

Paragraph deconstruction exercise:

Thompkins argues that the *Riders of the Purple Sage* represents an effort to juxtapose masculinity and Christianity. Christianity, she says, “had to be forcibly ejected.”

Here’s two grafs where she makes this argument. Let’s break them down.

In Venters, American men are taking their manhood back from the Christian women who have been holding it in thrall. Mercy and religion, as preached by women and the clergy, have stood in manhood’s way too long, and now men are finally rebelling. But even though the gun is obviously a symbol for the penis, manhood, in this scenario, does not express itself sexually. Violence is what breaks out when men get guns. “Now I’ll die a man,” says Venters when he gets his pistols back. Which is to say, now that he can risk death in a gunfight, he can be a man.

When Christianity is no longer the frame of reference — that is, when Lassiter arrives — manhood can prove itself only through risking death. At the moment this shift occurs, the gospel of peace and charity becomes manhood’s nemesis; urging forgiveness and turning the other cheek, it deprives men of the chance to prove their manhood by facing death at the hands of an enemy. In the place of the gospel of forgiveness, Lassiter installs the reign of an eye for an eye. “mercy and goodness,” he says to Jane at the end, “such as is in you, oh they’re the grand things in human nature, can’t be lived up to on this Utah border. Life’s hell out here. Jane you think — or you used to think — that your religion made this life heaven. Mebbe them scales on your eyes has dropped now.”