

Citation information. *in esse: English Studies in Albania*. Volume 4, Issue 1, Page 107-124.
ISSN 2078 – 7413.

The Creation of the Modern Cowboy Myth: *The Virginian* and *Shane* (Film Version)

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Abstract

The American West has been mythologized for its uniqueness, endless economic opportunities and the decisive role it has played in shaping the American character and democracy (Turner's Thesis). The eventual rise of the frontier hero, based on Daniel Boone's legend and Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, kindled even further the eager Easterners' curiosity about the region they could only read or dream about. That interest, in fact, gave rise to dime novels in the second half of the nineteenth century which "exploited" such a golden opportunity to reap material success by fantasizing larger-than-life fictional heroes and mythologizing the deeds of real pioneers like Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill Cody, Wild Bill Hickok, Calamity Jane, to name a few. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the West had begun to urbanize and lose its long-held charm, it was Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) which came to the rescue of the western mythology by depicting a timeless and unique topography where the virtue was rewarded and the evil punished. In fact, *The Virginian* established the modern classic Western hero, who, with slight alterations, survived well into the mid-twentieth century before being taken up by the most distinguished and revealing work of the era, i.e. Jack Schaefer's *Shane* (1949) in which the West is depicted at its most imperative and transitional period right before the domestication and settlement. What's more, *Shane*, which was made into a very successful film by G. Stevens in 1953 starring Alan Ladd, depicts the Western hero as a gunman who turns to violent actions in order to restore normalcy and a painless passage for settlement before vanishing forever where he belongs, that is, in the popular imagination.

Keywords: *American West, Western, Modern Western, cowboy, gunman.*