

While its appeal has waxed and waned, the myth of the American cowboy is one that endures in the United States, continuing to appear in print and on screens big, small, and digital. Although individual depictions vary, some common features of the paragon of the Western man appear across decades and in the works of various authors and other artists. The cowboy is of European descent, most commonly of English extraction (although he necessarily associates with people of other ethnic backgrounds), frequently coming from a landed background and having military or militaristic experience. He is indelibly associated with life on horseback, and commonly carries weapons for use at long range and in close quarters. More to the point, he lives according to a strict code of honor, demanding self-reliance and grit in fighting and holding those who are less able to protect themselves in high regard; his honor calls for the cowboy to “ride for the brand,” being loyal even to the point of death to the landed owner of a particular mark or to the land and mark itself.

In this, the American cowboy is markedly similar to the knight of Arthurian romance. Not only is he akin to those who sit at the Round Table in his surface features, but in many cases, his narrative patterns follow those employed by Malory, the Gawain-poet, their forebears, or their Victorian medievalist successors, following a single character for a time in additive adventures that end up repeating their own tropes again and again. His appearances in the writings of such authors as William W. Johnstone exemplify the parallels neatly, demonstrating that the Arthurian knight continues to be refigured and reappropriated in the early twenty-first century.