Wister. The motif of the gunfighter cognizant that “his days are over,” as the titular hero of *Shane* is told, is frequent, as is the tendency for many of the heroes of these films to be aging. The element of the now vulnerable hero, an erstwhile near-superman with a six-shooter, may be tragic, as in *Ride the High Country* or *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, or it may be savagely, even morbidly ironic, as in *The Wild Bunch*. But in all

cases, the once invincible hero of dime-novel Westerns has become a complex representation of a member of an age which has passed and whose violent solution to once simple situations has now become either outmoded, as in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, or merely criminal, as in *The Wild Bunch*: Pike and Bishop could at an earlier stage of their development (or decline) have been Stephen Judd and his friend Gil.

Much as the aging, sick, and outdated hero of *The Shootist* (1976), played with understated sensitivity and power by John Wayne, wishes to die with self-respect, so too does the Old Gringo wish to die in a moment and manner chosen by him. Both characters shun their reputations. The Old Gringo avoids mentioning his name or revealing significant autobiographical data, such as his association with William Randolph Hearst, to anyone but Harriet. Similarly, Books, the aging shootist, is reluctant, at least at first, for the truth about his identity to get around the small town to which he has come, as he does not wish to give fame-hungry guns a chance to prove themselves. He even forces a Ned Buntline-like newspaperman to leave his boarding house at gunpoint after hearing his publicity scheme.

Important to *The Shootist* is the discrepancy between the myths or legends which have formed around Books and in general around the figure of the gunfighter, as opposed to the historical reality of such figures as well as, in this case, the personal biographical facts about J. B. Books. In *The Old Gringo*, a similar conflict between historical fact, legend, and falsification of history is established, since the character of the Gringo is based on the historical figure Ambrose Bierce; their "biographies," as Joaquín Roy has shown, tend to intersect in several ways, the chief of which is their journey to Mexico with the intention of dying or disappearing.

The picture given of Books and of the Gringo is well-removed from "history." The Fuentes narrative, filtered through the recollections of Winslow, presents a picture of the Gringo, who only slowly comes to be revealed as Ambrose Bierce; his anonymity is maintained during the earlier part of the novel, until he begins to reveal himself to Harriet. The Gringo character, presented in legendary proportions (as in the battle scenes or the early incident of heroic "proof," in which the Gringo demonstrates his marksmanship), is in part derived from legends about Bierce, especially the tale about his disappearance in Mexico. As Joe Nickell has suggested in his "Biography: The Disappearance of Ambrose Bierce" (19-53), this tale may have been fabricated by Bierce to cover his withdrawal from society, perhaps to live in Colorado until his expected death, probably from suicide. In any case, the Gringo, or Bierce, becomes as much a part of Winslow's perspectivist recollections as does the portrait of the Mexican Revolution which emerges from such mythmaking works as *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa! [Let's Go with Pancho Villa!]* (1949), by Rafael Luis Muñoz.

Similarly, J. B. Books is placed into parallel in an interesting manner with the filmic image, that is, the mythic or fictionalized image, of John Wayne. The film opens with clips from some of Wayne's earlier movies, all showing him in heroic or dynamic sequences. Here the effect is not, as Marsden and Nachbar have stated, to "suggest [ ] that Books and Wayne are identical" (1274), but rather on the one hand (1) to show the character of Books as derived from a corpus of myth; (2) to imply that the public image of Books as heroic may be as much of a fiction as was the image of Wayne as a frontier hero; and (3) to emphasize the elegiac core of the film, since the clips lead us to remember the past deeds of Books.

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*The Shootist* in effect critiques the gunfighter persona, since Books, though indeed a man of singular prowess and integrity, does not himself romanticize his actions. Nor does he retreat into mysterious statements about his past as does Shane or Jules Gaspard (Yul Brynner), the gunfighter of *Invitation to a Gunfighter* (1964). To the contrary, Books (whose name indicates his fictive nature) is quite hard-nosed about the reasons for his actions; he says clearly that he only tried to defend his interests: "I won't be wronged, I won't be insulted, and I won't be laid a hand on. I don't do these things to other people, and I require the same from them." He also pointedly debunks the legendary Bat Masterson, with whom he is, nevertheless, implicitly associated in the Western myth: "But then, Bat Masterson always was full'a—sheep-dip."

As does Books, the Gringo remains marginalized, largely by choice. Despite his attempts to kindle an impossible romance with Harriet—who sees him as a surrogate father—he remains an observer, almost voyeuristically watching Harriet's affair with Arroyo. The gunfighter of the Shane-Books type, which is traceable to the wandering archetype of Wild Bill Hickok and earlier of Davy Crockett and Leatherstocking (see Parks 33-59), is typically either unaccepted into society or incapable of relating to it, whether because of its civilized values or, as in the case of the mulatto Jules Gaspard, because of some deep resentment from a childhood perceived as socially unjust. The Gringo is rather like Gaspard in his chosen marginalization; his cynicism seems defensive, since he really suffers greatly—as did the historical Bierce—from the loss of his family. The "outsider" status of the Gringo, like that of the Western hero, is both adopted by and imposed upon him; like Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), the Gringo helps to heal the wounds of family loss (Harriet "finds" a father to put in her father's empty tomb, Martin rediscovers himself and his cousin Debbie with the help of Edwards) but cannot share in it. Edwards leaves the community, in a famous shot in which the door of the adoptive family of Martin frames his exiting figure, made vulnerable by Wayne's clutching his elbows as if chilled or crippled. The Gringo is the sacrificial catalyst of Harriet's resolution of her fixational conflict about her own father.

The sense of loss and marginalization felt by the Old Gringo is mirrored in Harriet Winslow, who has never, at least until the unfolding of the narrative here, become reconciled with her father's abandonment of her and her rather domineering mother and has in fact collaborated or acquiesced in fictionalizing the desertion into a heroic death for her father at San Juan Hill. Harriet, like the Gringo, and like Ned Buntline or any other popularizer of the Western hero, is engaged in "mythmaking," that is, lying and the falsification of history.

Or perhaps, one might say, in rationalization, since Harriet would rather eschew mention of her fixated concentration on her father, an undeserving object of such attention. The Electra motif here is similar to the less clearly expressed, but nonetheless central complex dramatized in *True Grit*, novel and film (1969), in which Mattie Ross (Kim Darby), a stubborn adolescent girl, enlists an aging marshal, Rooster Cogburn (John Wayne), to help her bring to justice the murderer of her father. She is inordinately determined to punish the killer, driving Rooster and a Texas Ranger who accompanies them sometimes to exasperation. One of the more interesting aspects of *True Grit*, clearer in the Charles Portis novel than in the more emotionally diffuse Henry Hathaway film, is the gradual transference of Mattie's

affection from her father and her dependence on the Old Gringo. The background of the narrative, becoming only a motivating plot element--to Rooster, whose "cussedness," at first repellent to the arch Mattie, gradually becomes endearing to her. Harriet Winslow, on the other hand, does not see the Old Gringo as repellent so much as she recoils from his cynicism; nevertheless, as does Mattie with Cogburn, she becomes fascinated with the Gringo and literally supplants her father with him. An interesting sidelight on *The Old Gringo* and *True Grit* is their narrative technique, as both are told in flashback (on much differing levels of sophistication, however) by their female protagonists.

The female perspective is often quite important to the elegiac Western. Just as Mattie criticizes and ironizes the action around her (especially in the novel), so Marian (Jean Arthur) in *Shane* provides a reasonable perspective on the rivalry between ranchers and homesteaders. It is she who perceives the truth about Shane's vulnerability and about his incapability of fitting into present-day society and who points up the absurdity of the hard-driving male solutions to range problems. Similarly, in *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952) Amy (Grace Kelly) acts as a balance to her husband's sense of perhaps misplaced duty by questioning the morality of violence as a solution. Such female characters are not merely stereotypical "voices of civilization" who try to restrain male depredations: more than this, they serve as surrogates for a critical perspective on the essential absurdity of the hero myth. Thus, Laurie (Vera Miles), in *The Searchers*, generally treats Edwards and Pauley in a rather indulgent manner, as if they were irresponsible adolescents who refuse to let the past alone and who thus jeopardize their present.

The presence of the past is of course at the center of the elegiac Western. Much as Mattie recalls an earlier part of her life in which she knew a heroic figure, the boy in *Shane*, Joey Starrett (Brandon DeWilde), remembers not only the heroic Shane but the passing of the heroic age with the coming of civilization; and Hallie Stoddard (Vera Miles) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* remembers, through the symbol of the cactus rose (Ray 237), both the heroism of the dead Tom Doniphon (John Wayne) and the falseness of the legend built around her husband Ranse (James Stewart), now a United States Senator. So too *The Wild Bunch* shows characters who remember a complex past, one which is shown not to be heroic but rather filled with compromises, betrayals, and errors (as in Pike Bishop's desertion of Deke Thornton). Similarly, the Old Gringo regrets his errors as a father and his work as a journalist and author--this is shown more explicitly in the Puenzo film, when he theatrically drops his collected works on the floor during a speech in Washington--but does retain positive memories of his military service as a mapmaker in the U. S. Civil War. Part of his motivation for going to Mexico is to create for himself an inverse heroic image, that is, to serve on the side of a rebellion instead of against it, as he had when fighting for the Union.

*The Old Gringo* and *The Wild Bunch* are in fact quite parallel in several respects, not the least of which is their setting in the Revolutionary period of Mexico. Both the novel by Fuentes and the film by Peckinpah employ imagery to convey the cruelty of the Revolutionary process and the out-of-place quality of heroism in such an environment. A noteworthy example is the scene in the novel in which the Federal colonel is executed by Arroyo while the wild pigs snuffle at corpses from the recent battle (78-

88); similarly, Peckinpah shows vultures—in close-up—ready for the battle which will close the film with the deaths of the Bunch. The physical quality of the desert is clearly conveyed in both media, in Fuentes' case with a cinematic technique which places elements of the general desert experience on a parallel level by means of sequential shots (16):

Sand mounts the mesquite. The horizon shimmers and rises before the eyes. Implacable shadows of clouds clothe the earth in dotted veils. Earth smells fill the air. A rainbow spills into a mirror of itself. Thickets of snakeweed blaze in clustered yellow blooms. Everything is blasted by an alkaline wind.

The novel is in such instances not far from a filmscript: is the previous passage a description of terrain or setting, or is it an indication for a prospective director for the desired *mise-en-scène*? For his part, Peckinpah uses a highly effective “flatness of perspective” to convey a similar unromanticized feel (Seydor 125).

Both *The Wild Bunch* and *The Old Gringo* feature heroes who also provoke their own deaths, as if admitting the truth of the proposition that their age is past. Pike Bishop, in *The Wild Bunch*, leads his remaining men to a warrior's death in an attempt to redeem himself for his past desertions of comrades; the other members follow him not from nihilism but from loyalty and shared heroic values (Seydor 99-100).<sup>5</sup> The death of the Gringo is similarly a statement of values, though a negative one; by burning the papers proving Arroyo's title to the Miranda land, he tries to demonstrate the worthlessness of his own career as a writer and also to allow Arroyo to free himself from his own past by parricide.<sup>6</sup> The Gringo, like Pike, dies shot in the back by a “son”—in the case of Pike, a boy who was the protégé of Mapache, the Huerta-like Federal general. Incidentally, Books, in *The Shootist*, also dies, shot in the back by a bartender whose motives are murky at best but who may have wanted the “glory” of killing a legend.

The importance attached to the death of the gunfighter or hero in the Westerns considered here causes their treatment to shade into ritual. The somber and haunting presence of Doniphon's plain coffin, the deromanticized but tragic “funeral” scene in *The Wild Bunch* (with the dead heroes borne off on the bounty hunters' horses [Seydor 134-35]); the pains taken by Mattie Ross in the novel *True Grit* to bury Rooster; and the maturely accepting attitude of Gillom (Ron Howard) in *The Shootist* toward the death of Books all exemplify the importance of such funerary set-pieces to the elegiac Western form.

One of the more striking parallels, in this respect, between *The Old Gringo* and the elegiac Western is the strangely ironic funeral procession of Jules Gaspard at the end of *Invitation to a Gunfighter*. Both the Gringo and Gaspard are voluntary outcasts from their own societies, maintaining cynical poses to hide their vulnerability and hurt idealism; both have “gone West” in search of “freedom of choice” (Mexico serves in *The Old Gringo* as the new frontier, replacing the closing West<sup>7</sup>); and both die as a result of their own provocative actions. Both also gain the affection and admiration of previously antagonistic constituencies—Winslow and the townspeople—and both are given ironically celebratory funerals. Gaspard is borne in heroic fashion on a makeshift bier carried by the now-grateful townspeople; the Gringo becomes the

surrogate father for Harriet when he is buried in her own father's empty tomb. The Puenzo film accentuates the elegiac nature of the Gringo's reburial by showing his disinterment in Mexico in a misty light, placing him seemingly into an epic or tragic realm.

One should not make the error of seeing the elegiac elements in *The Old Gringo* as positively nostalgic (as, perhaps, one could see *Ride the High Country*); if nostalgia is an element here, its core of loss is emphasized. Or it is shown as nostalgia without basis, as in the fond stories propagated by Harriet about her father. As *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* reveals the lie behind the fame of Ranse Stoddard and calls into question as well the myth of the Western hero (who, as Robert Ray has noted, is shown to be the other side of the outlaw coin [236-37]), so too *The Old Gringo* questions and criticizes the revolutionary past of Mexico—Frutos García dies a comfortable, scarcely heroic death in his house in Mexico City in 1964 (90)—while still not sparing the Porfiriato. Arroyo's fantasy about the Indians' land title is deflated by the criticisms of the Gringo concerning the lack of worth of the written word and by the inability of Arroyo to read, and is finally exploded by the Gringo's burning of the papers. The legalistic appeal by Arroyo is shown to be just as fruitless, one might suggest, as has been the sad appeal to treaties by the wronged original inhabitants of North America. The heroic myths about the U. S. Civil War are questioned by references to the ironic stories of Bierce about that war, in which its "glory" is deflated. Thus, *The Old Gringo* demonstrates its affinity less to autumnal elegies like *Ride the High Country* or to pastoral hymns like *Shane* than to more corrosive and demystificatory critiques such as *The Wild Bunch*, *Little Big Man* (1970), and, occupying a middle ground, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Like Pike Bishop in *The Wild Bunch*, the Old Gringo wishes to emend his compromised past with heroic action—however futile—and as do Pike, Tom Doniphon, and J. B. Books, he dies an outsider, only finding an ironic re-integration into the community after his death.<sup>8</sup>

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**NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> The discussion of *The Old Gringo* which follows will refer, unless otherwise indicated, to the Fuentes novel and not to the Puenzo film, which fails to capture the complexity of the novel, turning it into a romanticized Hollywood epic instead of what it actually is—a text typical of Fuentes in which characters undergo a complex doubling process and in which history and fiction are mixed.
- <sup>2</sup> The term is applied by Henry Nash Smith to the splitting of the Leatherstocking character to make it more agreeable to romantic environments. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage, 1950), 76, qtd. in Parks 38.
- <sup>3</sup> My remarks here concerning East and West parallel, in part, those of Trimmer (16-17).
- <sup>4</sup> The list of “elegiac Westerns” usually includes *Ride the High Country* (1962) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969), both by Sam Peckinpah; *Lonely Are the Brave* (1962), a contemporary-setting Western with Kirk Douglas; two films with John Wayne, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962) and *The Shootist* (Don Siegel, 1976); *Monte Walsh* (1970); and *Will Penny* (1967). Sometimes *Cat Ballou* (1965) and *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (Sam Peckinpah, 1970), comic treatments of such material, as well as the earlier *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953) and *The Gunfighter* (Henry King, 1950) are included.
- <sup>5</sup> A reasonable argument can be, and often is, made that Bishop and his gang are essentially ridiculous or absurd figures and thus that the film is nihilistic. I am in agreement with Paul Seydor that this is not the case; otherwise, how to explain the obviously heroic quality of the film? Critics may see these characters as senseless or merely ironic. I do not believe that Peckinpah did.
- <sup>6</sup> The term is Becky Boling’s (see Works Consulted).
- <sup>7</sup> See *The Old Gringo* 70.
- <sup>8</sup> I wish to acknowledge the helpful suggestions of the editorial board of *Literature/Film Quarterly* and of Professor Michael Anderegg of the Department of English at the University of North Dakota. I am also indebted to Ron Stottlemeyer for my description of the closing shot of *The Searchers*.



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