



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Garth Ennis' Preacher and the Western

Or how Preacher is a western

B.A. Essay

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The comic book, as it is known today, had its beginnings in the early 20th century. It is possible to go a long way further back and find stories told with pictures, though. The western genre has been, as with the comic book, around for a while in several mediums, from the novels of Zane Grey to films. It's in films that the western gained its current reputation. It is, I think; fair to say that the western genre is best known through films, as the first narrative film was a western (*The Great Train Robbery* (1903)).

In comic books, the western genre is not really prevalent. The best known western character in comic book history is Jonah Hex, a character that has been around for decades and, as of 2009, still has a series going strong. Recent output of westerns in comic books isn't really long. Brian Azzarello's short lived series *Loveless* is an example along with the recent *Jonah Hex* series. Those are both westerns taking place in the mythical time of the west, the 19th century. In 1995 *Preacher* started coming out, a contemporary western. This essay will deal with *Preacher* as western. How it is a western? What are the signs? I will make a case for *Preacher* being a western first and foremost. Because, generally, western is not the first thing thought of when it comes to the series. Rather, its depiction of God and religion, its amount of sex and violence or its difficulty to actually put into any one genre because of the fact that so many genres are included throughout the series. I think *Preacher* is a western first and always and then, on top of the western, it's crime, horror, and everything else.

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Introduction

Between the years 1995 and 2000 Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon made a comic book published by Vertigo, an imprint of DC Comics. The comic was, unlike superhero comics, a finite series with a definite ending, ending after seventy five issues, sixty six in the regular series, four specials and a four issue miniseries. In a foreword to the miniseries, in the fourth book, *Ancient History* (1998), Garth Ennis says that the comic was his take on the western genre (4). The comic, called *Preacher*, has been collected in nine trade paperbacks. The first one, *Gone to Texas* (1996), collects the first seven issues of the series. One issue is usually around twenty four to thirty two pages that come out monthly, initially, with a couple of issues combining to make up an arc. An arc, story arc, consists of several, on average around four to six, issues that make up a little story within an overall storyline. A couple of arcs are put into a trade paperback. *Preacher* and other finite series are generally not as episodic as superhero comics are. In *Preacher* there is always an ongoing storyline.

The series revolves around a preacher named Jesse Custer who has started questioning his faith. What gets the story going is a half angel/half demon who gives Jesse the power to tell anyone to do anything. Jesse decides to search for God who has left his throne. To aid Jesse in his quest are Tulip and Cassidy, Jesse's ex-girlfriend and an Irish vampire. The story goes through several genres and has a large supporting cast that can't be typecast into any specific genre. Joe R. Landsdale, in his introduction to the first book, *Gone to Texas* (1996), describes *Preacher* as "part western, part crime, part horror, and part fucked up strange..." (5).

I am going to make a case for *Preacher* fitting into the western genre first and foremost. Or rather what makes *Preacher* a western, since Ennis himself has said that *Preacher* is a western. I've split the essay threefold: narrative, iconography and character. In the second chapter, I'll discuss narrative: how the story is told and how, or where, the narrative follows the tradition of the western. In the third chapter, I'll look at iconography: how important is the iconography of the western to and in *Preacher*. In the fourth chapter I'll examine characters: focus on

the main characters and treat at them as characters in a western. Are there any characters that betray the fact that *Preacher* is a western?

As reference I'll focus on films and film studies. I'll then modify them to the comic's medium where and if needed. Comics and films have their similarities, most importantly, in this case, in that both are visual mediums. Garth Ennis references films specifically in his aforementioned foreword and in *Preacher* there are often references to films.

CHAPTER ONE

Ennis, Preacher and Vertigo

Garth Ennis was born in 1970 and according to a short biography on Avatar Press' homepage, who have published work by Ennis, he started writing around 1988 for *Crisis* and *2000AD*. *2000AD* is a long-running British sci-fi comic and *Crisis* is a companion magazine to *2000AD*. (Avatar, par. 1). Ennis started writing *Preacher* in 1995 and finished in 2000. Steve Dillon was the artist for the entire series, aside from a couple of specials and a miniseries. In 1991 Garth Ennis wrote, for Vertigo, *Hellblazer*, a series that as of 2009 has been published in well over 200 issues and is still going strong, having gone through a variety of writers (*Hellblazer* is Vertigo's longest running title). *Hellblazer* follows John Constantine, a paranormal investigator first seen in Alan Moore's run on the *Swamp Thing*. Ennis also wrote a series called *Hitman* for DC, about Tommy Monaghan, a hitman in Gotham City (home of Batman). Beyond Vertigo and DC, Ennis has written the *Punisher* for Marvel. Ennis wrote the Punisher first under the Marvel Knights imprint but is best known for his work under the MAX imprint. The difference between the two is that the former is more humorous while the MAX imprint was aimed at mature audiences. The MAX series, called simply *The Punisher*, is outside the Marvel universe so Garth got to write darker material about Frank Castle, the punisher, in a world devoid of superheroes where Ennis had aged Frank Castle appropriately according to his history.

When *Preacher* came out first in 1995, the Vertigo imprint was only a couple of years old. Ron Goulart, in *Great American Comic Books* (a book about comics' history) says the Vertigo line grew out of already existing titles, like Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing*, and began to go in an alternate direction to the DC Universe. The line was targeted at an older audience and promised mature content. What was important at the time was the fact that Vertigo didn't consult with the Comics Code Authority, which regulated what content could and couldn't be in comics. The Vertigo titles bypassed the Code entirely, putting disclaimers on the titles, though, that read "suggested for mature readers" (318-319). This meant that the stories told could be darker, more complex and written specifically for adults. Before Vertigo, there hadn't been anything like it, as superhero comics entirely ruled the market and those comics were under the Code. Although superhero comics are

still a force in comics today, alternate comics are much easier to find, and not just in independent comics. Vertigo is a line within DC Comics, one of the big two. Marvel has tried to follow DC's Vertigo with the MAX imprint. Similarly targeted at a mature audience, Ennis' own *Punisher*, is an example. As *Preacher* didn't go through the Comics Code Authority the series was quite controversial when it arrived first in 1995. Niall Kitson says in an essay about *Preacher (Rebel Yells: Genre Hybridity and Irishness in Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon's Preacher)* that the series stepped up in terms of sex, violence and blasphemy. He also says that the series became, and is, a standard by which all future titles are judged (Kitson, par. 1). *Preacher*, along with many other finished Vertigo titles, is still in print as of today, and still sells in trade paperbacks. Those getting into comics for the first time are going to be introduced to *Preacher* sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER TWO

NARRATIVE

I

In 1903 Edwin S. Porter directed the film *The Great Train Robbery*. The film is now known as the first western narrative film. A short one-reel 10 minute film that became incredibly successful in its day. One of the actors in *The Great Train Robbery* was G.M. Anderson, an actor Jon Tuska described, in his essay *The American Western Cinema 1903- in Focus on the Western*, as "the first western star" (28). Anderson, according to Tuska, made three hundred seventy five short, one-reel, western films from 1908 to 1915. He was the first man to shoot his films on location (28). Tuska also mentions Carl Laemmle, president of Universal Film Manufacturing Co., who from 1915 until 1935 had a hand in almost all western films made in Hollywood. Right from the beginning, the western was a popular genre.

John Ford was the western genre's most prolific and successful director when the genre was at its most productive, a period that spans from the 1930s to the 1960s, making films such as *Stagecoach* (1939), *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949). John Ford was, and perhaps is, the director most closely connected to the western genre. However, this was the

western's most productive period so there were a lot of other directors who made one to several westerns, such as George Stevens and Fred Zinnemann who each tried their hand at the genre once with *Shane* (1953) and *High Noon* (1952), respectively. Anthony Mann, Howard Hawks and Budd Boetticher, however, made several westerns each. Mann made eight westerns with James Stewart that were influenced heavily by film noir films (so much that they have been called noir westerns), Hawks made four with John Wayne, including *Red River* (1948) and Boetticher made several low budget westerns with Randolph Scott.

In the late 1960s with the western on the decline spaghetti westerns came along as well as the revisionist western, a subgenre of the western that questioned the classical western and went more towards realism. An example of a revisionist western is the Sam Peckinpah directed *The Wild Bunch* (1968). He and Clint Eastwood were probably the directors most closely connected with the western in the 1970s. Eastwood starred in and directed *High Plains Drifter* (1973) and *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) and then came back to the western in 1992 with the Academy Award winning *Unforgiven*. Since the decline of the western genre in the 1960s, though, the output of westerns has never come close to what was seen from the '30s and into the '60s.

Like *Preacher*, the majority of western films of the last decade, circa, have been contemporary westerns. These are films such as, *No Country for Old Men* directed by the Cohen brothers (2007), and Tommy Lee Jones's *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005), that takes the western and move into a contemporary setting. The westerns with their setting in the past, the old west (19th century), are much fewer and further between. *The Proposition* (2005), directed by John Hillcoat and *3:10 to Yuma* (2007), a remake of Delmer Daves's 1957 film of the same name, directed by James Mangold, are two of the few recent outputs that aren't contemporary westerns.

Preacher, however, is a contemporary western that revolves around Jesse Custer's search for God who has left his throne. To help Jesse he has around him Tulip O' Hare and Proinsias Cassidy. Tulip is, at the beginning, Jesse's ex-girlfriend; they have an on and off relationship through the series. Cassidy is an Irish vampire who befriends Jesse after having helped Tulip escape from a botched assassination attempt. Seemingly, the reason for God's absence is Genesis. Genesis is an entity, a child of an angel and a demon that merges with Jesse Custer and gives him the power to make people do whatever he tells them

to. Because of Genesis's escape from heaven the Saint of Killers is sent after Jesse. The Saint of Killers is the angel of death. He never misses mark and can't be killed. Also after Jesse are Herr Starr and the Grail. The Grail is a secret organization that has protected the bloodline of Jesus Christ, who has in the world of the *Preacher* lived, married and had children before he died. Herr Starr, however, isn't on board with the Grail's ideas and plans a coup and succeeds. With the exception of Herr Starr and the Grail, who are introduced in the fourth arc, all of this is set up in the opening arc. Beyond this there are subplots with their own beginning, middle, and end in some arcs. The second arc of the series, for example, is a crime story told through the perspective of Jesse Custer's search for God. It's through Jesse's search that he meets Si Coltrane, a serial killer. In the arc, John Tool and Paulie Bridges are detectives who are hunting the serial killer; they are two of the main characters along with Jesse, Tulip and Cassidy. Neither is seen again after this arc. Their story has its beginning, middle and end in the second arc of the series.

I'll discuss the narrative in three specific chapters. First I will look at the most obvious western story, and narrative, in *Preacher*, an arc in the series called 'Salvation' which constitutes the seventh book of the *Preacher* (out of nine). I will look at that arc with the help of Will Wright's definition of the classical western plot. The next chapter will revolve around the overall narrative of the series. With all the other genres that can be found in *Preacher*, where is the western? Or how is *Preacher* a western if the overall narrative blends genres so freely? Lastly I want to discuss a subgenre of the western, the spaghetti western, and its connection to *Preacher*, and mostly the question of violence in both.

II

Salvation – arc and town

Will Wright's book *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (1975) deals with western films and splits the western into four basic plots: the classical plot, the vengeance plot, the professional plot and the transition theme. Wright says the book is a work of social science where he will use selected films "to exhibit the narrative and symbolic structure of these four plots..." (2; 15). Wright

picks the most popular western films to dissect. The first half of the book describes the plots, lists its functions, characters and oppositions, and uses films as examples to show how each plot works. The second half, or so, of the book Wright goes deeper into each plot with regards to society. Wright, for example, says that he will discuss how the “classical plot corresponds to the individualistic conception of the society underlying a market economy.” (15). I will only focus on Wright’s definitions of the plots, oppositions and characters in westerns. The book deals with films but I will use it for comics. I think this works because both are visual mediums and because the plots Wright puts forth can, probably, be seen in any western story in any medium.

In the seventh book of the series called *Salvation* is an arc of the same name where Jesse goes into the small town of Salvation, Texas, becomes sheriff, rids the town of evil and then leaves the town and continues his search for God. The arc follows Wright’s classical plot very closely. Will Wright divides the classical plot into sixteen functions; they are:

1. Hero enters a social group
2. Hero is unknown to the society
3. Hero revealed to have an exceptional ability
4. Society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; hero gets special status
5. Society does not completely accept the hero
6. Conflict of interest between villains and society
7. Villains are stronger than society; society is weak
8. Strong friendship between hero and villain
9. Villains threaten society
10. Hero avoids involvement in conflict
11. Villain endanger a friend of the hero
12. Hero fights villains
13. Hero defeats villains
14. Society is safe
15. Society accepts the hero
16. Hero loses or gives up special status (48-49)

Wright says that numbers two, eight, ten and eleven are optional. These functions don't necessarily occur in westerns that follow the classical plot. (48-49).

If we go through the functions, we will see that Jesse is the hero and Salvation, Texas is the social group (function one). Function two is a little bit tricky. Jesse Custer is indeed unknown to the community, but he does immediately recognize Lorie, who is the sister of Jesse's friend from childhood, and he discovers his mother who he thought was dead. Function two is, then, not an exact match. Jesse is indeed unknown to society but there are people there from earlier in his life. Function three is fulfilled when he arrives at the bar, where he takes care of a bully and outside the bar where he saves Lorie from employees of Odin Quincannon, the main villain in the story, who runs a meat business just outside the town. His employees can just about do what they like because of Odin's power over the town, which fulfills the seventh function, the villain is stronger than society. Four is the sheriff who recognizes Jesse's talents. He offers Jesse a job, which Jesse declines; but he offers to take the sheriff's job, whereupon the sheriff accepts and leaves town. Function five is not very strong. Jesse is quick to make friends in town but Cindy, the deputy sheriff doesn't accept Jesse at first. Jesse does win her over quickly, though. Six is, for example, shown when Odin goes to Jesse and tells him how Odin expects things to work. Odin is used to having all the power which is seen clearly in that scene. We have already mentioned the seventh function, which perhaps is also in the same scene between Jesse and Odin. Eight, an optional function, is not in the 'Salvation' arc, unless Gunther, an older man and, at first, a friend of Jesse's until he gets the knowledge that Gunter used to be a Nazi is considered a villain. Nine is, perhaps weak in 'Salvation'. Odin's power over the town and his attempts at getting Jesse, fall under the ninth function. Jesse never avoids conflict, eliminating function ten, but function eleven may be seen in the shooting of Hector, a character who is often seen at the town's bar. Hector is established early on in the story as he finds himself at the end of most jokes. He can never be said to be a friend of Jesse's though, so the link is weak. Functions twelve and thirteen are fulfilled when Jesse fights Odin and ends up shooting him. Similarly, fourteen is obvious and fifteen is really found throughout, Jesse gains friends and trust quickly, much thanks to his mother and Lorie. Finally, function sixteen is that Jesse leaves the town to continue his search for God. The 'Salvation' arc follows Wright's classical plot fairly closely. Besides the functions

Wright says are optional, all functions can be found in the story. Some are, admittedly, weak, such as function five and nine, but they are there.

Wright suggests that there are three sets of characters, the hero, the villain and society, in the classical plot. In the 'Salvation' arc these are Jesse, Odin and the town of Salvation, respectively. Wright also claims that there are three basic oppositions in westerns, the hero versus society, good versus bad and strong versus weak. The fourth opposition he says is wilderness versus civilization (49). At least the three basic oppositions can be found in the 'Salvation' arc. The first is Jesse versus Salvation, Texas, which is very connected to strong versus weak, as Jesse always stands up against Odin and never wavers. He has no doubts. The good versus bad opposition is obviously Jesse versus Odin and perhaps Jesse versus Gunther, perhaps a more subtle and complicated good versus bad opposition. Was what Jesse did right when he threw Gunther a rope to hang himself with? Jesse says that some things can never be put right (*Salvation*, 184). Is Gunther still a Nazi? Is that something that can never be forgiven, no matter what? Through the arc Gunther always seems nice and friendly to Jesse and everyone in town. Gunther and Jesse's mother, for example, had been friends for a while when Jesse comes into the town. The fourth opposition, wilderness versus civilization might and might not be there. It depends mostly on whether Jesse can be considered to be connected to wilderness. Jesse and Tulip can be connected to wilderness because they don't have a home. Their homes throughout the series are motels and sometimes a friend's house. However, the three basic oppositions are all in the 'Salvation' arc and without doubt it is possible to find further oppositions working from these three basic ones, such as villains versus society as another strong versus weak opposition. It all fits into Wright's definition of the classical western plot, from characters, narrative to the oppositions.

III

Preacher – Jesse's Quest

The plot that drives the *Preacher* is Jesse's search for God. That is Jesse's quest. It's through Jesse's quest, for example, that they end up meeting serial killer Si Coltrane. Cassidy knows Si and thinks Si might be able to help Jesse find God,

that's how Jesse meets up with Si. In some arcs, Jesse's quest is perhaps in the background, but it is there. The third arc, the first arc in the second book (*Until the End of the World* (1997)) tells the story of Jesse's past. Jesse and Tulip are taken hostage by Jesse's family, of whom Jesse's grandmother is the matriarch, because Jesse had left his post in Annville. Unbeknown to Jesse is the fact that God gets involved as he helps Jesse's family by making sure they aren't affected by Jesse's 'Word' (his ability to make people do whatever he says). This is only temporary as God practically uses Jesse's family to give Jesse a warning to stop his quest. God seems to have made sure that Jesse's family would find him and thus made sure both he and Tulip lived. The following arc, the fourth, begins after Jesse and Tulip have taken timeout from Jesse's quest. They are discussing it when the arc opens. Unlike the 'Salvation' arc this is not a break in the narrative from Jesse's quest; Jesse may have taken a break away from his quest, but the narrative jumps over that. The quest is still a part of the fourth arc. In the fourth arc the Grail and Herr Starr are introduced, and they have a lot to do with Jesse's quest. Genesis merging with Jesse is at the centre of it all. The Grail is after Jesse because he is merged with Genesis. Jesse is after God because he is merged with Genesis, which is how Jesse knows of God's absence. Genesis is at the centre of everything. The fourth arc, which takes up the latter half of the second book and the entire third book, doesn't seem to have much of anything to do with Jesse's quest to begin with. But, it's in the fourth arc that Jesse gets a second warning from God and Jesse gets information on Genesis from its father, an angel in captive by the Grail, both important in Jesse's quest. Jesse's quest may be in the background for long stretches but the quest is always near, always important to the narrative.

A quest of some kind is quite well known in westerns and shows up in various ways. *The Searchers* (1956), by John Ford, revolves around Ethan Edwards' search for his niece, who's abducted by the Comanches. Ethan's quest is to find his niece. In *The Wild Bunch* (1969), by Sam Peckinpah, there are perhaps two quests. One involves a gang of outlaws for the final score, the other a gang of bounty hunters to capture the outlaws. There is a quest for money in Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966) and in Tommy Lee Jones' *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) the quest revolves around keeping a promise and a search for a small town in Mexico. All films are different kinds of westerns. Will Wright claims *The Searchers* (1956) follows the vengeance

plot while *The Wild Bunch* (1969) follows the professional plot (31-32). This idea of a quest, then, pops up repeatedly in westerns, in a wide array of variations and in all different plots and subgenres. John Ford's film is a classic western, Tommy Lee Jones' is a contemporary western and Sergio Leone's film is a spaghetti western. Looking back at Will Wright's four plots there seems to be a quest (of some sorts) involved very often. The westerns that deal with bounty hunters are usually about one or more bounty hunter searching, or in pursuit of someone in order to kill him or take him to jail. Vengeance plotted westerns are about the quest for vengeance, obviously, and professional plots are mostly about a quest for money.

Jesse Custer's quest is what drives the entire narrative forward. Jesse's search for God is the basic narrative for the whole series. The basic plot of the *Preacher* is quite similar to *The Searchers* (1956), John Ford's western about Ethan Edwards' search for his niece. No one quite knows what Jesse and Ethan will do when they find what they are looking for. What will Jesse do when, and if, he finds God? What will Ethan do when he finds his niece? Like *The Searchers* (1956), *Preacher* is driven by a search. When Jesse's quest is over so is the narrative of Garth Ennis' *Preacher*.

IV

Preacher and Spaghetti Westerns

Spaghetti westerns are films produced, mostly, between the years 1960 and 1975 by European film companies. In an article about the history of the spaghetti western John Nudge explains that the reason for the beginning of these westerns was due to the dwindling of American Western by 1960 (Nudge, par. 1). At that time, due to the western's popularity, European producers started making westerns themselves. These westerns got nicknamed "spaghetti westerns" by critics who disliked them, but this name is now affectionately used by fans of the spaghetti western. In those fifteen years over six hundred spaghetti westerns were made (Nudge, par. 1). 1964's *A Fistful of Dollars*, Sergio Leone, was a turning point. Director Sergio Leone, an Italian, made the film on a very small budget, but the finished product was considerably more stylish than what had come before and Leone's next film, *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) cemented Leone's reputation,

and became a blueprint for many spaghetti westerns to follow. Sergio Leone is by far and away the best known of all spaghetti western directors, the reason being that he was, quite frankly, better than the rest. His film *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966) is, for example, on film critics Roger Ebert's list of 'Great Movies'. Leone's films are the only spaghetti westerns generally known to those who aren't fans of the spaghetti westerns. There were, however, other good directors involved in the genre, known only by those who know something about spaghetti westerns. Sergio Corbucci, who made *The Great Silence* (1968), which is considered to be one of the best spaghetti westerns, and the third Sergio, Sergio Sollima are both known directors within the spaghetti western genre.

Spaghetti westerns were action films. They were violent, stylish, most often cheap European westerns. They were more violent than the American westerns and more action heavy, with one-liners, music that was as important as the dialogue and featured anti-heroes rather than the classic hero. In Leone's films, the violence was over in a matter of seconds, but the lead up was built up as long as possible, while a film like *Django* (1966), by Sergio Corbucci, was banned in England until 1993 because of violence (Braughton; par. 11). *Django* contained over-the-top violence and over thirty sequels were made, almost none of them official. *Django's* popularity meant others tried imitate the films success. Spaghetti westerns became more over-the-top in terms of violence. *Django Kill!* (1967) is deemed the most brutal by John Nudge (par. 9). Violence and action, and most of the time style, were a guarantee when it came to spaghetti westerns.

Preacher is considerably influenced by spaghetti westerns. The best example is in the Saint of Killers miniseries. The Saint of Killers could be straight out of a spaghetti western. Steve Dillon even gives him several close-ups similar to those often seen in Sergio Leone films: close ups of the eyes, with the entire screen, panel in the comic, showing a close-up of the Saint's eyes. One example is in the first arc where there is a close-up of the Saint of Killer's eyes, with the panel's shape like a widescreen. The spaghetti westerns influence is also seen throughout the series in how violence is portrayed in *Preacher*. Violence in the series is, like in spaghetti westerns, over-the-top, extreme. Steve Dillon, the artist of *Preacher* makes the violence look over-the-top but never disturbing. For example, in the first issue of the series, when the Saint of Killers is introduced he shoots the angel, Pilo, who is sent after him. Dillon has a close up from the side of Pilo after he has been shot and the back of his head is gone. Another panel has

the angel from behind so Pilo's brain, the rest of it, is in view. (29-30). Later in the same arc Cassidy goes into a bar and sees a pile of corpses (91). Based on those descriptions, these scenes seem quite disturbing. In Steve Dillon's hands, however, these gruesome images don't affect the reader nearly as much as it would if his style were more realistic. Dillon's art tends toward the comical in its depiction of violence, which fits in with Ennis' writing.

When the Saint of Killers is around violence isn't far away, neither is his never changing grimacing face or his Colts. His clothes bear similarities to the clothes the three men waiting wear in the opening of Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). Even when he isn't around, though, violence is never that far off. The story is very violent. No matter where Jesse, Tulip and Cassidy go, violence and the Saint of Killers follow.

CHAPTER THREE

ICONOGRAPHY

I

A loner rides into a town on his horse, with either, or both, the vast empty landscape or the town itself in the background. As he enters the town no one is seen. Just the few houses on the either side of what often seems to be the only street. At least it's always the main street. The loner rides straight into the town and stops either at a bar, a saloon, or a hotel. Sometimes one house serves for both, or all. There are countless variations of this imagery. One example occurs in Sergio Leone's film *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964). This image is part of the iconography of the western genre. This imagery is known through films but can be as effective in comics because comics are a visual medium.

Timothy Corrigan and Patricia White's book *The Film Experience* (2004) (a book described in its preface as an introductory film text) describes iconography as "images or image patterns with specific connotations or meanings." (290). Iconography is only found within specific genres. It's not possible to understand iconography without grasping what genre is. The western is a genre with its own characters, narrative and visual style. Here I'll focus on the visual style, the iconography. For the purposes of the following chapters I will use the

aforementioned definition of iconography by Corrigan and White. Although their definition focuses on films, I will use it for comics. Both mediums have their own iconography but so does the western genre. The western has its own iconography regardless of medium, though it is chiefly associated with film. All of these distinctions of iconographies interchange with each other, however.

I will divide the iconography for *Preacher* into two chapters. The first I will call 'the known' where I will discuss Ennis' use of well known western iconography, meaning specific places, such as Monument Valley. The second I'll call 'the unknown' and this will deal with all the anonymous iconography connected to the western, any anonymous bar or a diner for example.

II

From Texas to Monument Valley (The 'Known')

The three most prominent places in *Preacher* known in western iconography are arguably Texas, the Alamo and Monument Valley. I have decided to focus exclusively on these three places because of their importance to *Preacher*. While there may be other noteworthy places, I think these are the three most important to the series. Jesse is from Texas and Alamo and Monument Valley are the locations of two of the biggest showdowns in the story. Texas is a state in the United States and Alamo, is in Texas, and is best known through history because of the Battle of Alamo and Monument Valley is a valley in the United States. However, all three are known through films. In a foreword Garth Ennis wrote for the Saint of Killers miniseries (in *Ancient History*), Ennis talks about films, and the westerns he watched and influenced him (3). The western iconography best known in film is quite important in *Preacher*.

The first book of the series is called *Gone to Texas* (1996). Jesse Custer is from Texas; Salvation is in Texas, and so is the Alamo. The series also opens and climaxes in Texas. In other words, Texas is important in the world of the *Preacher*, and especially in Jesse's world. Everything always goes back to Texas. Jesse goes to France, New York and San Francisco, among other places, but still everything leads back to Texas. When Jesse himself is alone after the events in *War in the Sun* (1999), the sixth book, he finds himself in the small town of

Salvation, Texas. As for the importance of Texas in western iconography a good examples are two recent western films: Tommy Lee Jones' *Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) and the Cohen brothers' film *No Country for Old Men* (2007), the former being more of a straightforward western, with both taking place in Texas. Older westerns include *Red River* (1948), about a man who wants to start a ranch in Texas, and *Rio Lobo* (1970), set in Texas, where Rio Lobo is situated. Texas has been and still is a part of western iconography, from the earliest westerns to those of today.

In *Preacher*, Monument Valley is where Herr Starr goes all out to catch Jesse Custer with the military at his side. However, the Saint of Killers shows up and ruins Herr Starr's plans. Monument Valley is best known in western iconography because of John Ford. John Ford was a director who made, among others, the films *The Searchers* (1956) and *The Stagecoach* (1939). Both of these films were shot in Monument Valley. John Ford made a lot of westerns, and most of them in Monument Valley. In fact, so well known is John Ford's use of Monument Valley that Sergio Leone went to Monument Valley specifically to shoot one scene for his film *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). Monument Valley has, therefore, become very well known in western iconography. In *Preacher*, Monument Valley is the location of one of two big showdowns, the other being the final showdown at the Alamo. It is in Monument Valley where Jesse Custer drops out of an airplane and is thought to be dead by Cassidy and Tulip. This is one of three big showdowns between Jesse and the Grail. The first is in Masada, France, whose outside resembles Monument Valley, the second in Monument Valley and the third at the Alamo.

As is the case with Monument Valley, Alamo is the location of a showdown. The climax of the entire series takes place at the Alamo, the final showdown between Cassidy and Jesse and the final confrontation between Jesse and Herr Starr. The Alamo was built, according to the Alamo's website, in 1724 on its present site where it "served as home to missionaries and their Indian converts for nearly seventy years." (par. 1) It is best known as the setting of the Battle of the Alamo where "a small band of Texans held out for thirteen days against the Centralist army of General Antonio López de Santa Anna." (Alamo, par.1). Today, the Alamo is also well known through films such as John Wayne's film *The Alamo* (1960) and in 2004 a film by the same name was made about the Battle of the Alamo.

These three places are very important in the world of the *Preacher*. Texas is, perhaps, of most importance. Jesse is from Texas and the series opens and climaxes in Texas. Texas, unlike Monument Valley and Alamo, is more than a place for a showdown. Jesse keeps going back to Texas. The Alamo, the series' location for the climax, is in Texas. The only place, I've discussed, that has nothing to do with Texas is Monument Valley. Monument Valley is the location of the series' biggest showdown in scale. All three places are known through films. Texas is, perhaps, linked to western iconography specifically because of films. They certainly strengthened the link between the two. The Alamo is known through history and the history is known thorough film. Monument Valley is known exclusively through John Ford's use of it in his westerns.

III

Bars, Diners and Motels (The 'Unknown')

By 'Unknown' I simply mean iconography not known by any specific name, anonymous. Such as any bar or saloon. Places that are seen in countless westerns, whatever the medium. Western iconography includes much more of the 'unknown' iconograhpy than ever of the 'known' iconography. The same goes for the *Preacher*. Throughout the series there is a lot of what I call 'unknown' iconography. I will, however, again focus on three of the most prominent uses of it: bars, diners and motels.

Western iconography has, in one form or another, always included hotels or motels, bars, or saloons, or diners. In the contemporary western the motel seems to have replaced the hotel seen in the old west and diners are, almost, exclusively known in contemporary westerns. In both westerns I mentioned before (*The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada* (2005) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007)) diners and motels are, if not prominent, then close by. Another example is in Sergio Leone's *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) where the image of saloons and hotels is recurrent throughout the film. In the television show *Deadwood*, we have the Gem Saloon and the Gem's competition, The Bella Union. Both places are very important in the town of Deadwood and in the TV series itself. These are central

places in towns of the western and are, as is the often the case, seemingly, at least, in the middle of town.

Jesse and Cassidy repeatedly go to bars, most of the time without Tulip. Several of the stories they tell each other of their own past include bars. The *Preacher* begins in a diner in Texas where Jesse, Cassidy and Tulip are figuring out what happened up until they arrived at the diner. Examples of the stories they tell each other is when Jesse tells Cassidy and Tulip, of how Genesis came to be merged with him. Jesse begins his story in a bar where Jesse gets drunk and says some dumb things, which he says is the explanation for a full church the following day. It is in the church in the middle of mass that Genesis gets merged with Jesse. Cassidy, later in the story, tells Jesse a short version of his life and a big feature in there is a bar he frequented for twenty-thirty years in New York. Bars are the most consistent image connected to the western iconography throughout the series. Because of all the travels of Jesse, Cassidy and Tulip they often stay at motels. After Jesse and Tulip get together there are several scenes where they talk to each other in motels throughout America. Of the three I mentioned, bars, diners and motels, diners appears the fewest times.

What I call the 'unknown' western iconography is littered throughout the series, not only in bars, diner and motels. In the fifth book, for example, Jesse, Tulip and Cassidy go to a graveyard where Jesse is trying to learn more about Genesis through voodoo. Graveyards are, at times, prominent in westerns. In *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966) the climax takes place in a graveyard. The graveyard isn't specifically noted in western iconography, but can be seen as such in *Preacher*. I saw similarities between the two. Bars, diners and motels are always there, however, and they are definitely noted in western iconography.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHARACTERS

I

As is the case in all genres, westerns have their own set of characters that appear in numerous stories, regardless of the medium. There are both sets of characters known by what they do, such as bounty hunters or sheriffs and by who they are.

The hero, for example, is often someone who doesn't run when others do, has a strong code of what is right and wrong and follows that code to the death. Sometimes the villain similarly follows some kind of code, which he follows to his demise. Garth Ennis, in his aforementioned foreword from *Ancient History* (1998), says that like the stories he grew up on the hero would stand for what's right, have a rogue sidekick, and a girl who would be beautiful (4). He used these stereotypes of western characters and made his own set of characters. It's clear, for example, that Jesse Custer stands for what is right and just and Tulip is the beautiful girl.

In this chapter I am going to discuss some of the main characters of *Preacher*. First and most important is Jesse Custer, Ennis' own variation on the western hero, where I'll discuss the importance of Jesse's quest from his standpoint. As well as discussing Jesse, I'll look at John Wayne who appears throughout the series as Jesse's friend. Secondly I'll discuss Cassidy and Tulip O'Hare. Neither is a prime example of a western character but both are immensely important to both the story and Jesse. Thirdly, there is the Saint of Killers. I'll discuss the Saint's own miniseries and the Saint of Killers as a representation of the old west.

II

Jesse Custer

Jesse Custer isn't your average preacher. He drinks, smokes, curses and doesn't have a problem with beating anyone up so long as he thinks whoever is on the receiving end deserves it. As seen in the third arc of the series (from *Until the End of the World* (2nd book)) Jesse had a difficult childhood. At an early age he saw his father shot. He lost his mother not long thereafter and grew up with his grandmother. His grandmother had plans for Jesse. Jesse wasn't allowed to live his own life. He ran away from home several times always to be caught and, eventually, became a preacher as his grandmother wanted. It is in Annville, where Jesse serves as a preacher, that he gets merged with Genesis. After which he leaves and starts on his quest. Jesse's character is described by Ennis, in a foreword in *Ancient History*, as a man who "stands four-square for what is right and just" (4). Jesse doesn't walk away from things he believes in and sticks by his

friends. He has a code, a strong sense of what is right and wrong, from which he doesn't waver. Jesse believes his quest stands for what is right and just. He believes that God did wrong when he left his throne and is planning on making God answer to mankind for leaving. Jesse never wavers in his belief, though he does, once, waver in his quest. This one time occurs when he and Tulip are caught by Jesse's grandmother. She is the only person that gets Jesse to, almost, quit his quest. At no other time does he waver. Jesse does everything he possibly can to protect those he loves, which, at times, gets him into trouble with Tulip.

John Wayne appears to Jesse Custer as an imaginary friend, or ghost. It is John Wayne that talks Jesse out of quitting his quest. John Wayne was an actor, best known from westerns, often under direction of either Howard Hawks or John Ford. Today John Wayne is known as a part of the western iconography. He has become almost synonymous with the western, especially in America. In the *Preacher*, John Wayne is himself, but not quite. He appears as himself, but dressed as a character from a western. He is dressed as the audience knows him best, as a western character. This is because, except for once, John Wayne, in *Preacher*, is only seen by Jesse and Jesse knows Wayne from his films. The exception is when Jesse is being told of the occasion when his father John Custer meets John Wayne in Vietnam during the war. John Wayne gave John Custer a lighter with the "Fuck Communism" written on it. Jesse Custer, eventually, got his father's lighter. John Wayne, as he appears to Jesse is, rather, John Wayne's film persona. John Wayne appears to Jesse as the western hero from all of Wayne's films. Jesse notes at one point that Wayne never gives him any information he doesn't know already. Jesse admits that Wayne isn't real. Still, it is after this that Wayne talks Jesse out of giving up. Whether Wayne is real or not doesn't matter to Jesse. He sees and hears him, believes he does, and that's what's important. John Wayne seemed always be there for Jesse when no else is. John Wayne is, real or not, very important to Jesse Custer.

Jesse Custer, along with John Wayne and the Saint of Killers, is the most essential western character in *Preacher*. The difference between Jesse, John and the Saint is that Jesse represents Ennis' take on the western hero. Both John Wayne and the Saint of Killers represent the old west, film and myth, respectively. But it is Jesse's story and it is Jesse's quest that drives the narrative.

III

Proinsias Cassidy and Tulip O'Hare

Cassidy and Tulip are, after Jesse, the series' most important characters. Tulip is a very strong character; she doesn't let anyone walk over her. She is also a very good marksman with a gun, unlike Jesse. Cassidy is an Irish vampire who is around ninety when Jesse meets him. Cassidy was born at the turn of the century. He quickly gets close with Jesse and rapidly they form a strong bond. They fit very well together, which Jesse says is because they have the same sense of humour (*Gone to Texas*, Ennis, 138). However, after Jesse sees Cassidy's true nature the friendship goes wrong. Cassidy's true colours, perhaps, shine through when Tulip and he think Jesse is dead, in the aftermath of Monument Valley, when Cassidy, as good as, keeps Tulip hostage for months.

Traditionally in the western, it's the hero who is better with a gun, who is faster. Even in what Will Wright calls the transition theme where the hero and heroine are equals (15). The hero is, however, always better with a gun. In *Preacher* Tulip is better than Jesse with a gun and is Jesse's equal in every way. She can, despite Jesse's worries, take care of herself. If Tulip finds herself in a difficult situation, likelihoods are she'll figure a way out. On several occasions, for example, Tulip helps Jesse out where he would otherwise, in all probability, be dead. In the third book of the series, *Proud Americans*, when Jesse and Tulip go to France to save Cassidy they are attacked at a restaurant. Without Tulip, Jesse would not have gotten away (59-64).

Cassidy is Jesse's best friend, until he first professes his love for Tulip and shows his true colours. Jesse starts getting the parts Cassidy left out of the stories Cassidy had told Jesse. Cassidy changes most of all throughout the story. Despite this, there isn't much to tell of him as a western character other than his being Jesse's friend. That is, perhaps, the only distinction that makes Cassidy in any way a western character is that he is the best friend of the western hero, in a story that's a western.

Cassidy and Tulip have, just about, the least association to the western genre of the main characters. Garth Ennis says in the foreword (*Ancient History*) that he wanted to have all the characters in his western that he saw. He says "...the girl would be beautiful, the sidekick a rogue..." (4), but beyond that Cassidy,

especially, and Tulip aren't easily fit into the mould of any western characters and Ennis' description is quite vague. Jesse is the hero who does what is right and just and is Ennis' take on the western hero he saw as he grew up. Cassidy and Tulip, on the other hand, go much further away from those roots than Jesse ever does. They are characters that fit into the world Ennis has made in *Preacher* as opposed to characters that fit into any stereotype of western characters.

IV

The Saint of Killers

The Saint of Killers is a character that walks straight out of the old west, literally and figuratively. Garth Ennis mentions Clint Eastwood and Lee Marvin as influences for the Saint in a foreword to the Saint's miniseries (in *Ancient History*) (4). The miniseries tells the origin of how the Saint became the Saint of Killers. He was killed by an outlaw and went to hell, where he became the Saint of Killers. He had been looking for a doctor for his sick family when he was interrupted by a gang of outlaws which caused him to be too late to save his family. He went to seek revenge on the gang. He almost got his revenge alive but ran out of bullets. He then came back as the Saint of Killers and finished what he had started. The Saint of Killers is, by design, similar to Clint Eastwood. Clint Eastwood is a western icon. That came both with his role in Sergio Leone's dollars trilogy and Eastwood himself went on himself to make several westerns. All of Eastwood's westerns happen in what I've referred to as the old west. The old west means the myth of the west sometime in the nineteenth century.

The Saint's miniseries is Garth Ennis' only chance of telling a story in *Preacher* that occurs in this old west, this myth. Ennis tells the Saint's story as a myth in the miniseries. The story starts with an old man telling a young man, a killer, the story of the Saint of Killers. What is perhaps unusual about the story is that it happens during winter, unlike most westerns. Similarities can be seen between the opening panels of the miniseries and a spaghetti western that takes place in winter, *The Great Silence* (1968) by Sergio Corbucci. Specifically, the first panels when we see the Saint for the first time bear similarities to the opening scenes of the film. Staying within the spaghetti western genre, the characters seen

in the miniseries could all be from a spaghetti western film, such as Sergio Leone's films. Leone made a landscape out of faces. All the characters in the miniseries have peculiar faces, especially the gang of outlaws.

The Saint of Killers represents the myth of the old west and John Wayne the western films. They are the most essential western characters. It might also be possible to look at the two of them as the classic western and the spaghetti western. John Wayne's films are all American westerns. The Saint of Killers' miniseries and the Saint himself seem to be more influenced by spaghetti westerns, and Clint Eastwood's influence on the Saint strengthens that link.

Conclusion

I wanted to look at *Preacher* with regards to western narrative, iconography and characters. As I have already mentioned, Joe R. Landsdale in his introduction to the first book in the series described *Preacher* as “part western, part crime, part horror, and part fucked up strange...” (5) I believe I’ve made a solid case for *Preacher* being a western first and foremost.

From narrative to iconography to the characters, *Preacher* is a western. Jesse is a western hero who drives the narrative forward. Jesse’s quest is what runs throughout the series. The only time Jesse’s quest is not to be found is in the ‘Salvation’ arc, an arc that follows Will Wright’s definition of the classical western plot, Jesse comes into a town, defeats the villains, and leaves the town. Visually, the series begins in a diner, finishes with Jesse and Tulip riding into the sunset and climaxes at the Alamo, and has a confrontation, between the hero and the villain at Monument Valley. A lot of bars, motels, along with diners are littered throughout the series. Outside this there are references to western films and western iconography. John Wayne is, for example, a western icon. Known for his films, and has become a part of western iconography.

John Wayne is also one of three of the purest western characters in *Preacher*. The other two are the Saint of Killers and the hero, Jesse Custer. They three are all very important characters that are there throughout the entire series. Looking past those three, however, things get a little murkier. Tulip and Cassidy aren’t really western characters. They are as Tulip is the heroine and Cassidy is the sidekick, the hero’s best friend. Tulip is a heroine and Jesse’s equal. She is a much tougher female character than often seen in westerns. Cassidy is a vampire, something not seen in westerns at all. *Preacher* is a western first, whatever else it may be.

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