Power, Subversion, and Containment: 
A New Historicist Interpretation of *The Virginian* *

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The paper aims to interpret *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (1902) by Owen Wister (1860-1938) from the New Historicist theory on power. Through the textual analysis, it will reveal how power permeates in gender, social class, and religion in the text, how subversion is produced and then contained in them. Coming from the eastern middle class, the heroine, Miss Molly, challenges the patriarchal society and subverts the traditional opinion on female role with her wisdom, bravery, and self-sufficiency. Moreover, the Virginian and his class, being “the quality”, rise to be the oppressing one from the oppressed, which leads to social progress and civilization. In addition, the strict Calvinist doctrines are rejected by people in the west due to its inappropriate way of preaching and untimely contents. Such discussion cannot only shed new light on the relevant research on *The Virginian*, but also uncover the historical and social context in the 1870s of American west.

*Keywords*: New Historicism, power, subvert, contain, context

**Introduction**

New Historicism, one of the influential literary critical theories, emerged in the early 1980s. It differed from the old historicism between 1920 and 1950, for it emphasized on the interaction of history and text instead of seeing history as its context. It was influenced greatly by Foucault’s “power and discourse”, Clifford Geertzian’s “thick description”, and Louis Althusser’s ideology (as cited in CUI, 2007, p. 6). Therefore, literary texts had political functions in new historicists’ views. According to them, “texts of all kinds are the vehicles of politics insofar as texts mediate the fabric of social, political and cultural formations” (Brannigan, 1998, p. 3). Moreover, “literary texts are vehicles of power which act as useful objects of study in that they contain the same potential for power and subversion as exist in society generally” (Brannigan, 1998, p. 6). Based on it, Stephen Greenblatt, the forerunner of New Historicism, developed his idea of power and put forward two terms: “subversion” and “containment” (Greenblatt & Gunn, 2007, p. 401). And the terms are often used to refer to the “capacity of the dominant order to generate subversion as to use it to its own ends” (Montrose, 1996, p. 8).

*The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (1902) (*The Virginian* hereinafter) by Owen Wister (1860-1938)

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has never lost its popularity as an accurate, exciting picture of Wyoming in the 1870s, which were the last years of the picturesque cowboy. And literary critics have been discussing its special contribution to the development of American western fictions and cowboy novels. In fact, except for its depiction of cowboys in the west, it touched the gender, social class, and religion in its historical context. The paper would interpret the text from the New Historicist perspective, especially its theory on power, so as to shed new light to its relevant research. According to New Historicism, power relations were the most important context for texts. And Greenblatt (1982) ever claimed, “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (p. 93). Therefore, analyzed from such a view, it would reveal how power permeated in gender, social class and religion in the text, and how subversion was produced and then contained in them.

Gender

According to Brannigan (1998), “each epoch is characterized by its mode of power and its attendant cultural forms” (p. 67). The heroine, Miss Mary Stark Wood, was born in a noble and middle class family. In the 1880s of America, a young white girl like Miss Wood did not work outside. They would “go to school like gentlefolk, dressed like gentlefolk, used the speech and ways of gentlefolk” (Wister, 2010, p. 72). Only after marriage, they had their own households to run. Working was considered inferior and an emblem of lower class white women or the colored people. It was unfortunate for Miss Wood, for “just one year before she was to be presented to the world, fortune had turned her back upon the Woods” (Wister, 2010, p. 72). Because of this, Wood decided to take on a job so as to support herself instead of marrying for money. She began to give music lessons to some pupils and did embroidery. She was against the social recognition that working for a lady was stooping. And in order to oppose the prejudice and pursue her independent life, she accepted the teaching position in the wild west which was two thousand miles away from her hometown.

However, as Ramirez (2003) said: “Owen Wister was in a patriarchal society ruled by a natural aristocracy of Anglo-Saxons. And Wister’s journal and some of his early non-fiction articles all manifested such a patriarchal society” (p. 121). How did the Virginian view the coming of the female to the wild land? When he got to know Miss Wood would accept the teaching position in Bear Creek, his initial response was his suspicion on her. “What would she be doing on Bear Creek?” (Wister, 2010, p. 51). That was also the typical view of cowpunchers on female in the virgin land. Indeed, the country in the west had been a country only for men for a long time. Although some women were brought to Bear Creek, the Virginian thought women were only for housework and should be the subordinate role on society.

As the well-educated, intelligent, and independent eastern female, Miss Wood attempted to subvert such convention and recognition. When she and the Virginian got to know each other on the first formal situation, Miss Molly tried to gain the upper hand in the conversation. “But Molly had already received enough broadsides for one day. She could allow no more of them, and she took herself capably in hand…. She knew that she had scored at last, and that this day was hers” (Wister, 2010, p. 103). She intended to dominate their relation with her pride, knowledge, and self-sufficiency. And she even told the Virginian, “I’ve always wanted to be a man” (Wister, 2010, p. 103). It was obvious that she was struggling to have the equal rights with men, even surpass them. Miss Molly could be regarded as the representative of new women near the end of the 19th century, who desired the independence of her sex.
Moreover, Miss Molly was resourceful and she rescued the Virginian when he was wounded by Indian near the spring. She even loaded the pistol bravely in order to protect both of them. At that moment, she was the protector while the Virginian was the dependent. Her behavior subverted the traditional opinion on female role, which could be regarded as the rebellion to the patriarchal society. Yet her subversion was contained by her true feeling to the hero in that she married the Virginian and became his deeply beloved wife finally. She became the subordinate role in the marriage relationship again. Fortunately, “by that time he was an important man, with a strong grip on many various enterprises, and able to give his wife all and more than she asked or desired” (Wister, 2010, p. 385). Molly’s independence and bravery gained comfortable and happy life for her, which encouraged women from traditional middle class to pursue independent new life at the turn of 19th century in America.

Social Class

Owen Wister was born in a family of comfortable means and high social position, in which his father was physician and his mother was daughter of a famous actress. So he was one of the aristocrats. He graduated from Harvard in 1882. As Humphreys (2010) said, “Wister wrote from his position as an upper-class Anglo-American male, whose list of friends included Roosevelt” (p. 122). Yet, with the development of industrialization after the Civil War, monopoly capitalism came into being, which led to great changes in social classes. The American eastern aristocrats and the former middle class declined gradually with the emergence of monopoly capitalist class. Though such change impacted Wister greatly, he accepted it and predicted the union of classes against the historical background.

Miss Wood came from the eastern middle class while the Virginian the lower working class in the text. In order to make up the gap between them, education and learning were the best methods. Therefore, the Virginian began to read classic books from Miss Wood. And they often discussed about the plot, characters in the classics. Moreover, he decided to “watch her ways and learn… stand still, Monte… I can learn a lot more than the kids on that…” (Wister, 2010, p. 105). In all, he tried to learn to behave like a nobleman. Their marriage at the end of the novel signified the union of two white classes successfully. On the other hand, the farmers in the wild west built a schoolhouse and chose the schoolmarm seriously. Mr. Taylor asked help from the narrator, an easterner, to judge whether Miss Wood was well-educated from the letter she wrote to Mrs. Balam before they decided the teaching position. Farmers in the west hoped their kids could accept the qualified eastern education, which would help them become the members of middle class of Anglo-American.

Among the same class members, the Virginian rose to be the oppressing one from the oppressed with his bravery and intelligence. The Virginian was appointed as the deputy foreman in the shipment of cattle to Chicago. Yet, on the return trip a lot of cowboys were lured by Trampas to find gold and they intended to get off the train in Rawhide. When the train had to stop near Rawhide due to broken bridge, he prepared a meal of frogs’ legs for his crew and other passengers. People around him admired him for his wisdom in meals. He improvised the story of frogs business and deceived Trampas’s followers into believing the big fortune that frogs would bring. Yet the Virginian finally ridiculed Trampas and said, “Frawgs are dead, Trampas, and so are you” (Wister, 2010, p. 154). In this way, he exposed his rival to be “a blind adventure” (Ramirez, 2003, p. 155). He made all of Trampas’ followers return to Sunk Creek. As Slotkin explained,

The ultimate stakes of the “game” between Trampas and the Virginian have to do with “the nation” itself. If the
Virginian and his class triumph, progress and civilization will be achieved; if Trampas and Shorty triumph, the ‘equality’ in power will reverse the course of progress. (Ramirez, 2003, p. 159)

According to the text, “All America is divided into two classes—the quality and the equality” (Wister, 2010, p. 113). “Let the best man win, whoever he is” (Wister, 2010, p. 113). That guaranteed the right of best man to succeed, who would rise from the equality. And it echoed the American dream in which one could achieve higher social position through one’s hard work. Yet, “the quality” was the natural ruling class. And the Virginian had proved himself a part of it. He beat Trampas and killed him finally, which supported the supremacy of the “quality”. Therefore, Wister (2010) also thought “equality is a great big bluff” (p. 111).

Religion

At the end of the 19th century, there were schools of religion, such as Christianity, Mormonism, Catholism, and Islamism. And the religious pluralism came into being. Yet, when the virgin west land was developed, it was “a desolate and mainly godless country” (Wister, 2010, p. 171) and there were no churches of any faith near Bear Creek. In order to spread the religion to the new land, some parsons came to preach. Judge Henry, who represented the ruling class in the text, welcomed parsons from different places warmly. The ruling class needed the religion in order to consolidate its domination. Yet, religion would not be accepted by natives if it laid supremacy upon them and did not “treat others as brothers” (Wister, 2010, p. 175).

The parson, Dr. Macbride, was the propagator of religion. His coming to Bear Creek indicated the spread of Christianity in the land and he brought the strict Calvinist doctrines. Yet, his behavior was not suitable. He had the “forceful personality” (Wister, 2010, p. 165) and he was “a vigorous, sincere, dominating man, full of the highest purpose” (Wister, 2010, p. 165). Judging from his appearance, the Virginian thought he would not be a qualified minister. The narrator also thought so and comment,

… but whatever his creed, I already doubted if he were the right one to sow it and make it grow in these new, wild fields. He seemed more the sort of gardener to keep old walks and vines pruned in their antique rigidity. (Wister, 2010, p. 168)

Moreover, the contents of his sermon were untimely, even grotesque obsolete according to the narrator in the text, for he overemphasized the sin and damnation, and stated that the creed might not save them even if they accepted it because it was doomed “before Adam was shaped” (Wister, 2010, p. 183). In the narrator’s view,

Like himself, like all mankind, they were invisible dots in creation; like him, they were to feel as nothing, to be swept up in the potent heat of his faith. So he thrust out to them none of the sweet but all the bitter of his creed, naked and stern as iron. Dogma was his all in all, and poor humanity was nothing but flesh for its canons. (Wister, 2010, p. 184)

As a matter of fact, the Calvinist doctrines impacted the Americans greatly when the nation was first founded. Yet with the development of industrialization and widespread of railway construction in the west, the economy developed fast. More and more people became wealthy because of their outstanding business acumen or good luck. The strict Calvinist doctrines could not meet the needs of people near the end of the 19th century. Some people began to subvert such religion, including the Virginian. He fooled Dr. MacBride into ministering the whole night to his “newly” converted soul, which inevitably irritated the parson and urged him to leave. Dr. MacBride’s failure in preaching showed his wrong ways of gaining supremacy and inflexible Christian virtues.
were not accepted by people in such historical background. According to Ramirez (2003),

The Virginian wins a leadership role and the respect of the ranch hands by understanding them, treating them fairly, and proving himself their superior, whereas the parson fails to gain their respect by assuming a false position of dominance based on titles and degrees rather than superior ability or wisdom. (p. 162)

Therefore, the subversion of the Virginian to Dr. MacBride showed that most cowpunchers rejected the strict Calvinist doctrines due to its inappropriate way of preaching. Though the ruling class needed religion to consolidate its domination in the west in the 1880s, the contents of religion should be reformed and follow the development of society in the historical context.

**Conclusion**

New historicist argued that

... literature does have powerful effects on history, and vice versa, and have paid considerable attention in their work to the effects of literature in both containing and promoting subversion, and to instances of state and hegemonic control over cultural expression. (Brannigan, 1998, p. 4)

By depicting the female, social class’ change and religion in the 1880s of American west, Owen Wister revealed how power permeated in these aspects and then how the subversion were contained, which helped to consolidate the ruling of the nation and promoted the social development. The heroine, Miss Wood, subverted the traditional social recognition on female position and role from middle class. And her containment by social convention brought her happy life finally, which inspired new women to pursue the independent life near the end of the 19th century. The union between lower working class and middle class among Anglo-American was inevitable for the social development. And education was the best way to narrow the gap between the classes. More importantly, the quality would rise to the ruling class. In regard to the beliefs, the strict Calvinist were subverted by Western people in the virgin land due to its inappropriate way of preaching and obsolete contents, yet it would be contained by the ruling class because it helped them to consolidate the domination. In all, *The Virginian* had its special historical importance in American literature history except for its contribution to cowboy fictions.

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