

VARIATIONS ON THE GUNFIGHT IN WESTERN SHORT STORIES

by
James C. Work

The Virginian said his farewell to Molly and noticed that it was "quite a while after sunset." And with that he stepped into the dusty street to make good his promise that he would kill Trampas if Trampas did not leave town. Suddenly,

a wind seemed to blow his sleeve off his arm, and he replied to it, and saw Trampas pitch forward. He saw Trampas raise his arm from the ground and fall again, and lie there this time, still. A little smoke was rising from the pistol on the ground, and he looked at his own, and saw the smoke flowing upward out of it.

'I expect that's all,' he said aloud.¹

This brief gunfight in Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, published in 1902, became a prototype for Western fiction. Not all writers, however, followed the now-classic scenario in which the hero tells the villain to get out of town and then meets him in the street face-to-face with revolvers ready. One example of a variation is the following scene by Clarence Mulford, featuring Mulford's popular hero, Hopalong Cassidy:

For a moment there was an utter silence, and then came a blur of speed from Hawes, but just the instant before it came, Bradley fell off his chair to the left, his own left arm falling across Hopalong's right forearm, blocking a draw; but other men had discovered, when too late, that Hopalong's left hand was the better of the two. The double roar seemed to bend the walls, and sent the lamp flames leaping, to flicker almost to extinction. One went out, the other two recovered. The smoke thinned to show Hawes sliding from his chair, and Bradley on the floor where he had fallen by his own choice, with both hands straining at the Mexican spur which spiked his cheek.

The two leveled Colts held the crowd frozen in curious postures.²

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The 1952 film *High Noon* comes to a climax with a combination of the classic showdown scenario and general pandemonium. Initially, Gary Cooper's gun battle with the outlaws follows the pattern found in *The Virginian*, but after the first exchange of shots it turns into a general free-for-all. John M. Cunningham's short story "The Tin Star," which was the inspiration for *High Noon* contains even more violence than the film, and a fatal ending for Sheriff Doane:

He cocked his pistol and strode out, swinging around. Pierce fired from the sidewalk, and Doane aimed straight into the blast and pulled as he felt himself flung violently around by Pierce's bullet.

Pierce came up from the sidewalk and took two steps toward him, opening and shutting a mouth that was suddenly full of blood, his eyes wide and wild, and then pitched down at his feet.

Doane's right arm hung useless, his gun at his feet. With his left hand he drew his other gun and stepped out from the walk, his mouth wide open, as though he were gasping for breath or were about to scream, and took two steps toward Toby as Jordan came out of the office door, firing. The slug caught Doane along the side of his neck, cutting the shoulder muscle, and his head fell over to one side. . . .

Jordan stood braced against the building, holding his gun in both hands, firing as he slid slowly down. One bullet took Doane in the stomach, another in the knee. He went down, flopped forward and dragged himself up to where Toby lay trying to prop himself up on one elbow. Doane knelt there like a dog, puking blood into the dust, blood running out of his nose, but his gray eyes almost indifferent, as though there were one man dying and another watching.³

When, quite by accident, I first began to compare various shootout scenes in Western fiction, I started forming a hypothesis. Since forty-five years had elapsed between the Victorian serenity of Wister's shootout and the violent bloodletting in "The Tin Star," I began to postulate that a steady increase in graphic violence might have accompanied the development of popular western fiction. And just as it seemed logical to assume that the rising popularity of "westerns" was being paralleled by a rising degree of bloody detail and gratuitous gore in the shootout scenes, it was also tempting to assume a causal link between violence and popularity. But my hypothesis quickly fell apart: violent gunfights show up in Zane Grey's *Spirit of the Border* (1905), Emerson Hough's *The Law of the Land* (1905), and "Wolfville" stories of Alfred Henry Lewis, and in Max Brand's *The Untamed* (1918), to name only a few.

As it turned out, my research was not a total loss. The University of Nebraska Press expressed interest in having me edit a small collection of gunfight stories. Phyllis Doughman of Metropolitan State College in Omaha agreed to search the sources in her region for additional stories, while I sat down to draw

up some procedures and parameters. Among other things, I suggested that we avoid using excerpts from novels. It turned out to be a suggestion that would lead to another surprising result and another hypothesis.

In a novel, a gunfight can simply be an episode, a bit of action or excitement that keeps the story moving or resolves part of the plot line. A short story, on the other hand, has a much tighter structure and has far less leeway for episodic conflict. A conflict in a short story almost always has to contribute to the central climax or must be the central climax. In short, it appears that a gunfight does not offer much material for the short story writer. Where we expected to find hundreds of gunfight stories, we found fewer than three dozen in which it could be shown that a gunfight functioned as the climax. We finally settled on fourteen stories for the collection, all of which seemed superior to the run-of-the-pulp-mill fiction. In each one of these stories the structural climax is an unconventional shootout. Each time we found a good gunfight, it was a gunfight that did not follow the prototype.

This intrigued me even more than the idea of progressively intensifying violence. Why were there so few short stories with gunfights at the climax? Why were there so many unconventional confrontations? I began to see another hypothesis. Something about a gunfight makes it unusable as a climax, a weakness in the structure of the short story. In spite of their widespread use in westerns, gunfights are actually more of a liability than an asset.

Short story structure is traditionally described in terms of situation, complication, and resolution. There is a situation in place when the story opens; something happens to complicate that situation, leading to a climax; the climax leads to the untangling of the complication. Looking at typical situations in pulp westerns, we see either the absence of law and justice, or a need for revenge, or a desire to defend the weak, or a question of honor between two antagonists who wear guns.

The fact that *guns* are present in each situation is extremely important. Think how many short stories you have read by such writers as James Joyce, Edgar Allen Poe, Flannery O'Connor, John Steinbeck, etc. in which there are no guns. The reason comes from a classic rule of short story writing which says that once something such as a gun is introduced, it must be used. Otherwise it is an unnecessary distraction. In a typical western, the gun is expected to be there because it is part of the cowboy or western stereotype. Given the situation and given the presence of guns, a gunfight becomes an inevitable part of the plot.

Now that we have the gun and a situation that will lead to its use, we need some motivation that will take us to the complication and then on to the climax. But because the gun and the situation are now directing the action, the complication will probably be superficial and the climax will be predictable. The antagonist and the protagonist will meet. Both are armed. Neither will yield. The complication is ignited. And what is the resolution? Bang! Bang! Or in more sophisticated versions, bang! bang! bang!

But a bang is an unsatisfactory resolution if a writer is trying to show plausible human conflict and emotion or trying to establish a character. It is unsatisfactory because it is a foregone conclusion, no matter how ingenious the foreshadowing, no matter how exciting the battle. It is unsatisfactory because it changes nothing about the initial situation. The friends of Trampas are still rustlers, vigilante law still prevails, The Virginian has no change of heart or mind, and Molly still marries him. This can happen in a novel, where the showdown is only one scene among many. But in a short story, which must be concise and memorable and leave a single impression in the reader's mind, a standard gunfight is inevitably a weak climax.

Some may argue that Stephen Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" (1898) is an excellent short story in which a gunfight is the climax. The gunfight in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," however, never takes place. Crane set out to dramatize what happened in the West when two eras confronted each other. To have Marshal Potter actually shoot Scratchy Wilson, or to let Wilson shoot Potter, would have resolved nothing. Crane's resolution is a non-gunfight.

In our search for good gunfight short stories we discovered several unique variations on the prototypical scenario. In each case, however, the gun duel is part of each story but is not the climax of the story.

In "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," Dorothy Johnson uses common situational motives, including revenge, blossoming love, and the search for self-respect, but the shooting of the man called Liberty is only the beginning of the complications. The killing puts the winner of the shootout into life-long obligation, molds his career and character, and creates a whole series of motivations, causes, and after-effects. Ironically, he did not kill Liberty Valance. The lethal bullet came from the rifle of a man hidden in the shadows. It is still an important shooting, of course, but it is not the story's climax.

O. Henry, famous for his surprise endings and also famous among western fans as the creator of The Cisco Kid, published nineteen western short stories in his book *Heart of the West* (1907). Three have gunfights in them. My favorite is "The Reformation of Calliope," in which the shootout is the situation containing the bulk of the rising action. Calliope, a big amiable redneck, is drunk and is once again shooting up the town. The marshal, at the end of his patience, hides his posse along Main Street with orders to shoot Calliope. But the inebriated gunman runs the gauntlet, eluding all but the marshal, and forts up in the railway station. There, sobriety starts to catch up with him.

So far, O. Henry's story mostly consists of shooting. The only suspense is whether the posse will "reform" Calliope before he "reforms" one of them. Then the train arrives. Seeing that the train could be Calliope's means of escape, the marshal recklessly charges the station. A shot rings out. The marshal's skull is creased by Calliope's bullet. When he regains consciousness, he finds that Calliope has assumed his identity and his badge. Calliope's mother has arrived on the train. O. Henry's resolution to this tale is to get the men to agree to swap

roles until Calliope's mother goes home again. Calliope will pretend to be the town marshal, and the marshal will pretend to be the town redneck. As in Crane's story, a woman comes West and has a remarkable effect on the violence.

Marshal Buck says: "After I stir around town a bit and put 'em on I'll guarantee that nobody won't give the thing way to her. And say, you leather-headed, rip-roarin' low-down son of a locoed cyclone, you follow that advice she gave me! I'm goin' to take some of it myself, too."

"Buck," said Calliope, feelingly, "ef I don't I hope I may . . ."

"Shut up," said Buck. "She's a-comin back."⁴

In William Eastlake's "The Death of Sun," a well-crafted contemporary short story, a young white woman is working to save Navajo pride and culture; Sun, an eagle, is the living symbol of freedom and the sacredness of life. A rancher and his hired man come in a helicopter to kill the eagle in the name of "predator control."

Waving her Winchester, Mary-Forge leads the Navajo on a horseback charge. It is good anti-Western material: the Indians become the cavalry, riding to chase off the technosavages.

As in "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," there is a third party who steps in to resolve the conflict. In Dorothy Johnson's story this third party is a hidden rifleman. In Eastlake's story it is Sun, the eagle. Sun flies into the rotors, fragments pierce the fuel tank, and the tin bird explodes in flame.

"It was Sun that did it," More Turquoise said.

The death of Sun.

All of the Indians and Mary-Forge were standing around the dying fire of the big whack-bird in the smoke that shrouded the death of Sun.

"When an eagle," the Medicine Man said, "—when a true bird has no hope—"

"Yes?"

"When the eagle is no more," the Medicine Man said.

"Yes?"

"Then we are no more."

"Yes," every person shrouded in smoke said.⁵

In broad terms, the shootout in "The Death of Sun" is the culmination of a social crisis, but in three other stories, shootouts become culminating episodes for psychological crises. In these stories we see a pattern of cause and effect. Each event prior to the climax is one cause of that climax; each event following the climax is a result of it. In each story, the cause-effect dynamics are complex, unconventional and unpredictable. The shooting in each story is actually the climax, a condition which we found to be rather unusual for western short stories involving gunplay. But the interesting thing about the climactic shootings in these three stories is that the gunfights are not real.

Nearly all of Bill Pronzini's very brief short story, "Righteous Guns," takes place in the mind of a movie actor who has lost touch with reality. His psyche cannot separate itself from the bad-guy gunman that he has played in film after film. As the story opens, we learn that he has shot and killed his film director. Confused and believing himself to be a gunman of the old West, he now wanders the false-front Western street of a movie set. The law arrives, bewildering to him because they wear blue uniforms and blue helmets. Nonetheless, he finishes the scene with a gunfight, as though it were a movie.

"All right," he yelled, "come and get it boys!" His hand went down, came up again with his desperate gun blazing—
And the righteous guns cut him down.⁶

Stuart Levine's story, "Wimpy. Zing." is unusual for a short story because of the amount of time devoted to tracing the youthful and middle age development of the central character. A short story does not usually deal in the development of the character, but instead presents the reader with a conflict which reveals the character.

"Wimpy" is a high school kid who sells orchids and is on the rifle team. He becomes a doctor, then a psychiatrist, and then a medic in Vietnam.

After Vietnam, Wimpy is disturbed by the thought of all the men who suffer from Post-Combat Mental Disorder, or PCMD. "Poor fruitcakes," he says, "all over the country now, guys pushing fifty, still bleeding and dopey because of that fucking war." One evening, Wimpy suddenly begins to talk to his friend, the narrator of the story. "I told you someday I would tell you what got me in Viet Nam. Seeing Joel makes me want to spill it."⁷

What he spills is the story of a shootout. A VC sniper begins taking shots at a wounded soldier whom Wimpy is trying to save. Wimpy tells, in sensitive detail, how he picked up a rifle and deliberately killed the sniper. But the sniper was a human being, and Wimpy was a physician dedicated to saving lives, not taking them. Wimpy's long-postponed confession of murder becomes the solution, or denouement, of this story's psychological tension.

The next example, Robert McCammon's "Black Boots," might be classified as macabre fiction, Western gothic, horse opera horror or cowpunk hallucinodrama—take your pick. The protagonist is "Davy Slaughter," a self-made psychopath. He believes that he is being pursued across the desert by a relentless gunman he has nicknamed "Black Boots." Davy has killed Black Boots eight times, but with each defeat Black Boots has become a little faster on the draw and a little more accurate.

Slaughter's imagination makes him believe that there are white worms in his canteen water, makes him see his horse as a living skeleton with the red lungs and heart visibly pumping, and transforms an ordinary bartender into a man who has a rattlesnake squirming out of one empty eye socket.

In the shootout, Slaughter whirls and once again blasts Black Boots into oblivion . . . but this time it turns out to be an unarmed kid standing in the saloon doorway. He whirls again: Black Boots has somehow gotten behind the bar. Slaughter butchers him again, but when he looks over the bar he finds only the body of the bartender. He runs to his horse and now finds his antagonist waiting for him in the street. "Black Boots shot Davy Slaughter twice, once in the belly and once at close range in the skull."⁶

This time, "Black Boots" is the mother of the murdered boy. McCammon's story has a tight cause/effect structure and a dramatic climax. But in order to create that drama, McCammon also had to create a very non-traditional gunfight.

So far, I have described short stories in which there is a gunfight but the gunfight is not the climax, and short stories in which a gunfight is the climax, but is not an ordinary gunfight. My final example is a short story in which a standard gunfight is used as a standard climax. Thanks to an ingenious setting, it comes as a surprise.

California writer Gerry Haslam's fine short story, "Cowboys," has a standard structure and a standard shootout. The creativity comes from the contemporary setting and the skill with which Haslam builds the suspense into a surprising outcome. One of the two contending "cowboys" referred to in the title is actually a hippie who drives a red convertible sports car. He shows up, little red car and all, to work on the crew of an oil derrick. He and one of the oil field roughnecks, Shorty, eventually buckle on their old-fashioned gunfighter rigs, face each other, draw, and shoot it out.

Haslam's precise characterizations of the two men make it entirely plausible that each man will resent the life style of the other. The feelings intensify until their mutual resentment reaches its peak, at which point it becomes obvious that these are not merely men who are only prejudiced, egocentric and sociopathic. They are both so poorly adjusted to modern life that they still believe in the right of a man to uphold his sense of honor by shooting another man. The two seem tragically unaware that they live in a society of law and punishment, a society in which the "winner" of such a duel will go to prison no matter who drew first and no matter what the provocation.

As the other roughnecks watch in amazement, the hippie and the hardhat draw their Colts and blast away at each other. Shorty, the "good ol' boy," is killed.

Shorty's friends can do nothing but watch as the hippie gets into his red convertible and drives away over the horizon. What would the Virginian's friends do, if Trampas had killed the Virginian? What do Haslam's modern New West cowboys do about the killing of one of their friends in a shootout?

"Easy Ed, he just kept looking from where Shorty lay with a big old blow-fly already doin business on his bloody lower lip, then back toward

the hill where Cowboy'd disappeared. We might could form a posse, he said."⁹

When Phyllis and I went in search of gunfight short stories, we did not expect to find so few in which the shootout has a structural function. We found a total of thirty-five stories that exhibit unusual creativity in gunfights, but in which the gunfights are not climaxes. We also found a few standard stories in which the plot does lead to a gunfight climax, but in these the motivations are stereotypical and the plot line is simplistic. In such a plot, two men carry guns (for any of several reasons) and they argue (over any of several issues) until the argument leads to some shooting. The ending features a sunset, a kiss, a farewell, a new beginning, or all of the above.

In 1955, Bernard DeVoto wrote a column for *Harpers Magazine* in which he postulated that the gunfight in *The Virginian* spoils not only that novel, but all like it: in DeVoto's words, "it is the climax of the fantasy that has kept the cowboy story from becoming serious fiction."¹⁰

DeVoto's objection is that Wister lets the gunfight detract from the larger social significance of the Johnson County War while setting a precedent for gunsmoke thrillers. DeVoto's essay made me realize that the gunfight in *The Virginian* is nothing but melodrama. It resolves almost nothing and obscures larger issues. DeVoto continues, "as these contrivances are worked out, somewhere along the way motive as a component of human behavior, occasionally present up to now, makes its final exit from horse opera. It has never yet returned."¹¹

All of which leads me back to a conclusion for my hypothesis about gunfights and the quality of the short stories in which they are found. The powerful literary influence of Owen Wister's 1902 gunfight, as DeVoto rightly complained, probably delayed the development of the serious Western novel. However, we have seen the publication of some excellent literary Western novels since 1955, with and without guns in them, and there is overwhelming evidence that at least some of our short story writers in the West have also overcome the prototype to produce some impressive literature.

NOTES

1. Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1902), 280-81.
2. Clarence Mulford, "Hopalong Sits In," *Short Stories* (January 10, 1930), 39.
3. John M. Cunningham, "The Tin Star," *Colliers* (December 6, 1947), 73.
4. O. Henry, "The Reformation of Calliope," *Best Stories of O. Henry* (London: Octopus Books, 1987), 141.
5. William Eastlake, "The Death of Sun," *Cosmopolitan* (October, 1972), 239.
6. Bill Pronzini, "Righteous Guns," *The Best Western Stories of Bill Pronzini* (Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1990), 40.

7. Stuart Levine, "Wimpy. Zing," was sent to me by the author in manuscript form. Early in 1993 it was accepted for publication in *Short Story*.
8. Robert R. McCammon, "Black Boots," *Razored Saddles* (New York: Avon, 1989), 16.
9. Gerald Haslam, "Cowboys," *Okies* (publisher & date unknown), 55.
10. Bernard DeVoto, "The Easy Chair—Birth of an Art," *Harper's Magazine* (December, 1955), 8-9, 12-14.
11. DeVoto, p. 14.

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