

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Virginian

by

Owen Wister

Book Information

Owen Wister, The Virginian
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With its original publication in 1902, this novel introduced the cowboy hero to the public. It has become an idealized image that has profoundly influenced our national consciousness.

Topics: Emotions, Love; History, Frontier/Pioneer Life; People, Cowboys; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, YALSA Popular Paperbacks; U.S. States/Regions, Virginia

Main Characters

Molly Wood the Virginian's beloved; a strong young woman from Vermont whose Eastern sensibilities are put to the test in the rugged atmosphere of Wyoming

Scipio a traveler hired by the Virginian as a cook, who is wise to the ways of the West and comes to enjoy a friendship with, and understanding of, the Virginian

Shorty a young and easily influenced man, who falls under Trampas's influence and meets a violent end at his hands

Steve the Virginian's long-time friend, who takes to cattle rustling and is hanged by his old friend

the narrator a "tenderfoot" from the East, who is immediately impressed by the character of the Virginian and, over the years, forms a close friendship with him

The Virginian a noble and wise cowpuncher from the South, who exemplifies the code of conduct for an honorable man in this wild and sometimes lawless territory

Trampas the Virginian's nemesis; a dark figure, who provokes the cowhands under the Virginian's supervision, leads Shorty to a life of rustling, and meets his final end in a street fight with his enemy

Vocabulary

- bantam** a small domestic fowl, often a dwarf variety of standard breeds
- ford** a shallow place in a stream or river where it is possible to cross on horseback or by other means
- lynching** the act of executing, often by hanging, by mob action without a lawful trial
- perambulator** a baby carriage or buggy
- porphyry** a kind of igneous rock with large crystals embedded in a fine-grained matrix
- rampart** an embankment of earth or any defense or bulwark designed to protect against attack
- saturnine** sluggish, gloomy, or morose; under the influence of Saturn
- temperance** a movement that advocated abstinence from alcoholic beverages
- tenderfoot** a person not accustomed to hardship or the ways of the West

Synopsis

As the story opens, the narrator has just arrived in Medicine Bow, Wyoming, from the East. His train is met by an interesting example of the Western character. The narrator is instantly impressed by this man's easy banter and wisdom in handling situations of all kinds, including the shepherding of a newly arrived tenderfoot. He later witnesses the man, whom he knows only as "The Virginian," put a surly card player in his place with the choice rejoinder, "When you say that, smile." The card player is Trampas, a ne'er-do-well who remains a thorn in the side of the Virginian throughout the story.

As the narrator spends time with the Virginian as a guest of Judge Henry on the Sunk Creek Ranch, he learns more about this plain-spoken man, and the two form a friendship. Meanwhile, Miss Molly Wood of Bennington, Vermont, has agreed to come to Wyoming as schoolteacher of the future Bear Creek school. She comes despite the warnings of her family, feeling, as always, the influence of her Grandmother Stark. Her first meeting with the Virginian sparks their mutual interest, as he rescues

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her from a stagecoach stuck in the middle of the ford. Thereafter, their meetings are brief and noncommittal, but the interest continues.

During a trip taken to deliver the Judge's cattle to market, the Virginian overcomes a mutiny attempt led by Trampas through the use of a cleverly spun tall tale. When he returns, he and Molly begin spending time together, with Molly's defenses still high. However, she reveals her heart during her first visit home, when she brings along a picture of the Virginian in full Western garb.

Duty often takes the Virginian away from opportunities to see Molly. The judge has made him foreman of Sunk Creek, and he is often asked to complete the tasks entrusted only to a "responsible man." At one point, he must retrieve some of the Sunk Creek horses from a local rancher. On the trip back to the ranch, the Virginian is forced to stop the rancher from a horrifying display of animal abuse. In the process, he is attacked by Indians and left for dead. It is Molly who finds him in a semi-conscious state and nurses him back to health. At the end of that time, she can no longer maintain her resistance, and the two become engaged.

Ranch business again separates the lovers, as the Virginian is called upon to dispense justice to some cattle rustlers. Most disturbing to the Virginian is the fact that one of the outlaws he must hang is an old friend, Steve. In the end, Steve's snubbing of the Virginian deeply troubles the cowboy as he and the narrator ride away together after the hanging. On the trail, they notice the tracks of the cattle rustlers who escaped capture. They find the body of Shorty, but Trampas escapes once again. While placing the young man in his grave, they find a note of friendship from Steve, and the Virginian's mind is set at ease.

Although the ways of Western justice greatly disturb Molly, she is able to put her lover's part in the hangings out of her mind, and the wedding date is set. On the day before the wedding, the two ride into town, and the Virginian's friends warn him of trouble with Trampas. Indeed, Trampas appears in the

saloon to make definitive threats from which no man of honor could back down. Trampas and the Virginian will duel at sundown.

When Molly learns of the showdown, she pleads with the Virginian not to go through with the duel and declares that the marriage will not occur if the gunfight takes place. The Virginian, however, cannot back down from his code of conduct and the defense of his own good name. When the gun smoke clears, Trampas is dead and Molly has relented--she and the Virginian are married the next day..

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Just after the Virginian is made foreman of Sunk Creek Ranch, he perpetrates an elaborate ruse to get rid of Dr. MacBride, the visiting minister who is sharing his quarters. What was the main reason for the Virginian's intense dislike for MacBride?

Like the other cowhands, the Virginian was willing to sit respectfully and listen to the itinerant missionary. However, the Virginian was deeply offended by the message and delivery of Dr. MacBride, who preached to the cowboys a litany of their own wretchedness and eternal damnation. The Virginian thought that MacBride set himself above others, and he could not abide to sit quietly while he "calls yu' a hawg and a swine."

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Literary Analysis

Think about the character of the Virginian. What are some of the personal qualities he exhibited throughout the book?

The Virginian was obviously intelligent, well-spoken, and clever, able to adjust his manner according to the person he was addressing. In his work for Judge Henry, he exhibited honesty, loyalty, industriousness, and determination. In dealing with Molly, he showed sensitivity, respect, and a great depth of feeling. At the core of his character was a defiant individualism and a certain nobility that commanded the respect of everyone around him.

Inferential Comprehension

What was the key to the judge's argument to Molly that hanging Wyoming cattle rustlers was NOT equivalent to hanging Southern Negroes?

Judge Henry points out to Molly that, in Wyoming, there was no law to which citizens could turn for justice. What law there was has now been corrupted by cattle rustlers, and it was now not possible to convict a man for rustling cattle in Wyoming. As the judge said, "When the ordinary citizen ... sees that he has placed justice in a dead hand, he must take justice back into his own hands...."

Constructing Meaning

After the Virginian deflected his men from abandoning him for the gold fields, the narrator said, "The Virginian had been equal to the situation. That is the only kind of equality that I recognize." What did he mean?

Early in Chapter 13, the narrator explains that he really doesn't agree with the idea that all men are created equal. Some, like the Virginian, were clearly of greater quality than most others. He rewords the Declaration of Independence's equality principle to read, "Let the best man win, whoever he is." After the Virginian's triumph with the frog-leg tale, the narrator affirms his admiration for the skillful storyteller and recognizes that his friend's abilities set him apart from other men.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Literary Features At one point in the story, the narrator offers a pointed discussion about the nature of "equality" in this country. He writes, "All America is divided into two classes--the quality and the equality. The latter will always recognize the former when mistaken for it. Both will be with us until our women bear nothing but kings." As an exercise in understanding of theme and analysis of an associated concept, assign students to reread the first two paragraphs of Chapter 13 and write a short essay explaining the meaning of the above quote in their own words.

Understanding Characterization The protagonist in this story is a quintessential man of strength and character, admired by all who know him. It may serve an instructional purpose to ask students to consider other books in which the protagonist is a strong, noble, or admirable character. Lead a class discussion on the ways in which these characters are similar to the Virginian and the ways in which they differ. What are the unique sets of circumstances and challenges that each must overcome? What are the universal qualities of character that each display?

Understanding the Author's Craft This story is told through the eyes of an unnamed narrator who was a participant in the action. To gain an understanding of how the author's choice of point-of-view affects the narrative, ask students to consider how *The Virginian* would be different if told as a first-person story by the main character. Consider the scene in which Trampas meets the Virginian for their final showdown. Ask students to re-write the scene from the first-person point of view. Ask them to include the Virginian's thoughts about the agonizing choice he was forced to make between his honor and the woman he loved. How does use of the first-person narrative affect the author's ability to tell the story?

Identifying Persuasive Language Molly was deeply troubled by the concept of "justice" as it was practiced in Wyoming at the time of this

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book. Judge Henry attempts to persuade her of the necessity for action outside the law in pursuing and punishing cattle rustlers. To help students understand this issue in its historical context and gain experience in representing different viewpoints, assign students to participate in a classroom debate on the subject of vigilante justice. Half the class will attempt to justify the hangings as they occurred in the book, and half will argue for lawful processing of criminals. As a starting point, students may re-read the exchange between Molly and the judge, and then do further research on the subject in encyclopedias or on the Internet.