Steers, Queers and Pioneers

Elaine P Lennon, Dr
On 28 April 1973 in Oklahoma City, Barbara Stanwyck was inducted into the Hall of Fame of Great Western Performers in the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. Her regular co-star Joel McCrea presented her with the Wrangler Award and a portrait was commissioned for the occasion. It was a tribute in recognition of her services to the cause of the western film genre, in which she had made such a stunning impact over her lengthy career, but especially during the 1950s when she shot seven westerns, and in the late 1960s, when her role as the powerful matriarchal figure, Victoria Barkley, dominated TV screens in The Big Valley. The film western had made a particular space for women in the 1950s: the rhetoric, both narrative and visual, expanded and so it seemed did the genre’s psychological spectrum. However, the representation of women in Westerns has always posed major questions: what do they represent dramatically and ideologically? Are they just adjuncts to the male protagonist? Can they ever carry a film by themselves? (And - can they shoot a gun?) Complicating the issue for our understanding of the issue is the problem presented by the star persona and its interaction with the narrative subtext. Frank Capra, one of Barbara Stanwyck’s greatest collaborators and directors, once said of her that she was “the greatest emotional actress the screen has yet known” and it was with his guidance that her attractive yet somehow discomfiting intensity was scaled back to fit the limits of the film frame convincingly in a number of genres and in a variety of character types.

In the early part of her screen career Stanwyck had non-exclusive contracts with both Warner Bros. and Columbia Pictures and eventually graduated to glamour roles but her most persuasive performance of the era was in Annie Oakley (Stevens, 1935), her first western and a tremendous boost after some dull years at Warners. She gave a great deal of herself to the legendary frontier character, ploughing that fabled performative dedication into the tale of the female cowboy but she also mastered the art of controlling horses and learned how to achieve the affect of gunplay. It would stand to her. Two years later she would earn her first Academy Award nomination for her performance in Stella Dallas (Vidor, 1937). Her most perfect performance for Capra was perhaps in Meet John Doe (1941), which deftly combined her sweetness with a powerful subtlety; but she also excelled in several thrillers and comedies. Her versatility left some directors in awe. However it was partnered with Fred MacMurray in Double Indemnity (Wilder, 1945) where her devastating powers were unleashed in a cynical tale of debasement. Her personal favourite of her films was to follow a year later. My Reputation (Bernhardt, 1946) was a women’s picture, outlining the social difficulties facing a young attractive widow and mother who does not want to conform to expectations. Stanwyck’s own life was taking a turn against the tide as the next decade commenced – returning to the genre in which she had made an impression years earlier – the western. Her look – wide cheekbones framing gimlet eyes; a long, aquiline nose leading to an attractive pout resulting from an untreated overbite which helped her speak with both upper and lower sets of teeth visible if she wanted, lending a vicious sweetness to her disguise, a smile concealing a grimace or vice versa – combined to give the perception of an innocent; but with merely graduated facial movement, Stanwyck could suggest dangerous depths and threatening force. It was the perfect mask with which to take on roles in the most masculine of genres in the decade to come and a wonderful platform for her seemingly boundless expressivity.
Stuart Kaminsky says that “Genre helps us see the unique properties of individual works by permitting comparison of these works with others of the same basic type.” He continues, “the roots of genre are not solely in the literary tradition but in the fabric of existence itself.” (1977: 12) Ken Dancyger cautions that:

when we speak of structure in genre, implicitly the question devolves to plot or character layer or both, or to what proportion of each is appropriate in each genre. In order to understand structure in a meaningful way, it’s best to link the issue of structure to the dramatic arc of a genre. (Dancyger, 2001: 65)

Any screenplay consists of a number of variables or story elements which nonetheless carry the story’s spine: a definite profession for the hero; a recognisable flaw in the hero which is related to that profession or situation; an event which forces the hero to choose between the flaw and an opportunity presented in relationship with same profession/situation; and a fresh approach to this angle, coupled with a sense of dramatic irony arising from the relationship between the major story event or catalyst and the hero’s profession/situation. In any well written screenplay the audience is affected by the hero’s response to the change in their circumstances and we respond to the character’s actions as they attempt to reinstate the status quo which has been disrupted. We might say that, in layman’s terms, what matters, matters, in screen storytelling. The western genre itself is a description of the winning of that part of the United States in a limited period (usually 1865-1890) and therefore the context for its critique usually refers to its specificity as historical representation, the verisimilitude of its reconstruction and the value of the contribution that the re-imagining of the west makes to generic filmmaking. This invariably calls up questions of ideological formation and the material basis for the west itself, a conquest and sovereignty that has frequently been presented as a binary opposition of shifting ideological antinomies as explored by Jim Kitses: Desert and Garden, West and East, uncivilised and civilised, the past and the future, and so forth (Kitses, 1969: 11). A more complex reading involves questions of socio-economic forces. However the interplay with contemporary audiences and therefore the modern also presents a mode of nostalgia,
which reflects back upon the time in which the respective films are made and exhibited: in other words, they combine to produce a myth.

Adapted by Charles Schnee from the Niven Busch novel, a freewheeling adaptation of that very mythogenic source, Dostoyevsky’s *THE IDIOT*, *The Furies* (1950) was a project nurtured by Anthony Mann. Set in 1870s Mexico, it has a number of pivotal generic archetypes which owe their origins to Greek tragedy in this overwhelming story of patriarchal power, rage, envy, greed and trauma. Busch had earlier earned notoriety as the writer of Howard Hughes’ infamous *Duel in the Sun* (Vidor, 1946) aka ‘Lust in the Dust,’ so this loose adaptation of a tragedy with Oedipal overtones was of a piece with his earlier avocations. As Blake Lucas puts it, he “…gave his stories a basis in modern psychology and linked them to the great dramas of antiquity, and … he was one of the first to thrive when the post-war western turned to specifically adult subjects.” (Lucas in Kitses and Rickman, 1998: 315). Kitses’ reading of Anthony Mann also finds that his “response to the western was not a response to history … but to its archetypal form, the mythic patterns deeply imbedded in the plots and characters of the genre that can shape and structure the action” (58). More than this, Kitses finds that Mann views the family as the repository of “the highest good, the source of all evil.” (61). Thus Busch and Mann’s predilections and interests dovetailed neatly with each other in the form of *The Furies*.

Her father’s daughter: the Stanwyck-Huston face-off

The opening of *The Furies* commences with a scrolled written introduction, locating us in the Southwest and thereby specifying the importance of the ranch, on the edge of Mexico with the desert at its frontier and the population constantly ebbing at its borders. The ranch itself bears the title name, unlike the book, which refers to the property as Birdfoot and commences with general comments about malign influence. The novel details the breakdown of the father’s marriage with Vance’s mother because of an interracial affair and explains the lack of maternal affection in her childhood. It is clear in the novel that Vance has had an affair with Juan Herrera (Gilbert Roland in the film) but they are just friends from childhood in the screen adaptation, albeit with an extraordinarily powerful sexual attraction and a kiss that frames the beginning and end of their relationship as adults ‘the kiss of a good friend.’ TC’s two-year sojourn away has meant he has missed his wife’s funeral and her bedroom is preserved just as she left it. He offers Vance the ranch on condition that she finds a husband of whom he approves. Thus the film’s setup deviates somewhat from the novel, with Greek tragedy now inscribed into the very earth that it is intended Vance will inherit.
The film was partly shot on location in Arizona and all the interiors were shot at Paramount Studios on Melrose Avenue. It boasts Mann’s usual signature – a formal dynamism within the shot, sculpted from noir-style imagery; quick cutting on action; deep chiaroscuro lighting coupled with complex interior production design; complex low angle shots to emphasise drama both external and internal; and a strong focus on positioning the characters to dominate drama within the frame so that power relations can be visually comprehended. The grammar of the film’s language expresses the film’s internal dramatic co-ordinates and deploys its emotional geography: visually, framing is dominated by the major character in each sequence, regularly cornered by some aspect of architecture, compared with a portrait or squashed by the mountainous backdrop, riding left to right in a formation that goes diagonally down the frame in a compelling drive to shape the forceful forward motion of the storytelling, all punctuated by the booming, overwrought orchestral score.

Vance takes aim at Flo with her mother’s scissors

A protagonist (or hero, if indeed the protagonist is heroic) is the driving force of any story. In the Aristotelian formulation, ‘we are what we do.’ “Character,” he states, “gives us qualities, but it is in our actions – what we do – that we are happy or the reverse.” (Aristotle, 1920: 37) Whereas Aristotle prioritises plot in story construction (he calls it the soul of the tragedy), Lew Hunter reminds us that “character and plot must intertwine.” (Hunter, 1993: 81-82). And, advises Lajos Egri, “If we wish to know the structure of conflict, we must first know character. But since character is influenced by environment, we must know that too. It might seem that conflict springs spontaneously from one single cause, but this is not true. A complexity of many reasons makes one solitary conflict.” (Egri, 1946: 136). In other words it is the gap – or lack – between what the character wants and what the character needs that creates narrative motion. It is the protagonist’s desire that provides the drama’s motor.

Whereas Aristotle’s analysis of drama focuses exclusively on plot and action, it is true to say that what grips an audience is character, a fact that Egri emphasises to expose the structural tenets of dramatic writing:

There must be something to generate tension, something to create complication, without any conscious attempt on the playwright’s part to do so. There must be a force which will unify all parts, a force out of which they will grow as naturally as limbs grow from the body. We think we know what that force is: human character, in all its infinite ramifications and dialectical contradictions. (Egri: xvi)
He continues that

…all that is required of a well-constructed premise: character, conflict, and conclusion. (Egri, 1946: 8)

Thus we see that the formal structure governing the narrative force of *The Furies* derives from the desire of Vance (Stanwyck) for Rip Darrow (Wendell Corey, Stanwyck’s co-star in that year’s *The File On Thelma Jordan*, Siodmak) a man who has a penchant for violence towards her despite his superficial civility; and the wedge that her desire drives between herself and her father, TC (Walter Huston) who wants to maintain full control of The Furies with neither interloper nor squatter. The rancher’s daughter is a stock figure in the western but rarely foregrounded as here. The desire overall in the film – the narrative substance providing the story’s motor - is that of control. This is emphasised one hour or so into the film, when the sequence finally brings out the issues that have now come between Vance and TC: embodied in the figure of an ambitious older woman, Flo Burnett (Judith Anderson), clearly out to get The Furies and TC’s money. Vance states to her brother in the film’s first ten minutes that she never understood her mother/has never let her father best her. This is the narrative rhyme on which the film’s spine is predicated. We further learn that T.C. trades in his own currency, TCs (IOUs); and we learn later in the story that her father needed other women because her mother was a lady. When Flo arrives she has the appearance of a lady but is actually a woman (her open indications of a physical relationship with TC proves that and horrify Vance). When Vance is rejected by Rip for misreading his signals and he agrees to a payoff of $50,000 from TC, TC embraces his daughter with the words “Welcome home!” Thus, Vance’s narrative journey means besting her father on his own terms whilst learning how to be both a lady and a woman, donning the refinements of the former whilst acquiring the business savvy of the latter. It requires sacrifice and a wrath that is written in the ranch’s name, a canny narrative strategy presaging tragedy and vengeance, tied into the earth itself. The Herreras’ standoff takes place in a mediaeval-style citadel high on a rock face from which they regularly push boulders at the enemy, linking the story’s power with mythical characters and accreting the force of the lush visuals. The fact that Vance links with them and leads the charge against her father and his enforcers lends weight to the elemental forces in the drama, punctuated at regular intervals by the bellowing mocking laughter of TC, a classic self-made man and total bully.

TC imitating his own portrait
Director Anthony Mann said of westerns that “… a woman is always added to the story because without a woman the western wouldn’t work” (Cook in Kitses and Rickman, 1998: 293); on the other, Mann’s work is always structured as a spectacle designed to have the man as the desired object and therefore operates as a kind of homoerotic voyeuristic spectacle. (Willemen in Kitses and Rickman: 211) Therefore, casting a star as intense as Stanwyck in such an outrageous Oedipal scenario opposite an equally aggressive actor playing her father, was doubly impressive. This was the role that would ease Stanwyck into a new phase in which she could ameliorate her formidable powers, creating a showcase for a dramatic bifurcate acting opportunity – displaying a business acumen and capacity for physical action in which she can easily duke it out with the boys; whilst also donning the garb of a lady in a phase of performative femininity and trading up her father’s IOUs (“my own legal tender!”) so that they rebound on his cattle deal in the most spectacular fashion possible in order to best him after he hangs Juan Herrera. Señora Herrera (Blanche Yurka) has the last laugh however (and literally) when she shoots TC in the back – the final twist in the narrative knife for this terrible old bully. A woman scorned is nothing compared with a mother deprived of her eldest son. Ironically TC has just asked Vance and Rip to name their first-born for him – in this narrative, a life taken is replaced with a life presumed to be given at a later date (another of TC’s TCs). This Oedipal scenario is also predicated on the assumptions of the time: that the masquerade of masculinity must ultimately be sacrificed in a drama of containment in which the female hero is changed into traditional women’s clothes and bears children in a family structure. The assumption here is that she will bear a male child – and repeat the phallic power structure underwriting her own temporary position as heir. Recuperating the feminine by the conventions of the time is the underwriting strategy of even the most radical of western themes.

If we specifically refer to its representation of women with regard to the ‘truth’ of women’s experience in the west, the intersection of representation in the western in this pivotal cultural and social era, the 1950s, resonates more than ever. Bazin writes of “the great epic Manicheism which sets the forces of evil over against the knights of the true cause” (Bazin, 1992:145) and he identifies woman as the force for good. If we apply this reasoning to The Furies, however, we come up with a rather different interpretation. For the western is a genre now capable of dispensing to its audience a sense of moral ambiguity. In other words by the early 1950s it has become a more mature entity, distinguished by its adult approach to material and more invested in its own evolution as dramatic form. The code identified by Warshow
as that by which the Westerner abides is not confined to male characters, he (or she) openly carries weapons and is disposed to dispensing justice on the open range. Stanwyck’s character here defies Warshow’s concept of the woman as the centre of a peaceable community and civilising influence: she herself is the drama’s principal agent of action, the source of the disruption of the status quo and its reinforcement at the conclusion.

Pounded by boulders at the Herreras’ citadel

Robert Corber sets out a template by which Lesbianism in its various iterations can be read through performativity, narrative and nuance (Corber, 2011) and it is this idea to which we now turn. The transgressive nature of Stanwyck’s roles in the 1950s occupied a space at a particular cultural moment widely discussed elsewhere: the return to the domestic sphere of a newly empowered female generation following the conclusion of World War II; the emergence of the cult of ‘Momism’; the subversion of the notion of ‘home’ as a triumph of the social instead recognisably the seeding place of newly popular psychiatric ailments; the relativity of femaleness. All of these were aspects of representation which Hollywood struggled to depict throughout this era. The western became the genre which was somehow able to provide powerful roles for women in an acceptable action format whereby violence was permitted in the struggle for self-defence and that of the home or ranch. Breeding wasn’t just confined to women, it was about animal husbandry and money and breeding children, property and land rights and inheritance.

Power is expressed through the vivid dialogue which is multi-layered and expressed in a number of different registers, all an echo of the powerful, charismatic, double meaning that is TC Jeffords himself. When Vance first meets Rip Darrow after he appears uninvited to Clay’s wedding, she takes an immediate fancy to him because her father despises him and she dances him onto the floor. Their conversation has three aspects: business, quipping and then sexualised banter. This focus immediately conveys Vance’s imitative qualities, taking over where her father leaves off: she has learned from his example, and understands that to be a woman in a man’s world she has to emulate masculine qualities – or die like her mother, a memory embalmed in a bedroom left the way it was before she died. TC never came home because he couldn’t cope with anything he owned slipping away. Vance has not reckoned on competition from another, living, breathing woman, however. We understand from Vance’s behavioural habits that she has none of the devious, feminine guile possessed by Flo, the older woman: “I don’t know how to fight her!” Vance tells her brother Clay, who is concerned for his sister’s predicament as the
rightful heir to the ranch yet who is apparently doomed to a long trip to Europe and an occasional visit to her own home while Flo makes over their mother’s bedroom.

This scene is not just about plot propulsion, it is about character revelation and it is here that we duly acquire sympathy for Vance – she just doesn’t know how to behave with or to control other women. She needs to learn. Linda Palmer asserts: “Well-crafted supporting characters allow the audience to see a hidden aspect of the leading character, or help to clarify the leading character’s motivation. They can convey exposition in an entertaining way.” (Palmer, 1998: 109) In casting any film it is the supporting characters who help us understand how we feel about the protagonist – and here Judith Anderson (who terrorized Joan Fontaine in Rebecca, 1940) terrifies the audience as much as she does Vance. It might be worth remembering that, whilst not widely known at the time, Anderson was in fact, along with Stanwyck, rumoured to be Lesbian, and therefore she was, as a character actor, regularly placed in roles which required (as Robert Corber reminds us, and according to Hollywood’s own contemporary perception of normative sexuality) a certain frisson of fear and unknowability. She excels as Flo, whom Vance then scars with a thrown scissors, damaging her very particular type of femininity, leaving her with a gash on her cheek and a permanently weeping left eye. Anderson had famously played Medea on Broadway in the recent past (and won a Tony for her performance), feeding into Busch’s ideas regarding the incorporation of Greek tragedy in psychological tales of inheritance, passion and greed. It also formed a basis for Mann’s own understanding of how western drama should play out. That sense of theatricality is also evoked with the staircase on which so much intrafamilial anxiety is staged: it is the platform on which Vance watches her father play around with Flo; where she has it out with him over her own relationships as the rain pounds the window pane on the half-landing; where she watches her father’s homecoming before he hands her a desultory set of old-lady pearls in advance of her true gift of real jewellery. It is the vantage point from which Vance assesses her situation as the world falls apart around her. These staircase scenes are a replication of the many scenes of mis/recognition that populate the woman’s film. Doane says it is this space “which articulates the connection between the familiar and the unfamiliar, or between neurosis and psychosis.” (Mary Ann Doane, 1987:135-6)
The Greek furies of course punished the most egregious crimes of all—matricide and patricide. In the film Vance clearly holds her father responsible for her mother’s death—even if she never understood her. Her action against her ‘replacement’ mother in the form of Flo, the ‘woman’ who appears to be a ‘lady,’ is then a more straightforwardly readable act of violence. The theme in the title is also inscribed in Vance’s protective attitude towards the Herreras, as an ethical stance or even an idealistic position, which otherwise would make no sense in the context of keeping her property one of a piece and regaining total control. It also explains Vance’s vigilance towards her father’s vicious character: in her eyes he has murdered both her mother and her lover, a variation on the story of Orestes, who is at the heart of the myth. The Furies is a story of retribution for crimes against the natural order. Vance is therefore an angel of vengeance.

In a change to the trajectory of the classic realist text, the woman’s contested role and her desire does not result in the formation of the heterosexual couple, which is usually the man’s decision, rather its destruction, when Juan, her natural companion, her equal and at the same time her adversary, is hanged at her father’s insistence. Thus the oedipal scenario at play results in the triumph of male desire over female desire and the woman’s agency is dissipated, resulting in what Laura Mulvey calls the splitting of the hero: “Here two functions emerge, one celebrating integration into society through marriage, the other celebrating resistance to social demands and responsibilities, above all those of marriage and family, the sphere represented by woman.” (Mulvey, 1981, unpaginated.) Neither character is hero or villain, both are. The ‘doubling’ effect therefore is irrelevant since both father and daughter could be said to be both figures, at various junctures in the narrative. Neither could be said to personify or even to uphold the law, either. “The female spectator’s fantasy of masculinization is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes.” Mulvey may be writing about quite a different film, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (Ford, 1962); but The Furies similarly boasts protagonists whose paths do not easily cross and in which the role-playing connotes questions of queerness, inappropriate sexual desires and transgression. This is a family where the sole child is an adult woman who is resolutely unmarried and has what might be termed male ambitions. She appropriates the outward affectations of maleness in order to fit in and express her ambitions, which are traditionally male and explained in the novel at least by her mother’s distance. She dresses appropriately for her tasks. She simultaneously desires and refuses marriage because it is refused her through Rip’s more significant desire for the Darrow Strip and therefore she resists integration into a world of biological expectation, at least at first. She dons women’s garb and wiles in order to re-establish her actual self which has been camouflaged with too much maleness and not enough female intuition: she rises to the top in business because she cultivates a banker’s wife and learns how to trade her father’s IOUs: $140,000 of nothing. Her very essence symbolises transgression. It is a portrayal which defies easy categorisation and is Stanwyck’s first great western role in which the narrative spine established early in the dialogue forces her to accommodate her female and male selves in order to assert her personality and her control over the other characters, the property and the forward thrust of the narrative arc.

This is a drama of individuation, whether female or male. Sexuality and the representation of gender identity are given great force in Stanwyck’s expressive
performance style: she is perceptibly ambiguous if not actually androgynous, forcibly integrating aspects of masculinity into her screen persona as well as being clearly attractive as a woman to men. It is this embodiment of sexual contradiction that allows her roles to be read as a seat of cultural conflict and also as potentially queer representation. The family melodrama is an affective mode of genericity that underwrites all cinema. The impossibility of closure makes the plight of the film family one of eternal compromise. The traditional overloading of paternal authority, the gender confusion of its progeny and the siphoning off of inappropriate rebellion into sexually unsatisfying marriage, all are elements which underlie the construction of the cinematic nuclear unit in melodrama. Its overwhelming failure to provide anything other than the ‘emergency exit’ ending has compromised its impact as narrative, although its importance as a fundamental mode of American cinema is not diminished. Mann’s own interest in Classical tragedy and in particular the incident of usurpation is fully declared here. (Kitses: 62).

Another reality dawns descending the staircase

The masquerade performed by the female in adopting a male form of dress and attitude destabilises reading of the feminine. It not only confuses the masculinisation of the look (in both senses), it effects a defamiliarisation of female representation. Modes of address and generic specificity – there are ‘male’ and ‘female’ films, as well as the ‘woman’s film’ which addresses the female spectator through female themes, some authors claim, albeit there is also the possibility of multi-address films – can convey a new rhetoric (Gledhill, 2008). These questions devolve upon arguments presuming upon the alignment of gender with genre – the idea that action is a male interest, ‘women’s films’ a purely female preserve, and that genre itself depends on the presentation of gendered bodies. For Bazin, “to engender respect for women more was needed than the fear of a risk as trifling as the loss of one’s life, namely the positive power of a myth. The myth of the western illustrates, and both initiates and confirms woman in her role as vestal of the social virtues, of which this chaotic world is so greatly in need.” (Bazin, *ibid.* )
Released 16 August 1950, *The Furies* was probably the first great psychological western in that fabled generative cycle but was not a box office success. It was the third part of Mann’s great trilogy of westerns that year – he also directed *The Devil’s Doorway* and *Winchester ’73* in a burst of activity that saw him leave B movies behind and establish an A-list reputation based on a serious approach founded on a rigorous aesthetic developed from working alongside such great lighting cinematographers as John Alton, whose work with him on *The Black Book* (1949) was some of the most astonishing of the era. Now he sought to make robustly psychological works and commenced a string of great western works and *The Furies* extols what Geoff Andrew calls his “classical interest in the evils of patriarchy.” (Andrew, 1989: 190). As Lucas avers, “the heroine figures strongly in every Mann western and tends to have a decisive influence on how the narratives play out … for all his acknowledged brilliance with space and landscape, revenge motifs and climactic gunfights, Mann would not deserve his place as a key figure and defining force in the genre’s classical maturity if the women were as weakly drawn as some have alleged … it’s hard to think of a director who has given us a more fetching and varied group of women … within one decade’s worth of westerns.” (Lucas in Kitses and Rickman: 306; 307) Identified by Jeanine Basinger as a transitionally flawed work in the Mann oeuvre (Basinger, 2007), *The Furies* is never less than fascinating.

*The beam of the moon - the scream of a woman - the savage meeting of The Moonlighter and his Midnight Lady!* This was how Stanwyck’s next film was tagged. She returned to the western with 1953’s *The Moonlighter* (Rowland) which was based on a screen story and screenplay written by Niven Busch, author of her previous western’s source novel. Playing opposite Fred MacMurray, her deadly co-star in *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944) along with western veteran and Ford favourite, Ward Bond, it was the only time the star was shot in 3-D. It is one of her lesser roles.
in the genre nonetheless it bears examination as an example of how the text responds to the star’s particular attributes. Far from the formidable filmic organisation of *The Furies*, and lacking its narrative and visual rigour, the comparatively static film (probably at least partly due to the exigencies of the 3D format) is structured in two unusually distinctive halves with four sequences in each of approximately 10 minutes in duration. The first part recounts the story of Wes Anderson (MacMurray), the titular hero in the early part of the twentieth century, whose voiceover anchors the narrative: “It’s me they’re after: Wes Anderson.” He’s a rustler who plies his trade by moonlight, a creature of Western lore.

Sequences are a readily identifiable structural tool, as described by Wolitzer:

> All scripts contain sequences – a series of thematically connected scenes that are powerful and memorable and direct the reader through the story…
> (Wolitzer, 1999: 91)

> A screenplay's structure is integrated fully with its controlling idea, or theme, which Linda Cowgill defines as follows: “Theme defines what a film experience is about; it determines the choice of incidents and events which make up the plot. At the end, when they are added up in the mind of the viewer, each scene and sequence should contribute to the ultimate discovery of what the film is about.” (Cowgill, 1999: 151). Theme also “gives direction to the plot, defines the key issues for the characters and ultimately determines the depth of meaning for a work. It is the integrative force behind a great film and is essential for understanding what makes a film great.” (Cowgill: 64) Similarly, Robert Riskin believed that theme was the most important element of the writer’s armoury. In his essay, ‘The Theme’s the Thing,’ first published in 1937-1938, he stressed the importance of this to his own screenplays and also dedicated several pages to the organisation and construction of his stories, which always adhered to the three-act structure. (Scott, 2006: 125-6). (1) And in their guide to aspiring screenwriters, John Emerson and Anita Loos called theme ‘the chief trick of the trade.’(Emerson & Loos, 1921: 23) The theme of *The Moonlighter* can be encapsulated in the word *freedom* and it is in various interpretations of that term that the action is catalysed.

Changing perspectives

The eight scene-sequences in the film are as follows: Wes is captured by a lynch mob and installed in a jail cell where by previous agreement with the Sheriff he is supposedly captured and hanged, except that they take the wrong man, then drown
his corpse and Wes swears revenge after busting out and then paying for ‘his funeral’; a lady called Rela (Stanwyck), who we eventually will learn is Wes’ former girlfriend, comes to town to stage the funeral and is regaled the story of it told in flashback by the funeral director, when a ‘W.O. Anderson’ gave a eulogy to ‘Wes.’ she returns home to Rio Hondo to tell his brother, Tom (William Ching) her new beau, it was clearly Wes and he is still alive; Wes then goes to the X-Bar Ranch “to even up the score” in the words of his voiceover and lassos the lynch mob’s ringleader, dragging him away before killing the Sheriff but he is himself shot in crossfire. He returns home to his mother and Tom where he discovers Tom’s relationship with Rela, who wants him to leave Tom alone or he will moonlight too; Wes’ buddy Cole (Ward Bond) arrives in town to plan a bank robbery where Tom works and Tom joins in because he’s been fired then gets killed during the escape – in a jalopy! Wes and Cole argue in their hideout where a deputised Rela, very much part of the law, eventually finds Wes tied up after she kills Cole; Rela tries to take Wes in but is nearly killed while they cross a waterfall and Wes saves her and agrees to go in, hand back the money and return to her after serving his jail sentence.

A film’s attractiveness to any star performer can often be measured by how many lines they have to say. *The Moonlighter* boasts one of the genre’s few monologues – a very lengthy eulogy which Wes offers as obsequy to himself. This is one of those occasions on which an actor has an uninterrupted platform in which to emote, orate, digress, abuse and praise – and Wes does this in excelsis. The monologue gives us backstory, premise, motivation and preparation for what will follow. It takes place as the funeral director’s flashback, told to Rela, who has come to town to organise Wes’ funeral only to discover that it has already taken place at the behest of one W.O. Anderson, alleged ‘relative’ of the deceased. “Even right now it seems to me like he still standing here talking to you like I am,” pronounces Wes, tongue firmly in cheek. He then proceeds to speak uninterrupted for the rest of the sequence giving us backstory, character and motivation. Ultimately, we have sympathy for Wes, a relatively harmless outlaw of sorts whose civility is then immediately undercut by his hold-up of the funeral attendees, who wind up paying for the burial.

The decisions that are hard to bear

The second half of the film focuses on how Wes and Rela (Stanwyck) reconcile their differences after his five years away with their essential similarity expressed in the scene where they meet properly again – trying to kill the same rampaging mountain lion. Rela is now dressed in cowboy garb, having donned the
appropriate ladylike dress and bonnet for her trip to the town to reclaim Wes’ body. Wes kills the predator first, which Rela says wouldn’t have happened in the old days. “You’ve changed, Wes,” she proclaims. “Nobody stays the same,” he responds. “You’ve changed too, Rela. Maybe you need people less.” “Maybe I need people more but I show it less,” she answers. This is clever dialogue in a film so dependent on the theme of freedom which seems rooted in adventures and decisions past. “I got wise to myself,” says Wes by way of explanation. “I know what people are like now.” Rela tries to make him see reason: “You can’t shut yourself off from people … you can’t make the whole world responsible for what a mob did to another man.” He states: “I’m probably the only man alive that saw himself hang. I know about people, Rela. I’m not sentimental any more. I’m strong because I can go my own way and that’s the road I’m going to travel.”

Stanwyck’s role here is one of the traditional western female, that of placating the hero as he embarks on a journey of self-awareness. Significantly here she is not identified as rancher’s daughter, teacher, wife, homesteader, dance hall girl or any other functionary in the canon. She is firmly individuated, primarily by dialogue. However the radical turn it takes is in her decision to become a Sheriff’s deputy and turn Wes in. She has made a decision for herself and that is to marry Tom: his death in the exchange of gunfire at the bank alters the course of her life and in turn alter’s Wes’ too. She is the voice of reason pleading for a belief in the cause of humanity – despite the actions of the mob. It is her decisive action – in killing Cole (perhaps an insider’s gloss on what should happen to a HUAC informer!) – and then her near-death on the waterfall that fundamentally dictates the course of the action. The paradox is that where Wes’ desire for revenge intersects with Rela’s desire for peace is their love – rekindled when he saves her life and agrees to be turned in. Their peaceable life together is postponed yet again, until he serves another jail term. “Nothing can stop us from now on.”

So while Stanwyck is ostensibly second billing in a dramatic sense and our reaction to the story is anchored by Wes’ voiceover, it is her pivotal decisions which turn the drama 180 degrees. Her performative choices are dictated by masquerade: she has turned to Wes’ brother whom she determines shall not follow the route of the moonlighter but who is unhappily festering at his 9 to 5 in the bank (which he eventually robs and is the death of him); she dresses as a lady yet is actually a fine shot and an excellent hunter (by her own admission Wes is now better than her after 5 years rustling); she feels compelled to enforce the law yet will welcome Wes back when he does his time. She is a complex individual with a strong sense of what is right – for everyone. It is a performance that demands our unwavering support for her decisions and she maintains that by a simply expressive tone, a firm delivery of the lines and a good physical command of the demanding shifts in behaviour. The theme of freedom is investigated with its obverse: the price that has to be paid for that freedom. Tom has paid with his life; another man has paid with his life for being mistaken for Wes; Wes has taken revenge for that act and now he must pay; Rela is now paying the price for Wes’ actions and her own decisions to do the right thing. If the action is static, the underlying narrative of cause and effect is rooted in significant moral choices.
Paired with Ronald Reagan in her next western outing, Stanwyck was directed in colour by silent movie veteran Allan Dwan in *Cattle Queen of Montana* (1954) (2). Written by Robert Blees and Howard Estabrook and based on a story by Thomas W. Blackburn, the production is distinguished by the fine photography by one of the great noir stylists, John Alton and art direction by Van Nest Polglase. Stanwyck’s hair was tinted a reddish hue, the better to tone in with the beautifully lush verdant Montana scenery for which for father has named her – Sierra Nevada Jones. Her suitability to life on the land in this part of the world is written in her name. “She strips off her petticoats and straps on her guns!” ran the film’s tagline. The film opens on Stanwyck’s voiceover, introducing us to “Sunrise to sunset, driving our cattle all the way up from Texas ...” She is a rancher’s daughter, arriving in Montana to settle with her father to settle his claim with thousands of head of cattle in this wonderfully green landscape that plunges into deep chilly blue lakes and rises to a snow-peaked mountain range beyond. Reagan plays Farrell, an Army spy working as an enforcer for McCord, the avaricious rancher pushing all the settlers away with the help of a renegade band of Blackfeet who are trying to usurp the heir to the tribe, Colorados (Lance Fuller), an educated man whose efforts to translate peace back and forth between his tribe and the white settlers provides the foundation for the story’s structure.

Establishing land rights the old-fashioned way

When Sierra and her father (Morris Ankrum) and their foreman Yost (Jack Elam) arrive to claim the land which her father has pre-empted ownership at the local bank they are quickly overwhelmed by a band of local Blackfeet put to the task by McCord (Gene Evans). Jones Sr dies in the raid and Sierra is taken in by another band of Blackfeet whom she presumes intend to kill her and Yost. Instead, Colorados
has just returned from University and is keen to modernise and civilise and do away with the old order. Yost is brought to the medicine lodge. The girl whom he left behind, Starfire (Yvette Duguay) is immediately jealous of Sierra; although Sierra’s dealings with Colorados are exclusively to do with their mutual (mis)understanding and her efforts to reclaim her land and her cattle, which he aims to help her accomplish. She is also trying to help her foreman get better but when she reclaims her riverside plot she returns to their tepee to find that he has been shot in the back with an arrow belonging to men led by Colorados’ tribal enemy, Natchakoa (Anthony Caruso). Whereas Sierra seems to be able to trust her Blackfoot friend as he determines to root out the opposition, she butts heads with Farrell, who is working for McCord but is actually spying for the Army. When she prods Colorados for details about who might be working for McCord he explains, “First thing a white must learn is never ask one Indian about another.”

Tending her foreman

The narrative is thus structured around several polarities: the Joneses (now just Sierra) against the Blackfeet who attacked (under McCord’s orders); Sierra versus the Bank and McCord, who made a claim against Jones Sr’s pre-empt the day before he murdered him; Colorados versus Natchakoa; Natchakoa and McCord against the settlers; McCord and the Army against Natchakoa; Starfire versus Sierra; Sierra versus Farrell on occasions; Farrell versus McCord. This convoluted circular setup is clarified in action and dialogue scenes which showcase the stunning mountain scenery and is frequently foregrounded on steep hillsides leading to deep mountain lakes, with the Nevada mountains in the distance providing depth to the drama which frequently resorts to simple opposition and detail to convey duplicity in the various parties’ undertakings. Natchakoa is placated with whisky; Starfire laments Sierra’s seeming attractiveness to Colorados and her behaviour in aiding Natchakoa tips the action towards the story’s conclusion. Sierra’s conversations with Colorados emphasise the necessity for understanding between the races yet the dialogue scenes though redolent of meaning are directed statically. “Our people will live in peace,” he says, “they will not forget.” He has a project of modernisation to undertake with a great deal of opposition from within.

Some very well staged action scenes depict the stampedes that are caused at the film’s first attack on the Jones’ and later, when Colorados follows that run by Natchakoa, his nemesis. The film’s midpoint takes place at the river which literally parts the film in two: Sierra finds her father’s stone claiming ownership and the score changes to the sweetness of a mellow string arrangement to emphasise this coming together of father and daughter in a fashion that is diametrically opposed to the
locking of horns in *The Furies*. The story effectively starts a second time when Sierra steadily regroups to activate his long-held dream which is now hers alone.

Stanwyck’s performance is on two registers: physically, she has to become the man of the family upon her father’s murder and go about the business both financially and tactically of taking on his enemies; she must also feminize her appearance and behaviour to appease both the Blackfoot squaws and the women in the town who strongly disapprove of her arrival on horseback with Colorados. She must achieve both in the same scenes at times and it is her sympathetic role that roots the forward movement of the action which is at times secondary to the stunning settings which are backdrops in magnificently shot dawn and twilight scenes. The romance between Sierra and Farrell is perfunctory at best but fits the dynamic of the genre, in which each character must change their behaviour and act like their real selves in order to achieve true individuation and justice to restore the status quo disrupted by the renegades in their respective communities. Sierra and Farrell exit through an enormous rock formation framing the shot, entering a valley of seemingly infinite green. “Now you can have everything you want,” he declares. “Including you?!” she asks. It is the closest the film can come to a happy ending with justice – and land – for all.

*The Violent Men* (Maté, 1955) was adapted by Harry Kleiner from the novel *SMOKY VALLEY* by Donald Hamilton and is a pure evocation of sexual politics in the genre. It is the story of John Parrish (Glenn Ford) who is baited by local cattle baron, wheelchair-bound Lew Wilkison (Edward G. Robinson, a late replacement for Broderick Crawford) into giving up his pacifist ways in order retain the title to his land. Beautifully shot by W. Howard Greene and Burnett Guffey, it was here that Stanwyck physically materialised as the strong, matriarchal, blonde cattle queen whom she would come to personify as Victoria Barkley in *The Big Valley*. Powerful, tricksy, not entirely trustworthy, this was the iconic figure for which she would be remembered. The character in the TV series would borrow from some of the character tropes established here and in subsequent of Stanwyck’s western roles. The drama is triggered by the intransigence of Parrish, whose recollection and activating of military tactics structures the plot at key points. He may be principled but his ideology has been driven by pragmatism and he is not one to give up in a fight – he will always remain a soldier. It is those military decisions that give the narrative action its shape.
This format is a perfect example of screenplay structure, wherein the protagonist and antagonist alter the configuration of each other’s lives 180 degrees – here Stanwyck and Ford’s characters are protagonist and antagonist to each other. Stanwyck is married here to another of her Double Indemnity co-stars, Robinson, with whom she had also appeared in Flesh and Fantasy (Duvivier, 1943). Here they once again play husband and wife at Anchor, an enormous holding which has squeezed the ‘nesters’ out of their settlements in bitterly violent disputes, the last of which put Lew on crutches. His brother Cole (Brian Keith) is now cuckolding him but is also carrying on an affair with a Mexican woman in the town. Parrish wants to sell up to Anchor and go east with his sweetheart but the low price and the outrageous, murderous bullying forces him to revert to military tactics and he takes on the Wilkisons. Unbeknownst to him, he has an ally in their daughter Judith (Dianne Foster), who is disgusted by her mother and uncle and who ultimately allies herself with her father for the good of the land.

Martha and Cole think they have fooled Lew

As Cohan and Swires remind us, “story consists of events placed in a sequence to delineate a process of change, the transformation of one event into another.” (Cohan and Swires, 1988: 53). Aristotle suggests that the connective tissue between incidents can be organised in such a way that the entire action of a drama can be united as a whole with individual sections of action which relate to the overweening arc of the drama itself:

Just as in other imitative arts the imitation is unified if it imitates a single object, - and one that is also a whole. So the structure of the various sections of the events must be such that the transposition or removal of any one section dislocates and changes the whole. If the presence or absence of something has no discernible effect, it is not part of the whole. (1996: 15)

If we apply the rhetoric of screenplay structure to the entire cycle of seven westerns made by Stanwyck between 1950 and 1957, then The Violent Men signifies the midpoint sequence. A sequence approach in structural analysis is utilised by Paul Gulino, who reminds the reader that the structuring of screenplays into explicit sequences approximating 15 pages was standard practice until the 1950s. In fact early screenplay manuals advised writers to construct stories of screenplays into explicit sequences according to reel divisions. In this way the point of view could more easily be shifted to characters other than the protagonist in order to create more dramatic tension and sustain audience attention. He says “the difference between a sequence and a stand-alone fifteen-minute film is that the conflicts and issues raised in a sequence are only partially resolved within the sequence, and when they are resolved, the resolution often opens ups new issues, which in turn become the subject of
subsequent sequences.” (Gulino, 2004: 2-3) The midpoint sequence would be the focus of a film’s centralising issues, dramatised in a number of actions which express the narrative’s major conflicts. It sums up the film as a whole, its major characters’ desires and the principal action aligned with the story’s theme which is powerfully expressed through conflict.

If, then, *The Violent Men*, is the midpoint in this cycle of westerns, it expresses the fulcrum about which the narrative of the cycle as a whole pivots: the lengths to which women must go to assert their rights in a male-dominated society and the dangers that their desires expose. This was a powerful idea to express at this time in the culture. The distinguishing feature of the film’s narrative is its play of sexual politics, highlighted by the different registers of dialogue, with personal and tonal shifts expressing not just ‘business’ but inflected with character, all personalised to a degree unusual in the genre. As Andrew Horton rightly points out, “It may surprise you how much of most films breaks down to a series of dialogue scenes between two characters.” (Horton, 1999: 145). For Aristotle, diction (or dialogue) must form part of the dramatic action. He states, “Diction should be handled with particular care in those parts in which little is happening, and which are expressive neither of character nor of reasoning; excessively brilliant diction overshadows character and reasoning.” (Aristotle, 1996: 42). Michael Tierno reiterates, “Dialog is part of the action and gets its power from the plot, whose effect builds in a cumulative as well as linear way. Dialog forms story action and derives life and energy from the action it helps build.” Tierno continues: “…in even the most dialog-dependent script like *My Dinner With Andre*, the dialog is intrinsic to the action – to the plot, meaning, causality of the incidents and the dramatic unity.” (Tierno, 2002: 129-130; 131). Dialogue is not, then, conversation; it affects the impact of conversation and carries character and action forward. It must differentiate characters from one another, imitate the rhythm of speech and at its best reveal subtext and deep character. In this instance it is purveyed not just on the level of distinctive individual voices pertaining to character roles and furthering (or slyly disguising) the purposes of the conversational exchange; it exists to express different registers and motivations, alternating and receding desires and intentions, and sexual difference. And of course, as with drama, as in life, people don’t always say what they mean and sometimes they even tell lies.

The structuring tool employed is the deployment of dialogue to express Parrish’s strategic position in relation to the Wilkisons. At the film’s commencement, Parrish stands back while the Wilkison boys beat up one of their usual victims. When
he meets Judith Wilkison she rags on him for trying to be different and when Martha brings him into the Anchor house her quiet attitude belies her position as the power behind her husband’s wheelchair-bound throne but Parrish admits that seeing the Sheriff shot in the back has spoiled his taste for hard liquor. Wilkison trades on the area’s history in his negotiation for Parrish’s land but what he offers is “not even a downpayment.” Martha canoodles with Cole and Parrish tells his foreman he will take the money and go. However the shooting of his man Bud turns the action at 38 minutes in and Parrish adopts a new tactic: pretend to retreat. When he then has a gun stuck in his back in the saloon he ends up killing Matlock, one of Wilkison’s men. At the film’s midpoint Parrish encounters Judith at Anchor again and tells Wilkison, “Don’t force me to fight, you won’t like my way of fighting.” Martha rubs her husband’s neck to the disgust of her daughter, who is repelled by her father’s being cuckolded. In the mountains that night Parrish directs his men, “Never meet the enemy on his own terms.” In the subsequent shootout his men line strategically amidst the rock and the brush of the mesa canyon and take on the Wilkison posse in a vivid scene. Eight men are dead and Wilkison learns that every rancher is on Parrish’s side. Judith leaves the Anchor because she believes her father misunderstands the situation, which has been stoked by her mother and her uncle. Martha ‘reasons’ with Lew: “I’ve reached the end of my endurance.” And, in front of the all-important map that lays out the land for his consumption, she goads, “I didn’t think you’d allow Parrish to stop you.” He admits to her: “I promised you the valley.” Judith explains the situation to Parrish; while Cole says to Martha, “You don’t need anybody, you never have, you never will.” He intends leaving for Dallas with his Mexican girlfriend, Elena.

The Anchor is burned out and Martha throws away Lew’s crutches and abandons him and the ranch in flames to have things out with Elena. Elena refuses to take a payoff. Lew covers for Martha when Judith comes back and finds him alive while Martha and Cole grandstand to the Sheriff about people building the country.” Anchor will be a fitting memorial to my husband,” she declares, unaware that he isn’t actually dead. Judith tries to make the men stop killing. A mob is gathered to avenge Lew’s death and at the gates of the ranch Martha is horrified to see Lew in situ and runs away, to be gunned down at the threshold by Elena, her rival in love. Back in town, where the story began, Judith approaches Parrish to the Anchor and work it with her father but he declines: “I’ve my own place to rebuild.” Then, both equal in shot size, he turns back and they ride out together. He has changed tactics once again: at the film’s beginning he states, “I want to get out of her and nothing’s going to stop me; now he tells Judith “You know your father once told me he’d get my ranch one way or another,” his fiancée long forgotten. While we learn that Martha had to be skewered by her own vanity, Parrish, we realise, is not a pacifist but a pragmatist.
The significance of the role for Stanwyck is its combination of both sadistic and masochistic components: she wears the customary costume of rancher’s wife but is in reality the cuckolding mistress of a thug; she is a mother, not a role model; she is the reason for her husband’s avarice; she defines the terms on which everyone in her home lives, bar Cole, whose lechery cannot be controlled. It is important that she confronts him about his promiscuity in a stables (given the avowed symbolism of the horse in sexuality). Her silent pacing of the ranch lounge and her threatening smiles promise and deliver a world of pain in which her own husband has borne the brunt of injury, literally castrated on the ambitions of a land-hungry woman. Her actions change Parrish’s tactics and she cautions her husband that he is taking on a man who was a captain in the Army. She has met her match. Her early silences are parried with her later pithy comments; her contempt for Cole and his liking for cheap Mexicans are her own tactical way of keeping him on side long enough to sate her proprietorial desire; her lust for land is even more demeaning than her lust for her brother in law and it orients her to drive her husband on to more and more destruction until finally she is undone by jealousy. It is the sheer wantonness of her performance as an older woman scorned that so fascinates: her duplicity conceals from her that the blood on the landscape will eventually be her own. Even when the map of the valley is in flames and all appears lost she can see an opportunity for herself. It is the American dream. Stanwyck’s full-toothed grimacing smile was never used so effectively to achieve such evil affect.

There was something about her
Since she was sixteen,
That attracted men to
The Maverick Queen.

In The Maverick Queen (Joe Kane, 1956) working from an adaptation by Kenneth Gamet and DeVallon Scott of the Zane Grey novel, Stanwyck plays opposite Barry Sullivan (her co-star from Jeopardy, Sturges, 1953), a pairing that would pay dividends in a film shot in the Naturama format, presumably to take advantage of the wonderful location photography in this vague gloss on that exercise in perversity, Johnny Guitar (Ray, 1954) which had starred Joan Crawford and Mercedes McCambridge. Stanwyck is Kit Bannion, the proprietor of the eponymous hotel which bears her nickname. She runs with the Wild Bunch, and derives enormous satisfaction from giving the Sundance Kid (Scott Brady) the runaround, especially
when a man claiming to be Jeff Young(er) (Sullivan) turns up to rival him in her affections.

A study in masquerade, the film’s entire narrative strategy is structured on characters being different to whom they claim to be. Kit was actually born to a wealthy Virginia family; Younger is actually a Pinkerton agent; Jamie (Wallace Ford) is a spy for Kit and not the loyal sidekick to rancher Lucy Lee (Mary Murphy) that she believes. It all ends in a hilltop shootout, with characters’ double identities and false loyalties steadily being revealed as one by one they are shot down.

Stanwyck’s role is as duplicitous as she could have desired: outfitted with copper hair, drop earrings and a Kelly green dress, she is introduced as a vivid picture of ambition. “I did what I had to do to get where I am.” She hopes she’ll meet a better man than Sundance, who, for his part, promises he will kill her. Lucy Lee, her polar opposite, is introduced as a more honourable farming woman with stock to sell, her family’s trusted helper Jamie by her side, and a masked stranger helping her when the Wild Bunch come calling. This contrast between the women is emphasised when she calls on Kit to buy her cattle – Kit is swathed in sheet black and elaborate feathers, ruling her particular roost, while Lucy is more straightforwardly attired by those standards. Young watches their interaction in a mirror. With Young(er) now established as a dealer in the hotel, it seems Kit literally holds all the cards. She watches him dealing in a green gown with a scarlet flower in her décolletage and introduces him to Sundance about raiding $50,000 in gold on an incoming train – it is a fateful event.
The narrative essentially traces the progress of a good woman gone bad and Kit explains to Young(er) that “you don’t leave the Wild Bunch except feet first.” They discuss their mutual survival instincts. Stanwyck is given room to manoeuvre both in terms of costume, idiom and physique. She survived being burned out of her family’s plantation in Virginia and recalls branding all steers. She warns Young(er) of Sundance because of his fitful jealousies. She is offered an immediate contrast in Lucy, dressed cowgirl style, whom Young(er) accompanies to the train. This is when Jamie tells Kit that Young(er) was present at the rustling of the Lee cattle. She receives this news enveloped in a white dressing gown with a peach neck, high to the jawline, her hair in a ponytail: the effect is of an immediate softening, a development from the tough broad we have already encountered. Thus we have both a difference from her earlier presentation and a difference to mark her out from Lucy, an equally determined woman but in a rather more conventional, non-threatening vein. After the raid Kit is greeted by Sundance and Young(er) at the safe house in the hills, clad in white shirt and a black hat with a red bandana and trousers. She tends to her own horse, with Sundance watching, clearly incensed. She is protecting Young(er) and the identity that she still presumes him to have. Inside, she talks to him about her vision for the future: “This country is changing. Settlers are coming and in a couple of years the gang will be wiped out. It’s too late for me. I’ve been remembering what it was like. Happiness, peace of mind, contentment.”

At heart, this may be a story of outlaws but it centres on the idea of progress and the locus of sexual politics and the meaning that these might have for the future. The safety net is in the past: a form of nation-building based on violence; the costume of disguise; the taking of land, cattle and lives for personal gain. The narrative is predicated on the shifting identities presented in masquerade, male and female, and when Jamie is unmasked as being responsible for the death of Lucy’s father it seems to unleash a force of moral retribution. Young(er) is revealed as a Pinkerton detective, he fights it out with Sundance in a dramatically deforested area in front of a sheer mountain backdrop and Sundance eventually dies after his own knife ends up in his back. The Maverick Queen has been rumbled and eventually after several double-crosses between the Bunch, she dies in the arms of the man who made her see the error of her ways. We learn that the Wild Bunch has ended its reign because of her. Politics and gender are conjoined in this flagrant bid for sympathy which flies in the face of her sexuality, goading these foolish men to their deaths in their efforts to aggregate her personal wealth. If Kit is the leader, Lucy is probably a more positive role model for future gender mobility, with the final message to the audience being, crime does not pay.
Trooper Hook (1957) was the penultimate western film Stanwyck made and was released on 12 July 1957. Based on a story by Jack Schaefer (famed for his novel Shane which George Stevens shot in 1951 and was released in 1953) it was written by David Victor, Martin Berkeley and Herbert Little Jr., with contributions by director Charles Marquis Warren. Re-teamed with her old sparring partner, Joel McCrea, in this their sixth and final pairing together (3), the plot recounts what happens following the massacre of a regiment by Indians. Trooper Hook (McCrea) captures the Indians and starts talking to their leader, Nanchez (Rodolfo Acosta). Hook discovers that the leader’s squaw is a white woman, Cora (Stanwyck), taken captive nine years earlier and she has borne him a son, Quito (Terry Lawrence). His task is to return the woman to her husband. She leaves with her son by stagecoach but Nanchez eventually catches up with them after escaping imprisonment, intent on reclaiming the boy. The journey effectively reveals Cora to Hook and vice versa as they engage first with their fellow passengers and then he displays his ruthless side when in an attack by Nanchez he threatens to have the boy killed rather than return him to the tribe.

Cora has to contend not only with the approbation of the women around her when she is rescued, but with the prospect of rejection from the husband she was going to meet when her wagon train was attacked on the trip from back east. She is accustomed to the dirty looks that she got from the squaws in the Indian camp but now she is confronted by the disgust of her fellow white women. Cora is exposed to the civilised world slowly, first by kindness from a Major’s wife; by self-recognition, literally, when she looks at her reflection in a mirror for the first time since being taken captive and speaks her name softly to herself; and when she speaks in public and threatens to kill the white men who berate her for having had a son by an Indian. “Take your hands off my son! Animals, all of you, animals! If you so much as touch my son I’ll kill you!” she roars, a lioness protecting her cub. These are her first words in her native language in eight years. “Mighty powerful sentiments, but they sounded real good,” marvels Hook drolly. Stanwyck is marvellous in her first silent scenes, relying on her face and simple, affective gesture to express deep pain at the cataclysmic turn her life has taken. She also registers annoyance, confusion and grief. She can’t yet speak but her contained emotions convey thanks when she is shown generosity. She holds on tightly to Quito, for fear she should ever lose him. She looks down at the ground and the floor, fearful of eye contact, of giving herself away. It is a
finely judged performance of perfect stillness that hints at depths of confused feelings. When she finally speaks it is a volcanic eruption. When she truly expresses herself, it is a relief as much for the audience as it must be for her character.

Hook’s protective attitude towards the child and his sense of injustice when Cora is refused entry to a dining room shows his humanity but also his pragmatism. He understands when she explains her survival instinct as a captive: “Just now in that water watching my son, listening to him laugh, that one moment was worth all those years. Can you understand wanting so much to live?” Hook’s silence tells us that he does. If he meets Nanchez on equal footing, to some extent, he also differentiates himself from him. “I am familiar with your mind,” says the Indian. “You will not let the blood of my son make you soft.” Hook responds, “You leave me no choice.” They understand each other too. The final unhappy reunion with Cora’s husband, alone all these years after she was captured en route to starting their new life together, pinpoints all the characters’ beliefs and establishes just how far each of them is prepared to compromise. The husband’s lack of preparation for such a moment means he is killed by Nanchez; but also means he has the opportunity to kill Nanchez, an act of equalising that sets in motion the relationship that we know is destined to be prolonged. It is in the order of things in this fascinating variation on the captive tale with its inbuilt fears of race, miscegenation and sexuality.

Egri formulated the classic approach to dramatic writing in which he states premise – or theme – as the central component of the successfully written play:

Every good play must have a well-formulated premise. There may be more than one way to phrase the premise, but, however it is phrased, the thought must be the same.

He urges the playwright:

You must have a premise – a premise which will lead you unmistakably to the goal your play hopes to reach. (Egri: 6)

Cora’s silent return to the white world

He also states: “In a well-constructed play or story, it is impossible to denote just where premise ends and story or character begins.” (Egri: 29) And: “Neither the premise nor any other part of a play has a separate life of its own. All must blend into an harmonious whole.” (Egri: 31). The theme of the white woman taken as
sagaw had already been attempted on a number of occasions but Stanwyck’s pivotal star role was a major development in the story’s telling and the fact that she plays the mother to an Indian leader’s child creates a tension hitherto unknown in this subset of the genre. The premise is perfectly expressed in her performance, getting to the root of Cora’s emotional intelligence, with her intensity bouncing off McCrea’s more relaxed take on Clovis Hook. She gauges the quality of her subjectivity from the protectiveness that any mother would have towards a child being threatened with removal from her care. The shooting of her husband by Nanchez clarifies what she already knows about Hook and the life they will have together; his own family life being a fabrication to avoid difficult conversations at the cavalry posting making this a rather extraordinary and modern marriage of convenience.

It is fitting that the seven-film cycle of westerns that Stanwyck made in the 1950s was bookended with the other great western role of her career. In Forty Guns (1957) cult writer and director Samuel Fuller had Stanwyck introduced with yet another one of the requisite theme songs that was attached to the decade’s westerns: “She’s a high-ridin’ woman with a whip!” In fact, the film was originally titled Woman With a Whip, but Warners objected because of its deviant connotations so Fuller was forced to change it (but the song remained the same). The role was one that Marilyn Monroe campaigned for (she had co-starred with Stanwyck in Clash By Night, Lang, 1952), but Fuller stood his ground, and got his woman, and, once again, Stanwyck was the cattle queen of all she surveyed in a rousing production which boasted Fuller’s typically arresting visuals, stylish storytelling and vividly subversive suggestiveness in a florid, phallic melodrama. Jessica Drummond (Stanwyck) is the precise, strongly delineated and robust persona that would lead Stanwyck to shortly becoming the leading lady of TV westerns with her long-running series, The Big Valley (1965-1969). For now she was playing once again opposite Barry Sullivan as the marshall and with Fuller as her director she could react to the muscular direction with a phenomenal performance in one of those films from a man whose occasionally lurid, permanently flamboyant work is still fairly uncategorizable in terms of American cinema. He defined film for Godard as “a battleground - love – hate – action – violence – death – in a word – emotion!” in Pierrot le fou (1965) and his taut signature is still staggering. A combination of brutality, abstraction and remarkable directness, he was a perfect complement to Stanwyck in this, one of her most perfect films.
Tone has been described as “the visual and verbal detail that directs us toward meaning.” (Dancyger, 2001: 75). Al Alvarez states “… it is the business of writers to create as true a voice as they can.” (Alvarez: 121) In Aristotle’s formulation,

…the action is performed by certain agents. These must be people of a certain kind with respect to their character and reasoning. (It is on the basis of people’s character and reasoning that we say that their actions are of a certain kind, and in respect of their actions that people enjoy success or failure.) (Aristotle, 1996: 11)

Aristotle is declaring that the ‘agents’ of the drama set the tone and influence the audience. Tone is perhaps the ineffable marker of any filmmaker’s work, expressing their point of view and therefore constitutes the totality of their ‘voice’ – or pitch. Tone can be described as a general or prevailing character, traceable across an oeuvre. With Samuel Fuller, the tone of any of his work is encoded with subtext of a peculiarly sadistic kind. He also demonstrates an authentic writing voice, which Alvarez likens to “perfect pitch… a natural gift, innate and distinctive, by which the best poets give new life to exhausted conventions and mold them to suit themselves. (Alvarez: 49) Fuller’s reputation as auteur is one in which tone shifts to express an underlying violence based on sexuality and animal instincts. His visuals are pure and direct, thrusting and Freudian. Griff is tracked through the town confronting the bullies twice – at the film’s commencement and at the end when he kills Brockie. The camera has the viewer by the throat with its tight focus on this unstoppable force of righteousness, like the Bible’s pale rider. Wes Bonnell (Gene Barry) is the actively phallic brother, looking at the town’s unusually attractive female gunsmith Rio (Ziva Rodann) down the barrel of a rifle in a shot of rare bravado, before cutting away to the couple in a highly suggestive embrace. Then he gets shot in the back by Brockie just as he is about to kiss his new bride. In this drama of gunslinging, retribution, understanding and forgiveness, Jessica is clearly the power behind the men but she has to be turned and part of her change stems from those elements of the past she has to reconcile with the present predicament partly due to the failed dynamics in her own family structure: her brother simply must die. An eye for an eye. But when Griff’s youngest brother, Chico (Robert Dix) saves Griff from certain death, Griff is disappointed and when Chico asks him why, he states bluntly, “you killed a man.” It is a confession made in sorrow. Another aspect to Jessica’s concession is her admission, “the frontier is finished.” And this is her particular sorrow.

Wrestling with reason

Fuller once stated that, “To work with Stanwyck is to work with the happy pertinence of professionalism and emotion. She’s superb as a queen, slut, matriarch, con girl or on a horse... her form or class or appeal or whatever you want to call it
stems from tremendous sensitivity and thousands of closeted thoughts she can select at will, at the right moment, for the exact impact.” Fuller has the full panoply of cinematic tools at his command yet it is the planes of Stanwyck’s face which concentrate the director’s focus. Long rumoured to be gay, with a supposedly convenient lavender marriage to Robert Taylor, Stanwyck’s role in *Forty Guns* is perhaps the queerest in the western cycle and lends itself easily to a reading in terms of transgressive representation. Dressed in black, riding a white stallion, brandishing her guns actual and living, she runs Tombstone as her own personal fiefdom. When they first meet she declares, “I’m not interested in you Mr Bonnell,” and fondles her six-shooter. The sequence in which she introduces Griff to the ranch’s hiding places is the transitional focus of the narrative: escaping with Griff from the swirling storm of sand and tumbleweed that represents the emotions churning in Jessica, snuggled up together in the shack her father first built before he acquired his wealth she relates how her mother died giving birth to Brockie (John Ericson); how she was almost killed by a rattlesnake and shot it; how she learned the ropes at her father’s elbow. “I was born upset,” she admits. It is here that Griff embraces her and they commence their love-hate relationship; it is here that Griff later finds her concealing Brockie beneath a rough mattress. She protests that murder is not in her brother’s blood; Griff says, “With your brand on him anything could be in his blood.” This ‘safe place’ is where Jessica’s better qualities are revealed; yet it is Fuller’s medium close ups of Stanwyck’s remarkable face, heading her Forty Guns at the dining table, that make the most impact. She is literally ravished by the camera in this her most sensual performance. It’s as though Sugarpuss O’Shea were transplanted to Tombstone, older and a lot wiser. This, it seems, is the Jessica we need, a powerful woman, man and woman, to a whole host of men whose livelihoods are at her whim, a fact made clear when she pays off the Sheriff (Dean Jagger) after his failure to kill Griff. He is devastated; however the drama is calibrated so cleverly and Stanwyck embodies her ferocity so sympathetically that we empathise with her. His feelings are for nothing. When Griff finally kills the untameable Brockie, Jessica, now dressed in conventional women’s attire of blouse and skirt, runs after him and, at the end of the long street, it seems he pauses long enough for her to jump on his carriage as he leaves town. The good man has won her over after he has killed her own brother, something she realises is necessary for the good of the community. She has been contained and recuperated by the love of a good man: the end, it seems, justifies the means. And, as the song reminds us, “you may find that a woman with a whip is only a woman after all.”

The western conjoined the underpinning politics of the United States: the right to individualism; the right to bear arms; and the right to farm the land under the expansionist schemes of the late nineteenth century. The genre was a safe place in which to express seemingly contradictory desires and those of the active woman, declaring ownership and intent in the guise of civilising the barren lands. In Corber’s framework we can read into Stanwyck’s representation the seat of a filmic conflict: the appropriation of the masculine for the purposes of achieving a significant feminine role in a generic style usually thought to be dominated by male characters in which the female was the sweetly submissive adjunct. However Stanwyck’s own dualistic possibilities, her attractiveness to both men and women, and her own powerful range of emotions, denying the definition of the actress as un-feminine or even as a Hollywoodized (ie acceptable) Lesbian renders her actuating presence in a western role as a powerfully ambiguous complex individualism which is too difficult to pin down, either as normative or alienating. Her expressive dialectic spans the whole
spectrum of communication and performativity. She dons traditional female clothing when it is necessary to admit to her typically feminine wiles; she wears appropriate trousers and hats when she is horseriding on the range. She shoots when it is required. She is, above all, adaptive and multi-layered. And yet she admits (ultimately) in all her roles that she will be happiest when she has the man she wants. It appears to be as much about control as love. This is why her role in the western genre is so significant to the representation of women to the era, replete with contradictions, wildly expressed emotions and desiring of power, above all. “I need a strong man to carry out my orders,” she explains as Jessica Drummond. And she has many of them, worshipping at her feet.

A genre which evolves to now permit its protagonist to be a strong female, wielding not just whips but sixguns, wearing buckskins and cowboy hats, owning half the range, opens up the rhetorical parameters to greater scrutiny and dates Bazin’s claims. The overdetermined ideology of the western itself, based on the binary structure which ultimately devolves upon the strong male and the supportive female, is cracked wide open in Stanwyck’s casting as the lead in all of her 1950s work. If melodrama is the underlying affective mode of cinema and its genericity, then it also permits within its structure for conflict and contradiction. These parameters are extended still further in the casting of such a powerful, androgynous performer, creating distance from the traditional image and thereby effecting another layer of complication in reading through the masquerade to produce an identifiable affect.

Barbara Stanwyck’s affiliation to the western genre is a good example of how the studio system could accommodate a strong actress with an allure of strength to both male and female viewers. Her particular affinity with this mode of address can be summarised in those aspects of performative femininity that she mastered in order to be appealing to both men and women in terms of gender fluctuation – adopting the codes of behaviour, dress, masquerade, sleight of hand and an adaptive approach that saw her master big and small screen in a genre which was itself adaptive to the changing social and sexual mores at a crucial time in the culture. Stanwyck’s position as queen of the Hollywood screen was no doubt in danger throughout the 1950s, a decade which saw off many of her former rivals yet which saw her thrive in this genre which she made her own and which complemented her performances in other major screen modes of the time in which she was equally active. Her subversive qualities and regal film titles (‘Cattle Queen’ etc.) ensured that her audience expected and got a series of magisterial performances of renegade women forced to take action to reclaim their power, land and status. This chimed with the emerging message of the time, when women were chained to their domestic appliances, perverted ‘Momist’ politics prevailed and the powerful women’s films of the previous decade suddenly seemed to have been wish fulfilment of the most extreme kind. Stanwyck appeared in a number of TV western episodes – Zane Grey, Wagon Train and Rawhide – before her campaign for her own series finally bore fruit. Her resonating screen power at the birth of the women’s movement cannot be underestimated: her weekly appearances as a powerful landowning matriarch on TV screens every week throughout the late 1960s as Victoria Barkley in The Big Valley were a reminder of what women could gain if they maintained their core strengths (and inherited a big ranch, perhaps). It is perhaps a disappointment to learn that the woman born Ruby Stevens was one of the founder members of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, an extreme right wing organisation that fed into theHUAC Red Scare; and that
her position included extolling the work of Ayn Rand, from whom even the most
dedicated Reds needed to distance themselves following her lunatic testimony on
their behalf. However, personal politics aside, Stanwyck’s radical renegade roleplaying;
her emotional range; her subtle gestural power; her emotional warmth and sheer
screen charisma, belie a cunning career management strategy that saw her become
one of the most respected actresses of any era and had many directors declare of her
that she was the greatest with whom they had had the pleasure to collaborate.
Towards the end of her life, she said, “I’m a tough old broad from Brooklyn. I intend
to go on acting until I’m ninety and they won’t need to paste my face with makeup.”
Being a frontier heroine for the ages, she very nearly did.

© Elaine Lennon 2013

Notes
(1) Scott comments, “The article placed great emphasis on a writer’s knowing his or
her theme and how that theme can and should work, whether the genre is comedy,
melodrama, or message film.” Ibid.
(2) This was the film playing at the neighbourhood movie theatre in Back to the
Future (Zemeckis, 1985).
(3) The other films that Stanwyck and McCrea made together were: Gambling Lady
(Mayo, 1934); Banjo on My Knee (Cromwell, 1936); Internes Can’t Take Money
(Santell, 1937); Union Pacific (DeMille, 1939); and The Great Man’s Lady
(Wellman, 1942).

Bibliography
Books
Aristotle (1920). ON THE ART OF POETRY. Translated and with an introduction
________ (1996). POETICS. Translated with an introduction and notes by Malcolm
Press.
Press.
Corber, Robert J. (2011). COLD WAR FEMME: Lesbianism, National Identity, and
Lone Eagle Press.
McCann.
Doane, Mary Ann (1987). THE DESIRE TO DESIRE: The Woman’s Film of the


**Journal Articles**


**Filmography**

*Annie Oakley* (1935) d. George Stevens (RKO Radio Pictures)

*California* (1947) d. John Farrow (Paramount Pictures)

*Cattle Queen of Montana* (1954) d. Allan Dwan (Benedict Bogeaus Productions, RKO Radio Pictures)

*Forty Guns* (1957) d. Samuel Fuller (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation)

*The Furies* (1950) d. Anthony Mann. (Hal Wallis Productions/Paramount Pictures)

*The Great Man’s Lady* (1942) d. William Wellman (Paramount Pictures)

*Maverick Queen, The* (1956) d. Joseph Kane (Republic Pictures)

*Moonlighter, The* (1953) d. Roy Rowland (Joseph Bernhard Productions/Warner Bros.)

*Trooper Hook* (1957) d. Charles Marquis Warren (Filmaster Productions, Sol Baer Fielding, United Artists)

*Union Pacific* (1939) d. Cecil B. DeMille (Paramount Pictures)

*Violent Men, The* (1955) d. Rudolph Maté (Columbia Pictures Corporation)

**Online resources**

[www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)

[www.tcm.com](http://www.tcm.com)

**Abstract**

The interplay of Barbara Stanwyck’s emotionally intense performances with the tropes of the western created an iconic series of films during the decade when the genre reached its mature form and challenges the view that women’s roles were subordinated to those of men. The representation of women in Westerns has always posed questions deeply rooted in the origins of the genre. Complicating the issue for our understanding of the issues is the problem presented by the star persona and its interaction with the ideological subtext and female representation in roles that appear
to be typically male. Stanwyck’s cycle of westerns in the 1950s raises (and answers) many of these issues.

Keywords
Stanwyck star directors genre screenplay structure sexual politics in the western

Copyright
All images courtesy Columbia Pictures Corporation, Paramount Pictures, Republic Pictures, RKO Radio Pictures, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, United Artists, Warner Bros.

Biography
Elaine Lennon received her PhD at the School of Media, Dublin Institute of Technology. She writes about films.