

ABSTRACT

“Manning the walls, covered with dust, and sunburnt”:
Stoicism in Western Movies

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Movie critics and cultural commentators often describe Western movies and their heroes as stoic. In contemporary language, “stoic” is usually invoked as an adjective for describing people who do not reveal emotion. The stereotypical Western cowboy faces the danger, hardship, and constant uncertainty of his world without trepidation; the description seems apt. However, in ancient Greece and Rome, Stoicism represented a philosophical school of thought that taught its adherents to consider virtue as the only good, vice as the only bad, and everything else as indifferent conditions. In this thesis, I argue that the casual use of “stoic” to describe Westerns may say more than it knows. I identify two Stoic types within the Western genre: the Pop Stoic and the Dutiful Stoic. The Pop Stoics embody the contemporary use of “stoic” and include unflappable, emotionless cowboys. The Dutiful Stoics, however, resemble the tenets of Stoic philosophy in important ways. These characters are resolved to fulfill their duties toward intrinsically good things: friendship, community, and justice. This commitment to duty no matter the cost enables the Dutiful Stoics to maintain equanimity in all situations. I consider four Western characters to support my argument: Blondie from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, Ethan Edwards from *The Searchers*, John T. Chance from *Rio Bravo*, and Wyatt Earp from *My Darling Clementine*.

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“MANNING THE WALLS, COVERED WITH DUST, AND SUNBURNT”:
STOICISM IN WESTERN MOVIES

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During every road trip of my childhood, my parents would turn on our minivan's DVD player, pop in *High Noon*, and enjoy an hour and a half of quiet while the four kids in the back became mesmerized once again by this movie. I owe endless debts to my parents. They constantly support and encourage me, and they model the love of God to me every day. However, I am particularly grateful that they instilled in me a love for good stories and introduced me to old movies about cowboys. I love them and am so proud to be their daughter.

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CHAPTER ONE

Stoicism: Athenian Agora to Self-Help Books

Introduction

What makes a good cowboy? This question sparked a fierce debate among Hollywood directors in the 1950s. On one side, Fred Zinnemann and Gary Cooper defended their 1952 masterpiece, *High Noon*. This film portrayed the good cowboy as one who will stand against injustice even when no one else will join him. However, this cowboy ultimately loses faith in his town and walks away from its norms and laws. On the other side, Howard Hawkes and John Wayne endorsed their 1959 classic *Rio Bravo* in direct response to *High Noon*. This film depicts a tough cowboy who defends his town but refuses to accept help. He wins out in the end, but viewers wonder how much of his independence was truly necessary.

The dispute between these two films provided the idea for this thesis. The warring movies explore important questions: What qualities make a good leader? How should we order our lives in community? What will make us happy? Movies often help us reflect on these questions, but the Western provides a particularly valuable venue for reasoning together. The genre represents modern America's shared origin story. Our society emerged out of the Wild West, and its characters, themes, and ethics are firmly lodged in our imaginations as a result.

However, the Western is also a genre ripe for philosophical inquiry because of its recognizable cowboy archetype. Many major characters in Westerns share a similar personality: they are tough, strong, unruffled, and cool-headed. Frequently, commentators

describe this sort of Western character as stoic, and I argue that this characterization says more than it actually knows. Specifically, I identify two Stoic archetypes in the Western genre: (1) the Pop Stoic and (2) the Dutiful Stoic. While Pop Stoicism reflects the contemporary use of “stoic” as an adjective to describe a resigned person, Dutiful Stoicism presents a character whose duty compels him or her toward unwavering resolve.

In the first chapter, I outline the development of Stoicism, from the Athenian Agora to contemporary self-help books. Stoicism originated in ancient Greece with thinkers like Zeno, Cleanthes of Assos, and Chryssipus. In this era, Stoics focused on the moral life of the individual and questions of logic and metaphysics. Eventually, Stoicism emerged in Rome and gained followers such as Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. The Roman Stoics contemplated political life and ethics, especially. The Greek and Roman traditions of Stoicism provide an intellectual foundation that contemporary Stoic programs have utilized to equip modern people to navigate an unpredictable world. Nevertheless, Stoicism’s primary place in culture today is through the adjectival use of “stoic” to describe a person who does not reveal emotion. In many cases, “stoic” carries a negative connotation by implying that the person stifles natural emotions and refuses to feel empathy towards others. This skepticism toward stoic people sometimes applies to the Western genre and its stoic characters as well.

In the second chapter, I examine the presence of Stoicism in Westerns. By considering two distinct Stoic types, the Pop Stoic and the Dutiful Stoic, I contrast different motivations for a stoic personality. To explore the Pop Stoic, I use the examples of Blondie in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and Ethan in *The Searchers*. These men possess the stoic, unemotive personalities, but their representation of Stoicism stops

there. To illustrate the Dutiful Stoic, I consider the examples of John T. Chance in *Rio Bravo* and Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine*. These characters also possess stoic personalities, but their equanimity proceeds from their resolute duties toward intrinsically good things, such as friendship, family, justice, and community. Therefore, the Dutiful Stoics resemble the Stoic philosophical tradition in noticeable ways.

In the third chapter, I raise three objections against my argument and respond to each. These objections provide an opportunity for refining my argument in several important ways. First, this project simply represents one viewer's interpretation of a classic Western character. I do not claim that Hollywood directors purposefully depicted nuanced forms of Stoicism in their movies. Second, I qualify my argument by admitting that Westerns often defend unabashed racism and sexism. While these prejudices are never permissible, I consider what insights into truth, goodness, and beauty these movies might still offer to viewers. Third, the objections allow me to clarify that a duty toward an ignoble object does not really constitute a duty. This distinction draws a clear line between the selfishness of the Pop Stoics and the honor of the Dutiful Stoics.

Finally, I conclude my thesis by reflecting on the value of Dutiful Stoicism for our culture. Anti-heroes and moral ambiguity saturate contemporary cinema and fascinate viewers. While not intrinsically immoral, obsession with anti-heroes seems symptomatic of a people's moral impoverishment. Although they may appear trite from familiarity, the Dutiful Stoics of the West represent a flourishing way to order one's life. These characters enjoy friendship and meaningful work, and they seek out justice for all members of their community. Our heroes have always been cowboys, and we have much to learn from them.

Stoic Philosophy

Stoicism has been the ideology of emperors, heroes, and sages. It has stood the test of time, enduring from the ancient world to the shelves of local bookstores today. Stoicism represents a rich philosophical tradition with valuable teachings for a modern world that is beleaguered with uncertainty. However, contemporary usage of “stoic” as an adjective conjures up only the narrowest ideas of Stoic behavior. In this chapter, I will outline the key tenets of Stoicism. This overview will reveal the crucial differences between the school of thought and the contemporary adjectival descriptor: stoic.

The distinction between the good, the bad, and the indifferent constitutes the essential idea of Stoicism. Although circumstances such as wealth, success, health, and glory seem like good things that promote happiness, the Stoics point out that these pleasant situations prove unreliable and often quickly pass away. Therefore, the Stoics claim that virtue constitutes the only truly good thing for humanity and that happiness depends only on virtue. If happiness depends entirely on virtue rather than on pleasant circumstances, then the virtuous person can always remain happy and face every circumstance of life with equanimity.

Diogenes Laertius, a 3rd century scholar whose work preserves the ideas of Greek Stoicism, outlines the Stoic perspective,

Some existing things are good, others bads, and still others neither of these. The virtues, namely wisdom, justice, courage, temperance, and the like, are goods, whereas their opposites, namely folly, injustice, and the like, are bads. Neither good nor bad are all things that neither benefit nor harm, such as life, health, pleasure, physical attractiveness, strength, wealth, good reputation, and good birth.¹

¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Pamela Mensch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 348-349.

This distinction between goods, bads, and indifferents produces impenetrable steadiness amidst great difficulty. Even as every pleasant circumstance of life passes away, the Stoic can keep hold of virtue, the best and only good. Therefore, Stoicism counts virtue as the only necessary condition for happiness. Here, it is worthwhile to consider how the Stoics defined “happiness” and “virtue.”

In the ancient imagination, happiness referred to the good human life: a flourishing, purposeful, and successful existence. Therefore, the pursuit and realization of happiness was equivalent with the pursuit and realization of a good life. This understanding of happiness proves richer and weightier than the contemporary definition of happiness as cheerfulness or a good mood. Further, virtue did not indicate Christian piety or innocence. The Stoics inherited the four cardinal virtues of the classical period: wisdom, temperance, justice, and courage. The virtues are beneficial to all people in all situations, and they help humans lead flourishing lives. The virtues enable humans to reach their end, and they make humans happy. The Stoics considered the pursuit and exercise of virtue as the highest use of human rationality.²

With these terms in place, the Stoic argument becomes clearer and more forceful. Happiness is the end and goal of life. If happiness is a result of wealth, health, or other pleasant circumstances, then happiness is out of human control and dependent upon the precarious twists and turns of fortune. Stoicism rejects this view of happiness, identifying happiness with the exercise of virtue instead. While a human can conceivably live a good life without the benefits of wealth, success, or fame, the Stoics claim that it is impossible

² Baltzly, Dirk, “Stoicism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, February 19, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/>.

to live a good life without wisdom, temperance, justice, and courage. Humans also possess equal access to the exercise of virtue while the benefits of fortune and circumstance prove random and unequal.

The Stoic argument also accords with common sensibilities. If conditions like wealth or health are necessary for a good life, then a person who decided to give away her wealth to the poor or became sick with cancer would have failed to live a good life. It seems implausible that anyone would consider such situations failures in life. However, a life marked by foolishness, indulgence, injustice, and cowardice has certainly fallen short of flourishing. In fact, this sort of vicious life likely represents the only definitive failure for humans.

According to the Stoics, virtue is the natural use of reason. While fortune allots wealth to some people and poverty to others, health to some and sickness to others, Nature endows reason to all humans for the exercise of virtue. Therefore, Stoicism teaches that humans should prize their natural allotment, the virtues, rather than the undependable allotments of fortune. Stoicism also asserts that humans belong to a single community that Nature, or even a supernatural force like Providence, governs.³ Humans participate in this common life through their reason and rationality.

In practice, Stoicism exhorts its followers to accept all situations in life with equal peace and happiness. Robin Campbell, a popular translator of Seneca's writings, explains, "It is man's duty to live in conformity with the divine will ... resigning himself

³ Robin Campbell, introduction to *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell (London: Penguin Book, 2004), 15.

completely and uncomplainingly to whatever fate may send him.”⁴ However, Stoicism does not require a person to prefer poverty or sickness to wealth and health. Preferring pain and disenfranchisement to flourishing and well-being even seems unnatural for rational creatures.

Compared to other philosophical systems, Stoicism appears informal and loosely defined. Consistent themes characterize Stoic thought, but the tradition lacks a single Stoic figurehead or rigid Stoic orthodoxy. In fact, the Stoics frequently adjusted their views to specific situations and disagreed with one another. For instance, P.G. Walsh remarks about Cicero, “He adopts a consistently Stoic stance, exploiting the freedom permitted by his school to embrace teachings which appear to him probable at particular times and in particular circumstances.”⁵ Seneca, too, takes a similar stance toward his predecessors, stating, “Will I not walk in the footsteps of my predecessors? I will indeed use the ancient road—but if I find another route that is more direct and has fewer ups and downs, I will stake out that one. Those who advanced these doctrines before us are not our masters but our guides. The truth lies open to all; it has not yet been taken over. Much is left also for those yet to come.”⁶

This fluidity and freedom accord with Stoicism’s origins. Stoicism takes its name from the front porch of the Athenian Agora, the *stoa*.⁷ Here, crowds would gather to

⁴ Ibid, 15.

⁵ P.G. Walsh, introduction to *On Obligations*, trans. P.G. Walsh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), xiii.

⁶ William O. Stephens, “The Stoics and their Philosophical System,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Kelly Arenson (New York: Routledge, 2020), 22.

⁷ Baltzly, “Stoicism.”

philosophize together, conjuring up the delightful imagery of friends in rocking chairs on the back porch, leisurely engaged in convivial discussion as dusk turns into evening.

Despite this informality, the Stoics were engaged in answering the same questions about human life and happiness that animate all philosophy. There are two distinct periods of Stoicism: Greek Stoicism and Roman Stoicism. In each period, the precise emphases of Stoic philosophy shifted slightly. The following section will examine each period and its teachings.

Greek Stoicism

Zeno of Citium (c. 334 - 262 B.C.) came stumbling into Athens looking for a man of wisdom, a man like Socrates.⁸ The locals referred him to Crates, a Cynic philosopher. Zeno studied under the Cynics for several years before founding the first official Stoa, earning credit as the founder of Stoicism. Zeno's teachings addressed Greeks reeling from political change and destabilization. During the third century B.C., political power shifted from the Greek city-states to centralized and distant governors, as various rulers vied for control after the death of Alexander the Great.⁹ This transition proved difficult for many Greeks who felt alienated from their leaders and dissatisfied with the political ethos of their new systems. Rather than actively participating in local governance, as was their custom, Greek citizens now found themselves subjects of a distant realm that passed down laws to their towns. Stoicism emerged during this tumultuous time. As Athenians

⁸ Ibid, 22.

⁹ Jason Lewis Saunders, "Ancient Stoicism," *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topics/Stoicism/Ancient-Stoicism>.

grappled to find firm footing amidst a changing *polis*, Stoicism directed citizens to orient their lives around worthwhile and reliable goods.

Zeno quickly made a name for himself as a man of virtue and simplicity. He rejected many of the comforts and norms of ordinary life, relegating himself to live in poverty and asceticism instead. In one description, “He practiced great frugality, wore a thin cloak, and ate raw food, often simple bread and figs. In temperance, dignity, and happiness he surpassed everyone.”¹⁰ Zeno took on many pupils at the Athenian Stoa. Diogenes Laertius writes, “People now went [to the Stoa] to hear Zeno, and this is why they were called Stoics. The same name was given to his followers, who had originally been called Zenoians.”¹¹ Zeno continued to build his school at the Stoa until his death. At that point, charge of the Stoa was passed to his pupil, Cleanthes of Assos (330-230 B.C.).¹² Stoicism grew in influence throughout Athens and established its place among the influential philosophical schools of its day.

After Cleanthes of Assos, Chrysippus of Soli (279-206 B.C.) took up leadership of the Athenian Stoa. Chrysippus pioneered the development of Stoic logic and metaphysics, and he is the other particularly notable figure of Greek Stoicism, besides Zeno. He was highly celebrated in his time and gained a reputation for great self-confidence. Diogenes Laertius records, “He was so renowned among the dialecticians that most people thought that if the gods had a dialectic, it would be none other than that

¹⁰ Ibid, 23.

¹¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 314.

¹² Stephens, “The Stoics and their Philosophical System,” 23.

of Chrysippus ... Hence this line is said to have been quoted in reference to him: Had there been no Chrysippus, there would have been no Stoa.”¹³

Chrysippus endeavored to ground Stoicism in reason and nature. For instance, he refuted Zeno’s view that fire represented the natural ordering principle, claiming that this principle was a spiritual, immaterial substance instead.¹⁴ Although some might view these matters as purely academic debates, Brad Inwood argues that they provide the essential foundation for Stoicism’s ethical outlooks. He explains, “The philosophers who insist that the goal of life, the aim of ethical improvement, is to live according to nature cannot ultimately ignore the study of nature. How else can we know what to follow?”¹⁵ Though seemingly erudite matters to the modern world, without detailed theories about logic, metaphysics, and the natural world, Stoicism’s popular ethical teachings would be shallow and poorly substantiated.

Hellenistic Stoicism emphasizes the moral life of the individual. The troubled political context of this period likely produced this individualism. As political power in Athens moved from the individual citizen to the abstracted state, Stoicism refocused its adherents on their own souls. Stoicism also emerged in dialogue and competition with the other philosophical schools of Hellenistic Greece. Cynicism is one such school. Although Cynicism has largely disappeared from the contemporary world, it was one of the dominant philosophical schools in the Hellenistic period. It has many similarities to

¹³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 379, 380-381.

¹⁴ Brad Inwood, *Stoicism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 45.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 106-107.

Stoicism, and Zeno's early training with the Cynics certainly contributes to its influence on Stoicism.

The Cynics in ancient Greece taught that detachment is intrinsically good. As a result, the Cynics scorned all social conventions, including the family. Diogenes of Sinope (c. 404-323 B.C.), the founder of Cynicism, lived a highly unorthodox life. He was fiercely committed to simplicity, constantly subjected himself to trials, and proved a contrarian in most situations. Diogenes Laertius records, "One day after seeing a boy drinking with his hands, Diogenes threw away the cup he kept in his knapsack, saying, 'A child has outdone me in frugality.' ... He reasoned this way: all things belong to the gods; the wise are friends of the gods, and the possessions of friends are held in common; therefore all things belong to the wise."¹⁶ Diogenes of Sinope died about two decades before Zeno arrived in Athens.

Zeno adopted aspects of the Cynics' views on simplicity and detachment.

However, crucial differences regarding the good human life separate the Stoics from the Cynics. For the Stoics, simplicity and detachment are not intrinsically good. The Stoics prized simplicity as a demonstration of one's independence from material pleasures and goods, which fortune controls. Simplicity provides a marker of virtue, but simplicity itself is not good. Similarly, Stoics view detachment as a means for independence from fortune's benefits. Detachment also signifies virtue without being intrinsically good.

The Stoics also do not share the Cynics' disdain for social conventions. The Stoics considered that a person could be virtuous from within or without social

¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 276.

conventions. In fact, the Stoics often prized institutions like the family and the state. The Roman Stoics, especially, viewed these institutions as arenas for developing and practicing virtues. While the Cynics thwarted social institutions and conventions, the Stoics prized duty to institutions and did not hold the same obstinate positions as the Cynics.

The Epicureans in Hellenistic Greece similarly helped the Stoics to define themselves. Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) was a contemporary of Zeno, and he feuded often with Chrysippus and other Stoics, exchanging many slanderous letters.¹⁷ The Epicurean view of the good human life differs dramatically from the Stoic view. According to the Epicureans, happiness is the goal of life, and pleasure is the means toward happiness. The Epicureans thought that humans should diminish their pain and increase their pleasure at all opportunities. They identified fear of death as the central concern of human life and pleasurable experiences as its only mitigation. Diogenes Laertius reports Epicurus himself as saying, “For I, at any rate, do not know what I would consider good apart from the pleasures derived from taste, sex, sound, and beautiful form.”¹⁸ While the Epicureans certainly indulged in hedonistic pleasures, they also recognized a hierarchy of pleasures and prized the mental pleasure of peace over purely physical pleasures. Ultimately, the Epicureans desired freedom from fear.

On the other hand, Stoicism completely disregards the benefits of pleasure and considers virtue as the only worthwhile benefit of human life. Therefore, the Stoics endeavor to detach themselves from reliance on pleasure. Rather than ridding themselves

¹⁷ Ibid, 493.

¹⁸ Ibid, 494.

of the fear of death, the Stoics emphasized the corresponding virtue: courage. The Stoics believed that dishonor, vice, and pusillanimity, rather than death, are the rightful things to fear. Then, the Stoics cannot center their lives upon the fear of death but rather upon the pursuit of virtue. Further, unpleasant circumstances and discomfort are indifferent within the Stoic framework. Stoicism prohibits these factors from ever mitigating one's pursuit of virtue or fulfillment of duty.

Unfortunately, the writings of the Greek Stoics were not preserved. Instead, we rely upon the work of later historians for records of the Greek Stoics' ideas. Thankfully, Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* records details about the life and teachings of Zeno and the other Stoics alongside many other philosophers in Hellenistic Greece, from Thales to Epicurus.

However, the writings of the Roman Stoics usually receive priority over these secondary accounts of Greek Stoicism. While Zeno and Chrysippus focused on the fine-grained differentiations between Stoicism and Platonism, Cynicism, and Epicureanism, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius wrote primarily about ethics, happiness, leadership, and the affairs of a state.¹⁹ The Roman Stoics focused on the commonplace questions of everyday life rather than academic debates. We turn to the Romans for answers about the universal affairs of human life: How can I make good decisions? How can I be happy when I am wronged? How can I remain calm when I am not in control? For these reasons, the Roman Stoics form the foundation of Stoic philosophy even though they followed the Greeks and built upon the Greeks' ideas.

¹⁹ Inwood, *Stoicism*, 19.

Roman Stoicism

In the second century B.C., Greece sent a Stoic, a Skeptic, and a Peripatetic to represent the best Hellenistic ideas in Rome. Soon after, Stoicism grew in popularity around Rome, especially among the political leaders and elites.²⁰ As in Greece, Stoicism arrived in Rome at a time of transition for the Roman government. The Roman republic came to an end as Julius Caesar (100-44 B.C.) claimed all political authority for himself. The elected representatives were replaced by a single emperor.²¹ It was a dangerous season for many Roman statesmen, and several of the early Stoics became famous for their stands against the rise of Julius Caesar.²²

Roman Stoicism took a much more practical slant than it had in Greece. Roman Stoicism also focused more specifically on Rome than Greek Stoicism had focused on Greece. In his introduction to Seneca's *Dialogues and Essays*, John Davie writes, "From the beginning there was, in principle, an affinity between traditional Roman morality and Stoic ethical doctrine."²³ The Roman Stoics were writing about Rome, Roman politics, and how Romans could live well amidst uncertainty and change. Again, Davie explains, "The representatives of the 'Roman Stoa,' ... addressed Romans specifically and offered a popularized version of Stoicism in which ethics overshadowed the two other branches

²⁰ Baltzly, "Stoicism."

²¹ Pigliucci, Massimo "Stoicism," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://iep.utm.edu/stoicism/#SH1c>.

²² Baltzly, "Stoicism."

²³ John Davie, introduction to *Dialogues and Essays*, trans. John Davie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xvi.

of philosophy.”²⁴ The Romans’ emphasis on ethics corresponded closely with their involvement in the public square.

Stoicism gained popularity among political leaders, like Cicero, emperors, like Marcus Aurelius, and imperial advisors, like Seneca. It offered a useful framework for rulers who wanted to avoid succumbing to the pitfalls that lead other rulers astray: glory, wealth, power, and safety. Roman Stoics demonstrated great piety for the state, and they worked for the public good, no matter the personal cost. For instance, Cato the Younger (95-46 B.C.) is an icon of Stoic virtue. This Roman statesman opposed the rise of Julius Caesar and led military forces in defense of the republic. Ultimately, Cato committed suicide rather than support Julius Caesar, valuing the good of the state over his own life.²⁵ Cato’s Stoic ideas propelled him into the most tumultuous conflicts of the public square. Other Roman Stoics followed his example and dedicated their lives to governance and the good of the *polis*.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (c. 4 B.C.-65 A.D.) was born in Spain, but he soon arrived in Rome to advance his education and begin his career.²⁶ Seneca quickly rose to prominence thanks to his wit and brilliance. However, he led a precarious existence due to his chronic attacks of bad health and penchant for scandal. He was exiled after allegations of his affair with the emperor’s sister, and he was only readmitted into society when Nero’s mother asked him to educate her son, the future emperor. He served as

²⁴ Davie, introduction to *Dialogues and Essays*, xvi.

²⁵ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Marcus Porcius Cato,” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marcus-Porcius-Cato-Roman-senator-95-46-BC>.

²⁶ Davie, introduction to *Dialogues and Essays*, vii.

Nero's tutor and advisor until he was accused of plotting to assassinate Nero and executed by his former pupil.²⁷

In his writing, Seneca often takes the tone of a teacher addressing the maladies of his interlocutors. He instructs his readers about practical matters: how to order their lives around virtue, how to be happy, how to live honorably, and how to rule well. A prolific author, Seneca's writings remain some of the most widely read works of Stoic literature. His most important books include *On the Happy Life* and *On the Tranquility of Mind*.

On the Happy Life is a brief treatise where Seneca endeavors to clarify the proper goal of human life and to explain the best path for reaching this goal. He begins by explaining, "It is the wish of all men, Gallio my brother, to live happily, but, when it comes to seeing clearly what it is that makes life happy, they grope for the light."²⁸ He predictably identifies happiness as the ultimate goal of life, but he acknowledges the difficulty of obtaining happiness. Humans are short-sighted and weak-willed creatures, and compulsions blur their vision, making lesser, transitory things seem like they will produce happiness. Seneca identifies virtue as the right means for happiness. He says, "The highest good is a mind that despises the operations of chance, rejoicing in virtue."²⁹ He continues to point out that this sort of mind will enable a life of confidence, fortitude, courage, freedom, and nobility. A man with this sort of mind "will be accompanied by continuous cheerfulness and a profound happiness that comes from deep inside him."³⁰

²⁷ Vogt, Katja, "Seneca," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, January 15, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/seneca/#LifWor>.

²⁸ Seneca, "On the Happy Life," in *Dialogues and Essays*, trans. John Davie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 85.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 88.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 88-89.

Seneca's other most important book, *On the Tranquility of Mind*, takes up similar ideas. Here, Seneca considers the means for achieving inner peacefulness. Inner peacefulness represented a great goal for the Roman Stoics. They ardently strove for peacefulness in all situations because unwavering peacefulness marks the person who prizes virtue above all else. Seneca directs *On the Tranquility of Mind* to his friend, Serenus, who is plagued by discontent and inner disturbance. He explains, "We ought to know that what makes us struggle is the fault, not of our locations, but of ourselves: we are weak when anything has to be endured, and unable to bear toil or pleasure or ourselves or anything for any length of time."³¹ The resulting malaise originates with dissatisfaction with oneself and one's life. This dissatisfaction feeds great frustration, boredom, and weariness.

Ultimately, Seneca identifies public services as the right remedy. Humans flourish when they take responsibility for the common good and devote themselves to the common good. He claims, "The best course, as Athenodorus says, would be to engage in practical matters, the administration of public business and the duties of a citizen ... the finest course by far is to be engaged in a task"³² Eager entrance into public affairs comforts a disturbed mind. Therefore, he spurs Serenus to embrace duty and commit his life, talent, and energy to the public square.

Marcus Aurelius (121-181 A.D.) used Stoicism in his role as Roman emperor to rule well. He came to Stoicism through reading Epictetus's writings and the influence of

³¹ Seneca, "On the Tranquility of Mind," in *Dialogues and Essays*, trans. John Davie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 118.

³² *Ibid*, 118.

his rhetoric teacher. After ascending to the throne, German invasions, bouts of the plague, and sporadic rebellions troubled Marcus Aurelius's rule.³³ His masterpiece, *Meditations*, collects his surviving journal entries from some of the most fraught years of his reign. In these pages, he considers his duties as a ruler, exhorts himself to tranquility of mind, and deliberates about how to act with equanimity in all situations. These reflections provide an appropriate entry point into Stoicism because they are easy to read, practical, and winningly personable.

The *Meditations* offer real encouragement to the modern reader. Marcus Aurelius reminds himself of truths he knows and charges himself to fix his eyes on goodness and virtue despite all manner of distractions. For instance, he reminds himself of the urgency and goodness of his duty and work, writing, "At day's first light have in readiness, against disinclination to leave your bed, the thought that 'I am rising for the work of a man.' Must I grumble at setting out to do what I was born for, and for the sake of which I have been brought into the world?"³⁴ These are endearing and winning words that will likely resonate with humans across time and space.

In another instance, Marcus Aurelius reiterates the principle of the Greek Stoics that a common whole unites all humanity. He writes, "Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will, and selfishness—all of them due to the offenders' ignorance of what is good or evil ... Neither can I be angry with my brother or fall foul of him ... To obstruct each other is

³³ Kamtekar, Rachana, "Marcus Aurelius," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, December 22, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/marcus-aurelius/>.

³⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 77.

against Nature's law."³⁵ Here, Marcus Aurelius renders one of the Greek Stoics' complicated theories into a mantra. His words are accessible and helpful, and they even appear in C.S. Lewis's novel, *Till We Have Faces*.³⁶

The Roman Stoics represent the heart, if not the backbone of Stoicism. The Greeks provided necessary philosophical frameworks for the tradition. Their ideas underpin the more popular ethical writings of the Roman Stoics. With this understanding of Greek and Roman Stoicism, the modern iterations of Stoicism gain clarity.

Stoicism Today

Stoicism never entirely disappeared from the popular imagination. However, as philosophy faded from the forefront of public life, the Stoic tradition became less familiar to the public. In recent years, however, Stoicism has experienced a modest resurgence in popularity, largely due to new public philosophy platforms like Alain de Botton's *School of Life*, that highlight Stoic teachings. Additionally, Ryan Holliday's popular book, *The Daily Stoic*, renders the ancient philosophy into practical terms, gaining many followers along the way.

These platforms make Stoicism accessible and useful to the modern man by distilling its practical teachings into five-step programs and kernels of life advice for everyday sorts of problems. For instance, the *School of Life* website has several summary videos about Stoicism and a handful of articles about Stoic philosophy. One article,

³⁵ Ibid, 45.

³⁶ The quote is paraphrased as one of the sayings of the Fox, "Today I shall meet cruel men, cowards and liars, the envious and the drunken. They will be like that because they do not know what is good from what is bad. This is an evil which has fallen upon them not upon me. They are to be pitied" (68).

entitled, “Why Stoicism Continues to Matter,” concludes with the lines, “When we are furious, paranoid, weak-willed or sad, Stoicism is on hand—as it has been for 2,000 years to nurse us with wisdom and friendship.”³⁷ *The Daily Stoic* has similar content. Its online shop sells the Daily Stoic Challenge Deck, a collection of thirty cards with quotes from Stoic philosophers and challenges for each day. *The Daily Stoic* website also has recent blog posts entitled, “5 Stoic Tips for Handling Rude People” and “How to Overcome Procrastination Based on Ancient Philosophy.”

Here, authors leverage Stoicism to help people exercise autonomy in their lives. The basic message resembles that of Zeno’s: external circumstances must not rule your happiness. These resources encourage people to use Stoicism to cultivate happiness, calmness, and self-control in a world of uncertainty. A plethora of Stoicism blogs, YouTube lectures, self-improvement books, and podcasts invite contemporary people to practice Stoicism. These helpful resources channel the complex philosophical tradition into tools for the everyday man.

One can readily discern the benefits of Stoicism for the contemporary world. Stoicism instructs those who feel out of control about how to regain control of what matters most: happiness. It requires no stretch of the imagination to recognize that things often feel out of control. A poll in the summer of 2020 reported that 80% of Americans thought that the country was out of control.³⁸ As the Covid-19 pandemic shut down all

³⁷ “Why Stoicism Continues to Matter,” *The School of Life*, accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.theschooloflife.com/thebookoflife/why-stoicism-continues-to-matter/>.

³⁸ Mark Murray, “Poll: 80 percent of voters say things are out of control in the U.S.,” *NBC*, June 7, 2020, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/meet-the-press/poll-80-percent-voters-say-things-are-out-control-u-n1226276>.

normalcy and massive crowds took the streets each day to protest police brutality, it proved increasingly difficult to feel in control. Constant debates about the reliability of the news, reliability of election results, and reliability of medical authorities furthered this feeling. Joaquin Phoenix's haunting whisper in his performance as a man on the brink could be the tagline for the age: "Is it just me, or is it getting crazier out there?"³⁹

The enduring appeal of Stoicism was particularly evident during this season. During lockdown, writers and leaders scrambled to offer people some explanatory frameworks to make sense of their overwhelming experiences. Stoicism proved a popular choice. A host of articles pointed bewildered and frightened readers to the Stoics.⁴⁰ These articles often pointed out that Marcus Aurelius lived through a plague, and his *Meditations* became a guidebook for many wading through the difficulties of a world in turmoil.

Other articles presented Seneca as a guide for facing hardship. In her article, "Take it like a Stoic: coping in the time of coronavirus," Nahlah Ayed quoted Seneca's *Consolations to Helvia*, "I am joyous and cheerful, as if under the best of circumstances. And indeed, now they are the best, since my spirit, devoid of all other preoccupations, has room for its own activities, and either delights in easier studies or rises up eager for

³⁹ *Joker*, directed by Todd Phillips (2019; Los Angeles, CA: Warner Bros.), HBOMax.

⁴⁰ See: "Stoicism in a time of pandemic: how Marcus Aurelius can help" at *The Guardian*; "How Stoicism can offer peace of mind during pandemic and beyond" at *Creighton University*; "When life gives you lemons ... 4 Stoic tips for getting through lockdown from Epictetus" at *The Conversation*; "The Roundtable: Can stoicism help us get through the pandemic?" at *ABC*; "The Irish Times view on Stoicism in a pandemic: lessons on living" at *The Irish Times*; and "Stoicism & The Pandemic: How Can You Build Resilience?" at *Refinery29*.

the truth, to the consideration of its own nature as well as that of the universe.”⁴¹ The lessons of this ancient school still have purchase on the hardships of the modern world, and many contemporary people have found solace in the teachings of Stoicism.

Stoic teachings affirm that humans cannot control external conditions. However, Stoicism reminds its adherents that everything necessary for happiness is safe from the threats of external problems and unaffected by an unpredictable environment. Boethius delivers this point memorably in his *Consolation of Philosophy* as his character laments the poor turns of fortune he has endured. He is imprisoned, sentenced to death, and ruined in public opinion. His family, too, stands in imminent danger of death. He complains that his good life has been taken away from him. Lady Philosophy, however, responds sharply to this claim, “Do you really hold dear that kind of happiness which is destined to pass away? ... I can say with confidence that if the things whose loss you are bemoaning were really yours, you could never have lost them.”⁴² This is a hard saying, but it is the right saying for our world. Despite new technologies and techniques that produce an illusion of control, we still are not the captains of our destinies. People cannot control the family they are born into, the timing of a stock market crash, or whether they have a genetic illness. Stoicism posits the empowering message that all people, despite their material conditions, have equal control over their own happiness.

Despite the continuation of Stoicism in these modern formats, the majority of people do not know the full history of the word. Instead, most people understand “stoic”

⁴¹ Nahlah Ayed, “Take it like a Stoic: coping in the time of coronavirus,” *CBC*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/take-it-like-a-stoic-coping-in-the-time-of-coronavirus-1.5520846>.

⁴² Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts (London: Penguin Group, 1969), 23, 25.

primarily as an adjective to describe a particularly tough person with an unflappable demeanor. For instance, Merriam Webster’s dictionary offers the following definition, “One apparently or professedly indifferent to pleasure or pain ... not affected by or showing passion or feeling especially: firmly restraining response to pain or distress.”⁴³ While not inaccurate, these definitions have become detached from Stoicism’s philosophical underpinnings. The adjectival description refers to a particular physical manifestation of Stoic teaching without providing its philosophical justification.

For this reason, “stoic” has developed a negative connotation. If a person does not react to his or her own suffering or the suffering of a loved one, then most people consider that person uncaring rather than philosophically grounded. Therefore, “stoic” usually refers to people that seem unsympathetic or emotionally repressed. Contemporary writing about masculinity and dating, particularly, demonstrate this usage of stoic as a description. Searching “stoic men” or “dating stoic men” on Google yields a huge amount of blog posts and articles about stoic masculinity and stoic relationships. Most of these articles assume that dating a stoic man is difficult, and they offer tips for communicating with a stoic man as well as implicit critiques of stoic masculinity.

For example, one particularly harsh article is entitled, “Stoicism Has Become a Masculine Ideal That Values Repression, Indifference. What Could Go Wrong?”⁴⁴ In the opening lines, she states,

⁴³ *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “stoic,” accessed November 8, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stoic>.

⁴⁴ Aditi Murti, “Stoicism Has Become a Masculine Ideal That Values Repression, Indifference. What Could Go Wrong?” *The Swaddle*, November 21, 2020, <https://theswaddle.com/stoicism-has-become-a-masculine-ideal-that-values-repression-indifference-what-could-go-wrong/>.

“Considering how society has always either disregarded or dismissed male emotion, it is no surprise stoic behavior has now come to be viewed as an attractive masculine ideal. Stoic-ness exists as a pillar of traditional masculinity alongside competitiveness, dominance, and aggression. The ‘ideal’ man is supposed to be rational and indifferent to crises at all times. However, the emotional labor of portraying a stoic, masculine ideal is a ticking time bomb for physical and mental distress.”

Further along, the author differentiates between Stoicism as an ancient philosophical tradition from these problematic characteristics. Nevertheless, her underlying assumption remains: Stoicism does not promote admirable or healthy behaviors.

Other articles caution that stoic men in relationships may appear reticent, unaffectionate, and uninterested. One author wrote, “As the girlfriend of a former U.S. Marine, I can tell you I’ve experienced firsthand how hard it is to date a stoic man. You’ll never see him shed a tear or lose his cool. He stays quiet and examines every situation before throwing in a word. At first, you question if there’s something wrong with you. Are you doing everything correctly? Is he losing interest?”⁴⁵ Many of these online resources offer tips for understanding a stoic partner and remaining confident and attached despite their cold nature. These lay-level posts unfailingly characterize stoic men as immature and difficult.

Conclusion

Comparing these contemporary characterizations of stoic men with anecdotes about the ancient Stoics displays the key point of difference between Stoicism and the adjective, “stoic.” The contemporary complaints describe stoic partners as unwilling to

⁴⁵ Taylor Miller, “8 Things to Know Before Dating the Guy with a Hard Outer Shell,” *Puckermob*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.puckermob.com/moblog/8-things-to-know-before-dating-the-guy-with-a-hard-outer-shell/>.

emote and unable to understand emotions. One well-known story about Zeno's early training in Stoicism demonstrates the origins of this behavior. When Zeno joined the Cynic philosophers, his first instructions were to carry a bowl of lentil soup between his knees while walking about town. He dropped the bowl, and lentil soup ran down the back of his legs. Zeno felt ashamed, and he began to run away. However, his instructor stopped him, reminding Zeno that he had no cause for shame, he had simply spilled his soup. The instructor wanted Zeno to feel ashamed when he had done something wrong and to view doing wrong as the only rightful cause of shame.

These teachings influenced Zeno to view virtue as the only good, vice as the only evil, and everything else as indifferent, even unfortunate accidents involving soup. Therefore, he does not renounce emotion or care for others *prima facie*. Rather, he moderates emotion to particular occasions where it is merited. Contemporary stoic men may emulate this behavior in their own way, applying emotion only to very particular situations where they see it as appropriate. However, without its philosophical motivation, stoic behavior seems cold and vapid.

From its inception in the Athenian Agora to its contemporary invocations in WordPress blogs, Stoicism has had a long and fraught history. At one point, it grew into a flourishing school of thought, spreading in reputation and power. At other times, its proponents faced exile and execution. Now, Stoicism retains a presence in the public's philosophical imagination through small movements of people studying Stoicism and applying its teachings to their lives. Most, however, understand "stoic" as a description of the shallowest manifestation of the philosophy's teaching.

CHAPTER TWO

The Cowboy and the Stoic

Introduction

In *On the Happy Life*, Seneca writes, “You will meet virtue ... manning the walls, covered with dust, sunburnt, horny-handed.”⁴⁶ Although these words were written in the first century about the student of philosophy, they could also easily describe the mythic lawman of the Old West. One could imagine these words narrating the back-lit sheriff’s ambling walk through the main street of town. His work is done, and the wicked flee, at long last. He ceaselessly labors to civilize a lawless land, and he never shows any sign of fear. Stoicism seems a natural counterpart to the West.

The tropes of the Western genre are unmistakable. In these films, the lawmen and gunslingers alike stand at the bar of the dusty saloon while “Camptown Races” plays on the upright piano in the corner. The horses walk slowly across the flat desert with their heads bent, searching for water and shade. Two foes stand a few yards apart, eyes squinting against the glaring sunlight. Their hands hover steadily over their guns, and they wait with unflinching nerves for someone to make the first move. The world of the Western is hard and unforgiving, and it takes a certain sort of person to thrive in this setting. In a single line, Johnny Cash articulated the ethos of the genre, “This world is rough, and if a man’s gonna make it, he’s gotta be tough.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Seneca, *On the Happy Life*, trans. Aubrey Stewart (Freeport: Vigeo Press, 2018), 15.

⁴⁷ Johnny Cash, “A Boy Named Sue,” track 8 on *At San Quentin*, Sony Music Entertainment, 1969, Spotify.

The brutality of the Wild West accentuates the unflinching calm of the Western protagonist. Like Hobbes' state of nature, life here is often "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."⁴⁸ Outlaw posses can ride into town at a moment's notice, and trouble might always lurk around the next bend in the trail. The lawmen are usually outnumbered and outgunned, and in many Westerns, the threat of a First Nations' raid looms constantly over the burgeoning towns. Life and peace are perilously maintained in these movies, and the characters face a bitter struggle for survival. However, the heroes of the Westerns encounter the constant peril with disarming calm and composure.

The cowboy's cool endures throughout the different eras and genres of the Western. In 1939, John Wayne landed his first major performance as Ringo Kid in John Ford's *Stagecoach*. In the film, Ringo Kid, a kind-hearted convict, joins several other passengers on a stagecoach ride through dangerous territory. Although he is young, poor, and an outcast from the other passengers, Ringo Kid offers courage and moral leadership to the others with his steady composure. When a woman goes into labor, he leaps into action to help her. He mediates between the bickering passengers, and he calmly defends the stagecoach from marauders. Ringo Kid saves the day repeatedly, and he never loses his charming, easy-going demeanor. After *Stagecoach*, John Wayne rose to superstar status, and he became a popular choice for leading roles in Westerns.

Half a century later, Westerns still featured similar, unflappable main characters. In Clint Eastwood's 1992 masterpiece, *Unforgiven*, William Munny is an old outlaw who leaves his law-abiding retirement to hunt down a wanted man. Although Munny's

⁴⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 89.

character has a far darker side than John Wayne's heroic Ringo Kid, the two cowboys share an unshakable sense of calm. In every gunfight, fist fight, heartbreak, and murder, Munny's face barely changes. At the end of the movie, Munny finally defeats his enemy, Little Bill. Before Munny pulls the trigger, Little Bill spits out, "I'll see you in Hell, William Munny," to which Munny unemotionally responds, "Yeah."⁴⁹ Whether up or down, Munny seems untouched by passion and worry.

Stagecoach is an early, classic Western where the good guys are unfailingly good, and right conquers wrong in the end. On the other hand, *Unforgiven* features a protagonist who must fiercely struggle against his own demons as well as the local sheriff. The movie revels in its ambiguity and constantly complicates each character's motivations. Despite their many differences, both movies suggest similar conditions for a cowboy in the West: unflappable, steady, and resolute in the face of all trouble.

These types of memorable films and characters help account for the frequent use of "stoic" to describe the Western genre. The heroes remain cool under pressure and respond to extraordinarily frightening situations with matter-of-fact assurance. This recognizable cowboy archetype justifies the regular use of "stoic" to characterize Westerns in non-academic sources, particularly.

For example, *The Script Lab*, a digital archive of movie scripts, defines Westerns as "usually [revolving] around a stoic hero and [emphasizing] the importance of honor and sacrifice."⁵⁰ On its list of "100 Best Western Movies of All Time," *Paste Magazine*

⁴⁹ *Unforgiven*, directed by Clint Eastwood (Warner Bros. 1992), 2:01:39. https://www.hbomax.com/feature/urn:hbo:feature:GXt_piWUrsJuSkwEAAAml.

⁵⁰ Noelle Buffam, "Western," *The Script Lab*, last modified March 26, 2011, <https://thescriptlab.com/screenplay/genre/988-western/>.

invokes “stoic” to describe the protagonists and moods of several different Westerns.⁵¹ To describe the masculine ideal embodied by John Wayne in the Old Western, Stephen Metclaf writes that these men are “stoic, humble, gallant, self-sufficient, loyal,” on the surface, at least.⁵² In an entry entitled “The Stoic,” *TVTropes.org* explains that stoic characters are often “Old West ... heroes who are made of iron complement physical toughness with stoicism to show mental invulnerability as well. It’s cool to be blasé while kicking around faceless goons, delivering one liners and foiling the evil plan.”⁵³

These uses of “stoic” reflect the contemporary meaning of the adjective to describe a person with a calm and determined demeanor, at best, or an unfeeling and cruel person, at worst. However, the casual use of “stoic” in these cases might say more than it knows. Are these cowboys simply tough, even so tough that they seem unmoored from reality? Or, do they share any similarity with the Stoics of Greece and Rome? I argue that some Western heroes can be interpreted as actually embodying aspects of the Stoic philosophical tradition. A real commitment to virtue underwrites their equanimity within a dangerous and uncertain world.

I identify two Stoic types in Westerns: (1) the Pop Stoic and (2) the Dutiful Stoic. The Pop Stoic reflects contemporary usage of “stoic” as an adjective to describe a person’s demeanor. The Pop Stoics are hard cowboys with little empathy for others and few visible emotions. However, the Pop Stoics’ cold personalities do not proceed from a

⁵¹ Andy Crump, “The 100 Best Western Movies of All Time,” *Paste Magazine*, June 20, 2016, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/movies/the-100-best-westerns-of-all-time/>.

⁵² Stephen Metcalf, “How John Wayne Became a Hollow Masculine Icon,” *The Atlantic*, December 15, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/12/john-wayne-john-ford/544113/>.

⁵³ “The Stoic,” TV Tropes, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheStoic>.

commitment to virtue as the only good of human life. Rather, bitterness seems to fuel their callousness. In other cases, their stoic disposition might represent a method for surviving a harsh world. As a result, the Pop Stoics seem vulnerable to the criticisms leveled against modern stoic people, and men especially. As the previous chapter discussed, contemporary culture often faults stoic men for suppressing their emotions and distancing themselves from friends, family, and significant others. Moreover, the Western Pop Stoic type has come under severe culture criticism for insensitivity, excessive bravado, and influencing harmful conceptions of masculinity.⁵⁴

The Dutiful Stoics, however, resemble the commitments of the Stoic tradition in significant ways. Like the Pop Stoics, they are unfailingly tough and composed. However, commitment, rather than detachment, animates their steadiness. The Stoics of antiquity oriented their lives toward virtue and viewed everything else as ultimately indifferent. The Dutiful Stoics do not use these sorts of terms. Nevertheless, the Dutiful Stoics orient their lives toward intrinsically good things, such as family, friendship, community, and justice. They act in accordance with their duties toward these intrinsic goods, and this duty sustains their sense of calm. As a result, the Dutiful Stoics may withstand the contemporary criticisms leveled against the Pop Stoics and people with stoic personalities. In the following, I will discuss each Stoic type and examine prominent examples of both the Pop Stoic and the Dutiful Stoic.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Kristen Kobes Du Mez's bestseller, *Jesus and John Wayne*. She writes, "Trump was the culmination of their half-century-long pursuit of a militant Christian masculinity. He was the reincarnation of John Wayne, sitting tall in the saddle, a man who wasn't afraid to resort to violence to bring order ... He was the latest and greatest high priest of the evangelical cult of masculinity" (271).

The Pop Stoic

The Pop Stoics are some of the toughest cowboys in the West. Their grit, ruthlessness, and endurance make them fierce and formidable enemies. Often, they come off as brusque in speech, matter of fact, and rude. Sometimes these characters are belligerent and violent, and other times their silence sets their companions on edge. They never show weakness, they often travel alone, and they roam endlessly. Many of the most iconic figures of the Western characters fit this archetype.

Although the main characters in Westerns often work as sheriffs, marshals, or other lawmen, the Pop Stoics rarely fill these roles. Instead, the Pop Stoics often represent the Man of the Wild motif. They live outside of town as outlaws or bounty hunters, and they resist society's order and norms. On the other hand, the lawman, or Man of the City, uses force to tame the West, and enjoys a settled life within the town as a result. The Man of the Wild, however, cannot join society and remains an outsider.

In his *New York Times* review of *The Searchers*, A. O. Scott describes the Man of the Wild motif. The film's final shot lingers on a Man of the Wild as he stands at the threshold of a home, watching the happy reunion inside that he made possible. However, the character does not enter. He is an outsider, a Man of the Wild, and he has no place in the happy domestic scene. Scott writes,

The hero ... is excluded, and our last glimpse of him emphasizes his solitude, his separateness, his alienation — from his friends and family, and also from us ... [Director John Ford's] shooting from the indoors out is his way of yoking together these two realms of experience — the domestic and the wild, the social and the natural — and also of

acknowledging the almost metaphysical gap between them, the threshold that cannot be crossed.⁵⁵

Although Westerns often conjure up grandiose notions of better-than-good lawmen, the Pop Stoics make a very different impression. They linger in shadows, subvert the law, and look out for their own interests. Two memorable examples of the Pop Stoic include: (1) Blondie, or the Man with No Name, in Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and (2) Uncle Ethan Edwards in John Ford's *The Searchers*. These men possess impenetrable outer shells and stoic personalities. They do not betray weakness and appear untroubled by violence, suffering, danger, and injustice. However, a vision of virtue as the end of human life does not ground their unshakable resolve. Therefore, their stoic behavior is void of meaningful, philosophical roots.

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Released in 1966, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* rounded out Sergio Leone's famous trilogy of Spaghetti Westerns. These Italian Westerns usually had smaller budgets than Hollywood films and often featured second-tier actors rather than well-known stars. Antonio Sanna describes, "The films are dramatic, action oriented and fast paced; they present few dialogues, whereas the musical scores provide continuous support to the visuals. The bizarrely named heroes (usually outsiders who are exceptionally talented in gunplay) confront and duel the villain in stories that are often based on themes of betrayal, revenge, and profit."⁵⁶ Spaghetti Westerns subvert the traditional depiction of a

⁵⁵ A.O. Scott, "The Searchers': How the Western Was Begun," *New York Times*, June 11, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/11/movies/11scot.html>.

⁵⁶ Antonio Sanna, "Spaghetti Westerns," in *Pop Culture in Europe*, ed. Juliana Tzvetkova, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017), 152-153.

main character as a chivalrous hero pursuing justice, opting instead for anti-heroes engaged in epic quests for revenge and profit instead. Despite their off-Hollywood filming and tight budgets, Spaghetti Westerns became widely popular in the 1960s, and Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns are definitive classics, routinely listed among the greatest films of all time.⁵⁷

The first shot of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* checks all the boxes for an iconic Western scene. A man with a worn, sneering face gazes out across a deserted town. The next shot reveals two horsemen in the distance, slowly riding down the main street. The two parties watch each other without emotion, and the audience wonders whether the riders are friends or foes. They approach each other and arrive at the front door of a saloon. At this point, the three men nod silently at one another and barrel through the door of the saloon with guns blazing. A second later, a man with raging eyes leaps through the window, shattering the glass in his desperate escape.

The screen freezes, and red cursive text identifies this escaping desperado as "the Ugly," and Ennio Morricone's iconic theme blares. Eli Wallach plays "the Ugly," who is called Tuco throughout the movie. Later, the audience meets "the Bad," Lee von Clef's ruthless Angel Eyes. In his first scene, he enters a home and terrorizes a family, hoping to learn about a certain man's whereabouts. The father complies and pays Angel Eyes an additional thousand dollars, hoping to spare his family. Nevertheless, Angel Eyes

⁵⁷ Lee Pfeiffer, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Good-the-Bad-and-the-Ugly>.

murders him and his son, saying with icy nonchalance, “When I’m paid, I always see the job through.”⁵⁸

Finally, Leone introduces “the Good.” Clint Eastwood’s character, Blondie, comes onto the scene by stealing Tuco away from a group of bounty hunters, hoping to earn the reward for Tuco’s capture himself. Although he wears white, has the quiet confidence of a man in the right, and wins out in the end, Blondie acts just like Tuco and Angel Eyes. Still, Leone labels him as “the Good,” setting him in sharp moral contrast to the other characters. In this way, the film calls into question traditional moral categories, presenting an amoral landscape where the good and bad guys use similar tactics to achieve similar ends.

The film follows these three outlaws as they race toward a massive treasure. The adventure culminates in an epic, three-way, cemetery shootout that has become one of the most recognizable scenes in cinema. None of the outlaws possess any clear code or set of principles. They kill and let kill, with no displays of remorse. In fact, passion proves the only factor that separates Tuco as “the Ugly.” Blondie and Angel Eyes exhibit stoic personalities. Whether killing, robbing, double-crossing, or facing death, they remain composed and display only a focused frown.

For example, midway through the film, Tuco forces Blondie to walk countless miles through the desert. Blondie’s face and hands show dangerous levels of dehydration, and he seems to teeter on the brink of death. Blondie knows that he will almost certainly die during this desert walk, but he silently staggers onward without begging for mercy,

⁵⁸ *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, directed by Sergio Leone (Produzioni Europee Associate, 1966), 14:19. <https://www.amazon.com/Good-Bad-Ugly-Eli-Wallach/dp/B0011XBLUS>.

despairing, or showing any real regard for his dire situation. He is a professional, through and through.

Angel Eyes shares a similar, unflinching composure. After killing the father and son in his first scene, Angel Eyes returns to his employer. He calmly wakes him, and the boss revels in his success. Angel Eyes quietly says that the murdered father paid him extra money, explaining, "I think his idea was that I kill you."⁵⁹ The boss laughs uneasily, but Angel Eyes reminds him that once he has been paid, he always sees a job through. Then, Angel Eyes kills his boss without passion or rage. In all situations, these two characters maintain an unwavering demeanor.

Tuco, on the other hand, does not hesitate to cause a scene. When Blondie captures him and delivers him to the marshal in town, Tuco shouts obscenities and curses Blondie as they ride through town. He does not refrain from expressing his anger or distress. He similarly responds with exuberant glee when he catches a good break, relishing his success. Leone presents this difference in composure as the distinguishing aspect between "the Good" and "the Bad" as opposed to "the Ugly." Accordingly, Blondie and Angel Eyes seem like very similar characters. They have similar dispositions and utilize similar methods in pursuit of the same treasure. On the other hand, Tuco serves as the fool of the movie. He is disheveled, often drunk, and wears his emotions on his sleeve.

In *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, Leone presents a vision of the Old West as lacking any sense of duty. As a result, the movie follows three outlaws wandering around

⁵⁹ *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, 16:43.

the desert, looking for money. They reveal no moral scruples, no grounding principles, and no commitments beyond their own wellbeing. The result is a movie about treachery and power, where the fastest gun wins out in the end.

The movie's setting amidst the Civil War accentuates the isolated self-interestedness of the characters. On every side, Union and Confederate troops clash over the soul of the nation. The outlaws constantly encounter dying soldiers, strategizing colonels, and wounded veterans. They also live briefly among monks who tend for any soldier, regardless of his allegiance. These periphery characters labor and lay down their lives for a cause bigger than themselves. However, the three outlaws maneuver between both sides, joining whichever group suits their needs at that moment. They freely utilize any means that might preserve their life or bring them closer to the treasure.

As a result of these factors, Blondie represents a perfect example of the Pop Stoic. He is tough and unflinchingly cool. Amidst any danger, death, or success he appears the same: his eyes squint against the sun and the dust, he grimaces slightly, and his cigar rests easily between his lips. His constancy almost acknowledges that fortune's tides will rise and fall. He recognizes and accepts that sometimes he will be the one with the loaded gun and sometimes he will be the one who digs.⁶⁰ Blondie does not rage against fortune's turning wheel, and he accepts all that fortune brings with equanimity. Therefore, his personality and view of the world seems to mirror that of the Stoics. Nevertheless, his calm demeanor does not proceed from a commitment to virtue as the unchanging,

⁶⁰ *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, 2:49:16.

ultimate good of human life. Instead, it seems like a tactic for surviving a harsh world, at the best, or a sign of his inhumanity, at the worst.

Most importantly, Blondie's stoic personality does not free him from the bonds of fortune's goods. Although he does not lash out when his fortune changes, Blondie is clearly enslaved to wealth. He is entirely motivated by the acquisition of wealth and orients his life toward achieving this end. Therefore, Blondie's outlook on life completely contradicts with Stoicism.

The Searchers

The Searchers sets the story of two men's rescue mission within the larger-than-life scenery of Arizona's Monument Valley. The camera hovers on picturesque log cabins nestled at the base of a soaring butte and lines of horseback riders trotting through a valley, camouflaged by the red-tinted foothills. *The Searchers*' beautiful scenery, troubled characters, and compelling performances make it a classic work of the Western genre. As Brian McFarlane writes,

The Searchers, grimmer, darker, more complex and ambiguous than any of the others, is Ford's indisputable masterpiece ... Among Ford's westerns, *The Searchers* was not particularly well-received at the time of its release, but it now enjoys classic status with critics and is venerated by other filmmakers. These include Paul Schraeder, Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg all of whom made films critics claimed were influenced by it ... As long ago as 1979, a newspaper article asserted that 'all recent American cinema derives from John Ford's *The Searchers*.⁶¹

Released in 1956, a decade before *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, *The Searchers* explores questions of family, revenge, racism, and the cost of civilizing a wild land. The film's opening scene situates the viewer inside a cabin, watching as a woman flings open

⁶¹ Brian McFarlane, "Best in the West," *Screen Education* no. 86 (September 2017): 112-113.

her door and looks eagerly across the horizon. A man on horseback emerges from the brush, and the entire family rushes outside to greet him.

The man is Ethan Edwards, played by a towering John Wayne, and he has arrived at his brother's home. The family receives him convivially, though Ethan's gaze rests too long on his brother's wife, and he implies that he is running from the law. Ethan warmly greets his two nieces, but he spurns his brother's young ward, the good-hearted Martin, because he is part Comanche. Although he is the main character, Ethan is never portrayed as the hero. He is racist, violent, and deeply troubled.

Soon after, Rev. Capt. Samuel Johnston Clayton arrives. He wants to swear the men into a posse hunting down Comanche cattle rustlers. Ethan and Martin join the posse, but Ethan refuses to take an oath, reminding the deputies that he pledged his allegiance to the Confederacy, "I figure a man's only good for one oath at a time."⁶² The men confidently ride away, but they soon realize that the cattle theft was a ploy to lure them away from the residential settlements. They return to their homes, but it is too late. Comanches raided his brother's home. The raiders kidnapped Ethan's two nieces, Lucy and Debbie, and murdered the rest of the family.

The remainder of the movie follows Ethan and Martin's quest to rescue the girls. Before long, they find Lucy's body, and Debbie becomes their sole focus. Ethan and Martin, however, prove strained traveling companions. Ethan is continually hostile toward Martin, and he makes menacing threats against the Comanches. They continue the chase for years, and Martin begins to suspect Ethan's motivations. At one point, the two

⁶² *The Searchers*, directed by John Ford (Warner Bros., 1956), 12:25. <https://www.amazon.com/Searchers-John-Wayne/dp/B001QJOZP0>.

approach the Comanche group, and Ethan prepares for an ambush. Martin restrains him, frantically warning that an ambush would certainly result in Debbie's death. Martin thinks they should form a plan to extricate Debbie carefully from the crowd instead. Ethan makes worrisome comments throughout the movie about kidnapped settlers who live among the Comanche for long periods, saying, "They ain't white anymore."⁶³ For Ethan, assimilation with the Comanche people is an unforgivable offense. Martin is determined to rescue Debbie, but Ethan appears focused only on killing Comanches.

These tensions reach a breaking peak when Ethan and Martin finally find Debbie. She lives in a Comanche camp governed by Scar, an infamous Comanche warrior. Debbie has become one of his concubine wives, and she does not seem to recognize Ethan and Martin when they enter the camp, disguised as traders. The reunion does not go well. Debbie tells the searchers that the Comanche are now her people, and Ethan prepares to shoot her. After a brief scuffle, Debbie escapes, and a Comanche arrow wounds Ethan.

Shortly after, Martin successfully rescues Debbie from the Comanche camp. When Ethan meets Debbie again, viewers hold their breath to see if Ethan will kill his long-lost niece. Although every sign points to a violent stroke, Ethan lifts Debbie in his arms, as he did in a happy, early scene of the movie. Softly, he says, "Let's go home, Debbie."⁶⁴ Debbie, Ethan, and Martin return to a friend's home, and life seems to resume for the weary travelers. Ethan, however, does not enter the home. Instead, he lingers in the doorway and turns away to walk back into the wilderness.

⁶³ *The Searchers*, 1:15:03.

⁶⁴ *The Searchers*, 1:56:15.

Ethan's serious character flaws and explicit racism have mitigated the legacy of *The Searchers*, and the film's depictions of violence against First Nations make it difficult for contemporary viewers to watch. In fact, Arthur M. Eckstein argues that John Ford intentionally darkens Ethan's character from his depiction in the source material for the movie. The novel that inspired the movie portrays Ethan as nuanced and troubled, but Ford intensifies the distastefulness of Ethan's character, amplifying his prejudices and aggression. Eckstein writes,

As the process of transferal of plot and character from novel to script and then to screen occurred, the Ethan character and his actions became progressively darker and more disturbed The fundamental changes Ford made, very late in the production process, all go in a single direction- to create the dark and truly disturbed Ethan Edwards of *The Searchers*, the Ethan Edwards who has become one of the most famous characters in all of American motion picture history. These findings are all the more important because John Ford has recently been repeatedly charged with complicity in Ethan Edwards's racism.⁶⁵

The darkening of Ethan's character causes the movie to lack a traditional protagonist. Although viewers expect John Wayne to embody goodness and heroism, Ethan's character spews hateful speech, treats his companion poorly, and sets out to murder his only surviving kin. This casting for John Wayne makes *The Searchers* a surprising and original film. As Eckstein summarizes, "[You] just do not expect John Wayne to be evil."⁶⁶

As a result, Ethan provides another interesting example of the Pop Stoic type.

From the outset, the viewers notice his toughness. He seems like an impenetrable force,

⁶⁵ Arthur M. Eckstein, "Darkening Ethan: John Ford's "The Searchers" (1956) from Novel to Screenplay to Screen," *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 1 (Autumn 1998): 4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

and his brother's family orbits warily around him. An early scene demonstrates his unshakable calm. After joining the posse to chase down the cattle rustlers, Ethan is the first to realize that the theft was a ploy to lure the men away from the cabins. He announces matter-of-factly, "Stealing the cattle was just to pull us out. This is a murder raid. Shapes up to scald out either your place or my brother's."⁶⁷ The other characters react immediately with fear and dread, and they all rush back to protect their families. Ethan, on the other hand, seems unfazed. Martin wants to hurry back to their family, but Ethan reminds him that the horses cannot make the journey without resting first. Martin storms away, but Ethan calmly sets up camp and waits while the horses eat and rest. His voice does not quiver, his face does not fall, and he betrays no sign of panic or sadness. Ethan makes a sensible decision, but it seems highly unnatural to the viewers. His composure forces the audience to question whether he cares about the violent murder of his family.

Ethan maintains this detached demeanor throughout the entire movie. At one point during their journey, Ethan exclaims that Debbie is no longer his kin because she has joined the Comanches. Martin screams "I hope you die" in response.⁶⁸ Ethan, however, coolly responds with his well-known catchphrase, "That'll be the day."⁶⁹ While Ethan maintains his stony exterior, Martin loses all composure, weeping bitterly as he turns away.

⁶⁷ *The Searchers*, 16:15.

⁶⁸ *The Searchers*, 1:32:00.

⁶⁹ *The Searchers*, 1:32:03.

Ethan endures the passing years with unchanging resolve, no matter the difficulty of the quest. He is threatened, attacked, and constantly endangered, but he does not seem discouraged by the long strokes of poor fortune. Ethan does have occasional outbursts, however. He vindictively shoots out the eyes of a Comanche corpse, kicks at a helpless Comanche woman, and scornfully delights in Martin's flaws. In these instances, he betrays moments of passion, but the passion is spiteful and cruel. Quickly, the passion dissolves back into quiet, frightful resolve.

Furthermore, Ethan's toughness is a part of his personality, and it does not rely on his vision of the stability of virtue. His toughness seems like an assumed demeanor and a means for retaining control in an unpredictable world. Even so, Ethan's sense of duty to his family animates his relentless search for Debbie across harsh terrains and long years. But, the sense of duty is twisted and based on racist prejudices. To the viewers' shock, Ethan considers it his duty to kill Debbie because she has joined the Comanche people. His duty turns him into a vicious hunter rather than a rescuing uncle.

Ethan's character reveals negative qualities of the Pop Stoic. Like Blondie, Ethan remains detached from the suffering of others, unmoored from guiding principles, and self-serving. As a result, Martin serves as the hero of the movie rather than Ethan. Martin puts up with abuse, ridicule, and racism through many years to protect Debbie from Ethan. Viewers root for Martin despite his missteps, emotions, and fretfulness. In contrast, viewers watch Ethan with horror, unsure what evil he might commit in the end.

Ultimately, Ethan undergoes a change of heart. To viewers' great relief, his prejudices and twisted sense of duty proves weaker than his love for Debbie. Even in this emotional scene, however, his demeanor never changes. He speaks to her calmly and

returns to his business. Ethan's Pop Stoicism does not shift depending on his moral commitments. His improved moral commitments do not essentially change him. He ends the movie as he begins it: an outsider. In the final shot, he lingers in a door frame, attracted to the comfort of domesticity but unable to cross the threshold. He turns his back and returns into the wild.

Pop Stoic Conclusion

The Pop Stoic represents an enduring, popular archetype of the Western. These heroes are tough, cool, and appealing to viewers. They remain above the fray and do not seem affected by the changes of fortune that mark every human life. However, the veneer of a detached, stoic personality reveals worrisome cracks. As Blondie and Ethan demonstrate, an unflappable personality does not constitute an intrinsic good. These characters misapply their toughness and demean themselves and harm their loved ones in the process. Therefore, the Pop Stoic seems vulnerable to the criticisms leveled against contemporary stoic people, and men particularly, outlined in the previous chapter.

There are many Pop Stoic examples I could have chosen from, and not all of these characters appear as vicious as Blondie or as troubled as Ethan. For example, recent Westerns have featured main characters with stoic personalities who nevertheless strut around town with charm, bravado, and humor. Kurt Russel's depiction of Wyatt Earp in *Tombstone* (1993), for instance, provides an example of a mercenary Pop Stoic who possesses immense swagger, falls madly in love, forms lasting friendships, and has an unending reservoir of memorable one-liners. Tim Blake Nelson's Buster in *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) offers another example. Buster is a Pop Stoic who unflinchingly murders his competitors and sings pleasant little tunes while waltzing from gunfight to

gunfight. In other cases, a Pop Stoic character might seem sentimental or overly nostalgic while engaged in a quest for home and comfort. They are Pop Stoics, but they lack Blondie's fearfulness and Ethan's inner demons.

Other examples of Pop Stoics include secondary characters like La Boeuf in *True Grit* or the leads in neo-Westerns, such as Francis McDormand in *Nomadland*, Daniel Day-Lewis in *There Will Be Blood*, or Anton Chigurh in *No Country for Old Men*. These contemporary Westerns sometimes demonstrate a strained relationship with the classic tropes of their genre. For one, the tough and dutiful cowboy archetype can seem old fashioned and worn out. In response, these movies opt for Pop Stoic characters that critique or subvert the classic mold: swashbuckling fools or a man whose repressed emotions ruin him in the end. The quiet assurance of a stone-faced John Wayne is switched out for Kurt Russel's Wyatt Earp screaming, "You tell 'em I'm coming, and hell's coming with me, you hear? Hell's coming with me!"⁷⁰

In his essay, "Stoicism in the South," Walker Percy describes a similar archetype to that of the Western Pop Stoic within Southern culture at large. Amidst the changes of the Civil Rights movement, he characterizes Southern culture as Stoic rather than Christian. He writes, "The greatness of the South, like the greatness of the English squirearchy, had always a stronger Greek flavor than it ever had a Christian. Its nobility and graciousness was the nobility and graciousness of the Old Stoa."⁷¹ Percy sensed that the South lacked the moral resources to make the demanded cultural reforms. He

⁷⁰ *Tombstone*, directed by George P. Cosmatos (Buena Vista Pictures, 1993), 1:34:00. https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/B00HMCVVVG/ref=atv_dp_share_cu_r.

⁷¹ Walker Percy, "Stoicism in the South," in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Picador USA, 1991), 84.

explains, “For the Stoic, there is no real hope. His finest hour is to sit tight-lipped and ironic while the world comes crashing down around him.”⁷² This grim description marks the Pop Stoic. Their silence and immovability amidst suffering proves egoistic and unhelpful rather than virtuous.

Therefore, the Pop Stoic’s lack of feeling represents a weakness rather than a strength. Stoicism does not consider emotion and empathy as wrong *prima facie*. Rather, the Stoics view disordered emotions as inhibiting human flourishing. They feared that strong passions toward transitory things like wealth, health, and status threatened one’s ultimate focus on virtue. The Pop Stoic’s obsession with wealth, honor, and pleasure manifests the very sort of attachments that the Stoics wanted to avoid. To distance themselves from the allure of vice, the Stoics intensely guarded their emotions and disciplined themselves to form attachment only to virtue. They trained themselves to despise vice: cowardice, vanity, greed, and tyranny. These things rightly deserve fear, and virtue alone deserves love and devotion.

However, the Pop Stoics do not seem to apply their passion in this measured way. Instead, their equanimity prohibits them from loving honorable things and propels them toward enslavement to fortune’s goods. They often seek wealth, pleasure, or revenge to their own destruction, forsaking the worthwhile affections of human life. They are not free but enslaved to the baser aspects of life that the Stoics steadfastly avoided. Therefore, their demeanor represents a departure from Stoicism rather than an expression of its views.

⁷² Ibid, 86.

Although Pop Stoics represent some of the most recognizable Western characters, they are less prevalent in the genre than one might expect. These characters are usually lawless, unkempt, drunken, vicious, and outcasts from their communities. As a result, the Pop Stoic seems like a deformation of the traditional Western figure. The following section will investigate the second archetype: the Dutiful Stoic. In contrast to the Pop Stoics, the Dutiful Stoics have stoic personalities while also being dutiful family members, loyal friends, and just lawmen rather than alienated loners. While the Pop Stoics value toughness as an end in itself, the Dutiful Stoics utilize toughness as a means for producing good and noble ends.

The Dutiful Stoic

The Dutiful Stoics live amidst the same violent, dusty environment as the Pop Stoics, and they also share equanimity and a deep-seated sense of calm. Despite their frequent grouping into a single Western type, the Dutiful Stoics possess a distinct moral code that sets them entirely apart from the Pop Stoics. To illustrate the crucial difference between the Pop Stoic and the Duty Stoic, imagine this scene: a sheriff enters a saloon alone to confront an outlaw. The entire crowd freezes, and tensions rise. The men stare each other down with icy eyes. Slowly, several bystanders rise and join the outlaw, their hands hovering over their guns. The sheriff realizes that he is dangerously outgunned. Nevertheless, he hardly reacts, and the standoff continues.

A similar scene to this one occurs in dozens of Westerns. The sheriff in this situation, whether a Pop Stoic or a Dutiful Stoic, would likely have the same reaction. Regardless of his Stoic archetype, he would likely remain unruffled and see the job through to the end. However, the underlying motivations for such a steady response to

danger distinguishes the Dutiful Stoic from the Pop Stoic. In this situation, the Pop Stoic responds with steady composure because he knows that he has the fastest gun and cannot lose. Alternatively, his composure might result from his meanness and habitual desensitization to fear, death, and pain. However, the Dutiful Stoic would respond with the same toughness for different reasons. The Dutiful Stoic does not retreat from danger because he has courage and a commitment to justice and the good of the *polis*. He views the situation without fear, knowing that he should fear injustice rather than death.

In many ways, the Dutiful Stoics adhere to the philosophical tradition of Stoicism. Beyond possessing a stoic personality, these heroes' steady demeanor results from their commitment to virtue and goodness. Regardless of the fortune they encounter, they are committed to doing the right thing. This commitment to the just, true, and right enables them to face all changes of fortune with equanimity, courage, and calm.

However, the Dutiful Stoics do not describe their moral commitments in these terms. They communicate their duties in simple terms. When Will Kane learns that his enemies are riding into town, his friends urge him to quickly escape. Kane, however, calmly responds, "I think I ought to stay."⁷³ In *Stagecoach*, Ringo Kid gets an opportunity to sneak away from the sheriff and avoid returning to jail. When his love interest, Dallas, begs him to take this opportunity, Ringo Kid responds, "Well, there's some things a man just can't run away from."⁷⁴ These characters usually make such

⁷³ *High Noon*, directed by Fred Zinnemann (United Artists, 1952), 9:47. <https://youtu.be/cJ9Ywh8mFyE>.

⁷⁴ *Stagecoach*, directed by John Ford (United Artists, 1939), 1:01:13. <https://www.amazon.com/Stagecoach-Claire-Trevor/dp/B00AGYXKLG>.

statements without overwhelming emotion. Nevertheless, they have made firm decisions to do the right thing, no matter the difficulty.

This assurance of right action makes the Dutiful Stoics confident and collected, even as they face hardships and danger. The following section will consider two examples of Dutiful Stoics: John Wayne's John T. Chance in *Rio Bravo* and Henry Fonda's Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine*. Both characters exhibit the calm personalities described as "stoic" in contemporary use. However, they also demonstrate fierce duties toward intrinsically good things.

Rio Bravo

The history of *Rio Bravo* is marked by rivalry, scandal, and opposing ideologies. Director Howard Hawks and lead actor John Wayne created the film to respond to Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon*, the 1952 classic with a strong message against Hollywood blacklisting and McCarthyism. John Wayne was the president of the Motion Picture Alliance from 1949 to 1953 and an outspoken proponent of blacklisting. He turned down the lead role in *High Noon* and famously claimed that the film was "the most un-American thing I've ever seen in my whole life. The last thing in the picture is [Gary Cooper] putting the United States marshal's badge under his foot and stepping on it. I'll never regret having helped run [Carl Foreman, the writer of the screenplay] out of this country."⁷⁵

In *High Noon*, the town marshal, Will Kane, gets word that an old enemy, Frank Miller, is arriving in town on the noon train. Miller's posse loiters at the train depot, and

⁷⁵ Glenn Frankel, "High Noon's Secret Backstory," *Vanity Fair*, February 22, 2017, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/02/high-noons-secret-backstory>.

worry fills the town. Although his friends and new wife urge him to flee, Kane decides to stay and face Miller. He proceeds to run about the town, imploring the citizens to stand with him against Miller, but no one joins his cause.

John Wayne and Howard Hawkes disapproved of *High Noon* for several reasons. First, they thought that Kane's response to the impending danger was unheroic. Rather than standing against evil with cool self-assurance, Kane seems frantic and desperate before growing disillusioned. Second, they thought that the townspeople acted shamefully by not coming to Kane's aid. Such unconventional portrayals of the West and its tropes called into question the cherished virtues of the genre.

However, *High Noon* is highly regarded as one of the best Westerns of all time, earning five Oscar nominations and enduring as a powerful witness against McCarthyism. In a moment of high irony, John Wayne accepted the Oscar for Best Leading Actor on Gary Cooper's behalf when Cooper was unable to attend the award ceremony. The two were long-time friends, but another decade passed before Wayne won his first and only Oscar award.

Nevertheless, Wayne and Hawkes opposed *High Noon*'s message and its innovations from the classic Western mold. They released *Rio Bravo* in 1959, to respond to *High Noon*. *Rio Bravo* mirrors *High Noon*'s rising action: After Sheriff John T. Chance arrests Joe Burdette, he learns that Burdette's brother and friends have headed toward town to break him out of jail. Chance must attempt to hold off the posse, but he is frightfully outgunned and knows he will likely die in the effort. Therefore, Chance refuses the help of the townspeople, hoping to spare as many innocent lives as possible.

Instead, he reluctantly deputizes two good men to join him. The result is a slow-moving, charming movie about friends waiting to face the inevitable, together.

Rio Bravo's opening moments remind viewers that the Wild West was a hard, violent place. The first scene shows citizens watching with blank faces as Joe Burdette harasses and beats a helpless man, assaults the sheriff, and murders the only person who stands in his way. Nevertheless, Chance walks coolly into an ambush, nonchalantly makes an arrest, and never raises his voice. Despite the movie's contentious context, Chance represents an ideal Dutiful Stoic. He constantly faces dire straits but effortlessly maintains composure and commits himself to upholding justice.

Soon, matters escalate as Chance learns that over thirty men joined the posse to bust Burdette out of jail. The townspeople volunteer to help Chance defend the jail, but he refuses their help, saying either that they are not talented enough or that they should not sacrifice their life for him. When one of Chance's old friends, Pat Wheeler, rides through town, he tells Chance, "If I ever saw a man holdin' the bull by the tail, you're it."⁷⁶ Chance still declines Wheeler's offer to help, and shortly after Burdette's cronies gun him down in the street. Fear spreads across the town, but the townspeople stand steadfastly with Chance. Chance does not react strongly to Wheeler's murder. He cannot allow intimidation to frighten him. He has a job to do, and he must do it confidently.

Chance only permits two men to join his team: Dude, played by Dean Martin, and Colorado, played by Ricky Nelson. Dude is a former deputy who dissipated into drunkenness when a woman broke his heart. He has wasted away several years and

⁷⁶ *Rio Bravo*, directed by Howard Hawkes (Warner Bros., 1959) 11:23. <https://www.amazon.com/Rio-Bravo-John-Wayne/dp/B003VW54QO>.

earned a reputation as a foolish drunk, but Dude wants to rebuild his life. Chance is loyal to Dude, and he anchors Dude, helping him toward sobriety and restoring his reputation. Colorado is a young sharpshooter who worked for Wheeler. He impresses Chance early on with his cool-headedness and get-along manner.

The friendship between these three men and the jail guardian, Walter Brennan's Stumpy, forms the heart of this movie. While focused on defending the jail, Chance is clearly affectionate and loyal to these friends as well. Despite his practicality, resolve, and seeming detachment, he demonstrates worry about Dude, graciousness to Stumpy, and endearment toward Colorado. He also develops friendship with Carlos, the local innkeeper, and falls in love with Feathers, a woman with a troubled past. He forms deep attachments to the intrinsic good he sees in his friends, work, and the town. These valuable attachments support his calm disposition.

The Stoics affirm the importance of friendship for a flourishing life. In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius writes, "Think often of the bond that unites all things in the universe, and their dependence upon one another. All are, as it were, interwoven, and in consequence linked in mutual affection."⁷⁷ The Stoics viewed human lives as inseparably connected, and this connection animated a fierce belief in the value of friendship. By serving a friend, a person participates in the interworking harmony of the universe and practices exercising virtues toward his friend.

In *On Obligations*, Cicero considers the duties that friends owe one another and relates this story,

⁷⁷ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 99.

The story goes that Damon and Phintias had such affection for each other that when the tyrant Dionysius named the day for the execution of one of them, and the one who had been condemned to death requested a few days' grace in order to commend his family to the care of friends, the other stood surety for his appearance, accepting that he himself would have to die if his friend had not returned. When the condemned man did return on the day appointed, the tyrant was so edified by the faith they manifested to each other that he begged them to enroll himself as a third partner in their friendship.⁷⁸

Chance manifests unwavering commitment to the good of his friends. He reinstates Dude as deputy although his drunkenness and poor reputation proves a liability for Chance.

Throughout the movie, Chance pays unending attention to Dude and goes the extra mile to take care of him, encourage him, and protect him. As a result of his efforts, Chance restores an old friendship and gains a valuable ally. Chance's friendship with Dude mirrors his friendship with the town. As with Dude, he is committed to the good of the town despite the personal risk intrinsic to this commitment. He knows that he will do the right thing for his friend and the town, and his equanimity proceeds from this sense of duty. He does not fear death or defeat, but he fears cowardice or injustice with respect to his duties.

My Darling Clementine

Although Wyatt Earp himself allegedly reported the details of the gunfight at the O.K. Corral to director John Ford, *My Darling Clementine* is still riddled with inaccuracies.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the film provides the canonical account of the legendary marshal's escapades in Tombstone, Arizona. The film marked John Ford's third

⁷⁸ Cicero, *On Obligations*, trans. P.G. Walsh (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99.

⁷⁹ Lee Pfeiffer, "My Darling Clementine," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 8, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/My-Darling-Clementine>.

collaboration with Henry Fonda. The two worked well together, and Fonda animated Ford's films with his star quality and charm.

Richard Huston explains that Ford created *My Darling Clementine* to advocate for the importance and relevance of American ideals. He writes,

John Ford, returning from his experience in [World War II] saw his task as a filmmaker as reassuring Americans that their history was relevant, that the war had been fought for certain values central to the United States as a liberal society, just as the West had been won for 'the abiding values of domesticity and small-town life,' for the everyday simple things in an American environment of peace and individual freedom ... The film he ultimately made in 1946 was an explicit attempt to present these issues for a liberal society.⁸⁰

The resulting film depicts civilization's gradual emergence from the Wild West and valorizes the heroes that made this transition possible. It pits violence and revenge against tradition and love, demonstrating that a society requires security and meaning to stand the test of time.

In *My Darling Clementine*, Wyatt Earp has one question: "What kind of a town is this?" The famous lawman has retired and taken to cattle driving with his three brothers. However, when he arrives in Tombstone, Arizona, he grows increasingly dismayed by the lawlessness and disorder of this town. The mayor and sheriff fail to do their jobs, and the wicked prosper. In an early scene, the Earp brothers meander into town and enter Bon Ton Tonsorial Parlor, hoping for a shave. The shave is soon interrupted by gunshots and bullets flying through the wall. When the barber flees, Wyatt marches outside with shaving cream still covering his face, intent on finding the source of this mayhem. He approaches the nearby saloon and finds a crowd helplessly watching as a drunk man

⁸⁰ Richard Hutson, "John Ford's *My Darling Clementine*," *Representations* 84 (November 2003): 200-201.

shoots recklessly in all directions. He sees the sheriff standing idly by and takes matters into his own hands, storming into the saloon and disarming the drunk man.

In gratitude, the mayor begs Wyatt to stay in town as the marshal, but he briskly responds, “Nope! ... I’m just passin’ through tryin’ to get me a relaxin’ little shave.”⁸¹ Shortly after, the Clanton family murders one of the Earp brothers, and Wyatt returns to accept the marshal job. The death of his brother marks a crucial turning point in the film. In true Western fashion, he exhibits a very mild reaction to his brother’s death. He stares, stone-faced at the gravestone and calmly considers the appropriate response. As he sits by the grave, he says, “Didn’t get much of a chance, did you James? ... We’re gonna be around here for a while. Can’t tell, maybe when we leave this country, young kids like you will be able to grow up and live safe.”⁸²

Ford’s film asks what it takes to civilize a lawless land, and the hero embodies justice as he commits himself to Tombstone. Hutson writes about this theme, saying,

A sense of liminality, of cultural anticipation that is marked in gesture, image, and narrative, pervades *My Darling Clementine*. Obviously, what the culture needs in order to move along the path toward civilization is a lawman, a figure who understands his role to be the care and protection of the people and values of a community. Wyatt Earp’s job, when he becomes marshal of Tombstone, is to execute the law as the expression of the general will of the ‘good people’ of the community, and to do so entails removing the obstacles to such an authority representing the general will.⁸³

⁸¹ *My Darling Clementine*, directed by John Ford (20th Century Fox, 1946), 10:45. <https://www.amazon.com/My-Darling-Clementine-Alan-Mowbray/dp/B009K1WMMY>.

⁸² *My Darling Clementine*, 14:50.

⁸³ Hutson, “John Ford’s *My Darling Clementine*,” 201.

Throughout the rest of the movie, Wyatt and his deputized brothers work to establish the conditions necessary for the burgeoning civilization's success: peace, order, and justice. The murderous Clanton family stands in their way, terrorizing the town like gangsters. However, the newly minted lawmen find an unlikely ally in Doc Holliday, the suave sharp shooter who presides over Tombstone's saloons and gambling rings.

Despite the Earps' ceaseless efforts to maintain order in Tombstone, they seem slightly removed from the life of the town. They regard the lawless citizens with distaste and remain above the fray. During the long, hot afternoons, the brothers linger on the porch outside the barbershop, reclining in rocking chairs and keeping careful watch over the town. However, the arrival of the elegant lady, Clementine, changes everything for Wyatt. He instantly finds himself drawn to Clementine because she embodies the virtues of civility and liberality that he hopes to establish in Tombstone. Clementine arrived in town after a long pursuit of Doc Holliday, her fiancé. Wyatt marvels at her loyalty and bristles when Holliday rebuffs such a woman. For Wyatt, she represents what Tombstone can still become: temperate, generous, selfless, and refined. As a result, he grows gentler, warmer, and more interested in his own cleanliness.

Clementine bridges the gap between the lawmen and the town. She has great affection for the town and points out its charms to the men, commenting "I love your town in the morning, Marshal. The air is so clean and clear."⁸⁴ Her admiration for the town and its citizens spurs Wyatt's own appreciation, and her impeccable character encourages him to persevere in his efforts. She also helps incorporate the brothers into

⁸⁴ *My Darling Clementine*, 59:53.

the life of the town. In one scene, the Earps recline on their porch and watch the townspeople pass by in their Sunday best to the town's first church service. They did not realize that the town had a church, and they refuse an invitation to attend the event.

However, when Clementine asks Wyatt if she can accompany him to church, he readily agrees. The couple walks toward the church as the congregation sings "Shall We Gather at the River?" Wyatt and Clementine receive a warm welcome, and they lead the group in dancing. Wyatt's admiration and love for Clementine compel him to join the community he stewards. As one commentator writes, "This scene is the moment when Wyatt finally leaves behind the kill-or-be-killed Code of the West to embrace the precepts of law and order. To do this, he needs to fully accept his place in the community, but it's not an easy thing for this recalcitrant cowboy to do."⁸⁵ Although Wyatt only attends the service to impress Clementine, she has a remarkable effect on him. This scene transforms Wyatt's sense of duty from a mere desire for justice to love.

Blondie and Ethan stood entirely outside of civilization, but Wyatt manages to transition from an outsider to a respected townsman and leader. While Blondie subverts the law and Ethan disparages the church, Wyatt eventually stands for both institutions. Rather than ridiculing and minimizing the customs of public life, Wyatt advocates for their establishment, recognizing the meaning and goodness that they instill in a community.

At the end of the movie, he finally confronts the Clanton family in the famous gunfight at the O.K. Corral. The Clantons have murdered two Earp brothers and Doc

⁸⁵ Ethan De Seife, "What I'm Watching: *My Darling Clementine*," *Seven Days*, June 7, 2014, <https://www.sevendaysvt.com/LiveCulture/archives/2014/06/07/what-im-watching-my-darling-clementine>.

Holliday's girl, Chihuahua. They threaten Wyatt and tell him, "We'll be waitin' for you, Marshal, at the O.K. Corral!"⁸⁶ Wyatt refuses the help of the townsmen, but he joins with his remaining brother and Holliday. They ride calmly and quietly toward their enemies. The following scenes are a Western treasure trove. The camera follows the three heroic men as they walk slowly down a deserted, dusty road. The Clanton gang see them coming from a mile away and start preparing. Despite being dangerously outnumbered, Wyatt does not resort to the brute force of the Wild West. Instead, he gives the Clantons a chance to surrender and go to trial. He risks his life by venturing into the open and announcing, "I got a warrant here for you and your sons, chargin' the murder of James and Virgil Earp. There's also a charge of cattle rustlin'. I'm giving you a chance to submit to proper authority."⁸⁷ The Clantons refuse this chance and kill Holliday in the shooting. But, the Earps win out in the end and return to town.

The final scene shows Clementine and Wyatt's farewell. Clementine has decided to stay in town and open a school. Wyatt must return home to see his father, but he tells Clementine he will pass back through town afterwards. He casts long looks at her, then mounts his horse and rides away. The concluding shot of the film lingers on Clementine as she watches Wyatt ride away. She has committed herself to serving the town that Wyatt created. She is forlorn at his departure, but she will live out her life in a town full of promise.

In the movie, Wyatt is undeniably calm and equanimous, but these characteristics do not demonstrate his detachment or lack of feeling. Instead, he proves himself deeply

⁸⁶ *My Darling Clementine*, 1:23:05.

⁸⁷ *My Darling Clementine*, 1:31:26

committed to the cause of justice and the good of the *polis*. His steady composure results from his courage and commitment to do the right thing, no matter the personal costs. In this way, he shares the commitments of the Stoics.

In *On the Happy Life*, Seneca writes that the one concerned only with virtue will be raised “to the level of the gods: you shall be subject to no restraint and to no want; you shall be free, safe, unhurt; you shall fail in nothing that you attempt; you shall be debarred from nothing; everything shall turn out according to your wish; no misfortune shall befall you; nothing shall happen to you except what you expect and hope for.”⁸⁸

Wyatt’s mythic status as the civilizer of a lawless land demonstrates these qualities. Although violence and uncertainty surround him, he remains unmoved and untroubled. He meets the loss of his brothers and friend with unfailing self-command. He observes the corruption of the town with sensible judgment. He rides into danger with unwavering courage. He responds to his trouble with self-sacrificing commitment to set the wrong to right, where he can. In the end, Wyatt successfully saves the day. He accomplished all that he set out to do, but his willingness to do the right thing did not rely on the assurance of positive results. For Wyatt, as for the Stoics, commitment to virtue provides its own reward, and commitment to virtue produces unflinching peace and calm.

In addition, Wyatt’s commitment to justice in the *polis* aligns with Stoic ideas. The Stoics write at length about justice, and Marcus Aurelius states that for the man of virtue, “Two things alone suffice him, justice in his daily doings and contentment with all fate’s apportionings.”⁸⁹ For Marcus Aurelius, justice refers both to one’s individual

⁸⁸ Seneca, *On the Happy Life*, 35.

⁸⁹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 156.

actions and one's participation as a member of the *polis*.⁹⁰ To practice justice, a citizen must act justly within his mind, his home, and his community. Wyatt, as an individual, a brother, and a lawman, has a responsibility for justice within these three spheres. He fulfills the comprehensive demands of justice by refraining from lashing out in response to loss, seeking justice for his brother, and establishing justice within Tombstone. As a result, he creates a better town for everyone.

The film's emphasis on civilization also corresponds with Stoic teaching. Marcus Aurelius states, "Men exist for each other. Then either improve them, or put up with them."⁹¹ Rather than abandoning Tombstone to its chaos and criminality, Wyatt walks into the mess and models lawfulness for the citizens. He reflects solidarity both for his family unit and his town. He is loyal to his brothers and dedicated to their good. Although he retired from marshalling and seems poised to enjoy a quiet retirement on the plains, he returns to a community. Wyatt puts up with Tombstone and tries to improve Tombstone, and Tombstone discreetly improves him as well.

Dutiful Stoics Conclusion

In the words of Robert Thompson, "The western has always been the American epic. It's exciting and violent and huge. We don't have a single text like *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* but the western is our story."⁹² Not all Westerns feature a hero that is a Dutiful Stoic, but many of the best ones do. These characters prove reliable, interesting heroes.

⁹⁰ Rachana Kamtekar, "Marcus Aurelius," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/marcus-aurelius/>.

⁹¹ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 134.

⁹² Stuart Miller, "The American epic': Hollywood's enduring love for the western," *The Guardian*, October 21, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/oct/21/western-films-hollywood-enduring-genre>.

The harsh setting of the Wild West tests their commitment to do the right thing, and the desire for revenge and security tempts their resolve to practice justice. Nevertheless, Dutiful Stoics encourage viewers, and their noble conduct invites further contemplation and, sometimes, imitation.

Dutiful Stoics abound in Westerns, and there are many examples to choose from besides the two highlighted here. These characters share the same equanimity and orientation toward duty, but they have different particular situations, commitments, and results. For example, John Wayne's Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* is a kind, tough, sensible hero with a troubled past. He faces down danger and cruelty with admirable confidence and willingness to do the right thing. Clint Eastwood's performance as the tough-as-nails William Munny in *Unforgiven* also represents an example of Dutiful Stoicism. He plays a complicated character who struggles to reform from his history of brutality and murder. He is surprisingly sensitive and responds to his sense of duty to his deceased wife and the prostitute he wants to help. Munny does not shy away from his risky mission, and he tries, however falteringly, to act in accordance with his duties. Tommy Lee Jones's Sheriff Ed Tom Bell in *No Country for Old Men* offers a contemporary example of a Dutiful Stoic. Bell is responsible for catching Anton Chigurh, a horrifying murderer who wields a cattle bolt gun. The sheriff discovers body after body with grim calmness, and he perseveres to carry out his mission. He faithfully tries to fulfill his duty, but his best efforts prove futile in the end. Finally, he retires and finds himself weary, restless, and anticipating his own death.

Although infamous for their lack of diversity, racial stereotypes, and old-fashioned gender norms, Westerns locate Dutiful Stoicism in surprising places. For

instance, both the 1969 *True Grit* and the 2010 remake portray Mattie Ross as a Dutiful Stoic. This teenage girl may seem an unlikely candidate for the toughness, steadiness, and moral fortitude that constitute Dutiful Stoicism. However, Mattie possesses a clear vision of her duty toward her murdered father, and she acts in fierce loyalty to this duty for the entirety of the movie. She recruits the irritable Rooster Cogburn to join her team, and she provides leadership to this hardened lawman as well. She does not recoil from the difficulties of life on the trail and appears unruffled by the dangers she faces. In the end, this young girl proves that she has as much grit as any of the men she encounters. Moreover, she directs her grit toward the fulfillment of her noble duty.

In another case, *Dances with Wolves* portrays two members of the Sioux people group as Dutiful Stoics. When American Lieutenant John J. Dunbar sets up camp alone on the frontier, the Sioux people worry that he poses a threat to their community. Wind in His Hair initially distrusts Dunbar out of duty to his people. In response to duty, he wants to run Dunbar off the frontier and eliminate the threat. However, the medicine man, Kicking Bird, does not view Dunbar as a threat, and he tries to communicate with the American soldier. Both Sioux men respond to duty to their community. Where Wind in His Hair sees a threat, Kicking Bird sees an opportunity for mutual understanding. They are both courageous men who do not betray weakness or fear in the face of danger. Eventually, Dunbar enters their community, and both men begin to trust him. As Dunbar befriends the Sioux community, both Wind in His Hair and Kicking Bird consider him one of their own. When he is endangered, they both respond in duty to protect their friend. Although Westerns often portray First Nations people as deviant moral

agents, these two Sioux men are portrayed as Dutiful Stoics. They act in accordance with their duties to their community and their friends.

The simple integrity of the Dutiful Stoic may account for the enduring appeal of the Western. The Dutiful Stoic is a hero, plain and simple. These characters manage to do the right thing, every time, even if it means that they will stand alone. They overcome the inner demons, doubts, and fears that hinder normal people from doing the right thing. Moreover, they stand against evil without cynicism or bitterness. These movies are timeless because they feature the sort of heroes that we all want and need.

CHAPTER THREE

Hollywood's Heroes

Introduction

In the first chapter, I traced the development of Stoicism from ancient Greece into Rome and the modern world. In contemporary language, “stoic” functions most often as an adjective to describe a person who does not express emotion. This definition captures only one component of stoic behavior without explaining its philosophical justification. Furthermore, contemporary culture tends to value empathy and views stoic people negatively because they seem to reject this value.

In the second chapter, I explored the traces of Stoicism in the Western genre. Westerns are frequently described as stoic, and their characters regularly possess the ruggedness and grit associated with contemporary understandings of a stoic person. Specifically, I identified two Stoic archetypes in Westerns: the Pop Stoic and the Dutiful Stoic. The Pop Stoic character embodies the contemporary meaning of “stoic” and appears brutal, tight-lipped, and disinterested in anyone other than himself. The Dutiful Stoic, on the other hand, faces hardship with steady resolve while remaining dedicated to virtuous behavior and fulfilling his duties toward his friends, family, and community. Therefore, the Dutiful Stoic demonstrates important similarities to the Stoics of Greece and Rome.

In this chapter, I will consider objections to my argument, examine the enduring role of the Dutiful Stoic in film, and consider the benefits of Stoic heroes for our culture. I argue that distinguishing between Pop Stoicism and Dutiful Stoicism preserves the

possibility that Stoicism represents a way to lead a flourishing human life. If the Pop Stoic is the true Stoic, then Stoicism compels its adherents to alienate themselves from duty and maintain detachment in all situations. However, if Dutiful Stoicism offers the more accurate rendering of Stoic philosophy, then Stoicism compels its adherents to form meaningful friendships, play self-sacrificing roles in their communities, and do good no matter the cost.

Objections Objection 1: Hollywood is not filled with philosophers

First, a reader might object that Hollywood filmmakers had no intention of using Westerns to demonstrate the nuances of an ancient philosophy. The filmmakers did not describe their characters as stoic, and it is likely that they had no real familiarity with the tenets of Stoicism. They did not overthink their heroes, and Stoicism had nothing to do with it. Therefore, identifying representation of Stoicism in Western movies seems inaccurate and anachronistic.

In support of this objection, it is worth noting that there is not a clear pattern for Stoic types in Westerns. The Pop Stoics and Dutiful Stoics do not correspond to particular time periods, sub-genres, directors, or actors. John Ford made a Pop Stoic of John Wayne in *The Searchers*, and John Ford made a Dutiful Stoic of John Wayne in *Stagecoach*. Clint Eastwood played a Pop Stoic in Sergio Leone's *Dollars Trilogy*, but he played a Dutiful Stoic in *Unforgiven* and many of his other films. These filmmakers simply create characters: some are good, and some are bad. If they possessed such a clear vision of the good human life, then their heroes would consistently reflect this vision.

In response, I readily concede that Hollywood filmmakers did not intend to write Stoicism into their movies. This project simply represents one interpretation of a regular character type in the Western genre. The frequent invocation of Stoicism to describe these movies and characters makes it an interesting point for comparison. However, even if the filmmakers had no intention of portraying different types of Stoicism in their films, the similarities between the typical cowboy hero and the Stoics of Rome are striking. The Stoics were animated by a love of duty and virtue, and they faced all the hardships of life with courage and calm. As Hollywood filmmakers in the 20th century imagined the Wild West and considered the sort of hero that it needed, they thought up a character quite like a Stoic: tough, dedicated, and undaunted by difficulty. The unintentional representation of Stoicism in this long-enduring genre makes its appearance even more fascinating.

Moreover, the Stoic character appears outside the Western genre. Many movie heroes seem like Dutiful Stoics, even if they do not ride a horse or wear a badge. Superheroes like Superman and Captain America are unfailingly tough and determined to do the right thing. They regulate their emotions and concentrate on their tasks. Rather than indulging in frequent despair, they cherish their ability to do good and fight against evil. While their super-human capacities might mitigate the impressiveness of their Stoicism, viewers hold them in high esteem and wish to emulate their courage.

In another instance, the Jedis of the world-famous *Star Wars* franchise practice a Stoicism of sorts by cultivating inner calm and equanimity despite the constant threat of the Dark Side. Yoda's advice that "Attachments lead to jealousy. The shadow of greed that is ... Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose," almost echoes Lady Philosophy's reprimand of Boethius, "You have no right to complain as if what you have

lost was fully your own.”⁹³ Or, Humphrey Bogart’s ever-cool Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* seems a Stoic figure. He is unmoved by the looming war and unbothered by the snooping authorities. He maintains constant composure and dishes out incredible lines, such as, “I’m no good at being noble, but it doesn’t take much to see that the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.”⁹⁴ At the end of the movie, he sets aside his own love and passion to do the right thing. It seems natural for heroes to be Dutiful Stoics. They serve as shining representations of our moral commitments, and viewers are drawn toward their Stoicism, hoping to face the difficulties of life with similar courage and resolve.

Pop Stoics also frequently appear outside of the Western genre. The Dude in Joel and Ethan Coen’s *The Big Lebowski* is a Pop Stoic of sorts. He lacks any strong commitment to an idea of the good, but he nevertheless faces down the extreme ridiculousness of his life with a constant aspiration to keep his cool. His life spins stunningly out of control, but the Dude abides and always reminds his friends to take it easy. Don Vito Corleone might also represent a Pop Stoic figure. He is a quiet man who refrains from public outbursts and hands out bone-chilling threats in a slow, gentle drawl. Nevertheless, he is fiercely violent and willing to do whatever it takes to get his way.

⁹³ *Revenge of the Sith*, directed by George Lucas (20th Century Fox, 2005), 34:27. <https://www.disneyplus.com/movies/star-wars-revenge-of-the-sith-episode-iii/4WvbqLFumNvi>.; Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Victor Watts (London: Penguin Group, 1969), 25.

⁹⁴ *Casablanca*, directed by Michael Curtiz (Warner Bros., 1942), 1:40:20. <https://www.hbomax.com/feature/urn:hbo:feature:GXdu2UQAP-qXCPQEAADfL>.

Undeniably, there is an enduring aspect of the Stoic character. The prevalence of these Stoic types in movies, whether is an enduring aspect of the Stoic character. The prevalence of these Stoic types in movies, whether intentional or not, makes their interpretation interesting and important.

Objection 2: Westerns cannot provide moral examples because of their racism and sexism

Another objection to my argument might point out that racism, sexism, and violence towards those on the margins mark the Western genre. Furthermore, the heroes are usually the ones spewing this hatred for cheap laughs. These movies demonize First Nations groups, belittle Black and Hispanics characters, ridicule people with disabilities, and treat female characters as objects. None of these attitudes are admirable or even excusable, and contemporary viewers have rightfully criticized Westerns for these ugly characteristics. In his article about the recent surge in Feminist Western films, Kaleem Aftab describes the Western,

It's the genre that is all about the celebration of white male power. Westerns helped popularise and market the myth of cowboys and Indians, encouraging kids to take up guns against a monolithic other, and spreading the idea that anyone who doesn't speak English is part of a backward people who don't deserve rights to property, to respect, or to live the life they desire within their cultural traditions.⁹⁶

Moreover, John Wayne, the poster boy for the Western, has a well-documented legacy of racist and sexist views. In 2020, turmoil over his many derogatory comments toward minority groups caused his alma mater, USC, to remove a campus exhibit about his work.⁹⁷ John Ford, on the other hand, described himself as a progressive, but he also

⁹⁶ Kaleem Aftab, "I used to hate the Western – but now women are riding in to save the genre," *The Independent*, April 13, 2018. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/western-movies-films-white-privilege-power-women-directors-save-genre-lucrecia-martel-a8302676.html>.

began his career by working on D.W. Griffith's infamous *Birth of a Nation*.⁹⁸ The

troubled history of such Western icons casts further suspicion on the moral credibility of the genre.

For many, the antiquated and fraught history of the entire genre is intolerable. Spike Lee, for instance, expressed his distaste for Westerns, saying, “Cinema is the people who tell the story. Those people have done a lot of damage. I’ve never been a fan of John Wayne and John Ford and that cowboy [nonsense]. I hate them.”⁹⁹ The ethics of Western movies are tainted by their inherent racism, sexism, and hatred. Therefore, the Western genre is morally bankrupt, and its characters should not serve as imitable examples.

In response, I agree that many Westerns are completely culpable for the worst sins of their day. They demonstrate reprehensible prejudices toward First Nations people, Black people, Hispanics, women, and anyone weaker than the protagonist. While these are evil and indefensible perspectives, I think that these films and characters still offer interesting cases for philosophical inquiry.

To begin, it is worth noting that one can appreciate a philosophical outlook while soundly rejecting components of its system. A student can learn from Aristotle about virtue, politics, and aesthetics while simultaneously reject his acceptance of slavery.

Similarly, the Roman Stoics possessed virtues that contemporary people should condemn,

⁹⁸ Sergio Mims, “Considering John Ford's 'Apology Western' Sergeant Rutledge,” *Roger Ebert*, June 14, 2021. <https://www.rogerebert.com/black-writers-week/considering-john-fords-apology-western-sergeant-rutledge>.

⁹⁹ Andreas Wiseman, “Spike Lee On Race, History & Hollywood,” *Deadline*, October 24, 2018. <https://deadline.com/2018/10/spike-lee-race-hollywood-fuck-john-wayne-and-john-ford-1202487771/>.

like glory. While glory represents a legitimate, secondary good, the prioritization of glory fosters vanity, selfishness, and ultimately, destruction. Students of Stoicism should accept some of its virtues and reject others. I propose that viewers of Westerns should treat the genre similarly. Some of its virtues, such as duty and courage, are imitable, but others, such as racism and sexism, must be rejected.

Furthermore, filmmakers have not abandoned the Wild West. Despite the moral shortcomings of the older movies, the West lodged itself into the American imagination and contemporary Western movies still have popular followings and win awards. Contemporary Westerns often dismantle the hierarchies embedded in the older films, casting women and people of color in leading roles rather than adhering to the traditional vision of the white, male cowboy.

For example, *True Grit* flaunts the stereotypical cowboy hero by casting the fourteen-year-old Mattie Ross as its lead. She proves a forceful, autonomous hero and leads the charge to avenge her father's death. Both the original and the remake also poke fun at the chauvinistic La Boeuf, played by Glen Campbell in 1969 and Matt Damon in 2010. In another case, Quentin Tarantino's 2012 *Django Unchained* casts Jamie Foxx as the lead. His character, Django, escapes from slavery with the help of a charming bounty hunter, Dr. King Shultz. The two join forces to hunt down evil slave traders, and the film becomes a revenge epic following Django and Schultz's escapades.

These contemporary Westerns suggest that the ugly prejudices of the older films are not necessarily intrinsic to the genre. They create compelling stories and characters that do not rely on propagating harmful biases. Even the Old Westerns have remained popular despite their unfashionable stereotypes. I argue that the Stoic character archetype

helps account for this lasting popularity. In his article, “The Psychological Appeal of the Hollywood Western,” Frederick Elken writes about Old Westerns,

In the conflict of Good and Evil, the Good is invariably held up as right. On the side of Good are honesty, loyalty, sympathy for the oppressed, respect for just law and, if it is occasioned in the story, love of children and respect for religion. On the side of Evil are treachery, callousness, ruthlessness, contempt for the underdog, and disdain for civil rights. It is suggested that justice and morality are worth fighting for and are worthy of great risks. Those who fight to achieve them are honored and respected while those who seek other aims at their expense are denounced and despised.¹⁰⁰

Elken proceeds to reflect on the complexity of the world and the difficulty of discerning what is right and wrong. Westerns are appealing because they offer a clear-cut moral frontier where the hero does the right thing and good wins out in the end. The Stoic hero assuages our uncertainty about whether goodness is worth its high cost and liberates us from the tyranny of emotions. He models the steadiness of virtue despite the way we feel and the poor turns of fortune we may encounter.

Objection 3: The difference between the Pop Stoic and the Dutiful Stoic is unconvincing

Finally, a reader might object that the difference between the Pop Stoic and the Dutiful Stoic is weak and unconvincing. Arguing that only self-interest motivates the Pop Stoic and only duty motivates the Dutiful Stoic seems too simplistic. Human motivations are complex, nuanced, and often overlapping. Therefore, dividing these two characters into stark categories lacks support.

Furthermore, some of the Pop Stoics might act according to duties that contemporary viewers simply do not recognize as duties. As a result, viewers interpret

¹⁰⁰ Frederick Elkin, “The Psychological Appeal of the Hollywood Western,” *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 24, no. 2 (October 1950): 73.

these characters as unmoored from any principles. Ethan in *The Searchers* has a sense of duty to preserve his race and culture and maintain his family's pure bloodline.

Contemporary viewers undoubtedly recognize this sense of duty as racist, and do not consider racism as a legitimate form of duty. However, Ethan responds to this sense of duty throughout the film and only abandons this duty when loyalty to his niece overcomes his racism. While an abhorrent moral example, Ethan acts according to duty, and he has more similarity with the Dutiful Stoic than my distinction allows.

While not all Western characters fit neatly into one of the two categories I have outlined, I maintain that the two categories are distinct in important ways. The Pop Stoics may act in accordance with some sense of duty, but they do not frequently act this way. Blondie, for instance, responds only to his own self-interest. He has one moment of empathy for a suffering soldier, and he spares Tuco's life in the end. However, he spends the entire movie chasing treasure without thought for anything else. Perhaps, his self-interest represents a duty to his own preservation, but this does not provide a compelling moral example.

A character like Nathan Burdette, the villain in *Rio Bravo*, might offer a more interesting case. Nathan owns an unsavory saloon in town, and he leads a gang of cowboy thugs. Nevertheless, he always presents himself as professional, calm, and rather gentlemanly. The conflict in the movie arises when the town marshal arrests Nathan's brother. The lawmen expect Nathan and his men to storm the jail at any moment, and they wait, guarding the jail to the best of their ability. Although the movie's villain, Nathan acts in accordance with his duty to his brother. He has a commitment to his brother's good, and he plans to break him out of jail as a result.

In this scenario, Nathan may resemble a Dutiful Stoic. He has a stoic personality, maintaining composure in all situations. He also seems to act in accordance with his duty to his brother. However, I argue that fulfilling a sense of duty is not intrinsically good. Duties are only worthwhile because of the goodness, truth, and beauty of the duty's object. Therefore, a duty to do an unjust deed is not actually a duty. If a sense of duty compels a person to do an unjust, or unconscionable deed, then the duty is illegitimate and must be rejected.

One can easily imagine examples of such illegitimate duties. For instance, a soldier might receive instructions to harm an innocent child to gain a strategic advantage. Although the soldier feels a legitimate sense of duty toward his nation and his commanding officer, this particular requirement of his duty is illegitimate and lacks moral force. Therefore, the soldier must resist his sense of duty, recognizing that it leads him to commit injustice. Nathan Burdette's situation seems similar. He has a legitimate sense of duty to his brother. However, ambushing the local jail to break his guilty brother out constitutes an unjust action and duty cannot require an unjust action.

For these reasons, I think that the distinction between the Pop Stoic and the Dutiful Stoic can withstand scrutiny and that the two types should be differentiated from each other. However, many Western heroes do not neatly fit into either the Pop Stoic or the Dutiful Stoic type. These characters complicate my argument because the two types do not account for every case. Consequently, there is perhaps an additional category we might call the Stoic Misfits. These nuanced characters help demonstrate the essential features of each Stoic type. In the following section, I will examine two of these cases.

The Misfits

Case 1: Will Kane

As I explained in the first chapter, the conflict between Gary Cooper's character in *High Noon* and John Wayne's character in *Rio Bravo* sparked the inspiration for this thesis project. Although *High Noon* has stood the test of time, its depiction of contemporary politics and leadership stoked great controversy. Gary Cooper's Will Kane stands for the cause of justice, although he must stand alone. He saves the day and becomes a hero, but he does not quietly resolve himself to the task. Instead, he grows increasingly panicked when he realizes that he must face his enemy alone. Howard Hawkes, director of *Rio Bravo*, responded to Kane's actions sharply, "I didn't think a good sheriff was going to go running around town like a chicken with his head off asking for help, and finally his Quaker wife had to save him."¹⁰¹

Kane responds to duty, but he does not possess a Stoic personality. He sweats nervously, his voice grows strained, and he responds with frustration and fear to his situation. He does not restrain his emotions, and the approaching danger clearly affects him. For these reasons, he does not fit comfortably in the Dutiful Stoic category. However, he faithfully fulfills his duty and does not fit into the Pop Stoic category either.

This case helps clarify the Stoics' view of passion. Undeniably, the Stoics were wary of passion. They considered the passions as extrinsic forces that a person passively experiences rather than conscious decisions of the will. As Dirk Baltzly explains,

The passions or *pathê* are literally 'things which one undergoes' and are to be contrasted with actions or things that one does. Thus, the view that one

¹⁰¹ Jeff Stafford, "Rio Bravo," TCM, accessed March 13, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150514195816/http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/1069%7C0/Rio-Bravo.html>.

should be ‘apathetic,’ in its original, Hellenistic sense, is not the view that you shouldn’t care about anything, but rather the view that you should not be psychologically subject to anything – manipulated and moved by *it*, rather than yourself being actively and positively in command of your reactions and responses to things as they occur or are in prospect.¹⁰²

Kane experiences strong passions in response to the threat of a violent death and the loss of his brand-new wife. To most people, such passions seem natural and psychologically healthy. However, the Stoics view these experiences of passion as “false value-judgements,” because the person mistakenly judges an indifferent condition, like death or loss, to be a condition that affects virtue.¹⁰³ The Stoics think that neither death nor the loss of his wife threatens Kane’s possession of virtue. Therefore, he should not experience passion in response to these conditions.

Kane’s passion demonstrates his Stoic imperfection. Nevertheless, his passions do not have the final word. Although he initially heeds his friends’ advice to flee, Kane quickly returns to town. At first, he hurries about town asking for help, but he eventually resigns himself to his task. When the clock strikes high noon, Kane is standing on the main street, ready to fulfill his duty and face down his foe. He experiences forceful passions, but he does not seem ruled, or even significantly swayed, by these passions. He subjects his passions to virtue, reason, and duty, and his conduct matches Stoic sensibilities more closely than one might initially expect.

¹⁰² Baltzly, Dirk, “Stoicism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, February 19, 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Case 2: Rooster Cogburn

The character of Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit* represents another imperfect case. Both John Wayne's portrayal in the original film and Jeff Bridges's performance in the remake cemented Cogburn as one of the most classic figures of the Wild West. He is rough, rowdy, and tough as well as slovenly, drunk, and foul. He has a reputation around town as mean and deadly, and he is not highly regarded as a man of honor.

Early in the movie, Cogburn is hired by Mattie Ross to hunt down her father's murderer. Mattie is a young girl with strong family values, and she regards Cogburn's foul habits with scorn. In both versions of the movie, Cogburn begins as a hired hand, but he and Mattie soon become fast friends. The two grow deeply loyal to one another, and Cogburn honors Mattie's conditions of employment and eventually saves her life. At the beginning, he accepts Mattie's job due to the pay and his amusement at her spiritedness. By the end of the film, he is sincerely committed to her good and to helping her in any way possible.

Mattie introduces a new set of possibilities into Cogburn's life. He has always lived around criminals, and his livelihood depended on his viciousness. He is a man of the wild, and he lives on the margins of society as a result. However, Mattie enters his life and brings good Presbyterian sensibilities with her. Rather than following the convention of hiring Cogburn to kill on her behalf, Mattie insists on joining him every step of the way. She demonstrates fierce loyalty to her family and perseverance in her pursuit of justice. In her own peculiar way, Mattie introduces civilization into Cogburn's life. As they travel together, he recognizes an alternative to his solitary, violent existence.

At the outset of the movie, Cogburn does not seem concerned with duty. His drunkenness and angry outbursts also prevent his clear identification as a Dutiful Stoic. At the end of the movie, however, he shows a softer side than what viewers ever expected from such a hardened cowboy. His relationship with Mattie demonstrates that a cowboy cannot live on grit alone and that love can transform him from a sounding gong into a dutiful friend.

Anti-heroes and Dutiful Stoics

In his novel, *Notes from Underground*, Fyodor Dostoevsky described his narrator as an anti-hero, naming for the first time a distinct motif of modern art. He wrote, “A novel needs a hero, and here there are purposely collected all the features for an anti-hero, and, in the first place, all this will produce a most unpleasant impression, because we’ve all grown unaccustomed to life, we’re all lame, each of us more or less.”¹⁰⁴ He described humanity as inert, alienated, and shackled by rationality. Rather than making independent choices and filling their lives with purpose and creativity, they grew increasingly detached, dissatisfied, and restless.

He wrote these words in the 19th century, but his cultural analysis readily applies to the present day, as well. Americans are lonely, directionless, and disconnected from one another, and the film industry reflects this malaise. Rather than prioritizing traditional heroes with unwavering morality and heroic courage, contemporary films tend to adopt anti-heroes, after Dostoevsky’s own manner. A thorough investigation of anti-heroes would require much more space than I have allotted here, but I think that the prevalence

¹⁰⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonksy (New York: Vintage Classics, 1993), 131.

of anti-heroes in recent movies demonstrates the importance of the Dutiful Stoic archetype.

Characters like Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, Daniel Plainview in *There Will Be Blood*, or Veronica Sawyer in *Heathers* fascinate viewers and garner critical acclaim. These unconventional protagonists revel in their acute humanness: they feel loneliness, bitterness, grief, and hatred, they make huge mistakes, and things do not always work out for them in the end. Often, anti-heroes allow their baser impulses to guide them, and they act in accordance with resentment, hurt, and desperation. Movies with anti-heroes demonstrate the brokenness of the human condition and mirror viewers' own interior states back to them through amplified, fictional characters. Undeniably, directors craft excellent, contemplative movies with these captivating anti-heroes. But, these films can seem indulgent in their ambiguity and bleakness.

Many anti-heroes resemble some sort of Stoic type because of their tough, silent persona and unflinching demeanor. However, these anti-heroes masquerade as stoic figures while they are actually consumed by a passionate excess of emotion. For example, Batman may fit this mold. Although his identification as an anti-hero is fiercely contested on the internet, his detachment from institutional law enforcement and obsession with his deep-seated fear of bats might provide support for considering him an anti-hero. He is tight-lipped, bold, and does not fear suffering, but he is also filled with angst and existential uncertainty. Pathos has likely conquered him. His passions torture him as he tries to go about his work and maintain composure.

In another instance, the 2021 movie *Power of the Dog* features a similar anti-hero in Benedict Cumberbatch's character, Phil Burbank. Phil epitomizes the meanness,

coldness, and viciousness of the Western cowboy. He terrorizes everyone he encounters and constantly reminisces about the great men of old. However, viewers quickly realize that Phil's toughness disguises the excessive passions that rule his interior life. He forcefully suppresses these raging emotions, and viewers watch with horror, unsure what he might do next.

Obsession with anti-heroes may prove a symptom of a culture's impoverishment and disenchantment. These characters make morally repugnant decisions, abuse their power, and do not value virtue. As a result, movies with anti-heroes entrench viewers in moral gray areas, forcing them to wrestle with impossible decisions, horrible consequences, and situations where no one can win. Anti-heroes do not provide imitable examples for viewers, and these movies often intend to trouble viewers and disrupt their preconceived notions.

For a culture allured by anti-heroes, the Dutiful Stoics of the West may provide a beneficial alternative. While anti-heroes seem not to care about anything, Dutiful Stoics demonstrate the value of caring about intrinsically good things. The Dutiful Stoics order their lives with duties toward intrinsically good things, such as family, friendship, justice, and community. The love of intrinsically good things forms the basis of the Dutiful Stoic's resolve in the face of trouble. Although conditions like wealth and safety are real goods, the Dutiful Stoic recognizes that these benefits are inconstant and unfulfilling. As a result, he is firmly devoted to intrinsically good things and pays no heed to the lesser goods of human life. Dutiful Stoics direct their energy, time, affection, and care toward the fulfillment of duty, and their purpose and peacefulness mark their lives.

Although the Dutiful Stoics of the Westerns do not speak in lofty terms about virtue and intrinsic goods, they demonstrate the value of ordering one's life in this way. They enjoy deep connections to friends and local institutions while also remaining invulnerable to poor turns of fortune. To resist the contemporary cult of not caring and anti-heroes, we might require more heroes like the Dutiful Stoics.

Conclusion

The Dutiful Stoic's embodiment of Stoicism differs greatly from the stereotypical stoic cowboy. Rather than the rough, uncaring, silent, and detached Pop Stoic icon, the Dutiful Stoic proves a measured, honorable, flourishing human being who cares about others and acts consistently for the common good. While Pop Stoic characters represent only the least refined ideas of stoic behavior, the Dutiful Stoic characters embody kernels of the teachings of Stoic philosophy.

Therefore, the Dutiful Stoics may withstand the contemporary criticisms of the rugged, stoic cowboy archetype of masculinity. Rather than necessarily dismissing these movies and characters as old-fashioned, emotionally repressed, and egoistic, the Dutiful Stoic casts these characters in an alternative light. They are tough men living in tough conditions. To adapt and flourish in their environment, they structure their lives upon intrinsically good things and act in duty to uphold these unchanging goods.

Most viewers likely live in extraordinarily different settings from the Western heroes. However, the principled commitments of the Dutiful Stoics can apply beyond the narrow confines of their genre. Even if viewers are not dusty lawmen charged with instilling order in a wild land, they can recognize the value of caring deeply about things that are good in and of themselves. Viewers can recognize that these goods deserve dutiful

commitment and that those who commit themselves to such duties can face the many uncertainties of life with equanimity.

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