Angling for Repose: Wallace Stegner and the De-Mythologizing of the American West

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Abstract
When Wallace Stegner published his first book in 1937, a stereotypical Western novel invariably included a gun-slinging cowboy hero, a near-mythical gunfight at dusk, and a formulaic, predictable plot that rarely left readers unsure of who would prevail in the end. Stegner recognized the limitations of such archetypal assumptions and sought to achieve something different with his work. In this paper, I argue that Wallace Stegner asked the nuanced questions necessary to further this nation's understanding of western archetypes and, as a result, to begin to debunk the misleading mythologies of the American West.

In this study, I look first back at the predecessors who have informed Stegner's works, the mythologies in question, and the general emergence of a western American literary canon; next I turn to Stegner's nonfiction and fiction works to examine where and how he addresses such problematic western archetypes; and finally I consider how Stegner's literary successors have been influenced by his lifelong efforts to rewrite a new, more reality-based contemporary American West.

While Stegner does have predecessors - such as writers Frank Norris and Bernard DeVoto - who began to recognize and disparage the archetypes of a glorified Old West, Stegner (1) both acknowledged and specifically cited the mythologies in his critical and historical nonfiction works, demonstrating from where they have emerged and why, and (2) attempted in his own fiction to both acknowledge and move beyond such mythologies. Through his essays, novels, and short stories, Stegner sought to draw those mythologies to the forefront and begin to dismantle them, one by one, in an effort to rewrite a more accurate portrayal of both the historical and the contemporary West.

As one looks ahead to an increasingly contemporary western American literary canon, I believe that Wallace Stegner marked an essential turning point in the canon's development; with Stegner, one learns to recognize and move beyond the mythologies that embed themselves in American language, history, and culture, and foster a literature that is rich in both history and in the diversity of today's contemporary West.

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contradictory components. He was a gentleman. Through his multiple legacies, Wallace Stegner remains the emeritus authority on the American West. He was of the region, but he also ventured beyond its borders. He dealt with racism as a national subject long before civil rights became a fashionable issue. During the early months of the Kennedy administration, he participated in discussions about the formation of a national arts policy—talks that resulted in the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities.