Hold Your Horses, It's Just an Adaptation

Ah, yes. The Western genre. A genre that is considered to be the fundamental core of the United States' national development. A genre that has spanned over generations and yet still continues its cycle of encountering new audiences. A genre that has become so encompassed in our everyday culture that we don't think twice about it, do we little dogie? Stated by Kirsten Day in her novel, *Cowboy Classics: The Roots of the American Western in the Epic Tradition,* the Western in "the American psyche [. . .] is a mythic-historical place where the nation's values and ideologies are formed. In this violent and uncertain world, the cowboy is the ultimate hero, fighting the bad guys, forging notions of manhood, and delineating what constitutes honor as he works to build civilization out of wilderness" (11). The Western adheres to common themes and plots, as Day explains above. In any given Western story, there is usually the fight for justice, the discovery of a man's endurance, and the creation of a town in the desert. Additionally, there are typical characteristics within the genre, such a shootout between two men in the middle of the street outside of a saloon, a challenge to survive the God-forsaken barren landscape, and an encounter with the opposing desert inhabitants, the Native Americans. Phillip French in his *Westerns* book says that "Cowboy pictures need the pounding of hooves, the crack of winchesters, [and] the hiss of arrows" (03), which are the common qualities mentioned above. The genre is full of notable creators and some of the top names include Louis L'Amour, Zane Grey, Larry McMurty, Cormac McCarthy, and John Ford. Essentially, the Western is a genre that is meant for men, created by men, and about men. Or so it seems to be that way.

Since the Western is such a popular genre, there are countless stories about the cowboy and his adventures, whether he be in film or in literature. If he is in both, there is a general con-

sensus that the book is always better than the movie. This opinion goes for any genre, not just in regards to the Western, but the common argument is that the novel outdoes the film version because the novel is a more intimate experience for the reader. The reader is able to visualize in his or her own mind what the characters look like and how the setting is displayed in the story. For the film, the director chooses the actors and decides how the set will be visualized for the audience. Linda Hutcheon argues, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, that film "is not supposed to be good at getting inside a character, for it can only show exteriors and never actually tell what is going on beneath the visible surface" (57-8). Other critical adaptation scholars, such as Brian McFarlane, Thomas Leitch, and Susan Hayward, agree that books and films cannot be compared to each other because they are not the same media. In other words, they are unfair to judge since the works are separate and individual projects. The process of an author writing a story is completely different from a script being written and then interpreted by a director. However, I am doing exactly what the scholars say not to do. In his book, *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation,* McFarlane says, "It does seem important in evaluating the film version of a novel to try to assess the kind of adaptation the film aims to be" (27), and this idea is one of the focuses of my argument.

Specifically, I am analyzing Western stories from the 1950s written by Dorothy M. Johnson. Her three works, *The Hanging Tree* (1950), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1953), and *A Man Called Horse* (1957), were each adapted into films around the 1960s. Did Dorothy adapt them herself? Of course not. No, respectable men in the industry created the film adaptations: Delmer Daves created *The Hanging Tree* (1959), John Ford did *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), and Elliot Silverstein completed *A Man Called Horse* (1970). Kirsten Day ar-

gues that the Western genre "demonstrates an intense concern with defining masculinity, and as a corollary, showcasing appropriate female roles, which are inevitably positioned as secondary or peripheral" (19), and I argue that Johnson herself is secondary in regards to the male directors' masculine choices, since she has no input with the process. Nonetheless, these men would not have been able to create their movies without Johnson's original stories. I also aim to look at the differences of gender problems of the Western and see what Johnson says about gendered aspects of the genre, and therefore see what is different between her books and the men's adapted films.

Dorothy Johnson is one of the few successful female writers of Westerns because three of her works were created into films. Why were her stories chosen? For one, they represent the common attributes of the genre. Judy Alter explains in *Western Writers Series No. 44 Dorothy Johnson* that Johnson's stories "are positive affirmations of man's ability to meet and conquer challenges thrown at him [. . .] coming from frontier life, a hostile landscape, and the bitter clash between two cultures" (28). In each piece there is some typical characteristic that fans of the genre recognize— a shootout, the desert landscape, and Native Americans— and yet there is something unique about her take on them. Alter further states how Johnson refers to a plot device as "'the switch' which [means] turning a situation around and looking at it from another angle" (26). Secondly, the characters themselves are relatable to audiences because they are regular people who feel emotions. In Alter's words they are "flesh and blood [. . .] who fear and hurt and laugh and cry" (27). Let's take a closer look at Johnson's three stories, their particular elements, and how she put her own twist to the common aspects of the Western genre.

A Man Called Horse: Native Americans

A Man Called Horse is about the capturing of an Englishman by Crow Indians and his acceptance of their culture as he becomes apart of their tribe. In Johnson's story he does not have a name other than the one given to him by the tribe, which is Horse. Judy Alter explains how Johnson wrote *A Man Called Horse:* "after reading about The Crow Indians she began wondering how someone from white culture would have survived among [them]" (21-2). This Western uses the Native Americans as rounded characters and develops an entire plot around their lives instead of having them in the background of the story for a few scenes. Nearly thirty years before Kevin Costner's acclaimed *Dances with Wolves* (1990), Johnson provides the perspective of a white person living in an indigenous environment who learns to welcome their particular culture.

Jane Tompkins claims in her book *West of Everything: the Inner Life of Westerns* that the "hero imitates the desert's fierceness in his hard struggle to survive, its loneliness in his solitary existence, and its silence in his frugal way with language" (84). Tompkins' quote is about the desert setting, which is more of a focus in *The Hanging Tree*, but the characteristics are still applicable to the Native American element. In *A Man Called Horse*, the Englishman struggles with the new world he is thrown into against his will, which is a desert wilderness instead of the lush land of England. Additionally, the Englishman must adopt an inner fierceness when he performs the Native's torturous sun dance—pegs are attached to his chest and he hangs for hours to gain respect as the hot desert sun beats down on him. Initially, he is alone while he is an outcast from the tribe and they treat him like an animal, tied to a post outside with the dogs. Later in the story he marries the Chief's daughter and has a better understanding of their language, too. As a result of the two cultures, Johnson's work does not have much dialogue because of the difference in communication.

In the *Filmgoers' Guide to the Great Westerns; Stagecoach to Tombstone,* Howard Hughes explains Elliot Silverstein's film: "Richard Harris [is cast] as John Morgan, an English lord captured by the Sioux (Crow in the book) [. . .] In a brave move, almost all the dialogue is in Sioux, with no subtitles or narration" (216). Similar to Johnson's original work, there are rarely any lines spoken in English, but in the film it is because the characters use the native tongue versus the book's narrator who describes the language dynamic. Another difference between the film and the book is the opening scene, otherwise the hostage scene. In the film this beginning is expanded with added characters, but Johnson concisely explains the exposition of how the Englishman becomes incorporated with the Native Americans:

> "On a day in June, he learned what it was to have no status at all. He became a captive of a small raiding party of Crow Indians. He heard gunfire and the brief shouts of his companions around the bend of the creek just before they died, but he never saw their bodies. he had no chance to fight, because he was naked and unarmed, bathing in the creek, when a Crow warrior seized and held him [. . .] They took him along in a matter-of-fact way, as they took the captured horses" (02).

We do not see the details of the bloody violence of the other men who are killed, nor do we see the Crow's plan to capture the Englishman. Silverstein's decision to illustrate the specific details of this heist is what Thomas Leitch calls adjustment, from his book *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*: "a common approach to adaptation is expansion [and] a surprising number of films have been fashioned from short stories" (98-9). *A Man Called Horse* is one of these surprising numbers, because what Johnson wrote as a twenty-page story is transformed into a two-hour film. There is a connection between Johnson and her protagonist in this story given that the Englishman is taken hostage by the Crow and lives with the Native Americans. Johnson is also an outsider coming into an established place, as she is a female writer in a male-dominated genre

and, therefore, she must adapt to a new world like the Englishman does. She stakes her claim by incorporating a new perspective lens and shows the Native Americans as real people instead of typical savages.

The Hanging Tree: Desert Landscape

The Hanging Tree follows a doctor, Doc Frail, of a mining town who helps heal a stranded young woman, Elizabeth Armistead, from her temporary blindness. Judy Alter explains that "Johnson found base for [*The Hanging Tree*] in two movies she had seen of men stranded in the desert. She began to wonder what would happen if it were a woman stranded [instead]" (24-5). What is interesting about this finding is that Johnson adapted certain aspects of other films to write her story, which later became its own film. This information shows that adaptations will always be around because they "are a synergy between the desire for sameness and reproduction, on one hand, and on the other, the acknowledgment of difference" (12). This quote by Susan Hayward in her chapter "Adaptation" of *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* rings true for Johnson's piece. In *The Hanging Tree* she brings something different by stranding a woman in the desert instead of a man, and we follow what becomes of Elizabeth throughout the story.

The desert element of the Western tests the characters and pushes them to their limits. Through this challenge, the characters realize their inner strength and with that strength is a new power. Jane Tompkins states that what the desert landscape is about is power because it "is what is being celebrated and struggled with in these grandiose vistas" (76). Johnson shows us the endurance of Elizabeth and her power within the mining town. Elizabeth becomes known as the 'lucky lady' as she invests money in various mines that are rich with gold. However, in Daves' film, Doc must challenge Elizabeth's power and she chooses his love instead. William Handley

explains that "Often in the same book or film, the western goes against itself in several respects, undermining the very values it seems to affirm" (437), and in *The Hanging Tree* Johnson illustrates Elizabeth as a more independent woman. She does fall in love with Doc, but she decides on her own to get rid of her investments and is not forced to by Doc. Here is a passage from Johnson's story that further shows the difference between her piece and the film version:

> "When Doc set out to court Elizabeth Armistead, he put his whole heart into it, since this was what he had been wanting to do for a long time anyway. He was deferential and suitably humble. He was gentle. He was kind. And Elizabeth, who had never been suited before (except by old Mr. Ellerby, who talked across her head to her father), understood at once what Doc's intentions were. He crossed the street more often and stayed longer. He came at mealtime, uninvited, and said he enjoyed her cooking. He even cut and carried in firewood. He brought his socks to be mended. They sat in pleasant domesticity at the table, while Elizabeth sewed and sometimes glanced across at him" (173).

What this passage shows the reader is the character's thoughts because we are told by the narrator what Doc's intentions are and how he goes about it: he puts his whole heart into it; he is deferential and suitably humble; he sits in pleasant domesticity. All of these characteristics are recognizable in a novel because of its format—we read the characters's internal purposes on the page. Contrarily, Linda Hutcheon argues that film "is not supposed to be good at getting inside a character, for it can only show exteriors and never actually tell what is going on beneath the visible surface" (57-8). Thus, what Daves does in his film is a montage of the second part of the paragraph. The audience sees smaller clips pieced together of Doc visiting more often, cutting up firewood, and eating supper with Elizabeth. Now, in regards to the western genre elements, a question to ask is, is a real man supposed to enjoy pleasant domesticity? Or does he simply help the woman with hers? Kirsten Day claims that "women who do play an important role function primarily as foils that serve to magnify heroic traits, while their concerns appear to be introduced

only to be pushed aside by the masculine agendas" (23). Therefore, Elizabeth has an important role of being a woman in need of medical assistance, but once Doc heals her she then becomes his love interest as he struggles with his independence and manhood.

The purpose of Daves' adaptation is what Hutcheon's claims an adaptation does: "It [can] keep that prior work alive, giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise" (176). Howard Hughes states "Gary Cooper, nearing the end of his career, enjoyed a new lease of life in [. . .] *The Hanging Tree* (1959)" (42). Gary Cooper is cast as the role of Doc to bring a new audience to the story, since audiences were aware of his past success in other Westerns, like the classic *High Noon* (1952). However, Gary Cooper's character is not an original aspect of the Western genre. Johnson made her work different by having a woman stranded in the desert, but the story's focus in the movie, is still of a man struggling with his emotions, which is not new. Charles Bramesco critiques in his short article "How the Western got Lost:Why the Genre Needs to Innovate to Survive" that the Western genre has to "take cues from its more mature entries instead of sliding back into macho escapism if it's going to stand any chance of remaining relevant, or simply effective as drama." Therefore, the masculine approach needs to be revamped into something else, such as a woman's actual approach since she is a component of the genre, too. In this case, it could have been Elizabeth's point-of-view instead of the Doc's manly perspective. Daves reignites Johnson's novel by bringing a new audience to the story with his film and furthering Gary Cooper's career, and this gender ideology shows a connection between Johnson and her work. A woman author tries to fit into a man's world, but the men take over her project, just like in *The Hanging Tree* where a woman is stranded in a desert, but she must be rescued by a man instead of surviving on her own.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance: Shootout

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance tells the story of a Ransom Foster, a man from the east who comes to the west to create justice as a lawyer. However, he becomes a target for the notorious outlaw, Liberty Valance, but survives their duel and lives to become a successful senator. Ransom owes his life to Bert Barricune, a rough cowboy who loves Hallie, the girl everyone in town adores. Hallie marries Ransom instead of Bert, but more out of obligation than devotion. Judy Alter explains how Johnson thought of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: "[it] grew out of her thinking on what could be done with the old and trite shootout scene" (27). The shootout scene is almost a mandatory factor for any Western and Johnson includes this knowledge into her story:

> "This was a classic situation, Ranse realized. Two enemies walking to meet each other along the dusty, waiting street of a western town. [. . .] Liberty's hand flashed with his own. The gun in Foster's hand exploded, and so did the whole world. Two shots to my one, he thought" (42-3).

Ranse realizes the importance of this situation because it is a literal life or death moment. Jane Tompkins further explains how in the Western "Facing death and doing something with your life become one and the same thing" (31). Therefore, Ranse must make something more out of himself because his life is not taken; he becomes a senator and marries Hallie. Ranse's life is saved because of Bert, who is the one who shoots Liberty Valance and kills him. This simple detail is what makes Johnson's shootout scene different from the rest: a third man hides in the shadows and does the killing, but does not receive credit for his duty. The reason Ranse becomes so famous is because he is known as the man who shoots Liberty Valance, hence the title. The secret is between Ranse and Bert, which is confirmed at the end of the story. Another secret between

the two men is that Bert and Hallie love each other, but Bert knows Ranse is the better choice for her and she chooses Ranse when he's found alive after the shooting. So, the final scene of Johnson's piece goes as follows:

> "As the Senator and his wife rode out to the airport after old Bert Barricune's barren funeral, Hallie sighed. 'Bert never had much of anything. I guess he never wanted much.' He wanted you to be happy, Ranse Foster thought, and he did the best he knew how.'I wonder where those prickly-pear blossoms came from,' he mused. Hallie glanced up at him, smiling. 'From me,' she said." (49).

This moment in the story is different in the film version because small details are changed or added. Also, the names of the characters are different from the original story and Ford's film. Ransom Foster becomes Ransom Stoddard, who is played by Jimmy Stewart, and Bert Barricune is Tom Doniphon, who is portrayed by none other than John Wayne. Both Jimmy Stewart and John Wayne, like Gary Cooper, are famous Western stars and this may be the reason the names are changed. Susan Hayward says, "It is clear that the choice of stars will impact the way the original text is interpreted" (11), so perhaps John Ford saw John Wayne as more of a 'Tom' than a 'Bert'.

Now back to the final scene, which in Ford's version shows the Senator and his wife on a train instead of heading to the airport like Johnson writes. Also, Ranse blatantly asks Hallie if she put the prickly-pear blossoms on Tom's coffin instead of asking who did. Hallie responds with a smile, however she does not say anything. These key differences, just in this one scene, depict the process of adaptation. Another big factor in the film version is at the end a person on the train recognizes Ranse as the man who shot Liberty Valance, which confirms the irony of the story. In the short story, this piece of information is assumed by the reader and not depicted at the end. In an earlier scene of Johnson's story, Bert does tell Ranse that he killed Liberty Valance in order to

save Ranse's life, and this scene is also depicted in the film. However, in Johnson's work, the public never questions Ranse's victory in the final scene. *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is about a city newcomer who gets caught up in the Wild West ways, which ends in a classic shootout. However, Johnson distinguishes herself by adding a twist to the typical gunfight, which makes her story remembered like the newcomer's myth of conquering the west.

As stated earlier, a general consensus among adaptation scholars is that books and films cannot be compared to each other because they are not the same media, and they are unfair to judge since the works are separate and individual projects. However, I am comparing the two mediums. My thesis compares Dorothy Johnson's stories (*A Man Called Horse, The Hanging Tree*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*) to their film adaptations because it is an important factor that a woman wrote Western stories, only for men to adapt them into movies, because the Western is a male-dominated genre. Furthermore, William Handley states that women Western authors, like Dorothy Johnson, are "significant not simply because they were women or were left out of literary history until recently, but because their work offers fascinating alternatives to, parodies of, and critical commentaries on the plots and concerns of male western writers" (443). Similarly, Bob Herzberg says the Western genre "boasted several women [and] with this new blood, the previously sunny, uplifting genre now gave us stories filled with sadness and cynicism" (188). Johnson wrote about three common aspects to the genre: Native Americans, the desert landscape, and the shootout scene; she put her own twists to each aspect. The Native Americans are established characters, a woman is stranded in the desert instead of a man, and a third shooter is incorporated into the duel. As a result of her success, with the three stories becoming films and starring famous celebrities, Judy Alter argues that Dorothy Johnson "does be-

long to the slim, but strong tradition of women who have written about the west" (42). Johnson is one of the few women to write memorable Westerns and this is an inspiring, comforting, and frustrating factor for someone who wants to also be a woman Western writer such as myself. For a genre that has such a masculine approach, since the 1950s when Johnson was working to even today, Alter claims that a "woman's point-of-views in the popular western [is] rare to nonexistent [. . .] and Johnson's use of it in frontier stories is a real contribution" (42). Her real contribution is a reminder that women are just as creative and capable and also a reminder that even though the Western is an established genre with conventional aspects, it has the potential to be revamped and improved.

"This is a man's world/ But it wouldn't be nothing/ Nothing without a woman." —James Brown (1966)