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In *The Virginian* by Owen Wister, several characters act as foils of the protagonist, the Virginian. Each foil helps to demonstrate the ways in which the Virginian is an exception to both the Eastern society the narrator and the Virginian's love interest, Molly Wood, are more accustomed, and the Western society of the cow-punchers.

The narrator acts as a foil to the Virginian in competence in the skills needed in the West and in understanding of the decorum of the Western society. The narrator bias of a man who is visiting the west for the first time heightens the differences he sees in the Virginian. When the narrator first arrives, he experiences several rebuffs of his attempted familiarity with the Virginian (Wister 16-17). The Virginian's rebuffs help the narrator realize he has violated the proper etiquette a stranger should take in a first meeting. On his first night, the narrator wants to leave a tense situation, though he doesn't because he was "ashamed to go" (27), while the Virginian capably defuses a situation. Once the narrator settles in, he tells us of a variety of his experiences as a "tenderfoot" where the Virginian had to watch over him and save him from himself (52). In these scenes, we not only see the narrator's incompetence and attempts to learn of the west, we see how very proficient the Virginian is in his field.

Finally, in the end of the narrative, when the narrator is nearing competence in his new skills, he learns of the decorum of the West regarding justice. In the beginning of the episode, the narrator is horrified by the practice, though he understand it is necessary to

keep justice in the West, and observes that he would not have been able to do it himself (256). He also believes Ed to be the more moving and upsetting display, resisting his death to the end, where the Virginian believes that Steve, who took his death calmly, was the more disturbing (257). Through their contrasts, the reader can see how well the Virginian can navigate his local ecology and society.

Another major foil to the Virginian is his friend Steve. According to the Virginian, they began working at the same time, and became friends, running the same jobs, and given the same opportunities as each other (269). However, the Virginian chose to remain honest, where Steve decided to become a cattle thief. When the Virginian is talking to Shorty, he explains his personal theories on the relationship between wealth and personal worth, how his money seemed to last longer when he had worked hard and honestly to earn it (180). These contrasts show the personal integrity and personal code that the Virginian uses to guide his life in his society.

A variety of other characters briefly appear to serve as foils to the Virginian in brief ways. When the Virginian encounters Mr. Taylor towards the beginning of the novel, the Virginian jokes with him about his position as family man, settled down and trying to form a settled community, whereas the Virginian is unfettered (46-47). In his discussion of Shorty, the Virginian points out that he didn't do anything "*well*" (261). The Virginian, on the other hand, seems to excel past the other cowboys, as even in the first scene, the narrator watches him easily rope a horse that no other cow-puncher could. Shorty is also illiterate, unable to even read a thermometer, while the Virginian is able to read Shakespeare and other literature given to him by Molly Wood. The traveling salespeople serve as foils on the first night the narrator and Virginian spend in town, to

show the Virginian's wit, sense of humor, and quick thinking. Through his ingenuity, he is able to trick the salesman into giving up his bed (19-34). In these scenes, Wister gives us a sketch of the mind and manner of the Virginian.

Wister uses characters as foils throughout the novel to create a portrait of the Virginian, and the ideals he embodies. The Virginian's character wouldn't allow boasting, or much talking of himself. Through the characters around the Virginian, Wister's creation is seen as stronger, faster, wiser, wittier, and more sensitive than others of the West.

Works Cited

Wister, Owen. The Virginian. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.