



# Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth

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## **Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth** Henry Nash Smith

The spell that the West has always exercised on the American people had its most intense impact on American literature and thought during the nineteenth century. Henry Nash Smith shows, with vast comprehension, the influence of the nineteenth-century West in all its variety and strength, in special relation to social, economic, cultural, and political forces. He traces the myths and symbols of the Westward movement such as the general notion of a Westward-moving Course of Empire, the Wild Western hero, the virtuous yeoman-farmer--in such varied nineteenth-century writings as *Leaves of Grass*, the great corpus of Dime Novels, and most notably, Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History*. Moreover, he synthesizes the imaginative expression of Western myths and symbols in literature with their role in contemporary politics, economics, and society, embodied in such forms as the idea of Manifest Destiny, the conflict in the American mind between idealizations of primitivism on the one hand and of progress and civilization on the other, the Homestead Act of 1862, and public-land policy after the Civil War.

The myths of the American West that found their expression in nineteenth-century words and deeds remain a part of every American's heritage, and Smith, with his insight into their power and significance, makes possible a critical appreciation of that heritage.

## **Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth Details**

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Author : Henry Nash Smith

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## From Reader Review Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth for online ebook

### Michael says

Would need to review my grad school notes, but as I recall this was a foundational work in the history of the American West.

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### Billy Marino says

I had to review this book for class, so I might as well post it here. Also, this is my first time writing a book review in this strict of a format, so bear with my learning curve:

Henry Nash Smith analyzes how the presumably empty West shaped Americans' understanding and how this effected the literature and ideas until Frederick Jackson Turner's conception of the frontier. (4) Smith uses clear formatting setting up his argument in three "books": 1) "Passage to India," covers the manifest destiny Americans applied to economic expansion to the Pacific; 2) "The Sons of Leatherstocking," covers the transformation of early pioneers into romantic literary figures; 3) "The Garden of the World," argues the agrarian settlers that followed the pioneers were a stronger force on political thought, if not as strong of a literary character. The way literature represented the West was, "an image that defines what Americans think of their past, and therefore what they propose to make of themselves in the future." (4)

Book one is a concise analysis of how expansion Westward went from being interpreted as an economic base in trade to an, "introspective conception of empire," focused on America's manifest destiny to, "develop the trans-Mississippi region." (29)

Book two is an in-depth examination of the frontiersman in literature. The characters are taken from real men such as pioneer, Daniel Boone, or Mountain Man, Kit Carson, and romanticized to fit Eastern conceptions of society. There was love of an ideal West, called primitivism, but the characters were often too low in the social hierarchy to allow a romantic story, a crucial aspect of a novel. This was remedied by the addition of genteel qualities or characters disguised as Wild West men, such as Leatherstockings. The stories captured the "absolute" freedom of the far West but also placed characters within socially acceptable standards, which allowed, "our hero [to acquire] all their virtues, and escape all their vices." (85)

Book three examines how the politically idealized "domesticated West" that followed the frontiersmen struggled to become a popular literary conception, yet maintained a strong position in the American mind. Smith states the divergence in literature well, saying, "[t]he agricultural West was tedious; its inhabitants belonged to a despised social class. The Wild West was by contrast, an exhilarating region of adventure." (52) This exemplified the juxtaposition between desiring the excitement of the frontier and holding Eastern societal values, but romanticizing the "middle condition...[that] offered a unique opportunity for human virtue and happiness." (127) The culmination of thought is Turner's Frontier Thesis, which displaying the presentism he lauded, draws from the yeoman based myths of the "Garden of the World" while also attempting to find a new way to explain American democracy at the turn of the century.

Smith deftly uses a range of sources which he examines through historical and literary lenses. While his lack of clearly defined terms and erratic method of burying his argument is often frustrating, he makes a convincing case for the way in which literature portrayed and perpetuated the myth of the American West. Smith's book expands our historical understanding of Turner while taking a slight jab at Webb's arid-land

regionalism, making it an important piece of American West Historiography.

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## Cat says

An excellent book on several levels. I highly recommend it for all of those interested in American History, Cultural Studies and Sociology.

The purpose of this book is to demonstrate the development of the American myth of the "Garden of the World". Smith argues (persuasively) that the idea of the American continent as a garden: fertile, lush and tamed(or tameable), deeply influenced the course of American history.

As Leo Marx said in his similarly awesome "The Machine in the Garden", the brilliance of this book lies in how Smith demonstrates how ideology drives action (or, alternatively: how ideas drive behavior).

Smith divides "Virgin Land" into three parts. Part One "Passage to India" describes the initial path westward and the philosophy of the individuals who pushed for westward expansion (Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Hart Benton, Asa Whitney, William Gilpin and Walt Whitman). By way of a prologue, Smith notes that the idea of "Manifest Destiny" did not develop as soon as the settlers arrived, but rather was developed by American Philosophers and Politicians (and land speculators). In the first Part, Smith describes how the initial push westward was justified via the idea that a passage west would increase trade with the Orient. Smith notes that this idea derived from 18th century Mercantilist economic theory and was therefore "archaic" (a favorite term of Smith's in this book) from the very beginning.

The Second part of the book ("The Sons of Leatherstocking") uses the literary character of Leatherstocking as an entry point for a discussion of the development of the western hero figure in literature.

A highlight of the book comes in Chapter Ten when Smith discusses the "Dime Novel Heroine". I found his discussion illuminating.

In the third and final part of the book, Smith lays out the characteristics of American Agarianism which would come to define westward expansion after the Civil War. Smith outlines the conflict between Southern Pastoralism and North/Western "Yeoman" Agarianism and notes how the Homestead Act was singularly influenced by this second conception of American settlement. He also documents how this same philosophy of agarianism prevented later reform of the Homestead Act even after it became clear to many that the Homestead Act had failed miserably in its goals.

Smith also discusses the struggle by authors to develop authentic western "characters" and relates that struggle to the emergence of the "Garden of the World" symbol.

This really isn't the forum to tease out all the different issues presented, thoughtfully, in this classic book. I recommend it highly.

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## Mike Fink says

This is a great book about a subject with which I'm more or less obsessed. Smith follows the trajectory of a number of interrelated (and sometimes actually disparate) myths about the American West as they conspire, collide, and transform throughout the course of American history--largely 19th century American history.

Expansionism, slavery, the rise and fall of political parties, literary trends and novelties, the history of science: this book touches on a little bit of everything in the course of its argument and ends in a very satisfactory, very authoritative way. I'm going to have to read it again taking notes this time.

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### **Steven says**

Unquestionably a classic of the American Studies tradition. Smith pulls together the history, literature, and social theory surrounding certain widely held beliefs (at least among the white, male, landowning class) about western expansion and its promise of American prosperity. The novelty of studying Edenic tropes in American history and literature has long sense worn off. But what remains useful is the distinction Smith makes between Northern and Southern agrarianism during the antebellum period, the former adopting a Jeffersonian picture of the virtuous subsistence farmer and the latter pragmatizing agrarian life as a means to leisure and hereditary title. Significantly, Smith doesn't draw the line between North and South quite so sharply and emphasizes the important influence of the West with its arid expanses, lack of economic infrastructure, and lawless characters. Smith uses the Western antipode of civilization to deconstruct, and at times discount, the Edenic vision of American policy-makers and aesthetes. Part of Smith's continued popularity among American Studies and environmental scholars stems from his willingness to approach singular metaphors or myths from multiple perspectives. The idea here is that no single idea of the Garden has ever existed in America--a myth perpetuated by scholarship disproportionately devoted to New England's history and literature.

In my opinion, as well as others who've reviewed the book here on Goodreads and elsewhere, one of the great weaknesses of Smith's book has to do with his narrow sampling of classic literature (mainly Cooper with smatterings of Whitman and Melville) and a too generous incorporation of dime novels along with other minor works. The structure of the book is also a bit confusing at times as Smith moves back and forth, chapter by chapter, between antebellum and postbellum literature and history without really developing a complete picture of either. It's a short book and one (and this is SUCH a rare thing with cultural histories) that could have benefited from lengthier chapters.

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### **Rae says**

Many of the Western history books I have read mention this historian as being an important one to be familiar with...so I tackled him. I hope I will grasp his significance as I continue to read more of the newer western scholarship. I found him to be quite dry.

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### **Samuel says**

As the first published work by an "American Studies" PhD in 1950, this book holds a special symbolic place in my book shelf. Although to speak collectively of "an American" way of thinking has been continually viewed as speaking too broad and thus too narrow to be academically viable, Henry Nash Smith uses literature (such as Dime Novels and James Fenimore Cooper novels) as well as mythological figures (such as Daniel Boone and Buffalo Bill) along with traditional historic narratives of a political nature to track the American notions of "the West" and "the frontier" during the nineteenth century. He organizes his arguments into 3 sections or myths: the passage to India, the mountain man tall tales, and the garden of the world. Smith reveals rather convincingly that myths of the American West were used by politicians as a means of gaining

votes and keeping power even in the face of harsh realities. Slogans such as "rain follows the plow" and the West serving as the "safety valve" against overpopulation of cities kept America always looking to the West as a constant source of hope: commercially, socially, and politically. The agrarian ideal of a nation of yeoman farmers was never realized though it was continually sought after by many American philosophers and politicians. Overall however, the myth masked class stratification in the guise that anyone unhappy with low labor wages could move west and farm. But as any true myth, these promises were half-truths exaggerated out of proportion. I believe what is most important to take away from this reading is to understand that myths, symbols and folklore play important roles in American history and culture. It is important to keep these in our minds as we seek to study history--it is a messy (but important) endeavor.

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### **Mary says**

"The" work of cultural criticism on the American West. Nash Smith examines themes or myths that have defined how Americans think about the West - myths including that of the "mountain man" (Daniel Boone, Leatherstocking, etc.) and of the West as the "garden of the world" or an agrarian utopia. His readings of dime novels, noncanonical fiction, and other subliterate works were likely revolutionary when the book was first published in 1950. Nash Smith traces literary treatment of the West, suggesting that authors have struggled to depict the West as it really is, as they have been hampered by myths of what it should be. Nash Smith's cultural history of the West is dominated by white men - unsurprising for the academic time in which he wrote.

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### **Paul Wilner says**

Deeply researched, authoritative (if sometimes dry) exploration of the fallacies surrounding the West

Reminds me in some ways of Edmund Wilson's "Patriotic Gore," though this is more about history than literature, although literature of the period described (much of it mediocre, though others, like Whitman and Emerson decidedly not) is also included. A final dissection of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier theories is devastating, and the analysis of the tension between the utopian garden myth of agrarian Jeffersonianism and the outcome of the Industrial Revolution is smart, and still relevant. (Among other things, it helps explain, depressingly, the outcome of our most recent election, given outliers' resentment of Eastern "elites.") Henry Nash Smith was (way) ahead of his time, and this prescient work is still well worth reading.

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### **M.k. Yost says**

A fascinating take on the symbolism of the American west in the nineteenth century, though Nash may have over-simplified a few things (like the presence of Native Americans already occupying those lands).

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### **J.M. Hushour says**

This is an older, if still intriguing, study of the relationship between various views of the American west and its role in the march of American history. There's a lot to take in here: Jefferson's views of a developed agrarian gentry all the way up to Turner's theories of the Frontier and the inherent theoretical assumptions of

everything between and their ultimate failure. There is much here on the manipulation of the symbol of the west, as Eden, as safety valve, and as an organic source of true democratic development. Too bad most of them didn't take into account the effects of the industrial revolution, the rise of corporate monopolies affecting land use (and its legislation) and the concomitant rise of labor unions.

Much of Smith's argument is taken up with literary portrayals of the west and its settlers and this part is pretty darn interesting if somewhat detached from the more historiographical points. If Smith had spent a bit more time analyzing the failures of the symbolification (is that even a word?) of the west, the book's denouement would've been infinitely more fascinating.

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### **Andrew says**

A classic work that has been (rightly) critiqued thoroughly over the years, but which has nevertheless retained a freshness and power in its efforts to bring so many disciplines and sources together. And, even if the author is not always terribly sophisticated about questions of gender and class, Nash is nevertheless aware of them in ways that many of his contemporaries were not.

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### **Patrick says**

A great study of the interplay between american myths in literature and politics and social/political reality. The arguments I enjoyed the most were 1) how these myths fail us politically and 2) our lengthy inability to develop a literature that reflected the actual experience of the west. The book also reads a bit like a psychoanalysis of my imagination and is just more proof how our completely corrupted we are by literature.

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### **Michael says**

A slow slog. Way too much "American Studies" academic dithering. Authors discussed for the most part are sub-literary and unknown to the general reading public. The theme of the west and frontier, garden, and American destiny soon grows tiresome with repetition.

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### **Jeff says**

Does it matter that one might have problems with it? Were one working in its field -- yes. I'm not yet working in that field, though a fascinating field it is, and folks like Charles Olson or Sherman Paul certainly did have their bothers with it, which, were I re-reading it, I might like them to buffer. Its achievement has yet to be gainsaid.

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