Games are occasions for people to temporarily disregard the boundaries of society and interact with one another using a new set of rules, but the games that people choose to play express modes of thinking that are created by the society that the players are escaping. Games and sports are a part of culture, and the qualities that a culture rewards and punishes are bound to be rewarded in its games as well. Bullfighting gives Spaniards an outlet to celebrate hot-blooded formality; Go beautifully expresses the Japanese belief in the flow of the yin and the yang; mancala’s overlapping tracks of motion capture the interconnectedness of life acknowledged by a spectrum of African tribes.

In the first decades of its history, the United States struggled to find a national game. Chess was a favorite of Benjamin Franklin. Whist was played by the first six presidents, and bridge was popular in New England (McManus 71). But these were the games of the sober Northeastern establishment, based more on diligence and rationality than the brashness of the new republic. America was a nation of bold risk-takers and it needed a game that reflected that. In places where moral attitudes did not prohibit gambling, games like faro and twenty-one flourished. But these, too, remained on the fringe. Respectable people knew better than to bet their earnings in a game of chance where heroes and geniuses are no less impressive than drunks and fools.

Poker, invented in New Orleans sometime in the early nineteenth century, locates a balance between skill and luck—and boldness and prudence, and science and superstition—reflective of the American mode of thinking. In poker, as in early American life, anything is possible at any time. Success is measured by money, but that money is not accumulated gradually; it is won in dramatic, risky showdowns. Players sit down at a table and win battles against each other, in changing combinations, through a combination of perceptiveness, good timing, aggression, trickery, and luck. Cheating is always a possibility but officially looked down upon. And any player, no matter how much he or she has lost, always has the opportunity to make a comeback.

It is now widely agreed upon that poker, along with baseball, is one of America’s Games; in fact, an 1875 editorial in the New York Times declared that “the national game is not base-ball, but poker,” citing the recent profusion of poker literature, the by-then widespread use of poker terms in journalistic reports of politics and diplomacy, and a certain jury in Oregon that arrived at a verdict using a deck of cards (New York Times 4). In his 1900 book Jackpots: Stories of the Great American Game, Eugene Edwards claimed that “practically all of the congressman before the Civil War played poker” (Edwards 38). By the time Abraham Lincoln assumed the presidency, poker was popular enough for him to be able to answer a question from a reporter about a dispute with England with a poker analogy and expect to be widely understood (Sandburg 269). Ulysses S. Grant, Chester Arthur, Warren Harding, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson were all...
avid poker players. Theodore Roosevelt used a poker term—the “Square Deal”—to brand his political agenda; his cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt followed suit by declaring his package of policies a “New Deal for America.” Richard Nixon used his poker winnings to finance his first congressional campaign. Barack Obama rose quickly in the Illinois political establishment by playing poker with his colleagues, and launched his presidential campaign by saying to his staff, “Let’s put our chips in the middle of the table and see how we do” (McManus 419). Now, millions of people play poker at home, in casinos, or online, and poker terms are regularly used in discussions of business, nuclear diplomacy, warfare, and even romance. In his article “Poker’s Promise,” Leonard Kreigel recalls that poker was a rite of passage for immigrants in the Jewish community of the Bronx where he grew up:

Among my vivid adolescent memories is listening to a group of middle-aged men—furriers, countermen, garment workers, taxi drivers—vehemently discussing in Yiddish the trials and tribulations of their weekly poker game. I can still hear the echo of those voices dripping with derision as a player’s efforts were dismissed with the contemptuous, ‘Er speet vee ah greener.’ (‘He plays like an immigrant.’) No condemnation could have been more formidable, no dismissal more damning. For to play like an immigrant was to deny those very entitlements America offered like some generous uncle dispensing unheard-of largesse. Even in the golden land, one listened carefully for opportunity’s knock. (Kreigel 135-136)

To be a bad poker player is to be a bad American.

But what does it mean to be a good American? The American identity is multifaceted and hard to pin down. When “American values” are discussed today, it is easy to forget that America is made up of regions that have distinct, and sometimes, opposing characteristics, and that the popular image of what it means to be an American is an amalgamation of values from the North, the South, and the West. The study of poker can provide a lens with which to examine different regions, specifically, the region of poker’s origin, the South, and the region which claims it as part of its mythology, the West. The first mention of poker in print is in the diary of a soldier, James Hildreth, titled Dragoon Campaigns to the Rocky Mountains upon publication. Hildreth defined poker as “a favourite game of cards at the south and west” (Hildreth 113) and tells a story about sneaking past the window of a major who loses a hand with four kings to a captain holding four aces. This paper intends to present two works of fiction by regional writers—Go Down, Moses by William Faulkner and The Luck of Roaring Camp by Bret Harte—as representative of the contrasting emphases placed on the game by artists seeking to capture the attitudes of the people of both regions.

**True Southern Gentlemen**

There has always been a tension in Southern white culture between aristocratic appearance and democratic participation. While people in Northern colonies settled in towns run by coalitions of small landowners or cities teeming
with merchant activity, Southern society tended to be organized around gigantic plantations owned by a small number of superwealthy individuals. Elite status could be obtained in the North by ecclesiastical or commercial achievement, but elites in the South were almost feudal lords, complete with tracts of land as big as small kingdoms, and slaves instead of serfs. Social mobility took on a separate form in the South; after the first few generations of settlement, the best way for a poor man to become rich was to marry into landed family.

There is an element of bluffing underlying all of this. In the seventeenth century, a number of men in England of middling social status obtained grants of land in Southern colonies through a variety of means, some of them through an obscure political favor or unsavory intrigue, others just by taking the risk of being part of an advertised voyage or military expedition. An unknown could travel to the New World, claim his share of the wide-open land through a legal process several steps removed from royal control, and then start to imitate the level of nobility that such land ownership in Europe would imply. Before long, the children of these lucky individuals were forming governments based on the superiority of those who inherited such advantages. A culture of nobility sprang into being, created out of thin air, supported by a certain level of denial. The new upper class made themselves feel like lords by building extravagant mansions, designing coats of arms, and developing a manner of speaking in which reality was often cloaked in sugary layers of politeness.

And by owning slaves. Southern gentility was sustained by the abhorrent practice of slavery, and so it cannot be denied that aggression and cruelty were also part of the Southern world. Not everyone owned slaves, of course, but every encounter between a white and a black in the South was influenced by the assumption that a white could, if he wanted to, treat the black like an animal. He could be worked, he could be whipped, and he could be hunted. He could be bought and sold, and he could even be wagered, as many slaves often were, in a poker game.

Soon after it was invented in New Orleans (by combining various card games played by European aristocracy), poker became extremely popular with wealthy Southerners. Enormous fortunes were created by the plantation system in the four decades before the Civil War, and many young men had to find ways to spend their money and leisure time. By this time, poker, having been pushed off dry land by anti-gambling crusaders in several states, was forced onto riverboats; travel on luxury riverboats was common for wealthy Southern gentlemen, and so the game found a natural audience (McManus 64). Such gentlemen lived off wealth they did not work to earn and felt validated in a game in which they were free to throw their money around in gallant ways, hoping to get even richer by winning money off of opponents who were gullible, weak, or insufficiently ruthless.

No less an iconic character than Rhett Butler in Gone With the Wind revealed the integration of poker into Southern culture when he told Scarlett that his father threw him out into the world with “no training whatsoever to be anything but a Charleston gentleman, a good pistol shot and an excellent poker player” (Mitchell 124). Perhaps the novel’s best example of how poker relates to the Southern mindset is the fact that Scarlett’s father, Gerard O’Hara, won his plantation by
pure luck in a poker hand (he was dealt four deuces), but afterwards he and his daughter talk about Tara as if it is their family’s ancient birthright. The land, the money, and the slaves are lately acquired, and the “heritage” Scarlett cherishes is a delusion, a desire to celebrate a glorious past that never existed.

William Faulkner wrote with deep power about the attachment of Southerners to their lineage and their land, and how it forced them into cycles of mendacity and brutality. The Southern love of poker goes hand-in-hand with these qualities, and *Go Down, Moses*, in particular, features poker prominently. A hand of stud in the first story creates two marriages that shape the book’s sprawling, feuding family tree, and the elements of a poker game—betting, bluffing, showdowns—echo in the actions of men throughout the novel as they compete for money, possession of women, and dignity. The men who find satisfaction in the novel treasure the blood and land they are born with, and make the most of it by waiting for the perfect moments to force showdowns they can win through guile, courage, and the thorough study of their opponents’ psychology.

The structure of poker is established by the actual game in “Was.” Two hands are played. The first is five-card draw between Theophilius McCaslin (Uncle Buck) and Hubert Beauchamp. They are faced with three situations—Tomey’s Turl’s pursuit of Tennie, Sophonsiba’s “capture” of Buck, and a contested $500 bet—that they agree can best be solved by a hand of poker, since the outcome would be unambiguous. Beauchamp pulls out a deck of cards and defines what is at stake by betting Buck’s bachelorhood from Sophonsiba against the $500, and the sale of Tennie against the sale of Tomey’s Turl. They are each dealt a face-down hand by an impartial observer, Cass. They assess their hands and are given a chance to trade in some of their cards; they can’t control what hand they end up with but can choose what kind of risk to take to improve their lot. After new cards are taken, there is a showdown. Beachamp’s hand is better than Buck’s so Beauchamp wins what is in the pot—in this case, the right to keep the $500 and shed both his sister and his half of the pair of troublesome slaves. The game continues the following night with Amodeus (Buddy) stepping in for his brother. As is common in poker, the stakes are raised: this time Buck’s bachelorhood is bet against the right of Beauchamp to forgo Sophonsiba’s dowry (which would include land and more slaves). In this case, the game is made more complex by switching to a variant, five-card stud, which allows more opportunities for betting and bluffing and therefore requires more skill. The dealer, Tomey’s Turl, gives each player one face-down card, then deals face-up cards one at a time with a chance to bet after each one. After the fourth card is dealt, Buddy shows a two, a four, and a five—a possible pair or future straight—against Beachamp’s ace and two threes—a pair with possible two-pair or three-of-a-kind. Passed priority, Buddy raises the stakes by betting ownership of Tomey’s Turl and Tennie against their monetary value. While deciding whether to call, Mr. Hubert reveals that his hidden card is another three. Despite having a much stronger hand showing, Beauchamp decides to fold. Buddy acts boldly and uses his reputation as an unbeatable poker player to scare Beauchamp into giving up.

Similar cunning and courage is displayed by Tomey’s Turl in the “game” that he initiates to begin the story. He wants to marry his love, Tennie, and uses his
knowledge of tensions between the McCaslins and the Beauchamps to manipulate them into giving him what he wants without having to give up anything in return. Like a good poker player, he waits months for an opportunity, then surprises the other “players” in the “game”—his masters—by escaping in the night and forcing them to react when they wake up and see what is at stake. He uses a series of tricks—galloping on his mule when he is expected to walk, misleading dogs by removing his coat, trapping dogs in a field-house, knocking down Buck with a door—to keep the game going long enough for Buck to make a mistake and lose his freedom to Sophonsiba. This is similar to the way a poker player with a small stack can stay in a game by feigning weakness to lure players with more resources into showdowns they cannot win. Like the fox who outwits the hounds, Tomey’s Turl is able to overcome the disadvantages of being a slave and maneuver his masters into a position where they will let him marry a woman they were initially unwilling to buy.

The second hand of poker in “Was” is a hint that, in Faulkner’s world, competition between families never ends and can be carried on by new players. Tomey’s Turl’s struggle against his white relatives is continued in the next generation by his son Lucas. “The Fire and the Hearth” depicts a series of showdowns in which Lucas competes with other men by forcing show downs that he can win with a combination of dishonesty, bravery, timing and luck. The story begins with Lucas burying his whiskey still as part of a scheme to “knock out” George Wilkins, a man who threatens Lucas by courting his daughter. He plans on exposing George’s illegal still and wants to make sure his own will not be discovered if the police search the whole plantation. When George stays in the game by moving his still to Lucas’ porch just in time for the police to see it, Lucas saves himself by allowing his daughter to marry George so that he cannot testify against him in court. In doing this he displays instincts that would be valuable in a poker game, where sometimes it is necessary to take additional risks to win a round in which it is revealed that you need a better hand than originally thought to win, or to reraise someone who raises a bet on you. The transfer of Nat leads to another poker-like episode in which home improvements—a stove, a porch, a well—are promised by George to match the privilege of fully possessing Nat. Eventually it is revealed that these calls were all bluffs and that George is not able to back up his representations when he needs to.

Interspersed with this narrative is a flashback to an earlier round of betting between Lucas and Zack Edmonds. After Zack’s wife died in childbirth, he took Lucas’ wife Molly into his home to replace her, figuring that his racial and economic superiority to Lucas would scare him into submission. But he did not read his opponent correctly. Lucas demanded Molly back and forced Zack to back down. The game did not end there; Lucas then raised the stakes several times, first by detaining Zack’s son Roth, then by threatening Zack with a knife, then a gun. Lucas’ almost certain chance of eliminating his rival was foiled at the last moment, however, by the gun’s misfire (akin to an unfavorable long-shot river card). He could have realistically cocked and fired the gun again to kill Zack, but that would not have been in line with the Southern mindset presented by Faulkner; once the cards are flipped over, they need to be shuffled back in and dealt again before another showdown can take place.
Decades later, Lucas finds his chance to challenge the “women-born” branch of his family again when he uncovers a gold coin in a mound of dirt and concludes that there must be a fortune buried somewhere nearby, hidden by Buck and Buddy long ago. His thoughts race in the same way that those of a poker player do when he looks at a great hand and tries to figure out what to do with it before the other players catch on. Lucas risks his income as a sharecropper by staying up all night digging for the gold. Deciding he needs a metal detector to complete the search, he obtains a “divining machine” from a salesman through a string of borrowed bets, bluffs, and unfair deals that could only be pulled off by an underdog poker player who knows how to take advantage of other people’s greed, gullibility, and blindness. Ultimately, though, Lucas is unable to find any treasure and ends up frustrating Molly so much that she wants the help of the grown-up Roth Edmonds in getting a divorce. In his showdown with Roth in court, Lucas wins Molly back by displaying that he is willing to give up his desire to win all the money at the table and go home with what he has.

The elements of poker can also be found in “The Old People” and “The Bear.” When Ike says that “a man might be smarter...or richer...but not better born” he is summarizing a Southern respect for lineage that mirrors the acceptance by poker players that a man is can only be as good as the hand he is dealt (Faulkner 170). The hunting skills that Ike learns from Sam’s father are analogous to the strategies of a winning poker player. Both sports reward players who can read their opponents (prey) precisely and who pick their battles wisely. The conflict between the hunters and Old Ben is structured like a poker game. There are long periods of waiting and observation in between showdowns. Stakes are raised several times, with more injuries and sacrifices as time goes on. Betting is involved; Major de Spain acknowledges that he “gambled” his dogs against Old Ben (Faulkner 214). It is only when the hunters have the perfect dog, and trap the bear in the perfect situation, that that they are able to win. The hunt is repeatedly described as having rules that cannot be broken, and the men enjoy sinking into a common rhythm: long stretches of tracking and planning, punctuated by calculated risks that cause progressively dramatic confrontations, ending finally in one side’s total elimination.

This is, of course, also the story of the Civil War, the ultimate expression of Southern masculinity. “Who else,” asks Ike McCaslin, “could have declared war against a power with ten times the area and a hundred times the men and a thousand times the resources, except men who could believe that all necessary to conduct a successful war was not acumen nor shrewdness nor politics nor diplomacy nor money nor even integrity and simple arithmetic but just love of land and courage” (Faulkner 288-289)? Who else has ever been so willing to raise the stakes so quickly? The Civil War was an incredibly audacious bluff that went wrong when the North called and had a better hand. In the closing stories of Go Down, Moses, Faulkner suggests that after the South’s defeat, Southern men were forced to find new ways of approaching life. Lucas is replaced by descendants who play dice and run numbers; Ike folds his hand and gives up his heritage, the new hunters shoot doe. Roth Edmonds refuses to face the mother of his son, and old Molly, left alone and grieving, doesn’t want anything to be hidden anymore.
Poker is absent from the book’s final stories, and as the values of the Old South faded away, poker was enthusiastically adopted by another region: the West.

**Dead Man’s Hand**

James Butler Hickok was born on a farm in Illinois in 1837. On his eighteenth birthday he rode west to the Rocky Mountains and spent the next six years as a hunter, trapper, and bodyguard. When the Civil War began, he volunteered for the Union army, and was dispatched by General Samuel Curtis to infiltrate the army of Confederate General Sterling Price in disguise. After the war, Hickok scouted for the Seventh Cavalry in Kansas, during which time it is suspected he had an affair with Libbie Custer, the beautiful young wife of General George Armstrong Custer. In 1865, after a dispute over a poker game, Hickok shot professional gambler, David Tutt, in the heart in broad daylight in Springfield, Missouri, and was acquitted of murder by a jury on the grounds that he acted in self-defense. After a stint as the marshal of Abilene, Kansas (he was fired for accidentally shooting one of his own deputies), he gambled and went broke in Denver, then in Kansas City, then Cheyenne before marrying tightrope walker and lion tamer Agnes Lake. Lake owned a successful circus, but Hickok felt that it would be unmanly to live off his wife’s income, so he went to the new boomtown Deadwood in the Dakota Territory to try to make his own fortune. During a poker game on August 2nd, 1876, Hickok was shot in the back of the head by a local named “Crooked Nose” Jack McCall. The hand Hickok was holding—two pair, aces and eights—would have won him the pot on the table; ever since it has been known as the Dead Man’s Hand (McManus 130-136).

“Wild Bill” Hickok has been the subject of scores of dime novels, magazine articles, serious novels, biographies, songs, movies, and television series. As James McManus puts it in *Cowboys Full*, “it was Wild Bill Hickok who forged the strongest links in the popular imagination between gunfighting, poker and manliness—all this despite being known as a losing player who was shot from behind by a cowardly punk” (McManus 137). As a poker player and marshal, Hickok repeatedly fell flat, but that doesn’t matter—what matters is that he was always willing to start over, to reinvent himself. His life served as a model of what would become the mythological Western man: the restless, reckless gunslinger who never settles down and always keeps his eyes open for the next opportunity to hit the jackpot. He is fundamentally different from the mythological Southern gentleman, not just in wealth and refinement, but in his views on fate and history. Both archetypal men display daring and win showdowns, but the Southern Man acts to maintain his social standing, estate, and family name, while the Western Man fights for nothing but adventure. They both play poker, but the former does so with ruthless cunning, while the latter prefers games that are on the square, and plays with a healthy acceptance of the forces of luck. In other words, the Southerner always plays to win because he can’t imagine losing, but the Westerner acknowledges that life will have its ups and downs, and doesn’t mind much because he has nothing to lose in the first place.
Bret Harte started writing fiction in the 1860s, around the same time as the appearance of Beadle and Adams cheap paperback Westerns (Lyon 712), but his best book of stories, *The Luck of Roaring Camp*, is refreshingly free of cowboys and shootouts. Harte instead focuses on the people living in the California camps and towns that sprung up as a result of the gold rush. There are no desperadoes in the book, but there are plenty of poker players. This is fitting, since the very act of going to California to mine for gold is a big gamble in itself—the ultimate all-in bet, because once you’ve lit out, you’d have to hit it big to ever get back again. Risk-taking is emphasized in the book. The first story, “The Luck of Roaring Camp,” open with a baby being born in a miner’s camp, and a gathering of men on the other side of the door betting on the outcome: “Three to five that ‘Sal would get through with it’; even, that the child would survive; side bets as to the sex and complexion of the coming stranger” (Harte 4). Along with incessant gambling often comes a belief in superstition; because the success in mining following the birth of the baby, the camp agrees to name the boy “Tommy Luck” (Harte 10). In “The Man of No Account,” a group of young men arrive in San Francisco by boat and buy shares in various businesses and projects, many of which they never see or know anything about. Profit is more often the result of a lucky guess than hard work.

Not that everyone has an equal chance of success. Like in *Go Down, Moses*, men in *The Luck of Roaring Camp* get they want through bold, decisive action, especially in romance. Women are scarce on the frontier and cause spirited competition. A “pushing, active, brilliant fellow” in “The Man of No Account” named Rattler attempts to woo a woman, Nellie, who is already in a courtship with a quiet, unobtrusive man named David Fagg. Fagg owns a hotel, has money earned from years of steady work, and is favored by Nellie’s father; he is in fact Rattler’s boss and often lends Rattler money. But Fagg doesn’t have the confidence to compete with Rattler, so he decides to move back East. Just by being courageous and charming, Rattler forces a rival with a better position to fold his hand. The narrator defends Nellie’s infatuation with Rattler, a rambling blackleg, by asserting that “we are more apt to take acquaintances at their apparent value than their intrinsic worth. It’s less trouble, and, except when we want to trust them, quite as convenient” (Harte 136). Another poker player, Jack Hamlin in “Brown of Calaveras,” similarly impresses a beautiful woman with his crafty bravado. In the first scene of the story, he is sharing a stagecoach with a judge, a congressman, and a colonel who are all competing for the favor of a well-dressed lady. When they stop at a hotel for dinner, the other three men leap out and all offer to assist the “descending goddess.” Hamlin takes advantage of the confusion by opening the opposite door, taking the lady’s hand, “dexterously and gracefully” swinging her to the ground, and lifting her onto the platform (Harte 91). Later on, Hamlin discovers that the woman is the wife of Brown, a friend who Hamlin is constantly busting in poker. She traveled from the East to live with her husband. Hamlin seduces Mrs. Brown behind his friend’s back, and when Brown unknowingly confides to Hamlin that he thinks his wife is in love with another man and asks for advice, Hamlin has the audacity to reply, “Spot the man, and kill him on sight,” adding that it would be justified since that man was taking a risk
Ultimately, though, Hamlin reveals himself to be much less ruthless and cutthroat than, say, men in Go Down, Moses. Early in the story, Hamlin gives back the money he won from Brown because he knows he needs it, and after seeing how much his friend loves his wife, abandons his plans to abscond with her and cheerfully mounts his horse to try his luck in the next town. In Harte’s world, at least, there is a limit to how aggressive a true Western gentleman will become. Like a white hat in a dime-store paperback, Hamlin delights in his own strength and courage but avoids competition with those he might wound too deeply.

Not all men in the West were gentlemen, though, and arriving in a Western town can feel like sitting at a poker table; with no family ties or social markers to fall back on, the only way to judge the trustworthiness of other people is to read their face and guess at what is behind the persona they are representing. Even people you think you know well could change in an instant. The friends in “The Man of No Account” don’t stay together long:

When the ‘Skyscraper’ arrived at San Francisco we had a grand ‘feed.’ We agreed to meet every year and perpetuate the occasion...Ah me! Only eight years ago, and yet some of those hands then clasped in amity have been clenched at each other, or have dipped furtively in one another’s pockets. I know that we didn’t dine together the next year, because young barker swore he wouldn’t put his feet under the same mahogany with such a very contemptible scoundrel as that Mixer; and Nibbles, who borrowed money at Valparaiso of young Stubbs, who was then a waiter in a restaurant, didn’t like to meet such people. (Harte 133)

In “The Idyl of Red Gulch,” Miss Mary finds out that a man she meets on the street, Sandy, who appears to be homeless drunkard, is actually a sweet, romantic lover of children, but then learns that he impregnated a woman in town and abandoned her and his own son. Tennessee in “Tennessee’s Partner” makes a living out of striking up pleasant conversation with strangers before robbing them; at one point he runs off with his best friend’s wife. In the face of such uncertainty, many Westerners were driven to mistrust everybody. As McManus points out in his essay “Black Magic,” poker “requires each player to account for deceit by the others” (McManus 164). So it’s natural that a pro like Jack Hamlin assumes that every person he encounters is trying to take advantage of him, and it’s understandable that the miners at Roaring Camp reject the idea of sending Tommy Luck to be cared for by women at Camp Red Dog. One of the miners, Tom Ryder, thinks that “them fellows at Red Dog would swap it, and ring in somebody else on us” (Harte 8). In the lawless West, it’s just not practical to believe in the honesty of others.

These layers of uncertainty are made possible by the fact that, on the frontier, every person starts over with a clean slate, and can give herself a new identity anytime she wants to. Harte makes this clear right away with his description of the miners in Roaring Camp: “they exhibited no indication of their past lives and character” (Harte 3). For the thousands of people who struck out for Nevada and California to escape the ailing South after the Civil War, perhaps the most jarring difference between their new and former way of life was that once they
were in the land with no history, previously inescapable facts, like family ties, bad reputations, debts, and criminal records, could be discarded. As the narrator puts it in “Tennessee’s Partner:” “at Sandy Bar in 1854 most men were christened anew” (Harte 57). To see how both worldviews—the South’s respect for tradition and the West’s culture of renewal—are able to be expressed in one game, poker, is to understand how a game that is as rich and multifaceted as poker is can yield different meanings through an adjustment of perspective. Thinking in terms of one hand, a player must accept the cards he is dealt, and operate according to the knowledge that everyone at the table has been assigned a combination that ranks them in an immutable hierarchy; a player can be persuaded to give up his claim to power, but in a showdown the stronger hand will always beat the weaker one. From a wider point of view, however, the strength of the hand you are holding is only meaningful for a few short moments because soon everyone will be dealt a new spread. The Western perspective captured by Bret Harte in The Luck of Roaring Camp is similarly wide. The best way to get out of a bad situation is often to admit defeat and then wait for a new deal. Sure, the guy across the table has your chips, but maybe next time you’ll get a chance to win them back. This is the philosophy that drives the miners in Roaring Camp to disassociate the newborn from his recently deceased, “sinful” mother; one man declares, “It’s better to take a fresh deal all round. Call him Luck, and start him fair” (Harte 10). It is also the attitude that allows Jack Hamlin to sincerely advise his distraught friend Brown to “sell all you’ve got, take your wife with you, and quit the country” instead of, say, discuss his suspicions with her openly, which would be foolish because it’s a showdown he can’t win with the cards he’s currently holding.

The knowledge that a new start is always possible in the future allows a certain ease and happiness in the present. This lack of anxiety in Westerners is best illustrated in Harte’s most famous story, “The Outcasts of Poker Flat.” Yet another noble poker player, John Oakhurst, is exiled from Poker Flat following a “change in its moral atmosphere”; a “secret committee had determined to rid the town of all improper persons.” Oakhurst’s state of mind is described:

Mr. Oakhurst received his sentence with philosophic calmness, none the less coolly that he was aware of the hesitation of his judges. He was too much of a gambler not to accept Fate. With him life was at best an uncertain game, and he recognized the usual percentage in favor of the dealer. (Harte 20-21)

The story is structured like a hand of stud; instead of a chain of events in which each event is caused by the last, there is a series of unexpected twists and turns, like random cards turned face-up one at a time. Oakhurst is kicked out of town! These other previously unmentioned people are too, and they join together! Now everyone is drunk! An old friend appears coming the other way! He ran away with his new lover! Now it’s snowing! Etcetera. It is dramatic only in the sense that new developments cannot be foreseen; suspense is not created at all until the snow starts to fall and it becomes apparent that the group of outcasts is stuck at their camp until it stops or until they run out of food, whichever comes first.
So comes the genuine surprise characteristic of Harte’s best sketches: after introducing a cast of characters with barely any dimension, and placing them in a situation that is barely interesting, the final scenes of the story turn out to be deeply moving, even transcendent. Instead of slipping into panic or despair, Oakhurst settles himself “coolly to the losing game before him” (Harte 33). Before he dies, he pins the deuce of clubs to a tree with his bowie knife with a note written on it reading “Beneath this tree lies the body of John Oakhurst, who struck a streak of bad luck on the 23rd of November, 1850, and handed in his checks on the 7th of December, 1850” (Harte 36). Tennessee faces his own execution with total calm; his Partner dies a few pages later, happy that he will join his friend. A flood sweeps over Roaring Camp; when a relief-boat crew finds the miner Kentuck clinging to the baby Luck and tells him the baby is dead and he, too, will die soon, Kentuck smiles and says, “tell the boys I’ve got the Luck with me now” before drifting away. And Piney and the Duchess, the last two outcasts left alive in the snowstorm, wrap their arms around each other and “fall asleep” with looks of peace on their faces. Even death is not hard to bear when you know that someday, somewhere, you will be born again.

It is reasonable to assume that people who actually died on the Western frontier did not all pass with such serenity as the characters in Harte’s stories. Wild Bill was reported to have been nervous and afraid the day of his demise—reluctant to sit with his back to the door, always looking over his shoulder (McManus 135). But that is left out in the telling of the legend. The romantic, Western view of death is that it is just the end of a streak of good luck.

**Skyscrapers and stock markets**

If the association of poker with the West seems the more natural fit, that is because the image of poker in our culture, especially after its recent jump in popularity, is thoroughly Western. The classification of the game as “gambling,” which causes it to remain banned in many states and in federal regulation of the Internet, implies that the element of luck in poker is widely emphasized over skill. The most popular variant now is Texas Hold ‘Em. Poker tournaments on TV are full of players who wear cowboy hats, or who are eccentric, which evokes the West for many viewers. The media highlights stories of poker champions who rise from “unlikely” backgrounds, who are amateurs, who are able to win without a lot of experience, who had conservative professions but quit to pursue their dream, who prevail by making reckless moves and exhibit devil-may-care attitudes. Poker may have been invented in the South but has now, through years of appearance in literature and cinema in service to the Western myth, become seen as the Game of the West. And it is now actually Western, in the sense that the cities where the most, and biggest, games are played are Gardena and Las Vegas.

But the fact remains: poker was invented in the South. Poker is a game of skill, of bluffing and catching bluffs, and its champions are treated like an aristocracy, an exclusive club with its own long-term feuds. Moreover, poker is designed to give underdogs a chance to leverage their small resources just by making smart moves, an attitude paralleled by the influence Southerners leveraged on national legislative
and electoral politics in the 20th century despite being a permanent minority.

So why is poker always presented in a Western context? Perhaps it is because, outside of the South, no one wants to be Southern, but a part of everyone wants to be Western. To be Western is to see excitement. It is to be self-reliant, to control your own destiny, to have second chances. It is romantic. To people outside of the South, to be a Southerner would be either meaningless or actually undesirable—small-minded, backward-looking. To outsiders, Southern politeness is shallow and odd. If you are a promoter or author looking to make money off the game of poker, you don’t want the game associated with the region no one cares about—you want it to be associated with the one that is fascinating, sexy, American.

Poker became Western, and so did America. After the Civil War, the North and South faded from view, and the West became, in the words of Lord James Bryce, “the most American part of America.” Frederick Jackson Turner theorized that the American identity was defined by the pioneer spirit; the insularity and oppression of the South and the puritanism of New England were artifacts of bygone eras, while the wide-openness of the West was what was really in tune with the values of the nation’s founding. After the westward expansion, America became all about risk-taking, renewal, self-reliance, and dramatic reversals of fortune. It’s only natural that these aspects of poker, too, became emphasized, and that the values of this game would in turn dominate our national identity. In America, hard work, intelligence, and compassion are, officially, important. But at the end of the night, the real measure of success is the number of chips you have on the table. In America, life is a zero-sum game.
**Works Cited**


Expansion of European-American populations to the west after the American Revolution resulted in increasing pressure on Native American lands, warfare between the groups, and rising tensions. In 1830, the U.S. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act, authorizing the government to relocate Native Americans from their homelands within established states to lands west of the Mississippi River, accommodating European-American expansion. Evidence of pre-Clovis cultures have also been found in the Paisley Caves in south-central Oregon and butchered mastodon bones in a sinkhole near Tallahassee, Florida. More convincingly but also controversially, another pre-Clovis has been discovered at Monte Verde, Chile. In The American West Hardcover October 1, 2005. by Laura Wilson (Author), John Rohrbach (Author), Richard Avedon (Photographer). Visit Amazon's Richard Avedon Page. Find all the books, read about the author, and more. Shot as a commission for the Amon Carter Gallery in Fort Worth, Texas, In the American West, allowed Avedon a free rein to travel and photograph people who in his opinion and I must stress that was his personal opinion, represented the West, over a period of severed years. Aided by photographer Laura Wilson and his two assistants, Avedon used a 10x8 camera, shooting outside against a white background, isolating his subjects from any distractions. Despite the success of the final exhibition at the Amon Carter in 1985, Avedon had his critics. The Empire is a nation of advanced technology. The Nebulis Royal Family Agency is a land that is feared as a "witch's land". In the midst of an endless war between them two boys and a girl met on the battlefield. The icy witch is revered as the strongest in the kingdom and the young swordsman, who is one of the greatest forces of the Empire. Show more. Latest manga releases.