

## **A Fanciful “Frontier”: The Image of the Lone Cowboy in Disney World’s Frontierland and Its Impacts on Young Audiences**

Katherine McIntire

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In her paper, Katherine McIntire analyzes the Disney World theme park “Frontierland,” arguing that by relying on the historically inaccurate concept of the lone cowboy it promotes problematic values that are antithetical to Walt Disney’s philosophy. Her incredibly clear **introduction** orients the reader to the analytic work she plans to do and to the many sources she plans to consult while constructing her argument. By giving herself space to tease out the specifics of her primary source and the various key terms relevant to her argument, Katherine effectively lays the groundwork for her **motive** and **thesis**.*

### *Excerpt*

From a rustic gate of whittled wooden beams hangs a long plank with the name “Frontierland” carved in jagged text [Image 1].<sup>1</sup> Step through this entryway and find yourself immersed in a world of joy reminiscent of the American Frontier. You can watch a musical performance at the “Country Bear Jamboree,” ride the “Big Thunder Mountain Railroad,” and shop for food and merchandise at various storefronts such as “Westward Ho Refreshments” and “Prairie Outpost and Supply.”<sup>2</sup> Or, you can simply take a stroll through this fanciful land and experience the sights of rocky, terra-cotta-hued hills and the traditional ferry steamboat coasting down the river, all while soulful country-western songs play in the background.<sup>3</sup> Together, these thematic appearances help create the idealized depiction of the old American West of Frontierland, one of four “lands” located in Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World, the most visited theme park in the world.<sup>4</sup> The exact definition or interpretation of the term “American

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<sup>1</sup> “Magic Kingdom Overview: Frontierland,” video file, YouTube, posted by Mouse Talk, May 30, 2016, accessed December 2, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqPEKcJ\\_PtQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqPEKcJ_PtQ). (1.20)

<sup>2</sup> “Saturday Stroll around Frontierland | Magic Kingdom,” video file, YouTube, posted by The DIS, February 4, 2017, accessed December 2, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYMjkg5PKa4&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>3</sup> Disney, *Frontierland*, amusement park, Magic Kingdom, Walt Disney World, Lake Buena Vista, FL.

<sup>4</sup> Disney, “Walt Disney World Attractions,” Disney.com, accessed December 2, 2019, <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/attractions/magic-kingdom/map/>; Adrienne Jordan, “These are the

Frontier” is contested, though it generally refers to the westward expansion beyond English settlements that occurred from the 17<sup>th</sup> century through the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> When we consider this phenomenon, one of the most common associations it instantly evokes is the image of the “Wild West”—the characterization of frontier settlement as a period dominated by lawlessness and cowboys. Given its popular usage in—amongst other things—films, novels and advertising, this concept has become one of the most widely recognized myths of American history and symbols of national identity, both throughout the country and globally.<sup>6</sup>

But, within the past several decades, there has been greater critique of the historical inaccuracy and socially outdated principles that these depictions in media typically represent. In particular, this criticism and social awareness have exposed the traditional theme in Wild West media of silencing perspectives from oppressed groups—namely women and Indians<sup>7</sup>—which coincides with a dominant sense of American exceptionalism.<sup>8</sup> With its characteristic thematic attractions and decorations, Frontierland embodies this same ideal of the Wild West as the classical western films that have been deemed so problematic. This inaccurate representation of history even contradicts what Walt Disney envisioned for the park, to be an experience based solely on historic fact.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is especially perplexing as to why it has not been subject to the same criticism as other media that depict this stereotypical imagery of the Wild West. Might

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world's most-visited theme parks," *USA Today*, last modified May 23, 2019, accessed December 16, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/news/2019/05/23/disney-world-magic-kingdom-world-most-visited-theme-park/1206310001/>.

<sup>5</sup> Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "American frontier," in *ENCYCLOPÆDIA BRITANNICA*, accessed November 24, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-frontier>.

<sup>6</sup> Will Wright, *The Wild West: The Mythical Cowboy & Social Theory* (London: SAGE Publications, 2001), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Acknowledging the complications with this term, indigenous populations and figures will be referred to as “Indian,” for the sake of simplicity and consistency with sources.

<sup>8</sup> Carter attests that the extensive misrepresentation of the true history of the American West has resulted in the large discrediting of these popular frontier themes. He describes how this process has occurred with the development of more advocacy for previously silenced groups, such as women and Native Americans. Matthew Carter, "Myth of the Western," *Edinburgh University Press*, 2014, 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt9qdqtz>.

<sup>9</sup> Marty Skylar, comp., *Walt Disney World: Background and Philosophy*, Harrison "Buzz" Price Papers, 7, <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/buzzprice/160>.

Frontierland's idealized representation of American heritage in fact be more problematic, given Disney's younger audience? What might be the implications of this depiction for children and families? I contest that this idealized, family-oriented depiction of the "Wild West" in Frontierland is in fact troubling for certain audiences. In particular, the thematic design of this park's attractions creates an environment that is subliminally centered around the historically inaccurate image of the "lone cowboy." Ultimately, their depiction of this ideal creates an atmosphere that promotes values that are problematic for the behaviors of young audiences. Furthermore, this depiction also undermines Walt Disney's original philosophy behind the park as a family-friendly venue based on historic reality, as these implications create a hostile environment for children and families.

This essay will first utilize Will Wright's analysis of the Wild West to introduce the phenomenon of the "lone cowboy" and the two principal qualities of this image. Then, Carolyn Merchant's discussion of the eradication of western Indian populations will demonstrate the historical narrative that this concept of the lone cowboy generates. Next, this paper will examine the display of this imagery in Frontierland, and Christopher Nave's findings will show why the social messages this attraction presents are of such great importance. This essay will then turn to the findings of James Garbarino and the Topos Partnership to consider the values that the lone cowboy imagery in Frontierland may foster in its young audiences. Finally, this paper will consider how this quality of Frontierland's display conflicts with Walt Disney's original philosophy.



Image 1. *Frontierland Gateway* photographed by Mouse Talk, 2016. Lake Buena Vista, FL, Walt Disney World.

*Author Commentary*

Katherine McIntire

I wrote “A Fanciful ‘Frontier’” for my primary research paper in Professor Emma Ljung’s freshman writing seminar “The Fragmented Past.” In this course we explored how the concept of heritage is experienced through remnants and interpretations of the past, such as preservations of historic monuments or displays of artifacts in the Princeton University Art Museum. For our third and longest research paper, we were prompted to address a particular problem pertaining to the fragmented past. Professor Ljung encouraged us to select any specimen of the fragmented past that we felt passionate about, whether a literal object in a museum or an intangible concept like the construction of a memory. When brainstorming potential topics that were of interest to me, I soon decided on the idea of Disney. As a child, I lived near Disneyland and loved everything about it, so I was excited to have the opportunity to reflect on my experiences in the parks and unpack some of the puzzling meanings behind “the magic of Disney.” (Notably, I did eventually choose to analyze the near-identical Frontierland in Disney World instead of Disneyland due to a greater availability of sources.)

In the early research process, I knew I needed to narrow my focus on one universal theme or one “land” within Disney. I chose to concentrate on Frontierland because it so explicitly and confidently embodies the theme of the “Wild West” in the United States, amidst controversy regarding this ideal in recent decades. I therefore expected to find a vibrant scholarly conversation surrounding this topic, but I was surprised when I could not find literature concerning this “monument” of American heritage. There was, however, extensive critique of the Wild West as a theme in general, particularly in the film industry. Upon reading these sources, I found it puzzling that there was such widespread criticism of Wild West films—and of the often racist or sexist values they often convey to an adult audience—while Disney’s Frontierland presents the very same ideas to millions of families visiting with impressionable young children. Thus, I was compelled to dig deeper and consider what kind of lasting impact these controversial values might have on Disney’s audience, which would require both a sociological and psychological approach.

I drew much of my early inspiration from books by experts in the American West, particularly Will Wright. In my initial drafts, though, I found that I had an overwhelming amount of primary evidence for the sociological considerations of the Wild West—far more than I could fit into the paper. I attempted to squeeze too much of this evidence into my early thesis, while I lacked a direct analysis of some other sources that I later realized could draw the connection between the sociological issues with Frontierland and the psychological impact on its visitors.

During this drafting process, Professor Ljung helped me to consider where I needed to cut down my writing and where I needed to reconsider my other sources or research new avenues to more thoroughly justify my argument. She also suggested that I include a signposting paragraph at the end of my introduction, given the number of sources and the variety of topics I go on to address. I believe this guiding addition helps to establish from the beginning what the reader can expect from the paper, allowing for greater ease in reading through it.

I am incredibly grateful for Professor Ljung and her inspiration and guidance in writing seminar. I enjoyed learning how to construct motive and develop a strong thesis, and this essay is certainly a culmination of my work and development this past term. I immensely enjoyed studying the previously unfamiliar topic of the fragmented past, and this essay brought me great joy and curiosity in reflecting on my childhood passion with a new lens.

## *Editor Commentary*

Malka Himelhoch

The introduction can be one of the most challenging parts of the paper to write. It needs to provide an orientation to the paper's topic, draw the reader into the paper, introduce the motive and thesis, and provide the reader a roadmap of the paper's direction. Being able to synthesize all of these different elements and doing so briefly and elegantly is not easy. In this excerpt Katherine successfully introduces her topic, sets up her motive and thesis, and provides the reader a roadmap to the rest of her paper, all in three paragraphs.

Katherine begins her paper with an extremely detailed description of "Frontierland." While the description is beautifully written, what makes it work as the opening of this paper is that Katherine's motivating question is directly connected to the physical reality of the space that she is describing. I found the description here to be particularly noteworthy because as a Writing Center Fellow I frequently read papers that rely on descriptions at the start of the introduction that are entirely disconnected from the paper's argument. In this case however, the description is useful because the physical space that Katherine describes here is relevant to the crux of her argument. It also allows her to establish many of the key terms that become crucial to her argument later in the paper. Most notably on the basis of the description, Katherine introduces the concept of the "Wild West" and defines it briefly and clearly. The description therefore works both to orient the reader to the primary source that forms the basis of the paper's analysis, Frontierland, and provides a compelling opening to an analytical paper.

Another great moment of this introduction is the final paragraph, which Katherine refers to in her commentary as a "signposting paragraph." In this paragraph she very clearly presents the reader with a roadmap to the paper, naming all the sources she is planning to consult and explaining how they are useful to the argument she is constructing in the paper. While such a paragraph can seem unnecessary, when juggling many sources while simultaneously making a complex argument, as Katherine does, the inclusion of a "signposting paragraph" is crucial. Even here, as she indicates exactly what she is planning to do in the remainder of the paper, Katherine is careful to say only as much as is necessary, reminding the reader that the rest of the paper is worth reading.

*Professor Commentary*

Dr. Emma Ljung, Princeton Writing Program

We are told to never judge a book by its cover. Yet, as writers, we are trained to invest a disproportionate amount of energy into the “cover”—the introduction—of our “books”—our essays. The introduction, we are taught, needs to draw the reader in by means of a hook. It must offer compelling evidence that stages the essay’s motive. It ought to introduce the main keywords and central scholars. It should set an appropriate stage for the essay’s thesis to perform its leading role. In short, the introduction is meant to do a *lot*. It is not strange that the first few paragraphs are the trickiest ones to write. Writing the introduction becomes a delicate negotiation between audience awareness and topic framing, a balancing act that forces the writer to appeal to the reader’s trust while simultaneously unbalancing the reader’s belief system. This is hard work.

And that is precisely what makes Katherine’s paper so impressive. Its introduction manages to defamiliarize the familiar, to make the ordinary strange. It does so by placing the reader in the middle of the stage, mid-scene, with utmost clarity, specificity, and intent. Note Katherine’s verb choice in the first few sentences: using the imperative mood, she makes it impossible for the reader to ignore the motive-building evidence because it is the reader who is experiencing it. Note the clever use of key terms: first introduced through the motive-building examples, they establish a framework for the essay’s narrative. And note how the strategic placement of examples helps Katherine formulate her motivating questions, questions that the reader cannot ignore because the introduction suggests that the answer is significant. This is how successful arguments are born.

As a teacher of writing, I often find myself having to encourage my students to start smaller: if the first sentence is of the broad “since the dawn of time” variety, motive and thesis have little chance of accomplishing anything specific. Here, Katherine is starting with the smallest scene possible for her topic: the gate into “Frontierland.” By making her introduction so specific, she sets up her thesis to do work that is narrow in scope and deep in analysis – precisely what scholarly work is meant to do. Moreover, Katherine’s introduction functions as a microcosm, a snapshot of the whole essay. Read it, and you know exactly what the rest of the paper will address. In fact, after reading her introduction, it seems that as readers we *should* judge books by their covers—or at least appreciate how far a strong introduction can take us. In Katherine’s case, it is all the way to the Wild West!



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## **Bios**

**Katherine McIntire '23** is a first-year from Massachusetts pursuing a major in Economics. She is a member of the Princeton women's varsity lacrosse team, and her favorite pastimes include reading, playing with her dog, and drinking tea. She wrote this paper as a first-year.

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