

# **Individualism Values of Cowboy in the Film *Open Range* (2003)**

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## **Abstract**

The presence of cowboy as the representation of the hero in the West is always substantial as they represent one of the values admired by Americans, individualism. Based on Wright's theory about 'natural' individuals, individualism values represented by cowboy include rationality, autonomy, and self-interest. The existence of cowboy in Western is inseparable from elements familiarly portrayed, namely death, women and the language of men, landscape, horses, and cattle. The film *Open Range* (2003) illustrates two characters of cowboy named Boss and Charley, as they reflect the values in the way they think and behave in their life. Elements of Westerns in the film are illustrated as a means of supporting elements in the representation of individualism values of the cowboys.

**Keywords:** cowboy, individualism, the West, Western

## **1. Introduction**

The popularity of Western is still with us today as it portrays the image of the West into dramatized version of the life American pioneers in the nineteenth century. Western has made its way to be such appealing genre in America from era to era with its typical story portraying the life of the West. The Western image has always performed cowboy illustrating a hero character defeating villains, helping society, and his close relation to nature. No wonder, the portraying of cowboy hero has impacted society until today for his inspiring deeds.

In the history record, at first, many chances for the starters to run business in the west side of America had led to the great migration or what so-called as moving west. The opportunities offered by the land were mostly in the field of farming, stock-raising, and mining. Hectares of the land were transferred to private hands by the Homestead Act of 1862. Cowboys who were mostly portrayed as cattlemen ran business by frequently ranging in the open range. In immediate time, this business had widely flourished throughout the West (Olson: 109).

Jeremy Agnew on his book *The Creation of the Cowboy Hero* states it is firstly noticed that cowboy has always been the main character in the image of the West. This popular character has always been placed as the popular identity of the West until today (2015: 1). Due to cowboy's presence in Western genre films has almost been always the central actor, it can be concluded that cowboy plays an important role in portraying the image of the West. Jane Tompkins classifies elements of Westerns into several things, namely death, women and the language of men, landscape, horses, and cattle. These elements of Westerns become a comparison in order to support the image of cowboy as a character representing individualism in this thesis.

According to Wright, the existence of cowboy as an individual has some distinct values which have strongly bonded in his appearance and actions related to individualism values. Based on the assumption that individual is naturally rational, there are three features which can be said as distinct and typical ones of cowboy including rationality, autonomy, and self-interest. Rationality is related to equality as the nature of rational individual. Cowboy's autonomy explains about freedom depicted by a cowboy as an individual. Meanwhile, self-interest is about owning private property (2001: 34).

These three features are the core of the analysis of individualism values emerged from the film *Open Range* (2003) directed by Kevin Costner. *Open Range* (2003) is chosen due to the film portraying the image of typical Western society of American pioneers. It is not just simply the image of the West, since the image of cowboy has become the major cultural icon for the West, hence, the cowboy characters in the film illustrate the individualism values by means of the way they think and take actions.

### **1. Aims of The Study**

The aims of the study comprise two main aspects, they are:

1. Describing intrinsic aspects in the film *Open Range* (2003) including narrative elements and cinematic elements.
2. Analyzing individualism values of cowboy in the film *Open Range* (2003).

### **3. Method of Research**

In collecting data, the author applies library method in which the data refer to books, articles, lecture materials, and the internet. This method is applied to give

information related to the study, therefore, some additional information can be addressed analytically to the object of the study. The author applies objective approach in describing the intrinsic aspects including narrative elements and cinematic elements. Sociology of literature approach is applied in analyzing the extrinsic aspects: individualism values of cowboy, by adapting to Will Wright's theory in *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy and Social Theory*. In addition, Jane Tompkins' theory about Elements of Westerns in *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* is put together as supporting things to develop individualism values of cowboy.

#### **4. Individualism Values of Cowboy**

Wright argues cowboy is not represented by his job which is often associated with herding cattle. Hence, these represented values that identify him as a cowboy. Cowboy can also include sheriff, rancher, or even farmer. His individualism values including rationality, autonomy, and self-interest are obtained from the basic assumption of 'natural' individual. 'Natural' individual emerges from values in the state of nature context which refers to values owned by individual to be free and equal aside from social order. Thus, these individualism values are inherent in cowboy, which define an individual as a cowboy (2001: 6).

##### **4.1 Cowboy Rationality**

Rationality refers to three main things related to individualism values, namely equality, superiority, and wilderness skills. Cowboy sees the wilderness as the nature of equality. Cowboy sees others as equal as himself, thus he often fights just to save others' equality. The way he sees and brings equality has led him to be honored by others (2001: 39). Being honored makes him become superior to others in the context of his merit. Wright states superiority comes from his merit in helping others and leads him to get his authority (2001: 38). Cowboy's point of view about equality is inseparable from his perspective about the way he sees nature. To help maintaining justice, it is his authenticity to master the wilderness. Violence skills matter since cowboy needs to survive in the wilderness which has no law and rule (2001: 40).

## **4.2 Cowboy Autonomy**

In the context of individualism values, cowboy autonomy delivers freedom, honor, and strength. Honor in this context is related to merit, he occasionally uses violence in order to protect society from villains. Honor in another word is a form of appreciation of cowboy's merit, however it directly impacts to his role in society (2001: 45). Cowboy is always identified as a free individual, he naturally represents the image of independent and self-reliant character. Freedom is derived from the wilderness where everyone can express themselves without any intervention (2001: 44). Meanwhile, cowboy's identity as a strong man is obtained from his close relation to nature whilst the wilderness is mentioned as a place promises freedom. The wilderness has naturally taught him to be strong as he has to deal with it. Strength is necessary to maintain justice which often becomes an issue in society (2001: 45).

## **4.3 Cowboy Self-Interest**

Owning private property is the essential of cowboy self-interest. As a rational and autonomous individual, cowboy aims to own private property in order to get involved in society. However, private property in this context mainly refers to land. The assumption begins with the open frontier as free land which nobody owns it. Even so, he only seeks for opportunity to own private property through a good way. Open frontier is wide where everyone can compete to claim some land, but when the land diminishes, a competition begins. However, people always need owning private property to improve and sustain (2001: 53).

## **5. Analysis**

### **5.1 Cowboy Rationality**

#### **5.1.1 Equality**

As previously mentioned, cowboy's rationality is related to three things, namely equality, superiority, and wilderness skills. The way Boss and Charley treat others represents equality. Boss is known as the leader in the group as he hires Charley, Mose, and Button. Boss considers them as family which takes care of each other and always treats his fellowmen in a good way, so does Charley.

Meanwhile, realizing that Baxter has forbidden them to free graze in Forth Harmon Country, eventually they plan to fight against him in order to help people and

themselves stand for justice. They stand for justice on the basis of pursuing equality, as equality means seeing others as equal as themselves. This thing has led to the gunfight and left Baxter dead. In fact, Boss never aims to kill others if in case nobody puts him in danger. As shown at the moment when Charley aims to kill one of Baxter's subordinates, but Boss and Percy block his way instead because they know this man is just an ordinary man who is paid as a gunhand.

BOSS : I ain't gonna let you do it, Charley. You do this, you ain't no different than Poole or Baxter or that gunhand of his that murdered Mose.

CHARLEY: Him killing Mose is how this started.

BOSS : We come for justice, not vengeance. Them is two different things. (*Open Range*, 01:49:28 - 01:49:41).

It illustrates of how age influences the way one thinking and behaving, as age is related to number of experience. Shown by Boss who is the oldest, he is the most admired cowboy by his fellowmen for his skills and good deeds. Meanwhile, Charley who is the second cowboy in the group, in some cases, he cannot control his emotion as hatreds still within him leaving him not as wise as Boss. It is his past influenced him the most.

### **5.1.2 Superiority**

Superiority is mainly shown by Boss as he runs the business. Superiority in the group is illustrated by many events where Boss giving orders to his fellowmen. One of them can be seen while Boss is giving orders to Button "Get yourself dressed, Button. Help Mose get things cleaned up around here then you walk out and look for them horses" (*Open Range*, 00:06:22 – 00: 06: 29). Button does as he orders, so do the others. As Charley also admits his superiority at the moment while Button has been badly injured, by saying "You know I never gone against you, Boss. Always let you do most of the talking" (*Open Range*, 00:40:23 – 00:40:28).

At the outside of the saloon, Charley also has another statement showing Boss's superiority, he says "Well, I work for you, Boss. I'll pay it however you want" (*Open Range*, 01:17:15 - 01:17:18). Soon later, Percy the livery stable owner comes their way to let them know that Baxter's subordinates are around who aim to chase them. Boss gives him some pennies to buy drink in order to appreciate Percy's help. This little thing

is what makes Boss superior in other's eyes, because of his merit by appreciating and helping others.

### **5.1.3 Wilderness Skills**

One thing certain about these two cowboys is their skills in mastery the wilderness likewise violence skills. They live nomadically as a group of free grazer on the open range, they have to survive and sustain as the wilderness can be unpredictable. As said by Boss while button ask him about moving on to another place "We always do, don't we, once we've grazed off the place?" (*Open Range*, 00:29:32 – 00:29:34). Once they settle, they build their tent to shelter.

Herding cattle in the beginning scene illustrates one of wilderness skills as a cowboy, besides Boss' ability in finding their lost horses and Charley in breaking a wild horse. Meanwhile, violence skills such as gun shooting and fighting are self-taught as they have to deal with the wilderness. However, Boss and Charley's ability in violence skills cannot be argued. Charley seems to master violence skill better than Boss, as his past experience which ever joined army. As illustrated by their triumph in defeating Baxter and his subordinates in the final gunfight, hence, Charley has set the strategy and Boss basically knows what he has to do. These wilderness skills and violence skills they have are always related to their merit in mastery nature.

## **5.2 Cowboy Autonomy**

### **5.2.1 Freedom**

The expression of freedom emerges from his existence as a cowboy who spends most of his time in nature, as nature delivers the value of freedom. Nature separates individual from society which has been restricted by social orders. It is illustrated by Boss and his fellowmen who lives nomadically in the country. They separate themselves from the society as they work as cattlemen.

Unfortunately, their freedom has to be deprived by Baxter who claims most of land in the country belonging to him. They feel the land as their home is stolen, as they do not claim land but live by ranging in the country. However, there are no such rules about disallowance of free grazing. Thus, they are against Baxter who is afraid of the lack of feed for his cattle as well. Somehow, Boss and his fellowmen admire the freedom on the open range. As said implicitly by Boss about the past day when he

began to live on the open range as his wife and child were dead “They caught the typhus and died. And after that, home didn’t seem a place to spend time. Believe I’ve changed my mind on that now that I’m getting on in years” (*Open Range*, 01:04:34 – 01:04:44).

### 5.2.2 Strength

As he derives from freedom value, he depicts equality for everyone. To help maintaining justice for everyone, the cowboy hero remains to be strong. That is what is shown by Boss and Charley in order to save the citizens from the corrupted marshal and the landlord who monopolizes the country. Boss and Charley are two strong cowboys with their mastery to both wilderness skills and violence skills. Their strength is shown while Boss speaks to Marshal Poole in front of many people in the café as they aim to tell people what Baxter has done. Nevertheless, their strength has led them to defeat Baxter and his subordinates as well as the marshal. Their triumph in the final gunfight has left Baxter and Marshal Poole dead.

### 5.2.3 Honor

Boss and Charley’s bravery and strength have led them to be honored by the society. The society appreciates justice they have maintained, thus the society grants them authority for his merit. Eventually, many people voluntarily help them fight against Baxter in the gunfight. Meanwhile, Boss’ honor is also illustrated by his closer ones. A small thing like standing up as boss entering the room at Doc’s house shows how Boss is respected by Charley. Charley and Mose, right after boss manages to find the lost horses admit it as well.

MOSE : (*smiling*) Old Boss sure can cowboy, can’t he?  
CHARLEY: (*smiling*) Yeah. Broke the mold after him.  
(*Open Range*, 00:09:33 - 00:09:39).

Moreover, Charley also directly shows his admiration to Boss before they start the gunfight.

CHARLEY: I ain’t doubting your grit, Boss. You got more than any man I ever known. It’s just that... I don’t mean to be hard about this. It’s just the other night, them fellows back in them trees we let go.  
BOSS : It was my call, Charley. I can see now it was probably a mistake.  
CHARLEY: It’s not what I meant. I mean, maybe it was. But the fact is it’s what I always respected about you. What I always appreciated. How you

treated other people and how you treated me. How you never look for no trouble. That kept me from trouble.

(*Open Range*, 01:35:45 – 01:36:18).

However, his fellowmen admire him and give him authority for his merit as he is skillful and he respects them as the leader in the group. Boss also respects others in the way he values authority, as he says to Button who cheats at playing card “A man’s trust is a valuable thing, Button. You don’t want to lose it for a handful of cards” (*Open Range*, 00:05:14 – 00:05:19). His equality value he depicts as an autonomous individual has led him to help the society. However, honor of his merit is only a gift as an appreciation given by others.

### **5.3 Cowboy Self-Interest**

Cowboy as a rational individual pursues his interest in owning private property. In this film, Baxter as the landlord is someone who aims to monopolize the country. He acts as all the land belongs to him, thus he takes control the country. However, individual aims to claim property, but if it means to steal the rights of others, it becomes a real problem.

Boss and Charley feel threatened of Baxter’s will since the country does not belong to him and no rules about disallowance of free grazing. Thus, they decide to fight against him instead to stand for justice. Somehow, there is a small thing shown by these cowboys about the right to own private property. At the moment when they sneak out of the camp of Baxter’s subordinates who aim to stampede their cattle, they tie up and break their guns, instead of stealing them. This indicates how these two cowboys see others as equal as themselves, thus, others’ property is not their right.

Boss and his fellowmen do not own land but the wagon, cattle, and horses. They only seek for the open range where they can herd the cattle. Realizing their wagon has been destructed by Baxter’s subordinates who warn them to leave the country, they do what it takes to protect their property as well. Meanwhile, in the café, Marshal Poole confronts them in front of the people claiming that Boss and Charley are against law. Boss explains to people what is actually happening, as he continues.

CHARLEY: We got no quarrel with none of you folks. Baxter’s man bushwhacked our friend and shot him dead. Shot a 16-year-old boy, too. And clubbed him so hard, he might not live. Tried to take out cattle. Your marshal here ain’t gonna do nothing about it. You don’t



like free grazers in this town. We don't much like being here. But a man's got a right to protect his property and his life. And we ain't letting no rancher or his lawman take either. We got no intention of harming bystanders.

POOLE : Anyone who helps or comforts these goddamn lawbreaking free grazers is gonna have to deal with me.  
(*Open Range*, 00:59:13 – 00:59:37).

## 6. Conclusion

Cowboy is popularly known for his role as a hero in American folklore until today. He derives from nature which has built him into a strong individual. Cowboy's life is inseparable from Western as it is the image of the West implemented in literary works and films. His presence in Western has always inspired many Americans due to individualism values he depicts. Individualism values of cowboy pervade rationality, autonomy, and self-interest. These three values are correlated to each other which consider one as a cowboy. A rational cowboy sees others as equal as himself. An autonomous cowboy obtains freedom to pursue his self-interest. Western has familiar elements which surround cowboy's life such as death, women and the language of men, landscape, horses, and cattle.

Individualism values of cowboy are represented through cowboy's life in the film *Open Range* (2003). The main characters illustrate how they spend days depicting the values and they are surrounded with the familiarity of Western. Living on the open range, sustaining, owning cattle, and riding horses are the familiarity of Western this film try to figure. Interacting with society depicts how these cowboys basically take part in the society as pursuing their self-interest. The conflicts occur as the country monopolized by the villainous landlord reflects the typical West's life as everyone competing for private property. As a consequence, these rational and autonomous cowboys eventually get involved in the gunfight in order to stand for justice.

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