

Introduction

The family is crucial for both the narrative strategies and ideological concerns of the Western genre. The plot variant tracing the relations between the Western hero and different family members is one among a plethora of ways in which the genre has addressed the subject. Despite being an important theme of the Western, however, and despite the attention that scholars have paid to the genre's preoccupation with identity politics and the issues of femininity and masculinity with which the motifs of family life are naturally connected, the family does not feature prominently in existing Western/frontier scholarship.

The Western plot often revolves around a broadly defined problem of heroic intervention into a family/community situation, and the ways in which intervention affects family life tests the social rules at large. For example, a change of a family situation can trigger the Western plot, as with the vengeance variation, which often begins with the death of a beloved kin. Alternatively, the hero can provide a foil for the family patriarch, which leads to a reconsideration of the latter's authority. The family as represented in the Western also embodies a variety of other ideological ambiguities. For one, it represents the norms of settler colonialism and stands for the values of American civilization, and thus constitutes the core of the social order to be protected by the Western hero. Consequently, the family sanctions the morally dubious but socially necessary actions to be undertaken by the hero, and yet the hero's nomadic nature is essentially at odds with the family's longing for permanence. As a result of this, the hero may help quench or aggravate generational conflicts. It must also always be born in mind, however, that frontier mythology also signifies a teleological process in the course of which American civilization expands beyond its temporary margins, and the resettlement of families is an important factor behind this process. As a result the contact between the two respective spheres of human experience,

epitomized by the Western hero and the family, inevitably produces a wide variety of thematic tensions.

These tensions are often reflected in the genre's constructions of gender. This thematic dimension of the Western can be derived from the myth of the frontier that centers on masculine dominance. The narratives of Hollywood's "Wild West", and other frontier fictions that are not generically Western, are typically held as masculine spaces. While the placement of the (predominantly white) male in the center of the myth has typically entailed the subordination of the female voice, such a simple schema of dependence is easily undermined by family subplots which immediately point to relational structures of power. This has the potential to liberate the female voice, which is then able to renew the narrative form. It can be argued, therefore, that the hero may introduce an alternative perspective on women's submissiveness and the possibility of their liberation within existing and ever developing social structures.

The articles collected in the present special issue of the *Papers on Language and Literature* seek to centralize focus on the family. That they concentrate on films made after the year 2000 might falsely suggest that it is contemporary filmmakers who have a particular interest in how the Western genre connects its constructions of gender to the problem of the family. As a matter of fact, numerous examples of classic Westerns that the contributors have referred to in order to trace the evolution of the genre's crucial tropes prove that the family has always been one of its main concerns. Equally, the theme of the family migrates across genres, and some of our contributors focus on films not obviously Western. Consideration of the hybridization of elements and tropes from numerous genres may result in an extremely porous genre map *and* ask us to stretch our understanding of perceived limits usual configurations, but ultimately enriches and renews the Western by reminding us of how much the dynamics of the family—fraught as they may be—ultimately matter.

The diverse approaches to the theme of the family, as represented by the articles gathered here, testify to the complexity of the subject in question as well as to the singularity with which individual films handle it. Generic solutions in the Western's treatment of family life create a whole spectrum of variations. While the nuclear family seems to be the focus of most of the essays, this form of family organization provides a frame of reference and a point of departure for symbolic reinterpretations of the family. For example, the vertical hierarchy of the nuclear family can be replaced by a horizontal familial structure, such as sisterhood, or can be shown as a functional entity within an extensive domain of kinship. What is more, family relations emanate onto larger environments and redefine the existing variety of interpersonal ties. The presence, often rather conspicuous because of cultural conditioning, of such family-like ties outside families prove that the family is a powerful vehicle for symbolization. Therefore, it comes as no accident that family themes often feature prominently in Western scenarios that foreground some kind of intercultural tension.

Contemporary filmmakers' continuing preoccupation with the place of the family in several variants of the Western/frontier plot—including hybrids—can be seen as a reflection of the cinema's larger tendency to explore the historical past in ways that carry contextual implications for the present time or—conversely—to reinterpret the past by looking at it through the lenses that the sensibilities of the contemporary era suggest. Family life represents a space wherein the tensions between intimate longings and social imperatives are the most apparent, which enables a cinematic examination of wider cultural consequences of the changes—often very subtle—in men's and women's perceptions of their own and other characters' gender in a given period. At the same time, the family as a theme in the Western fulfills a fundamental role in eliciting the audience's emotional response because—since every viewer has an experiential basis to relate to the problem of family life—the family never functions in film merely as a historical or cultural abstraction.