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Slotkin's Reading of Violence and the American Story

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Contents

1. Introduction

The aim of this graduation thesis is to present Richard Slotkin's reading of violence, as well as to explore the conditions which led to the creation of the American national myth. All of this cannot be discussed without returning to the conditions on the frontier that formed the American national identity.

Richard Slotkin works within the tradition of American Studies by offering a critical approach to the myth/symbol school and reading American history by taking into account previously neglected concepts of violence and imperialism. For this reason, Slotkin's ideas will be compared to the previous paradigms in American Studies. The first attempts at American Studies will be elaborated, starting with Alexis de Tocqueville's claims on the exceptionality of America, and Frederick J. Turner's address on the significance of the frontier in American history. Furthermore, an overview will be given of the myth/symbol school approach to American Studies, including Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, R.W.B. Lewis' *American Adam* and Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness*. Moreover, an outline of the critical approach to myth/symbol school will also be given, including Alan Trachtenberg and Leo Marx. Furthermore, Slotkin's trilogy on the myth of the frontier, which is the basis for this thesis, will be explored. This includes *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860, The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890,* and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America*. Each of the works will be summarized, taking into account the main features of each volume. Moreover, a more detailed elaboration will be given on the key elements of Slotkin's paradigm. This includes the violence and the frontier, the evolution of the American hero, American attitudes toward guns, weapons, and military conflicts. Finally, scholarly criticism of Slotkin's work is also provided.

2. Slotkin in Relation to the Earlier Paradigms

The constructions of the American identity are based on the foundational myths which have been shaping contemporary discussions of the United States to date. Such myths include, among others, the myth of Columbus and the 'discovery' of America, the myth of the Promised Land, the myth of the Founding Fathers, the myth of the American West and the myth of the self-made man. The purpose of each myth is to approach the interpretation of American culture from a different angle, with each of the angles providing a particular narrative of American history. These myths, however, are not fixtures in the American national cultural imaginary. They continue to exist due to their adaptability over time, claims Paul (11).

The extraordinary mission of settlers as 'God's chosen people' was expressed in John Winthrop's image of the City upon a Hill, William Bradford's history of Plymouth Colony, as well as the Puritan journals. However, the first time that the notion of exceptionality was introduced was in Alexis de Tocqueville's seminal work *Democracy in America* (1835/1840), where he proposed that "the position of Americans was quite exceptional" (42). According to later scholars, what he said was not that Americans were special people, but that they had a unique political system, in comparison to his native French system. For Tocqueville, the American system was God-willed and exceptional because it managed to take root in the absence of feudal structures and aristocratic opposition. From this point onwards, the notion of American exceptionality was decontextualized and began to be used to describe the American nation in more general terms. As American scholars study American exceptionalism, they tend to produce new exceptionalist narratives, which are religious, political and economic in nature. The economic aspect of American exceptionalism is often associated with notions of individualism as a precondition for success, which is seen predominantly in economic terms. The myth of the self-made man, who goes from rags to

riches, illustrates the promise of success as a direct consequence of freedom and equality. It is argued that this myth also makes up the immigrant myth, offering a utopian narrative of the American dream, the hope of a better life for those who settle in the United States (Paul 14-16).

For Frederick J. Turner, it is the phenomenon of the frontier which gave rise to individualism and encouraged the American spirit of independence. In his1893 text ,"The Significance of the Frontier in American History", he introduces the importance of the frontier experience in interpreting the development of the United States. It is claimed that the existence of the frontier and its settlement had the key role in shaping the American character. Turner equates American history with the history of the colonization of the Great West, referred to as "an area of free land" (Turner 1). American social development has been repeatedly beginning over again on the frontier, claims Turner (2). This constant cycle of rebirth and the expansion westward dominate American character. The frontier, according to him, is the meeting point between savagery and civilization, which is a proposition Slotkin agrees with. It represents a continuous movement away from European influence and is distinguished from the European frontier because it lies at the hither edge of free land and presents the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. It is the movement westward that identifies the rejection of England as Europeans become more and more American (3-4). Turner describes the condition of the European settler in the following way:

> The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois and runs an Indian palisade around him. (4)

As Slotkin puts it, Turner's concept of the frontier is divided into two realms, the "Metropolis", which is projected onto the other realm - the "Wilderness". In that sense, the "frontier" represents the interface between these two realms. Beyond the frontier, however, lies a world of unappropriated abundant resources, unencumbered by the rules of the established order. The expansion proceeds from the Metropolis outward, each new conquered frontier becoming the Metropolis and pushing the expansion further into the Wilderness. This movement is motivated by the cheap and abundant resources beyond the frontier and holds the key to the economic development (*The Fatal Environment* 41). Turner's critics, Slotkin claims, point out that the frontier institutions were often shaped by the rules carried over from the Metropolis and that the populations involved in the frontier settlement were not usually the simple yeomen or safety-valve-oriented workingmen that Turner speaks of. However, whether it is seen as agrarian or industrial, an actual part in political economy or only a myth, the Frontier remains the determinant of the history of development. Slotkin supports Billington's conclusions that it generates productivity by providing abundant unclaimed resources that exist outside the Metropolis and the law (*The Fatal Environment* 42). On the other hand, Slotkin argues that the economic developments that arise within a Metropolitan society and demand discoveries of resources have ideologically troubling social and political consequences. The economic expansion is not a simple increase in population and productivity, but is accompanied by shifts in the status and power of different classes, impoverishing some and elevating others. In that sense, the precondition for later waves of expansion is the industrialization of the Metropolis, which leads to the dispossession of peasants and farmers, provoking social violence, revolutions and wars. (*The Fatal Environment* 44). According to Slotkin, the rise of the middle classes in Europe, the confrontations between borrowers and lenders, laborers and contractors, are as central to the

frontier development as the conventional opposition between the white man and the Indian. Yet, they are not a part of Turner's frontier thesis. In Slotkin's words:

> Frontier Myth and its ideology are founded on the desire to avoid recognition of the perilous consequences of capitalist development in the New World, and they represent a displacement or deflection of social conflict into the world of myth. As we shall see, in that myth the simple fable of the discovery of the new land and the dispossession of the Indians substitutes for the complexities of capital formation, class and interest-group competition, and the subordination of society to the imperatives of capitalist development. (*The Fatal Environment* 47)

Furthermore, Slotkin argues that Turner marginalizes the historical significance of violence in the development of the frontier, which weakens his analysis. By rejecting the idea of racial violence as the basis for the development of individual and social character, he devalues it as a political symbol (*Gunfighter Nation* 55). To sum up, in addition to Turner's notions of the frontier, Slotkin proposes that the frontier does not imply democratic values, but regeneration of violence. In his terms, the frontier is seen as result of the conflict between the individual and society. However, the frontier is more than just the place of contact. It is a powerful place of both attraction and repulsion toward the "other". Slotkin argues that in American history, this dreadful other has almost always been a racial other. Violence in the center of the frontier myth is a direct outcome of the European experience in the appropriation of native lands, as well as the appeal and repulsion towards the natives and their myths. As it is stated, peculiarities of America's version of this myth originated from its original condition as a settler-state, a colony of the European 'metropolis.' Yet, in America, all the social transformations which led to modernization began with physical separation from the originating 'metropolis' (*Gunfighter Nation* 10). Therefore, the "achievement of 'progress"

was related to territorial expansion and shaped by the experience of emigration (*Gunfighter Nation* 11).

Even though Theodore Roosevelt supported Turner's frontier thesis, believing it to be complementary to his own conclusions proposed in *The Winning of the West*, Slotkin argues that their versions of the frontier thesis were actually antitheses. While Turner places the farmer at the center of American development, accentuating democratic collectivity, Roosevelt assigns this role to the hunter/Indian fighter, emerging from the fight in order to establish his neo-aristocratic right to rule. Moreover, for Turner, the frontier is a place where political and social life is morally regenerated, while Roosevelt sees the industrial/urban order as the logical result of the frontier past (*Gunfighter Nation* 29-35). What they had in common was the assumption that the frontier was a key factor in the development of American institutions. Both feared that the closing of the agrarian frontier would mark the beginning of the crisis in American history, even though the frontier was at that point far from being closed (*Gunfighter Nation* 30). As Slotkin proposes, more public land was brought into production at the turn of the century, along with the development of timber and oil industries and the gold rush in Alaska. However, the new entrepreneur of this new industrial era, argues Slotkin, had to contend with large capitalist enterprises for the control of resources (*Gunfighter Nation* 31).

Tocqueville and Turner's texts are mentioned as first attempts at American Studies. However, the discipline developed in a more formalized way in the 1930s. Up until the 1950s, scholars of the so-called myth/symbol school studied myths and symbols that allegedly formed the basis of American uniqueness and sought to affirm American exceptionality (Paul 18). The myth/symbol school is based on the hypothesis that the central part of American culture may be found in great works of American mythology. Recurring myths in such works include the American Adam, the notion of virgin land and the machine in the garden.

Henry Nash Smith is one of the most prominent scholars of the approach, whose seminal work *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* uses the notions of symbol and myth to designate collective representations rather than singular constructs. Without discussing whether these constructs reflect empirical facts, Nash Smith argues that they nevertheless exert an influence on practical situations (2). He was one of the first scholars to consider American identity as shaped by myths and symbols. “The force which pushes America onward toward her historical destiny”, claimed Smith “is the westward movement of the frontier” (38). He relies on Turner’s frontier hypothesis and offers some additional insights regarding the concept. For Smith, the frontier also represents a means of economic, spiritual, and masculine renewal. He argues that the journey into the primordial West required rough individuals, the pioneers who knew both "wilderness" and "civilization", heroes such as Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and Wild Bill Cody, and heroines such as Hurricane Nell, Wild Edna, and Calamity Jane. Smith calls these individuals trailblazers, “The Sons of Leatherstocking”. However, with the arrival of European immigrants to the West, the yeoman becomes the central figure, establishing the myth of the garden. The westward movement of the settlers is described in regard to the mental concepts, both conscious and unconscious, that led them to venture into “virgin” land and settle in this new territory. However, in this myth of progress, Smith does not mention violence or how the savage land was tamed by captivities and savage wars. He omits essential details, such as the fact that the so-called virgin land was already inhabited and the westward movement was achieved through bloody wars.

Smith offers an idealized image of the West where one can leave the past behind and start anew, the image of the ever young, constantly renewed America where possibilities are endless. Slotkin rereads Smith taking into account American imperialism. He offers a different view of the concept of “virgin land” and attacks Smith’s portrayal of the frontier myth. He focuses on what the myth/symbol approach omits, such as genocide of native tribes

and destruction of nature. While for Smith this symbolism was regarded as positive, Slotkin offers a different standpoint. He agrees with Smith that the West was formative for the American national character, but he also points to the negative aspects of the westward expansion, such as racism and violence, rather than innocence. Slotkin builds on Smith's approach, offering a critique of American exceptionalism and taking into account important factors such as race and class. Furthermore, Slotkin argues that behind the mystery of the "virgin land" lies the principle of the "resource Frontier". In other words, there is an economic rationale behind the conquest of the frontier, in exploiting resources such as metals, industrial ores and cheap labor. Moreover, the violence obscured by Smith hides a concept of social relations where there is a racial basis of class difference. In a divided society, therefore, conflict was unavoidable until the savage race was completely exterminated or subjugated. This doctrine was also applied to social relations in industry, as well as to nonwhite populations overseas in the imperialist search for new lands and markets (*The Fatal Environment* 531).

Beside Nash Smith, other leading scholars like R.W.B. Lewis and Perry Miller also examined the nature of the American experience within the myth/symbol school. Lewis' work *American Adam*, introduces the image of a new hero emancipated from history, "untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self- propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources" (5). He calls this archetypal hero the "American Adam" by using the analogy with the biblical concept of Adam before the Fall. The American myth, Lewis argues, sees history as just beginning, giving a second chance to human race. The American Adam is described as an authentic American, fundamentally innocent in his newness (5). He is a heroic figure of enormous potential, entering into an unknown world, colliding with it in a "fortunate fall" (153).

Slotkin, however, rejects the Adamic myth and proclaims the innocence lost. The American myth, as he describes it, usually involves a protagonist living in an initial state of innocence, living sheltered from dark powers. This blissful state is soon interrupted by corruption, often embodied by Indians who symbolize his own sinful potential and drag him into the wilderness (*Regeneration Through Violence* 305). As he is alienated from his happy state, his corrupted mortal life begins, ultimately resulting in "figurative rebirth, the attainment of a new soul" (*Regeneration Through Violence* 101). One of Slotkin's main theses is that the alleged earthly Eden was created through acts of violence against the land and the native people. In other words, heroic actions of the Adamic heroes are always tied to the destruction of nature and its inhabitants. The heroism in these figures consists in their method of achieving their goal. Their trophies have no material value, but are important as concrete proofs of "the self-justifying acts of violent self-transcendence and the regeneration that produced them" (*Regeneration Through Violence* 564). However, their alleged independence of time and consequences is an illusion, he proposes. The consequences of their actions are well visible in the land and its people, the debased and impoverished Indians, economically wasted and exploited land, the wars against man and nature, as well as between races (*Regeneration Through Violence* 565).

Perry Miller's work, on the other hand, focuses on the Puritans' "errand into the wilderness" allegedly guided by the divine power. Miller sees the 17th-century Puritan theology as the philosophy which has a permanent influence on the American culture. As he put it his 1956 classic *Errand into the Wilderness*, the wilderness or the frontier is the "basic conditioning factor" for the European settlers (1).

Miller's understanding of the frontier is somewhat different than Turner's and Smith's. While Turner believed that the frontier gave America its individualism, Miller claimed that what pushed the Puritans into the wilderness was their perception of themselves as people

sent by God on an errand. Since the Puritans believed this errand came from a higher power which intended them to move to the New World, they aimed to set the example of a Christian commonwealth, a shining "city upon a hill"(15). However, Miller argues that it was the desire for land, rather than the desire for democracy that led the Puritans. In this regard, Slotkin argues that the land was not to be taken simply in the name of conquest, but with the purpose of purification of the Puritans' spirits in a spiritual journey and a trial through which they would be rendered worthy of entering the Promised Land (*Regeneration Through Violence* 38-39). The very concept of errand into the wilderness was invented, Slotkin says, in order to quiet the inner voice which called them back to England (*Regeneration Through Violence* 41).

For Perry Miller, the American mind is shaped by the wilderness and the cult of Nature (235). American Nature is fundamentally opposite to European, which is considered artificial (212). In that sense, America is considered a "Nature's Nation" (210). However, the European *Volkgeist*, as Slotkin terms it, was transported to the New World. Racial prejudice, but also religious differences between Catholicism and Native American blood rites offered an additional cultural opposition, which was exemplified in North American literature, more particularly in the accounts of Indian wars and captivity narratives. Such myths facilitated the aggressive westward expansion. Furthermore, it seems that the early settlers propagated Christian martyrdom to serve as redemption from their sins. For Miller, religion is one of the crucial aspects in comprehending the frame of mind of the early settlers. Slotkin adds to this argument by saying that the series of captivities is what forced the Puritans to examine their mission (*Regeneration Through Violence* 121). Since they conceived themselves as the chosen people, the bearers of light, the catastrophe of the Indian war threatened their most fundamental postulations about their own spirit and their relationship to God (*The Fatal Environment* 56). The concept of the city on the hill was founded on the principles of resisting the forces of superstition and paganism. In order to create this city they were compelled to

violate the ties of blood and the affection that bound them to England. The trauma of breaking those ties made them stick rigidly to the remembered English ways. On the one hand they rejected accusations of "Americanization", and paradoxically claimed the American Puritanism to be purer than English Protestantism (*Regeneration Through Violence* 121). In other words, they were torn between the promise of America and the fears of cultural dissolution. The errand could work in the small area of New England, but the West was too big and turned people into hunters and half-Indians (*Regeneration Through Violence* 432).

In the mid-1960s, the myth/symbol school's theories started to be questioned. In the wake of the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and the anti-war movement, many scholars suggested alternative genealogies of America and its identity. This approach cast a more critical light on American history and questioned the 'innocence' of the American Adam cultivating his 'garden' in the 'wilderness.' The principal ideology of American beginnings, which had been favoring certain groups while marginalizing or completely leaving out others, was no longer accepted as representative of the American experience. The critics of the myth/symbol school focused on the experiences of women, non-white people and native people previously removed from the wilderness, the role of slavery in the formation of the nation and aspects such as violence, racism, sexism, and genocide as foundational for the American nation. However, old myths were often not entirely discredited, but only reinterpreted. The critical approach shed light on the fact that the homogeneous nation and a single version of history were products of a hegemonic narrative that excluded many perspectives. The critical approach started to put an emphasis on the heterogeneity of American society and uneven distribution of power, offering a more comprehensive account of America (Paul 20-22).

Alan Trachtenberg proposes the argument that myth/symbol studies "takes a culture to consist in myths, e.g., constructs whose power over collective intelligence and behavior is

uniquely powerful, and powerful especially to the extent that it is irrational, based not on empirically-determined 'truthfulness' but on other sources of need, of collective purpose, or ideological imperative" (667). Slotkin makes a similar point. He argues that myths are stories that integrate a society's ideology and generate a predictable response upon mention of certain code words. In order to understand why a certain myth works, we must locate it in a specific time and place, then extrapolate its symbolic meanings. As he puts it in *The Fatal Environment*: "The essence of all that is genuinely exceptional in American history is embodied in those myths that are peculiar to our culture, of which the oldest and most central is the Myth of the Frontier" (34).

Furthermore, Leo Marx elaborates on how the American pastoral ideal was interrupted by the industrialization of the 19th and 20th century, the concept referred to as the "machine in the garden". He examines literature in order to understand this conflict between the image of a pastoral America and America as an industrial power. The anti-pastoral forces at work in American literature seem to become more violent, argues Marx, as the industrialization "provides the counterforce in the American archetype of the pastoral design" (26). For example, Marx describes the scene in Thoreau's *Walden* where the whistle of the locomotive interrupts him in his reverie while sitting in the woods. But perhaps the most well-known metaphor used by Marx is the one found in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He argues that the steamboat that smashes the raft represents the machine destroying the garden. Almost always, the machine appears suddenly and abruptly, he argues (15). The raft and Thoreau's cabin represent freedom, an escape from restrictions of society, while the intrusion of the steamboat represents the entrance of reality into this pastoral dream. Sometimes an ominous sound may be heard while waiting for impending doom that the steamboat brings, but just like in the aforementioned scene, it cannot be seen until it is very close (329). In these fables, Marx argues, the hero ends up either dead or alienated from

society. The tribute he may pay to the landscape is mostly bitter and ironic. Finally, he argues that American authors point out the problems, but rarely give resolutions to their pastoral fables. Ultimately, this is not their responsibility, but one of society and politics (364-365).

In this regard, Slotkin argues that just as the farm replaces the wilderness, so the railroad represents a further advancement of civilization. This progress always takes the form of asserting human control over nature. While one may nostalgically admire the former pastoral ideal, it is the industrial bustle that represents the suitable next stage of progress (*The Fatal Environment* 215). Slotkin cites Webster when he argues that the world of the farm is similar to the world of childhood, while the industrial world is a world mature adulthood. Even though we may long for the pastoral Eden, it is our destiny to struggle in order to earn our bread. Finally, it is the yeoman farmer who represents the vanishing American, while the railroad man is the one to inherit the earth (*The Fatal Environment* 216).

3. The Trilogy on the Myth of the Frontier

3.1. *Regeneration Through Violence: the Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*

Regeneration Through Violence, published in 1973, is the first part of Slotkin's trilogy on the mythology of American violence. Violence continues to be the focus of American perception of itself and the world around it. Slotkin's trilogy thoroughly accounts how the phenomenon of violence has been fundamental to the creation of American mythology. He proposes that the founding fathers of the American nation were those who tore it violently from the merciless wilderness. This resulted in what he calls "the myth of regeneration through violence", which "became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (*Regeneration Through Violence* 5). Furthermore, this work is also a study of how the literature of the frontier led to the creation of a national mythology based on the westward movement. Two American myths are elaborated in detail: the captivity myth and the hunter-hero myth.

Slotkin begins this study with the experience of Puritans settling in the New World. The settlers perceived the wilderness as a hell inhabited by demonic creatures – the Indians. As they moved westward, the contact with the Indians and constant confrontation led to many people, most often women, being taken into captivity. The literature describing this experience came to be known as captivity narratives. The literary tradition of captivity narratives presents accounts of survival of white people in the savage wilderness and reflects Puritan anxieties about surviving on this "new" continent. In other words, the central theme of the captivity myth is the Puritans' fear of the wilderness and hatred towards the Indians, where a white protagonist usually falls victim to the Indians, while the Indians are seen as grim and violent. Moreover, the Puritans believed that the control over their situation was held by God

or the divine power, perpetuating the belief in the lack of human agency. The protagonist of the myth is the white warrior. He exerts violence on the Indians while rescuing the captive from their hands, performing a symbolic exorcism of the Indian. While the figure in the captivity myth may be both male and female, the values are best represented by a passive, Christian female. The figure of the hunter-hero myth, on the other hand, is exclusively male. He is usually the father or husband of the female, acting as her rescuer.

After the Revolution, the settlers ventured further into the wilderness. This led to the creation of the hunter myth, with protagonists like Daniel Boone and Cooper's Leatherstocking characters, who are the focus of the hunter-hero myth and exemplify the archetype of the hunter-hero. This myth narrates the Indian war where the central figure is that of the frontiersman and his conflict with the Indians and the wilderness. In short, it addresses the following issues: how the settlers either adopted or pushed against the Indian customs and how they interpreted violence as the means of achieving their heroic purpose. In this myth, the hunter-hero fights against the Indians and the wilderness, taking part in violence that leads to his regeneration.

The difference between the violence exerted by the Indians and by the white protagonist is in the fact that the latter's violent actions have a redemptive force whereby he achieves regeneration and initiation into the world of the Indian. This violence is rooted in the lust for killing, both the beasts and the Indians. In a symbolic way, the white protagonist now becomes Indian for the purpose of annihilating the Indian.

Slotkin argues that the Puritans were repulsed by Indian culture because it represented forbidden desires that existed in their own minds. The myth of the hunter uses the wilderness as a symbol of the human unconscious and the beast as a metaphor for the dark soul within each person. Therefore, it follows the pattern of the archetypal quest for the source

of divine power. The quest entails looking for the two worlds (the temporal and the underworld), as well as the hero's soul. These quests guide him to the earth goddess, his 'lost half,' or his anima, representing the hidden part of his male consciousness. In this union with his other self the hero achieves his personal salvation (*Regeneration Through Violence* 156).

In short, Slotkin proposes that the structuring characteristic of American identity is the relationship with the Indians. The first step in the evolution of this relationship is the Puritan fear of the Indians and the wilderness, which symbolizes the primitive states of human consciousness. This transforms into a violent coexistence described in captivity narratives. Finally, heroes such as Boone and Deerslayer appear and embrace the wilderness in search of self-renewal through the violence of the hunt and regeneration of the wilderness through its destruction. Slotkin shows how these narratives created a national mythology and contributed to the formation of American identity even in the present day.

3.2. *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890*

The focus of Slotkin's study in this work continues to be the American myth and its evolution. His premise is that the American frontier mythology is the primary force in the formation of American national character. As the frontier line recedes, the myth becomes stronger. By referring to the conflict with Native American tribes, Slotkin builds upon the arguments set forth by Frederick Jackson Turner, but also takes into account the violence practiced on the frontier. He argues that “The Myth of the Frontier is arguably the longest-lived of American myths, with origins in the colonial period and a powerful continuing presence in contemporary culture” (*The Fatal Environment* 15). The language of the myth, as he puts it, is “indirect, metaphorical, and narrative in structure”. It conveys ideology in the

form of symbol, exemplum, and fable, and may evoke fantasy, memory, and sentiment. The logic of myth depends less upon logic than on an instant and intuitive comprehension of a meaning" (*The Fatal Environment* 22). Thus, while a culture's mythology evolves, it creates a universal ideology by transforming historical events into celebrated narratives (*The Fatal Environment* 24).

In *The Fatal Environment*, he argues that after the official closing of the frontier, the frontier myth persists until 1890s as a representation of the subordination of the industrial proletariat at home and the imperialism abroad. Indians were replaced by Mexicans and the myth of regeneration through violence was revived. He argues that the original myth of the frontier had offered a fictive reconciliation between the opposing demands of individual ambition and social order, and the solution was offering external goals for ambition (the virgin land) and external targets for hostility, Indians and renegades (*The Fatal Environment* 515).

In the 1850s, the Pacific railroad became the symbol in a "false renewal of the agrarian Myth of the Frontier" as it promised access to the far West (*The Fatal Environment* 214). However, this led to the emerging of an industrial civilization. Race and class were the central elements in the subjugation of both black and white workers in order to restrain their independence and savagery. America was no longer the agrarian republic as imagined by Jefferson. Instead, it had become "a semiurbanized industrializing state" (*The Fatal Environment* 290).

The frontier myth remained important only as a tool of social control, Slotkin claims. The new analogy was the one between workers and savages. The discovery of gold in Dakota in 1874 gave new life to the frontier myth. The white hero could now revive the frontier mythology, as he was skilled in wilderness but was also the promoter of civilization.

The post-Civil War version of the frontier hero was Custer, "an early type of organization man, hiding in the costumes of the cavalier trooper and the Frontier buck-skin" (*The Fatal Environment* 375), which is elaborated further in sub-chapter 4.2. of this thesis.

According to Slotkin, the encounter between General Custer and Indian tribes at the Little Bighorn in 1876, in which Custer lost his life has been made into the most significant event of the time, longest remembered and invested with the heaviest symbolic meaning (*The Fatal Environment* 14). Custer became the new Daniel Boone, "opening up for the American people a new Frontier of fertile land and abundant gold; and doing it at the precise moment when such an acquisition was most needed by an imperiled republic" and the encounter between the two sides became "the symbolic key to interpreting the meaning of history" (*The Fatal Environment* 8). As he argues, after Little Bighorn, Indians started to symbolize all those who threatened the so-called Age of Industrialization. Furthermore, Custer became the symbol of victory of civilization over savagery. As he elaborates on his life and newspaper interpretations of the Last Stand, Slotkin is led to the conclusion that Custer's confrontation with Sitting Bull became the justification for an even more cruel response to savagery.

To sum up, Slotkin traces the development of the myth through different narratives. From Custer's Last Stand to King Phillip's War, all the way to 1890, or the alleged closing of the frontier as proposed by Frederick Jackson Turner. It is argued that this development can be traced through different representations of Indian wars. Slotkin's argument is that American myths of the frontier are a vital element in history, with the belief that progress is achieved through intrusion of civilization into the savage wilderness and the subjugation of native people.

3.3. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America*

The final volume of Slotkin's trilogy, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America* (1992), starts where *The Fatal Environment* ended. In this volume, Slotkin proposes that the frontier myth had a significant impact on American politics of the twentieth century, from Roosevelt to Reagan and Bush. It is a comprehensive study of the frontier, as represented in various media, from novels like Wister's *The Virginian* and Dixon's *The Clansman*, to Western films such as John Ford's *Stagecoach*, Zinnemann's *High Noon*, and Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*.

The book opens with Turner's famous 1893 address on the closing of the frontier, followed by a chapter on Roosevelt's "The Winning of the West" and Wister's "The Virginian". Moreover, Slotkin connects the myth of the frontier with American engagements in the Caribbean, in Southeast Asia and finally in the Vietnam War. From the 1890s onwards, "the exchange of an old, domestic, agrarian frontier for a new frontier of world power and industrial development had been a central trope of American political and historical debates", Slotkin claims (*Gunfighter Nation* 3).

Two currents of the myth of America are discussed in *Gunfighter Nation*. One is populist and agrarian, represented by Jefferson, while the other is progressive and expansionist, represented by Alexander Hamilton and Theodore Roosevelt. Slotkin explains that this myth arose out of a history of violence, ultimately leading to progress (*Gunfighter Nation* 11). In other words, progress is tightly related to regeneration through violence that legitimated acts such as conquering the frontier and displacing the native population. Once the frontier closed in the 1890s, this led to the search for new frontiers and new territories, contributing to the politics of imperialism (*Gunfighter Nation* 86).

Furthermore, Slotkin focuses on the idea of “savage war“, just as in his previous work. He states that it is "a mythic trope and an operative category of military doctrine" (*Gunfighter Nation* 12), with the assumption that peaceful coexistence between the sides is impossible. Hence, the outcome can only be the complete destruction of either side, most typically the Native American or Mexican one. It is said that "the Indian war also provides a symbolic surrogate for a range of domestic social and political conflicts" (*Gunfighter Nation* 13). The myth of the savage war blames Native Americans as instigators of the war. Even though they may have occasionally been aggressors, after 1700 there has not been a general policy of white extermination. As Slotkin puts it, “the accusation is better understood as an act of psychological projection that made the Indians scapegoats for the morally troubling side of American expansion" (*Gunfighter Nation* 12-13). It is proposed that from the 1870s, the white man transferred his suppression from the “savages” on the frontier to different groups in urban settings. In a way, suppression of Indians was now projected onto which ever group seemed to threaten America’s plan of attaining progress and civilization.

The concept of the savage war has also contributed to the rise of the Western. From its inception as a captivity narrative all the way to Cooper’s Leatherstocking novels, in which he uses the opposition between the white and the Indian opposition as means of explaining other social oppositions. For example, in the wake of the Vietnam War, American troops often described Vietnam as “Indian country”, and referred to their missions as a game of “Cowboys and Indians” (*Gunfighter Nation* 3). Slotkin notes that these oppositions found in Cooper are “the most basic and definitive of historical tropes” and represent “the ideological justification of American history" (*Gunfighter Nation* 15).

In the period at hand, the figure of the gunfighter replaces previous heroic protagonists. The term *Gunfighter Nation*, evidently stands for America. The term does not describe merely the American attitude towards guns. Moreover, it is argued that this violent

frontier continued to function as a tool for legitimization of American violence. In Slotkin, such frontiers represent the meeting point of savagery and civilization, while the surrounding myth has the capability of "the life, thought and politics of the nation" (*Gunfighter Nation* 4). As the American myth is retold, the original story becomes conventionalized until it is completely reduced to symbols, 'icons,' 'keywords,' or historical clichés (*Gunfighter Nation* 5). It must be noted that no overarching myth can be eternally consistent due to changing narratives that reflect reality. This will result in the alteration or development of the myth in order to explain social change. The forces that modify the myth can be attributed to "the bad harvest, the plague, defeat in war, changes in modes of production, internal imbalance in the distribution of wealth and power that produce a crisis that cannot be fully explained or controlled by invoking the received wisdom embodied in the myth". When the crisis has passed, it establishes its place in mythology through alterations in ideology and social principles. The result is the combination of old views with the new ideas (*Gunfighter Nation* 6).

Slotkin's argument is that myths influence not only a nation's worldview, but its actions as well. For example, the genre of the Western flourished precisely at the time of the domination of the progressives, the cold war and World War II. During Kennedy's era, the myth was described as the "New Frontier". In order to describe the demoralizing of America and the inversion of the myth, Slotkin discusses *The Wild Bunch* and the Vietnam War's Mylai massacre, where several hundred unarmed civilians were killed. The point conveyed is that through such acts of violence the American side becomes the savage one, enacting the fears it had about the natives.

Finally, Ronald Reagan is described as the final attempt at reviving the myth that once held the nation together. Slotkin stresses that no myth can be everlasting, since there always comes a time when a nation must choose to adhere to the old formula or adapt to new

conditions. A myth is a continuous conversation, he points out. Even though corporate and political institutions often manage to control the masses, they cannot always be impervious to social change. This is exemplified by Hollywood's inability to revive the Western in mid-70s and early 80s, which goes to show that capitalist industry is unable to control the production of myths and ideologies (*Gunfighter Nation* 659). The discourses of myth are instruments, he proposes, that help a nation revive the nostalgia for a "falsely idealized past" (*Gunfighter Nation* 659-660).

4. The Elements of Slotkin's Paradigm

4.1. Violence and the Frontier

From the beginning of their experience on the "new" continent, the settlers perceived their history through the conquest of frontiers. However, it was only when this experience was formulated into a narrative that it became crucial in the formation of their identity. The myth of regeneration through violence represents, as Slotkin proposes in his trilogy, the fundamental American approach to symbolically handling violence. Moreover, many American myths may be seen as versions of this myth.

The myth is traced from the 17th century Puritan narratives and savage wars. It arose out of the internal conflict that the settlers felt as they entered into the new world. This internal conflict consisted in simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward the wilderness. The Puritan and the Indian cultures represented two different worldviews and two conflicting attitudes towards nature, wilderness and the role of human beings. The decisive factors in the victimization of native tribes are the Puritan ideology, conquest under the pretense of Manifest Destiny, the captivity narrative, and the sacrifice of Custer's Last Stand, where he was killed by the Indians at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Moreover, Slotkin's work is influential in its elaboration of the mythic perception of the world found in popular narratives, and its impact on the formation of American ideology.

Slotkin elaborates on myths which contain violence as their crucial element. The first myth is the myth of the captive. The captive is usually a white Christian female, captured by the Indians, whose faith is tested in this predicament. Finally, the Indians are destroyed, while the captive is returned regenerated to the Christian community. The violence directed towards the Indians is a projection of the settlers' desires for freedom and escape from the strict Christian community and its rules. Therefore, the rescue of the captive and the destruction of

the Indians symbolically represent the captive's fear of their own desire for freedom found in the wilderness. Slotkin proposes that the American settlers were "not simply an idiosyncratic offshoot of English civilization" but became "Americanized" or "Indianized" through their interaction with native tribes in America (*Regeneration Through Violence* 6). The settlers faced the wilderness with ambivalent attitude toward it. On the one hand, it represented a source of power and virtue. On the other hand, they felt the need to tame it in order to attain progress. Such an ambivalent attitude was, as Slotkin suggests, built into the Puritan experience from the very beginning, since they saw an inverted mirror image of themselves in the culture of the New World (*Regeneration Through Violence* 57). In other words, Slotkin argues that the early settlers came with their own cultural conceptions and mythologies from their homelands and were influenced by native American mythologies throughout the duration of the contact with the natives. As he puts it:

> The Europeans who settled the New World possessed at the time of their arrival a mythology derived from the cultural history of their home countries and responsive to the psychological and social needs of their old culture. Their new circumstances forced new perspectives, new self-concepts, and new world concepts on the colonists and made them see their cultural heritage from angles of vision that noncolonists would find peculiar. (. . .) This racial-cultural conflict pointed up and intensified the emotional difficulties attendant on the colonists' attempt to adjust to life in the wilderness. The picture was further complicated for them by the political and religious demands made on them by those who remained in Europe, as well as by the colonists' own need to affirm—for themselves and for the home folks—that they had not deserted European civilization for American savagery. (*Regeneration Through Violence* 15)

The American loves the spirit of the wilderness, claims Slotkin, and his acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit (*Regeneration Through Violence* 22). Violence is practiced in the settling of colonies, exhibiting bravery in war and spreading Puritan faith, while displacing the alleged barbarism of the native tribes. As Slotkin puts it, the early settlers saw the settlement of the New World as an opportunity to regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation. However, the means to that regeneration finally became the means to violence, and "the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (*Regeneration Through Violence* 5). According to Slotkin, the anxieties and the ambitions of the colonists found their most striking and symbolic depiction in the stories of Indian wars. Moreover, English Puritans were turned against a culture that was antithetical to their own and this enabled them to emphasize their Englishness in opposition to the Indian barbarism, assert their own superiority by acclaiming their bravery in battle, the extreme peril of their situation and the divine fervor for Christian expansion (*Regeneration Through Violence* 21).

Furthermore, the myth of the hunter, found in legends of Daniel Boone and Cooper's Leatherstocking characters, was born precisely out of the fascination with the wilderness and the Indian way of life. This myth represents the union of the white man with the wilderness. The entrance of the white hero into the wilderness is enacted through pursuing and killing an animal or an Indian, which leads to his rebirth. In Slotkin's words, the violence is an initiation and a conversion in which the hero is united with the powers that rule the universe and whereby he acquires a new moral character (*Regeneration Through Violence* 551). However, the hunter runs great risks in achieving his intentions. He has left his own family for the insecurity of the Indian ways, and he may get so immersed into the wilderness that he becomes just like the Indians.

Slotkin claims the captivity narrative to be the "archetype of the American experience" (*Gunfighter Nation* 98). From 1682 to 1716, it is stated, “captivities were the only narratives about the frontier published in America" (*Gunfighter Nation* 144). It is argued that from the moment of its literary conception, the New England Indian captivity narrative operated as a myth, reducing the Puritan state of mind and world view, colonization and settlement, into archetypical drama (*Regeneration Through Violence* 94). Certain elements are present in all captivity narratives. They usually start with a short religious excerpt and continue with teaching the audience a spiritual lesson. The captive is perceived as spiritually isolated, as an outcast from his or her own land. As the victim is captured, he or she becomes lost to the community until rescued. The community then ceremoniously gathers around the victim to exalt him or her "to a level equivalent to members of the medicine society, with the task of witchfinding” (*Gunfighter Nation* 137). Later, in Westerns, the ceremony frequently takes the form of a wedding ritual, whose purpose is to unite the rescued white captive with a proper white counterpart and hence cancel out the threat of assimilation. According to Slotkin, the Puritan dread of Indian marriage was born out of fear of adjusting and merging with the nature of the New World. For the Puritan, the traditional repulsion towards marriage with the natives was amplified by the horrific idea of marriage with the wilderness. It is argued that there is a conviction that "the only acceptable communion between Christian and Indian, civilization and wilderness, was the communion of murder, hunger, and bloodlust" (*Gunfighter Nation* 125). The captivity myth, argues Slotkin, allows only two reactions to the Indian and to evil, either passive resignation or violent retribution in the name of divine justice (*Gunfighter Nation* 141).

To conclude, Slotkin argues that, even though the Western frontier sums up what is at the same time the most ideologically powerful and optimistic American mythology, there is a surge of violence that lies beneath its colorful exterior (*Gunfighter Nation* 3). As he argues, it

is not necessarily the amount or sort of violence that characterizes American history but the mythic significance that has been assigned to the kinds of violence experienced, as well as the forms of symbolic violence, which is imagined or invented (*Gunfighter Nation* 13). As it is argued, the stereotypical "cowboys and Indians" trope is manifested in naturalistic terms: native resistance to European settlement takes the form of a struggle for survival, which inevitably turns into "wars of extermination". In such a conflict, one side or the other must perish, either through never-ending killings or by the humiliating experience of subjugation and torture (*Gunfighter Nation* 12).

4.2. The American Hero

American mythology first took shape in the genre of colonial Puritan writing. The hero of such narratives was the captive or victim of cruel savages and his heroic quest was aimed at religious conversion and salvation, as previously described in this thesis.

As the settlers became more experienced in living on the American continent, their early enthusiasm to remain non-American became confused with the growing affection toward the land and their desire to know it and claim it, which was often the subject of later narratives. The subsequent adaptations of the myth portrayed the settler growing closer to the Indian and the American land. Hence, a new kind of hero came into view. His role was to reconcile civilization and savagery. Those heroes were the yeoman farmer, explorer or surveyor and later, the naturalist (*Regeneration Through Violence* 21). This kind of hero was a step away from the American Adam, who escapes society and ventures into the wilderness. Instead, the new hero was a frontiersman who inhabited the fine line between savagery and civilization.

In *Regeneration Through Violence,* Richard Slotkin claims that the early form of the archetypal hero quest became hybridized through the encounter between European and native worldviews and set the foundation of the modern myth of the frontier and national identity. Slotkin claims that the hunter myth offered a justification for the process by which the wilderness was to be expropriated and exploited (554).

Both the captivity and the hunter mythologies see the frontier experience as one of regression, claims Slotkin. Civilized men and women abandon contemporary society and enter the primal world, be it willingly or as captives. If they maintain their integrity and defeat the forces of dark, they will be able to return with renewed moral and physical powers. They submit to regression in the name of progress and go back to the past to purify themselves, regenerate the present and create a better future. However, there is danger in this regression. One may be tempted to remain in the past, become a renegade or be so altered by the experience that civilized life becomes unattractive (*The Fatal Environment* 63).

By the late 1800s, Daniel Boone had appeared as the central character in the myth of the heroic quest. This figure was a man who rejected mixing blood with the savages or returning to civilization. He was stained by the wilderness, but remained outside organized society. Slotkin asks, "If a man is civilized, why would he leave society for the savage solitude of the forest? And if he is not civilized, how can he be set up as a hero for civilized men to emulate"? However, by leaving society, he creates a new one and in the end returns to his family. Accordingly, there is the trinity of values that are fundamental to Anglo-American society: social progress, piety, and the family (*Regeneration Through Violence* 279). For example, the Boone narrative establishes a strong correlation between Boone's state of mind and the state of the real landscape. The myth begins with Boone's total immersion in an experience of the wilderness, continues with him tasting both the promise and the terror of the Indian world, and culminates in his achievement of a deeper perception of the nature of the

wilderness and of his own soul and his assertion of rational control over his environment (*Regeneration Through Violence* 293).

The "hunter myth" represents a different scenario of relationship between the colonist, the wilderness, and the Indian, argues Slotkin. The gender of the hunter-hero is always masculine and he enters the wilderness willingly. The captive, on the other hand, is taken against their will beyond the boundaries of society. The hunter is the heroic agent of an expansive colonial society, rather than the symbol of a colonial culture wandering aimlessly in an alien landscape. Furthermore, he is an individualist with the desire to establish himself outside colonial authority, at times even sharing the Indians' antipathy for those authorities. The hunter is never a renegade, but he speaks for the pioneers who were approaching the status of rebels and outcasts. Very much like the captivity narratives, the symbolism of the hunter myth originates from historical resources, from literary depictions of the lives of real frontiersmen. He enables progress and civilization, and himself embodies the go-getter values, the willful temperament and the pragmatic mind. He is usually described as strongly individualistic, an expert woodsman, adept both at fighting and understanding Indians. Moreover, just like the captivity narrative, the hunter story includes a conversion or an initiation, in this case triumphant rather than traumatic. Boone's adventure involves systematic assimilation to the world of Indians, beginning with his radical solitude and separation from society, and culminating in his captivity and adoption into a tribe of Indians. Boone represents the rescuer of captives, and the captive who succeeds in escaping and finally defeating the Indians. Consequently, he emerges at the end as the solution to the problem of the captivity, “and as the human agency through which the American errand into the wilderness will be consummated”. (*The Fatal Environment* 64-68).

Even though the Indian is consistently portrayed as inferior to whites, Slotkin argues, his presence is necessary for the revelation of the Anglo-American hero and his heroism. The

Indian is the threat, the opponent against whom he must exercise and develop his heroic traits as representative of civilization (*Regeneration Through Violence* 189). It is argued that for some authors, the Indian personifies an exemplification of the power of wilderness to destroy man's higher sense of justice. Both Boone and the Indian are products of wilderness. However, Boone's actions are guided by the self-restraint necessary for citizens of a perfect republican democracy. The Indian, on the other hand is an "instinctive democrat but without a sufficient sense of civic responsibility" (*Regeneration Through Violence* 275).

Furthermore, Slotkin argues that after the official closing of the frontier, the frontier myth persisted until 1890s as a representation of the subordination of the industrial proletariat at home and for imperialism abroad. Indians were replaced by Mexicans and the myth of regeneration through violence was revived. In the 1850s, the Pacific railroad became the symbol in a "false renewal of the agrarian Myth of the Frontier" as it promised access to the far West (*The Fatal Environment* 214). However, this led to the emerging of an industrial civilization. Race and class were the central elements in the subjugation of both black and white workers in order to restrain their independence and savagery. America was no longer the agrarian republic as imagined by Jefferson. Instead, it had become "a semiurbanized industrializing state" (*The Fatal Environment* 290). The frontier myth remained important only as a tool of social control, Slotkin claims. The new analogy was the one between workers and savages. The discovery of gold in Dakota in 1874 gave new life to the frontier myth. The white hero could now revive the frontier mythology, as he was skilled in wilderness but was also the promoter of civilization. The post-Civil War version of the frontier hero was Custer, "an early type of organization man, hiding in the costumes of the cavalier trooper and the Frontier buck-skin" (*The Fatal Environment* 375). However, Slotkin claims that he was actually an active participant in the corruption of the Gilded Age (*The Fatal Environment* 424).

At the turn of the twentieth century, the traditional frontier hero was modernized from "the man who knows Indians" into a military aristocrat representing managerial values. He was transferred from the wilderness to an urban or imperial frontier, where immigrants and strikers now symbolically represented the Indians. Again however, this hero repressed those classes in a "savage war" and governed them without their consent. Moreover, many dime-novels abandon the story of the Indian war and concentrate on conflicts between outlaws and detectives, as well as on struggle between the classes (*Gunfighter Nation* 126-127). The detective hero is a figure similar to that of the Virginian, Slotkin says. He knows Indians, or in other words, knows the world of crime from the inside, but also has a heroic sense of honor and justice (*Gunfighter Nation* 218). This is the one hero who embodies the frontier myth by fighting the villains, either in the wilderness or in the urban criminal underworld. This is where the key to the social disorder is found, "where the trail of an upper-class malefactor can be picked up, where the detective confronts the gang-bosses who constitute the elite of urban crime" (*Gunfighter Nation* 222).

In 1960s, the gunfighter hero is the key figure. However, Slotkin points out that this figure is not necessarily tied to a specific time frame or setting. This character is used to fulfill a specific social role, i.e. in resolving a variety of conflicts in a variety of settings. He exhibits professionalism in using weapons, but this is justified because he knows "how the world works". He understands it is a cruel place, and people's intentions are rarely honorable. Modeling the American hero on a figure of a populist rebel is indicative of the ideological shift to the right during the Cold War, claims Slotkin (*Gunfighter Nation* 401-402).

Finally, the evolution of the hero is constant, as well as the process of mythogenesis. Those who go in and out of the dangerous frontiers become mythic figures. Each new generation transforms them in an attempt to understand its past and present condition.

4.3. Guns and Weapons

In the process of pushing the boundaries out into Indian country and fighting wars against the natives, Americans have developed heroic virtues, the ability to fight creatively, Slotkin claims in his interview with Bill Moyers entitled "Segment: Richard Slotkin on Guns and Violence". American relationship with nature and the notion of progress are achieved not by man exploiting man, but man exploiting natural resources – gold, mineral, oil and timber. In order for the violence myth to work, the Indians have to be perceived as less than human. Since they like nature, the forest and the wilderness, they are legitimate objects of destruction. The evolution of the myth depends on the creation of America as a white man's republic. And white democracy depends on the extermination of natives. The western, Indian and slave frontiers are all boundaries enforced and created by violence.

Furthermore, there is a difference in American violence and the violence of other countries, Slotkin says. First and foremost, this arises out of the fact that America is a settler state and a colonial society, elements which the Europeans never incorporated. However, other countries were also founded on the premise of being a settler state, yet do not propagate celebratory rhetoric towards violence. Furthermore, in the United States, the idea of democratic individualism grants individuals a license to kill. The thing that is exceptional about American violence is the license that is granted for the private use of deadly force. This stems from certain kinds of violence associated with the growth of the Republic. Moreover, democratic individualism and glorification of social historical political violence contribute to American gun culture. The individual is granted a parallel right to protect not only life and property but also honor, social and racial status. However, there is a difference in the perception between white violence and black violence, between urban and suburban violence. Violence in cities is seen as normative and there is a dismissive attitude about it. Historically, Slotkin believes, this is because minorities which make up the urban population and among

which violence is somehow expected, are not seen as human. Black on black violence leaves white America untouched, he argues. Yet, such violence contributes to the largest percentage of violent deaths (Segment).

Most of all, America supports the mystique of weapons. The gun is seen as a symbol of productive violence in American history which has mystic and even magical properties. Furthermore, Slotkin claims that the American consumer sees guns as property and wants to be able to use his property as he wishes. On an ideological level, gun ownership has become a symbol for deregulation of everything, especially during the Reagan era. On a paranoid level, he argues, people feel it is their Second Amendment right to resist the government. He criticizes this and sees it as nonsense and as the exploitation of the language of liberty and rights. The most nonsensical argument for gun rights, Slotkin claims is the threatening government. This should somehow legitimate the idea that an individual has the right to violently oppose the authorities, which would be extremely pernicious for the society. There is a level of political rage in American citizens. There is anger out there looking for an object, and the more permissive the society is with guns, the more violent it will become. Moreover, Slotkin proposes that America produces the lone killer. The killer tries to validate himself and place himself in relation to meaningful events in the past. White men often feel their social position to be imperiled and the way they deal with it is through violent outbursts. Even though most do not start a war themselves, they condone somebody else starting it for them.

Slotkin also comments on the equalizer fallacy, or the popular notion of the Colt pistol as a kind of an equalizer. He claims that, as opposed to hunters' and soldiers' weapons, the Colt was marketed as a man killer for slave owners fearing slave rebellion. However, there is a fallacy at work here, since the possession of weapons produces privilege, not equality. The guarantee of liberty should be provided by the law, not by private use of weapons. The myth, in this case, is stronger than reality, Slotkin argues in the interview with Moyers. Moreover,

mass killings in the US and their perpetrators model their behavior on examples they consider heroic. The model of heroism is internalized from the media that purvey the myth that shapes the society. The perpetrators are playing out a script and images they have obtained through the media, he claims. The appeal of violence is exploited in the media and the popular culture, while transgression of everyone's norms is explored. And that is precisely how mythology works. The most important thing becomes to triumph within a narrative. Video games, movies, popular culture all provide an interesting rationale with their stories: no moral, political or social problem can be resolved without violence (Segment).

The number of guns in circulation is undoubtedly an element in the modern gun culture, says Slotkin in his review of Michael Bellesiles's *Arming America*. In countries like Switzerland and Israel, where army reservists maintain their own weapons, they are hardly ever used for private violence or crime. Furthermore, responsibility for gun violence cannot be entirely put on the influence of the media, Slotkin proposed. In Europe and Japan, audiences consume violent films as much as the Americans do. However, the critical element at work is the cultural ethic that sanctions private violence. What makes the difference, Slotkin argues, is not only the accessibility of guns but also the ethic, embedded in American history, which teaches the people how, when, and on whom violence can be used ("The Fall Into Guns").

Moreover, for Americans guns are not only tools or commodities, but instruments of social power. Social change in the period between 1865 and 1925 led to a series of violent struggles for domination. The industrialization endangered the status of workers and farmers, while businessmen perceived the worker discontent as a threat. Migration North of southern blacks, as well as immigration brought social hierarchy into question. In response, leaders started to promote a new approach to the administration of violence. They asked for stricter measures against social disorder, including greater use of the military against organized labor.

The gun began to be marketed as a tool of self-protection to the public, while the governments were offered the machine gun, created to enable a small professional force to outgun an armed mob (“The Fall Into Guns”).

In his conversation with De Vega, Slotkin suggests it is not the case that other countries do not have extraordinarily violent histories, where social violence ran rampant. It is, in fact, that the United States exceed all other countries when it comes to interpersonal violence. Guns have a unique role in American culture. The whole culture is very permissive about allowing the possession of firearms, and for a long time there was no national structure of law enforcement to keep social violence under control. What is more, America takes part in fetishizing weapons, which is rooted in the national mythology of the conquest of the West and the celebration of the gun as an instrument of civilization (An Interview With).

To conclude, Slotkin argues that, even though the Western frontier sums up what is at the same time the most ideologically powerful and optimistic American mythology, there is a surge of violence that lies beneath its colorful exterior (*Gunfighter Nation* 3). As he argues, it is not necessarily the amount or sort of violence that characterizes American history but the mythic significance that has been assigned to the kinds of violence experienced, as well as the forms of symbolic violence, which is imagined or invented (*Gunfighter Nation* 13). As it is argued, the stereotypical "cowboys and Indians" trope is manifested in naturalistic terms: native resistance to European settlement takes the form of a struggle for survival, which inevitably turns into “wars of extermination“. In such a conflict, one side or the other must perish, either through never-ending killings or by the humiliating experience of subjugation and torture (*Gunfighter Nation* 12).

4.4. The American Wars

For Slotkin, the most defining American war is the Civil War. In his lecture entitled "The War That Defines Us: Writing the Civil War as History and Fiction", he says that every generation since 1865 recounts this story as a way of establishing its relation to perhaps the most "defining moment in the development of America as a modern nation-state" (The War That Defines Us). Moreover, in his interview with the Civil War Trust, he argues that the Americans tend to disregard the revolutionary nature of the Civil War "because they know what did *not* happen: the abolition of slavery did not make the US a multi-racial democracy, the Union was not destroyed, constitutional government was not replaced by despotism". Nevertheless, whether the Americans choose to forget or they choose to remember the Civil War, it defines the nation, he argues (The Long Road).

In the lecture entitled "The War Bargain: Military Conflict and the Democratization of American Citizenship", Slotkin discusses how US participation in twentieth-century conflicts mobilized the ideas about American nationhood. He says that in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries most political figures characterized America as a white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant nation that achieved its progress through conquests of "savage" native populations. In years leading up to World War I, a similar concept of nationhood came into view. Even though more than a third of US residents at the time had been born abroad, the government still defined the nation in a way that left out immigrants and minorities. However, this started changing with the US involvement in World War I. Since the war required a unified, numerous army, the government had to incorporate minorities into the armed forces. The American nation then began to be defined in a more liberal way, so that the immigrants and minorities could be able to proclaim themselves American. This tactic proved successful as many minority members enlisted in the US army. Slotkin proposes that, on the one hand, this American pluralism went hand in hand with demonizing the German opponents. On the other

hand, after the war this led to a major racist backlash towards Black war veterans, Jews and Eastern Europeans. Moreover, in the 1940s, platoon movies became popular as efforts of reimagining the nation. Movie producers worked with federal agencies to create films like *Bataan* (1943) and *Sahara* (1943), which depicted the American army as a racially integrated, cohesive unit. However, Slotkin argues that such films perpetrated racial conflicts. Moreover, the Nazi or the Japanese were usually depicted as exhibiting racial hatred, which in turn justified American war efforts (The War Bargain).

In *Gunfighter Nation*, Slotkin claims that films do political work in preparing the people to embrace war. Moreover, he explains how the symbolism of a "New Frontier" mobilized the people to accept imperialism and condone American participation in overseas conflicts. The evocation of new frontier also shaped the language through which wars would be understood by those who commanded and fought them. In that sense, American troops often referred to Vietnam as "Indian country", while missions were called games of "Cowboys and Indians". Kennedy's ambassador to Vietnam, Slotkin says, justified military escalations by quoting the need of moving "Indians" away from the "fort" (*Gunfighter Nation* 3). However, the projection of the frontier myth onto overseas conflicts did not end there. This rhetoric was also applied by Lyndon Johnson who urged American troops to "bring the coonskin home" from Vietnam (*Gunfighter Nation* 496). Initially, the American role in Vietnam was that of a heroic rescuer, saving "settlers" from "Indians". However, the two were virtually indistinguishable in Vietnam, he argues (*Gunfighter Nation* 547). Moreover, events like the defeat in Vietnam call the frontier myth into question (*Gunfighter Nation* 626).

Nevertheless, the same symbolism of the frontier was used by Reagan in his campaigns. What is more, Reagan revived the "savage war" trope and the frontier myth in the Cold War against the Soviet Bloc, principally through the enormous buildup of military forces and the acquisition of the most advanced military technology. The Cold War also envisioned

the nation's resumption of an active counterinsurgency role in the Third World, as a means of resisting the advance of Communism. Since the public at the time was unwilling to support American overseas involvement for the fear of a repeated Vietnam War scenario, a sort of cure for this so-called "Vietnam syndrome" had to be found. Therefore, in order to build public support, the threat of the growing "Soviet menace" had to be perpetuated (*Gunfighter Nation* 648-649).

The newest myth of violence is the good war myth, Slotkin claims. It came out of World War II, when a multiethnic nation united against a common enemy. This is precisely what is happening today with wars that allegedly liberate Asia or Europe through the force of American arms. On the one hand, the war in Afghanistan was proclaimed a necessity, a savage war against a primitive enemy bent on destroying American values. Since they cannot be liberated, they can only be destroyed in a "righteous" war. The war in Iraq, on the other hand, was supposed to be the next World War II, Slotkin says in his interview with Moyers. It was presented as a war of liberation, while provoking public revulsion amongst liberals (Segment). The notion of a "righteous" war falls within the concept of the frontier myth where the enemy is seen beyond all redemption. Moreover, this enables the Americans to ignore the deaths of civilians in their overseas conflicts. Since they are seen as less than human, the violence against them is then justified as righteous.

5. Criticism of Slotkin's Work

The principal complaints of Slotkin's critics include the oversimplification of his arguments, the density and the extensiveness of his text, as well as unnecessary repetitions. Moreover, some even claim insufficient stepping away from the earlier paradigms, as well as misinterpretation of literary works. Some of these issues will be addressed in what follows.

Dawn Lander Gherman argues that Slotkin's fundamental argument includes love that insists upon murder as its expression. Furthermore, she claims that his implied theme is the relation between violence and sexuality, translated into love. The mystique of hunting is depicted through the metaphor of marriage between the slayer and the slain (210). Moreover, *Regeneration Through Violence* draws on allusions to the psychological constructs of Freud's id and Jung's anima. The Indian stands for the id, and as such represents something that should be exorcised. The female, on the other hand, represents the anima. In other words, the id and the anima represent the libido and superego of the white male hero. The object (or id, represented by the Indian or anima represented by the female) is a victim killed by the American hero. This type of hunter figure stands for the ego, while beasts, Indians, and women are complements to the ego. These victims are never angry, never resisting, but merely timid victims reconciled to their slayers. In other words, Gherman proposes that Slotkin works under the illusion that violence achieves what peaceful love could not: Indian and white man united (211).

Furthermore, Gherman states that the final paragraph of *Regeneration Through Violence* is vague and suggests that Slotkin sees the potential tragedy of the vision he has provided (211). The final paragraph is quoted here in its entirety:

> Under the aspect of mythology and historical distance, the acts and motives of the woodchopper, the whale and bear hunter, the Indian fighter and the

> deerslayer have an air of simplicity and purity that makes them seem finely heroic expressions of an admirable quality of the human spirit. They seem to stand on a commanding ridge, while we are still tangled in the complexities of the world and the wilderness. But their apparent independence of time and consequence is an illusion; a closely woven chain of time and consequence binds their world to ours. Set the statuesque figures and their piled trophies in motion through space and time, and a more familiar landscape emerges — the whale, buffalo, and bear hunted to the verge of extinction for pleasure in killing and "scalped" for fame and the profit in hides by men like Buffalo Bill; the buffalo meat left to rot, till acres of prairie were covered with heaps of whitening bones, and the bones then ground for fertilizer; the Indian debased, impoverished, and killed in return for his gifts; the land and its people, its "dark" people especially, economically exploited and wasted; the warfare between man and nature, between race and race, exalted as a kind of heroic ideal; the piles of wrecked and rusted cars, heaped like Tartar pyramids of death-cracked, weather-browned, rain-rotted skulls, to signify our passage through the land. (*Regeneration Through Violence* 565)

What Gherman proposes is that Slotkin acknowledges the fact that the path of the hero has resulted in the Indian being violated and impoverished. Yet he rarely modifies his own celebration of the heroic hunter ideal, which incorporates in its fantasy of violence the fantasy of domination over the female (211-212). Moreover, Slotkin's reading of captivity narratives is interpreted to suit his thesis, Gherman says. The captives are usually victims or anti-heroes, and Slotkin persists in the stereotype that women are victims in the wilderness. Most appalling for Gherman, by identifying white women only with civilization and insisting upon

their victimization by Indians, Slotkin implies that the Indian was exterminated for the sake of the white woman. In this way, he attributes racism exclusively to the white female, while at the same time exonerating the white male (212).

Levi S. Peterson argues that *Regeneration Though Violence* deals admirably with the attitude of colonial America toward the wilderness and violence, while at the same time suffering from an exceedingly restrictive view of American history and poor composition (72). As an explanation of American history, the book is immensely oversimplified. It completely ignores the abundant historical literature demonstrating that economics and political thought derived from Europe were hugely significant in the development of the American mind. Moreover, it also demonstrates an oversimplification of the relationship of Americans to wilderness and Indians. What is more, Slotkin's uncompromising explanation of works of fiction leads at times to overly sterile interpretations. For example, Thoreau is interpreted in *Walden* as imitating the experiences contained in the hunter myth. For Peterson, however, the significance of *Walden* is precisely the opposite. Rather than showing the virtue and regenerative influence of violence, *Walden* demonstrates that wilderness can be approached in a peaceful manner and for explicitly nonviolent purposes (73).

In his review of Slotkin's work, Leo Marx argues that Turner was half right in arguing that the frontier experience exerted influence on the transferred culture of the settlers. However, the product of this experience was not democracy, as proposed by Turner, but violence. In that sense, the European experience in the new world was a regressive episode. The weakness of Slotkin's argument, he claims, is in the fact that he applies the same explanation for all violent behavior in America. Marx wonders whether the American involvement in Vietnam is traceable to the frontier experience, as implied by Slotkin, and what that says about the wars of other nations (365). In comparing Slotkin with Nash Smith, Marx argues that even though they employed similar concepts of myth, Smith's analysis was

guided by the effort to compare the alleged influence of the myth to the influence of other material, such as the theory of society and the theory of consciousness (366).

Henry Nash Smith also reviews Slotkin, saying that his use of the notion of “myth” in different combinations, from "myth artifact," "myth-structure" to "myth-literature," and "consummatory myth" to "legend" and "archetype" adds to the confusion that prevents Slotkin from explaining his aims clearly and consistently (74-75). However, Smith agrees with Slotkin that "the archetypal enemy of the American hero is the red Indian, and to some degree all groups or nations which threaten [the Americans] are seen in terms derived from [American] early myths” (*Regeneration Through Violence* 558). What Slotkin in fact claims is that Americans could liberate themselves from the power of their myths by acknowledging their existence. "A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions", says Slotkin (*Regeneration Through Violence* 4-5). Along those lines, Nash Smith wonders whether myths can be used to change institutions. If it is so, how and by whom should it be done. The best course perhaps, argues Nash Smith, may be the destruction of mythology (77).

6. Conclusion

This paper begins with the discussion of Slotkin's relation to earlier paradigms in the American Studies. First of all, his ideas are compared to those of Frederick Jackson Turner. For Turner, the phenomenon of the frontier led to the American spirit of independence. The frontier experience is recounted in his 1893 address, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History". Both Turner and Slotkin agree on the definition of the frontier, proposing it is the meeting point between savagery and civilization. However, for Slotkin, the frontier is more than just that. It is also a place of powerful attraction and repulsion toward the "Other", which is a determining factor contributing to violence on the frontier. Slotkin also argues that Turner marginalizes the significance of violence in the development of the frontier.

Furthermore, Slotkin's relation to the myth/symbol school is discussed. Henry Nash Smith was one of the first scholars to consider American identity as shaped by myths and symbols. In his seminal work *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, he proposed that the westward movement is the force that pushes America forward. By relying on Turner's concepts, he offers his own reading of the American frontier. Furthermore, he adds that the frontier also represents a means of renewal, requiring heroic individuals to venture into the so-called "virgin land". Even though Slotkin agrees that the West had a formative influence on the American national character, his objection to Smith is the fact that he does not mention violence or how the land was conquered through bloody wars. For Slotkin, the conquest of the frontier has an economic rationale behind it. In other words, the westward expansion was led by the desire for exploiting natural resources and cheap labor.

Besides Nash Smith, R.W.B. Lewis and Perry Miller of the myth/symbol school are also analyzed. Lewis' *American Adam* introduces the image of a new hero emancipated from history, an authentic, innocent, self-reliant American hero. Slotkin, however, proclaims the

innocence of this figure lost through acts of violence against the land and the Indians. This hero is only seemingly independent of time and space. In reality, the consequences of his actions are seen in the exploited and wasted land, as well as its debased inhabitants.

Perry Miller's *Errand into the Wilderness* discusses the Puritan venture, supposedly guided by the divine power. They are pushed forward by their perception of themselves as people sent by God on a divine errand to establish a "shining city on a hill", in order to serve as a model community. Miller acknowledges it is desire for land that led the Puritans, rather than desire for democracy. Slotkin accepts this, adding that the land was to be taken in the name of purification of the Puritans' spirit. The very errand was, in Slotkin's view, invented to quiet their inner voice which called them back to their native land.

The critical approach to the myth/symbol school took shape in 1960s, with scholars such as Alan Trachtenberg and Leo Marx. Slotkin agrees with Trachtenberg that a culture consists of myths which exert power over the collective mind, and adds that the most central of myths is the frontier myth. Leo Marx, on the one hand, elaborates on the pastoral ideal interrupted by the industrialization. On the other hand, Slotkin believes that progress usually includes establishing human control over nature. One may nostalgically be in awe of the pastoral ideal, but it is industrial development that represents the next stage in the evolution of civilization.

The next chapter in this thesis summarizes Slotkin's trilogy on the myth of the frontier. *Regeneration Through Violence* recounts the Puritans' experience in settling into the new world and how the national mythology was shaped by the westward movement. Next, *The Fatal Environment* discusses how the frontier myth persists in the era of industrialization from 1800 to 1890, or the supposed closing of the frontier. In the final volume of the trilogy,

Gunfighter Nation, Slotkin elaborates on the impact of the frontier myth on American politics of the twentieth century, as represented in various media, from Western films to novels.

The next chapter in this thesis explains the elements of Slotkin's paradigm. These include violence and the frontier, guns and weapons, wars and the evolution of the American hero. Moreover, an overview is also given of scholarly criticism of Slotkin's work, including readings by Gherman, Peterson, Leo Marx and Henry Nash Smith.

The complex of American violence is explained through the conquest of frontiers. The element of violence is explored in captivity narratives and savage wars by focusing on its underlying causes. It is proposed that the violence was born out of the internal conflict that the Puritans felt as they entered into the new world. On the one hand, they perceived the wilderness as a source of power and virtue. On the other hand, they were immensely afraid of it. The contemporary attraction and repulsion toward nature and the Indian way of life could only be solved by annihilating the object of their desire. The exceptional thing about American violence is the license granted for private use of weapons. Democratic individualism and glorification of social violence contributed greatly to American gun culture. What is more, America supports the mystique of weapons. Gun ownership has become the symbol of deregulation. People feel it is their Second Amendment right to oppose the government, a proposition regarded as nonsense by Slotkin, who claims this attitude is extremely dangerous for the society.

The evolution of the American hero begins with the figure of the captive, whose heroic quest was aimed at religious conversion and salvation. As the settlers develop affection toward the wilderness, a new kind of hero emerges. This hunter hero both understands and fights Indians, and his role is to reconcile civilization with the wilderness. At the turn of the twentieth century, however, this type of hero is replaced by a figure transferred from the

wilderness to the urban or imperial frontier. This hero embodies the frontier myth by fighting the villains in the wilderness or in the criminal underworld. In the 1960s he is succeeded by the gunfighter hero. Such a figure may be found in a variety of settings, and is not necessarily tied to one time and place, but is usually used to fulfill a particular role.

Furthermore, this paper gives an overview of Slotkin's ideas on American wars. It is argued that all American wars have a common underlying principle, from the Civil War, to Vietnam, the Cold War, as well as wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the center of all American wars there is the projection of the frontier myth onto overseas conflicts. Moreover, the process through which Americans are able to disregard civilian casualties is rooted in the idea of the righteous war and in perceiving the enemy as less than human.

In short, Slotkin's works offer a valuable addition to American Studies, especially for exposing the violent nature of the settlement of the new continent, as well as the reasons which led to the violence on the frontier. The concept of the national myth is thoroughly elaborated as a system of belief still guiding the American mind. With particular focus on the justification of violence as means of progress, Slotkin also raises important questions about the cost of such progress. Moreover, Slotkin's analysis shows that the frontier myth persists to this day, both in relation to domestic issues and overseas military interventions. The rhetoric of the myth, however, seems to have changed slightly, with a shift to a more critical and reasonable discourse. Nevertheless, the underlying myth still holds sway in American national consciousness.

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Abstract

This graduation thesis discusses Richard Slotkin's reading of violence, with particular focus on the conditions which led to the creation of the American national myth. Slotkin's work is analyzed within the tradition of American Studies, more particularly within the critical approach towards the earlier paradigms of the myth/symbol school. Besides comparing his ideas to those presented in works by Frederick J. Turner, Henry Nash Smith, R.W.B. Lewis, Perry Miller, Alan Trachtenberg and Leo Marx, the key elements of Slotkin's paradigm are also provided by relying predominantly on his trilogy on the myth of the frontier. More specifically, the trilogy consists of *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860*, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890*, and *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-century America*. A summarized account of each volume is given, followed by some essential elements of Slotkin's paradigm. These include violence and the frontier, the evolution of the American hero and American attitudes towards guns, weapons and military interventions.

Keywords: Richard Slotkin, violence, the myth of the frontier, American imperialism, weapons, American hero, myth/symbol school, American Studies