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The Desire for a Home: Individualism in Louis L'Amour's Dark Canyon

Guy Redmer
Tamkang University, Taiwan
guyredmer@yahoo.com

Abstract

Individualism is a hallmark descriptor of American culture. Frederick Jackson Turner's seminal Frontier Thesis argued that such individualism has its roots in the frontier. While some have questioned this, subsequent studies have found empirical support for the cultural significance of the frontier experience. It is therefore worth revisiting relevant literature to explore depictions of individualism and all of its nuances. This paper examines individualism in Louis L'Amour's *Dark Canyon*. L'Amour's work, spanning more than fifty years, have embodied the quintessential Western novel. This paper's analysis is guided by a proposed framework of individualism coming from inherent traits of the American frontier. These include the following: selective migration, rugged conditions, and opportunity for advancement through hard work. The author posits that this picture of individualism is reflected and expressed in *Dark Canyon*.

Keywords: individualism, Frontier Thesis, Louis L'Amour

Introduction

Individualism is a keyword descriptor of American culture. It has been defined in deceptively simple terms such as "a preference for a loosely knit social structure in which individuals take care of themselves and their immediate families only" (Hofstede, 1980, p. 87). Of course, research has found individualism to be more complex and nuanced than a short definition can embody. Numerous studies have also found that individualism may be expressed in diverse ways such as dominant use of personal pronouns, infrequent children names, and innovation (Gorodnichenko & Roland, 2011; Kashima & Kashima, 1998; Twenge et al., 2010). But what is the origin of American individualism? In 1920, historian Frederick Jackson Turner aimed to address this question with his seminal Frontier Thesis. Turner argued that the American frontier, with its wild and rugged land, gave birth to the American identity and understanding of individualism.

Since then, some inquiries have supported the formative power of the frontier experience on American culture. One of these found extensive empirical support (Bazzi et al., 2020). Slatta (2001) postulated that Turner's Frontier Thesis affected literary fiction and other depictions of the old American West. Whether it is the thesis itself or cultural and historical realities that have impacted the arts, it is worthwhile to revisit such works and examine their depictions of individualism. This paper takes the Frontier Thesis and another study by Bazzi and colleagues (2020) as a conceptual framework of American individualism and applies it to Louis L'Amour's novel *Dark Canyon*. For L'Amour, the land and nature play central roles in the narrative. Traits of this wild frontier can be seen as formative of the characters and their actions. These traits are selective migration, rugged conditions, and opportunity for advancement through hard work.

The Frontier Thesis

Turner maintained that the wide-open frontier shaped American beliefs at a pivotal time when the culture was still being formed. Essentially, "these free lands promoted

individualism, economic equality, freedom to rise, democracy" (2012, p. 259). The existence of an open and untamed land held out hope for prosperity, new life, second chances, and human autonomy, but only for those willing to endure the risks and effort. The frontier was in fact settled. Over time, Americans moved onto the land and had the frontier experience. This experience and its subsequent stories helped form the national culture and identity. As Turner (2012, p. iv) wrote, "the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American Development".

Bazzi and colleagues (2020) aimed to analyze the Frontier Thesis with a modern understanding of political economy and social psychology. They theorized that the frontier attracted a certain kind of migrant, those who were already predisposed to an individualist lifestyle. Their study, using census data and geographic information system mapping (GIS), found evidence for this selective migration. A significant portion of settlers were working age males, illiterate, and foreign-born. This is consistent with other data in other studies (Jokela, 2009). The researchers also theorized two factors underlying the selective migration. First, the rugged conditions of the frontier fostered a kind of adaptive self-reliance. Supporting this hypothesis, it was found that infrequent names correlated with higher socioeconomic status on the frontier more than other places. Infrequent names were also associated with lower rates of migration off the frontier. Second, the open and untamed land held opportunity for socioeconomic advancement through hard work. In fact, the team's data showed that intergenerational economic mobility was greater on the frontier than elsewhere. The following analysis of *Dark Canyon* adopts this framework of individualism on the frontier.

Louis L'Amour and *Dark Canyon*

Louis L'Amour remains one of the most popular American writers of the old American West. He called his writing "frontier stories," producing 100 novels and even more short stories. At the time of his death in 1988, his books had sold hundreds of millions of copies. Today, most of his books are still in print. He received numerous awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Ronald Regan in in 1984. The latter is certainly a testament to what has been considered to be literary expression and preservation of American national identity.

L'Amour began his life in a North Dakota farming community. His father was a large animal veterinarian and his grandfather had fought in the U.S. Civil War. Two of his uncles had worked on ranches for decades. It was from these family members that L'Amour began to hear stories about the frontier (*The Official Louis L'Amour Website*, 2022). His older sister was a librarian at the local library. Here, L'Amour spent countless hours reading. But eventually, bank failures destroyed the regional economy of the Midwest. The elder L'Amour took his family on the road for seven years. It was during this time that Louis did a number of jobs. He worked with cattle and joined other laborers in saw mills and lumber yards. Not surprisingly, it was also during this period that Louis met a colorful group of people that later inspired his literary characters. He met the former marshal of Dodge City, a former member of the Dalton Gang, Texas Rangers, cowboys, and settlers who had survived gunfights. These were people who knew the frontier of the nineteenth century because they had lived it. As he grew older, Louis traveled the country on his own working a number of different jobs. He spent a great deal of time hiking and traveling the former frontier that would later become the settings for so many of his stories. Always on the move, he even traveled across the world as a merchant seaman. But throughout all of these experiences, he never ceased reading and hungering for more education. Although he had dropped out of school after tenth grade, he always spent countless hours in

libraries and bookstores. After serving in World War Two, L'Amour's writing career really began in earnest. This was the beginning of his eventual fame and being most known for his Westerns or "frontier stories."

Dark Canyon was first published as a paperback in 1963. It is one of many shorter length novels written by L'Amour. Set in the Utah wilderness, *Dark Canyon* opens with the Colburn Gang. Led by Jim Colburn, it is revealed that the four men had hunted buffalo together. They stayed together and began branding cows, but ended up working for a corrupt rancher named Weston. He and his close friends were cheating men out of wages. After a few months, Colburn and the others heard these stories and quit. Weston then arbitrarily deducted two months pay from each of them. Colburn advised his friends to avoid an uncertain gunfight. Instead, they hid in the nearby mountains and waited. When Weston rode alone, the Colburn Gang ambushed him and took everything he had. From that point, the men drifted into a life of lawlessness, robbing stagecoaches and banks. Still, they planned carefully to avoid killing men.

In the opening scene, Colburn returns to camp with a young man named Gaylord Riley, the main protagonist of *Dark Canyon*. Colburn tells the others that he had caught a group of cheaters during a card game, but when he confronted them he was outgunned. Apparently, Riley had seen the whole thing while sitting at the bar. He calmly spoke up and told the other card players to deal him in the game or return Colburn's money. The other players seemed to know Riley and took his threat seriously. They returned Colburn's money and told him to ride off. At that point, Colburn invited Riley to join him, knowing that the former had probably saved his life.

Riley turns out to be quiet but dependable. He's skilled with a gun and doesn't spend much money or drink a lot, although he does buy drinks for the others. One day, Weaver, a member of the gang, convinces Colburn that they should help Riley escape from this life. None of them were meant to be outlaws, he says. They are constantly on the run with no land and no home. Later, by a river, Weaver asks Riley about his own past. Here, the reader learns that Riley had been living in Texas with his father. His mother had died previously, and his father only had a few cows, hoping to increase the number. One night, some men came to steal the cows. In the process, they injured Riley and killed his father. As Riley tells it, he was taken in by an Indian who later helped him track down three of the five men. Riley saw them spending his father's money. Incensed, he killed them and never stopped looking for the other two. Weaver and the rest of the gang convince Riley to take his money and fulfill his dream of purchasing cattle. In fact, they all pitch in some of their own money and give it to Riley. They tell him that some day they will need a place too, a place to rest and have "honest beef." Hesitantly, Riley takes the money and tells the gang that they will always have a place with him.

Riley chooses some open land he had seen before, near the small town of Rimrock. He has a dream of building a ranch here. Despite the land being rugged, he believes that it is possible to raise Hereford cattle. The only other person in Rimrock with Herefords is Dan Shattuck. A widower, Shattuck lives on his ranch with his niece, Marie. The other big name in Rimrock is Martin Hardcastle. He owns a saloon, a cattle ranch, and a prostitution house. Hardcastle had once told Dan Shattuck that he wanted to marry Marie. Shattuck angrily rejected, being very protective of Marie and not wanting her with anyone that had a questionable reputation. Hardcastle is too proud for the rejection, and he plans revenge. Meanwhile, Riley hires two cowhands. Cruz, a Mexican, and Darby Lewis, both become good helpers and friends of Riley. Riley immediately gets to work surveying his land and building a house. After getting to know some of the locals, Riley learns of some Hereford cattle in far off Spanish Fork. Nobody believes that he can bring the cattle all the way to

Rimrock. The main trail has other property owners and the land is too rugged without enough water. Still, Riley counts on recent rainfall and uses part of the Outlaw Trail. On this stretch of land, some would steal cattle and then drive it south to be sold in Arizona or Mexico. Cattle ranchers along the trail would help drive the cattle on for some form of payment. They did not want the cattle on their land anyway. Through faith and sweat, Riley successfully brings the cattle up to his land.

Hardcastle hatches a plan to eliminate both Riley and Shattuck. He hires some men to steal some of Shattuck's Herefords and then sell them to Riley. Unbeknownst to Riley, not only is the cattle stolen but one of Hardcastle's men was part of the gang that killed his father. Hardcastle hopes to get Shattuck and Riley into a gunfight. Then, he would survive to take Marie. The first attempt fails because the local sheriff and Shattuck himself have their doubts that Riley stole the cattle. Meanwhile, Marie and Riley fall in love. Riley hopes to eventually bring Marie to the home he is building. Sometime throughout all of this, Weaver has been shot and injured. The Colburn Gang believes that this may be a good time to go to Riley for help and leave their life of crime. Against Weaver's wishes, they make contact with Riley and take their injured comrade to the ranch. This occurs just in time, because Hardcastle has a new strategy. He aims to kill Shattuck outright and send his hired men to kill Riley. Later, he would make it look like a fight between Shattuck and Riley over stolen cattle. In the end, Shattuck is only injured. His friend and ranch helper, Pico, witnesses the fight and kills Hardcastle. The Colburn Gang, Riley, and Cruz get warned of the coming surprise attack on the ranch. They take their positions and win the battle.

Selective migration and rugged conditions

Most of the characters of *Dark Canyon* are single men who were aiming to build their own destiny on the frontier. They are either single or widowed and none of them are depicted as having a high education. Rather, they are hard working laborers. Thus, moving to the rugged frontier, with its need for self-reliance, can be seen as an attractive and natural option for them. Even Martin Hardcastle is described as a self-made man.

> From a repeat voter and hired slugger, he had gone on to become a watchman at a gambling house, a gambler, master of a bawdy house, and finally, owner of his own gambling joint. The sudden birth of Rimrock had offered opportunity and he had moved in, opened his own saloon and then bought another. He had prospered immediately, the saloons crowded, the house on the river doing a land-office business. He bought the livery stable, and opened a store close by (L'Amour, 1997, p. 32).

While Hardcastle had moved west from New York, the local sheriff, Ed Larsen, is a single, second generation Swede. As Riley reflects on the residents of Rimrock, L'Amour describes Sheriff Larsen.

> An old man, a careful man, a man unafraid. He was a Mormon, and in good standing with the Church. He had come west with the Handcart Mormons as a child—the Mormons, most of them from Europe, who walked across the

> plains pushing their few belongings in handcarts (L'Amour, 1997, p. 39).

In fact, L'Amour briefly mentions the Mormons more than once in the short novel, as if they are as part of the environment as the land itself. They are clearly a part of the selective migration into the frontier, albeit for their desire to seek religious refuge. For example, Riley is accused of murdering a man from whom he bought cattle. He reflects on his predicament.

> Riley knew it was unlikely that anyone would believe he had brought his herd of cattle through the rough, dry country where ordinarily two or three men on horseback were lucky to find enough water. And the men who knew anything about that country were few indeed, and unlikely to want to appear. Several were Mormons, hiding out for reasons best known to themselves, hard-working men who had found safety in the remote mountains of the Roost country (L'Amour, 1997, p. 79).

Of course, the main protagonist himself, Gaylord Riley, is also an image of selective migration. He grew up on the frontier with a self-reliant father, and then chose to stay. But beyond that, Riley has a deep love and awe for the land. Perhaps this is another facet of selective migration. Certainly, many who migrated and remained on the frontier may have had a deep affinity for the rugged conditions and wilderness itself. In *Dark Canyon*, Riley's love for the land is clear.

> When Gaylord Riley was only sixteen he had camped for two nights near a spring at the head of Fable Canyon. They had been still, cold nights in the fall, with stars hanging so low it seemed a man might knock them down with a stick. Never had he forgotten those magnificent distances, the mountains and canyons, the tremendous reach of unpeopled land, and now he had returned, as he had known he would. To some the immensity, the solitude, the vastness of sky and landscape would have been appalling, frightening; but to Gaylord Riley, whose nature was attuned to all this, it offered something to the spirit. Near the head of Fable Canyon, on a bench at the foot of the Sweet Alice Hills, he began the house that would be home (L'Amour, 1997, p. 15).

> When Riley worked at the walls of the house he was building he could look out over the country around him, and it was an empty land. Yet it had not always been so. There were cliff dwellings in Fable Canyon, there were other

> ruins in several of the neighboring canyons and in the basin. Who were those people? Where had they come from, and where had they gone? Above all, why had they gone? Since the Navajo had been moved from Bosque Redondo and settled in northern New Mexico, a few had drifted into the vast lands south of the Colorado and San Juan rivers…It was a haunted, mysterious land, and the ghosts of those all but forgotten people lingered. The thought of them was often at the fringes of Riley's mind (L'Amour, 1997, p. 42).

As the above excerpt reflects, there are several descriptions in the novel of Riley exploring the land and having a reverence for it. He feels a spiritual connection to the nature and the former inhabitants. With pride, Riley describes the topography and his plans for a ranch. He knows every water source and every patch of grass. He knows the optimal location for his cattle to graze and his house to be built. In the following excerpt, Riley is talking to his hired cowhand, Cruz.

> Cruz looked at the scene with astonishment, then crossed himself. "It is a devil's land," he whispered. "I had heard of it, but—not—never like this!"
> "We're eight thousand feet up," Riley said quietly, "and it is here I have begun to build, here I shall live. Right down there in front of us is Fable Canyon, and we'll hold our stock there through the worst of winter. The rest of the time we'll graze them on the plateaus or over in the basin to the north. There's thousands of acres of good grazing over there, but we can't run too many head. This country won't stand overgrazing. I've seen it done, and seen thistles come in, and sage…the cattle won't eat them" (L'Amour, 1997, pp. 34-35).

Most of the characters in L'Amour's novels are looking for opportunity on the frontier. In many cases, they have already achieved economic success, such as Dan Shattuck and Martin Hardcastle in *Dark Canyon*. Gaylord Riley, as the central character, is of course no exception. He has a dream to own Hereford cattle and prosper on a rugged landscape that no one heretofore has ever ventured.

> From the moment Gaylord Riley rode away from the outlaw camp he had been thinking of this place. It was not an area anyone else would be likely to think of. There were better grazing lands available, but they were not better for him. The grazing here was good. There was timber for building, there was an

> unlimited view, which he liked, good water, and no near neighbors (L'Amour, 1997, p. 16).

Everyone in the small town of Rimrock tells Riley that Dan Shattuck is the only one with Hereford cattle, and that he had worked hard to get them. There was no way he was going to sell. But Riley is not dissuaded. He learns of a man named Beaman in Spanish Fork who had tried to bring three thousand head of Hereford cattle from Oregon to Kansas. He had failed to get over the huge expanse of land, having run out of money. Riley makes the trip to Spanish Fork and persuades Beaman to sell him the cattle at a bargain price. He then sweats and works for weeks, bringing the cattle over the Outlaw Trail.

> Slowly, the herd strung out. Riley rode a good horse, and he needed it, for here and there a steer started for wider pastures to right or left, and both and Cruz were hard put to keep the herd pointed, roughly at least, toward the wide spaces (L'Amour, 1997, p. 66).

> At daylight the herd was moving again, and from out of nowhere a dozen riders had appeared, all top hands, judging by the way they handled themselves and the herd. And so it went as the herd headed south from Castlegate, finally making the swing on the fifth day out…Cruz hesitated, and then he said, "I have heard of the Outlaw Trail, amigo…is this it?"
>
> "Part of it. Canada to Mexico, right down the backbone of the country it goes, with stations all along the route…Up Montana way somebody steals some cattle and they push them into the Outlaw Trail. A rancher on the trail pushes the 'strays' south, and the others do the same. Actually, nobody is stealing except the man who sells them. The others are just moving strays off their places" (L'Amour, 1997, pp. 67-69).

L'Amour does not just describe the hard work of driving the cattle, but also the considerable risk of this venture for upward mobility.

> When Cruz had ridden away, Gaylord Riley watched the drag of the herd drift by. His future rode with this herd; but more than that, the futures of the men who had given him his chance to amount to something in the world. Everything depended on getting the herd through…everything. And he was not at all reassured by the good start they had made, for the roughest, driest

> part of the trail lay ahead. All he owned lay with that her. True, there was money in the bank, money needed to carry him over until he had cattle to sell, but it was little enough, and he would find no such bargain as this herd. Not again (L'Amour, 1997, p. 69).

L'Amour describes this opportunity for advancement in all of his frontier stories. But his writings are somewhat unique in this genre. The protagonist's journey often culminates in a permanent home. Thus, "the movement in many L'Amour fictions is toward stasis, as opposed to the ever onward and outward expansionism of the more classic formula" (Sullivan 78). In classic Westerns, the hero will ride off into the sunset at the end. But L'Amour often preferred a story model in which the central character is looking for a home, a place to build and stay. As the following excerpts show, *Dark Canyon* also has this element.

> Riley became fascinated with the task before him. He was building a house…a home. Never in his life had he had what might properly be called a home, and most of his years had been lived out under the sky. But these very logs he was laying in place, these were the walls of the house where, with luck, he would live out his years. Obsessed with the thought, he drove himself, working harder and faster, until Cruz finally straightened up and drew back.
> "There is always tomorrow, amigo," he said gently.
> Riley straightened up, a little embarrassed. "Of course." He looked across the building at Cruz. "It is just that I never had a home before."
> "Ah?"
> Cruz lit a cigarette. "All the more reason then, to build carefully, build to last" (L'Amour, 1997, pp. 37-38).

> There is always that within man, as deeply seated as is the desire to wander—the desire for a home, for a place that belongs to oneself a shelter away from the world. His own home would be here among these fantastic canyons, these towering spires (L'Amour, 1997, p. 69).

The author of this paper proposes that the 'journey to a home' feature of L'Amour's writing also reflects frontier opportunity. As previously described, research has found support for selective migration to the frontier, partially based on the belief that there was opportunity for advancement. It is not unreasonable to assume that building a home was part of that human quest.

At the end of *Dark Canyon*, L'Amour takes the reader on a generational journey, revealing that the Colburn Gang gave up their life of lawlessness, two of them even

entering law enforcement. We then see one of Riley's descendants on his honeymoon. He and his new wife decided to camp in the Sweet Alice Hills. Their guide and packer shows them interesting finds. The last lines of the novel are:

> Later, when Riley accidentally kicked an old
> cartridge shell out of the earth
> near the fire, the guide glanced at it. "Better
> keep that," he said, "they don't make that kind
> any more" (L'Amour, 1997, p. 149).

Perhaps L'Amour is referring not just to the cartridge shell, but to the people of the frontier. He may have seen that breed of men and women as having faded away. But one thing is for certain, individualism remains a core tenet of American culture and *Dark Canyon* depicts it in classic L'Amour style. His literary expression of individualism appears to be reflective of data that supports the Frontier Thesis.

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Contact

Dr Guy Redmer
Tamkang University
Department of English
No. 151 Yingzhuan Rd.
New Taipei City
Danshui Dist.
Taiwan, ROC 25137
guyredmer@yahoo.com