



## FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION *WESTERN* The Examples of *Godless* (Netflix, 2017) and *The English* (BBC, 2022)

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### KEYWORDS

*Television fiction*  
*Western*  
*Television*  
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### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents a case study of two significant television fictions on the representation of women in the contemporary television western. The two television series under consideration are Godless (Netflix, 2017) and The English (BBC, 2022), both of which are available to view on streaming platforms. In order to conduct this research, a qualitative methodology is employed, which applies an analysis of gender studies in order to analyse the narrative, characters and verbal stereotypes, and identify the processes of signification associated with the female model. The findings indicate a rise and modernisation of the television western. The increased presence and importance of women in these narratives gives rise to new topics, including motherhood, sisterhood and non-normative relationship models. The new female protagonists serve to counterbalance the patriarchal structure and establish narratives that are more modern, diverse and inclusive.*

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## 1. Introduction

The western is regarded as one of the classic genres of cinema, with a universally accepted origin in the American silent short film *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903). As with all genres, the western has universal roots as a popular narrative form (Kaminski, 1974). However, it is identified more by its iconography than by its style, art form or subject matter (Sánchez Noriega, 2002, pp. 145-146), and is in constant transformation (Altman, 2000, p. 64). Nevertheless, the western is a narrative convention that is articulated along several axes.

The genre is typically characterised by the utilisation of scenarios encompassing action, suspense or melodrama. However, the defining aspect that endows it with its distinctive iconography stems from the incorporation of exotic locales (Santamarina-Macho, 2017). In particular, locations imbue narratives with meaning and context, assuming a leading role in the construction of the narrative. The territories of Southern California, Utah, the vast landscapes of Arizona and Wyoming, and the states of New Mexico, Texas, and Montana are imbued with a wealth of ideological meaning and serve as recognisable locations, symbols of the conquest and construction of the American nation (López de la Osa, 2018).

Another of the key elements in Western narratives is the characterisation of individuals. The narrative landscape is populated by a number of recurrent characters, including cowboys, ranchers, sheriffs, outlaws, renegades and Native American Indians. Indeed, one of the most pervasive leitmotifs of Westerns is the theme of land colonization, wherein white men engage in conflict with indigenous populations for dominion over the territory.

Additionally, the Western is characterised by the presence of specific themes that allude to a historical and mythical conception of human nature. It has been proposed that the western genre represents the promised land in modernity (Valhondo, 2021), or the frontier and exploration, given its recreation of the expansion of the frontier towards the West as a New Eden (Alés, 2017, p. 53). The Western genre traditionally engages in a discourse that challenges binary oppositions, such as the opposition between nature and the person, social order and anarchy, the individual and the community, reality and myth. However, the conflict between good and evil, Christian tradition and the founding of a nation occupies a central position within this discourse (Deltell, 2009, p. 127). This configuration of the Western fulfils a role in the formation of American national identity, offering a realistic and violent vision of the nation's creation. Despite the involvement of brutal acts in achieving this, the creation of the nation is expressed as a historical episode, a great national deed (Hawagood, 1976). The western has acquired in the United States "the same function as a founding legend of the nation that medieval epics had in Europe" (Sánchez Noriega, 2002, p. 146).

Since its inception, the genre has undergone a number of significant transformations. The genre flourished in the 1940s, a period characterised by the dominance of classic Hollywood cinema. The work of notable directors such as John Ford, Howard Hawks and Anthony Mann was instrumental in defining the aesthetic and plot elements of the genre. Subsequently, towards the 1970s, the genre began to lose interest, both in terms of the public and in terms of its artistic dimension (Tatum, 2013). This contributed to the disintegration of the western into sub-genres such as the spaghetti western, which was relocated to Italy – although many of these films were shot in Almería, Spain – and whose greatest exponents were the director Sergio Leone and the actor Clint Eastwood, who made films – such as *Dollars Trilogy* – with violent storylines featuring characters far removed from the romantic halo of the classic western. Another parallel sub-genre is the twilight sub-genre, which revisits the characteristics of the classic from the point of view of decadence and nostalgia, with explicit violence and characters who do not fully comprehend the values of the society in which they live, as exemplified by *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962). Until the 1980s, the Western was a residual product. In the subsequent decade, however, the Western reappeared under the label of the neo-Western, which revived the genre with new directors who introduced avant-garde elements into their films. Female protagonists emerged, alongside revised character archetypes such as the cowboy, the Indian, women, and themes such as environmentalism, racism, and even the founding myth. This shift can be attributed to varying approaches, such as those exemplified by Clint Eastwood and Kevin Costner, who adopt a more traditional methodology; Quentin Tarantino, who employs a more classical approach; and Quentin Tarantino, who utilises a more classical approach. Additionally, there are those who adopt a more postmodern approach, such as Quentin Tarantino, or female directors such as Chloé Zhao or Jane Campion, who introduce new perspectives and visions.

### 1.1. The Western on Television

The western genre played a pivotal role in the formative years of television. Roy Huggins, a key producer during the inaugural period of television fiction, created *Cheyenne* (ABC, 1955-63), an episodic narrative in which the protagonist traverses the western United States, experiencing a series of adventures and administering justice. The series was created concurrently with *Gunsmoke* (CBS, 1955-1975), which was the most popular prime time television series from 1957 to 1961, running for twenty seasons and resulting in five films in the 1990s. In this period, television westerns were created with the intention of appealing to indigenous audiences. They sought to reimagine the past and offer a vision of liberation through the portrayal of nomadic protagonists navigating the constraints of the Cold War era (Cascajosa, 2005). The popularity of these narratives led to a significant increase in viewership, prompting networks to produce a considerable number of similar fictions within the genre. The period between the late 1950s and early 1960s saw the scheduling of more than thirty westerns on American television (Cascajosa, 2007), which has led to the designation of this era as "the era of the western". Subsequently, the genre experienced a gradual decline in popularity. However, it continued to demonstrate its potential with *Have Gun, Will Travel* (CBS, 1957-63), *The Rifleman* (ABC, 1958-1963), *The Virginian* (NBC, 1962-1971), *The Big Valley* (ABC, 1965-1968), and *The High Chaparral* (NBC, 1967-1971). It is worthy of note that *Bonanza* (NBC, 1959-1973), created by David Dortort, achieved considerable popularity in the United States, Latin America and Europe. It remains one of the ten most-watched programmes throughout all of its seasons, having topped the American charts between 1964 and 1967. Additionally, it is the inaugural series to be filmed in colour. The programme represents an atypical, humanistic interpretation of the western genre. It chronicles the experiences of the Cartwright family, a patriarchal unit comprised by three brothers who assume responsibility for their father's care, residing on a vast and unchanging ranch in Nevada.

Subsequently, both the television western and the film western experienced a steep and long-lasting decline in popularity. This trend was reversed with the premiere of *Lonesome Dove* (CBS, 1989), which was created by William D. Wittliff based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of the same name by Larry McMurtry. The series achieved record ratings and was awarded seven Emmy awards. The narrative revolves around a cohort of retired Rangers (portrayed by Robert Duvall, Tommy Lee Jones, and Danny Glover) who embark on a challenging expedition with their livestock from Texas to Montana, confronting numerous obstacles along the way.

However, the definitive resurrection of the television western occurred with *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-06), created, produced and written by David Milch, which was met with unanimous critical acclaim. The series depicts the founding period of Deadwood and elucidates the process by which civilisation emerges from chaos. The plot is historical, based on well-known characters and accurately depicts the setting.

Subsequently, two other programmes were broadcast: *Hatfields & McCoys* (History, 2012) and *Longmire* (Netflix, 2012-16). The former is a historical re-enactment written by Ted Mann that achieved outstanding audience acceptance. It was the highest-rated show in US cable television history, excluding sporting events, to that date (Stanley, 2012). It exposes the rivalry between the patriarchs of two Confederate families (Kevin Costner and Bill Paxton) in the aftermath of the American Civil War (1861-65). The second is an action series that adapts the novels of Sheriff Walt Longmire, written by Craig Johnson, and combines the western with the detective genre, which originated in the United States and remains a popular one.

Another example of a hybrid production is *Westworld* (HBO, 2016), created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, which is based on the film of the same name written and directed by Michael Crichton (1976). This fiction presents a novel approach to the genre by combining elements of the Western with those of science fiction, offering insights into the potential consequences of technological advancement and the coexistence between humans and machines. The setting is an amusement park inspired by the Old West, where players engage in experiences and fantasies without real-world consequences, as the hosts are reset at the conclusion of each gaming session.

It can be reasonably asserted that the last few years have witnessed a surge in the popularity of Western genre productions. Notable examples include the family melodrama *Yellowstone* (NBC, 2020) and its prequels: *1883* (NBC, 2021-22) and *1923* (NBC, 2022); futuristic dystopias, such as *Wynona Earp* (Syfy, 2016-21) or *Raise Hell* (2011-16); classic westerns, such as *Godless* (Netflix, 2017); or neo-

westerns such as *Justified* (FX, 2010-15), *Outer Ranger* (Amazon Prime, 2022) or *The English* (BBC, 2022).

As can be observed, until the 21st century the majority of outstanding works were written, directed and, in most cases, starred men. Furthermore, these works frequently explored conventional gender themes that were aligned with traditional masculine norms. However, this trend has undergone a transformation in the digital era. Consequently, a resurgence of the television western can be observed, encompassing novel plotlines and an increasing representation of women in creative, casting, and thematic aspects.

## **1.2. Background to the Study of Female Representation and the Western**

The Western is a product of a specific sociocultural paradigm, one that is closely intertwined with the American way of life and its iconic archetypes. From the perspective of gender representation, it has traditionally been situated within a masculine and patriarchal framework. The protagonists are male, and they perform a variety of adventures, exploits and feats, frequently linked to violence, typically as executors, while women, with a few exceptions, typically appear in secondary roles or are presented as ornamental, accessory or symbolic elements (Clemente, 2007). Additionally, women are frequently victims of violence perpetrated by men. Furthermore, in numerous instances within these cinematic works, "women and children [...] legitimize the violence that men practice to protect them" (Cawelti, 1999, p. 41).

The analysis of female gender representation in television fiction has made significant advances in recent times, thanks to the contribution of relevant works, such as those of the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (2014; 2016; 2018). These studies have demonstrated that, in addition to the underrepresentation of women (Smith et al., 2010), there is a prevalent image of women that is characterised by stereotyping (Collins, 2011), sexualisation (Mager and Helgeson, 2011) and the performance of roles such as housewives, wives, mothers or sex objects (Kahlenberg and Hein, 2010). Furthermore, they are victims of male violence (De-Caso-Bausela, et al., 2020; Fernández-Villanueva et al., 2009). Additionally, they are expected to satisfy men, which has resulted in physical attractiveness becoming a predominant feature in comparison to male characters (Lacalle and Castro, 2017). Recent research indicates a shift in the professional and personal spheres of women, with the emergence of new roles such as working, independent, divorced and single (Marcos-Ramos and González-de-Garay, 2021). However, this shift has not yet been reflected in the representation of women in series broadcast on digital platforms, where there continues to be an over-representation of cisgender characters and heterosexual orientations, along with the maintenance of less qualified professional occupations and hypersexualisation (Marcos-Ramos and González-de-Garay, 2021). In general terms, several studies demonstrate the paucity of diversity in television fiction (Martín García et al., 2023; ODA, 2023; among others).

There is a scarcity of academic research on the Western in television, although there has been a recent proliferation of studies analysing this genre, particularly in the context of audiovisual media, which have paid attention to the rewritings that are carried out (Blanco-Herrero et al., 2020; González, 2024; Lorenzo-Otero, 2023). *Feminism and the Western in Film and Television* (Wildermuth, 2018) is particularly noteworthy in this oasis. The author presents evidence that feminist themes are pervasive in Hollywood Westerns throughout the 20th century, from *Cimarron* (Wesley Ruggles, 1931) to *The Quick and the Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1995). Furthermore, it can be seen that films adhering to this genre reflect social changes that progressively empower women in the public sphere, from the end of the first wave to the decades following the second wave of American feminism. The study concludes that there is a tendency to represent women as more powerful in both the private and public spheres, despite the tendency to view the former as feminine and the latter as exclusively masculine. Even values traditionally associated with femininity, such as love, compassion, domestic peace and security, are now played out in the public space (Wildermuth, 2018, p. 4).

In terms of titles, the most extensively researched is *Deadwood*. In the majority of his works, David Milch presents a polemical and radical text endowed with multiple dramatic readings, which sets out to interpret reality from a contemporary perspective. The series presents an original historical account that uses the enquiry of the past as its inspiration and starting point. It strives to be more faithful to the spirit than to the literalness of the facts. (Cascajosa, 2007). Furthermore, the series focuses on the relationships and constructions of identity at the various levels and roles of the frontier society. This

society is described on the basis of conflict, inequality and exploitation, and it appears that the coincidence of personal interests is the backbone of the community. Additionally, research has been conducted into how identity and otherness are represented in *Deadwood*. One study, for example, examines the identities of the "others" depicted in the work. These include the invisible Indian, the mysterious Chinese person, the lonely black man, the Jewish friend, and the whore, wife, or local woman (Fernández de Mata, 2017). Another study on the identity of these characters posits that the series' significant contribution to the filmic-televisual historical model is its integration of national legends and local characters (Garin, 2013). For others, *Deadwood* reflects post-9/11 angst by simultaneously exploiting and subverting the narrative and cathartic closure characteristic of the traditional western (Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, 2009). Furthermore, it alludes to identities, male and female, that deviate from the traditional cliché in this work.

The television series *Westworld* has also been the subject of academic scrutiny. The social consequences of inhabiting hybrid spaces were explored, and the moral implications of these environments and their links to reality were analysed (Díaz, 2023). The prevailing view is that the series reflects contemporary life and explores the social implications of technological advancement, video games, and virtual platforms on men and women. Additionally, *Westworld* has been compared to *Game of Thrones* in order to examine the production factors and narrative decisions that contribute to the success of HBO productions (Huertas, 2018). In this comparison, the representation of women in both titles is considered to be a positive aspect. In one, power struggles are reproduced from a fantastic medieval setting where women are given strength, and in the other, a futuristic western where a rebellion of machines led by a woman takes place (Huertas, 2018, p. 116). In terms of gender representation, it has been concluded that *Westworld* employs musical elements to reinforce the nuanced portrayal of female characters and to advance their self-determination and power (Jones, 2011, p. 133).

Another pertinent background study is that of Cawelti (1999), which analyses the western as a popular and influential genre since its inception. Cawelti (1999, p. 31) indicates that women develop two types of roles: the teacher and the prostitute. Furthermore, the genre rejects the "interchangeability of gender roles" on the grounds that "women must remain feminine" (p. 153). Additionally, the author asserts that the Western genre has historically exhibited a predominantly sexist orientation (p. 123). Furthermore, he asserts that "feminism and the Western genre seem to be contradictory terms" (Cawelti, 1999, p. 353).

Clemente (2007) examines the female stereotypes of the Far West. The proposal details the typology of women who constitute the Western film. For example, the Western heroine is predominantly Anglo-Saxon, white, Protestant, and represents ideals of freedom, independence, and equality, and seeks prosperity and stability for her family, which in turn leads to the improvement of her environment (Clemente, 2007, p. 13). It is also concluded that in order to be worthy of marrying the hero, the women depicted must possess a set of qualities and virtues that qualify them as "mothers of the nation".

The reviewed antecedents exhibit variations with respect to the themes and representation of women in paradigmatic Western television titles. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of research that considers a further object of study, namely Western television series representative of the phase of television fiction that characterises the new audiovisual ecosystem, shaped by streaming platforms.

### **1.3. Objectives**

The main objective is to examine the portrayal of women in contemporary television westerns through a case study of two distinct works with female protagonists. The selected works are *Godless* (Netflix, 2017) and *The English* (BBC, 2022).

In order to achieve the aforementioned main objective, the following complementary objectives have been established:

1. To analyse the story of each of the selected television fiction programmes in order to identify the narrative and the audiovisual language used in relation to the background of the western genre.
2. To examine the female characters, both main and secondary, in the two productions, and to establish their relationship with male characters in terms of power and violence.

3. To compare the construction of the television genre proposed in both series with the canons of the western, in terms of stereotypes, representations and narrative composition.

## 2. Methodology

The study is based on a sample of works consisting of two television fiction programmes. The works under consideration are *Godless* (Netflix, 2017) and *The English* (BBC, 2022). Both are contemporary productions of different nationalities, namely the United States and the United Kingdom, created for television broadcast, and comprising a single season. Both works are set in the same spatial context, namely the United States, and temporal context, namely the end of the 19th century. Furthermore, both feature female protagonists and supporting characters. Television fiction is the focus of this analysis because, as Galán (2007) notes, in addition to providing entertainment, series present models of identification that have an impact on society. This is because they are viewed by a significant proportion of the population and show reality from a recreational perspective.

It is important to acknowledge that the Western has served as a significant point of reference for the representation of the female gender over the past century. Additionally, research on the Western is extensive when its object of study is film, but limited when the focus is on television fiction, and even more scarce when the representation of women in this television genre is the primary concern. This work aims to mitigate this circumstance and facilitate new avenues for research into gender stereotypes.

In order to develop the research, a qualitative methodology is employed which utilises an analytical tool to study the representation of the principal and secondary female characters. This is conducted in accordance with the following phases: decomposition, recomposition and interpretation.

The study will be conducted in two stages: 1. The analysis will comprise an examination of the narrative, encompassing themes, characters, space and time. 2. The characters will be analysed in terms of their physical, psychological and sociological attributes, as well as the verbal stereotypes associated with gender. This will include an investigation of who speaks, what they say, why and with what attitude, with a view to identifying the processes of signification of the characters represented in the two productions related to the female model (Galán, 2007, pp. 230-231). This methodological framework builds upon existing research on stereotypes (Galán, 2007) and draws upon the theory of gender studies for research in audiovisual culture (Zurian and Herrero, 2014). The aim is to evaluate the construction of female characters and narrative roles in television fiction formats.

Finally, a comparative study is employed to analyse the aforementioned results against the traces of the preceding television fiction's logic. This is done to ascertain whether these new fictions are influencing the canons and standards of the classic western in terms of stereotypes, themes, plots, as well as the characters that are represented. This is done in order to ascertain whether the role of women in Westerns has been affected by social changes, the modernisation of the genre and new productions.

As previously stated, the subject of this study consists of two distinct productions. The initial production is *Godless*, which was authored and produced by Scott Frank for the Netflix streaming platform. It comprises seven episodes and has a total runtime of 432 minutes. The setting is 1884 New Mexico, and the narrative concerns the inhabitants of La Belle, a town whose male population has been decimated by a mining accident. As a result, the town is populated exclusively by women. The second production is entitled *The English*. It was co-produced by the BBC, All3Media and Amazon Studios. The script was written and the direction was undertaken by Hugo Blick. The series comprises six episodes, with a total running time of 301 minutes. The series follows the experiences of Cornelia Locke, an Englishwoman who arrives in the United States in 1890 with the intention of killing the man responsible for the death of her son. She is assisted in her pursuit by Eli Whipp, an indigenous man who has been discharged from the US Army.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. *Godless*

*Godless* represents a contemporary reinterpretation of the classic Western genre. The film maintains the traditional spatial logic of the Western genre while proposing a subversive reinterpretation of its established conventions. The visual language developed is characteristic of the Western genre, featuring general, open and distinctive shots, an arid, desolate and savage landscape occasionally used as an

objective correlate, allusions to and references of characters from the Civil War and the Indian Wars, violence as a core element of the narrative, the use of wandering characters, and so forth. Furthermore, a meticulous staging is employed, encompassing the conventional elements and iconography of the Western genre. This includes the customary depiction of actions such as pursuits, violence, massacres, and shootings; characters, including outlaws, gunmen, sheriffs, and horses; and objects such as weapons, ranches, towns, and costumes.

Concurrently, the production diverges from the classic canon insofar as it affords a robust female presence, both in terms of screen time and narrative value, to the story. To such an extent that, in the television series *Godless*, the traditional male protagonist is balanced with the female. This is demonstrated by the contextualisation of the plot, which is set in the village of La Belle, where women are most of the population. This is due to the fact that almost a hundred men have died as a result of an accident in the mine that they mine. The male population is reduced to a mere handful, rendering the female population the *de facto* rulers of the village. The group is comprised of a set of characters who undergo a process of evolution through actions and dialogue that are revealed in a profound and transversal manner, which is an unusual occurrence within the genre, given that parliaments are typically scarce and superficial. The characters are complex, coherent, and complementary, collectively constituting a multifaceted and nuanced representation of women.

In terms of story and screen time, Alice Fletcher represents the first female protagonist. She resides in solitude on a ranch situated on the periphery of the town with her mixed-race son, Truckee, and her Indian mother-in-law, Yyovi. She is subjected to ostracism by the community, which attributes the town's misfortune – the mine accident – to her marriage to a Peyute Indian. She is physically attractive, proud, has initiative and is adept at defending herself. She is subjected to judgment without having knowledge of her dramatic history, which includes the loss of both her husbands, the experience of being attacked and raped by one Indian tribe, and the receipt of assistance from another.

The second most significant character is Maggie, who undergoes a transformation following the death of her husband. From an aesthetic perspective, Maggie is depicted in a masculinised form. She is seen wearing men's clothes, shooting guns with precision and displaying her love for another woman openly. Callie Dunne is the protagonist's romantic partner and the most affluent and highly educated individual in the community. She had previously earned her livelihood as a prostitute until the fatal accident at the mine resulted in a loss of clients. This transformation had a profound impact on her life. Subsequent to this event, she assumed the role of the town's educator and financial power.

It is also noteworthy to mention the following female portrayals: Sadie Rose is a stylised representation of a German immigrant who takes refuge in La Belle, fleeing from her husband's mistreatment. She walks and engages in nudism with apparent ease, fires her rifle, and channels her sensibility through painting. Another notable female character is Charlotte Temple, the widow of the last mayor. In terms of social and/or cultural conventions, she plays the role of the more traditional woman, who pursues the recovery of the status quo. This entails men assuming the role of leaders in the town, which is why she is the one who first agrees to sell the mine to Quicksilver, a wealthy investor, after hearing the offer.

President of Quicksilver: We're going to build you the city and I'm going to bring in 50 men next week and 100 more next month to work hard and look after you. I'm sure by now you all miss the smell of a man. A real man.

## Chapter 2. The ladies of La Belle.

The story establishes an archetypal moral conflict, that of good versus evil, while simultaneously raising a number of social issues, including those related to paternity and maternity, family, racism, and so forth. These issues are explored through a unifying theme of female empowerment. The subjugation of women under patriarchy and their subsequent emancipation appear to be among the fundamental elements of the plot, which is conveyed through actions, dialogues and metaphors. In some instances, the latter are created through the process of interpolation, such as in the example of horses. This example can be seen in the phrase "If you force an animal, it will end up forcing you," which is a reference to those who mistreat their horses. Similarly, in the context of reading, it is women who possess this ability and are able to teach men how to read. Additionally, in the initial approach to an accident that

leaves a village practically without men, the only survivor of the accident is not in his right mind and nobody knows his name.

The notion of freedom and the pursuit of autonomy is also explicitly reflected in the various sequences featuring Maggie's character. In her initial dialogue, she is depicted as a male figure, engaged in the act of cleaning the barrel of a rifle within the confines of the dining room. Subsequently, her brother Bill, the local sheriff, also a widower, makes an appearance, and the following dialogue ensues:

Bill: Are those Albert's trousers?

Maggie: Not anymore.

Bill: Are you wearing his hat too?

Maggie: And her supplies (pointing to her cartridge belt).

Bill: May I ask why?

Maggie: Someone has to take care of everything.

Bill: You look ridiculous.

Maggie: Have you put your dress on yet, Bill?

Bill: No, I don't, and I don't plan to.

Maggie: Well, you should put it on right now, and the corset while you're at it.

#### Chapter 1. An incident at Creede.

In the negotiations between the women of La Belle and the president of Quicksilver regarding the sale of the town's mine, the latter alludes to the traditionally accepted norms of behaviour by referring to the former by her married name, McNue.

Maggie: It's Miss Cummings. I've taken my maiden name. Albert is dead, there's no reason for me to bear his name. He has a brother in Missouri for that.

#### Chapter 2. The ladies of La Belle.

In the same sequence, Maggie alerts the president of the mining company – and, incidentally, the Women's Voting Council – to the transformation of the town's female population.

Maggie: We built this place together. We left everything behind to build something new. And then we lost everything. Husbands and some horses. We're still here. And, sir, we're stronger than you can imagine.

In another significant scene, her brother Bill, the sheriff, decides to leave his children in Maggie's care because he is away on business. When he knocks on the door of his house, it is Callie, his sister's lover, naked, barely covered by a blanket, who opens the door. She tells him that Maggie is not there, that she is "hunting quail for breakfast", reproducing the myth that it is the man who goes hunting while the woman waits at home with the children. After she has shot a bird, the following conversation takes place:

Bill: Do you want to tell me what Callie Dunne is doing in your house?

Maggie: I suppose you are washing.

Bill: You're not the same.

Maggie: So, what has changed?

Bill: You're not motherly like you used to be.

Maggie: Motherly?! I loved my husband, and I love my nieces and nephews too, but I hate that for us happiness is reduced to motherhood and taking care of others.

#### Chapter 2. The ladies of La Belle.

While the depicted female characters exhibit a range of profiles and personalities, the fundamental aspect that unites them is the portrayal of a sisterly bond. In this patriarchal context, and despite the differences between the protagonists, a manifest sisterhood is evident. These women perceive each other as equals, sharing, collaborating and ultimately forming an alliance that enables them to repel Griffin's attack on La Belle, which involves more than thirty gunmen. This is accomplished with the



assistance of only four male figures, and with the women assuming the role of architects, maintaining control of their town and standing up to the attackers.

A pervasive theme throughout the series is the abuse of women by men. For example, the Indians attack Alice, beating her, slashing her and attempting to rape her; a Norwegian immigrant is forced to consummate with the villain while her husbands only mourn, revolting against the attackers; or the mistreatment of the African-American Louise Hobbs by her father, who brutally whips her after catching her in her first love affair with a white boy.

The group of women who are the subjects of *Godless* are defined by Frank Griffin, the false reverend, as "the paradise of the lobster, the lizard and the snake, the dagger and the gun. It is a godless country". The notion of a godless country serves to transform traditional gender roles, proposing alternative, more protagonist, diverse and supportive roles for women. This is in line with the drive for equality in society and the questioning of what is considered normative, which underpins the work.

### 3.2. *The English*

*The English* film generally adheres to the formal characteristics of the classic Western, including an abundance of establishing shots, careful compositions, and an aesthetic use of light. Furthermore, the themes of revenge, the conquest of the West, and the differences between the indigenous population and the settlers are prevalent throughout the genre. Additionally, the film incorporates elements of subversion, particularly in the portrayal of women. Furthermore, the production subverts certain elements, including the leading role of a woman. Cornelia Locke is a woman of considerable beauty and wealth, hailing from England, who embarks on a journey across the American continent to avenge the death of her son. As a result of a series of events, she is accompanied on her journey by Eli Whipp, a Pawnee Indian who has recently been discharged from the Union Army and is attempting to reclaim the land that has been taken from him by white settlers. Furthermore, the British fiction, filmed on a farm in Ávila, Spain, portrays the love affair between the two protagonists with great delicacy. This represents a distinctive deviation from the conventional Western narrative, wherein the most prevalent relationships are those between white men and Indian women.

*The English* production employs a contemporary perspective. From a visual perspective, the film is highly stylised, incorporating the protagonist's voice-over as the narrative voice. Indeed, the initial depiction of the protagonist employs the technique of metonymy, wherein various bodily parts are shown in rapid succession until, in slow motion, her face is revealed when a veil is lifted. Furthermore, the series employs analepsis at various points to disrupt the linear narrative, a technique commonly utilized in contemporary fiction but less prevalent in classical storytelling.

Cornelia Locke is the absolute protagonist of the story, as she drives the main plot and all the other characters are secondary to her. She is a strong-willed woman who leaves behind her comfortable life in England to arrive in a land where violence taints everything, even people. This is a reflection Cornelia makes on more than one occasion, asking herself: "What has this country done to me?" This protagonist is also the heroine of the narrative. This is corroborated by both her actions and her statements: "I'm not afraid anymore. Do you know why? Because I'm already dead". Cornelia is granted the license to kill typically associated with Western heroes, having been presented as a character who has committed acts of sufficient heinousness that the audience is prepared for her extermination. Despite the assertion by Clarke that Cornelia is "a lady who has no stomach for stealing and killing", the character is shown to be willing to execute those who have caused her pain and suffering without any hesitation.

The story features other female characters who play episodic yet significant roles. For instance, Martha Myers is a young widow living in Hoxem, Wyoming, with her son. She confronts her late husband, whom she married under deceitful circumstances and while pregnant. Reflecting on her situation and her son, she remarks, "The sweetest heart comes from the hardest soul (...). A woman with a child must endure everything. At least he couldn't touch me, he wasn't able to." Another character is Black Eye Mog, an elderly woman marked by her disfigurement, known for wearing black glasses to conceal her lack of eyelids. She also has no hair, as she recounts to Cornelia, "The Cheyenes, in '68. I was 21 years old, and they took everything else: my virtue and my family. Like a coming-of-age gift. I don't need to explain about the eyelids". Since then, she has lived for vengeance, collecting scalps—Cheyenne, Pawnee, and others—without regard to gender or age. Katie Clarke, a woman with Indigenous features, is married to John Clarke. Together, they exploit every opportunity to take advantage of settlers crossing their land.

Another pivotal character is Touching Ground, a Native woman and mother to White Moon. She is the wife of a chief killed by soldiers and separated from her child. When she reunites with him, she is enslaved by soldiers but aids Cornelia and Eli in freeing him, even if it requires killing those who stand in her way.

These women can be considered victims of male violence, although they also engage in similar behaviour when they perceive it as a means of self-defence. Some, such as Black Eye Mog or Katie Clarke, assume antagonist roles, yet they remain victims of a patriarchal system and a sexist and misogynistic society where "a woman's life is worth less than that of an animal." In these narratives, these women adopt characteristics traditionally associated with the masculine, such as the use of violence to resolve conflicts. Although fiction employs aesthetic techniques to portray violence, it does not explicitly depict rape. Instead, it suggests the act and uses ellipses to convey the narrative.

The theme of motherhood is intrinsic to the plot and is evident in the characters' actions and dialogue. All the female characters, to a greater or lesser extent, act in a manner that is motivated by their children. Some are for those who died as soon as they were born, such as Katie Clarke, while others are for those born as a result of violence, including Cornelia, Black Eye Mog and Martha Myers. The prominence of the theme of motherhood in Western narratives is noteworthy.

Unlike classic Westerns, which depict the conquest of territory and celebrate visions of improved living standards and prosperity, *The English* questions this narrative. The characters recount stories of violence and death resulting from colonisation. Some, like Thomas Trafford, Cornelia's fiancé, express deep disillusionment. Upon arriving in the United States, he says: "It was my trail the devil followed... he leaves me no choice but to stand against this country... never come to this place".

Joseph Campbell developed a well-known narrative model, the hero's journey, which indicates the different phases a character goes through in fiction. Maudrey Murdock (1990 and 2016) presented an alternative model to that of Campbell, whereby the different avatars experienced by a female character on her own journey, both inner and outer, are reflected. In this fiction, Cornelia's character progresses through a series of states, including identifying with the masculine and gathering allies, confronting the challenges of the journey, healing after being wounded by the masculine, and integrating characteristics traditionally associated with the masculine and feminine.

Clemente (2007) points out that the West is essentially populated by "good girls" and "bad girls". In *The English*, however, it is not so easy to categorise women within this dichotomy. The narrative itself blurs the lines between these two groups, going beyond prejudices and appearances. It explores how the context shapes which side these women align with, showing that they are ultimately just trying to survive in a world dominated by rough and violent men.

#### 4. Discussion and Results

In recent years, the western genre has undergone a period of reappraisal and resurgence. This is evidenced by the release of a wide range of audiovisual fiction in this genre that has been produced during the platform era.

The principal aim of this paper is to analyse the representation of women in a case study of the contemporary Western. It observes that the most significant change has been the promotion of mutations in both the approaches taken in the stories and in the main characters. The latter have resulted in a notable alteration to the presence and role of women in these narratives, with an increase in their importance. This shift has been brought about by the transformations in social structures that demand, with increasing vigour, equity in the treatment of the male and female genders, as well as the questioning of normative models. In this new context, the maxim proposed by Caweltii (1999) – that westerns and feminism are contradictory terms – no longer appears to be valid. Women are no longer confined to the roles of wives, mothers and/or prostitutes accompanying the male characters. They are now protagonists in their own right, not only in terms of the plots but also in terms of the actions they undertake, as evidenced by the series analysed in this article, *Godless* and *The English*.

In examining the initial specific objective, which assesses the narratives and formally in relation to the antecedents of the Western, both series exhibit some conventional characteristics of the genre. These include the use of classic iconography pertaining to space, the portrayal of wandering characters, and the exploration of themes associated with revenge. However, they also demonstrate a capacity to innovate through the incorporation of narrative techniques that are aligned with contemporary sensibilities. To illustrate, *The English* presents an aestheticization of violence and employs

discontinuity in the narrative, whereas *Godless* composes a thematic change based on the prominent female presence in the cast, which projects alternative possibilities for female empowerment.

The second specific objective, which examines female characters and their relationship to male counterparts, shows that women take on the role of heroines. They are the ones who save the community from the antagonist, a role predominantly assigned to men. As a result, the image of women, in both its physical and subjective dimensions, is reinforced in the eyes of the audience. Now, in addition to being beautiful, they are strong individuals who do not hesitate to use violence to confront those who threaten their goals: revenge, in *The English*, and maintaining the status quo, in *Godless*. The women in these new stories are also autonomous and independent, which means that their relationship with the male characters is emotional rather than subservient. In fact, it is the men who take on the role of supporting the women, rather than the other way around. Finally, the central positioning of women in these stories introduces new themes such as motherhood, sisterhood or non-normative relationship models. These women also break with traditional associations of femininity, such as love and compassion, in the public sphere (Wildermuth, 2018). Indeed, they do not appear pious in either the public or private sphere, as they pursue their goals relentlessly and are not afraid to punish those who stand in their way.

On the third specific objective of the study, which focuses on comparing new constructions of the *Western* genre with its traditional standards, it is evident that recent works share a language that is closely related to the classical genre, especially in its aesthetic components. At the same time, however, they introduce changes that contribute to the evolution of the genre. The most obvious example is the portrayal of women in leading roles, which in itself represents a modernisation of the *Western* that challenges its very essence. As Gubern noted, "the *Western* is a man's cinema" (2005, p. 90).

Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that the works under examination do not purport to be hegemonic models, but rather contribute to an emergent phenomenon characterised by a notable proliferation of female heroines. The examples are numerous and can be found across all genres. Catherine Cawood in the police drama *Happy Valley*; Alicia Florrick in the court drama *The Good Wife*; Khalessi and Ayra in the fantastic *Game of Thrones*; Defred in the dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale*; the superheroine in Jessica Jones; and, of course, in the serialised western: One may cite, for example, Beth Dutton (*Yellowstone*), Cara Dutton (1923), Elsa Dutton (1883), or Maeve Millay (*Westworld*). It is important to note that, while there have been advancements in representation, there is still a need for re-readings and revisions that expand the scope and develop alternative perspectives, such as decolonial gazes that challenge the dominance of "white" gazes and characters.

The role of fiction as a mirror of society cannot be overlooked. Series reflect the social changes taking place within communities and also serve to present models of behaviour. The fact that the *Western*, a traditionally male-dominated genre, has embraced changes in gender roles highlights an undeniable truth: the importance and relevance of women's roles in society.

The presence of these heroic female protagonists seeks to balance the patriarchal trend of traditional representation and establish more modern, diverse and inclusive narratives. Women have finally taken up arms.

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