

*THE WIRE* & THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE WESTERN

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## ABSTRACT

The HBO television series *The Wire* ran for five seasons from 2002 to 2008. The series, which garnered much critical acclaim, depicts the lives and complex intersections of the police, drug gangs, political, and educational systems in Baltimore. This project seeks to examine the criteria and implications of re-imagining this television series as a work of narrative fiction belonging to the Western genre. The critical framework for these tasks is provided by John G. Cawelti's text *The Six Gun Mystique* along with examples drawn from the films *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* and *The Wild Bunch* as well as the series itself.

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## *The Wire* & the Mythology of the Western

*“These men are natural. They are themselves. They are rugged individualists. ... they don’t have to conform” - John Ford on cowboys (Peary 50)*

In the vast and detailed universe of *The Wire*, there is one character who without a doubt sticks in the mind of every viewer, casual or serious, of the series. Omar Little, the homosexual stickup artist is legendary amongst fans of the series and the fictional residents and drug dealers of West Baltimore. The character is partially based on a few real-life stickup artists that series co-creator Ed Burns encountered during his career with the Baltimore Police Department (Alvarez 314). However, there is much more to Omar and the universe in which he operates than meets the eye. This paper will explore the idea of *The Wire* as a work of narrative fiction that is significantly influenced by the Western genre and subsequently that Omar is a cowboy hero figure, and not a gangster such as Avon Barksdale or Marlo Stanfield. Indeed this is an idea that has popped up in critical commentary of *The Wire*, and series creator David Simon himself cites films such as *The Wild Bunch* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* as inspiration for the series (Alvarez 316). Despite these facts, this idea has yet to be paid due diligence (even though much of the series takes place in an area known as “The Western,” a nickname given to Baltimore’s Western District by the police in the series). An analysis of the history, elements and common themes of the Western genre sheds new and thought-provoking light on the show’s messages about the War on Drugs. To explore these ideas, first I will offer a brief overview of the history and importance of the Western genre in American popular culture. From this I will discuss the evidence for considering *The Wire* influenced by Western literature, and more specifically, Omar Little a cowboy hero by comparing the series to the films that Simon states served as inspiration. Finally, I will discuss how rethinking *The Wire* as influenced by Western literature affects the messages present in the series about the failure of the War on Drugs and the harmful effects this failure has had on the fundamental questions about American life that Westerns have always examined.

When one thinks of cowboys and the Wild West there are a number of images that come to mind. Untamed wilderness, from vast plains to desert vistas, mysterious strangers such as cowboys and gamblers, small frontier towns populated by ranchers, farmers, and miners, dangers ranging from raging rivers to thirst, greedy villains like bankers, land speculators and railroad magnates, presided over by law enforcement agencies whose control and power is often tenuous at best (Wright 15). These images not only tell the story of America’s expansion westward, they are the foundation of American mythology. That is to say, they provide “An explanation, etiology or justification for something such as the early history of a society” (OED). Over many decades, the characters and settings that help define this genre have become mythologized through tellings and retellings of fantastic feats. The story of the Alamo, the OK Corral, and the exploits of figures such as Jesse James and Wild Bill Hickock have been manipulated in so many ways over a long period of time that they are either somewhat or completely severed from the limitations of

their historical realities. Therefore, what were once historical events have grown into epic, highly symbolic, and nation-defining struggles between the forces of good and evil.

In his influential book *The Six-Gun Mystique*, John G. Cawelti discusses how Westerns fit into Northrop Frye's mythos of romance. Romance is a narrative and dramatic structure more commonly associated with knights and chivalry, which Frye characterizes as one of the four central story forms that exist in literature. Frye cites adventure to be the most essential element of the romance plot, with the quest being the most important type of adventure. A proper quest has three stages: the perilous journey and the preliminary adventures, the crucial struggle in which the hero, the villain or both are sacrificed, and the exaltation of the hero (68). Cawelti makes a compelling case for his classification of the Western as romance when he notes how the prevalence of chases and pursuits in Western literature dramatize the classic quest, the trope of the climactic shoot-out embodies the crucial struggle, and the movement of the Western hero from a place of alienation to one of commitment serves as the exaltation of the hero (69). Additionally, Cawelti notes the struggles between heroes and villains, presenting both hero and villain as outsiders, and the association of the hero's actions with the establishment of law and order are also ways in which the Western genre fit Frye's mythos of romance. This categorization underscores the mythological nature that Westerns have taken on and ascribes to them the power of creating a moral framework. "Hence," as Frye says of romantic heroes, "[t]he hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world" (69). This act of moralizing gives the romance genre—including Westerns—immense cultural and political power.

Over the years Westerns have shaped political and cultural values in America and have played a role in helping out during times of national crisis. The latter part of this statement might seem like an exaggeration but it is not; it is a testament to the power of the Western. In the book *The American West: A Concise History*, Anne N. Butler and Michael J. Lansing discuss the role of the Western in American politics. They note that from the early 1950s through the 1970s the Western was the dominant form of American film entertainment. During this time America was in the midst of the Cold War, and Westerns "portrayed America's previous triumphs to soothe those worried that the nation, even the world, might not survive the current struggle against the Soviet Union" (183). Westerns therefore served as a kind of ideological guide to victory in the Cold War. That is, the path to victory in the Cold War was charted in a return to the ideals that won the West (183). These ideals included individualism (as opposed to communism), heroic feats of action and sacrifice, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. To put it another way, "The Hollywood inspired Western movie functions as a screen memory of the social antagonisms that play a central ... role in American history" (McGee 38). Although the importance of Westerns during the Cold War era may be debatable, what is not debatable is the power of the patriotic myth of the Western. This myth was being served to Americans in books, television, and



in films during this period and it undoubtedly influenced the way Americans thought of themselves and of the fundamental characteristics of their country.

Now that I have discussed the history and significance of the Western genre, I think it is important to ask what are the elements that make up a Western? Cawelti discusses a tripartite formula for the Western whose elements from most to least important are: setting, characters, and plot (*Six Gun* 30). Cawelti emphasizes setting and characters as more important than plot due to the fact that these two elements allow for a wide variety of plots and therefore they are more important in defining the genre (67). For all the varieties of stories that the Western allows for, the fundamental characteristic of the Western plot is the clash between civilization and savagery. According to Cawelti, the plot of a Western is simply the action that arises from this clash (31), an antagonism that is at the heart of the genre of the Western. It can be seen in the setting via the struggles inherent in the landscape, and in the characters who embody the epic struggles between heroes (who are often vigilantes and not operatives of the law) and villains.

This Western formula is highly flexible and adaptable and therefore one can recognize it in many different and unexpected forms, such as in Akira Kurosawa's samurai films *The Seven Samurai* and *Yojimbo*. However adaptable the Western formula may be, there are a few essential elements that Cawelti states must be included in an authentic Western. The story must take place in the West or near the frontier, although he expands this requirement in his sequel to *The Six Gun Mystique* with the idea of the post-Western where multicultural America has taken the place of the frontier (*Sequel* 102). Westerns must also take place during a time period where social order and anarchy are in tension, and the story must involve some kind of pursuit (31). Many of these features are prominent in *The Wire*. Cawelti's most important element of a Western, the setting, reveals tension between civilization and savagery as well as a number of parallels to the drug-infested slums depicted in *The Wire*. The setting of a Western is always rife with danger for the heroes, villains, and townspeople. Westerns take place in environments that are as inhospitable as they are volatile. The threats to one's person in the setting of a Western can be divided into two main categories: dangers that are inherent in the landscape and dangers that are inherent in the social order. As mentioned above, Cawelti describes the setting as "a meeting point between civilization and savagery" and it contains physical features that serve to isolate and antagonize its inhabitants (*Six Gun* 31). The dangerous physical features of the setting include: openness, aridity, lack of resources, and extremes of light and climate (39). These features work together to create what can be referred to as a landscape of death.

The landscape of death is highly visible in a number of films including *The Wild Bunch*. The film begins with the striking image of a group of children watching two scorpions being swarmed by red ants. Besides setting an ominous tone for the rest of the film, the image symbolizes the harshness of the environment, showing the viewer that even the toughest of predators can fall victim to the pitfalls of the landscape of death. Throughout the film this message is reinforced with director Sam Peckinpah featuring vistas of the barren desert

landscape. These vistas show the overwhelming size of the desert and how dangerously lacking in resources it is, especially readily available water and shelter from the sweltering sun. These visual cues build up to the final shootout, which takes place at the army base of the warlord Mapache. It is here where he, several hundred of his men, and the Bunch are violently killed. This event, although not a feature of the physical landscape, helps to define the character of the landscape as consistent with the ideas and features of a landscape of death.

The drug-infested West-side slums of Baltimore depicted in *The Wire* are as much a landscape of death as one would find in any Western film. Many of the features described by Cawelti and seen in films such as *The Wild Bunch* find representation in the series. The first and most obvious of the features of the landscape of death that can be found in *The Wire* are the dilapidated and decaying buildings that give a sense of faded grandeur and beauty to the bleak landscape they tower over. These buildings create a desolate landscape; a task that is usually fulfilled by deserts in traditional Western films. The emptiness and advanced level of decay of these buildings also fulfill another task usually carried out by deserts or the frontier landscape; they are a visual cue of how inhospitable this environment is to life. Like the deserts of *The Wild Bunch* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, the abandoned buildings and dilapidated properties of the Western district are vast spaces that only support the most meagre plant life, long grass and weeds mostly. There are no trees, no shrubs, and no signs of human care and cultivation. The landscape lacks even the most elementary of life supporting features. The human population mirrors the plant life, only gaining a tenuous foothold in this wasteland.



Figure i, a row of boarded-up houses as seen in *The Wire*

Instead of homes filled with families, the abandoned buildings provide ample space for criminal activity. For example, in season four of the series, one of the main plot lines involves drug lord Marlo Stanfield and his enforcers Snoop and Chris using these vacant buildings as a killing field, where they commit 22 drug-related murders (“Alliances” 4.5). These buildings also provide cover for the proliferation of the drug trade. For example in the season three episode “Time After Time,” Bodie remarks on the importance of the abandoned and dilapidated buildings of West Baltimore to the drug trade, specifically the Fremont Towers, saying:

All over the city, even in the county, you have people. Coke and dope 24/7. Where was it they go? Man, you live in the projects you ain’t shit; but you sling product there, you got the game by the ass man (3.1).

In the season five episode “Clarifications” Mayor Tommy Carcetti describes the destructive power of the drug trade on both the landscape and the citizens of Baltimore when he says, “I have seen what drugs have done to Baltimore. Drug dealers do not just destroy individuals, they destroy families, they destroy entire communities” (5.8). Indeed not only the buildings themselves but the alleyways and corners between them also support the plague that is the drug trade. Drugs have physically, economically, and socially consumed the Western district, turning it into a landscape of death. To emphasize the destructive power of the drug trade, the drugs sold in the show are given colorful street names such as “pandemic” and “WMD.” These names underscore the devastating physical damage the drug trade has caused to people and their communities, as well as emphasizing the uncontrolled proliferation of the business and the addiction, poverty, and death it causes.

Dealing drugs is little more than dealing in death, as the series depicts the many ways—from overdose to murder over territorial disputes—that drugs kill. The social conditions that the drug trade has helped to create in the Western district embody the violent clash between civilization and savagery. Before the drug trade took hold, West Baltimore was a poor, working-class, but stable neighborhood that was populated with “Strong single-parent families,” specifically ones headed by mothers (*It’s All Connected*). The damage done to these inner-city neighborhoods and their residents by the drug trade is something Simon and Burns are experts on. As a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* and a retired homicide detective respectively, Simon and Burns witnessed these events first-hand and have subsequently chronicled them in *The Corner: A Year in the Life of an Inner-City Neighborhood*. The introduction of crack cocaine into this environment in the 1980s and 1990s changed that by turning these mothers into addicts and completely obliterating one of the most important stabilizing forces in the lives of the residents of West Baltimore (*Connected*). “Children were raising each other in the streets because their home life had been so devoured” says Simon of the effects of crack. The fourth season of the series shows this phenomenon in detail by following the lives of schoolboys Michael, Dukie, Randy and Namond. Michael must deal with a drug-addicted mother who sells food out of her

kitchen cupboards in order to support her drug habits. Her addiction means that Michael must assume the role of primary caregiver for his younger brother Bug (“Corner Boys” 4.8). This is savagery in the purest sense; *The Wire* shows the cruelty of children being left to fend for themselves as addiction wastes away those who are supposed to nurture and care for them. Situations such as Michael’s fit Cawelti’s definition of savagery, which is a reaction against the lawful order of the town (*Six Gun* 53).

The next most important element of a Western are the characters, which Cawelti groups in three categories. These categories are: townspeople, outlaws, and heroes (41). Each of these groups also has their own distinctive features: the townspeople hover in their settlements defensively, the outlaws are associated with the inhospitable or uncontrolled parts of the landscape which they roam freely, and the heroes are friends to the townspeople while also possessing the same power of movement as the lawless. Cawelti states that these groupings of characters dominate “The western pattern of action”(41). For example, the film *The Wild Bunch*, which Simon has cited as inspiration for *The Wire*’s street gangs (Alvarez 316), depicts the exploits of a band of outlaws. The Bunch led by William Holden, are looking for one last big score they can retire on. When they are double-crossed by former member Deke Thornton, the Bunch makes a deal with the Mexican warlord Mapache: \$10,000 for 16 cases of stolen guns, a deal that ultimately goes awry. In the opening scene of the film, the Bunch rides into a small South Texas town dressed in military uniforms and robs a railroad office. To make their escape they join in a temperance march that is passing by the office. When a shootout begins between the Bunch and the posse that is out to capture them, a number of citizens are killed in the crossfire. In this example, Cawelti’s three groups of characters clearly materialize. The temperance marchers are the citizens; they are the ones on the defensive; when the violence breaks out they run and duck for cover. The Bunch are clearly the outlaws, not only because they are acting outside the law, but because their wanton disregard for the lives of the townspeople is an embodiment of the hostile qualities of the landscape of death with which outlaws are associated. Also their escape to Mexico shows how freely they are able to roam the wilderness, another quality of Cawelti’s outlaws. Finally Thornton comes out as the hero in this case; he possesses the same roaming capabilities as the Bunch (evidenced by him following them to Mexico), but he is a friend to the townspeople in that he tries to defend them from the Bunch. In the shootout he is the only character who is seen consistently and carefully aiming his shotgun in a way that will avoid civilian casualties (*The Wild Bunch*). This precise use of force is a hallmark trait of the cowboy hero (*Six Gun* 59)

Applying these categorizations to *The Wire*, one can make the same observations as with *The Wild Bunch*. Clearly the citizens of West Baltimore are the townspeople, the drug gangs are the outlaws, and as I will demonstrate, Omar Little is the hero. The citizens are on the defensive, stuck in the middle of the struggle between the police and the drug gangs (or sometimes between rival gangs). The drug gangs are once again the outlaws as their actions are both outside of the law and their involvement in the drug trade embodies the landscape of death. The gangs also

possess freedom of movement, because outside of the police, they are the only group of characters that consistently drive around in cars. There are other examples of the gangs traveling all around Baltimore or leaving the city all together, such as when Marlo goes to the Antilles to check his overseas bank accounts (“Not for Attribution” 5.3). Indeed there are more similarities between the Bunch and the gangs in *The Wire*.

The individuals who comprise both the street gangs of *The Wire* and the Bunch are at times depicted sympathetically. For example, the viewer sees the Bunch defend the honour of themselves and their friends as they struggle to survive in their changing environment. The complexity of the outlaws makes *The Wild Bunch* revolutionary among Westerns in that no Western before it showed the so-called villains to be real, complex people with problems and concerns that many viewers would share. This is also true of the criminals in *The Wire*. Burns notes that viewers were often surprised to see drug dealers and murderers as real human beings with feelings, misgivings, and even morals (*The Game is Real*).

The motivations of the Bunch and the gangs are also very similar. These characters commit crimes not because they enjoy it or because of profit, although these aspects may be a part of their motivation. In *The Wild Bunch*, the crimes committed by the Bunch are really about getting out of the outlaw business, which is true of many of the criminals in *The Wire* as well. For example, over the course of the series Stringer Bell begins to view his criminal activity much differently than his friend and co-conspirator Avon Barksdale. While Avon is in prison, Stringer takes control of their drug empire and works toward owning and operating more legitimate businesses. In particular Stringer is obsessed with work on a luxury condominium development, an investment of time and money that Alvarez says “Stringer was hoping to renovate in his foray into a world he craved: legitimate, high-rolling capitalism” (265). For Stringer, criminal activity was a means to escape the poverty of Baltimore’s poorest neighbourhoods. In order to do this he must gain the requisite resources to be able to leave his life of crime behind. Violence and unlawful conduct is the means by which these groups of outlaws try achieve their ends.

The final character type Cawelti defines, that of the cowboy hero, is embodied by Omar Little. If there is one visual in the series that clearly demonstrates the Western credentials of *The Wire*, including Omar’s status as a cowboy hero, it is the episode “Middle Ground.” This episode features a showdown between Omar and New York gangster, Brother Mouzone (“Middle Ground” 3.11). The scene is a classic example of the showdown trope with features like a train whistle in the background, the stance of the characters, the tension created by their drawn weapons and dialogue about murder and revenge. It is also reminiscent of the scene in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, where Jimmy Stewart’s Ransom Stoddard and Lee Marvin’s Liberty Valance talk about the harm they intend to cause each other while facing off in a showdown. As one critic notes, “The scenes in which he [Omar] confronts his fellow super gangster Brother Mouzone are like something from a Sergio Leone spaghetti western” (Cormier 210). This is no coincidence as George Pelecanos, the writer of the episode, says in the episode commentary: “I wrote this scene to obviously be sort of a Western kind of scene between the two mythical

figures of our show. Then Joe [Chappelle] took it and ran with it and actually shot it Westernly” (“Middle Ground” 3.11).



Figure ii, Omar and Brother Mouzone in a wild west showdown

Critics and writers aside, the most compelling evidence that this scene demonstrates Omar’s cowboy nature is his behavior. Cawelti states that the most important part of the “draw” or showdown are the qualities of reluctance, control, and elegance that are displayed by the cowboy hero (*Six Gun* 59). Omar’s calm and collected behavior in the scene demonstrates all of these qualities. In the scene, Mouzone threatens Omar, first to get his attention and then to make him listen to a proposition (“Middle Ground” 3.11). In a clear reference to the showdown between Stoddard and Valence, Brother Mouzone threatens to shoot Omar in the elbow, which Valence does to Stoddard in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*. Omar could easily shoot Mouzone while he is talking (Omar even notes “[At] this range? And this caliber? Even if I miss I can’t miss”) and be rid of the threat, settling things “once and forever” (“Middle Ground” 3.11). This doesn’t happen though, and it is because Omar is a cowboy hero. Because of his status, Omar cannot use deadly force preemptively. Instead of shooting, he converses with Mouzone, waiting for him to escalate or deescalate the situation. Omar does pull out his weapon, but slowly, carefully, even gracefully, showing off the elegance with which Cawelti states a cowboy must conduct himself (*Six Gun* 59). Cawelti states that cowboys are the modern descendants of

medieval knights and therefore they are linked to traditions of chivalry (*Six Gun* 59). Like Omar in this scene, cowboys do not seek out combat for its own sake and they try to avoid shedding blood (59). If a cowboy is forced into a situation where killing is necessary, it is carried out with precision, just as Thornton does in *The Wild Bunch*. In Cawelti's connection between Western and romance plots, this scene could also be classified as a crucial struggle. The alliance that is created between these two characters ends up having a profound impact on the course of the series when together they execute Stringer Bell ("Mission Accomplished" 3.12)

Perhaps ironically, the modern conception of a cowboy comes from another form of popular entertainment—Wild West shows. In his book *The Cowboy Way*, Paul Carlson explores the origins of the popular conception of a cowboy hero. He notes that a real ranch hand or cowboy, working during "The age of the classical cowboy" from 1865 to 1890 was on average 24 years old and worked for approximately seven years (2). These cowboys were dirty, overworked laborers who wore miscellaneous and ill-fitting clothing (2-3). Until the 1880s the word cowboy usually referred to a drunkard, outlaw or cattle thief (3). Around this time, after the collapse of the open-range cattle frontier, the modern mythic idea of the cowboy started to develop. In 1883 Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Exhibition included young men herding cattle whom Cody referred to as cowboys (5). One of the most famous of these cowboys was a man named Buck Taylor who was advertised as "The King of the Cowboys" (5). By 1887 Taylor had become such a popular attraction that Prentis Ingram, a hack writer, wrote a dime novel depicting Taylor's exploits (5). *Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys* became very popular and "[a]lmost overnight the cowboy image was transformed" (5). After Ingram, others began to follow suit in turning cowboys from rogues to heroes. Owen Wister's 1902 novel *The Virginian*, a foundational work in the Western genre, carried on this idea where it became the basis for countless films, novels and radio serials (5). Just as events were severed from the limits of history, so too has the cowboy figure himself. This allows the cowboy to be used in many ways. Carlson writes that the mystic and elusive nature that the modern cowboy quickly acquired likened him to a "Medieval knight-errant," once again connecting the genre to Frye's mythos of romance. The history of the modern mythic conception of the cowboy also shows that cowboys as they are, and have always been, performers. However humbly the cowboy legend may have begun, it became and has remained a symbol of freedom, strength, independence, and action (8).

Tom Doniphon (played by John Wayne), the protagonist of John Ford's film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* is cited by Simon as an inspiration for Omar (Alvarez 316). In the film, the outlaw gunfighter Liberty Valence, who uses violence and coercion to frighten the townspeople into submission and manipulate them, menaces Shinbone. The local marshal, Link Appleyard, is unprepared and unwilling to do much to deter Valence, so that responsibility falls upon Doniphon, who ends up killing Valence. However, Doniphon does this in secret, from a distance, allowing Stoddard to take the credit for killing Valence. Doniphon is a literal outsider in his community, living in a small cottage outside Shinbone with his African-American farmhand Pompey. The secrecy of his actions cause Doniphon to sacrifice a lot, including his chance for



acceptance by the people of Shinbone and a future with his love Hallie. He lives the rest of his life remaining an outsider on his ranch until he dies. Because of Doniphon's sacrifices and resulting inner conflicts, Cawelti places him on the more complex side of the spectrum of cowboy heroes (*Six Gun* 55). Cawelti states that what makes these heroes complex is that they have internalized the conflict between civilization and savagery, and therefore the outcome of Westerns with this kind of hero are more ambiguous and tragic (55). Doniphon also demonstrates several other key cowboy hero traits, both in his manner of dress and in his actions.

Chief among the parallels between Doniphon and Omar are their inner complexities. For example, the apparent clash between Omar's moral code and his occupation of robbing drug dealers most certainly place him on the complex side of the hero spectrum. Both of these characters yearn for a simple domestic life; for Doniphon this means settling down with Hallie Ericson and for Omar leaving "the game" and living quietly with Renaldo as he does at the beginning of season five ("Not for Attribution" 5.3). However, both of these characters must sacrifice their dreams to serve a greater purpose: driving out outlaws and the savagery associated with them from their environments. Even though these two characters seek to diminish the power and control of the outlaws, they are still fighting un-winnable battles, especially Omar in his fight against the drug gangs of Baltimore. Doniphon is perhaps more successful in his crusade because, by acting as a vigilante, he kills Liberty Valance in a duel. Doniphon then encourages Stoddard to turn into a political figure, helping the territory in which Shinbone is located achieve statehood. While Stoddard goes on to become governor of the new state, Doniphon suffers the pain of his sacrifices in silence, never able to live the life he had previously envisioned for himself.

The sacrifice of marriage and a domestic lifestyle by Doniphon and Omar is one born out of the connection between cowboys and medieval knights. Marriage and domesticity are often not a possibility for these kinds of heroic characters because their adventurous lifestyles disqualify them from it. Their existence revolves around being free to roam from place to place without any attachment, fighting the forces of evil. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Doniphon has marriage on his mind, but his choice to help Stoddard become the town hero means he also chooses to give up that dream and instead continue living as an outsider with Pompey. In *The Wire* Omar's homosexuality all but guarantees his exclusion from married life, although throughout the series he does have romantic relationships with three men—Brandon, Dante, and Renaldo. These relationships seem to be an earnest attempt at living a somewhat domestic life, but they cannot compete with Omar's work, which he consistently chooses to pursue over a domestic lifestyle with a romantic partner. Although marriage is eliminated as an option for both of these characters, they are not completely alone in their struggles as. Omar and Doniphon are both members of (or connected to) marginalized groups. For Doniphon it is the African-American community, which he is connected to via his close relationship with Pompey. For Omar it is the gay community. Cawelti states that connections to these kinds of groups is typical of a cowboy hero (*Six Gun* 62).



One of the most important elements of any stage, film or television character is his or her costume, as it often offers important clues or visual cues that reveal telling information about a character to the viewer. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, Doniphon's costume demonstrates a number of elements Cawelti cites as belonging to a cowboy hero. Cawelti notes that utilitarianism was a major part of cowboy fashion and that the manner of dress of a cowboy symbolized his adaptation to the wilderness (*Six Gun* 45). This quality is most certainly displayed by Doniphon in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, especially when his costume is contrasted with that of Stoddard's. Doniphon's clothes are work-worn, dirty, and crumpled, all signs of his adaptation to the wilderness. By contrast, Stoddard's clothes are neat, clean, and obviously meant for non-physical labour. Additionally, Doniphon is wearing a holster to carry his weapons, which are an important part of a cowboy hero's dress. They show that he is ready and willing to use violence in his quest to settle the conflicts between civilization and savagery by transforming the wilderness into a new social order (49). All together Doniphon's dress is functional for his lifestyle living on a desolate desert ranch as well as doing Shinbone's "dirty work" by dealing with Valence.



Figure iii Doniphon teaches Stoddard to shoot

Omar's costume is not the stereotypical cowboy hat, bandanna, cowboy boots and spurs that Doniphan sports, but it is a distinct uniform that is connected to cowboy history and myth. "I didn't want to sound or dress like a New York dude," says Michael Kenneth Williams, the actor who plays Omar. "Baltimore has its own swagger and style—just a white T and a do-rag. They keep it simple and clean" (Alvarez 314). Of course the other parts of Omar's iconic costume include a desperado duster, body armor and some type of weapon, usually a shotgun. These costume choices are far from arbitrary and stem from deeper notions supplied by Simon and Burns. In Alvarez's guide to the series Simon, Burns, and Williams discuss the origins of Omar. Describing one real life stickup artist named Ferdinand, upon whom Omar is partially based, Burns says:

I once watched Ferdinand walk up into a [project] courtyard and come up to a guy with his Jesse James duster coat on ... He apparently thought the guy wasn't giving up everything he had, so then you see the shotgun slide out and shoot the guy in the leg (315).

Burns goes on to add that "[t]he stickup guys are mavericks ... they are a totally different breed" (314). In both of these instances Burns is making a clear connection between stickup artists such as Omar and Wild West figures like Jesse James through their clothing. Therefore one could argue that Omar's duster signifies his status as a cowboy in itself.

Besides his "Jesse James" duster, Omar's clothing identifies him as a cowboy figure in other ways. In her essay "Work Clothes of American Cowboys: The Pictorial Record," Susan Karina Dickey describes typical cowboy clothing. "Cowboys ... generally wore drab, baggy pants held up by suspenders, an ill-fitting shirt and a nondescript vest" (Dickey 95). As noted above, Cawelti also emphasizes the importance of functionality in cowboy dress. This description applies to Omar's uniform. He is often seen wearing oversize clothing like many of the other characters in the series. These clothes do the same thing for Omar as they did for other cowboys: they provide functionality for work (95-96), and Omar's uniform is very functional for his occupation of robbing drug dealers. The baggy pants and T-shirt are not only in keeping with the "Baltimore style," as Williams notes, but their bagginess also provides ample hiding space for the various weapons that Omar is seen carrying on his person. Additionally, they add some much needed bulk to his slender frame, helping him to appear larger and more menacing than he is. The body armor part of Omar's uniform has perhaps the most practical purpose of all his pieces of clothing. Serving as a "nondescript vest," Omar is seen sporting two different kinds of body armor in the series. The first is a standard bulletproof vest that he is seen wearing a number of times. The second is an improvised vest made of layers of telephone books that he wears in the seventh episode of season four entitled "Unto Others" ("Unto Others" 4.7). Omar's constant need for the protection of body armor speaks volumes about what he thinks of himself and of his work. He recognizes the danger of his profession and therefore the need for body armor is somewhat obvious. However, this item of clothing and its function also suggest that Omar views

himself and his work as important—he must protect himself so he is able to keep working to save the townspeople from the menace of the outlaws.



Figure iv, Omar Little in his uniform

Besides the utility displayed by Doniphon and Omar's costumes, they also include the same elements of dandyism and the tradition of "The man in black," both of which are important elements of the cowboy hero costume and mythos. Cawelti notes that in cowboy films, specifically in "more sophisticated" Westerns, that it became a commonplace for Hollywood directors to dress heroes in black (*Six Gun* 44). This was a change from the simple visual cue that many B Westerns used which was to dress the hero in clean, well-pressed clothes and a white hat and the villain in sloppy black clothing and hat in an attempt to show their moral opposition (44). Throughout *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, Doniphon dresses in dark, well-tailored clothing, a style which Cawelti notes is a classic display of dandyism (45). Dandyism, defined as the "Highly artificial love of elegance for its own sake" (45), often takes the form of "elaborate costumes laid over with fringes tassels and scrollwork" or, "beautifully tailored cowboy uniforms" (45). Although Cawelti does not elaborate further on this point, the embellishments of the dandyism tradition in cowboy films may be connected to the history of modern cowboys as performers. Since real cowboy clothing was ragged, ill-fitting and completely utilitarian, it seems the added drama offered by dandyism is one way in which the real cowboy was adapted to make him more entertaining and visible. In the example of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, there is a scene where Doniphon confronts Valence in a restaurant.

Doniphon is wearing a dark suit with a checkered shirt and bow tie, all of which are unmistakable signs of dandyism.



Figure v, Doniphon displays dandyism

Much like Doniphon, Omar's costumes also display many classical cowboy elements. Although Omar is not dressed in black in every scene he appears in the series, he is seen wearing all black or nearly all black enough of the time that he can be considered a part of this tradition. However, for Omar dressing in black is also part of the utilitarian function of his clothing. Compared to most of the other characters in the series, Omar spends quite a bit of his time lurking in the shadows, spying, hiding, and waiting to attack. For such tasks dark clothing is most definitely an asset as it helps his quest to solve the conflict between civilization and savagery. Also, like Doniphon's dirty work clothes, Omar's choice of dark colours shows his adaptation to the wilderness, the mean streets of Baltimore's Western district. While mostly utilitarian, Omar's costumes still display elements of dandyism as well.

In *The Wire* there are a few occasions where Omar's dandyism is most noticeable, specifically in the sixth episode of the second season, "All Prologue" and the third episode of the fourth season "Home Rooms." In "All Prologue" Omar is in court testifying in the trial of Barksdale associate Marquis "Bird" Hilton and even though he received a voucher for proper court attire Omar appears in a black jacket (in keeping with his heroic man in black status) but has added a new item; a gilded tie he purchased with his voucher ("All Prologue" 2.6). Such neckwear is reminiscent of Doniphon's bow tie, creating yet another parallel between these two characters. In "Home Rooms" Omar is seen leaving his residence and walking to the corner store



to buy cereal wearing only bright blue satin pajama pants and robe (“Home Rooms” 4.3). While this is a departure from the “Man in black” tradition that Omar is usually aligned with it is also an unmistakable display of dandyism, of artifice for its own sake. In both examples the costume choices are deliberate attempts at creating a certain style of look, one that is decorative and flamboyant and in keeping with cowboy hero norms.



Figure vi, Omar’s blue pajamas



Figure vii, Omar testifies in court sporting stylized neckwear

Besides distinctive costumes, moral codes are a trademark of cowboys, helping them in their epic struggle against the forces of evil that existed in the Wild West (Buscombe 19-20). One of the most important features of these codes is that they are not actually codified, that is they are not usually written down and they do not arrange things in a careful systematic way. These codes are short and simple; they are easily memorized and internalized. The impetus to formulate and act upon them comes from an internal desire or belief in them, and not simply because they are laws, which many characters in *The Wire* find ineffective, not valuable, and easily disregarded. In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, Doniphon operates according to his own set of morals. His morals are not analogous to those of the townspeople, thus setting him apart and placing him between the townspeople and Liberty Valence morally. Doniphon's morals are not revolutionary among film cowboys; they include the skill and willingness to use violence, but only for the sake of protecting the townspeople or helping Stoddard. Order in Shinbone relies on the responsible and controlled use of force offered by Doniphon as it is the only effective tool against Valence. Like Doniphon, Omar has a moral code of conduct to which he rigorously adheres. This code has several elements that Omar identifies throughout the series. Omar's code includes such tenets as: not using drugs or brutalizing addicts (Alvarez 312), not cursing ("The Pager" 1.5), an acknowledgement that he and his work are "All in the game," ("Sentencing" 1.13) and therefore

it is “Play or get played” (“Lessons” 1.8), and not targeting people who are not in “the game.” As Omar says, “No mistakes, no bystanders, no taxpayers getting caught up in the mix, I mean you just get in close and hit the right nigger” (“Lessons” 1.8). The viewer gets a glimpse of how seriously Omar takes the last part of his code in “All Prologue,” while he is testifying against Hilton. When pegged by attorney Maury Levy as someone who would “Shoot a man down on a housing project parking lot and then lie to the police about it” Omar takes offense. “I ain’t never put my gun on no citizen” (“All Prologue” 2.6) he replies. Although he has just admitted in open court to robbing drug dealers, the brutal honesty and genuine offense Omar takes at the implication are endearing and enlightening to the viewer. It is apparent how seriously Omar takes his code. He believes in it deeply, which is a marked contrast to the police characters some of who show repeated and blatant disregard for the laws they are supposed to enforce. Speaking about the importance of Omar’s code Alvarez says: In a world where alcoholic cops consider diving down a flight of stairs for a disability pension and apprentice gangsters devour their childhood homeys for profit and promotion, Omar is a man of abiding consistencies for whom we can cheer (312).

Indeed, as Alvarez points out, it is Omar’s deep belief in, and his consistent adherence to his code that is admirable. For example, in season four when Marlo frames him for a murder, Omar’s code and reputation convince Bunk to investigate further and find the real killer (“Unto Others” 4.7). In *The Wire*, nearly everyone is corruptible; and even though Omar’s code is not traditionally moral—it does promote the use of violence and criminal activity—it does situate him as part of the moral centre of the series. *The Wire* shows repeatedly how morality, the principles by which we decipher what is right from what is wrong, is flexible and adaptable to circumstance. In the world where “the game” ruthlessly devours the citizens of Baltimore, Omar’s work robbing, and even killing, those who exploit the poverty, addiction, and immense vulnerability of these people is just, good, and effective in helping the citizens of the Western live their lives.

Thus, Omar’s code, like Doniphan’s in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, marks him as part of the moral core of the series. At the heart of his work is the idea of egalitarianism, taking from the haves and giving to the have nots. In his book *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy & Social Theory*, Will Wright notes that this is an important trait of the cowboy: “A lone cowboy emerges ... he rides a horse and wears a gun, and he represents freedom and equality” (1). In his work Omar openly and successfully challenges the drug lords, the oppressors of his social environment, by stealing the drugs they use to exploit and control the citizens of West Baltimore. “[Stickup artists] rebel against the drug world and are very set with a moral code. Even though it is kind of twisted, it is a code and they stay with it all the time” says Burns (*Connected*). The fruits of Omar’s labor (both drugs and money) are not saved; instead he freely spreads them around. The drug trade enslaves victims through addiction and subsequently those addicts support the drug trade through the money they supply. By giving away drugs that the

citizens of the Western normally pay for, Omar undermines the economic power of the drug trade.

The code and his strict adherence to it gives authority and legitimacy to Omar's work. He earns respect from people in the community, who are always willing to help him evade the Barksdale or Stanfield crews. Even more telling, in the streets of West Baltimore the children argue over who gets to play Omar ("Dead Soldiers" 3.3). His deeds and character set an example that is positive and inspiring to others. At the end of the series, as the life cycle of Baltimore refreshes itself with new characters stepping up to fill the voids left by characters who have been killed or otherwise displaced, a new Omar emerges in Michael, one of the four school boys the series follows. Michael cuts ties with the Stanfield crew for whom he had been working and begins robbing criminals himself ("—30—" 5.10). The legacy of empowerment and the will to fight against evil and savagery is a testament to the success of Omar's career as a cowboy hero. Omar becomes legendary. He lives on as one of the most popular and impactful characters in the series. As one critic notes, "Asking viewers their favorite character [on *The Wire*] was 'like asking their favorite member of Adele'" (Martin 152).

The final element of Cawelti's Western formula is the plot. Although there are some like Frank Gruber who try to categorize Westerns into seven basic plot lines (*Six Gun* 34-5), as has already been discussed, Cawelti simply states that plot is what arises from the clash between the hero (or civilization) and the villain(s) (or savagery) in the Western setting. Since this definition is so much more open, the only real necessity of a Western plot (besides it including a hero and a villain) is that it is violent. This violence usually is significant as it is often the embodiment of some sort of political message. As previously discussed Westerns have a very political history and have not shied away from exploring political questions and ideas. For example, regarding the violence depicted in *The Wild Bunch*, critic Stephen Farber notes that children play an interesting role. As previously mentioned, during the opening credits of the film, a group of children is seen watching two scorpions trying to escape a mob of ants. Eventually, the children give up on this struggle and set the insects on fire (*The Wild Bunch*). Next, after the temperance parade shootout the same children are seen "running among the corpses in the street firing make believe pistols and imitating the gunfighters with admiration" (Farber 5). Finally, in the shootout that ends the film, it is a child who kills Pike Bishop, leader of the Bunch. Farber discusses how Peckinpah shows these children as instinctively violent, but the "[t]he freshness of their faces teases us to believe that they are capable of something more than violence. It is this something more that Peckinpah searches for in the *Wild Bunch* too" (Farber 5). Just as in *The Wild Bunch*, *The Wire* moves between harsh cynicism and an older belief in grand human possibilities that have always been the most sentimental affirmation of Westerns (Farber 5).

Besides exploring the morals and potential for redemption, there is still more that complicates the violence perpetrated by the Bunch and the gangs of *The Wire*. In his book *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking The Western*, Patrick McGee offers a new take on the violence of the Bunch. He sees Westerns as full of class struggle, race war, and gender divisions. At stake in



these antagonisms are questions of wealth and its relation to power (39). The Bunch stand in opposition to the law, both physically and morally, and their criminality only serves to empower the ruling class by giving them a political antagonist they can oppose. In this way, McGee argues, the law is waging class warfare against the Bunch (152). The judicial system in this instance works to serve some (in this case the railroad industry) while it oppresses and antagonizes others. This inequity is masked by the appearance of doing right. The concentration of political and economic power sustained by violence is something Peckinpah believed to be a significant antidemocratic threat in the twentieth century (154). Once again the Western was being used as a vehicle for highly political messages and imagery relating to the fundamental elements of American life.

The class warfare that is waged on the Bunch closely parallels the interactions of the justice system and the drug gangs in *The Wire*, especially for the corner boys on the street level. McGee's contentions about the connection between class and race struggles, and the questions they raise about wealth and power also hold true in the world of *The Wire*. Systemic injustice and its oppressive effects are one of the key themes of the series. Just like with the Bunch, systemic injustice and oppression of the residents of West Baltimore is masked with rhetoric about fighting the War on Drugs. What *The Wire* shows viewers time and time again is that the pursuit, capture, and release cycle that makes up the War on Drugs, coupled with the wheeling and dealing of the legal system, turns this so-called war into a game. Eventually this system and the forces that enable it create the mistaken impression that the drug trade, and the problems of poverty, addiction and crime that are associated with it, are ones that are inherent in the people of West Baltimore instead of ones that are created by the very system that is meant to deal with them. A viewer on the outside of the action sees this cycle clearly and just as with *The Wild Bunch*, the series engages its audience "in recognizing their own implication in the social violence that produces stable structures" (McGee 151).

Rethinking *The Wire* as being significantly shaped by the Western genre affects the messages and themes one takes away from the series. Positioning the series in this genre allows viewers to reflect upon the more difficult questions of American life. Westerns challenge viewers to think critically about their roles within systems of violence and oppression as *The Wild Bunch* demonstrates. *The Wire* changed the game so to speak by modernizing and re-imagining the traditional political questions that Westerns have been exploring since *The Virginian*. In his article "How the Western Was Lost (and Why It Matters)" Michael Agresta sums up the politics of the Western by saying:

In the enduring examples of the genre, the real threat to the homestead, we learn, is an economic system that is being rigged for the wealthy, or the search for the bad guy becomes a search for meaning in a culture of violent retribution, or the treasure of the Sierra Madre is a diabolical mirage of the American dream (Agresta).

*The Wire* updates the politics of the Western to reflect a modern struggle—the War on Drugs. The focus on the War on Drugs brings up the same kinds of questions Agresta mentions in his article: the effects of an unjust economic system, the search for meaning in a violent culture and the movement of the American dream out of the reach of more people. The answers that Simon gives to these questions in *The Wire* is that the War on Drugs is a complete failure that has only further entrapped and impoverished some of the most vulnerable members of American society—those living in the harsh conditions of inner cities.

Both within *The Wire* and outside of it Simon has been an outspoken opponent of the War on Drugs. “All you are doing is making meaningless street arrests that have no consequence, you’re just harvesting stats,” says Simon (*How to Make Money Selling Drugs*). Not only does Simon see the War on Drugs as futile, he also claims that current tactics used to wage it amount to nothing more than “[h]unting the poor” (*How to Make*). Simon notes the harm that has come from the steep stigmatization of drug use caused by campaigns like Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No”:

“[‘Just Say No’] was like one America talking to the other, not even knowing how the other half has to live. Just Say No was like telling people in a factory town don’t go to work for steel or telling people in Detroit don’t go work for GM. ‘Just Say No’ in West Baltimore is like telling somebody don’t go and work for the only factory that’s hiring in your neighborhood” (*How to Make*).

In its realistic portrayal of life in Baltimore’s Western District, especially when it’s juxtaposed with the wealthier areas of the city like the downtown and suburban neighbourhoods, *The Wire* exposes the economic injustice that lies beneath mainstream American life. For most of the residents of the Western District, working hard and trying to save money—the fundamental tenets of American meritocracy—will not allow them to eventually fulfill the American dream. They will not gain the economic means to enable them to leave the ghetto and live in another nicer area of the city. Even Stringer Bell with all the monetary success and power he gains still cannot escape “the game” and become a completely legitimate businessman. While the War on Drugs is not the only cause of the economic injustices on *The Wire*, Simon’s comments emphasize how the drug trade enslaves a great number of the poor (whether by addiction, the lack of other economic opportunities, or both) and how subsequently the War on Drugs punishes them for engaging in one of the only prospering economies in their community.

The cynicism that is evident in Simon’s remarks about the War on Drugs are connected to its failure and the subsequent damage it has caused. “It is impossible for the police to have a normal procedure in a crime where nobody wants to report it” notes one retired detective. “No one calls 911 when they use a drug, buy a drug, or sell a drug” (*How To Make*). Drug use and addiction are public health concerns but currently they are being treated as criminal ones. America’s current Drug Czar, Gil Kerlikowske, even admits this failure saying:

If you read the research, you clearly and you quickly come to realize addiction is a disease. I think for too long we probably thought either we could arrest our way out of the problem or solve it through some criminal justice lens and I think we know from past history that is not the case” (*How To Make*).

Kerlikowske’s remarks highlight how the drug trade and the War on Drugs create a cycle of economic exploitation perpetrated upon some of the most vulnerable members of society. *The Wire* shows repeatedly how the current methods dealing with the problems of poverty and drug addiction are inadequate; they only prolong and exacerbate them and crime rates associated with them. This in turn creates the self-fulfilling prophecy of “the game.”

One of the great tragedies examined in *The Wire* is the difficulty of finding meaning in a violent world. Characters like Wallace, who is murdered at the end of the first season, show the disposability and devaluation of human life caused by the drug trade and the War on Drugs (“Sentencing” 1.13). Wallace is a kind and compassionate teenager, trapped in the ruthless world of “the game.” Social circumstances such as addiction and incarceration have burdened Wallace; he takes on heavy responsibilities by caring as best he can for a brood of parentless street children by providing them with a safe place to sleep as well packing their lunches and helping them get off to school each day (“The Wire” 1.6). These actions greatly endear Wallace to the viewer. Wallace’s innate goodness and wasted potential are shown through his half-finished education. While he occasionally struggles with math, he is able to recognize Alexander Hamilton on the ten dollar bill when none of his companions can (“The Target” 1.1) and he shows an interest in learning chess (“The Buys” 1.3). Ultimately this child is brutally murdered by his friends for being a suspected snitch (“Cleaning Up” 1.12). He was built up to be so endearing, thoughtful, and so full of potential; for a brief while the viewer even believes that these qualities may be enough to allow him to beat the odds and escape “the game.” However, looking back on Wallace’s time in the series it is evident that he is not a fully fleshed-out character; he is only ever referred to by his surname (his full name is never revealed) and neither are many details of his past. The character of Wallace functions as a glimpse of the humanity that is squandered and destroyed by the leviathan that is “the game” and his tragic death emphasizes the enormous cost of the drug trade and War on Drugs. Even more disturbing is how “the game” continues unabated, taking no notice of his passing. Of the many Wallaces seen in the show, as well as their real-life counter parts Simon says, “The country is telling you implicitly we don’t need you, you’re a human being without purpose and that’s 10 to 15 to 20 per cent of our population at this point,” he adds “We had not given the slightest bit of thought to what the people in these worlds were supposed to say yes to, and we still haven’t” (*How To Make*). In the chaos, violence, and death created by the drug trade and the War on drugs *The Wire* shows viewers that meaning in this world is fleeting, delicate, and easily disposed of.

Omar Little, who is arguably the most charismatic and memorable character in HBO’s *The Wire*, and perhaps even television history, is unlike any of his contemporaries that populate the

series. He is a Wild West cowboy hero operating under the guise of a homosexual urban male stickup artist. Omar's manner of dress, his moral code, and his precise and controlled use of force are all evocative of cowboy heroes seen in films like *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*. Indeed there are many other elements of the Western genre evident in *The Wire*. From the connections between the drug gangs of West Baltimore the members of the titular outlaws in *The Wild Bunch* to the landscape of death, Westerns have been the political parables that both teach Americans about their history and culture while reflecting back at them the thorny questions and contradictions prevalent in their daily lives. Omar is part of the moral core of the show; he successfully and consistently metes out his own form of justice. While it is easy to take issue with his methods, through his work Omar helps diminish the power the drug gangs and sets an example for the citizens of the Western district which emphasizes the fact that they all have the potential to be empowered. His unique characteristics make Omar one of the most beloved and memorable characters in television history, and as one critic notes, "Brave, loyal and free spirits like Omar may be good to have around whether we live in the drug infested ghettos, comfortable suburbs or comfortable, gentrified, former ghettos," or it would seem, the Wild West (Cormier 212).

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