

THE EVOLUTION OF THE COWBOY STORY: A PRODUCT LIFE CYCLE PERSPECTIVE

by

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ABSTRACT

Professional storytellers have always consciously marketed their work. Their tactics can be explored with reference to the concept of the product life cycle and the adoption curve model. By viewing examples (which are both historical and outside the realm of typical marketing scholarship) a wider range of our profession can be grasped.

INTRODUCTION

Although literary creation is very different from smokestack manufacturing, writers have long functioned as skilled marketers. Elsewhere, I have argued that for thousands of years storytellers have strategically hawked their wares in ways which parallel modern marketing management techniques. In my earlier writing, however, I painted with a broad brush and did not focus upon specific examples of the marketing of literature.

The present paper concerns one genre of literature as it evolved and has been marketed. Specifically, the American cowboy story and its noteworthy variants will be analyzed with reference to the strategies and implications of the product life cycle and the adoption curve as these concepts are currently expressed in modern marketing thought. By viewing literature in this historic way, marketing can not only broaden its horizons and applications, it can also contribute to other disciplines such as literary criticism.

THE BEGINNINGS

One of the most perplexing problems facing the historian who wishes to analyze a particular genre of literature is to choose the universe of discourse to be investigated. A study of the cowboy story, for example, could trace the genre back to prototypes such as epics of knights in shining armor since the cowboy hero parallels such protagonists in various ways and since some authors were overtly influenced by such prototypes. And should we include detective stories and/or science fiction where the hero's personality resembles that of the cowboy even though the action take place in a contemporary or futurist environment?

misfortune of being displaced by the coming of civilization. Throughout The Pioneers, Natty judges people, statuses, rights, and privileges using his own standards, and he must eventually go west where he can act according to his code. The end of The Pioneers is a case in point: Judge Temple, the leader of society, convicts Bumpo of breaking arbitrary laws which he finds irrelevant to the situation at hand. As a last straw, Natty disrupts the decorum of established law and is banished to the wilds where his character is not at odds with the prevailing social norms. He and his dog are last seen retreating into the untamed wilds where society has not yet entrenched itself.

In The Prairie, sequel to The Pioneers, however, Bumpo does find a place where society cannot usurp him. Reflecting the beliefs of the times, Cooper depicts The Prairie as a desert where society can not establish itself. Finding a haven, Cooper's individualist hero lives out his days without worrying about the encroachment of society.

Cooper's "cowboy" or frontier epic, therefore, has three basic components:

- 1) The hero is a moral person whose very moral stance made him the antithesis of culture.
- 2) Due to conflict between the individualist hero and conforming culture, society rejects the noble hero.
- 3) The hero retreats to the great American desert where society cannot usurp him.

Beyond doubt, Cooper's work well satisfied his market. Both The Pioneers and The Prairie were best sellers and they established Cooper's reputation as a major literary figure. Many years later, primarily because of public demand and Cooper's financial needs, he wrote three additional Natty Bumpo novels which deal with his hero's younger years. As with the sequels of many authors, however, these later works are not of the same quality and they contribute little to Cooper's vision of the hero who is simultaneously superior to society and is in a doomed struggle against it.

As is often the case with innovative products, Cooper's original customers (his readers) were educated, affluent, and of relatively high social class. And as is also typical, as time went on, the product was embraced, in turn, by other groups ranging from "early adopters" to "late majority." An example of this innovation aimed at the late majority is the so-called "penny dreadful" novels of the late 19th century. These cheap uninspired versions of Cooper's original plotline were marketed to poor, uneducated people of low social class. Thus, although the typical customers for this product changed over the years, the product itself went on without a significant reformulation. Indeed, this plotline has never been totally eclipsed, examples of it can still be found, although it is certainly no longer the vogue.

OWEN WISTER'S ALL CONQUERING HERO

Enjoying a long popularity with various markets, Cooper's portrayal of the displaced hero was

Wood, a highly individualist woman from the East. As the story progresses, Molly helps the Virginian smooth his rough edges and he helps her reassert her own individualistic identity which had largely been submerged due to her Eastern upbringing. At story's end, the Virginian has gained the ad hoc skills he needs to permit his individualism to successfully storm the Eastern Bastions of the social establishment, as Molly recognizes and embraces her own individualism.

The classic cowboy novel, The Virginian was successful because it updated Cooper's formula using the perspectives provided by the Turner Thesis. As often happens in marketing, an innovation precipitated by evolving conditions changes an existing product which restarts its product life cycle. While keeping the personality of the hero constant, Owen Wister transformed his protagonist from a passe remnant banished to the hinterland into an all-powerful superman, vital and triumphant. Not only is such a hero a strong moral force, he is also able to achieve pragmatic goals within society.

Becoming established around the turn of the 20th century, this updating of the cowboy story originally appealed to the upper and educated classes who were looking for an apology for capitalism and for a means of portraying American civilization on a par with (if not altogether superior to) older European cultures. Owen Wister's cowboy hero, via his social Darwinistic portrayal of the Turner Thesis, forcefully accomplished these goals.

As time went on, various forms of mass communication (movies, radio, and TV) brought this innovation to an ever wider audience. As in the case of the later variants of Cooper's plotline, furthermore, Wister's formula was embraced by people who lay further down the rungs of the socio-economic ladder. In addition, the Wisteresque hero became involved in a long series of morality plays directed primarily at children. Thus, although some examples may have survived as "the thinking men's Western," Wister's innovation increasingly became niched as a genre for people of low social class and for children. This situation remained until the 1960s when the formula again changed.

ABORTED INNOVATIONS

As every marketer knows, a significant innovation is not always successful in the marketplace. Innovations must be made available when the public is willing to embrace them; otherwise the product will not sell even if it's "superior" according to other criteria which the designer holds dear. If the timing is wrong, innovations cannot be successfully marketed.

In the history of the 20th century cowboy novel, there are at least two examples of innovations which failed because the public rejected them. They are represented by Zane Grey's The Vanishing American and Walter Van Tilburg Clark's The Ox Bow Incident. Both significantly expanded Wister's social Darwinistic/Turner Thesis plotline and updated its message. And both are excellent examples of fiction created by acknowledged writers. Neither, however, was able to impact upon the evolution of the cowboy story. From a marketing point of view, they were presented to the public at inappropriate times and failed.

other possible suspects. By not interfering with the mob, they allow its vengeance to be dissipated in a way which does not hurt them. Thus, while the Vanishing American confronts evil and dies, the antiheroes of The Ox Bow Incident capitulate and live.

Although The Ox Bow Incident was a best seller and is still praised by critics, it didn't impact upon the dominance of the Wisteresque plotline of the cowboy story where the hero is a superman whose prowess was wrought on the frontier. Instead critics depicted the novel as "serious fiction," which merely used the conventions of the western as a literary device. Some critics even come up with the farfetched notion that the novel was a symbolic tale about Nazi Germany set in the old west.

Clark rode the waves of Ox Bow's success to a literary career, but he never returned to the cowboy story. As is the case with Grey's Vanishing American, Clark's Ox Bow Incident came and went without impacting upon the genre or the tastes of the reading public.

The history of marketing exhibits many examples of seemingly superior innovations which were unsuccessful because the public would not accept them. In such cases, a product might be ranked as "superior" based on many criteria, but still prove unsuccessful in the marketplace. The Vanishing American and The Ox Bow Incident reflect this potential failure. Both were excellent works of fiction and each in its own way expanded the formula of the cowboy novel by adjusting it to an evolving world. Both, however, were rejected by the public; neither could restart the product life cycle of the cowboy story.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the belief in the Turner Thesis - that the frontier had honed the American national character to a new level of greatness - was still a strongly cherished belief. Even uneducated people who had never heard of the concept itself were, nonetheless, influenced by it. The Vanishing American and The Ox Bow Incident undercut these cherished beliefs by suggesting that the strong moral force wrought on the rugged frontier must either remain true to itself and die or capitulate to the immoral forces of society in order to survive. Because these innovations contradicted the cherished beliefs of the times; thus, they were rejected by the public even while winning the praise of literary critics.

A FINAL EMBRACE

As we have seen, innovations - however well thought out - will not impact upon a product or influence potential customers if they are offered to the public at an inappropriate time. In the 1930s and 1940s, the fatalistic and antiheroic western plotlines were innovations which were out of sync with the conventional wisdoms of the times; as a result, they failed to have a lasting impact upon the cowboy story.

Ultimately, there was nothing wrong with these innovations; the timing was merely off. As American culture and world view evolved, however, these products eventually became acceptable to the public and then they could be successfully marketed.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study of literature provides examples of individual producers (artists) who consciously market their wares in systematic and strategic ways. For that reason, literary criticism can provide excellent examples of marketing management as it has existed throughout the ages. Not only can literary analysis explore how artists market their products, they can also help us analyze why specific clienteles are willing to embrace certain products at specific times. In the case of the cowboy story, the public's acceptance of various plotlines is directly related to evolving world views which have dominated American thought at different periods; successful westerns embraced society's prevailing views of the world.

James Fenimore Cooper's writing began the product life cycle of the modern cowboy hero by depicting a strong, individualistic, moral force which was ultimately displaced and cast out of an amoral society. Somewhat reflective of both the "Noble Savage" paradigm popularized by Jean Jacques Rousseau and the early 19th century belief in a "Great American Desert," this plotline was quickly embraced by the intellectuals of the time. As time went on, it fell heir to others besides the educated and elite; late 19th century "Penny Dreadful" novels, for example, brought these stories to lower class people who can be identified as "late majority" customers according to the popular "diffusion of innovations" model.

In the 1890s, historian Fredrick Jackson Turner developed the "Frontier thesis of American History." According to this influential theory, American culture was superior to its European prototypes because exposure to a wild and raw frontier had honed the American spirit to a razor sharp edge. It was assumed, therefore, that the frontier experience had made Americans and American culture inherently superior to European prototypes. Although the frontier had closed, Turner continued, America would continue to reap the benefits of the frontier experience for generations to come. Owen Wister was a literary innovator who embodied such concepts in his Western stories; the hero emerged as a superman due to his frontier experiences and he rejoined society as an all-conquering hero. While Cooper's Natty Bumppo could only retreat to the desert, Wister's hero used his skill and prowess, won on the frontier, to surpass his eastern/civilized counterparts. Wister's plotline totally dominated the genre (product) for about 50 years and it emerged as an innovation which was able to restart the product life cycle of the cowboy story. The Wisteresque plotline remained dominant until approximately 1960.

Although Wister's vision remained the standard during this period, certain authors transcended it. Zane Grey, for example, depicted the fatalistic hero who remains true to himself and dies as a direct result. Walter Van Tilburg Clark, in contrast, portrays protagonists who have heroic possibilities but suppress this potential in order to capitulate with an immoral world and survive as a result. These prototypes, however, did not have any lasting impact upon the cowboy story; they were in such conflict with the prevailing world view of the public that they proved to be unacceptable. Although literary critics laud the literary skills of Grey and Clark, both innovations were unacceptable to the public and had little impact upon the evolution of the cowboy story.

The field of marketing as a distinct profession/discipline developed in the 20th century. As a result, most of the documented examples of marketing management behavior have taken place in recent years. This "time compression," understandable though it is, has created an unfortunate ahistorical flavor of our discipline.

Applying a modern marketing analysis to historic examples can help us overcome such limitations. In the case of the cowboy story, the marketing of modern examples of the genre can be compared with prototypes which go back to the 1820s. By doing so, the marketing of literature can be investigated using a long time frame. As a result, the social and intellectual pressures which impacted upon these products and their marketing can be more meaningfully investigated.

In the final analysis, marketing is a social science which takes place in a specific and evolving socio-cultural milieu. A broader historical perspective allows marketers to better come to grips with this reality. This paper provides a specific example of the options of historical research in marketing and some of the benefits of it.