
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Longing for a Home and the Role of Women in Louis L'Amour's Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This research explores relationships between Louis L'Amour's literary works and the Frontier Thesis, which defined the impact of the American frontier on national character and identity. The central theme of L'Amour's literature is rugged individualism. This is described in some detail, analyzing how it is portrayed in his selected works. Primary focus is given to the longing for a home—a recurring but overlooked theme in L'Amour's narratives. By extension, the role of women in L'Amour's writings is highlighted. Women are depicted as crucial in the establishment of homes and communities on the frontier. Strong female characters in L'Amour's works embody the essence of homemaking and resilience on the frontier. Analysis of representative works by L'Amour show how the themes of rugged individualism, the longing for a home, and the role of women are woven together. A conclusion summarizes the key findings and discusses implications for understanding the American frontier experience through literature.

KEYWORDS

Frontier Thesis, Louis L'Amour, women in literature, language and culture.

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1. Introduction

In 1893, as Chicago crowds enjoyed the summer and a world exposition, historian Frederick Jackson Turner stepped up to address the American Historical Association. His seminal essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," introduced what would later come to be known as the Frontier Thesis. Turner posited that the frontier experience was more than merely an historical event; rather, it was a powerful shaper of the nation's character, institutions, and democracy. Settlers saw opportunities to make a new life as they pushed westward. Within the wildness, the frontier fostered a culture of rugged individualism and innovation. In short, the westward expansion created a uniquely American identity—characterized by independence and self-reliance. Turner's thesis endured long after that meeting in 1893. It has since prompted numerous scholars to explore the social, economic, and cultural impacts of the frontier on American society (Turner, 1920; Faragher, 1994). In literature, various aspects of the Frontier Thesis may be expressed through themes, settings, and character development.

Louis L'Amour remains one of the most prolific authors of stories set in the old American West, otherwise known as frontier literature. L'Amour produced over 100 novels and even more short stories, many of which became bestsellers and were adapted into movies and television series. Louis L'Amour's childhood began in a North Dakota farming town. His grandfather was a U.S. Civil War veteran, and other relatives spent decades working on ranches. Through these family members, L'Amour was introduced to stories about the frontier. Later, L'Amour worked with cattle and laborers in sawmills and lumberyards. Unsurprisingly, this brought him into contact with a wide range of individuals. Among them were an ex-member of the Dalton Gang, Texas Rangers, cowboys, and settlers who had survived gunfights. These were people who knew the nineteenth-century frontier because they had lived and breathed it. L'Amour always believed that these personal experiences and others, such as his travels across the United

States, and work as a merchant seaman, informed his writing and allowed him to authentically capture the spirit of the frontier (L'Amour, 1989; Nolan, 2008).

This research aims to explore the relationship between Louis L'Amour's literary works and Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis. Initial focus is given to the theme of rugged individualism, a central element in both Turner's thesis and L'Amour's literature. By analyzing how L'Amour depicts this theme in his selected works, the study seeks to highlight the connection between his narratives and the Frontier Thesis. By extension, this study will investigate the recurring theme of the longing for a home within L'Amour's narratives. Central to this exploration is the depiction of women in L'Amour's stories, where they are portrayed as essential figures in the establishment of homes on the frontier. These strong female characters reflect the spirit of homemaking and resilience, offering a fresh perspective on frontier literature.

Detailed analysis of representative short stories by L'Amour will show how the themes of rugged individualism and the longing for a home are woven together. The selected stories will also highlight the depiction of women's roles in forming homes. Thus, the study aims to provide a deeper insight into L'Amour's literary depiction of the frontier. The conclusion will summarize the key findings and discuss their implications for understanding the American frontier experience through literature.

2. The Frontier Thesis

Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis was first introduced in his essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner presented the idea that the American frontier was a critical factor in shaping the nation's character and democracy. The frontier's untamed land offered opportunity for those attracted to its wildness. Turner summarized that "These free lands promoted individualism, economic equality, freedom to rise, democracy" (1920, p. 30)

The frontier experience promoted individualism as settlers adapted to the challenges of frontier life without established social structures. These challenges resulted in selective migration (Bazzi, Fiszbein, & Gebresilasse, 2020; Stewart, 2006). People who were attracted to the wildness of the frontier and the resilience that it required made up the bulk of settlers. They pushed westward for the chance to achieve upward social mobility. Many were not just landless. They were initially poor and illiterate (Stewart, 2006). Yet, historical data shows that many did eventually gain wealth. The frontier could thus be characterized as a land of hope and second chances. Turner observed that "Isolation accompanied by opportunity and freedom from social restraints fostered individual initiative and made for the rugged independence characteristic of the frontier" (1920, p. 293). This became formative for the nation's culture. In short, the experience of westward expansion resulted in a uniquely American identity characterized by a sense of rugged individualism and resilience.

The Frontier Thesis has been the subject of numerous inquiries since its introduction. Several studies have explored its formative impact on American society, culture, and politics. Within this body of research, some empirical support for the Frontier Thesis has been documented (Bazzi, Fiszbein, & Gebresilasse, 2020; Goldin & Sokoloff, 1982; Jokela, 2009; Stewart, 2006). Notably, Bazzi and colleagues (2020) investigated how the frontier experience fostered an enduring trait of rugged individualism in America. Using historical data and econometrics, they found that U.S. counties with significant historical exposure to the frontier still show stronger individualistic traits today. For instance, the population of these counties reported a higher value on self-reliance and personal responsibility. There was also a higher level of entrepreneurial activity. Those who populated these counties with historical frontier exposure were also more likely to support a limited government role in the economy. In their conclusion, the authors suggested that a connection between modern attitudes and the historical frontier experience was supportive of the Frontier Thesis. Such studies indicate that the frontier did indeed have great impact.

3. L'Amour's Narratives

3.1 Rugged Individualism

Louis L'Amour's work consistently highlights rugged individualism. His protagonists face obstacles where survival hinges on their ability to adapt to the frontier and navigate it. Yet, they persist in their pursuit of opportunity and to build or safeguard a new home. These characters reflect L'Amour's own belief in the power to shape one's destiny, an idea that resonates with the historical frontier as a crucible of rugged individualism (McGrath, 2008). But this theme is also seen through his portrayal of characters who feel oneness and a love for the land (Redmer, 2022).

In Redmer (2022), I analyzed *Dark Canyon* as a prime example of rugged individualism in L'Amour's works. The protagonist, Gaylord Riley, is an ex-outlaw who now dreams of owning his own cattle. He scouts out and chooses a rugged land that no one had ventured onto before. On several occasions, Riley expresses a deep reverence for the land and a desire to be one with it. At one point, he reflects on this land that he chose. To him, the vast solitude "offered something to the spirit" (L'Amour, 1997, p. 15).

Similarly, *The Ghosts of Buckskin Run* tells the story of Rod Morgan. Alone, he begins to settle in the remote Buckskin Run with the goal of establishing a homestead and raising cattle. Despite rumors of it being haunted, he pressed forward because “working as a cowhand would never allow him to save enough to support a wife or build a home” (L’Amour, 2004, p. 147). Morgan saw the wild valley and felt that it was all that he had dreamed of before. Through Morgan’s eyes, L’Amour describes this land in great detail, the stream going over the stone, the awesome cliffs, and the lush valley.

Morgan builds a cabin there as he awaits the arrival of Aloma Day from the East. Morgan has been courting Aloma for some time, and for the past two years they have maintained a long-distance relationship through letters. But upon Aloma’s arrival, she witnesses Morgan shoot and kill a man. Unbeknownst to her at the time, it was in self-defense. The reader learns that gold was previously discovered in Buckskin Run. One of those who discovered it killed the others and started a ranch, but not before burying the gold in a secret location. He started a rumor that one Tarran Kopp had been the murderer, as well as the valley being haunted. Since then, the “ghosts” of Buckskin Run had kept other parties out. But not Rod Morgan, who loves the land and sees it as his future.

The real killer and his gang spread lies about Morgan to drive him off the land. Aloma begins to be courted by one of the gang as she hesitates to marry Morgan, now uncertain from all the rumors. Morgan takes the loss of Aloma as a hard blow. He is not prepared to build a home without her. As Aloma grapples with her doubts, the situation becomes more intense when the gang comes seeking Morgan. Meanwhile, a mysterious man, Jed Blue, appears and befriends Morgan. He seems to know the land and its history well. Indeed, the reader later learns that this is actually Kopp returning. Jed convinces Aloma of Morgan’s true nature and innocence. In the climax, all three of them find themselves in a dangerous standoff with the gang before overcoming them. Throughout the story, Morgan never gives up the rugged land and sees it as a home.

3.2 The Longing for a Home

I propose that the longing for a home in L’Amour’s narratives can be seen as another literary expression of the Frontier Thesis (Redmer 2022). Turner argued that the frontier offered upward social mobility, in other words, pursuit of economic opportunity. But, the wildness of the land and the risks in pushing west resulted in selective migration. These were Mormons searching for a sanctuary from religious persecution, immigrants, war veterans, farmers, laborers, entrepreneurs, and even single women (Arrington, 1958; Brands, 2002; Gates, 1973; Unruh, 1993). Many were not just landless. They were initially poor and illiterate (Stewart, 2006). Yet, historical data shows that many did eventually gain wealth. In essence, these groups were longing for a home as a refuge or as a place to settle for prosperity.

In literature and history, the desire for a home represents belonging, safety, and identity. On the historical frontier, it was no different. On a personal level, they were not just physical shelters, they were places to build a family in a challenging environment. Thus, the longing for a home was natural to settlers. Ultimately, this was a part of their drive and journey. L’Amour also seems to have a multifaceted perspective of homemaking on the frontier, as is evident in his detailed descriptions of the characters’ inner and outer journeys. The desire for a home does not merely encompass physical shelter from the wild frontier; it is finding a place where one can be at peace and prosper. This theme resonates with readers as a basic human desire. It is in the context of the frontier that it takes on a unique expression. Moreover, L’Amour’s narratives are unique in the genre for depicting this longing for a home. While in many frontier stories the protagonist rides off into the sunset, L’Amour depicts a journey toward “stasis” instead of an “onward and outward expansionism” (Sullivan 78).

In *Jubal Sackett* (1985), the protagonist is driven west by a desire to find a place he can call home and live in harmony with nature. Jubal’s exploration of the frontier is partly motivated by a curiosity to explore the unknown lands and find opportunities for a new life, but it is also an almost spiritual journey, expressing a deep affinity for the land and a desire for a sense of belonging. Along the way, Sackett is asked by a priest from the Natchez tribe to find Itchakomi, a Natchez woman who has traveled west with some warriors to find a new home for the tribe.

On his quest, Sackett runs into all of the challenges of the harsh frontier. When he finds Itchakomi, he becomes embroiled in a competition for her affections with a Natchez warrior. In the end, Sackett and companions scout a valley which becomes home for himself and the Natchez tribe.

In *The Ghosts of Buckskin Run* (2004), more than one character is driven into the frontier while longing for a home. The protagonist, Rod Morgan, feels an immediate connection to Buckskin Run when he sees the remote, virgin valley. He dreams of building a homestead there. During the narrative, he has only built a cabin for himself. But even here, Morgan feels a peace and a sense of refuge. Meanwhile, Aloma Day, also experiences the longing for a home. She reflects on her instinctive decision to head into the rugged frontier. Her aunt had died and there was no one left for her back East. Any sense of home there was gone. Thus, without further hesitation, she answers Morgan’s invitation to help him establish a home and a new life, despite the fact that she was

heading into a rugged and wild unknown. The character of Jed Blue also exhibits the longing for a home. Jed had been driven away from the Buckskin Run valley by the lies spread about him. The real murderer wanted the gold for himself, of course, and the land. After he, Morgan, and Aloma had overcome the murderer and his gang, Kopp just wanted to build a home on the frontier. His days of hiding were over. The story ends with the same resolution as so many of L'Amour's works.

Together, they rode back down the trail to the cabin on Buckskin Run. Jed Blue looked around at them, pointing at the cabin. "I never had no home before," he said, "but that's home. We're a-comin' home" (p. 194).

3.3 The Role of Women in Establishing Homes on the Frontier

We know that the role of women as homemakers was seen as crucial on the frontier (Myres, 1982). Women had the daily tasks of preparing food, caring for children, and cleaning. These were essential for the survival and health of families in a rugged and challenging environment. But a frontier woman's role was not just limited to domestic tasks. Indeed, they also participated in the economic activity of their homes by farming, preserving food, and making clothing. By being homemakers, frontier women were also significant in establishing communities and maintaining a sense of cohesion on the frontier.

Women in L'Amour's works also play central roles that drive the story forward. They are often portrayed as prime motivators for the protagonist because of their crucial role in the establishment of homes. They are partners who work alongside men to overcome the challenges of frontier life. These female characters embody resilience and determination. L'Amour's depiction of women emphasizes their essential contributions to the creation of communities on the frontier.

In *Dark Canyon* (1997), the protagonist, Riley, builds a home in the wild canyon that he loves. But he begins to court Marie Shattuck, making her one with his desire for a home. He thus expresses an unspoken knowing that there cannot be a home on the frontier without the homemaker. In fact, Marie is pursued by Riley's antagonist as well. Through the narrative, L'Amour shows that a young, single woman on the frontier is seen as highly valuable in her own right. At one point, Riley is preparing to defend the home he started to build. He describes his future home plan to Marie, inferring that only she could make it complete as the homemaker.

She looked at him, so tall and strong; yet somehow so much alone, and her hands wanted to reach out to him...And then he added, "When this is over, I should like to come calling." He gestured around, not waiting for her reply. "This is only one room. There will be seven or eight. I shall build the house in the shape of an L, with the open side toward the south, I think. The setting sun can be beautiful..." (p. 88).

In *Conagher* (1969), co-protagonist Evie Teale is a resilient and independent woman struggling to survive in the Arizona Territory. Her husband has never returned from a journey and now Evie must raise her children on the frontier. She takes over her from her husband maintaining a remote stagecoach station. Here, she must ensure that an important link between frontier communities survives, and still provide for her children. Evie must fight off all kinds of challenges on the frontier including the harsh land, unwanted advances from men, and threats. Still, she maintains a resemblance of home for her children as well as the stagecoach station. Amid loneliness and hardship, Evie finds peace in creativity. She writes poetry and ties it to tumbleweeds; each one expressing her feelings and hopes. Evie Teale is one example of L'Amour's compelling women characters. They are depicted as strong and resilient, knowing their role as homemakers and thus important parts of frontier communities.

In *The Ghosts of Buckskin Run* (2004), Aloma Day is sought after by both Rod Morgan, her original suitor, and cattleman Mark Brewer. Brewer aims to seduce Aloma as she starts to believe rumors about Morgan. This strikes Morgan as a huge blow. He displays genuine feelings for her. But more than that, he had been greatly anticipating Aloma's arrival on the frontier because he saw her as crucial to making a real home on the frontier. However, Aloma does not disappoint.

She shows determination and resolve. Aloma waits for Morgan's companion to come into town. When he does, she confronts him in order to know the truth about Morgan. She entices other characters into revealing true intentions, and then does not give up until she reunites with Morgan. The story concludes in classic L'Amour style, with Aloma ready to be a homemaker as Morgan concludes his journey to a home.

These examples highlight L'Amour's theme of homemaking as a collective effort that involves both men and women working together to overcome challenges and build a better future. L'Amour's portrayal of women as strong, capable, and integral to the success of the frontier underscores the importance of gender roles in the historical narrative of westward expansion.

4. Conclusion

Like all other forms of art, literature offers a window into cultures and worldviews. Just as history is formative of people's aspirations, longings, and struggles, so literature is its artistic expression. Simply put, literature is a vehicle to understand people, and the ride can be engaging. This research has found indications that frontier literature, particularly that of Louis L'Amour, is no exception. Significant but overlooked themes are woven throughout L'Amour's narratives to reveal key aspects of the Frontier Thesis. One of these is rugged individualism. In this analysis, I continue from a previous one (Redmer, 2022) that revealed L'Amour's depiction of rugged individualism as being intertwined with a love for the land itself, its wildness, beauty, and solitude. I also revisit how L'Amour gives his protagonists a longing for a home. In fact, this is portrayed as the main driver of the protagonist's journey and motivation to overcome challenges. I propose that this desire for a home can be seen in the Frontier Thesis. Relatedly, this study has highlighted the role of women in L'Amour's narratives. Female characters are portrayed as critical in the establishment of frontier homes and communities. Their roles are central and crucial to the protagonist's journey. Individually, these characters are depicted as resilient, and discerning. This is consistent with data on the historical frontier woman.

4.1 Limitations

While this study reveals a deeper understanding of how Louis L'Amour's literary works relate to the Frontier Thesis, there are limitations. First, the analysis is limited to selected literary works by L'Amour. While it is believed that these works are representative, a wider selection may reveal some variation in the depiction of rugged individualism, the longing for a home, and the role of women on the frontier. Second, the study does not address critiques and limitations of the Frontier Thesis. Relatedly, there is no analysis of how L'Amour's writings might diverge from this historical narrative. Finally, the research does not include other perspectives on frontier literature that include critical examinations of gender, class, and race. A wider, interdisciplinary approach could give a more comprehensive analysis of L'Amour's portrayals.

4.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the limitations of this study, there are avenues for future research. First, expanding analysis to include more of L'Amour's works would give a more comprehensive view of how rugged individualism, longing for a home, and the role of women are portrayed. Such an analysis could reveal distinctions in works that are set in different regions or time periods.

Second, integrating critiques and limitations of the Frontier Thesis may reveal insights on how L'Amour's depictions interact with these perspectives. A comparative analysis with other frontier authors could also show how L'Amour's portrayals contrast or align with frontier literature and the Frontier Thesis. Finally, a more interdisciplinary approach could offer rich insight on how L'Amour depicts social relationships and groups based on race and class. This broader view of the historical frontier could be a template for a broader analysis of L'Amour's literature. For example, L'Amour's depictions of Native Americans could be studied in terms of typical stereotypes.

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