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History 201: The Western

"Men and the Wilderness"

Solid - clear opening sentence.

Next sentence used to elaborate.

Americans conquered the wilderness. With the hatchet and the plow, settlers carved out a living for centuries in the dense forests of the East and later cultivated the barren plains of the West. Yet the American vision of an infinite land of open space shattered when the census of 1890 declared the frontier closed. Suddenly claustrophobic and fearful for the future of their country, the American public, particularly men, embraced a new reverence for nature. At the turn of the century, men listened to the rising tide of environmentalists like John Muir, devoured the Westerns of writers such as Owen Wister, Willa Cather and Zane Grey, and began regarding nature as a sort of deity, a majestic wilderness that could restore them to their future power and glory. The closing of the frontier as well as the Progressive Movement provided the perfect context for the rising American Conservation Movement, as the existence of wilderness, and thus the existence of man's virtue and power, came into question.

explains a historical change

one way that change was manifest

notice that this first paragraph mentions only writers in passing and as part of a larger cultural phenomenon - the linking of the natural world to a worry about fading masculinity.

Americans had long regarded the West as a place for men to embrace "strength, truth and virtue."[1] Transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau enlisted primitivism, or the idea that civilization is wicked and that man can only find true fulfillment in nature, in their mid-1800s writing.[2] The American West was an ideal place for isolation from that civilization. Yet it wasn't until the late 19th century that the American public saw the Western wilderness as a force worth preserving. Historian Frederick Jackson Turner startled American masculinity in 1893 by

narrowing down the subject to men and nature and the West.

Also notice that this topic sentence makes a statement that the rest of the graf supports.

[1] Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1978), 72.

[2] Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2001), 47.

Notice here the citation to a book we've read and a second outside source

publishing his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." This essay defined the consequences of the closing of the frontier, the most important of which was the removal of what was known as the "safety-valve" of America—the eternal chance for the common man to move west, conquer virgin land and find a fresh start.[3] When the existence of nature became finite in reality, men deified its power through art. As preservationists like John Muir argued for the creation of national parks and conservationists like Gifford Pinchot stressed the need to consume resources responsibly, Western writers rendered depictions of nature as majestic and mighty—a force worth saving. The Western these artists created provided access to this suddenly coveted wilderness for men who were lamenting that its power was lost to them forever.

notice again the use of a secondary source to support the point - still with not a film nor novel mentioned.

Here's the big move - from cultural context (men worrying about the seeming ephemeral nature of the West to a way that they could express and alleviate that worry) into on specific form within the larger context - the nature that appears in westerns is tied to a larger set of concerns of fledgling environmentalism.

bold statement here that the western was a form of "conservation"

For early 20th century men, the Western itself is a strong argument for the conservation of the American wilderness. The Western glorified nature as the embodiment of masculine virtues. Its writers portrayed nature as masculinity in its purest form, and so by preserving the wilderness, Americans were preserving the masculine identity as well. Dominating the Western are the most striking visuals of the American West—the jarring silhouette of Monument Valley, the endless prairies of the Great Plains, the deep red wastes of the New Mexican deserts—because those are the views which men found most fulfilling; the views that exuded a timeless strength. These are scenes most Easterners had never seen; scenes to contrast with the mediocre gray of city life in an increasingly urban world. Historian Jane Tompkins writes that "Western 'nature' exists not in itself but through and for Eastern men's eyes," explaining that the myth of

and ties it one point in particular - a way to preserve masculinity.

nature as masculine strength

[3] Nash Smith, *Virgin Land*, 7.

Notice again the citation of one of our secondary sources. The paper does not reinvent the wheel but addresses the work of other scholarss.

the forces of Western nature is a reflection of the desire for certain traits, like strength and endurance.[4]

In order to fulfill this desire for a mythical world of masculine strength, contemporary writers like Cather and Grey made sure that no view in the Western was nondescript, and every instance of nature was powerful. They romanticized every description of the landscape with color, intense imagery and statements of nature's strength. In his 1912 novel *Riders of the Purple Sage*, Grey depicts the sagebrush hills of Utah as independent and forceful, a truly unique place where "Dark, lonely cedar trees…stood out strikingly," and a wall of rock "looming dark purple and stretching its solitary, mystic way" fills the background.[5] Cather describes the New Mexican desert in her 1927 novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, a phenomenally different landscape, with the same idea of strength. "The hills thrust out of the ground so thickly that they seemed to be pushing each other, elbowing each other aside, tipping each other over," she writes.[6] In both instances, elements of nature seem to have their own will, and exude the power men looked to recapture. The importance of the existence of such nature was clear; from nature strength can be drawn, and so nature cannot be allowed to be dominated.

now we're down to some basic evidence. The author has established a premise and a way of presenting an argument and has now moved onto providing specific examples from texts.

notice the introduction of the quotes

Here the author explains why this evidence is important

transition and a reference back to the argument. Point 2

Another way the nature of the Western aligned with the American Conservation Movement is its message about the isolation of the wilderness. Nature can only be powerful if it is virtually uninhabited, the Western asserts. Solitary men could venture into its wonders, but the moment civilization showed up the wilderness was no more. Wister voices this concern in *The Virginian* with his symbol of the schoolhouse. Its appearance "brought a change into the wilderness air. The feel of it struck cold upon the free spirits of the cow-punchers, and they told

an introduction to the quote

[4] Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press 1992), 77.

[5] Zane Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (New York: Forge Books 2000), 2.
[6] Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (London: Virago Press 2012), 15-16.

each other that, what with women and children and wire fences, this country would not long be a country for men."[7] Willa Cather's protagonist Latour also experiences this detrimental effect of settlement on air in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The "peculiar quality in the air of new countries vanished after they were tamed by man and made to bear harvests," Cather writes. "Parts of Texas and Kansas that he had first known as open range had since been made into rich farming districts, and the air had quite lost that lightness, that dry aromatic odor. The moisture of ploughed land, the heaviness of labour and growth and grain-bearing, utterly destroyed it."[8] Nature, like men, was powerful when left to its original state as sovereign. When put to work and thus corrupted, whether civilized inside a schoolhouse in the case of men, or bulldozed and irrigated like nature, both lose their inherent identities.

another transition and a call back to the argument - point three

Finally, the Western emphasizes the importance of the existence of the wilderness because it suggests that only by physically being in nature can men attain true masculine strength. In his 1902 novel *The Virginian*, which set a precedent for the onslaught of Western novels to come, Owen Wister showed the effect of merely dwelling in nature on man. Wister's narrator (called the Tenderfoot) hails from the East. He is educated yet incompetent (he lost his luggage on the train), well-off, and is overly concerned about his appearance. The Tenderfoot is at first off-put by the bareness of the Wyoming landscape. While in town, the Tenderfoot plays the naïve observer to the Virginian, Wister's archetypal character that embodies the masculine Western hero: a strong, brave, reticent, and capable cowboy. The Tenderfoot is obviously out of place as he comically struggles to perform a satisfactory "toilet" with the rustic amenities provided to him, contrasted with the Virginian, who was "the neatest of us" after washing up in

bringing to mind an illuminative example this time rather that the quote

[7] Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York: Empire Books, 2012), 51.
[8] Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 219.

the same trough.[9] Yet unexplainably, as he is exposed to the nature of the West, the Tenderfoot is transformed. As the duo leaves town, Wister describes the baptismal experience the Tenderfoot observes: "And in a moment we were in the clean plains, with the prairie-dogs and the pale herds of antelope. The great, still air bathed us, pure as water and strong as wine."[10] The Tenderfoot's urban, Eastern confinement is washed away, his masculinity restored, simply by surrounding himself with the mythic nature.

Transition and then another way to reinforce the entire argument.

This fantasy of nature's power to restore men's strength is ubiquitous in the Western. Zane Grey shows the same transformative power of nature as Wister in *Riders of the Purple Sage*, using the dynamic nature of multiple characters as well as vivid prose about the landscape itself to create the desired myth. After cowboy Bern Venters escapes into the wilderness, he becomes "taller, wider of shoulder, deeper chested, [and] more powerfully built."[11] He adapts to the wild, living off the land, doing heroic deeds like chasing down rustlers and becoming the patriarchal figure for Bess, a woman he meets on the sage. Grey contrasts Venters' transformation with that of Lassiter's, a gunslinger who was used to spending his nights out on the sage. Lassiter agrees to visit with ranch owner Jane Withersteen in her house and thus falls under her influence. Once the gunman is removed from nature, Grey writes, "He ain't no more Lassiter! He's lost his nerve; he doesn't look like the same feller."[12] A man without the freedom of nature and access to its power is no man at all, Grey demonstrates with Lassiter's decision not to confront the villain Tull. Venters challenges Oldring, who is his own personal enemy, after being exposed to the wild, yet Grey portrays Lassiter for much of his novel as

[9] Wister, *The Virginian* 8.
[10] Wister, *The Virginian*, 26.
[11] Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, 192.
[12] Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage*, 239.

hiding behind a woman's skirts. Venters is rejuvenated in nature, whereas Lassiter is emasculated in domestic life, Grey writes.

And finally the conclusion.

The reliance on nature for the characters of Westerns demonstrates what was truly at stake for American masculinity in the early 20th century. The complete loss of the wilderness could mean the complete loss of man's power, and so Americans had to protect that wilderness at all costs. John Muir, a conservationist whose writing had been prominent since the 1870s, led

bringing back a figure from the introduction to make the point more forcefully.

the charge by forming the Sierra Club in 1892 and bringing publicity to the cause. He rebelled against the "cruel, repressive and utilitarian tendencies"[13] of civilization, with which many Americans could identify in a world of industry, urbanization and monopolies. Along with Muir, Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot and his foresters used the Progressive Movement to push through legislation to create national parks and otherwise protect the American West. Within decades, the wilderness had changed in the eyes of the public from an enemy to be dominated and consumed to a fantastic realm where men could mythically find strength and virtue.

[13] Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 123.