Myths of Violence in American Popular Culture

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One of the “big issues” in the late 1960s, the question of violence in the mass media has been temporarily eclipsed by other problems such as “inflation.” Actually public concern about the portrayal of violence and crime in the media rises and falls in a distinctive cycle. The agitation usually reaches its peak in a time of considerable social upheaval and in response to the emergence of a new popular genre centering on violence and crime. In connection with the general clamor, new scientific studies purport to show a definite causal connection between violence in the media and criminal behavior. Moral pressure groups of various sorts pick the issue up and there is an outbreak of censorship episodes, prosecutions, and legislative inquiries. Finally, two developments usually lead to a lessening of tension and, for a time, the public agitation dies down. First, the medium under attack announces with great éclat a program of self-regulation which results at least temporarily in a reduction in the level of violent content or in a more conventionally acceptable mode of presentation of violent themes. Second, a further series of scientific inquiries are carried out which cast some doubt on the causal claims of the earlier studies and which suggest that the relationship between the media portrayal of violence and violent behavior is more complex than was thought and cannot be understood in terms of a simple cause-effect equation. These two developments tend to defuse the issue until it is raised in relation to a new generic development.

This cycle is clearly evident in the attack on the gangster film in the 1930s, the agitation about horror comics in the 1950s, and the concern
with television violence in the 1960s.\(^1\) Though the discussion is somewhat muted at the moment, it will doubtless break out again in response to new developments in the representation of violence. Like many big issues, such as corruption in government, about which the public becomes agitated from time to time, the discussion of media violence has been frustratingly repetitive in its cyclical character. The same issues are aired over and over again, while new versions of “expert” testimony lead to the same ambiguous conclusions as before. It seems to me that this is at least partly due to the way this “issue” has been formulated, and I would like to try to develop an approach to the problem of violence and literature that may enable us to gain some new insights into the significance of this complex phenomenon.

The chief difficulty with most social and psychological studies of violence lies in their assumption that violence is essentially a simple act of

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1. The most useful and provocative brief survey and critique of studies of media violence and their theoretical assumptions is André Gluckmann, Violence on the Screen (London, 1971). The 1930s agitation which focused particularly on the impact of the newly popular gangster films and which led eventually to a new formulation of the motion picture production code was accompanied by the first major studies of the impact of film, a series of investigations supported by the Payne Fund. These were reported in a number of books and summarized—quite inaccurately as Garth Jowett points out in a recent review of a reprint edition of the Payne Fund Studies—in H. J. Forman, Our Movie Made Children (New York, 1994). The Payne Fund studies and other early research into the impact of media violence were exhaustively and rather devastatingly criticized by Mortimer J. Adler in his Art and Prudence (New York, 1937), which remains the most solid philosophical study of the questions surrounding the moral and political impact of the arts. The attack on the crime and horror comic books in the 1950s, which led to the temporary elimination of the genre and a new comics code was most vividly mounted in the articles, books, and legislative testimony of the psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham (see his Seduction of the Innocent [New York, 1954]). The most effective defense of the media and critique of research in that period was Joseph T. Klapper, The Effects of Mass Communications (New York, 1960). The execution of the crime and horror comics, like that of the gangster film, was short-lived. A number of elements of the genre went right on in Mad magazine and its imitators, while the full-scale panoply of the horror comics surfaced in the 1960s in the various underground comics and in slicker, more expensive comic publications like Vampirella. More recent investigations of the impact of violence can be found in Otto N. Larsen, ed., Violence and the Mass Media (New York, 1968); Leonard Berkowitz, Aggression: A Social Psychological Analysis (New York, 1962); and David M. Rein, “The Impact of Television Violence,” Journal of Popular Culture 3, no. 4 (Spring 1974): 934–45, which reports on the extensive series of studies commissioned by the Office of the Surgeon General.

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aggression that can be treated outside of a more complex moral and
dramatic context. This may be the case with news reports of war, mur-
der, assault, and other forms of violent crime, but it is certainly not a
very adequate way to treat the fictional violence of a western, a detective
story, or a gangster saga. It is true that one can count and catalog the
number of violent acts that occur in a day or a week of television and
produce distressing statistics about the number of murders and assaults
per minute on the typical television show. One can, like the redoubtable
Dr. Wertham, amass specific instances where a young person has im-
itated or thinks he has imitated an act of violence he saw on television,
though we should not forget that it can also be said without much fear of
contradiction that the literary work which has directly caused more vio-
ence in the history of Western civilization than any other is the Bible.
One can also construct laboratory experiments in which various groups
are shown short films of violent acts and demonstrate that in certain
circumstances this experience will cause further aggressive behavior.4
With procedures such as this, the evidence of a correlation between
media violence and aggressive behavior becomes more and more per-
suasive. But do such studies tell us anything more than that this is a
violent age and that there is probably some connection between the
violence of actuality and the representation of violence in the media?

However, the degree to which people may imitate acts of violence or
be stimulated to aggressive behavior of their own by an overdose of
violent fantasy is only one dimension of the problem, for, in fictional
works, acts of violence appear in a complex context established by
generic conventions, cultural stereotypes, and the specific treatment of
motive, act, and emotion, in the story in which the violence occurs. While
it may be true that a certain proportion of the audience may be so
disturbed or unsophisticated that they experience, say, the shootout in a
western, as an isolated act of violence without a moral or dramatic con-
text, this is surely a pathological extreme. I would assume, until there is
persuasive evidence to the contrary, that most people experience their
media violence in the moral and dramatic context provided by indi-
vidual stories and by the generic conventions which underlie these
stories. Unfortunately, only one experiment that I am familiar with dealt
even tangentially with the extent to which children experienced violence
in film in such a context and that experiment seemed to indicate that
genetic convention was a dominant part of the experience.3 It seems

2. This has been the approach commonly adopted by the most careful laboratory stu-
dents of media violence, Bandura and Berkowitz. See the reports of their experiments in
Berkowitz.

3. F. E. Emery, "Psychological Effects of the Western Film: A Study in Television
al. in Television and the Child (London, 1958) noted that children were less disturbed by
violence in genres they were familiar with than in adult dramas, but did not systematically
explore the effect of generic conventions.
clear to me that further inquiries into the significance of media violence must address themselves in a more complex way to this dimension of context in the fictional representation of violence, for it is from the patterns of context in which violence is portrayed that acts of aggression gain their meaning and significance.

American culture has long manifested a large public demand for books, films, and television programs in which violence plays a central role. Much as one can point to the indispensable place of violence in the whole history of literature from savage fighting Achaians through murdering Macbeths, American writers and filmmakers have been exceptionally prolific in the invention of stories and even whole genres of violent action. From the end of the seventeenth century when early tales of Indian wars and captivity were among the first best-sellers, through the nineteenth-century fascination with bloody sagas of the western frontier and gothic thrillers about the cities, down to the violent gunfighters, private eyes, gangsters and gangbusters of twentieth-century film and television, the American public has made its legends of violence a primary article of domestic consumption, and of export. So potent and pervasive have been these American images of violence that it is through them that Americans have been imaginatively known to much of the rest of the world.4

One puzzling thing is that, in spite of this penchant for imagined violence, Americans have traditionally thought of themselves as a non-violent law-abiding people.5 Our rhetoric of manifest destiny in the nineteenth century taught that America was the great redeemer nation bringing peace, democracy, and the rule of law to all the world. Though much of this rhetoric is obsolescent and even seems, to some, obscene, the basic belief in America’s role as a peace-bringer still retains its hold, as can be seen from the way former President Nixon and his supporters tried to use the role of peacemaker for his justification. Indeed, the Watergate situation mirrors in microcosm the complex ambiguities which so often seem to characterize the American way of relating peace,


5. In a recent column in the Chicago Sun-Times, Vic Gold observed as so many have that “we, as a people are guilty of conducting a prime time love affair with crime and violence. In the daytime, we talk law-and-order morality. But after hours, we take vicarious pleasure in lawlessness and violence.”
violence, law, and crime. In trying to understand how Nixon and his aides were motivated, I find myself drawn to a paradoxical supposition about a deep-lying American attitude. Why were these burglaries carried out in the first place? Why, after their discovery, was the even more dangerous and far-reaching cover-up decided upon? While it is possible that some specific set of motives may be revealed in the future, an air of irrationality hovers about the proceedings and I find it quite impossible to understand them except in the light of the assumption that these men believed that, in their crusade to bring peace and law to America and the world, a certain degree of violence and crime was not only permissible but morally necessary. Would a group of practical, experienced politicians have embarked on such a destructive and absurd course of action as Watergate and the cover-up unless they were somehow compelled by the feeling that the accomplishment of their goals necessitated such actions and that their dedication to law and peace was not sufficient or complete enough unless it was tested by their willingness to commit criminal and even violent actions in support of their crusade?

Of course, I may be completely wrong in imputing such motives to the president's men, but I think I am correct in saying that, on the evidence of a large body of our literature of violence and crime, Americans have a deep belief in the moral necessity of violence and that this belief accounts for the paradox of an ostensibly peace-loving and lawful people being so obsessed with violence. It also, I think, helps explain certain aspects of the actual character of violence in America, in particular that which grows from our inability to control the spread of firearms throughout our society. The gun is our prime symbol of moral violence. Until we can change the imaginative connection between possession of guns and the moral stature of the individual in our society, we will remain in the thrall of what I have called, in another essay, the six-gun mystique. Thus, a fuller understanding of the imaginative meaning of violence in our society is not only a matter of seeing how the portrayal of this theme in our media reflects certain fundamental cultural attitudes, but a necessary base for any serious attempts to change these attitudes. In this paper, I hope to make a tentative contribution to this analysis by examining more fully the theme of the moral necessity of violence in some of our most pervasive literary formulas.

The formulas I have in mind are those of the western, the hard-boiled detective story, the gangster saga, and the police melodrama. While these genres by no means encompass the totality of American popular culture, they are the popular genres in which crime and violence are the central themes.6 Presumably the way in which these genres represent the

6. I have been assisted in this discussion by the insights garnered from a variety of analytical comments on these popular genres. The bibliography on the western is fairly
world is sufficiently close to the public's sense of what is significant, interesting, and plausible to be satisfying as a fictional experience. We can hardly claim that these genres fully coincide with the public's attitudes, but they must present at least an acceptable picture of the world for the purposes of entertainment and escape. We can assume, then, as a preliminary hypothesis, that the themes which appear in all these popular genres are of compelling interest to their audiences. And of such themes, the most obvious and recurrent is that of the moral necessity of violence.

A few examples will clarify the general outline of this theme. In the highly popular western film Shane (1953), which was a fairly close adaptation of Jack Schaefer's novel (1949), the heroic protagonist is a gunfighter who rides out of a mysterious past into a newly settled Wyoming valley to find himself in the midst of a conflict between a group of homesteaders and the tyrannical old rancher who seeks to drive them out. Throughout the first part of the story, Shane attempts to escape from his violent past. He settles down on a farm with the Starrett family, hides his guns, and never speaks of his history. At first, he takes no part in the struggle between farmers and cattlemen. However, when the rancher's attempts to persuade the farmers to leave the range fail, and he turns toward violence, Shane is increasingly drawn into the conflict. The rancher hires a professional gunfighter, the notorious Stark Wilson, to help him drive the settlers out. Wilson tricks one of the farmers into drawing his gun and then shoots him down in cold blood. By this time it is evident that appeals to legal process or morality cannot stop the rancher from driving the peaceful farmers out of the valley. Shane buckles on his guns, knocks out Joe Starrett to prevent him from facing the professional killer, and rides into town, where he shoots both Wilson and the villainous rancher. Shane's killings are presented in such a way that violence is not only seen to be inevitable in relation to the plot —since the rancher will not give up his open range except over his dead body—but morally right and even transcendent. In the novel, the young boy who narrates the story describes Shane's act in the following terms:

well covered in the bibliographies in Cawelti (n. 4 above) and in Jack Nachbar, ed., Focus on the Western (New York, 1974), and in Richard Etulain's indispensable Western American Literature: A Bibliography of Interpretive Books and Articles (Vermillion, S.D., 1972). The hard-boiled detective story is particularly well analyzed in George Grella, "Murder and the Mean Streets," Contempora 1 (March 1970): 6-15. For the gangster saga, I have been particularly dependent on two superb discussions: Robert Warshow's essay on the gangster in The Immediate Experience (Garden City, N.Y., 1964), and Stuart M. Kaminsky, "Little Caesar and Its Role in the Gangster Film Genre," Journal of Popular Film 1, no. 3 (September 1972): 209-26. I have also learned a great deal about the gangster film from conversations with Kaminsky, who has a more detailed and insightful knowledge of this genre than any film scholar I am familiar with.
I would think of him in each of the moments that revealed him to me. I would think of him most vividly in that single flashing instant when he whirled to shoot Fletcher [the rancher] on the balcony at Grafton’s saloon. I would see again the power and the grace of a coordinate force beautiful beyond comprehension. I would see the man and the weapon wedded in the one indivisible deadliness. I would see the man and the tool, a good man and a good tool, doing what had to be done. . . . I would see him there in the road, tall and terrible in the moonlight, going down to kill or be killed, and stopping to help a stumbling boy and to look out over the land, the lovely land, where that boy had a chance to live out his boyhood and grow straight inside as a man should.7

The combination of moral, aesthetic, and psychological values united in this passage is a striking formulation of the theme of the moral necessity of violence. Shane’s killings are an essential precondition of the young boy’s “chance to live out his boyhood and grow straight inside.” But the act is not only morally justified in terms of its social end, it is a moment of beauty and power in its own right and one in which the hero becomes one with himself and his weapon, a moment of supreme fulfillment. As narrator Bobby Starrett observes earlier when he sees Shane buckle on his gun: “These were not things he was wearing or carrying. They were part of him, part of the man, of the full sum of the integrate force that was Shane. You could see now that for the first time this man who had been living with us, who was one of us, was complete, was himself in the final effect of his being.”8

Another example from a different genre. Mike Hammer, the hard-boiled private investigator of Mickey Spillane’s widely popular I, the Jury (1947), discovers that his best friend has been brutally murdered. His quest for the killer leads him to uncover a vicious drug racket operated by a beautiful, wealthy psychiatrist who uses her situation as a doctor to hook her patients on drugs and as a cover for her operation. This woman, the appropriately named Charlotte Manning, attempts to betray Mike by pretending to be in love with him. At the end of the story, after Mike has discovered her guilt, Charlotte tries to kill him. She seductively strips before him to distract his attention from a gun she has hidden. Instead, Mike waits for the climax of her striptease and shoots her herself. Here the killing of the evil one is obviously a matter of self-defense, vengeance, and the righteous execution of a vicious killer who endangers society. But the killing is given further moral overtones as an appropriate response to an immoral use of feminine sexuality for the purpose of betrayal. It becomes a purification of the obscene as well as the destruction of a killer. The moral necessity of this act of violence is so

clear—at least to Mike—that when the dying Charlotte asks him how he could have shot her like this, he can reply, “It was easy.”

In *The Godfather* (1969), Mario Puzo treats violence in a more complex fashion, in part because he is not working in the tradition of heroic adventure which dominates the western and hard-boiled detective genres, but in the more morally ambiguous genre of the gangster saga. Nevertheless, the violent actions in which Michael Corleone becomes progressively involved are presented to us as moral necessities required by the endemic corruption and brutality of a fundamentally unjust society. Michael's first act of violence, the murder of police Captain McCluskey and his criminal associate Virgil Sollozzo, is an attempt to preserve the security of his own “family.” However, it is also a just revenge for the attempted assassination of Michael's own “good” father and is further justified as an attack on criminal gangs who seek to enter the vicious drug traffic. Throughout the story, the Corleone family is presented to us in a morally sympathetic light, as basically good and decent people who have had to turn to crime in order to survive and prosper in a corrupt and unjust society. Even the climactic series of assassinations planned by Michael to destroy rival gang leaders and consolidate his own power are presented to us in conjunction with a complex of moral and religious symbols; in the end, Michael Corleone stands out like Shane as a man who has achieved complete self-integration by sacrificing himself to violence for the sake of the peace and prosperity of those he loves and feels responsible for.

Finally, to bring ourselves up to the immediate present, there is Michael Winner's recent film *Death Wish* (1974) which might be characterized as a modern urban western. In this story, a successful New York real estate planner of liberal inclination, who abhors violence to the degree that he served as a conscientious objector in the Korean war, becomes a one-man vigilante force when his wife is beaten to death and his daughter driven into psychosis by a gang of muggers. When he is given a pistol by a business associate from Arizona, our hero goes for an evening stroll in the park and is accosted by a mugger, whom he shoots. Though his initial reaction is horror (he rushes home and vomits in the toilet), he soon overcomes his squeamishness and embarks on a one-man crusade to destroy the rampaging muggers who seem to be everywhere in Fun City. In this particular film, there is no question about our basic sympathy and moral support for our hero's killings. It is clear that the society is overrun by vicious barbarians in the form of nasty-looking thugs against whom the law is utterly helpless. To drive the point home, our hero reminds his grieving son-in-law that the pioneers would never

have allowed things to come to this point and that it is perhaps time for Americans to become pioneers again. As to the good social consequences of our hero’s crusade, we are told that not long after the actions of “the vigilante” had made the headlines, the rate of mugging in New York City sank drastically. Even the police turn out to be sympathetic to the hero. When the police inspector in charge of the investigation discovers the vigilante’s identity, he only insists that the hero leave town and move to another city. At the end of the film, we leave our hero in Chicago, obviously ready to continue his crusade there.  

This narrative pattern—a protagonist placed in a situation where some form of violence or criminality becomes a moral necessity—is one of the basic archetypes of American literature. It is certainly an important element in Cooper’s Leatherstocking Saga, whose hero inspired D. H. Lawrence to his well-known observation that “there you have the myth of the essential white America. All the other stuff, the love, the democracy, the floundering into lust, is a sort of by-play. The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.” Some scholars, like Richard Slotkin, have traced this pattern back as far as the very beginnings of the American imagination in the seventeenth century. It comes down to us today in a relatively unbroken tradition through the followers of Cooper, like Robert Montgomery Bird, into the dime novel, back into the adult novel in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century western adventures of writers like Owen Wister, Emerson Hough, and Zane Grey, and from thence into the uncountable twentieth-century books, films, and television serials involving gunfighters, private detectives, gangsters, and policemen.

But observing the pervasiveness of the story pattern of morally necessary violence does not carry us very far into an understanding of the imaginative significance of all these shootouts and heroic killings. Indeed, the treatment of heroic violence as morally justified has been an almost inevitable accompaniment of stories of heroic adventure since the epics of Homer. To have a truly splendid hero we must have a man who faces the ultimate challenge of life and death and emerges triumphant. And if the hero becomes involved in violence, his action must be justified in some sense, if only because it is performed by a hero. It is perhaps interesting to raise the question as to why American culture has seemed to need so many different sorts of adventurous heroes and to wonder whether this penchant for adventurous heroics is a more or less univer-

10. Death Wish is a more sophisticated version of a genre which might be called the enforcer saga. This genre has gained great contemporary popularity in the form of pulp paperback series like “The Destroyer,” “The Executioner,” “The Butcher,” “The Enforcer,” etc., which can be seen in large quantity at any paperback bookstand.

sal constant in human nature or whether some cultures tend to turn more dominantly to this heroic archetype, but such a complex inquiry exceeds the limits of my knowledge at the present. Instead, I want to look into the more specific sorts of interpretations given to the pattern of morally necessary violence in American popular media. How, in other words, do American stories of violence tend to justify the culminating acts of violence? As I see it, these justifications are typically built into the stories themselves in the form of patterns of circumstances and choice which enforce upon the hero the necessity of acts of violence. There are, I think, at least five of these patterns which I shall refer to as the "myths of violence." They are to some extent interrelated, and while some stories emphasize only one of these myths, it is more typically the case that two or more will be involved in the development of any given story.

1. The Myth of “Crime Does Not Pay,” or “As Ye Sow, So Shall Ye Reap”

In the more overtly moralistic 1930s, such explicit statements as these used to appear at the beginning and ending of such gangster films as Little Caesar (1931), Public Enemy (1931), and Scarface (1932). This myth reflects one of the oldest and simplest human conceptions of justice, the lex talionis or “eye for an eye” principle of retaliation which most civilized societies have rejected. However, there is something profoundly satisfying and morally neat about this kind of justice which has made it flourish in the area of popular literature. There, unlike life, the circumstances can be manipulated to insure a moral and poetic equivalence between the criminal act and the hero's vengeance. To some degree, this myth is embodied in most examples of the literature of violence, particularly in those forms which are especially designed for the younger and the less sophisticated portions of the public. For example, lex talionis is perhaps the dominant moral principle which informs the writings of Mickey Spillane, the most broadly read of hard-boiled detective writers, while the more sophisticated private-eye adventures of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler are usually critical of this myth of justification, even

12. Terminology is a constant difficulty in the discussion of patterns of the sort I am considering in this essay. What does one call them? In terms of conventional critical usage one could probably substitute the term “theme” for the term “myth” in almost every case that I use it. I am troubled by the vagueness and the manifold variety of significations of the term “myth,” but “theme” is even worse in this respect since it can evidently be applied to anything in a literary work that the critic thinks significant. At a minimum I think the term “myth” implies a story of some sort, however brief and fragmented, that possesses exemplary and explanatory value. It also implies a pattern common to a number of works and presumably broadly significant in the culture. Thus I have chosen to call the patterns of action which justify or explain the moral necessity of the hero's violence “myths.”
if some of the satisfaction to be derived from their stories comes from our seeing the criminal meet an appropriately violent end. We might speculate that the presence of this myth in most of our stories of violence reflects a deep underlying commitment to a primitive sense of justice latent in all of us under the veneer of civilization and close to the surface in those who face the most frustration and powerlessness in their actual lives, the young and the poor. In any case, this hypothesis might merit empirical testing by examining the attitudes of audiences and inquiring into the comparative patterns of distribution of films and books which place the most immediate stress on this particular myth.

However, even in the case of the relatively simple and straightforward myth of “Crime does not pay,” we encounter a further complexity. While this myth does provide an obvious moral justification for the killing of gangsters or murderers by G-men, detectives, or policemen, it becomes more ambiguous in films where the gangsters themselves are clearly the protagonists as in the three early 1930s films mentioned above. Here, “Crime does not pay” was an official motto, a bit of publicly acceptable moralism. The actual sympathies of the audience were probably as much with the gangster who initiated the violence as with the lawman who retaliated against it.

The same ambivalence is reflected in the popular genre which embodies the myth of “Crime does not pay” in its simplest, most abstract form—the saga of the superhero. Tales of caped crusaders, supermen, and Lone Rangers have in common their portrayal of an inevitable nemesis or transcendent force which automatically responds to criminal activity with perfect justice. The hero’s own violence tends to be somewhat muted in these stories. Superheroes rarely kill the criminals they overcome; instead they knock them out and turn them over to the police, or, like the Lone Ranger, they shoot the gun out of the villain’s hand with silver bullets or some other mystical weapon and then call the sheriff. For all his dazzling capacities, marvelous weapons, and fantastic disguises, the superhero is a transcendent agent of society. In fact, in his other identity, he is generally some respectable member of that society. As superhero, he gains no personal advantage or satisfaction from his heroic deeds beyond his basic and automatic concern to make justice prevail. Thus, he is purely reactive, a symbolic embodiment of the general principle that the criminal is certain to meet his nemesis. No wonder that in such stories the villains are often more interesting, various, and enjoyable. As in the classic gangster film, I am inclined to believe that in superhero stories we secretly root for the villain. The official conventionality of the myth and the certainty of the superhero’s ultimate triumph enable us to delight in the villain’s criminality without having to worry about its consequences since the criminal’s defeat is inevitable.
2. The Myth of the Vigilante

Where the myth of "Crime does not pay" emphasizes the evil deeds of the antagonist, the admirable motives of the hero's violence and the inevitability of the process through which bad acts of violence beget retaliation, the myth of the vigilante dwells on the weaknesses and corruption of society. In this myth the hero is typically reluctant to use violence. Only after it has become absolutely clear to him that the legally constituted processes of society cannot bring about justice does he step in and take the law into his own hands. Sometimes the hero's family or friends become victims of an act of criminal violence which the law is unable to avenge. When it becomes evident that the police, the courts, and society in general cannot either protect the innocent or avenge acts of criminal violence, then the vigilante must himself become the law. Since he is only an individual (or a small group without legal authority), his only possible means of securing justice is counterviolence. With no court but his own judgment, his only choices are either to destroy the antagonist or let him go. Since failure to destroy the villain will only free him for further evil deeds—the community being either helpless or in some way supportive of the criminal—the hero must confront and destroy the criminals through violence, usually a considerable skill with guns.

Unlike the superhero in the myth of "Crime does not pay," the vigilante does kill. Probably to satisfy our thirst for vengeance against the evildoer and our feeling of frustration at the weakness and corruption of society in general, his violence is dramatically climactic. It either represents an escalation of the villain's acts of violence or it is performed with some striking skill or style. In Death Wish, one recent embodiment of the myth of the vigilante, the hero, played by Charles Bronson, develops a distinctive style of cool and humorous nonchalance in his style of dispatching the villains. In Dirty Harry, another recent film, Clint Eastwood plays a police officer who rejects the legal process in order to destroy a maniacal killer who menaces many lives, yet cannot be brought to book by regular police procedures. In this film the principle of dramatic climax is one of escalation. In the first phase of his extralegal attack, the vigilante hero beats the killer to a bloody pulp to make him confess. Then when he is released from jail on the basis of legal technicalities and returns to his maniacally violent ways, the hero tracks him down and shoots him in a lavishly brutal scene. The western High Noon (1952) was a much more complex elaboration of the vigilante myth. The hero, persuaded to retire from his post as sheriff by his new Quaker wife, discovers, as he is about to depart on his honeymoon, that a vicious killer he had sent to prison has been released and is about to arrive in town with his gang in order to kill the sheriff and wreak vengeance on the town.
Advised to run away, the sheriff decides that it is his obligation as a man to face up to the situation. He asks for support from the community, but out of cowardice, weakness, and corruption, the townspeople leave him to face the outlaws alone. The dramatic climax comes when, after killing most of the gang, he is about to be shot by the one survivor; his pacifist wife, in a sudden burst of action, shoots the villain in the back.

The myth of the vigilante is often traced to the actual social phenomenon of vigilantism in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South and West. Yet, there is a distinctive difference. Vigilantism was invariably a collective phenomenon, the result of mob action or of organizations like the Klan and the quasi-legal vigilante committees of some early western communities. These organizations or mobs, tacitly supported by the community, were frequently directed against an unpopular minority and were as often the expression of racial or social prejudice as they were directed against criminal violence. In the myth of the vigilante, however, the hero is generally an isolated individual who must cope with the weakness and corruption of the community as well as the violence of criminals and outlaws. Moreover, the vigilante myth appears to be more characteristic of twentieth- than of nineteenth-century stories of violence. While there are elements of the vigilante myth in later nineteenth-century dime novels, these stories were more characteristically focused around such superhero characters as Buffalo Bill and Deadwood Dick and therefore constitute forms of the “Crime does not pay” myth. The first major adult version of the vigilante myth I am familiar with is Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902). But in recent years, the vigilante myth has seemingly become the most pervasive pattern of the literature of violence. It dominates contemporary urban action films, both black and white, and pervades many recent westerns and gangster films. *The Godfather*, for example, can be seen as a particularly complex form of the vigilante myth, with the Corleones taking the law in their own hands to establish justice in the face of a totally corrupt and unjust social order.

Both novel and film begin with a group of people appealing to the Godfather for justice which has been denied to them by social prejudice, by government inflexibility, or by the corruption of men of power. The

13. In *The Virginian* vigilantism is not only a major element in the dramatic action but is explicitly rationalized and defended as an important American moral and political tradition: “When your ordinary citizen sees . . . that he has placed justice in a dead hand, he must take justice back into his own hands where it was once at the beginning of all things. Call this primitive, if you will. But so far from being a defiance of the law, it is an assertion of it—the fundamental assertion of self-governing men, upon whom our whole social fabric is based” (Owen Wister, *The Virginian* [New York, 1956], p. 514). Wister’s spokesman, Judge Henry, sharply differentiates between this western vigilantism and southern racial lynching, which he condemns.
Don uses his extralegal power, based on his willingness and ability to use violence, in order to accomplish justice for these petitioners whom society would deny. Later in the book, Michael kills a police captain to avenge an attempt on his father’s life, because the police are themselves corrupted allies of his enemies. In every case, the Corleone family brings order and justice to decent people, and punishes evildoers society is unable to deal with. When the family moves its headquarters into an outlying area,

Long Beach became the most crime-free town in the United States. Professional stickup artists and strong-arms received one warning not to ply their trade in the town. They were allowed one offense. When they committed a second they simply disappeared. The flimflam home-improvement gyp artists, the door-to-door con men were politely warned that they were not welcome in Long Beach. Those confident con men who disregarded the warning were beaten within an inch of their lives. Resident young punks who had no respect for law and proper authority were advised in the most fatherly fashion to run away from home. Long Beach became a model city. 14

This is perhaps the ultimate fantasy embodied in the myth of the vigilante: the use of individually controlled violence to create the ideal suburb. In such an expression, the vigilante myth perhaps comes closer to reality than is entirely comfortable, for the unrestrained use of personal and community security forces has always played a significant role in protecting the American upper classes in their walled-off estates and housing developments. In a sense, The Godfather projects a democratization of this sort of power by self-constituted vigilantes.

3. The Myth of Equality through Violence

This myth centers around stories of how lower or lower-middle class individuals use their skills in violence to achieve a level of equality with persons of established wealth and power. In The Godfather, the account of the early life of Don Vito Corleone is organized around this myth, for it is a tale of how an Italian immigrant, despised and exploited by those above him in the social structure, used his willingness to engage in acts of violence to win a position of equality and even superiority in the society. 15 Many of our gangster stories portray the gangster’s rapid rise from obscure poverty to power and affluence as an obvious variation on

15. For a brilliant account of this myth as an aspect of American organized crime, see Daniel Bell, “Crime as an American Way of Life,” in The End of Ideology (Glencoe, Ill., 1960), pp. 115–36.
the Alger story, the protagonist's technique of success being not pluck and luck but his free and easy manner with a .45 or submachine gun. Equality through violence is also an important pattern in hard-boiled detective stories. The private eyes of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, though men of relatively low social status, prove in the course of their adventures that they are more than equal to the corrupt men of wealth and high status whom they usually encounter in the course of their adventures. Curiously, this does not appear to be a particularly significant myth in recent westerns, though many earlier tales, like Wister's *The Virginian* or W. S. Hart's *The Return of Draw Egan*, present heroes who rise from low status to positions of leadership in society through their skills in violence.

The myth of equality through violence is closely related to the conception of America as a frontier society where violent confrontations are part of the ordinary course of life. This is a pervasive vision in our popular literature and films, whether set in the Wild West or the jungle of the modern city. In the western, attacks by Indians or outlaws are an everyday occurrence, just as in the city of contemporary police, detective, and gangster stories, the threat of criminal violence is the dominant characteristic of life. In such a setting, violence is normative rather than exceptional, and the hero who can use it for just and valuable purposes is inevitably a leading citizen. But, in this context, the mere achieving of equality or status is rarely treated as a sufficient justification for the hero's violence. More importantly, the hero's action is seen either in terms of the myth of the vigilante, which we have already discussed, or that of the hard-boiled hero and his code.

### 4. The Myth of the Hard-boiled Hero and His Code

For the hard-boiled hero, violence is a test of honor and integrity, a means of proving an individual code of morality which transcends both the law and the conventional morality of society. He is prepared to risk his life in man-to-man confrontations with the criminal, but it is also significant that he uses his violent abilities with extreme moral restraint. The classic western shootout is one key symbolic dramatization of the hero's responsibility to a rigorous moral code in his use of violence. The shootout usually occurs only after the most extreme provocation by the antagonist, and it is a ritual ceremony in which the hero waits for his opponent to draw first and then with the most extraordinary grace and discipline pulls his own gun and sends a bullet through another dashingly heart. The hero's controlled and restrained demeanor under

pressure and his adherence to the ritual structure of the shootout are external signs of the inner discipline and moral integrity he gains from his absolute obedience to the Code. Though the Code is an unwritten law, engraved only on the hearts of its adherents, it is, nevertheless, a stringent set of moral rules concerning, above all, the proper uses of individual violence. The Code assumes that neither written law nor the conventional standards of society are adequate guides to moral conduct. True morality can be judged only by a man who is prepared to face extreme situations of violence with trust in his own individual judgment backed up by a willingness to place his life on the line at the proper moment. The tough private investigator and the heroic policeman are both usually presented as being deeply concerned with the moral conditions of their acts of violence. A substantial part of their special tough-guy heroism results from their willingness to bend or break the law when it seems right to them to do so. The hard-boiled detective is often shown in conflict with a legalistic police officer who insists on following the letter of the law, but is incapable of stopping unrestrained criminal violence. In contrast, the heroic policeman is more often than not a maverick who finds that to preserve law and order he must step outside the constitutional limits. The justification for this rejection of legally constituted processes is the individual’s superior moral concern and judgment. The hard-boiled hero’s acts do not derive from an unrestrained delight in violence or from a willingness to use violence for personal ends of wealth and power. This is the immoral mode of criminal and outlaw. The hard-boiled hero’s violence must be accomplished in such a way as to prove the validity and propriety of his personal code. He is a curious sort of crusader who wanders through the endemic criminality, violence, and corruption of the frontier West or the urban jungle attempting not so much to save society as to preserve the honor and integrity of his character. As Raymond Chandler eloquently expressed this myth:

Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. I do not care much about his private life; he is neither a eunuch nor a satyr; I think he might seduce a duchess and I am quite sure he would not spoil a virgin; if he is a

17. This is perhaps the essence of the hard-boiled ideal: a man of complete morality who never needs to assert it in words, who can even act like a crook without any question of his honor arising.
man of honor in one thing, he is that in all things. He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he would not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man’s money dishonestly and no man’s insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him.18

Or as Robert Warshow puts it:

What [the western hero] defends, at bottom, is the purity of his own image—in fact his honor. This is what makes him invulnerable. When the gangster is killed his whole life is shown to have been a mistake, but the image the Westerner seeks to maintain can be presented as clearly in defeat as in victory: he fights not for advantage and not for the right, but to state what he is, and he must live in a world which permits that statement. The Westerner is the last gentleman, and the movies which over and over tell his story are probably the last art form in which the concept of honor retains its strength.”19

5. The Myth of Regeneration through Violence

In this myth, the justification of moral violence derives from its treatment as a necessary act of purification and regeneration. A classic example in relatively pure form is W. S. Hart’s movie Hell’s Hinges (1916). In this film, a young minister and his beautiful sister arrive from the East in the frontier town of Hell’s Hinges. Here, a small group of decent pioneers have established a church to oppose the town’s unrestrained outlawry and sensuality, centering around the saloon operated by villainous “Silk” Miller. The young minister is weak, however, and is easily seduced by a dance hall girl in Miller’s entourage. Inspired by this victory over the forces of God, the saloon crowd marches upon the church, determined to burn it to the ground and drive out the good pioneers. However, the area’s most courageous gunfighter, Blaze Tracey, has fallen in love with the minister’s sister and in the process has converted to religion. Outraged at the course of events, Tracey singlehandedly constitutes himself an angel of vengeance and purification and, in the film’s climactic moments, he attacks the saloon and purges it with fire. Out of the burning ashes of Hell’s Hinges, the nucleus of a new, moral community marches forth led by Tracey and the minister’s sister, now fully united in Christian love.

19. Warshow, p. 94.
In a superb recent book, *Regeneration through Violence*, Richard Slotkin traces this myth from what he argues are its origins in seventeenth-century Puritan Indian captivity and war narratives down through its complex elaboration in the nineteenth-century figure of Daniel Boone, the frontier hunter, and the many literary characters inspired by his legend, most notably Cooper’s Leatherstocking. As Slotkin sees it, the myth of regeneration through violence grew out of the deep conflicts and ambivalences which Americans felt as they underwent the “initiation into a new world and new life that is at the core of the American experience.”20 These conflicts grew out of a confrontation between Christian English and Indian cultures “that embodied two distinctly different phases of mythological evolution, two conflicting modes of perception, two antagonistic visions of the nature and destiny of man and the natural wilderness.”21 In the imaginative elaboration of the confrontation between settler, Indian, and wilderness, there emerged two basic mythical patterns, both of which tended toward a resolution through violence. The first myth, Slotkin argues, was that of the captive, a story of the white Christian captured, tormented, and tempted by Indians. The captive’s faith was tested by this challenge and he then destroyed the diabolical Indians and returned regenerated to the Christian community. The violence in this myth, Slotkin feels, was related to the settler’s imaginative tendency to project onto the Indians his own latent desires for freedom, sensuality, and escape from the spiritual rigors of the Christian community. Thus, in the myth of the captive, the ultimate rescue and destruction of the Indians are also symbolically a destruction of the captive’s own feared desires for lawlessness and the lascivious freedom of the wilderness.

However, the appeal of the wilderness and the fascination of the Indian way of life were strong enough that a second myth developed which presented a symbolic union between the white man and the wilderness. This was the myth of the hunter in which, through the tracking and killing of an animal (or an Indian), the hunter entered into the spirit of the wilderness and was reborn. In this version of the myth the violence of the hunt “is an initiation and a conversion in which [the hero] achieves communion with the powers that rule the universe beyond the frontiers and acquires a new moral character, a new set of powers or gifts, a new identity.”22 This myth was elaborated, according to Slotkin, in the variety of legends and stories which grew up around Daniel Boone and was then given significant literary expression in Cooper’s Leatherstocking series. It is also, Slotkin feels, the myth which underlies the more complex and profound explorations of Thoreau’s *Walden* and Melville’s *Moby Dick.*

21. Ibid., p. 25.
22. Ibid., p. 551.
Yet as Slotkin sees it, the myth of the hunter was rarely expressed without ambivalence for it contained tendencies which, from the point of view of the Puritan tradition, were morally dangerous:

the hunter in achieving his quest, runs grave moral risks. He has broken the family circle by his own act. He becomes partly assimilated to the world whose ways he is learning, the world of the Indian; and he may partake so much of the flesh of wild, hunted things that he becomes like them. Or he may so delight in the exercise of his newly acquired skills and powers that his pursuit of them becomes a calling or profession, an activity that he regards as self-justifying or as a substitute for civil religion.23

Slotkin sees the myth of the Code as one imaginative means of allaying the fear that the hunter's wildness will subvert and destroy civilized morality. Another mythical means of insuring that the hunter does not give way to wilderness urges is to place his actions in juxtaposition with the captivity myth, as Cooper did with his Leatherstocking:

Participation in the captivity myth alters [the hero's] relationship to the wilderness. For the sake of the captive and the values of society and Christianity which she represents, the hunter must exterminate the Indians who have taught him his skill and establish a safe refuge for the captive by opening the wilderness to settlement. He may not merge his identity with the wilderness so far that he is truly of it. Hence his acquisition of the powers of the wilderness creatures has disastrous consequences: he will use those powers, not to sustain the wilderness world, but to destroy it in the name of something higher.24

Though Slotkin does not carry his analysis of the myth of regeneration through violence down to the present day, it is clear that it continues to inform the popular tradition of the western at least as recently as Shane and John Ford's The Searchers (1956). In Shane the hero's return to his role as heroic gunfighter is clearly represented as an act of revitalization and redemption in which, through an act of violence, the hero saves the captive homesteaders and becomes one with himself. In a different way, in The Searchers, an epic hunt for a girl captured by the Indians leads the two heroes to become more and more like the Indians they pursue until, in the culminating battle, the Indian chief is destroyed and the captive restored to the Christian community. Whether this myth in a somewhat different form also plays a major role in other contemporary genres of violence, such as the hard-boiled detective story and the gangster saga, will require further inquiry. It is possible that the myth of

23. Ibid., p. 552.
24. Ibid., pp. 552-53.
regeneration through violence constitutes, as Slotkin would argue, the basic American way of dealing imaginatively with violence and that the other myths we have analyzed can be seen as versions of it. Certainly the myth of the hard-boiled hero and his Code has many points of connection with the archetype of regeneration through violence. However, I am inclined to think that the myth of the vigilante has separate sources and significance. In any case, this should be one line of further investigation.

I am not at all sure whether the five myths of violence I have discussed in this paper constitute a complete anatomy of the moral and dramatic contexts in which violence is treated in our various popular genres. As we set out to analyze the presentation of violence using more complex and specific methods such as those I have tried to follow in this paper, we shall doubtless have to add further categories and to redefine some of the myths I have treated here. In addition, where I have focused my attention on the protagonist’s violence and the various story lines which serve to justify it morally, we will also need to examine the antagonist’s violence to see whether it reflects the same mythical patterns or implies something else. But this is certainly enough to show that violence in popular culture is not simply a mindless representation of aggression which can be understood in simple quantitative terms. Further empirical and historical studies must take into consideration the variety and complexity of the mythical patterns involved in the representation of violence in popular culture, or they will continue to oversimplify this complex phenomenon to the point that conclusions about the causal effect and significance of media violence will be as open to doubt as they have been in the past.

At the moment, such an analysis raises more questions than it answers, but that is appropriate to the early stages of a meaningful cultural inquiry. The definition of different myths of violence suggests a variety of provocative lines of inquiry which should give us much fuller insight into the role of fantasies of violence in American and other cultures. What are the relationships between different myths of violence? Do different cultures tend to stress different myths in their presentation of fictional violence? Are there certain subcultures which seem to prefer one myth over another? Are the different myths of violence equally distributed throughout the culture or are some more dominant than others? Does each culture have a basic myth of violence of which there are many different variations, or are there differing myths which reflect

25. For example, a very interesting study could be made of the significant differences between English and American detective and crime fiction as they relate to different cultural attitudes toward violence. For British attitudes toward violence, see the historical study by T. A. Critchley, The Conquest of Violence (New York, 1970).
conflicting patterns of value? Are there differences in the distribution of these myths over time? For example, could it be that the myth of regeneration through violence is replaced in the twentieth century by the myth of the vigilante? If so, what does this imply? Above all, how do these different mythical patterns relate to the dialectic between literature and life? With a more complex and specific conception of the various patterns of media representation of violence, we may be able to arrive at the answers to some of these questions.