The Missing Heroine: Women in Early Westerns

Sondra Miles

Westerns connote images of dirt, dust, guns, horses, cowboys and heroes: physically strong, iron-willed, independent, resourceful, quick-witted men. Although the modern Western (the writings of Louise L’Amour, Zane Grey and the numerous films starring John Wayne, Roy Rodgers, Gene Autry) seems to focus on this ideal hero, the genre actually also provides women with strong, self-reliant, active roles. In fact, many texts that preceed the typical modern Western had females as the main characters. However, the role of the heroine still differs from that of the hero; the role does not defeminize women but gives them depth as characters. These women still retain their femininity and domesticity, but they also rescue those around them, take care of themselves, and have a relationship with the land. The Girl of the Golden West, a play written by David Belasco around 1905, perfectly demonstrates this idea. The heroine, the Girl, speaks frankly, carries a gun, takes care of herself, protects the miners’ money, and actually rescues the villain. At the same time, she comforts her boys, desires to recreate the home she remembers, and, epitomizing female virtue, converts the road agent with her love. Other earlier works also provide examples of active, strong women. These earlier works laid a foundation and created a tradition from which the modern-day Western evolved. The tradition began in the earliest days of the colonies with the captivity narratives and eventually blossomed into stories such as The Girl of the Golden West, undoubtedly a Western with a heroine.

In her book, West of Everything, Jane Tompkins discusses the essential elements that define the genre. From her discussion, one can extract a working definition: the setting, the props, and the characters define the Western. First, the landscape announces the genre. "The typical Western movie opens with a landscape shot" (Tompkins 69) signifying the centrality of the wilderness and the environment to the story. This "inimical" environment forces the characters to endure and survive (71). The heroes attain their status by using their knowledge of the land to survive the trials it presents. Secondly, horses are expected in Westerns; they are the props. Horses stand at hitching posts, carry the hero over the frontier’s rough terrain, allow the fleeing villain to outrun the pursuing posse, and represent "the heart and soul of a Western" (89-90). But, the essential component of the Western is the hero, the character. Without question, the hero must exude a certain spirit hinting at his physical capabilities, his fearlessness, and his ability to accomplish even the impossible. The Western values his actions over his words (50) and idealizes his physical strength (11). Interestingly, the West requires these heroes to have strength and to act assertively, but their ability to endure the West’s challenges actually molds them into heroes. The rough wilderness, the hero, whose presence dwarfs the robbers and townspeople alike, and the trademark horses that keep the hero in action, carrying him across the unfriendly terrain, provide a working basis on which to compare texts and the roles of the characters. Although Tompkins discusses these elements in the context of the modern Western, they also apply to the earlier texts and are the elements that survived the evolution of the genre. Furthermore, they empower women and men equally.

Captivity narratives provide the first visible traces of this American tradition, specifically Mary Rowlandson’s text: A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. Rowlandson was held captive during Metacom’s War from February to May 1676. She first published her text in 1682, although evidence suggests she composed it within a year of her restoration (Derounian-Stodola 3-5). "The first captivity narratives [Rowlandson’s] were genuine, first-person accounts of actual ordeals" that developed as "a natural, spontaneous product of the New World experience" (Slotkin 95). Later fictional captivity narratives appeared, written for their theological potential and as material for revival sermons in the Puritan community (95). Mary Rowlandson was the wife of Joseph, the pastor of the Lancaster church. Joseph was the "only Lancaster resident allowed the prestigious title of 'Mister’ rather than the lowly ‘Goodman'" (Derounian-Stodola 3). Marrying Joseph elevated Mary Rowlandson’s social status to Mistress (4). In this Puritan society, Mary Rowlandson’s only power came from her husband, without him, she would simply be another Goodwife. Her captivity strips her of this superficial power and awakens her hidden strength as a survivor.
On the day Mary Rowlandson was taken captive, thirty-seven people were in her house, only one escaped death or captivity (Rowlandson 14). Mrs. Rowlandson lost her sister, her sister’s son, and several days later, her own babe. The Indians also wounded her and captured her other two children(13-17). She and the other captives had to "go with those Barbarous Creatures, with [their] bodies wounded and bleeding, and [their] hearts no less" (14). Her elevated social standing within her own culture meant nothing to her masters (Derounian-Stodola 4). Both her house and family structure were equally impermanent (4). Unexpectedly and tragically, she lost everything: her family, status, and security.

Furthermore, as a captive she unceasingly faced the challenges of the wilderness, starvation, and her captors’ temperament. Suffering from the bullet wound in her side, they forced her to travel into "the vast and desolate Wilderness" (Rowlandson 15). She had to "sit all [the] cold winter night, upon the cold snowy ground, with [her] sick Child in [her] arms" (16). She crossed cold waters on makeshift rafts praying that she did not get her feet wet (21-22). For nine days, her captors refused her "any refreshing of one nature or other, except a little cold water" (17). The poor woman was stripped to absolute poverty from relative prosperity. She instantly went from easy comfort to unimaginable hardship. She fell from socially powerful to virtual slavery.

From these hardships and trials, her heroic strength appeared. On the very first night of captivity, she begins to take care of herself and demonstrate her will to survive. When the Indians stopped for the night, Mrs. Rowlandson asked them "whether [she] might not lodge in the house" that had been deserted nearby (Rowlandson 14). Although the Indians did not permit her to sleep in the house, she had the courage to ask, right after she had seen them brutally murder her relations, rather than meekly accepting a cold night outside. Furthermore, her will and courage were so strong that despite her own broken heart, she still offers hope and support to the other captives. Mrs. Rowlandson went to the other nine captives and "asked them whether they were earnest with God for deliverance" (19). She also asks Goodwife Joslin, who, desperate, wants to run away, "whether she would read" the Bible with her (20). As a Puritan, Mary’s comfort lies in her faith in God, and she shares this with the others hoping to lighten their load. Unfortunately, Goodwife Joslin does not have the same inner strength as Mary Rowlandson and provokes the Indians (by begging constantly to go home) until they "stript her naked" and "knockt her on the head," killing her and the child in her arms (20).

After just a short time in captivity, Mary Rowlandson learns to adapt and uses her skills to survive. By the third week among the Indians, food that she had formerly thought she would "starve and die" before eating now tasted "pleasant and savoury" (Rowlandson 22). Her desire to live proved much stronger than her repulsion for such things as horse liver or boiled horse feet. Additionally, she begins to use her sewing skills to trade for precious food. For "a shilling," she made "a shirt for [Philip's] Boy" (25). For a "piece of Bear" from another Squaw, she made another shirt (25). For a "quart of Pease," she "knit a pair of Stockins" (25). She fights starvation with every tool available to her, including her sewing skills. As Richard Slotkin notes "She has partaken of the Indians' world, their bread and wine; she has devoured it as it would have devoured her" (112). In a situation calling for adaptation or death, she chose to live.

Even more remarkable, Mary Rowlandson acquires a certain amount of equality with her captors. After obtaining enough Bear and Pease, she "invited [her] Master and Mistress to Dinner" (Rowlandson 25). In order for her to invite her Master and Mistress, Mrs. Rowlandson had to be in a position to invite them. A slave would not invite his Master; his Master may join him but usually not by invitation. Furthermore, usually the titles Master and Mistress signify the providers, but in this case, Mary is providing them with food for the evening. She also asserts her independence by talking back. After Mary had been begging for food from other Wigwams (one of her other survival tools), her Mistress says that she "disgraced [Her] Master with begging: and if [she] did so any more, they would knock [her] on the Head." She assertively replies that "they had as good knock [her] on the Head, as starve [her] to death" (36). At another time, because Mary "complained [her load] was too heavy," her Mistress "gave [her] a slap in the face" (28). Mrs. Rowlandson writes that "their insolence grew worse and worse" (28). Although her refutations of their power are not physically threatening to her captors as their insolence is to her, her words send a clear message: she owns herself.
Mary Rowlandson’s strength as a survivor pervades the text and becomes more visible as the time passes. She is forced to survive on the most basic level: to shelter herself against the elements and find food in any way possible. Through it all, she is a wife and a mother; her thoughts are for her husband (Rowlandson 30) and her children (47-49). Her trials in the Wilderness allow her to develop a different kind of power, a power independent of her social status as a Puritan woman. Her text validates her as both a survivor and a "Puritan model" in a way that was generally not acceptable for a woman in Puritan society (Derounian-Stodola xxii). Her narrative established a model of strength, femininity, and heroism for the texts that followed.

One writer that succeeded Mary Rowlandson and helped the tradition evolve further is Catharine Maria Sedgwick. In 1827, she published *Hope Leslie*, a novel that "addresses the Puritans subjugation of the indigenous population" (Kelley xxi). The heroine of the story, Hope Leslie, like the women of the other texts, helps an Indian woman, Nelema, to escape (xxiv) and possesses a captivating spirit. The editor, Mary Kelley, writes that Sedgwick’s readers would have expected the selfless heroine that filled the pages of nineteenth-century literature but "would have been unprepared for the spirited independence typically found in male characters" (xxiii). This heroine and this text depend upon the land and the wilderness, and the wilderness shapes the heroine. *Hope Leslie* provides another example of a text with a heroine just as heroic as the modern Western male, yet very much a female, and a story intertwined with the land, unable to be separated from the setting.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, though definitely very different from a modern Western, also contains incidents that embody the heroic spirit carried forth from the captivity narratives and employ the same elements. However, Stowe’s entire text does not depend on the land and the spirit of a Western hero. Perhaps the most visible, remembered character, Uncle Tom, does not fight, does not dominate anyone, and conveys his message through his refusal to act. The context of the story also prohibits the characters from using Mary Rowlandson’s assertive words: the heroes and heroines in this text have been slaves from birth. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the heroes and heroines act within the constraints of slavery, within the construct of the text. The novel’s organization also differs from the previous text and affects how the heroine can be discussed. In Mary Rowlandson’s narrative, her experience is central to the text. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, our active, courageous heroine, Eliza appears intermittently, but the story follows Uncle Tom.

Despite these differences, the text still depends on the same elements. For example, Eliza Harris rescues her son, Harry, from the slave traders by escaping in the night, fleeing by foot, and crossing the Ohio River in full flood. The drama and the courage in this feat lie in Eliza’s disregard of her fear and the simultaneous danger and safety afforded by the river. Eliza exemplifies the role of a mother and a wife, yet she also performs a heroic act. She overhears Mr. Shelby telling Mrs. Shelby that Harry has been sold, and, unable to bear the thought, she flees with him. Before going, she gathers a package for Harry not forgetting "one or two of his favorite toys" (87) and warns Uncle Tom that he too has been sold. She also asks Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe to tell her husband, if she never sees him again, "to be as good as he can, and try and meet [her] in the Kingdom of heaven" (91). Even at the last minute, this loving, Christian woman thinks of those around her: of Uncle Tom, of her husband, and of her son’s favorite toys. She is praying for her husband’s soul and begging him in her own way to be good. The reason for her flight also clearly portrays her domesticity and femininity; she endangers herself and forever parts herself "from every familiar object" and the "protection of a friend whom she loved and revered" (104).

Stowe shows that Eliza’s motherly nature and care for others distinguish her character and actually give rise to her heroism. Eliza and Harry arrive in the town of "T------ by the Ohio River" (Stowe 107) with Haley, the slave trader, pursuing them (on horseback, of course). This river divides the free world from the slaves’ world; the bank on the far side of the river symbolizes Harry’s safety. However, the river is "swollen and turbulent" in spring flood with "great cakes of floating ice … swinging heavily to and fro in the turbid waters" and preventing "the usual ferry-boat from running" (108). Eliza settles down to wait, hoping a man down the way will be able to cross later that night. Unfortunately, Haley enters the town, spies her, and chases after her as she runs toward the river. The feared slave trader stands behind her
waiting to punish and capture her; the river in front of her waits to swallow her. Faced with Haley or death, she chooses, but is spared from, the latter. "Nerved with strength such as God only gives to the desperate...[Eliza] vaulted sheer over the turbid current by the short, on to the raft of ice beyond" (118). Leap after leap, from one chunk of cracking creaking cake of ice to another, she saves her son and is helped up the bank on the Ohio side. Sheer desperation and infinite love for her son enables her to accomplish the impossible. Furthermore, her heroism depended upon nature’s challenge. If she had been able to cross the river in a boat, she still would have saved her son, but she would not have been the heroine depicted in this scene. Her virtually impossible crossing distinguishes her, but her feminine, motherly character drove her to cross the river and characterizes her as a heroine.

Like Uncle Tom’s Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe and A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, The Hidden Hand or, Capitola The Madcap by E.D.E.N. Southworth also has a strong, independent female and depends upon the same spirit and elements seen in the Western, but to a different extent. Southworth’s novel, serialized in 1859 (Dobson xii), does not seem to have any relation to the West. The story takes place in Virginia, and the heroine received her education on the streets of New York rather than from the difficulties of frontier life. However, much of the story’s excitement comes from Capitola’s adventures: riding Gyp, rescuing Clara, and capturing infamous robbers. This story opens with the somewhat ominous description of Devil’s Hoof, the "range of steep, gray rocks, spiked with clumps of dark evergreens" that surrounds three sides of Hurricane Hall (Southworth 7). As soon as Old Hurricane, her guardian, teaches her to ride, Cap quickly explores the entire countryside around the estate. She "[gallops] down to the water’s edge” and "[plunges] boldly into the stream" (111), despite the fact that she has been forbidden to ford the river. Attempting to find the Hidden House, she approaches Devil’s Punch Bowl and "[urges] her reluctant steed through a thicket of stunted thorns and over a chaos of shattered rocks" approaching as closely as possible the “awful abyss” (271). Cap’s numerous different rides give the sense that she is everywhere, traversing the country, learning the landscape, seeking adventure in forbidden places, and never shying from danger. Southworth’s language also makes Cap a very active, engaged rider; rather than simply sitting on her horse, she urges Gyp on and races him to the water.

The landscape and Cap’s rides begin to convey Cap’s heroic spirit, but her repeated forthright, indignant speeches and her fearless deeds undoubtedly establish her heroine status. As an orphaned child surviving on the streets of New York City, Cap suffered "dreadful exposure for a young girl" but assures Old Hurricane, the Recorder, and the spectators "[she] took care of [herself]" and they must not "dare to think but what [she] did" (Southworth 45). As she says this, "her whole countenance [flashed] with spirit" (45) and the reader is introduced, for the first time, to Cap’s ardor. At Hurricane Hall, Cap repeatedly puts Old Hurricane in his place, telling him that she "won’t be treated with both kicks and half-pennies by the same person" (123), and that she would willingly return to Rag Alley rather than suffer that kind of treatment; "freedom and peace" (124) are more important than his wealth. She also displays this same disregard for fear and caution in the face of actual danger. Black Donald, "the awfulest villain that ever went unhung" (155), visits Hurricane Hall dressed as a peddler. Cap tells the peddler that she "[longs] to see" (156) Black Donald, who then reveals himself. Cap, sharp and ready for adventure, quickly recovers from her surprise at seeing him, jumps on his back and yells, "I’ve caught Black Donald!" (157). Cap fills the reader with faith that she can accomplish anything and fears nothing; she whisk the reader away into her adventures, but always gives a feeling of security.

As in the previous texts and many Westerns, she does accomplish what others cannot with her spirit intact and the sense that her feat hardly challenged her. The Le Noirs live in Hidden House and essentially imprison Clara, Gabriel’s ward. Gabriel Le Noir and his son, Craven, scheming to steal Clara’s fortune, order her to marry Craven despite her engagement to another character, Traverse. Desperate and uncertain, Clara begs for advice from Capitola. Cap responds with a fiery "Oh! wouldn’t I make them know the difference between their Sovereign Lady and Sam the Lackey" and adds that, "If I had been in your place, and the dastard Le Noir had said to me what he said to you, I do believe I should have stricken him dead with the lightning of my eyes!" (Southworth 305). Although Cap cannot strike anyone dead with lightning from her eyes, her words almost make it seem possible. Furthermore, Southworth’s italics clearly differentiate Cap from Clara. Cap can and will fight back, but Clara cannot. As expected, Cap devises a plan to help Clara escape and uses the opportunity to publicly denounce the Le Noirs as "a pair of fools"
who have "been outwitted by a girl" (316). And, of course, Clara escapes by galloping to town on Cap’s pony, Gyp, and taking the stage: a beautiful image of the old West, except that when it was written, the West was still being born.

In strength and courage, Cap equals any hero written about – she rescues Clara, captures Black Donald, and defends her own honor – but she, like our other heroines, still acts like a woman. Justice is important to her, and she loves the attention she gets for her heroic deeds, but her morality influences how she accomplishes these feats. Black Donald waits in Cap’s room to kidnap her but before putting his plan into action, drinks the egg-nog she makes for him and enjoys her conversation. However, he remains a little too long. Capitola questions him about his "soul black with crime" (Southworth 391) reminds him of his "poor mother" (391), and begs him to leave her. When her entreaty fails, she tells him to repeat "Lord have mercy on me" because she does not wish to "kill both [his] body and soul" (393). He refuses, and she begging again. Finally she prays "May the Lord pity and save Black Donald’s soul, if that be yet possible, for the Savior’s sake" (393), and sends him into nothingness through the trapdoor. Capitola feels she has "purchased" her safety "by such a dreadful deed" (393). Cap has the courage to send the robber to his death (she believes she will kill him) but fears for his soul. This young, virtuous woman cannot damn this man even though he waited in her room intending to kidnap her. Although she does not lack courage or fearlessness, she still possesses the softness associated with a woman: feeling, morality, and caring for others.

Besides possessing the sentiments and emotions associated with female characters, she also engages in traditionally feminine activities (in the time she has between heroic deeds). She calls herself "the little mistress" of the mansion (Southworth 108). She has been instructed by Mrs. Condiment in the "mysteries of cutting and basting, back-stitching and felling, hemming and seaming" (109), all tasks a woman of the day must know. She lined Old Hurricane’s "warm slippers and the sleeves of his dressing gown" (123). Additionally, she is a gourmet cook, "inventing" a dish of "partridges" and "currant sauce" (362) for Old Hurricane’s taste. Cap does everything and does everything well. All of these tasks make her sound like the docile, gentle lady of the house. However, just as she is more than a simple hero, she is more than a simple mistress: she is our heroine.

Southworth’s text creates excitement and engages the reader through this spirit embodied in the heroine. Cap’s exciting adventures and zest for her life provide readers with an opportunity to engage in situations they have imagined and allow them to feel a kindred spirit with this heroine, without ever forfeiting their safety. Even the narrator expresses her happiness at being able to "get back to [her] little Cap" after spending several chapters narrating the events in the Mexican War; both the narrator and the reader have been "pining after her" (465). The landscape, adventures, and Cap’s spirit capture the reader.

The Girl of the Golden West, without a doubt, fits the definition given for a Western, except that the hero is female. This play opens with a glimpse of Cloudy Mountain, the Girl’s home in the Sierras. In addition to simply opening with a picturesque view of the setting, the landscape actually shapes the plot of the play. Dick Johnson (actually Ramarrez the road agent) tells the Girl that he must leave her cabin and Cloudy that night. However, the blizzard that has arrived during their conversation, unbeknownst to them, prevents his departure. Johnson protests, saying, "I’ve got to go- -I’ve got to go" (219), but the Girl quickly silences him, asking, "Ever sample one of our mountain blizzards? In five minutes you wouldn’t know where you was. Your important business would land you at the bottom of a cañon- about twenty feet from here” (219). The weather and the mountain dictate that Johnson stays; they determine his fate. Some time later that evening, the posse arrives and reveals Johnson’s real identity. The Girl kicks him out, and the posse shoots him. Once again, the landscape provides one of the challenges to overcome. If Johnson had been able to leave earlier, if more than one path existed to the Girl’s cabin, if the Girl’s cabin had more than one door, Johnson would have had other options and might have been able to escape.

Although the horse is one of the main elements of the modern Western, this text (and Rowlandson’s and Stowe’s and Southworth’s) does not place the same importance on the horse. The Girl’s pinto provides companionship and a way for her to get "all over the country" (Southworth 215). However, the audience never sees a horse or anyone on a horse. Horses are still an element of the story (the audience expects the posse and the Pony Express rider to be on horseback), but they are not part of the experience (the
excitement of the villain galloping away or a rider wheeling his horse around with spurs jangling and the bit clanging is absent). But, clearly this play and the films produced from it are every bit as Western as those starring a male figure.

Furthermore, like a true, Western heroine and those of our early texts, the Girl has a home on the frontier and the character expected of the hero, while possessing the traditional femininity and domesticity of a female character. Although, the female character does not possess the same physical strength and power as a man, that does not render her any less of a hero. Rather than fighting using bullets and brawn, the heroine wins her battles with wit and cunning. After Johnson is shot, the Girl unsuccessfully hides him from the Sheriff, Jack Rance. Using her brain and knowing she cannot possibly fight the Sheriff, she challenges the gambler Jack Rance to a game of "straight poker" (Southworth 228) with high stakes: if she loses, she will marry him, and if she wins, she keeps Johnson. She beats Rance, rescuing the one she loves in the fashion of a true hero. Although the heroine uses her wit to win, she is willing to use a man’s weapon if the situation necessitates it. The Girl carries her "little weeping" which ensures she can "look after [herself]" and remain "independent" (198).

Belasco adds depth to the Girl’s heroism by maintaining her femininity and having her occupy a feminine sphere. The heroine is not the unfeeling, anti-sentimental male; she is a woman full of love and feeling and tenderness. The Girl reminisces about her childhood and her parents’ "little heaven" with her mother "at the faro table with her foot snuggled up to Dad’s" and herself, as a little girl, "under the table sneakin’ chips for candy" (199). She tells Jack that she "couldn’t share that table an’ the Polka with any man – unless there was a heap o’ carin’ back of it" (199). Admittedly, her idea of heaven is slightly different from what the reader expects. However, she still dreams about a marriage of true love, and her partner would be someone she could share her cherished Polka with. Like a girl sharing her dreams with a friend, this action and this fantasy clearly separate our heroine from a hero.

Secondly, the Girl still occupies a domestic sphere, though again, her sphere is rather different from the typical domestic scene. She is the den mother, a mother to all of her boys (Sonora, Handsome, Trinidad, Happy). She helps them better themselves through her academy, she helps them write letters to their families, and she is genuinely attached, but not attracted, to all of them. She says, "...when I go away- -I want to leave the key of my cabin with old Sonora here. And I want you all to come up sometimes, an’ to think of me as the Girl who loved you all, ... an’ I want to think of little Nick here runnin’ my bar, an’ not givin’ the boys too much whiskey" (239). Just like a mother, she focuses her last thoughts on taking care of her boys. The heroine is not a masculinized woman; she is a feminine, domestic, strong, active female.

Not every text mentioned actually takes place on the frontier. However, the modern Western genre generally explores living in the West. As this genre evolved, the West evolved to mean different parts of the continent. For Mary Rowlandson, the entire continent was uncivilized frontier. During the time period in which Hope Leslie is set the West was what was considered the East when the Girl ran the Polka in Cloudy. However, the actual realities of the West, and life on the frontier, do not matter as much as the potential to create heroes, legends and heroines from the West. The setting allows for the imagination to create women equal, though different, from men. Both sexes must survive this harsh, uncivilized land; social conventions, expectations and classes matter little when survival is the challenge. Southworth provides an excellent example; her writings contain both the fantasy and romance of the Western life and the harsh realities. Almost every one of her novels of "Western relocation" contains "lengthy passages describing the toils of ‘the hard-working pioneer woman’" (Kolodny 213). In India: The Pearl of Pearl River, Southworth’s character Rosalie is warned of the "daily drudgery" of frontier life. The hotel landlord’s wife says:

"If ever you have a house of your own, and a baby of your own, and no one to tend to nyther but yourself -- mark my words-- just exactly when the loaf of bread is burning in the oven, and the tea-kettle is boiling over, and the fat is catching afire in the frying pan, that very time that baby’s going to squall you to deaf. (Kolodny 205)"
However, neither Rosalie nor any of Southworth’s other characters ever encounters the doom they have been warned of. Annette Kolodny suggests that "Southworth’s use of the idea of the west conflicted with what had been her own firsthand experience in Pairie du Chien" (212) when she lived there with her husband, and that she was "incapable of altogether masking the realities of her characters’ situation" (206). Southworth mentions the realities of Western life, but she uses the idea of the West and her imagination to empower her heroines and engage the reader. The idea takes precedence over the reality in this genre: the fantasy empowers the characters and engages the readers.

Another interesting point that affects the role of the heroine (or hero) is the author’s sex. Hope Leslie, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, and The Hidden Hand or, Capitola the Madcap are all written by female authors. Female authors would seem much more likely to write about successful, heroic women, regardless of the genre. These three authors use their writing to explore the social and cultural position of women and society’s views of women. If their writing is meant to denounce or disapprove of the status of women during the time they were written, then of course the authors would write about heroines who can handle their affairs as well as a man and still maintain the traditional female role society expects. However, David Belasco wrote The Girl of the Golden West, which still revolves around the female figure: a male author and a heroine. The majority of the modern Westerns do not focus on a heroine; the modern genre of Westerns guarantees the presence of a man, stronger, tougher, and more independent than the men around him. A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, Hope Leslie, The Hidden Hand or, Capitola the Madcap, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and other similar works laid the foundation for the genre to be built upon, a foundation laid by successful women. However, as the male authors and the film industry took over the development of the genre, the heroine disappeared behind the hero. In her introduction to Hope Leslie, Mary Kelley remarks on Sedgwick’s status in the first half of the nineteenth-century, sarcastically commenting that "no matter how splendid a person she might have been, Sedgwick had only prepared the ground to enable more talented writers to create a truly American literature" (xii). Sedgwick and these authors did prepare the ground for a new genre to develop, for the spirit of exploration and the West to be captured forever in our imaginations and our spirits. However, the genre has changed dramatically from these early forms: the early works depended upon the land and the hero’s or heroine’s spirit, but the modern works have molded the genre into a formula, a formula that does allow some variation, but a formula nonetheless.

The power of the Western genre to captivate readers and transport them to another life and another place where the challenges are different and much more interesting than our typical day lies in the image of the West and the spirit of the characters. Wrapped up in the image and the spirit are the elements and the realities that gave birth to the genre. Guns, horses, robbers, Indians, and heroes fill the pages and the films of the modern Western. These characters and props romanticize the setting and enhance our imaginations. However, the texts that established the Western tradition such as those by Rowlandson, Southworth, Sedgwick, and Stowe use these elements very differently. Firstly, these authors wrote when guns, horses, and the struggle against the land were challenges alive in the world. Secondly, the images associated with the elements evolved with the genre. The imaginative element of the Western does not exclude women from the heroic role; the evolution of the genre has done that. Interestingly, over the same time period that heroines disappeared from this genre, women gradually appeared in a more prominent and more equal role in society.

Works Cited