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Close Reading of *The Virginian*:

"Always for him the first signs that he had gained the true world of the mountains began at the island. The first pine trees stood upon it; the first white columbine grew in their shade; and it seemed to him that he always met here the first of the true mountain air—the coolness and the new fragrance. Below, there were only the cottonwoods, and the knolls and step foot-hills with their sage brush, and the great warm air of the plains; here at this altitude came the definite change. Out of the lower country and its air he would urge his horse upward, talking to him aloud, and promising fine pasture in a little while. Then when at length he had ridden abreast of the island's pines, he would ford to the sheltered circle of his camp-ground, throw off the saddle, and blanket from the horse's hot, wet back, throw his own clothes off, and, shouting, spring upon the horse bare, with a rope for bridle, cross with to the promised pasture. Here there was a pause in the mountain steepness, a level space of open, green with thick grass. Riding his horse to this, he would leap off him, and with the flat of his hand give him a blow that cracked sharp in the stillness, and sent the horse galloping and gamboling to his night's freedom. And while the animal rolled in the grass, often his master would roll also and stretch and take the grass in his two hands, and so draw his body along, limbering his muscles after a long ride. Then he would slide into the stream below his fishing place, where it was deep enough for swimming, and cross back to his island, and dressing again, fit his rod together begin his casting. After the darkness had set in, there would follow the lying drowsily with his head upon his saddle, the camp fire sinking as he watched it, and sleep approaching to the murmur of the water on either side of him."

In this passage from *The Virginian*, Owen Wister makes clear, through his word choice and diction, the importance of nature and its ability to heal and rejuvenate those in need. By describing the favorite camping place of the novel's hero, the Virginian, as a small island tucked into an isolated stretch of river deep in the mountains, Wister shows the importance of untouched nature to the true Westerner. This importance is stressed by Wister's repetition of the words "true" and "promise" to describe the island, and the mountains around it. Throughout the passage powerful words and phrases such as "sheltered circle" and "freedom" are used in reference to the island itself, and to the Virginian and his horse's state of mind upon reaching the island. Picking his words with precision, Owen Wister uses this passage of *The Virginian* to show the power that nature

can have on the spirit and body of the westerner.

Beginning the passage by contrasting the “true world of the mountains” with the plains from which the Virginian has come, Wister portrays the ride to the island as a spiritual journey into a kind of Eden. Within two sentences, the word true is used twice, and first is used three times to describe different aspects of the mountains. Despite using simple language, Wister manages to depict the mountains as a beautiful, untouched place where even the air itself is cool and fragrant.

In comparison, below on the plains there are “only” cottonwoods instead of pine trees and unlike in the mountains, the air of the plains is “warm.” By using contrasting words, Wister sets up the idea in the mind of the reader that the mountains are a rejuvenating place where one can come should life on the plains become too overwhelming. To further convey this point, Wister then describes the Virginian urging his horse upwards, “out of the lower country and its air” and “promising fine pasture” to the animal.

The Virginian’s campground on the island is no mere resting place, instead it is described as a “sheltered circle”, an extremely meaningful phrase in the context of the passage. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word shelter means “something that covers or affords protection” while a circle is, among other things, “a closed plane.” Thus, by portraying the campground on the island as a sheltered circle, Wister is in effect describing a closed space in which the Virginian can find safety, protection and peace. Such an image is made even more appealing by the simple fact that the sheltered circle was not constructed by man, but rather, has been provided by nature. Thus, Wister completes the image of the mountains, and the island specifically, as a kind



of natural Eden.

Having established that the island represents a sort of protected natural paradise, Wister goes on to describe the rejuvenating powers of that paradise. Immediately upon reaching the island, the Virginian removes the blanket, and saddle from the "horse's hot, wet back." By using the words "hot" and "wet" to describe the horse's back, it becomes clear to the reader that the horse is very much in need of rest and care that only the island can provide. Transformed by the island from his normal reserved self, the Virginian, having removed his clothes, "and shouting", "springs" onto the horse's back and rides from the island to the "promised" pasture across the river. Although slightly shocked by the Virginian's out of character behavior, one cannot help but smile at the image of the cowboy riding naked in his mountain paradise. The use of the word "promised", with its religious connotations, also helps to enforce the image of island as an earthly paradise.

The transformation of both man and beast continues as the two reach the pasture, and the horse is released to his "night's freedom." The two partners, horse and naked cowboy, then roll together in the grass, seemingly released from care and worry by their surroundings. If the island has such influence on the normally reticent Virginian, the reader thinks, he must powerfully deserve it.

The Virginian, having rolled in the grass, completes his transformation by bathing in the river, physically washing the dirt, grime, and remnants of the plains, from his body. Finally, clean and carefree, the cowboy rests by the fire, sleep brought on "by the murmur of the water on either side of him." By describing the sound of the water as a murmur on either side of the island, Wister makes it seem as if the water, rushing on either side of the "sheltered circle" of the island is protecting the Virginian as he falls into a vulnerable

sleep.

Upon examination of this passage, it is evident that the island represents a physical and spiritual refuge to the Virginian. It is also clear from the value that the Virginian puts on the island that he very much needs such a refuge from the demands of civilization. In creating the island as a sanctuary for the Virginian, Wister expresses the idea that even morally upright conscientious men such as the Virginian need an occasional escape into nature to heal and rejuvenate. The Virginian's complete enjoyment of and surrender to nature make it clear that he respects, and perhaps deserves a place like the island more than the other characters in the novel. The island's rejuvenating effect on the Virginian in this passage make clear the power and importance of nature to those true westerners who need and deserve it.



Works Cited:

Wister, Owen. *The Virginian*. New York: Signet Classics Publishing, 2002