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**SADDLESORE: PARODY AND SATIRE IN  
THE CONTEMPORARY WESTERN NOVEL**

**Michael Cleary**

**A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University  
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for the degree Doctor of Arts**

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SADDLESORE: PARODY AND SATIRE IN  
THE CONTEMPORARY WESTERN NOVEL

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## ABSTRACT

### SADDLESORE: PARODY AND SATIRE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WESTERN NOVEL

by Michael Cleary

The Western novel has always been the willing victim of its own popularity. The Western formula was quickly defined and accepted, and few writers dared to vary such elements as stereotyped good and evil characters, a plot line emphasizing action and romance, and a mythical setting in the frontier. However, since about 1960, there has been a noticeable trend by writers to parody, exploit, and otherwise alter the Western formula.

This dissertation traces the development of a sub-genre which has produced a number of Western novels which use parody and satire to distort the conventions of the popular Western in order to expose their superficiality and to expand the genre into a new, more vital type of fiction. This study focuses on seven novels which comprise four recognizable types of satiric Westerns.

Chapter I provides a background of the forces which shaped and encouraged the rigid structure of the formulaic

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Western. An attempt is made to note the significant, often corresponding influences of literature, film, and television.

Chapter II examines Charles Portis' True Grit, a novel which parodies several Western conventions, most notably that of the epic hero. Although Portis employs parody to spoof the genre, True Grit is nevertheless shown to be as romantic and mythic as the traditional Western.

Chapter III concerns two novels which rely on parody to attack the Western formula. Richard Condon's A Talent for Loving and David Markson's The Ballad of Dingus Magee spoof stereotypes such as the gunfighter, the cowboy, the Indian, and the heroine. In so doing, parodic Westerns suggest that their farcical worlds are no more ludicrous than the romantic worlds of the formula.

Chapter IV examines a type of satiric novel labeled "reactionary" Western. Although this type uses techniques found in strictly parodic Westerns, its targets are more varied. "Reactionary" Westerns rely on the reader's familiarity with literature and criticism outside the boundaries of the Western. H. Allen Smith is a humorist whose Return of the Virginian is an outright attack against Wister's book and the formula it popularized; it also lampoons a number of contemporary literary trends. John Seelye is an academic writer whose complex novel, The Kid,

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manipulates characters and themes from a number of classic American novels by writers such as Mark Twain, Herman Melville, James Fenimore Cooper, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark. In addition, Seelye spoofs Leslie Fiedler's literary theories and a number of Western conventions as well.

Chapter V discusses satiric Western novels which transcend the narrow focus of the Western formula. Robert Flynn's North to Yesterday and Thomas Berger's Little Big Man do more than parody stereotypes; they are truly comic novels which explore themes concerning man's potential and the nature of human values. North to Yesterday uses the framework of the Western to create memorable characters and express an existential philosophy. Little Big Man re-evaluates our interpretations of history and myth, combining the two into a vision that is both humanistic and ennobling. This chapter concludes with a few observations regarding the ways in which these works have expanded the literary potential of the Western novel by insisting on a human, not epic, approach.

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION: NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WESTERN NOVEL

The history of the Western novel is a record of the stultifying effects of popular success on a literary form and formula. With few exceptions, the Western novel has been the eager victim of its own popularity. American writers of the nineteenth century were quick to discover the successful ingredients of the Western formula and rarely violated them: stereotyped characters representing clearly identifiable values of good and evil; a predictable plot line emphasizing adventure and romance; a semi-mythical setting in the harshness and grandeur of a shifting frontier.<sup>1</sup> So successful and enduring was the formula that few writers risked disappointing their readers' fixed expectations.

Henry Nash Smith has traced the origins of the Western novel to the legends which grew up around Daniel Boone and James Fenimore Cooper's depictions of the frontier hero in

<sup>1</sup>C. L. Sonnichsen, "The New Style Western," South Dakota Review, 4, No. 2 (1966), 23.

the Leatherstocking stories.<sup>2</sup> But it was the dime novels and pulp magazines that appealed to the mass audience in the latter half of the nineteenth century which popularized on a grand scale what was to become "the hardiest weed that ever grew on the literary landscape."<sup>3</sup> But even weeds can bloom brilliantly. Owen Wister's The Virginian, for example, gained some critical respectability for the cowboy story at the turn of the century. Its success marked the acceptance of Western characters and themes which were doomed to be repeated in hundreds of imitations, many which threatened to overtake the popularity of the original. Zane Grey combined a sense of national purpose and first-hand experience with his subject into enormously successful books with characters who responded nobly and heroically to the challenges of the West. His works expanded the heroic model beyond the image of the cowboy, sheriff, and rancher. Whether the hero was a railroad engineer, wagon train boss, hunter, trapper, telegraph worker, or even outlaw, the stereotypical qualities remained intact. Nobility was something a person earned by evidencing courage, passion, ingenuity, and high moral purpose in the face of natural

<sup>2</sup>Henry Nash Smith, The Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (New York: Random House, 1950).

<sup>3</sup>Douglas Branch, The Cowboy and His Interpreters (1926; rpt. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1961), p. v.

and human obstacles. Virtue never went unrewarded. Grey's success encouraged other writers who were anxious to share in the rewards waiting for craftsmen of the Western formula. Max Brand (at that time Frederick Faust) was given a copy of Grey's Riders of the Purple Sage and told to write something similar.<sup>4</sup> So successful were Brand's novels that the result was to further embed the conventions of the Western formula. With writers such as Grey and Brand imitating their own success or the success of others, there was little interest in varying the proven methods which so obviously satisfied the expectations of their readers.

The stagnant condition of the Western novel was observed as early as 1931, when Walter Prescott Webb lamented that the writer of Westerns had succeeded too well; the subject he had chosen lent itself to "melodrama, to popular exploitation, and the author could not resist the temptation to become popular. He let his cowboys ride too hard, wear too many guns and use them too much and too well";<sup>5</sup> he strained relentlessly against the bounds of ordinary American English. Webb was only one of a growing number of critics who protested against the stylized romantic

<sup>4</sup>Frank Gruber, Zane Grey: A Biography (New York: World Publishing Company, 1970), p. 108.

<sup>5</sup>Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1931), p. 465.

nature of the Western novel. They resented this antiquated holdout against the "artistic" schools of realism and naturalism. Bernard De Voto echoed Webb's remarks in 1937 when he claimed that thirty years of cheap fiction about the cattle kingdom had created an inertia which serious literature found difficult to counteract.<sup>6</sup> Almost twenty years later, Joe B. Frantz and Julian Ernest Choate, Jr., concluded the same thing: writers of Westerns had hit upon a successful formula seventy-five years previously and had not dared to depart from it since. Like the formula writers in other popular genres--the detective and science fiction stories--writers of Western fiction (with some notable exceptions, of course) were interested in fulfilling the audience's expectations, not in re-defining the formula. The enormous popularity of the Western was itself a barrier to serious writers who "avoided the cowboy for fear they might wind up defending Zane Grey or Deadwood Dick."<sup>7</sup> By default, the province of Western fiction was left to the hack writers.

Since about 1960, however, the Western novel has attracted a number of writers who have parodied, ridiculed,

<sup>6</sup>Bernard De Voto, "Horizon Land (2)," Saturday Review, 24 April 1937, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup>Joe B. Frantz and Julian Ernest Choate, Jr., The American Cowboy: The Myth and the Reality (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), pp. 8-9.

exploited, and otherwise altered the Western formula. In his 1966 study, The American Western Novel, James K. Folsom observed that "the Western novel today leads a vigorous life which is by no means confined to the sub-literature of the newsstand."<sup>8</sup> The post-sixties witnessed the publication of disparate works which were both non-traditional and anti-traditional. A brief sampling includes Peter Dawson's The Showdown, a reworking of Henry IV, Part I, with Western locales and characters;<sup>9</sup> Ishmael Reed's voodooing black Loop Garoo Kid who is really a demon opposing the Pope in Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down; Harry Brown's The Stars in Their Courses, an attempt to create the definitive Western epic by rewriting The Iliad with guns and cowboy boots; Richard Brautigan's "Gothic novel," The Hawkline Monster; James Leo Herlihy's Midnight Cowboy, which effectively reverses the common Western plot of the Easterner who is ennobled by a journey West; and Dee Brown's They Went Thataway, a Western replete with vying espionage agencies. These works and many others are of widely varying literary merit, but together they indicate a persistent effort to break new ground in the Western format.

<sup>8</sup> James K. Folsom, The American Western Novel (New Haven: College and University Press Services, 1966), p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Mary Alice Money, "Evolutions of the Popular Western in Novels, Films, and Television, 1950-74," Diss. University of Texas at Austin 1975, p. 26, n. 18.

In 1966, C. L. Sonnichsen noted that writers such as Larry McMurtry and Max Evans had made it clear that "the horse opera may indeed be the take-off point for a body of writing of which we need not be ashamed. . . . For sixty years, we have been trying to make literature out of it, and it looks as if we are doing better as time goes on."<sup>10</sup> Shortly thereafter, Leslie Fiedler added the names of John Barth, Ken Kesey, Norman Mailer, David Markson, Leonard Cohen and others to the list of writers who have injected new vitality into the old forms of Western writing. Fiedler labeled these novels "New Westerns," works that do not revive the popular Western but instead exploit it with an irreverance and pleasure which is contemptuous of the reader's expectations.<sup>11</sup> These "New Westerns" cross and recross the traditional borders between history and myth and formula. The results are new configurations which approach absurdity and surrealism. According to Fiedler, the starting point for most of these works is the familiarity of writer and reader with the Western formula:

Those more sophisticated recent pop novels which play off, for the laughs, the seamier side of Western history against its sentimental expurgations are not quite satisfactory. . . . Yet to understand the West

<sup>10</sup>Sonnichsen, 28.

<sup>11</sup>Leslie Fiedler, The Return of the Vanishing American (New York: Stein and Day, 1968), p. 14.

as somehow a joke comes a little closer to getting it straight. . . .

. . . . .  
 For perhaps the first time in our literature, a kind of anti-Western Western is being written here, which begins by assuming the clichés and stereotypes of all the popular books which precede it, and aims not at redeeming but at exploiting them, bringing the full weight of their accumulated absurdities to bear in every casual quip. Self-conscious camp has overtaken the Western.<sup>12</sup>

In The Six-Gun Mystique, John G. Cawelti emphasized that the most interesting literary development of recent years is the number of works which employ the traditional subjects and formal characteristics of the Western, but engage in a more self-conscious, complex, and critical examination of the Western myth. Cawelti points out what is perhaps the most important consideration regarding the "New Westerns": that their subject is not a re-examination of the historical West, but of the literary and cinematic legends which surround it.<sup>13</sup> It is necessary to keep this in mind, for the de-mythification novels of the 1960s do not usually aim at the authentic treatments of realistic Western novelists such as Andy Adams, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, or Eugene Manlove Rhodes, who knew the historical

<sup>12</sup>Fiedler, Vanishing American, pp. 136, 146.

<sup>13</sup>John G. Cawelti, The Six-Gun Mystique (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, n.d.), p. 101.

West and described it authentically. Rather, the recent creation of Western anti-heroes is an attempt to diminish the romanticism and unreality of the superheroes of formula Westerns.<sup>14</sup>

A distinction has always existed in Western writing between the formula writers and their literary brothers. Richard W. Etulain defines "The Western" as the popular novel which stresses romance, adventure, and a rigid moral structure; "The Western Novel," on the other hand, emphasizes a more realistic treatment of character and incident.<sup>15</sup> Sonnichsen earlier made a similar observation, using the terms "Low Road Western" to designate the popular form and "High Road Western" for the more artistic type.<sup>16</sup> Whatever terms used, there is agreement that in the last fifteen years something new and vital has been happening in the non-traditional Western novel which is in some ways a departure from both earlier types.

Moreover, it is ironic that as this new sub-genre of Western fiction developed, there was an absence of new writers entering the field of the formula Western. Marc

<sup>14</sup>Richard W. Etulain, "The Historical Development of the Western," in The Popular Western, ed. Richard W. Etulain and Michael T. Marsden (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1974), p. 724/82.

<sup>15</sup>Richard W. Etulain, "Literary Historians and the Western," Journal of Popular Culture, 4 (1970), 525, n. 1.

<sup>16</sup>Sonnichsen, 23.

Jaffe, an editor of Westerns since 1948, has noted that during the 1960s the output by big-name Western writers slowed down or stopped, and no new writers arrived to take their places. Although the market is still highly successful, it is dependent on reissues of departed writers. Louis L'Amour may, in fact, be the last in the line of the giants of popular Western fiction. Conditions are such that one publishing house has resorted to using a stable of young writers. After editing for consistency and conformity, the books are published under one pseudonym--Jake Logan. A steadily growing readership of "Jake Logan" novels indicates that there is still a demand for the predictable action Western by a familiar writer who knows the formulaic rules and continues to play by them.<sup>17</sup> The unflagging popularity of such new formula Westerns and the continuing market for reissues of the past masters suggest that the New Western novels are written for a somewhat different audience. It is evident that the post-sixties parodies and satires have not diminished the market for the traditional action Western.

The New Western novels have used two separate methods to reinterpret the West. The first method is to place the characters and action in a contemporary time and setting.

<sup>17</sup>Ray Walters, "Paperback Talk," NYTBR, 9 October 1977, pp. 45-46.

In this type, Western history, myths, and literary conventions are only the backdrop for the plot and theme. Gerald Haslam contends that this use of a contemporary setting is a reaction against critics who "have assigned the West a permanent, ossified past without a present. . . . The national myth allows the West only a past. Indeed, critics have had problems dealing with Western writing as anything but myth."<sup>18</sup> The incorporation of Western themes into contemporary works is not unique to the post-sixties, of course. Only through a conscious effort could most writers divorce their work from historical and literary traditions. It is only the relatively recent critical attention given to the Western which has prompted critics to identify Western elements in what would previously have been considered as part of the mainstream of fiction. Some earlier writers who successfully used the West-as-backdrop technique without being branded as hack writers were Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, Edna Ferber, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris. Nathaniel West's highly regarded The Day of the Locust and F. Scott Fitzgerald's acclaimed The Great Gatsby both employ Western motifs as important themes without being forced to defend their motives or their art.

<sup>18</sup>Gerald W. Haslam, "Introduction: Western Writers and the National Fantasy," in Western Writing, ed. Gerald W. Haslam (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), p. 4.

Like the writers who preceded them in utilizing a common understanding of a real and mythic Western past, contemporary Western novelists use this heritage to add a counterpoint to the present world which they examine. Fiedler sees an awareness of the Western myth as a prominent feature in a number of works such as Norman Mailer's Why Are We in Vietnam? and John Barth's The Sot-Weed Factor.<sup>19</sup> An essay by Andrew Horton illustrates the utilization of The Lone Ranger symbol in Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and John Updike's Rabbit, Run, two of the best novels of the 1960s. Horton points out how the two novelists employ the Western myth as a means of focusing attention on contemporary issues and the chaos of contemporary life.<sup>20</sup> The technique has been used by a number of other writers as well. Certainly Larry McMurtry's work makes a serious attempt to show his characters coming to terms with Texas' past and present worlds. Works such as Horseman, Pass By, Moving On, and All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers contain older men who are reluctant holdovers from an antiquated West. Usually elderly ranchers, these characters act as foils to the younger people of a newer, different world. Jack Schaefer, a "traditional" Western writer, also

<sup>19</sup>Leslie Fiedler, "Cross the Border, Close the Gap," Playboy, December 1969, p. 254.

<sup>20</sup>Andrew S. Horton, "Ken Kesey, John Updike and the Lone Ranger," Journal of Popular Culture, 8 (1974), 572.

juxtaposes past and present values in the Western format. As Schaefer's novels move steadily through the twentieth century, they become more bitter and strident about the deterioration of human values in the wake of "progress."

The second type of "New Western" does not use a contemporary time frame to suggest a conflict between past and present. This type of novel sets its characters squarely in the traditional province of the Western, the nineteenth-century trans-Mississippi West. Writers of the first type, such as Kesey and McMurtry, employ contemporary settings and themes to create a distance between their characters and the Western myths. This distance allows them to fall more noticeably within the mainstream of contemporary fiction. But novelists of this second group, those who place their action in the mythic West of the past, are far more conscious of the literary traditions of the Western novel which precede them. These writers do not resurrect the popular Westerns of Zane Grey and Max Brand or the realistic Westerns of Eugene Manlove Rhodes or Walter Van Tilburg Clark. Instead, they use parody, comedy, and satire to re-examine the ready-made conventions of their predecessors.

This study will examine the satiric elements in a number of novels which are representative of this second type. All were written after 1960. All use satire and

parody to question not the actual Western experience, but our vision of it. With one exception, the novelists are not readily identifiable as writers of Westerns, having written only one work in that genre. In reformulating the predictable characters, plots, and themes of popular Westerns, these writers have given a new perspective to Western literature, history, and myth; the result is the emergence of a viable sub-genre--the satiric Western. The difference between the novelists of this sub-genre and the formula writers who precede them is a difference in what Cawelti terms "convention" and "invention":

Conventions are elements which are known to both the creator and his audience beforehand--they consist of things like favorite plots, stereotyped characters, accepted ideas, commonly known metaphors and other linguistic devices, etc. Inventions, on the other hand, are elements which are uniquely imagined by the creator such as new kinds of characters, ideas, or linguistic forms. . . . Conventions represent familiar shared images and meanings and they assert an ongoing continuity of values; inventions confront us with a new perception or meaning which we have not realized before.<sup>21</sup>

Another facet of convention is the reordering of established conventions into new configurations; this is certainly the case in the novels which are examined in this study. In fact, both traditional Westerns and satirical Westerns depend upon an accepted body of conventions. The formula Western succeeds by fulfilling expectations; the

<sup>21</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, pp. 27-28.

satirical Western succeeds to the extent that it defies expectations and forces a re-examination of them.

Although this study is concerned with the literary form of Western satire and parody, it is necessary to recognize the influence of other media as well--most notably television and film. From its inception, the visual medium made good use of the action and spectacle of the Western; one of the very first films with a narrative line was Edwin S. Porter's The Great Train Robbery in 1903,<sup>22</sup> one year after the appearance of The Virginian. Porter's ten-minute film contained a robbery, chase on horseback, gunfight, fistfight, and the soon-to-be cliché of the saloon bullies making the dude dance.<sup>23</sup> Mary Alice Money has done an excellent study which examines the interrelationship of the different media and their influences upon one another.<sup>24</sup> It is, of course, impossible to document with any degree of accuracy the order of specific influence. Although parody and satire are not new to Western films--some early examples are Ben Turpin's Small Town Idol in 1921 and Abbott and Costello's Ride 'Em Cowboy in 1942<sup>25</sup>--

<sup>22</sup>Arthur Knight, The Liveliest Art: A Panoramic History of the Movies (1957; rpt. New York: New American Library, n.d.), p. 24.

<sup>23</sup>William K. Everson, A Pictorial History of the Western Film (1969; rpt. Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1975), p. 15.

<sup>24</sup>Money.

<sup>25</sup>Everson, pp. 6-7.

the satiric elements became more pervasive in the late 1950s and 1960s. Television audiences witnessed elements of Western parody in series such as Sugarfoot, Maverick, F Troop, and certain episodes of Bonanza and Gunsmoke. Films of the 1960s displayed a growing tendency to incorporate satirical elements into otherwise traditional Western films. This was the case in The Professionals, True Grit, The Scalphunters, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, Bad Company, and McCabe and Mrs. Miller. Other films went farther, giving themselves over totally to a parody of Western conventions: Support Your Local Sheriff, Dirty Dingus Magee, Cat Ballou, Buffalo Bill and the Indians, Blazing Saddles, and Andy Warhol's Lonesome Cowboys.

Because the writers examined in this study do not come from the mainstream of popular Western novelists, and because their works appeared at a time when television and film representations of the West were perhaps more influential than written ones, it is likely that the targets of satire may be the conventions of Western films as much as the formula of Western novels. Furthermore, because several of the novels were subsequently adapted to film, it is possible that the impact of the film treatments of the novels may be greater than the original book versions. At any rate, it must be kept in mind that the conventions which these novelists satirize can be found in any of the

three media. Money's study observed that the success of a work in one medium can sometimes initiate a cycle of similar works in other media. The result can often become a new convention of its own making, a new cliché.<sup>26</sup>

An example of how a convention rebounds from one medium to another and changes in the process is the development of the gunfighter image. A long-time component of Westerns, the stereotype reached its apotheosis in Jack Schaefer's novel Shane and the subsequent film version, and a little later when Gregory Peck portrayed a jaded gunman in The Gunfighter. The convention was then parodied in novels such as Richard Condon's A Talent for Loving and David Markson's The Ballad of Dingus Magee. The parody of the gunfighter became a staple in the Maverick television series, and the gunfighter-as-buffoon was a recognizable "new" convention by the time it was superbly dramatized in the film Cat Ballou.

As we have seen, then, the Western novel has been undergoing drastic shifts in content and tone in the last fifteen or so years. For purposes of unity, this study will focus on seven novels which comprise four types of satiric Westerns, excluding the numerous other possibilities that have been outlined above. The first type is the

<sup>26</sup>Money, p. 150.

novel which presents variations of traditional Western characters and plots and thus reveals new glimpses into the possibilities of the genre. Although satire and parody are employed, this type of novel stops short of attacking the formula; it will often appear as an improvement of that formula rather than a mockery of it. The second type of novel is an outright parody of the formula Western and its conventions. It relies for its effects on the reversal of expectations, often debunking Western history and myth. The third type of novel expands the satirical vision beyond the mere parody of formula. Because its satire relies on the reader's familiarity with other types of literature and criticism, this type of satirical novel will be labeled "reactionary." The last type of novel to be examined is that which uses satire and parody as supplementary devices to create literary works which can stand on their own merits, creating characters and themes which are ultimately original and independent.

The study will begin with a discussion of Charles Portis' True Grit which manipulates traditional heroes, incidents, and themes and creates a new type of Western hero and heroine. Although satire and parody are used effectively, the novel is in many ways as romantic and mythic as the formula Westerns of Zane Grey and Luke Short.

While it is surely a "Western with a difference,"<sup>27</sup> its characters are intended to be heroic and admirable.

The second type of Western satire will be the subject of the next section of this paper. Richard Condon's A Talent for Loving and David Markson's The Ballad of Dingus Magee rely totally on the effects of parody and reversal of Western conventions. This type of novel caricatures our stereotyped gunfighters, cowboys, and heroines; character and situation are grossly distorted in order to confront the reader with the absurdity of his expectations. The reliance on parody to undercut myth results in the type of satire which Fiedler calls not anti-myth, but anti-stereotype.<sup>28</sup> According to another critic, William T. Pilkington, this type of parodic novel may have a corrective purpose, but it cannot proceed beyond its limited range of distortion to reveal new insights. Because of these limitations, works of this type have remained a relatively low order of comedy.<sup>29</sup>

The next part of the discussion will be concerned with the "reactionary" Western satire. Although this type

<sup>27</sup>Edward Weeks, rev. of True Grit, by Charles Portis, Atlantic, June 1968, p. 119.

<sup>28</sup>Fiedler, Vanishing American, p. 164.

<sup>29</sup>William T. Pilkington, "Aspects of the Western Comic Novel," Western American Literature, 1 (1966), 213.

employs techniques found in other satirical novels, its targets are more diverse. Novels of this type rely on the reader's awareness of a literature and criticism beyond the scope of formula Westerns; often they attack specific works of literature as well as literary theories. John Seelye's The Kid is a complex work which is conscious of the "serious" American literature which precedes it. Seelye incorporates into this novel elements of Jack Tier, Huckleberry Finn, Billy Budd, and The Ox-Bow Incident, as well as the literary theories of Leslie Fiedler. In addition, he re-examines in the course of the narrative several Western conventions. Another of this third type of Western satire is Harry Allen Smith's The Return of the Virginian, an iconoclastic barrage against Wister's book and the formula it popularized. Its satirical focus is broadened by its twentieth-century setting; it is the only novel in this study which is set in contemporary times. Nevertheless, the book straddles the present world and the frontier world, much like the curious twilight worlds of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers which merged anachronistic Western elements into their twentieth-century settings.

The last type of contemporary Western novel to be analyzed is that which uses satire to enrich characterization and theme, adding new dimensions to Western fiction. This type is the closest to true comedy, employing satire

as a means rather than an end in itself. The result is a scope and meaning which are universal; a serious attempt is made to provide significant commentary on man's faults and foibles.<sup>30</sup> This type of satire achieves more than anti-stereotype; it suggests truths which are more believable and enduring than those of the superficial world of formula fiction. Thomas Berger's Little Big Man has attracted considerable attention and praise from a number of critics. Its picaresque narrative form with its hero's wild meanderings allows Berger to examine the underside of almost every Western cliché and legend: Custer, the Indian, gunfighters, buffalo hunters, and even the tradition of the town drunk. Like Berger, Robert Flynn also employs the picaresque in his novel, North to Yesterday, but its focus is more concentrated than that of Little Big Man. Flynn's novel deals with the cowboy myth and the legendary trail drive. But through his narrower, more specific focus, Flynn offers a statement about the existential and absurd nature of the world. Flynn's vision of the West is bound to an interpretation of the American Dream, and because his narrative is structured on a human, not epic scale, it is more credible and meaningful than the world of formula Westerns.

<sup>30</sup>Pilkington, 214-15.

## Chapter II

### TRUE GRIT: FROM PARODY TO MYTH

In his 1968 novel True Grit, Charles Portis blends familiar Western conventions and parodic variations on conventions into a refreshing anomaly. The novel poises between parody and myth, a condition apparent by the critical reaction to the book. Some critics regarded it as "pure, beautiful corn,"<sup>1</sup> "a spoof, a parody Western,"<sup>2</sup> and "a pop anti-Western in the best tradition of Cat Ballou and The Ballad of Dingus Magee."<sup>3</sup> Other reviewers recognized the parody but insisted there were serious elements as well. This view held that the novel was Americana and a spoof of Americana at the same time; that it achieved a legendary, folkloristic quality.<sup>4</sup> The reviewer for the Washington Post expressed this more serious aspect when he

<sup>1</sup>Sara Blackburn, rev. of True Grit, by Charles Portis, Nation, 5 August 1968, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup>Eliot Fremont-Smith, "Two Cheers for Mattie Ross," rev. of True Grit, by Charles Portis, NYT, 12 June 1968, p. 45.

<sup>3</sup>"The Ballad of Mattie Ross," rev. of True Grit, by Charles Portis, Time, 14 June 1968, p. 94.

<sup>4</sup>Edmund Fuller, rev. of True Grit, by Charles Portis, Wall Street Journal, 2 July 1968, p. 14.

stated that Portis had made an epic and a legend: "Mattie Ross should soon join the pantheon of America's legendary figures such as Kit Carson, Wyatt Earp and Jesse James. . . . True Grit speaks to every American who can read, there are few books that can claim as much."<sup>5</sup> This controversy was soon extended to the film medium when the 1969 film earned John Wayne an Academy Award for his portrayal of Rooster Cogburn, a performance which many felt was a deliberate spoof of the Wayne cowboy persona. The film created sufficient interest to warrant a sequel in 1976; but the failure of Rooster Cogburn pointed out just how much the original film relied on the substance and ambiguity of Portis' novel.

Sufficient evidence exists of both parody and epic in the novel to justify both positions. The argument, however, is one of degree, and it can only be decided by appraising Portis' utilization of traditional conventions of the Western formula. By analyzing the parodic elements in True Grit and measuring them against the conventions they spoof, it is possible to appreciate Portis' parodic innovations in the areas of the Western hero and narrative technique. However, it will be shown that his variations of the formula do not extend to the realm of plot structure and theme; and

<sup>5</sup>L. Rosenthal, rev. of True Grit, by Charles Portis, Book World, 11 August 1968, p. 11.

that in the last analysis, even his comic version of the Western hero emerges as something fundamentally traditional.

One of Portis' greatest accomplishments in True Grit is his success in giving another turn of the screw to the concept of the mythic Western hero. While he consciously reacts to the pervasive larger-than-life dimensions of the Western formula, he stops short of making a mockery of them. Portis' characterization of Deputy Marshal Rooster Cogburn contradicts the contention of critics such as John R. Milton who argue that:

What is wrong with the conventional Western is not the myth itself but the fact that it is taken for granted and exploited with a non-literary ease, so that the Western landscape becomes only an accidental stage on which the medieval players may re-enact their old myth.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, Portis has deliberately taken pains to avoid the medieval knight model so apparent in Wister's The Virginian and its successors such as the television series, Have Gun--Will Travel. What makes Portis' intention apparent is his deliberate juxtaposition of the "medieval player" convention with an image which stands in stark contrast. Chivalric dimensions are in evidence when Mattie Ross, the fourteen-year-old narrator, describes her father as he prepares to begin a journey:

<sup>6</sup>John R. Milton, "The Novel in the American West," in Western Writing, ed. Gerald W. Haslam, p. 77.

Papa left us on his saddle horse, a big chestnut mare with a blazed face called Judy. . . . He wore his belt gun which was a big long dragoon pistol, the cap-and-ball kind that was old-fashioned even at that time. He had carried it in the war. He was a handsome sight and in my memory's eye I can still see him mounted up there on Judy in his brown woolen coat and black Sunday hat and the both of them, man and beast, blowing little clouds of steam on that frosty morn. He might have been a gallant knight of old.<sup>7</sup>

The description could easily fit the Virginian, Shane, or any number of familiar Western epic heroes, and Portis undoubtedly expects the reader to recognize the similarities. Because Mattie's remembrance fits the knight-hero stereotype, it makes her description of Deputy Marshal Rooster Cogburn all the more jarring. Significantly, unlike most initial glimpses of Western figures such as Shane and the Virginian, Rooster is not allowed the stature--symbolic as well as literal--of being mounted on horseback:

I had guessed wrong as to which one he was, picking out a younger and slighter man with a badge on his shirt, and I was surprised when an old one-eyed jasper that was built along the lines of Grover Cleveland went up and was sworn. . . . The floor boards squeaked under his weight. He was wearing a dusty black suit of clothes. . . . He had a moustache like Cleveland, too. (pp. 39-40)

Portis' parody of the Western hero is not limited to physical aspects; he includes personality traits as well. Even

<sup>7</sup>Charles Portis, True Grit (1968; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1969), pp. 15-16. All further references to this work appear in the text.

the most unsuspecting reader quickly identifies the unheroic character of Rooster Cogburn.

In his essay on the puritanical basis of Western film and fiction, Peter Homans observes five areas of temptation which define the moral quality of a character: drinking, gambling, money, lust, and violence. According to Homans, if a character surrenders to these temptations, he assumes the role of the villain; if he resists them, he is a hero.<sup>8</sup> For the most part, this distinction is true of both Western film and fiction, and it will be helpful to assess Portis' version of the Western hero by measuring him against four of the five areas of temptation defined by Homans; insufficient evidence concerning Rooster's sexual attitudes (the fourth type of temptation) precludes anything but the most hypothetical assumptions.

Much of the humor in True Grit arises from Rooster's inclination to drink to excess. On Mattie's visit to his room, Rooster proceeds to get drunk and concludes the evening with an inebriated monologue on the sorry condition of law and lawyers. He punctuates his remarks by serving a "rat writ": he shoots an actual rat which Mattie has to discard. Rooster generously suggests that Mattie drink

<sup>8</sup>Peter Homans, "Puritanism Revisited: An Analysis of the Contemporary Screen Image Western," in Focus on the Western, ed. Jack Nachbar (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 87.

some whiskey to ward off her cold. Increasingly bitter and withdrawn, he is oblivious to Mattie's attempts to shame him into seeing her safely back to the boardinghouse. In a later incident, while trailing the Lucky Ned Pepper gang, Rooster once more becomes drunk and incoherent, finally pitching off his horse and blaming the innocent animal for its clumsiness.

The second temptation cited by Homans, gambling, has been used in novels such as The Virginian to indicate a character's manly skills and cunning, although it is seldom acceptable for a Western hero to be too fond of gambling. For this reason, few formula novels employ a professional gambler as hero, although he can serve as the protagonist's sidekick. A certain amount of gambling, then, is acceptable in the Western hero. However, it is unacceptable for the hero to lose at cards, for that would indicate inferior skill, a form of weakness. For instance, in Zane Grey's The U. P. Trail, the hero's addiction to gambling is a manifestation of his despair and moral degeneration.

Evidence abounds in True Grit that Rooster not only possesses an unhealthy fondness for gambling but that he invariably loses as well. Mattie notices that Rooster loses steadily to the Chinaman, Lee. Characteristically, Portis avoids the ritualistic Western contests of faro or poker; Rooster and Lee play a game called "Seven-up." In

another instance of gambling incompetence, Rooster reports that he once lost two thousand dollars to some Texans on quarter-horse racing. This seems particularly embarrassing because it is placed in the context of the Western hero's supposed expertise--knowledge of horses.

The third temptation which Homans uses to evaluate the nature of hero and villain is money. The Western hero traditionally remains aloof from the mundane demands of finance; he often seems to belong to a world void of economic concerns. If he has a job, it is loosely defined, and personal ambition is the least of his concerns. The hero's vocation is important only insofar as it gives him the opportunity to witness evil and use his considerable prowess in the name of justice and morality. On the other hand, the villains are identifiable by their tainted relationship with the world of money. There is often an implicit correlation between moral corruption and financial gain. The primary flaw which characterizes Western villains such as land speculators, saloon proprietors, ranch barons, and bank/stage/train robbers is an inordinate preoccupation with the acquisition of wealth.

The world of True Grit, however, is a world in which everyone is preoccupied with money matters. From the first paragraph to the penultimate one, Mattie evidences an obsession for the price of things. The two representatives

of the law--Marshal Rooster Cogburn and Texas Ranger LaBoeuf--are clearly motivated more by money than by a consuming passion for justice. At their first meeting, Rooster informs Mattie that his pursuit of the killer who murdered her kindly father in cold blood, and in front of witnesses, is predicated on her ability to pay him one hundred dollars, half in advance. Money is of equal concern to LaBoeuf. On the trail of Chaney for the murder of a Texas senator, LaBoeuf attempts to persuade Cogburn to join forces. His arguments fall on deaf ears until he plays a pleasing note: the senator's family has offered a reward of fifteen hundred dollars. Suddenly interested, Rooster replies, "That is more to my liking. . . . How do you figure on sharing the money?" (p. 83).

In spite of his badge, Rooster is more bounty hunter than lawman. In fact, his concern with monetary benefits and a selective enforcement of the law strongly suggests a kinship with another hero of popular fiction, the hard-boiled private detective. At the beginning of the novel, Rooster testifies at the trial of a surviving member of the gang Rooster has recently destroyed. In commenting on the attempts of Odus Wharton's lawyer to have the execution commuted, Rooster explains the reason that Odus was captured alive: "I should have put a ball in that boy's head instead of his collarbone. I was thinking about my

fee. You will sometimes let money interfere with your notion of what is right" (p. 73). In a later episode, Rooster overrules Mattie and LaBoeuf, who want to chase after the fleeing Lucky Ned Pepper gang. His argument is that he wants to bring in the bodies of the dead gang members and the stolen horses in order to claim the reward before scores of railroad detectives and other marshals arrive and dispute his claim. When he deposits the bodies, Rooster reneges on his promise to a dying bandit to send the man's effects to a relative. Only Mattie's insistence overcomes his machinations.

The last aspect of temptation described by Homans is the hero's attitude toward violence. The stereotyped Western hero is gentle and peace-loving, averse to violent means. Martin Nussbaum has also discussed this convention, noting that "the Westerner hates guns and killing but is quick-on-the-trigger when he is compelled to fight."<sup>9</sup> Even when violence seems altogether unavoidable, the hero insists that the villain draw first, thus providing the villain with every opportunity to avoid the final confrontation. In Shane, the hero remains a pacifist on two successive occasions, finally giving in reluctantly when the bullying cowboy Chris leaves him no alternative.

<sup>9</sup>Martin Nussbaum, "Sociological Symbolism of the 'Adult Western,'" Social Forces, 39 (1960), 26.

Rooster Cogburn's departure from this stereotype is clear early in the novel when Mattie asks a local sheriff for his opinions of the different marshals. His description of a man named Quinn seems to fit the conventional lawman of the formula. Quinn is a lay preacher; he believes that all men deserve a break; he won't plant evidence or abuse a prisoner. By contrast, his description of Rooster appears more apt for a traditional villain: Rooster is the meanest of the marshals; "he is a pitiless man, double-tough, and fear don't enter into his thinking. He loves to pull a cork" (pp. 24-25). Rooster's readiness to kill--"to pull a cork"--is apparent in his own testimony at the Wharton trial. Under cross-examination, Rooster admits to having killed twenty-three men in the four years he has served as marshal, and he has shot many more who have luckily survived their wounds.

Rooster's insistence that he has killed men only in self-defense is contradicted by his actions in the course of Mattie's narrative. When LaBoeuf says that he will prevent Rooster from collecting all the reward money for the capture of Chaney, Rooster says he would then have to kill LaBoeuf. Also, there is little reason for a self-defense argument in Rooster's plan to capture the Pepper gang at the dugout. The marshal's intention is to wait until the gang has entered the hut; the last one to

enter the door will be shot in the back by Rooster. Only then will he give warning. "It will give them to know our intentions is serious" (p. 117).

It might be possible to defend Rooster's crude pragmatism on the grounds of expediency and self-preservation. It is not surprising that Rooster must resort to violence to deal with a violent world; that is expected and counted upon by the Western audience. What is troubling is Rooster's habit of meting out punishment after the fact, when it is no longer a means to an end. At the Wharton trial, Rooster's testimony raises the question of how one outlaw's body ended up in a fire after Rooster shot him. There are two possibilities: either Rooster lied and did not kill the man in self-defense, or he moved the body into the fire after shooting the man. It seems more than coincidence that Rooster had just witnessed the outlaw's latest crime: a dying man whose feet had been burned by the gang. This fact, plus the gang's murder of Potter, Rooster's oldest friend, suggests that Rooster might have had something to do with the man's ending up in the fire. Later in the story, Mattie personally witnesses Rooster's unjustified violence. Although Rooster's actions seem commendable when he kicks two boys off a porch for idly watching a mule's suffering, the reader has to question his motives when, without provocation, he matter-of-factly

repeats the punishment moments later. In a still later incident, Rooster methodically kicks a prisoner who lies face down in the snow; the man "forgot" that he had a pistol and knife concealed in his boots.

Portis' departure from the familiar character of the Western hero is not limited to attitudes toward drinking, gambling, money, and violence. The Western hero is such a familiar stereotype that he has accumulated physical characteristics and personality traits as well as a moral identity, and Portis is quick to capitalize on these stereotypes. Kent Ladd Steckmesser and John G. Cawelti are two Western scholars who have described predictable aspects of the Western hero.

Steckmesser has described three obvious characteristics of the hero's physical and intellectual superiority. They consist of a genteel manner and bearing, a clever and facile intellect, and superior physical skills.<sup>10</sup> The hero's genteel nature and noble bearing are recognizable in figures such as the Virginian. Patient, gentle, wise, possessed of enormous integrity, the Virginian is one of nature's aristocrats. His lithe figure is first glimpsed as he skillfully gentles a whirling bronco. Rooster, as we have seen, is portly, one-eyed, irascible; when drunk, he

<sup>10</sup>Kent Ladd Steckmesser, The Western Hero in History and Legend (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), pp. 241-42.

falls off his horse. Although not as ancient as the youthful Mattie would have us believe, Rooster is in his forties, and hardly a dashing young man by anyone's standards. Elmore Leonard's Valdez Is Coming also utilizes an aging lawman to good effect in his 1970 novel. But Valdez is old only in years; his physical skills and stamina are not eroded. Rooster is more believably old; when he rolls the familiar cigarette, his hands shake and he spills the tobacco. Such scenes as this one suggest that Portis may have been influenced by the depiction of the aging Western heroes in Sam Peckinpah's 1962 film, Ride the High Country.

Another quality of the hero cited by Steckmesser is a practical intelligence which displays wit and cunning. Seldom an educated man, the Western hero is wise in the ways of the world. His victories are often due to his quick intelligence as well as his physical courage. In a number of instances, Portis portrays Rooster's less-than-adequate intelligence. Rooster's failure to take precautions and his inability to devise reliable tactics are repeatedly the cause of his setbacks. When they capture two of Lucky Ned Pepper's gang members, LaBoeuf advises Rooster to keep the men separated. By ignoring the advice, Rooster inadvertently causes their deaths, but refuses to admit his mistake. When he sets the trap at the dugout,

Mattie concludes that Ned had no intention of being drawn into Rooster's snare. Luckily, LaBoeuf's premature rifle fire is a handy excuse for Ned's escape, and Rooster can avoid blaming his own faulty tactics. In a later incident, Rooster becomes so disoriented by whiskey that he brings his party within the easy grasp of the gang he is chasing. Captured by Lucky Ned Pepper's gang, Mattie rails against Rooster's irresponsibility and ineptitude:

Who was to blame? Deputy Marshal Rooster Cogburn! The gabbing drunken fool had made a mistake of four miles and led us directly into the robbers' lair. A keen detective! Yes, and in an earlier state of drunkenness he had placed faulty caps in my revolver, causing it to fail me in a time of need. That was not enough; now he had abandoned me in this howling wilderness to a gang of cut-throats. . . . Was this what they called grit in Fort Smith? We called it something else in Yell County! (p. 161)

The last of the Western conventions parodied in True Grit is the portrayal of the hero's physical prowess. We have previously mentioned Rooster's uncharacteristically overweight condition, his inability to hold alcohol, his trembling hands. But perhaps the best example of Portis' conscious refusal to satisfy the reader's expectations is his depiction of his characters' skill with guns. As Cawelti observes, even a professional gunfighter-hero is reluctant to resort to his superior skills. When it is

inevitable, however, the hero uses the gun with grace, expertise, and objectivity.<sup>11</sup>

Portis proffers several variations on this convention. In a scene described earlier, Rooster's drunken execution of a rat in his apartment reveals a decidedly casual use of his weapon. In later incidents, Portis displays Rooster's inaccuracy as well. At the first ambush of the Pepper gang, LaBoeuf misses Ned and hits his horse. As Ned zigzags away on foot, Rooster's shots continually miss their target. Portis takes this opportunity to create a memorable scene which parodies a number of marksmanship scenes which often seem obligatory in Western novels, films, and television programs. Rooster's Indian friend, Captain Finch, chides Rooster for once again missing the chance to shoot Lucky Ned. Indignant, Rooster initiates the following performance of firearm prowess:

Rooster was holding a bottle with a little whiskey in it. He said, "You keep thinking that." He drained off the whiskey in about three swallows and tapped the cork back in and tossed the bottle up in the air. He pulled his revolver and fired at it twice and missed. The bottle fell and rolled and Rooster shot at it two or three more times and broke it on the ground. He got out his sack of cartridges and reloaded the pistol. He said, "The Chinaman's running them cheap shells in on me again."  
(p. 144)

<sup>11</sup>Cawelti, The Six-Gun Mystique, pp. 60-61.

LaBoeuf suggests wryly that maybe the sun was in Rooster's eye. A shooting contest quickly develops between LaBoeuf, Rooster, and Captain Finch. They take turns tossing up over sixty corn dodgers and firing at them. All three men prove to be inconsistent, and only Captain Finch--the Indian--manages to hit two at the same time, and he has to use his rifle to do that. Mattie comments that "it was entertaining for a while but there was nothing educational about it. I grew more and more impatient with them. . . . 'Shooting cornbred out there on the prairie is not taking us anywhere'" (p. 145).

This analysis of Portis' portrayal of a different type of Western hero has revealed a contrast to the conventional appearance, morality, intelligence, and prowess of the Western hero. In de-glamorizing the hero, Portis has added new elements to the Western novel by employing parody and reversal. In confronting Portis' off-beat hero, some readers might be tempted to conclude that the novel itself is a spoof of the genre. But this is not the case. A consideration of theme and structure in True Grit reveals that the novel observes the primary dictates of Western fiction. Before examining theme and structure, however, it is necessary to consider briefly the narrative techniques of the novel, for it is Mattie's disarming voice which often obscures the otherwise traditional format of the book.

Portis has affected the first-person narrative device of nineteenth-century accounts of adventure. As Charles Elliott observes, the style of Mattie Ross, the narrator, has "as much grace as a board fence . . . tight, plain and direct, not a nail out of place or wasted."<sup>12</sup> An unabashedly subjective narrator, Mattie's admission of her shortcomings serves to emphasize her candor rather than her fallibility. Her self-conscious presence allows the reader to see beyond the mere action of the story. Eliot Fremont-Smith notes that what emerges is a description of character and incident which is told with "unrelenting vigor, cool-eyed precision . . . and with a matter-of-factness that brooks not the slightest doubt."<sup>13</sup> Mattie holds nothing back. We see her prejudices toward both European immigrants and native Indians, her jealousy of fellow writers, her unrelenting concern with money, her pious exhortations of the reader and her judgment of various clergy, her admitted mean streak, her prissy sense of literary conservatism which causes her to shy away from contractions in the speech of the most common characters, her tendency to place colorful words or those of doubtful propriety in quotation marks. Her limitations are always

<sup>12</sup>Charles Elliott, "Picaresque Prig in Pigtales," rev. of True Grit, by Charles Portis, Life, 14 June 1968, p. 14.

<sup>13</sup>Fremont-Smith, p. 45.

obvious to the reader. For instance, in witnessing a triple hanging, Mattie can observe the death throes of the condemned with considerable detachment while she invokes a dubious moral tone: "You must remember that these chained beasts were murderers and robbers and train wreckers and bigamists and counterfeiters, some of the most wicked men in the world" (p. 37).

Mattie's frequent digressions into seemingly unrelated areas and her obsession with the quotidian--particularly the price of things--add a sense of verisimilitude even as her comic tone makes us smile. By observing flaws in herself and others, she infuses an aura of truth into her story. Portis' narrative accomplishment, according to Brian Garfield, is that he "destroys absurdity by overcoming it with truth. Mattie Ross is 19th-century America, it is impossible to doubt the tale she tells. Hers is a yarn of swagger, color and song."<sup>14</sup> We believe Mattie's tale partly because of the care she takes to look into every corner. At times she appears to remember too much, but her remarkable memory and gabbiness are all part of her success in convincing us of her accuracy: the price of a bushel of corn, Chaney's marital status, the number of

<sup>14</sup>Brian Garfield, "Song and Swagger of the Old West," rev. of True Grit, by Charles Portis, Saturday Review, 29 June 1968, p. 26.

people she has met named Yarnell, the waterworks of Fort Smith, the price of Rooster's headstone.

Mattie's uncompromising portrayal of her beloved Rooster humanizes him; we believe in him because of his flaws, not in spite of them. In fact, many of the characters in True Grit are noticeably imperfect; their incompleteness is highly visible in a wide assortment of physical deficiencies. Besides depicting the realities of a violent West, Portis may be having fun with film and television treatments which until recently have suggested that marathon fistfights were routine but generally harmless. Seldom did either hero or villain spill blood, break bones, or lose teeth, despite resorting to weapons such as bottles, axes, and furniture. Bullets either knocked the gun out of a person's hand or resulted in nothing more than the ubiquitous "flesh wound." By contrast, the characters in True Grit bear obvious signs of their violent lives; their physical conditions are a mixture of realism and grotesque. Rooster has lost an eye, is wounded in the shoulder, and has shotgun pellets embedded under the skin of his face; Mattie has an arm amputated; the outlaw Moon has his fingers chopped off and watches them fly up in front of his eyes like wood chips; Lucky Ned Pepper has an asthmatic wheeze and has had a part of his lip shot off so that he whistles when he speaks; LaBoeuf has had his

head split open by a rock; Chaney's face is disfigured by a powder-burn.

By utilizing a narrative technique which is part realistic detail, part unreliable narrator, and part self-deprecation, Portis has skillfully fashioned a new shape out of the traditional Western formula. Mattie's propensity for digression and her frequent intrusions into the story indicate that, unlike other Western writers, she is in no hurry to march out a familiar cast of characters and get on with the scenes of vicarious action--the violence, the chases, the beatings, and the shootings. Thus, it is surely the "Western with a difference"<sup>15</sup> which Edward Weeks describes; yet an examination of theme and structure in True Grit reveals that its differences are not sufficient to make it a true parody of the Western genre.

True Grit is the story of how Mattie Ross "avenged Frank Ross's blood over in the Choctaw Nation when snow was on the ground" (p. 190). The revenge story is not new, of course, and it comprises one of the seven basic Western story lines outlined by Frank Gruber.<sup>16</sup> Max Brand's Destry Rides Again is a prototype for this conventional plot; and although Portis spares Mattie the unrealistic

<sup>15</sup>Weeks, p. 119.

<sup>16</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, pp. 34-35.

humanistic conversion which Brand grafts onto the ending of his novel, True Grit conforms readily to the revenge story pattern.

Scholars have frequently pointed out that the Western is America's version of the Morality Play, pitting recognizable good against recognizable evil. Portis has not strayed from this basic theme, although his characterization acknowledges comic and realistic possibilities for the hero. In spite of Rooster's penchant for gambling, drinking, wealth, and violence, he is still a recognizable force for good. While his unsympathetic and pragmatic dispatching of criminals is often bloody and final, Portis makes it clear that the victims are criminals and that the Oklahoma Territory he describes is far from civilized. Mattie recalls that sixty-five marshals had been killed: "They had some mighty tough folks to deal with" (p. 38). Rooster's "persecution" of the Wharton gang was precipitated by the gang's torture and murder of a man and his wife for a fruit jar of money. Although Wharton's lawyer manages to raise suspicion about Rooster's methods, there is never any argument about the criminal culpability of the Wharton gang. Tom Chaney responds to Frank Ross's kind treatment by killing him in a drunken rage. There is ample evidence that Lucky Ned Pepper's gang are legally guilty and morally reprehensible. Lucky Ned is affable enough, but has no

compunction about sacrificing his gang members to make good his escape, or to kill a child if it is necessary. Given such enemies, Rooster's character flaws appear less damning.

An interesting sidelight to Portis' depiction of good and evil is his characters' choice of weapons to reveal aspects of their personalities. In a genre often ridiculed for its use of such techniques as white and black hats and other melodramatic touches to indicate the nature of characters, Portis purposely assigns guns to his characters to indicate personality features. A far more sophisticated technique than the use of the color of hats or horses, this demonstrates Portis' ability to use familiar elements of the formula in slightly different ways. Mattie's father, decent and kind to a fault and in every sense chivalric, carries an antiquated cap-and-ball dragoon from the Civil War. Tom Chaney, shiftless and irresponsible, carries a rifle slung across his back on a cotton plow line, too lazy to fashion a leather strap out of available harness. LaBoeuf, conceited and smug, has a fancy cartridge belt and white-handled guns which remind Mattie of a Wild West show. Rooster, stolid, professional, and unpretentious, carries his cartridges in a sack, his revolver in his belt, and two additional pistols in saddle scabbards.

Guns, of course, perform an important function in the Western for they are the means by which the conflict is finally decided. John G. Cawelti has observed that the structure of the Western derives from the essential opposition of civilization and savagery.<sup>17</sup> Invariably, the confrontation centers upon three elements: the townspeople, the outlaws (or savages), and the protagonist who possesses the frontier skills of the outlaw but whose allegiance is with the townspeople. Cawelti states that "the antithesis between the townspeople and savages is the source of plots."<sup>18</sup> A classic example of this basic structure is found in Shane, where the gunfighter must use his violent skills to defend the more civilized community against the opposing violence of the hostile ranchers.

In spite of Rooster's characterization as something of a violent rascal, he is nevertheless an agent of the Federal court, an instrument for the preservation of law and order. Rooster's alleged outlaw career before and after his adventure with Mattie should not obscure the fact that his actions in True Grit are founded on the dictates of the law. Also, Rooster's negative feelings toward progress represented by bureaucracy and the "little thin fellows that

<sup>17</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, p. 53.

have won spelling bees back home" (p. 73) constitute an ambivalence of the Western hero which traces back to Cooper's Leatherstocking stories. Portis' implications that progress and civilization might be of dubious value are not original ones. In fact, an ambiguous attitude toward savagery and civilization has become prevalent in the Western, replacing the unrealistically rigid divisions between good and evil. However, even though civilization may be imperfect and sometimes corrupt, its potential is worthy of the hero's efforts. Cawelti states that:

Like many figures in American literature, the Western hero is something of an anti-hero to the self-made man and embodies strong feelings of hostility to the symbols and values of progress and success. Nonetheless, his ritual role is one of resolving this hostility by concentrating it upon particular villains.

Though the Western remains officially on the side of progress and success, shifting formula patterns in the twentieth century reflect an increasing disillusion with these ideals. . . . As we approach the present, the ritualistic affirmation of progress and success becomes more and more ambiguous and strained.<sup>19</sup>

Nussbaum also discusses the development of ambiguity in his essay on the "adult Western"; he observes that when right and wrong are difficult to identify, the reader's commitment should be toward the faction which stands for the judicial position.<sup>20</sup> This explains the importance of

<sup>19</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, p. 78.

<sup>20</sup>Nussbaum, 26.

Rooster's legal jurisdiction in True Grit and Portis' care in making him more than a bounty hunter, even if the reward is a prime factor in his choice of criminals. The resolution of ambiguity by determining legal right is apparent in Shane, where the gunfighter's violent resolution of the problem is in defense of the homesteaders who are legally justified.

In addition to re-enacting the fundamental plot which pits the hero's defense of the town against the enemies of justice, True Grit also employs the conventional ending which is perhaps most familiar in Shane--the fate of the hero whose violent defense of civilization results in his exile from that civilization. Cawelti explains this irony: "These townsmen are always in need of the heroic individual, but when he appears and reluctantly saves them, they have no real place for him. . . . [He] is either destroyed or finds that even his heroic success is a kind of defeat."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Rooster's forced resignation for killing Odus Wharton and a friend at the novel's end is yet another example of the Western which follows traditional conventions.

Before Rooster resigns for his actions, however, we are witness to a memorable portrayal of the final shootout

<sup>21</sup>John G. Cawelti, "God's Country, Las Vegas and the Gunfighter: Differing Visions of the West," Western American Literature, 9 (1975), 283.

scene. Carol Anne French has noted that no matter how unwilling the hero, he is always forced to resort to his gunfighting skills in the climactic scene.<sup>22</sup> Although hardly a pacifist, Rooster is not the maniacal killer others try to make him. His plot to capture the Pepper gang at the dugout includes an attempt to capture them alive (after shooting one in the back to prove his serious intentions). Later, Rooster offers some gang members the chance to leave unharmed and he gives Ned the choice of surrendering. They refuse, of course, and in the best tradition of the formula, they begin shooting first. But Portis goes the formula one better; his riproaring gun battle is a preface to the escalating perils which Mattie faces as she is poised on the brink of a fatal fall: the killer Chaney, bats, a rotting human corpse, and a nest of rattlesnakes.

An examination of the concluding gun battle between Rooster and the Lucky Ned Pepper gang reveals the means by which Portis elevates his novel above the level of parody. Earlier, it was shown how the gunfighter convention was deflated when Rooster, LaBoeuf, and Captain Finch used the corn dodgers for an abortive display of marksmanship and when Rooster failed to hit Ned as he escaped on foot.

<sup>22</sup>Carol Anne French, "Western Literature and the Myth-Makers," Montana: The Magazine of Western History, April 1972, p. 79.

These incidents added elements of comedy and realism to the novel. In the concluding gun battle, however, the former ineptitude vanishes and we see accuracy and dexterity which rival the most outlandish of the formula Westerns. "Determined and unwavering," Rooster charges four armed men (p. 171). Reins in his teeth, guns blazing in both hands, Rooster manages to shoot three men and rout the fourth. A wounded Ned is killed by "LaBoeuf's wonderful shot" of over six hundred yards (p. 172). Although these events approach the incredible, they are not farcical. Our acceptance of Rooster's tactic has been foreshadowed by Rooster's earlier explanation of how he and Potter had once used the technique of bold attack against a posse, and further, that it had also been successful during the Civil War. We are meant to believe Rooster's explanation that, when faced with the threat of death, the instinct for self-preservation is often more compelling than a rational trust in the safety of numbers.

By relying on the convention of a hero's prowess with a gun overcoming unlikely odds, Portis has adopted the most familiar element of the Western formula. In light of Rooster's heroic charge in the meadow, the reader forgets the shooting of the rat and the corn dodger episode. The enduring image is that of a resolute hero whose weapons find their marks with unerring accuracy. Nussbaum has

related this familiar transformation through gunplay to the classical technique of deus ex machina:

Innumerable times we have seen the Western hero strap on his gun and attempt to resolve a difficult situation in the only way possible, after all other methods have failed. The Western hero may have his back to the wall and be facing an overpowering adversary, but when, lightning-like he draws his gun from his holster, we see the god leaping on earth and fusing with the hero into an overpowering force.<sup>23</sup>

Along with the gunfight scene, the adventures of the latter portion of the book raise Rooster from buffoon to hero, from "an old one-eyed jasper" to a figure described in mythic terms; there is genuine awe in Mattie's tone as she describes the battle:

Rooster . . . took the reins in his teeth and pulled the other saddle revolver and drove his spurs into the flanks of his strong horse Bo and charged directly at the bandits. It was a sight to see. He held the revolvers wide on either side of the head of his plunging steed. . . .

It was some daring move on the part of the deputy marshall whose manliness and grit I had doubted. No grit? Rooster Cogburn? Not much!  
(p. 170)

Rooster's actions ennoble him, as despite his wounds, he pulls an injured Mattie out of the pit; as he knowingly puts tobacco juice on her arm to draw the venom; as he runs on, panting but determined, under Mattie's weight. In fact, in Rooster's saving of Mattie's life, Portis comes

<sup>23</sup>Nussbaum, 27.

dangerously close to transforming Rooster into the legendary knight rescuing the maiden from certain death.

Portis' accomplishment in True Grit, therefore, is not his spoofing of the Western formula, but his success in adding parodic elements without changing the basic theme and structure. His portrayal of Rooster Cogburn and Mattie Ross as somehow both comic and realistic and mythic is a commendable achievement. Portis has taken some of the sweetness out of the Western formula and made it more palatable. But he leaves the elements of theme, structure, and heroic action intact. True Grit does not mock the familiar Western myth so much as it creates new variations. It would be writers such as Richard Condon and David Markson who would bring the irreverence of total parody to the Western novel.

### Chapter III

#### PARODY: EVER IS HEARD A DISCOURAGING WORD

By adding elements of humor and realism to stereotypes of the formulaic Western, Portis, as we saw, effectively combines "convention" and "invention." Readers of True Grit can thus accept the parody of characters and narrative techniques because they are contained within the familiar boundaries of Western plot and theme; Portis does not embarrass his readers by making a mockery of their expectations.

There are, however, novels which purposely violate the borders of the formula Western and force readers to admit to their programmed expectations. Unlike True Grit, which uses parody to enrich the genre, these novels rely totally upon the spoofing of conventions. Works such as Richard Condon's A Talent for Loving and David Markson's The Ballad of Dingus Magee defy the commonly held tenet expressed by Will Henry that "the West of popular fiction is a deceptive fairyland, an illusion maintained by an unspoken agreement between reader and writer never to shatter it."<sup>1</sup> In

<sup>1</sup>Russel Nye, The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America (New York: Dial Press, 1970), p. 302.

parodying virtually all the aspects of formula Western fiction, Condon and Markson rely on quite opposite methods: Condon inflates incident and character beyond any semblance of credibility, outdistancing even myth. The subtitle of his work is "The Great Cowboy Race," a pun which refers to a cross-country horse race, while it also insinuates the ironic exaggeration which he brings to the "race" of Western cowboy heroes. Markson, on the other hand, deflates the mythic aspects by depicting character and incident which are grossly inferior to our expectations. Both writers, then, employ a burlesque of conventions to illumine the preposterous repetition of clichés in the Western.

Richard Condon's A Talent for Loving, written in 1961, is a crazy-quilt concoction that seems at times to have singlehandedly set out to debunk every Western convention gleaned from fiction, film and television. In fact, the novel has authentic ties to the electronic media: the work started out as a filmscript,<sup>2</sup> and its frenetic pacing of scenes is reminiscent of a series of blackout sketches. Condon's "shotgun" approach allows him to hit a number of targets, but the sheer volume of targets proves to be distracting, as if he lacks the confidence for a sustained attack. Condon feels obliged to flaunt his irreverence in

<sup>2</sup>Julian Smith, "The Infernal Comedy of Richard Condon," Twentieth-Century Literature, 14 (1969), 225.

every paragraph, with the result that the reader sometimes feels that he is witnessing a compulsive wisecracker, not a novelist. The breadth of satirical topics and cramped feeling of this novel have been duplicated in a recent novel by Tom Robbins, Even Cowgirls Get the Blues. There are several similarities in the two works, the more important being their ambitious restructuring of the West into their own designs, designs which rely heavily on the absurd and surreal.

A preliminary understanding of Condon's range of parody can be gained from a brief perusal of a handful of characters who appear in A Talent for Loving: a vegetarian cowboy who knows everything about cows except how to eat one; a Mexican army recruited by the allure of uniforms pirated from a Detroit opera company; the same army forced to fight in their underwear because bullets and blood were ruining the costumes; Mat Sun, "a well-known and inscrutable oriental"<sup>3</sup> who imports and popularizes a marvelous Chinese drink which is labeled "an old-fashioned"; Oscar Street, a nefarious Indian killer who once invited eighty-six Indians to a feast and killed them with cannon fire and was himself later captured and tortured by the avenging tribe which left

<sup>3</sup>Richard Condon, A Talent for Loving: Or, the Great Cowboy Race (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), p. 197. All further references to this work appear in the text.

only a few fingertips; Peggy Flinn, a saloon owner whose unrestrained sorrow causes her to splinter her bar with jeweled brass knuckles; two stepbrothers exactly identical in height, weight, and skills, except that the native-born Mexican is called Irish because of his ideal Celtic features, while the New Orleans-born Irish descendent resembles in every way a pureblood Mexican.

Condon will do anything for a laugh, but often the results are gained by laborious methods in which the punch line seems unworthy of the premise. For instance, he goes to great lengths to describe a grisly Indian massacre of women, children, and animals to provide a motive for a character's revulsion to cooked meat (it reminds him of the smell of his mother's charred flesh). He also intrudes into the narrative with mini-lectures on sundry topics such as the characteristics of different types of cheese, the history of vegetarianism, reflections on Freudian psychology, and page after page of recipes and detailed perceptions of the appearance, smell, and taste of food. At other times, Condon indulges in flippant, throwaway comments which serve little purpose other than diverting the reader's attention from the narrative: a passing reference to a character's Mexican relative who foolishly drank American water and died; a conversation in which the dialogue is punctuated by a speaker who casually breaks wind; the presence of a

frontier Philharmonica band. Another Condon indulgence is his penchant for pausing in his narrative to wink at friends or celebrities. Two obvious examples of this are the reference to a Parisian chef from the Rue Artbuch Wald, and a guitar player named Gobel. A more subtle example is the designation of a military outpost called Fort Frankenheimer --John Frankenheimer directed the film version of Condon's earlier novel, The Manchurian Candidate.

Despite such flaws and self-indulgences, A Talent for Loving is nevertheless an important Western parody. It breaks new ground in its attempts to de-mythify the legendary West. Whether coincidental or not, several of the elements in the novel find their way into later works of the sixties and seventies. The practice of giving a child a head start in the world by bestowing on him a name which is also a title is used by Condon's Patten family which confers names such as Major, Admiral, Professor, and Governor on its male heirs. This comic touch is found one year later in Joseph Heller's novel, Catch-22, in the person of Major Major; incidentally, at least one critic has compared Heller's tone and purpose to Condon's work.<sup>4</sup> Condon's scene describing an Indian warrior henpecked by his captive white wife reappears virtually intact in Thomas Berger's Little

<sup>4</sup>"The Sustaining Stream," Time, 1 February 1963, p. 83.

Big Man. The narrator's preoccupation with reporting the exact numbers of cattle, sheep, acres, etc., is an obsessive tendency of a character in Richard Brautigan's The Hawkline Monster. Other elements such as the cowboy's breaking wind and the swearing preacher appear in David Markson's The Ballad of Dingus Magee; the two elements are also found, along with the Jewish-sounding Indian dialogue, in Mel Brooks' film spoof, Blazing Saddles.

The episodic structure of A Talent for Loving represents a departure from the formula Western, which traditionally focuses upon one hero in a series of adventures covering a brief period of time. In contrast, Condon's novel covers an entire generation--1844-71. Book I covers the years 1844-51, introducing Major Patten, a compulsive gambler who overcomes his vice by appropriating thousands of acres of Texas land and paying its Spanish titleholders pennies an acre. Major Patten meets an even greater cattle baron, Don José Vicuña, a cultured graduate of the University of Edinburgh, a man who speaks English with a Scottish accent, Spanish, three Indian languages, French, Italian, German, English, Latin, something different to dogs and horses, pidgin English, Kuan Hua, beche-de-mer, Yiddish, Swahili, and Romany (p. 37). The Vicuña family members are the unfortunate victims of an Aztec curse placed upon one of their ancestors, a Spanish conquistador whose amorous

escapades with Aztec maidens exceeded the exploits of Casanova "by a total of six hundred and twelve partners and eight seemingly unrealizable sexual attitudes" (p. 57). For attempting to malign an Aztec god by attributing to the god his own sexual proclivities, the Vicuña forebear incurred the following curse: "Every life born of your loins unto the thousandth generation, shall be possessed with such a talent for loving that he shall grow insane for the need of love at the instant of his first carnal embrace" (p. 58). The effectiveness of the curse is humiliatingly evidenced when Don José's mother and aunt leave their husbands to run away with a traveling circus in order to mate with five acrobats. Don José staffs his castle with females only, so that he might have instant gratification for his insatiable sexual urges. In spite of the curse and Don José's warning, Major Patten is so enamored of Vicuña's daughter that he marries her, thus uniting the two greatest cattle ranches in Texas and Mexico.

Book II chronicles the years 1857-68. Attention wanders from Major Patten to the adventures of his two foster sons, Jim Street and Benito (Irish) Reyes, as well as the Major's daughter Evaliña. Book III describes "The Games" of 1871, a series of twelve incredible contests between Jim and Irish to decide who will marry Evaliña. The marriage is necessitated by the imminent curse and the

compromising of the girl's virtue when the two boys stumble into her bedroom through a skylight. This skeletal plot is fleshed out with the incorporation of such minor figures as the Mexican gunman, Don Guillermo Peña; an Eastern cattle-woman and Indian confidant, Marilyn Ridgeway; Tortillaw, a Lipan Apache chief; and General Moliña, whose political ambitions prompt him to start revolutions so that he can dramatically crush them.

This condensed plot summary suggests only a fraction of the subjects glimpsed by Condon's parodic vision. According to Gerald Walker, Condon's "surrealist story line . . . and ability to invent outlandish detail are meant to fascinate, surprise, and entertain by whatever means he finds."<sup>5</sup> It is possible to select random pages and locate any number of farcical depictions of Western conventions. For purposes of this study, however, an examination of only a few examples should allow a sufficient understanding of the author's attempts to hold Western clichés up to the fun-house mirror of his imagination. This study will focus on Condon's treatment of the Western stereotypes of women, sex, the gunfighter, and the Indian. It will conclude with an identification of several scenes which suggest Condon's particular interest in film and television Westerns.

<sup>5</sup>Gerald Walker, "Aztec Curse, Open Skylight," rev. of A Talent for Loving, by Richard Condon, NYTBR, 23 July 1961, p. 5.

Condon's most significant achievement in A Talent for Loving is the introduction of sex into a world which has been traditionally Victorian in its attitudes. The Western hero has always been something of a prig in sexual matters, doubtless a reflection of his origins in the chivalric code. Even if A Talent for Loving achieves nothing else, its presentation of a libido in the cowboy world entitles it to an important place in Western fiction. The book is doubly significant in this respect because it confers sexual drives on women as well as men; and Condon doesn't hide behind the Aztec curse to excuse his characters' actions. When Major Patten waits with Don José's Indian veterinary assistants, we see sexual desire in characters who are untouched by the curse. We are told that Major Patten "felt a need for rutting, roiling, rubbing, ructating sex explode throughout his liquated hollowness. He was staring at the [female] butler. She . . . let herself stare at his trousers. He turned away" (p. 35). Moments later, Don José absent-mindedly tickles the bottom of one of his assistants. Another example of Condon's comic descriptions of sexual matters occurs when the untimely entrance of Jim Street and Benito Reyes into Evaluña's bedroom provides them with a glimpse of "her architecturally impossible bosom" (p. 143) which would stir an elderly military statue (p. 163). By conferring carnal desire on his Western heroes, Condon

burlesques the traditionally Platonic nature of cowboy love as well as the usual depiction of the Western hero as a restrained, invulnerable participant in control of every situation.

Condon is especially effective when he describes feminine lust. Feminine sexual desires provide a counterpoint to the cool sophistication of his decorous ladies. Major Patten's bride, Maria de Lourdes, is a study in cultured pursuits; after dinner she whistles "Paganini's 'The Devil's Trill', utilizing Tartini's third sound. . . . Her virtuoso puckering very nearly drove the major's imagination to collapse" (p. 47). But following her first kiss (fortunately a nuptial one) her sensual nature dissolves her former reticence:

Maria de Lourdes had become a totally changed woman within the timing of that dual set of kisses. Gone was the withdrawn, tentative manner; the frightened, needful eyes; the frozen-angel visage. . . . Her nostrils writhed. Her scarlet tongue licked at her lips . . . hungrily and incessantly. Her eyes were filmed with the daintiest lust imaginable. She could not keep her hand off the major but, with enormous effort, kept it from going further than plucking at his sleeve. Don José began to believe that the old priest would need to read the marriage rite while running backward up the main staircase and along the corridor toward Maria de Lourdes' chambers while she made her responses and pulled the major along after her. (p. 75)

The hurried ceremony takes only four minutes and is consummated seven minutes later. The wedding couple stays in

bed two and one-quarter days, at the end of which time Maria massages her husband in bed, helps him into his clothes, and hobbles with him downstairs. For the fifteen months of his marriage, Major Patten stays within a half day's ride of his wife in the event that she should need his services.

The Pattens' daughter, Evaliña, also possesses a sensual nature, one which is evident prior to any enactment of the curse. Reading the love letter from Mr. Moody, the English drummer, "Evaliña's bottom was roiling rapidly under the chair. Her breathing seemed to come more rapidly. . . . She regained herself and jerked herself backward from the kneeling image of Mr. Moody in her mind--oh, that lustrous mustache; that pendulous pink under lip!" (p. 210). In incidents such as these, Condon contributes a sexual dimension--albeit a comic one--to the Victorian morality of the Western formula, thereby contradicting the stereotype.

Another effective technique in his portrayal of women is to take a given stereotype and exaggerate it until it becomes caricature. This is the technique he uses to parody the saloon girl convention. Often portrayed as less than genteel--especially in contrast to the demure heroine--the coarse saloon women in A Talent for Loving lack even the rudiments of feminine appeal: "a man could strike a wooden match on the cheeks of most of the drunken dance-hall women

while they slept and never wake them" (p. 3); when working, their hair is piled atop their heads because that makes it easier to wipe away the sweat which comes from their perpetual dancing. These women are too pragmatic and cool-headed: when attacked by Indians, they instinctively shoot at the horses rather than the men, pointing out that it would be foolish to go around shooting their potential market.

Another Western stereotype which Condon frequently spoofs is that of the gunfighter. The novel contains several characters in a number of incidents which mock gunfighting motifs. The book begins with the bullying gun for hire, Bat Dongin, "a skinny man with a strong sour smell and port-wine scar on the left side of his face from hairline to jawline. He whined everything he said" (p. 4) in a voice which sounded "as though he should have blown his nose many years before" (p. 12). Possibly, the portrayal of Bat Dongin is an intentional distortion of the gunfighter Lassiter in Zane Grey's Riders of the Purple Sage. Lassiter sought the evil Mormons who corrupted his sister; Dongin has an unreasonable antipathy toward preachers, having already killed three. In Condon's depiction of Bat Dongin's modus operandi is an implicit condemnation of the man's lack of style rather than his immoral

nature. The suggestion of Lassiter's noble quest to revenge his sister's lost honor is present in Dongin's words:

At nine o'clock or thereabouts, Dongin was to walk to Hanline and say loudly, "I'm a-goin' tuh kill you fer whut you done to my sister," because this was something that always threw a man off balance. Dongin had made a living with that single sentence for two years, and he'd shot down eight men. . . . The work made him jumpy. He always fired before he could finish the sentence. He was a sloppy workman all around. As a result, the small flawed things he let himself do made people remember him more than the port-wine scar did. (p. 10)

The "small flawed things" which Dongin does set him in opposition to Major Patten, a professional gambler who takes his role very seriously, as evidenced by his meticulous attention to the smallest detail of the gambler's costume and code. Dongin's oafish villainy is made apparent in the traditional Western poker game. As Jenni Calder has pointed out, whether a man wins or loses at cards is of secondary importance to his ability to respond coolly and unemotionally.<sup>6</sup> This convention was set forever in The Virginian, where the first indication of Trampas' ignoble character is observed at the poker table; his intemperate behavior prompted the most famous line in Western fiction:

<sup>6</sup>Jenni Calder, There Must Be a Lone Ranger: The American West in Film and in Reality (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 68.

It was now the Virginian's turn to bet, or leave the game, and he did not speak at once.

Therefore Trampas spoke. "Your bet, you son-of-a-----"

The Virginian's pistol came out, and his hand lay on the table, holding it unaimed. And with a voice as gentle as ever, the voice that sounded almost like a caress, but drawling a very little more than usual . . . he issued his orders to the man Trampas:--

"When you call me that, smile."<sup>7</sup>

In A Talent for Loving, the gambling gaucherie of The Virginian is pushed to new limits of bad taste: "Bat Dongin threw his cards untidily and with no regard for custom. He swore at his bad luck. He crowed when he won. He had a way of spitting too close to the Major's boots" (p. 10). In a more subtle parody, Dongin asks for five cards, a tactic so moronic that one of the men who has contracted Dongin's murder of Hanline laughs out loud at the killer's card-playing naïveté.

Condon spoofs the "good" gunfighter convention in the character of Don Guillermo Peña, the greatest gunman in Mexican history. His unlimited capability for menace is apparent when Jim and Benito first glimpse him: "The look which crossed his eyes almost turned them and their horses to stone. . . . The slash of a mouth . . . could have made a great matador of bulls shiver. It was the mouth of a man who could keep vultures as lovebirds" (p. 108). Don

<sup>7</sup>Owen Wister, The Virginian (1902; rpt. New York: Popular Library, 1962), p. 22.

Guillermo's motives are more admirable than those of evil gunfighters such as Bat Dongin; Don Guillermo is inspired by national pride. He only kills boasting Yankee gunfighters, especially those like the Sweet Potato Kid who show their contempt for Mexicans by refusing to notch their guns when they kill one. Peña's gunfighting ritual is simple and direct. He politely whispers "Good-bye" to his victims, then yells "Draw!" and observes the "after you" etiquette of the good gunfighter before he kills his man.

Don Guillermo and Benito Reyes enact Condon's most extensive travesty of the gunfight convention after Benito explains why he must break his long-term engagement to Peña's daughter. The scene needs only a slight nudge to parody the guns drawn-guns knocked away-ensuing fistfight pattern of innumerable Western showdown scenes. The scene is preceded by several pages depicting the two men feasting on roast pig and tequila and talking at cross-purposes. When Don Guillermo finally understands that his daughter is being rejected, both men leap up with guns in both hands. But because of their pork-greased fingers, all four guns go flying across the cantina:

They sprang forward, reaching the weapons almost simultaneously. Their hatless heads clanged together, sending them staggering backward to the opposite wall as though they had been rammed by goats. Each step and movement of the grim duel was in precise synchrony with the rhythm of the paso doble "El Gato Montes" being played on the debtor's guitar. Dazed and battered, each man made it to his feet and started uncertainly toward the inert guns. This time, as though as

the result of exhaustive rehearsals, they tripped and skidded upon their fallen pork bones, sending both forward headlong, passing each other by as in a major movement in a folk dance, each to crash head-first into opposite walls of the cantina. (p. 222)

Scenes such as this illustrate Condon's mockery of the graceful, highly capable cowboy stereotype who, according to David Brion Davis, is "a superman and is adorable for his own sake. . . . He is the descendant of supernatural folk heroes . . . perfect . . . absolutely incapable of doing the wrong thing."<sup>8</sup> Condon's burlesque of the gunfight and the gunfighter helps us to realize the innate absurdity of the perfectly orchestrated showdown which is a staple of the formula Western.

Another frequent object of parody in A Talent for Loving is the stereotypical image of the Indian as merciless savage. The description of Tortillaw, chief of the Lipan Apaches, begins in the conventional way, but soon detours into comic directions:

Tortillaw was a large, muscular man who very early in his career had established himself as having strength, bravery, endurance, and intelligence unequalled by anyone in his tribe. He was a great killer of men, a gifted hunter, an effective diplomat, a first-class thief, and a wily and wholly dishonest leader. (p. 139)

<sup>8</sup> David Brion Davis, "Ten-Gallon Hero," in The American Experience, ed. Hennig Cohen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 249.

This brutal savage is later defended by Miss Ridgeway who maintains that he is "one of the truly delightful Indian executives in the country" (p. 126).

Tortillaw is brought into the story through his abduction of Jacaranda, Benito Reyes' sister. He lives to regret his actions, however, as Condon grafts the henpecked husband stereotype onto the Apache chief, much as Thomas Berger does to the Cheyenne a few years later in Little Big Man. With sarcastic venom, Jacaranda addresses her warrior husband as "my fine Indian friend" and refuses to allow him a night out with the boys at the big rain dance (p. 142). Nevertheless, Jacaranda becomes a proud Indian mother, as evidenced by her boasting of her sons to her brother. The following remarks by Jacaranda allow Condon a chance to have fun with the frequent depiction of Indian torture scenes:

"Rafeito, the oldest, was only eleven years old when he killed three United States Army officers. Officers. And there isn't a kid in this fastness who can torture a prisoner the way he can." She shook with laughter. "He does a stunt that is the funniest thing you've ever seen. He ties a prisoner up. Then he pops out one of their eyeballs, sitting right in front of them, then he chews the eyeball very, very solemnly, staring at the prisoner without cracking a smile. It is hilarious!" (p. 141)

Condon's spoof of Indian stereotypes also includes a parody of such familiar conventions as the Indians' cunning use of animal sound signals and the stilted syntax of Indian dialogue. The Indians' imitation of animal sounds

for surreptitious communication is a frequent device of attack scenes in innumerable Westerns, especially film versions. Condon describes these signals in elaborately outrageous detail: one such call is described as the sound of a grieving armadillo mother whose offspring's larynx is being crushed by the hoof of a water buffalo; the answering call is that of an alligator in labor. As is often the case in the book, however, Condon tends to linger too long in his parody. This is the case in his handling of Indian dialogue in a later scene, when, instead of the usual simplistic version of English ("Me want gun"), nature's noblemen are forced to utter asinine anachronisms such as "How's tricks, sister?" and "You can say that again, Brother" (pp. 261-62). In spite of such clumsy attempts, Condon's parody of the Indian stereotype does serve to illuminate the Western's one-dimensional approach to the Indian as untamed brute.

This examination of parody in A Talent for Loving will conclude with a glimpse of a few conventions which are clearly derived from television and film clichés. The purpose of isolating them from other parodic subjects is to illustrate the eclectic nature of Condon's burlesque. If nothing else, Condon is truly non-discriminating in his attempts to present a catalogue of distorted Western stereotypes. One such cinematic burlesque is evident when the

villainous gang of Roth, Ragaway, Moses, and Segal begin their grim walk on their way to gun down Jim Street and Benito Reyes. Their gait is "a stiff wooden-legged lurch which was to be imitated by so many gunfighters throughout the West as the years went on" (p. 150). Meanwhile, the inebriated Street and Reyes prepare for the showdown by managing to strap themselves inside a single gigantic gunbelt which pins their arms helplessly to their sides, "bound together like Ishmael and Queequeg with one belt, two guns, three boots, and no hats between them" (p. 152). The scene conjures up images of the comic buffonery of Laurel and Hardy, much as a later one suggests the slapstick antics of the Three Stooges: Street and Reyes engage in an unmanly fight in which they simultaneously kick each other in the ankle, then hop up and down on one leg, holding the injured foot.

The novel also contains two scenes which spoof the singing cowboy motif. In the first, Benito Reyes serenades his intended with a song called "There is an altar in Parangaricutirimucuaré." As the last notes waft toward Evaluña's balcony, she addresses her suitor in starkly unromantic tones: "I hab a bery, bery bad cold. . . . I'b afraid dweel hab to make the courding sub other nide" (p. 185). In another incident, it is Jim Street who plays the singing cowboy. His poignant ballads so move General

Moliña that he is required to sing for over six hours, with the marathon performance deteriorating to his bleeding fingers strumming on the banjo and a voice with the broken texture of potato salad (p. 237).

Another familiar episode in television and film Westerns is the saloon scene. Countless re-enactments of the bartender-stranger ritual would seem to preclude the possibility of an original parody, but Condon's skillful timing and judicious diction give the scene a fresh look. The stranger in this case is an English drummer who has just ordered a drink:

The bartender slid a bottle down to him along the top of the polished bar. It stopped directly in front of him. He reached a glass, poured a shot into it, and gulped it down. He poured another and sipped it; nectar it was, a wonderful medicus and a great whiskey all in one. The bartender followed the bottle, walking slowly, polishing the ruby-red wood of the bar with a large soft rag as he came. . . .

"Stranger, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"I knew that for true."

"My-uh-speech?"

"No."

"My costume?" . . .

"I mighta noticed your suit later."

"How then? Because I do not understand what is happening outside?"

"No. It was the way you drank the furniture polish. . . . First time I ever seed it done.

. . . No sir, I did not serve it to you. I was polishin' my bar like I always do. I finished up at that end so I slid the bottle up to this end to work up here and you took it and you drunk it."

(pp. 169-70)

But the scene is not finished. The bartender tastes the polish and discovers that it is more delicious than the whiskey he sells. He vows to serve it to his customers so that when they spill their drinks they also will be shining his bar. Grateful to the Easterner for the discovery, the scene concludes with the bartender generously inquiring, "Have another polish?" (p. 170).

One of the cleverest examples of Condon's parody of film and television conventions is a scene in which a stage-coach is attacked by a band of Indians. The scene catches the reader by surprise because it points out a film cliché which is so prevalent that, like Poe's purloined letter, it often escapes notice. One passenger peers through eyes watering from acrid gunsmoke and observes, "Hey, looka that. . . . Ever' one of them Indians is ridin' a paint horse! . . . Damnedest thing I ever saw. . . . Where'd eleven Indians get eleven paint horses?" (p. 204). In the novel's rousing conclusion, Condon reverses a more recognizable Western film tradition when a war party of savage Apaches arrives just in time to rescue train passengers from a massacre by the cavalry.

By inflating Western stereotypes such as the gun-fighter, the savage Indian, the cultured Spanish nobleman, the ambitious empire builder, and the cultivated, chaste heroine, Condon exposes the artificiality of the clichés by

exaggerating them beyond even the generous borders of formulaic fiction. By stretching the formulaic elements into new shapes, A Talent for Loving performs the therapeutic function of making us laugh at the ludicrousness of conventions which, through countless repetition, have attained an aura of truth. In his enthusiasm to turn all the clichés of the genre inside out, Condon sets a frenetic pace which cannot be sustained for the duration of the novel. The book is marred by the sheer volume of satirical subjects; frequently, the reader wishes that Condon would probe beneath the obvious parody to seek the truth buried within. However, this is not the author's intent, and A Talent for Loving remains on the parodic level; nevertheless, it is a very good parody, effectively--and sometimes ingeniously--exposing the unreality of Western stereotypes.

Whereas Condon relies on exaggeration as his parodic technique, David Markson uses the opposite technique to achieve the same result. In his 1965 novel, The Ballad of Dingus Magee, Markson deflates Western stereotypes by creating characters and incidents which fall noticeably short of the reader's expectations. In addition to the novels' differences in technique, the scope of parody in The Ballad of Dingus Magee is more confined than that in A Talent for Loving. By focusing on the conflict between Sheriff C. L. Hoke Birdsill and the wanted desperado, Dingus

Billy Magee, Markson's novel parodies the two most common Western story types identified by Frank Gruber--the marshal story and the outlaw story.<sup>9</sup> Although he employs a more tightly structured plot line than Condon, Markson nevertheless manages to parody a number of other Western conventions, such as the easy distinctions between hero and villain along with the genre's puritanical stance toward bawdy and scatological language, sex, and women. It is all done with a light touch, however, and Markson's reversal of Western clichés is commendably restrained by his primary purpose which is to entertain, not preach.

Obviously based on the legendary characters of Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett, Sheriff Hoke Birdsill and outlaw Dingus Billy Magee are two decidedly unheroic Western heroes. Although Markson teases the reader in the first chapter of the novel by presenting an apparently cool, fearless, unselfish gunslinger and a dedicated, intrepid law officer, the masks are soon removed. Dingus is shown to be a scrawny teenager of nineteen, "a snotty twerp"<sup>10</sup> who suffers two ignoble wounds: a sprained wrist, the result of being outwrestled by a madam he vainly tries to

<sup>9</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup>David Markson, The Ballad of Dingus Magee (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 120. All further references to this work appear in the text.

molest, and a glancing bullet wound in the buttocks. Dingus lacks the most fundamental traits of the hero, traits defined by Dixon Wecter as self-respect, decency, honor, and a sense of fair play.<sup>11</sup> A consummate liar and cheat, Dingus is most deceitful to his comrades; a familiar ploy is to loan his hat and red and yellow Mexican vest to a traveling companion so that Hoke Birdsill's sporadic ambushes are directed at the unsuspecting person wearing Dingus' gaudy outfit. Following each ambush, the escaped Dingus retrieves the vest and hat from the local doctor (who is treating the unfortunate victim) so that he can put the garments to similar future use.

Another stereotype which is attacked in The Ballad of Dingus Magee is the "good" bad guy. The "Robin Hood in New World Guise" is a familiar Western convention, of course, dating back to Edward L. Wheeler's first depiction of the noble outlaw in the 1877 dime novel, Deadwood Dick, the Prince of the Road; or, the Black Rider of the Black Hills. "Intelligent, handsome, and chivalrous, Deadwood Dick gunned and galloped his way into the hearts of the reading public,"<sup>12</sup> and was popularized in such novels as Zane Grey's

<sup>11</sup>Dixon Wecter, The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero-worship (1941; rpt. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 482.

<sup>12</sup>Daryl E. Jones, "Clenched Teeth and Curses: Revenge and the Dime Novel Outlaw Hero," in The Popular Western, ed. Richard W. Etulain and Michael T. Marsden, p. 652/10.

The Lone Star Ranger and Max Brand's Destry Rides Again.

As Daryl E. Jones has observed, the "good" bad buy is distinguishable from the "bad" bad guy by his social polish, manners, and chivalrous conduct to friend, foe, and particularly women.<sup>13</sup> Dingus Magee displays none of these qualities. We have already seen his readiness to sacrifice his friends, and his attempted rape of a madam (in a later scene he smugly seduces an unsuspecting schoolteacher). Dingus' shabby treatment of his foes similarly discloses Markson's burlesque of the noble outlaw stereotype, as shown in Dingus' confrontations with Sheriff Hoke Birdsill. In one scene, a solicitous Dingus suggests that Hoke might like to relieve himself before continuing a grueling stage-coach journey; while Hoke's gun hand is otherwise occupied, Dingus draws his gun and robs him, an experience which so terrifies Birdsill that he urinates on his boots. In another incident, Dingus forces the unarmed Hoke to eat burro droppings, a nauseating feast which Dingus wryly recalls as the time they ate chow together (p. 15).

If Dingus is an uncharacteristic outlaw hero, Hoke Birdsill is an even more unlikely sheriff. An inveterate bungler, Hoke is continually bested by Dingus. Hoke owes his sheriff's badge to his fancy-looking derby and suit

<sup>13</sup>Jones, p. 655/13.

which catch the eye of Belle Nops, the politically influential madam of Yerkey's Hole, New Mexico. She hires Hoke to guard her brothel and be on call for sexual duties when she desires; when Hoke insists on the appearance of respectability, she has him appointed sheriff of the town as well, a job which pays twenty dollars less than the position at her brothel. As sheriff, Hoke is an embarrassing joke. Forever gullible, he is continually taken in by Dingus' vest and hat ploy. And when Hoke does arrange an ambush, his fallible marksmanship matches his lack of imagination. The first time Dingus lends the vest to a companion, Hoke empties his revolver at the man but only succeeds in grazing his hip. The second time he is fooled by the ruse, he nicks a man in the shoulder with the third shot from his second gun. His gunfighting prowess reaches its nadir in a final scene in which he empties his revolver down a well shaft four feet wide and eight feet deep, and somehow manages to miss Dingus with every shot.

Markson's version of the sheriff and outlaw "heroes" leaves no room for the Western's customary opposition of good and evil. Every character in the book acts out of self-interest, fear, or greed. Dingus, especially, is a comic reversal of traditional figures such as the Virginian and Shane who are notably strong and silent types. Dingus is an exact opposite--undersized and loquacious, he is quick

with his tongue, not his gun. His escape from jail is accomplished by convincing Hoke that if he lets him go, Dingus will rob a train and commit other crimes which will result in escalating rewards until the figure reaches ten thousand dollars. Typically, Dingus breaks his promise. In fact, Dingus commits only one real crime--the robbery of Hoke earlier mentioned--a situation which forces the sheriff to take matters into his own hands. Hoke commits crimes in Dingus' stead, leaving behind not-so-subtle clues such as a note addressed to Dingus, and clothing bearing Dingus' initials. And unlike the traditional outlaw rogues described by Cawelti, Markson's characters are spared the usual fate of "good" bad guys--reformation or death.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps Markson's purpose can be illustrated most clearly by measuring it against a description of the formula Western which it lampoons. Russel Nye's discussion of the Western explains the salient features which are so thoroughly lampooned in The Ballad of Dingus Magee:

Life in the Western's West is simple, with easily defined enemies and clear-cut victories and defeats. In it the old-fashioned virtues prevail --courage, integrity, pride, honor, stamina--in an unambiguous, uncompleted, uncomplicated society where success and failure, good and evil, bravery and cowardice, can be clearly identified and measured.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, p. 77.

<sup>15</sup>Nye, p. 304.

One of the most outrageous parodies of Western conventions in The Ballad of Dingus Magee is the shootout scene. Unlike Condon's parody of this ritual in A Talent for Loving, Markson does not depict the gracelessness and ineffectiveness of his combatants, but instead removes them from the scene altogether. The midnight showdown at Yerkey's Hole finds Hoke Birdsill knocked out by his betrothed prostitute, Belle Nops, who realizes that Hoke's incompetence would get him killed. Prudently, she goes in his place to face Dingus. However, Dingus has once more outfitted a stranger in his vest; this time it is a preacher, Brother Rowbottom. The actual shootout which follows is nothing more than some harmless shots fired into the dark by Belle Nops, Rowbottom, and the incredibly ugly twenty-five cent Indian prostitute, Anna Hot Water, the "only damn independent bim-bam in town" (p. 53). While the confused shootout is taking place, Dingus--disguised as a girl and with Hoke's unwitting help--is robbing Belle's safe. At the conclusion of the novel, there is a showdown of sorts between Hoke and Dingus, but it is hardly menacing; both men are wearing dresses and neither is injured.

In addition to ridiculing the two basic hero figures of Westerns, The Ballad of Dingus Magee also violates the Western dictum that the characters speak in a restrained manner. Kent Ladd Steckmesser is one of several scholars

who have observed that the genteel hero uses purified language and never curses.<sup>16</sup> Even an unregenerate villain such as Wister's Trampas can do no worse than "you son-of-a-----."<sup>17</sup> Of course, Wister and others were bound by the practices of publishers as well as the tastes of their audience, but the often stilted and unconvincing dialogue of the Western goes beyond the nature of obscenity laws and common usage. What reader can repress a smile when coming across the following line in Zane Grey's The U. P. Trail? "Red" King, a character known for his determined shyness and taciturnity, discovers a young lady who has survived a Sioux massacre: "'It's a girl!' he ejaculated."<sup>18</sup>

Current writers such as Louis L'Amour and Nelson Nye are not bound by publishing laws, only the requirements of their audience; the fact that they decide against the use of obscenity or raw language emphasizes the inflexible nature of all formula literature. Very likely, the practice rises from the very heart of the Western, its creation of an idealized, romantic world. The popular Western does not hesitate to give detailed descriptions of beatings, lynchings, tortures, shootings, and mutilations, but it seldom stoops to coarse language or the depiction of sexual

<sup>16</sup> Steckmesser, p. 241.

<sup>17</sup> Wister, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Zane Grey, The U. P. Trail (1918; rpt. New York: Pocket Books, 1976), p. 30.

experiences. As in all ideal worlds, the environment relies on selective details which, by their very nature, deny the real world. Fiedler notes the absence of these topics in the Western when he says:

Certainly, the de-crabbed, castrated Westerner, that clean, toe-twisting, hat-tipping White Knight embodied finally in Gary Cooper, betrays the truth of American history . . . and an attempt . . . to recount the opening of the trans-Mississippi West without the passion and venereal disease is an unintentional travesty.<sup>19</sup>

Fiedler's comment seems to be transferred directly into Markson's novel when Belle Nops describes her attack on Dingus: "Oh, I doubt I murdered the critter, but I scared the crabs right off his smelly bottom for fair" (p. 164). In fact, the first sentence of The Ballad of Dingus Magee indicates Markson's avowed departure from the hygienic world of the formula Western:

Turkey Doolan's crotch itched. His scalp was gamy. Poised in the saddle, with one freckled hand inside his jeans and several stumpy fingers of the other beneath his sombrero, he relieved himself by scratching simultaneously and with vehemence. (p. 3)

Turkey Doolan is waiting for Dingus to relieve himself in the woods; the first page of the novel thus suggests an unfamiliar tendency to confront basic bodily functions. He accomplishes this departure from the genre by using two kinds of earthy language--the scatological and the bawdy;

<sup>19</sup>Fiedler, Return of the Vanishing American, p. 136.

confronting this language in Markson is curiously reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's humorous use of the same devices. Like Swift, Markson satirizes man's false sense of modesty and literary "propriety."

In A Talent for Loving, Condon presents a scene in which a character breaks wind as he converses. The incident is recorded and then forgotten. In The Ballad of Dingus Magee, however, Markson frequently relies on scatological humor. The least sophisticated type of humor, scatology can achieve a sense of realism as it provides comic relief or an opportunity for an author to display his ingenuity. Markson's scatological humor is used for all of these purposes, in addition to the shock effect he obviously desires. Although he relies too heavily on the device, he can sometimes achieve marvelously apt metaphors or striking mental images. It is hoped that a sampling of Markson's scatological and bawdy language will give some idea of its effectiveness, even though wrenching them out of context and lining them up one after the other might suggest a frequency which is not found in the work.

When Dingus discourses on a transcendental philosophy he has overheard, a preacher regards it as "Emersonian horse pee," a judgment Dingus is forced to accept when "certain sensuous remnants of the preacher's flatulence were abruptly wafted toward him and he had to go hurriedly

elsewhere" (p. 138). Brother Rowbottom's assertion that he doesn't "give a fart on a wet Wednesday" (p. 52) about Dingus' buttocks wound also conveys the colorful language found in the novel. But Markson's most shocking use of scatological humor is in the memorable protest of an Indian outraged by Dingus' sexual knowledge of the chief's squaws. The Indian rides "right smack down the main street bold as a fart in church"; for four days and four nights he squats motionlessly under a blanket in front of the hotel. On the fourth morning, according to a citizen named Redburn, the Indian was gone but not forgotten, for "right there it stood, heaped up fer all to see and looking like there weren't no human being in the world, and not even no red-skinned one neither, could leave that much of a monument behind with jest one solitary dumping of his bowels" (p. 126). Words are unnecessary to convey the Indian's contempt for Dingus' sexual promiscuity.

The second type of language which Markson introduces to the Western is the earthy, bawdy references which, like scatology, deprive his characters of epic pretensions. As stated earlier, the first chapter of the novel is carefully constructed to resemble a straightforward version of the Billy the Kid-Pat Garrett legend; in fact, this early section of The Ballad of Dingus Magee resembles Charles Neider's well regarded saga of Billy the Kid, The Authentic

Death of Hendry Jones. Markson's first hint that his book is untraditional comes at the end of the chapter when Hoke Birdsill discovers that he has once again been duped by Dingus' Mexican vest trick. It is Hoke's word choice which announces a departure from the formula Western:

Oh, that double-dealing, nooky-snatching,  
sneaky-assed skunk! . . . I'll crucify him!  
I swear, this time I'll murder the little  
sidewinder. . . . I'll bend his mangy dong in  
half and stomp on it. . . . That makes three  
times in six months I done put a bullet through  
the turd-wiping thing. (pp. 18-19)

Although Hoke, Dingus, Anna Hot Water and others are given to memorably obscene language, the most fluent practitioner is Belle Nops, the madam whose maniacal hatred of "Dingus Turdface Magee" (p. 167), the "lying-mouthed little pussy-poacher" (p. 198), inspires an awesome eloquence: "that lamb-ramming, rump-rooting, scut-befouling, fist-wiving, gopher-mounting, finger-thrusting, maidenhead-barging, bird's nest-ransacking, shift-beshitting, two-at-a-time-tupping lecherous little pox" (pp. 185-86). Belle's language is no more than one would expect from the madam of a brothel in the town of Yerkey's Hole, New Mexico, a name which commemorates not a life-sustaining water well, but a former whore.

A consideration of Markson's use of bawdy language leads to an appraisal of his treatment of sex in The Ballad of Dingus Magee. Whereas Condon judiciously goes no farther

than the depiction of sexual desire in A Talent for Loving, Markson flaunts the Victorian tradition of the Western with a variety of incidents in which characters describe or participate in sexual acts. His treatment of sex is relatively restrained, however, far more so than his use of scatology. His sexual descriptions and incidents provide a valid opportunity for enlarging upon the comic characterizations in the novel.

In his discussion of the "anti-Western" in The Return of The Vanishing American, Leslie Fiedler observes that "one thing only escapes dissolution in the compulsive anti-mythical burlesque of such books--the hero's ability to satisfy sexually all women, including and especially Indian ones."<sup>20</sup> Fiedler illustrates this tendency by referring to such promiscuous Indian women as Indian Jenny in Ken Kesey's Sometimes a Great Notion and Tombaby in James Leo Herlihy's Midnight Cowboy, as well as Anna Hot Water in The Ballad of Dingus Magee. Anna is a twenty-five cent prostitute so unattractive that even her determined sales pitch to every available man fails to gain her a single customer in the course of the novel. However, other Indian women are more fortunate in receiving sexual gratification. Anna chronicles the superhuman sexual performance of Dingus, who manages to sexually satisfy "seventeen squaws

<sup>20</sup>Fiedler, Return of the Vanishing American, p. 161.

in twenty hours nonstop and squish the belly-button out'n every damn one" (p. 133). In a later incident, Indian squaws ambush a U. S. Cavalry patrol and take turns holding it at bay until Dingus can once more satisfy all seventeen female members of the Indian camp.

Markson's comic exaggeration of the white man's conquest of Indian women is perhaps best evidenced by a scene which humorously links two aspects of the white man's violation of Indian rights. In this scene, an Indian warrior chief has his amorous pursuits interrupted when he discovers Dingus enjoying sex with one of the chief's squaws. A panic-stricken Dingus barely manages to escape, but in his retreat he notices:

The brave was blandishing a gleaming Winchester rifle over his head. . . . "That's it!" he cried. "That's it! The end, the absolute fornicating end! Because they drove us from the hunting grounds of our ancestors, and we suffered that in silence! Because they gave us treaties from the Great White Father, and then they took our new lands as well, and we endured that likewise! Even when we've had nothing to eat but buffalo flop, we have accepted. But now an end! An end, I say! Because when they will not even let a man have his bim-bam in peace, I tell you it is time for revenge!" (p. 114)

The portrayal of Dingus' indefatigable sexual prowess is an obvious parody of the male virility tradition which Fiedler defines. Markson also reverses this convention in order to mock the priggish puritanism of Hoke Birdsill.

When Hoke faces the same seventeen squaws in the sexual gauntlet which Dingus survived so magnificently, Hoke fails abysmally. He is distressed by the fact that it is daylight and even the parade of naked women fails to effect even the slightest sexual desire. On the contrary, he is reduced to a sobbing hulk of a man, pounding his fists on the ground, begging them to take his rifle, his derby hat, his horse, anything that will prevent them from sending in more women to humiliate him. The scene is also a wonderful spoof of Indian torture scenes.

By displaying Hoke's sexual ineptitude, Markson makes him inferior to Dingus. It also allows Markson a chance to parody what Jenni Calder calls "the chocolate box heroine,"<sup>21</sup> the passive female in Westerns who serves no function other than that of an attractive observer or a helpless captive who requires the hero's gallant rescue. In The Ballad of Dingus Magee, Hoke's sexual reticence draws attention to the liberated sexual aggressiveness of Belle Nops. This combination of the boyish, callow male and the no-nonsense, worldly prostitute is later treated with considerable success in Robert Altman's film, McCabe and Mrs. Miller, although Altman does not share Markson's farcical treatment. In one scene, Belle's passion prompts her to spontaneously

<sup>21</sup>Calder, p. 170.

disrobe her justly famous figure with this remarkable effect: "the astonishing bosom unfurled like gonfalons loosed, like melons in dehiscence. But Hoke saw not, partook not. He had already fainted" (p. 96). In a further reversal of aggressive male-submissive female stereotypes, Markson describes Hoke as nothing more than Belle's sexual plaything. On duty at the brothel, Hoke is ignored by Belle except on the occasions when she discreetly nods her head in his direction, her summons to the bedroom. Markson's depiction of her urgent needs and Hoke's forlorn position as the abused concubine is done with unrestrained glee:

Hoke would begin to hear immediately the slow inexorable steady mouthing of the curses, the mounting vituperation and blasphemy which startled even him, ex-cowhand, in tones flat and vicious yet somehow finally perversely impassioned too, finally lost among the enormous calving sounds and the heaving breath, the culmination. Then before he himself could recover or think to remember what she had been calling him she would be dressed and gone again, once more indifferent and contemptuous and sour. . . . He would go three or four days without so much as a word or sign from her . . . that she even knew him by sight. (p. 32)

Markson's use of the technique of reversal is as effective in his treatment of sex roles as it is in his application to the other Western stereotypes we have examined; the sheriff and outlaw heroes, and purified

dialogue. Although he never presumes to be writing for any purpose other than that of entertainment, he nevertheless manages to draw attention to the tendency of Western fiction to ignore the ugly, the realistic, and the unheroic. But perhaps the most significant achievement of The Ballad of Dingus Magee is Markson's attack on the creation of history, legend, and myth. We have already seen that his "heroes" are ineffectual, cowardly, greedy; they depend on rumor and artifice to convey their desired public identities. In Markson's West, heroism is not an intrinsic quality, but the result of clever public relations and Machiavellian machinations. The novel is a humorous dramatization of the concept so frequently asserted by Henry Nash Smith and others--that from the time of Daniel Boone, the public has constantly altered the facts of westward expansion to fit the requirements of myth.<sup>22</sup> The preference for legends, not men, was perhaps best exploited by Ned Buntline whose writing "created" a Buffalo Bill Cody and an unbroken succession of imitations.

Markson's good-natured attempt to remind us of the distortion of history and myth is accomplished by his irreverent treatment of famous Western figures, as well as his unheroic portrayal of Hoke and Dingus. An obvious

<sup>22</sup>Henry Nash Smith, p. 114.

example of Markson's intent is his practice of using epitaphs to introduce each chapter. The reader encounters the words of famous and infamous Western figures such as Wild Bill Hickock, Johnny Ringo, Cole Younger, Sam Bass, and Doc Holliday. The ironic intent of the epitaphs is broadly announced by the complete title of the novel:

The Ballad of Dingus Magee: Being the Immortal True Saga of the Most Notorious Desperate Bad Man of the Olden Days, his Blood-Shedding, his Ruination of Helpless Females, & Cetera; also including the Only Reliable Account ever offered to the Public of His Heroic Gun Battle with Sheriff C. L. Hoke Birdsill, Yerkey's Hole, New Mex., 1844, and with Additional Commentary on the Fateful and Mysterious Bordello-Burning of the Same Year; and furthermore interspersed with Trustworthy and Shamelessly Interesting Sketches of "Big Blouse" Belle Nops, Anna Hot Water, "Horseface" Agnes, and Others, hardly any Remaining Upright at the End. Composed in the Finest Modern English as taken diligently from the Genuine Archives by David Markson.

The Ballad of Dingus Magee, like Thomas Berger's earlier Little Big Man, debunks actual gunfighters, as well as his own fictional creations which are thinly disguised versions of Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid. In one fanciful incident, Dingus is robbed by two highwaymen who become frightened that Dingus will seek revenge. One of the robbers argues that they have to go through with a crime just once, instead of only writing to the newspapers about fictitious crimes. At the end of the scene, Markson reveals his intent when the reluctant robbers address each other as "Doc" and "Wyatt."

Markson's most intensive effort to expose the nature of Western myths is found in the debate between Turkey Doolan and a familiar Western medical man with the traditional single name of "Doc." The argument immediately precedes the ineffectual gunfight involving Anna Hot Water, Belle Nops, and Brother Rowbottom. The dimwitted Turkey insists on believing that Hoke and Dingus represent the apex of all sheriff-outlaw rivalries, pitting "the notoriousest desperado and the hardest-rock sheriff in the whole untamed West" (p. 141). In a memorable roll call of Western gunfighters, the cynical Doc recites the sorry facts behind the legends; it is the closest Markson comes to revealing a serious thematic undercurrent in his novel:

Wild Bill were sitting at a poker table with'n his back turned when they shot him in it. Billy Bonney were on his way to carve hisself a slice of eating beef when Pat Garrett kilt him in a dark room without no word of previous notice neither. Bill Longley got strung up by the neck and Clay Allison fell out'n a mule wagon and broke his'n. That feller Ford snuck up to the ass-end of Jesse James, and John Ringo blowed out his own personal brains, and John Wesley Hardin is doing twenty-five years in the Huntsville Penitentiary. . . . But now all of a sudden either Hoke Birdsill or Dingus Billy Magee is gonter become the first individual in modern-day history, outside of maybe in that there traveling show Buffalo Bill Cody done put together to bamboozle a bunch of lard-headed Easterners, who's gonter get kilt by sashaying accommodatigly on up to another feller he knows is carrying a primed firearm in his hand. (pp. 143-44)

Markson clearly reveals the distance between myth and historical fact following the mock gun battle in which Anna Hot Water and Belle Nops fire inconsequential shots into the dark while Dingus and Hoke remain conspicuously absent. Inexplicably, Doc suddenly decides to capitalize on the opportunity to begin a new career by joining a Wild West show and do some bamboozling of his own by relating the "true facts" of the famous shootout. The onlookers believe that both Hoke and Dingus have crawled off to die from fatal wounds when Doc tells them:

Now what reason would I have fer telling fibs?  
 . . . Ain't neither one of 'em dead in any except  
 the ordinary sense. . . . What I mean, this were  
 their mortal demises, nacherly, but in another  
 way, a brace of gallant, romantic figures like  
 that, especially Dingus, why he's gonter live on  
 in folks' recollections for just years and years.  
 You might even put it that he belongs to the ages  
 now, like that Henry Wadsworth Longfeller feller,  
 died last year, or General Custer hisself.  
 (p. 156)

Markson's insistence on portraying history as a joke we play on ourselves is given one final emphasis by the inclusion of "Horseface Agnes'" nine stanza tribute, "The Ballad of Dingus Magee." The irony at the heart of the entire book is summarized in the lines, "And none can judge, are heroes born,/ Or are they only made?" (p. 202).

The conventions and stereotypes of the Western novel provide a virtually unlimited and easily accessible source

of parody, and writers such as Richard Condon and David Markson can spoof the genre by either exaggerating or reversing the elements of the formula. Such parody represents a comparatively low form of satire, a fact predicated by parody's reliance on the forms it distorts. However, it does serve the useful function of exposing the prevalence of stereotypes. Charles B. Harris has noted that such burlesque novels manage to reject the traditional forms and styles even as they continue to exploit them.<sup>23</sup> A danger in parodic Westerns is that the dependence on familiar conventions can make their humorous versions as predictable as the original formula itself.

One last satiric dimension of The Ballad of Dings Magee requires notice: Markson's playful allusions to non-Western writers, a little game he plays with his readers. For instance, the only epitaph which is not attributed to a Western lawman or outlaw is by William Faulkner, concerning an offer he once had for the ideal job --landlord of a brothel. Commenting on Markson's novel, Leslie Fiedler describes the style as "rendered in straight-faced Faulknerian prose."<sup>24</sup> Markson also pokes fun

<sup>23</sup>Charles B. Harris, Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd (New Haven: College and University Press, 1971), p. 23.

<sup>24</sup>Fiedler, Return of the Vanishing American, p. 153.

at the author of Love and Death in the American Novel by including a cavalry captain named Captain Fiedler. Markson is obviously responding to Fiedler's thesis that American novelists have an adolescent attitude toward sex and are unable or unwilling to treat it realistically in their fiction. At the end of The Ballad of Dingus Magee, Hoke Birdsill is knocked senseless by his former lover, Belle Nops, an experience which makes Hoke wish that "he were back in Yerkey's Hole with young Fiedler and his womenless troopers. The captain seemed intelligent, the last sort to be engulfed in such sexual maelstroms" (p. 195). The naïve Captain Fiedler is easy prey for "Horseface" Agnes Pfeffer who spends a busy day first seducing Hoke, and then Turkey Doolan, in her frantic attempt to inspire their guilt feelings and force them to do the right thing and marry her. Even the simple Turkey avoids her trap, but in a subtle postscript we find that she finally manages to work her devious wiles successfully on one unsuspecting man: the author of "The Ballad of Dingus Magee" is Mrs. Agnes Pfeffer Fiedler.

Markson also alludes to specific literary works in his novel. The final "discovery" scene is taken from Tom Jones: Dingus learns that Belle Nops, a woman he has vainly tried to seduce on several occasions, is his long lost mother. Belle's determination to reunite the Dilinghaus family and

make them good Christian folk is a recreation of the ending of Huckleberry Finn, the book which Hemingway maintained was the source of all subsequent American novels. Both Huck and Dingus resolve to strike out for the Territory at the end of the two novels. Markson makes an indisputable parallel between the novels when Dingus' last words are identical to Huck's when he, too, was in danger of being "sivilized": "I been there before."<sup>25</sup> And like Huck, the male characters of Markson's novel (Dingus, Hoke, Turkey Doolan) escape feminine society.

Markson's allusions to such literary traditions are confined to the brief instances just discussed, representing a very minor facet of the novel's parody. However, as we will see in the following chapter, the reaction to literary tradition and criticism provides the major focus for other satiric Western novels.

This discussion of A Talent for Loving and The Ballad of Dingus Magee has shown that parodic Western novels rely on techniques of exaggeration and reversal to lampoon a great number of formulaic conventions. Richard Condon and David Markson draw our attention to the unreality of the genre's heroes, villains, Indians, women, and moral principles. They replace the old, romantic versions of the

<sup>25</sup> Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885; rpt. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 245.

Western myth with a farcical version. The resulting contrast emphasizes the absurdity of both, for parody not only mocks the target of its ridicule, but itself as well. It is not the function of parody to supply rigid norms of behavior, but to point out the failure of existing standards. At best, parody can suggest implicit truths which have been concealed by the ignorance or deceit which parody exposes. In this sense, parody achieves a cathartic effect; after all, knowing what is not true is an important step toward learning what is true.

The value of parodic novels, then, is that they uncover falsifications which masquerade as facts. If they have a serious theme, it has to do with the relativity of truth. We are reminded of Akira Kurosawa's film, Rashomon, in which a number of characters provide widely disparate versions of a shared experience; each version is shaped by the particular narrator's idealized image of himself or herself, and each refutes the "reality" proposed by the others. Coincidentally, Rashomon was remade in America as Martin Ritt's Western film entitled The Outrage: the setting was shifted from feudal Japan to the nineteenth century Southwest; Japanese characters were transformed into a Southern white couple and a Mexican bandit. Like Kurosawa's superb film, parodic Western novels do not provide us with an absolute truth, but expose a number of

untruths. Condon and Markson do not pretend that their versions of the Western myth are more real than those of the formula Western, but that both are equally unreal. A Talent for Loving and The Ballad of Dingus Magee remind us that the truth of the American West lies somewhere between heroism and buffoonery, epic and farce.

## Chapter IV

### REACTIONARY WESTERN SATIRES

The practice of satirizing particular writers through the guise of the Western traces as far back as Bret Harte's parody of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales in Muck-A-Muck. Years later, Hemingway uses it in The Torrents of Spring, a thinly disguised lampoon of Sherwood Anderson. But it is the sixties which witness an outbreak of satiric Westerns based on famous works. Because many of these new writers rely on their reader's familiarity with earlier works, we shall label such fiction "reactionary." During this time, serious imitations were also produced in works such as Harry Brown's The Stars in Their Courses, a cactus and cattle version of The Iliad, and Peter Dawson's The Showdown, a Western-styled Henry IV, Part I. A humorous rendition of Don Quixote appeared in Richard Gardner's Scandalous John.

This chapter will examine two Western novels which illustrate reactionary satire: H. Allen Smith's 1974 novel, Return of the Virginian, which begins as a parody of Wister's novel but soon broadens its satiric base to include

a variety of contemporary issues; and John Seelye's 1972 novel, The Kid, which incorporates the literary theories of Leslie Fiedler as well as usurping scenes and characters from American fiction ranging from Huckleberry Finn to the Ox-Bow Incident. Unlike strictly parodic novels such as Condon's A Talent for Loving and Markson's The Ballad of Dingus Magee, these reactionary novels produce satire which extends beyond the mere parodying of familiar Western conventions.

In two ways, H. Allen Smith is an exception to the other writers who are included in this study. First, he is a member of the generation preceding that of the other novelists; he began publishing in 1939. Second, unlike the other writers, he can be associated with the Western genre-- several of his thirty-eight works are comic Westerns. The other novelists use the genre only once, although several have written other novels.

Return of the Virginian also differs from the other works examined because it is set in the twentieth-century West, not the nineteenth century's. Since the premise of his novel concerns the offspring of the Virginian and Trampas, this modern setting is chronologically necessary. However, it also allows the author to satirize a number of current issues and personalities which have no bearing on Wister's work. Smith writes in the tradition of the

American humorist, addressing his satire to a number of topical issues. The limitations of this study preclude the analysis of such contemporary targets of satire as women's liberation, hippies, the cosmetics industry, the sexual revolution, religious hypocrisy, hucksterism, as well as personalities such as Jeanne Dixon, Lyndon Johnson, Jane Fonda, and "You-all" Gibson. Smith is particularly effective in what Martin Levin calls his "free-form burlesque that skims over the ground treetop level, providing a dizzying view of the manners and mores of Caliche, Texas."<sup>1</sup>

In spite of its twentieth-century setting, Smith's novel relies on the timelessness which surrounds our Western mythology. Hennig Cohen points out this condition when he says that although the ranch may use a station wagon or other modern conveniences, the distinguishing attributes of cowboy and environment are kept intact.<sup>2</sup> The result of the coexisting worlds of the present and past can be seen readily in the Western worlds of Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, where the presence of trucks, jeeps, radio, and periodic musical interruptions never seem to totally interfere with the suspension of disbelief. Much of this is due to the continued use of Western paraphernalia such as cowboy hats,

<sup>1</sup>Martin Levin, "A Reader's Report," rev. of Return of the Virginian, by H. Allen Smith, NYTBR, 13 March 1966, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>Davis, p. 246.

six-guns, and horses, which are constantly in evidence without appearing anachronistic. Perhaps more than any other single influence, the singing cowboy Western, with its musical interludes and semi-modern setting, marked the end of the Western's pretense of realism. Buck Rainey illustrates this shift in emphasis when he describes a scene in Gene Autry's Mexicali Rose (1939), in which Autry's musical outburst is complemented by a full orchestra in the middle of the prairie and an accommodating outlaw gang which forms the chorus. Such assaults on credibility, says Rainey, show that "realism was thrown out the window with the coming of the crooners and pluckers."<sup>3</sup>

Several television series of the late 1950s perpetuated the singing cowboy film's employment of Western motifs in the contemporary world. Tales of Texas Rangers would sometimes combine the two time periods by featuring an automobile pursuit into rough terrain which would necessitate the use of horses which were quickly transported to the scene by van. The strangest example of the semi-mechanized Western was Sky King, a successful series which featured the traditional ranch, cowboys and horses. However, the resolution of the weekly crimes and crises

<sup>3</sup>Buck Rainey, "The 'Reel' Cowboy," in The Cowboy: Six-Shooters, Songs, and Sex, ed. Charles W. Harris and Buck Rainey (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), pp. 52-53.

would invariably require the ranch owner's use of his private airplane. A current television series, McCloud, sets a twentieth-century New Mexico marshal in New York City, where his flamboyant cowboy independence defeats both villains and bureaucracy.

In focusing on Owen Wister's The Virginian, Smith chose a work that is formidable in many ways. By 1969 it had sold over 1,736,000 copies.<sup>4</sup> The 1929 film version starred Gary Cooper; it reappeared in the 1960s as a television series (unaccountably converting the malevolent Trampas to the Virginian's best friend). The novel was indisputably the first of the classic Westerns. According to Douglas Branch, it singlehandedly elevated the genre from sub rosa literature to respectability and recognition.<sup>5</sup> In 1958, Walker Percy declared it to be the best Western ever written and used its merits to reveal the "counterfeit" Westerns on television.<sup>6</sup> In 1974, the year Smith's Return of the Virginian appeared, Bernard De Voto declared in an unrelated essay that The Virginian had so effectively set the conventions of the shootout, the schoolmarm, and several others, that the Western art form would never recover from

<sup>4</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>Branch, p. 191.

<sup>6</sup>Walker Percy, "Decline of the Western," Commonweal, 16 May 1958, pp. 181-83.

it.<sup>7</sup> Now it remains to be seen whether Wister's novel will recover from Smith's sequel.

Although a great deal of the book's satire is independent of the parody of The Virginian, the early part of the novel is structured to parallel Wister's book. The narrators of both works--"the Prince of Wales" of The Virginian and Forsyte Grady of Return of the Virginian--are Easterners transplanted in the West. Both reveal their well-educated, cultured roots through frequent intrusions into the narrative, advising the reader and expressing personal philosophy and literary taste. The relationships of other characters to those in Wister's novel are even more obvious: Rustler Smith is the son of the villainous Trampas; Jefferson Cordee is the grandson of the Virginian (nicknamed "Jeff" by his friend Steve in Wister's book). Cordee wants to ask Smith a few questions, a situation which provides the initial plot line. A more oblique relationship is found in Holly Smith, Rustler's daughter and Trampas' granddaughter. Not only does her name suggest Molly, the Virginian's love interest, but both Molly and Holly are teachers who are especially fond of literature. And in case the reader requires further ties with the original work, Mungo Oldbuck, the cynical millionaire, comically alludes

<sup>7</sup>Bernard De Voto, "Birth of an Art," in Western Writing, ed. Gerald W. Haslam, p. 11.

to Molly Stark Wood as an historical figure. The full name of the Virginian's lady, of course, was Molly Stark Wood.

The early part of Return of the Virginian roughly corresponds to the plot structure of The Virginian. After the narrators orient the readers to time and place, they give detailed descriptions of the ruggedly handsome cowboys. In describing the Virginian's grandson, Smith indulges in his most conspicuous plagiarism of the original. It is as if he wants to assure the reader that he has access to the original and will use it to bridge the two works. This wholesale rendering is not often employed, however; the following descriptive example is the only exact duplication found in Smith's novel. It is necessary to first observe Wister's admiring appraisal of the black-haired Virginian:

Lounging there at ease against the wall was a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures. His broad, soft hat was pushed back; a loose-knotted, dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his throat; and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge belt that slanted across his hips. He had plainly come many miles from somewhere across the vast horizon, as the dust upon him showed. His boots were gray with it. The weather-beaten bloom of his face shone through it duskily, as the ripe peaches look upon their trees in a dry season. But no dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Wister, pp. 6-7.

Forsythe Grady's description of Jefferson Cordee, the Virginian's grandson, contains most of the original, with a single intentional variation to remind us of the time change:

A man had just come through the door, a trim young giant more picturesque and downright beautiful than Kodachrome film could ever imbue or delineate. His wide soft gray hat was pushed back on his head; a loose-knotted dull-scarlet handkerchief sagged from his brown throat, and one casual thumb was hooked in the cartridge belt that slanted across his hips. The weather-beaten bloom of his face shone duskiy, as the ripe peaches look upon their trees in a dry season. Nothing could have tarnished the splendor that radiated from the man's youth and strength. . . . He removed his hat, revealing blue-black curly hair.<sup>9</sup>

Smith soon indicates his intention to play fast and loose with Wister's work, rendering subsequent scenes quite differently than they appeared in The Virginian. For instance, in The Virginian, the narrator is struck by the joshing, good-natured humor of the cowboy hero who kids old Uncle Hughey about his marriage plans. The motivation for Jefferson Cordee's discussion with old Rustler Smith is considerably different, hardly indicative of either wit or humor: he wants to know why Smith is eating his pie backwards, from the crust end to the pointed end. In The

<sup>9</sup>H. Allen Smith, The Return of the Virginian (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 30. All further references to this work appear in the text.

Virginian, the confrontation with the villain was precipitated by Trampas' remark to the Virginian, "You son-of-a-----" (p. 22). In Return of the Virginian, Trampas' son calls the Virginian's grandson a "Pansy son of a bitch" (p. 29), revealing Smith's conscious imitation of Wister's characters. However, the results of the two confrontations are dissimilar. Both cowboy heroes draw their guns at the insult. The Virginian softly drawls, "When you call me that, smile" (p. 22); Cordee is even more restrained and polite, saying, "Oh, Sir . . . you shouldn't of called me that" (p. 29). But there the similarities end. The Virginian's iron will forces Trampas to back down; Rustler Smith, on the other hand, reacts to Cordee's drawn gun with unfaltering resolve, breaking a straight-back chair over Cordee's head.

The fact that Cordee is only temporarily staggered by the blow from the chair points out an important distinction between the two novels. The early part of The Virginian was devoted to developing the natural aristocracy of its hero in all ways, most of them non-physical. In his humorous repartee with Steve and his befuddling of Uncle Hughey and the drummer, Wister takes pains to give the impression of a civilized, clever, intelligent hero. Jefferson Cordee is quite the opposite. In direct contrast to his grandfather's earthy, masculine language, Cordee's vocabulary stops at

"son of a gun." He also lacks his grandfather's naturally keen mind. When offered a job as foreman of Asia Battle's ranch, he hesitates until he is assured that the bunkhouse is equipped with television. He remarks that he likes Gunsmoke "some," but mostly he watches football and roller derby (p. 47).

In other scenes, Smith returns to a virtually straight re-creation of Wister's plot to keep some ties between the works. For instance, the Virginian met Molly when he rescued her from a stagecoach stranded in the river. Similarly, Jeff meets Holly when he saves her from a station wagon caught in a flash flood. Holly and Jeff also enjoy quiet discussions at the edge of a creek, much like those of the Virginian and Molly Wood. There are just enough parallel scenes of this type to keep the reader aware of the plot of the original book so that Smith can parody other aspects of it.

A great amount of critical attention has been awarded Wister's intentional transference of the chivalric mode to his cowboy heroes. Its appearance in the Western format is largely responsible for the mythic dimensions of the genre. Wister's chivalric Western hero is spoofed by Smith in a number of instances. He refers to the handsome but ignorant Cordee as "the Cavalier of the Plains" (p. 48), "the young Hercules" (p. 53), and "Lancelot" (p. 204). Even Forsyte

Grady, a discreet coward, generously describes himself as "Lochinvar, D'Artagnan, Sergeant York" (p. 222). At the end of the novel, Smith goes so far as to de-mythify the original Virginian. Through Jeff and Rustler Smith, a number of "true facts" are revealed. First, the Virginian was never forced to direct the hanging of his friend Steve, as Wister claimed. Knowing his alcoholic flaw, the other vigilantes simply gave him a bottle of whiskey and he immediately drank himself unconscious, missing the entire affair. Also, he never moved on to the Montana wilderness; he returned to Virginia when his brother Frank left him a hog farm. These "truths" reveal the inglorious fate of the Virginian, but his true unheroic status is steadfastly ignored by the people who know better, the citizens of Medicine Bow, Wyoming, the town where the action of The Virginian occurs. No one doubts the opportunistic nature of the Madison Avenue mentality, but there is something altogether sacrilegious about seeing its blatant success in the pristine Western setting. Jeff describes his visit to the town:

They got signs all over town that say, "When you call me that, smile." The hotel is called The Virginian, and next door to it is the Virginian Motel, and there's a sign on the spot the Virginian killed Trampas, and across the street at the Union Pacific depot is a monument to Mr. Wister made out of hunks of petrified wood.  
(pp. 112-13)

One of the most interesting sub-plots of The Virginian is Molly Wood's tutoring of her cowboy suitor. This narrative technique allows Wister the opportunity to accomplish a number of things. We witness the Virginian's admirable combination of literary sensitivity and common sense, a necessary counterpoint to his physical skills if he is to represent a "whole" man. It provides a common ground on which the couple can develop their understanding of one another, and thus their romance. Finally, it allows Wister the opportunity to display his literary background. Wister was a Philadelphia lawyer from an old and accomplished American family. His mother wrote essays for the Atlantic Monthly (and deplored the audience appeal and construction of her son's novel). As a young man, Wister contemplated a career as a composer, playing in Europe for Liszt, who enthusiastically declared him a great musical talent. In a later edition of his novel, Wister dedicated the book to a family friend who was the book's staunchest supporter-- Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>10</sup> Given this background, it is not surprising that the Ivy League graduate should feel the urge to preen his literary feathers in an attempt to upgrade his Western novel.

In Return of the Virginian, Smith imitates Wister's depiction of Molly's tutoring efforts, even placing his

<sup>10</sup>Percy, pp. 181-82.

couple in a similar riverside setting. Wister ennobles the Virginian's character by allowing him to express thoughtful comments on Sir Walter Scott's Kenilworth, Shakespeare's Henry IV, Part I, and other works; invariably, he is drawn to characters who manfully determine their own fates and, if necessary, suffer stoically. He dislikes Browning's sentimental verses, dismissing him as a "smarty" (p. 222). His insight is so acute that he often reveals levels of meaning which Molly had not discovered.

As Elton Miles observes, Smith takes advantage of such scenes "to lambaste not only writers like Hemingway, Faulkner, and Barth but their defenders for pretentiousness and obscurity."<sup>11</sup> Smith refers to Holly Ann's tutoring of Jefferson Cordee as a "heinous plot" to educate him (p. 159) in "the dragass prose of Faulkner and the rantipode enigmas of John Barth" (p. 215). Like Wister, Smith uses the literary discussions to reveal the character of his uneducated cowboy, but Cordee is hardly equal to the untutored but sensitive soul of his grandfather. We hear of one tutoring session from Spiro Keats, a former English literature and plumbing major who has inadvertently overheard the following conversation:

<sup>11</sup>Elton Miles, rev. of Return of the Virginian, by H. Allen Smith, Western American Literature, 9 (1974), 222.

She tried to get him back on American Lit [sic] and she began talking about Hemingway--something concerning heartlessness and self-deception with which ole Ernest acknowledged his instinctual life, notwithstanding the ironic linkage of his transparent insubstantiality. Whereupon this boy crawled right over to her and grabbed her and said something about liking Mad magazine and Sports Illustrated and then he dampered off the literary criticism with a great luxurious kiss. (pp. 96-97)

The literary discussions in Return of the Virginian diminish the reader's opinion of the dashing young cowboy. In fact, it should be noted that following the initial description of Cordee (taken from The Virginian) as a breathtakingly attractive man, subsequent incidents only detract from our first impression. He really is nothing but a pretty face. This is the opposite of the pattern used in the original work, where each scene revealed increasingly greater depths of the Virginian's wit, humor, intelligence, restraint, sacrifice, and courage.

Passages such as the one previously cited not only expose Cordee's simple tastes but Holly Ann's literary pretensions as well. The literary discussions allow Smith an opportunity to wield a double-edged sword: he can satirize contemporary developments in the novel as he parodies the actual scenes and tone of Wister's book. Another report from Spiro Keats will more fully illustrate Smith's attitude toward contemporary writers and their esoteric critics:

I might just as well have gone back and got on my horse and headed for home. I couldn't understand a thing she was saying. This kook Mailer figured in it--I've read some things about him and I tried to read one of his books, which was about Vietnam, except that it wasn't. It was mostly about a bear hunt in Alaska, with a lot of dirty talk, and some people said it would rank as a classic long after Shakespeare and Hemingway are forgotten. . . . I remember that she talked about this John Barth, and Faulkner, and then she explained what those two are driving at, telling that cowboy that in the end analysis Barth and Faulkner are saying the same thing . . . and she said the parallel is downright enchanting, but she never did get around to saying what the thing is that Barth and Faulkner think the same thing about. It was weird.  
(pp. 95-96)

The satire of literature in Return of the Virginian is not limited to the dead end conversations of Holly and Jeff, however, but is also conveyed in the comments of the narrator, Forsyte Grady, and his friend, Mungo Oldbuck. Again, there is precedent for this in The Virginian, but Smith exaggerates the amount of literary snobbery exhibited in the comments of "the Prince of Wales." The reader gets a strong impression that Smith would engage in his gleeful ridicule of other writers regardless of its appearance in Wister's novel. At any rate, there is evidence of literary criticism in The Virginian, such as the narrator's opinion of Coleridge: "a half-great poet once had a wholly great day, and in that great day he was able to write a poem that has lived. . . . He called it The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (p. 182).

But the narrator's intrusions are relatively rare, and Wister undoubtedly felt that the tenderfoot from back East would quite naturally make such comments. The backgrounds of the two chief literary commentators in Return of the Virginian also justify their critical remarks: Forsyte Grady (named after John Galsworthy's Forsyte Saga, a work Grady dislikes) is a newspaper publisher; Mungo Oldbuck is a former publishing magnate from New York who hates authors and writes an enormously successful book to show how easy it is. In addition to the authors previously mentioned, Grady and Oldbuck find occasion to comment on a variety of writers such as Truman Capote and Jacqueline Susanne, "author-hambones" (p. 154); Buckminster Fuller, "a genius who writes surrealistic prose" (p. 50); Somerset Maugham, the "meanest goddam author in the whole history of literature" (p. 64); and J. Frank Dobie, "the greatest writer ever produced in Texas" (p. 55). Other writers discussed are Edna Ferber, P. G. Wodehouse, Noel Coward, Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, Sinclair Lewis, H. L. Mencken, James Joyce, and Neil Simon; allusions are also made to works by Dickens and Lewis Carroll. There are others as well, but it is already obvious that the "reactionary" nature of Smith's Return of the Virginian is not limited to the mere parody of Wister's novel, but entails a humorous critique of contemporary literature as well.

Smith's literary enmity is often voiced through Grady's disdain for the dreaded "New Journalism," as indicated in the following passage:

The Old Journalism. Who, What, When, Where, and Why. That's the old-style way . . . and that's still the best way. Balls to this New Journalism I keep hearing about. Bunch of nances back East, flipping their gay tails around. . . . Please! Don't get me started. (p. 31)

In a later speech he rails against the "New American Novel with its flamboyant treatment of constipation and degeneracy, the romance of same" (p. 67). But Grady's (and Smith's) most vitriolic expression of his critical disdain for the present state of literature is made in his angry monologue on the "goat-faced writers" in the New Criticism journals:

I shall assume no posture of intolerance toward the authors . . . no position of parochial fogyism. I shall be content to say that their authors represent as ratty a crew as ever stunk up the back alleys of Manhattan Island since the Canarsie Indians lived there and each day anointed their bodies with sulphur water and vulture spit. . . . We should try to be broad-minded toward them, except for their hairiness and their life-style and the waste material that flows from their typewriters. (p. 159)

This "parochial fogyism" is an excellent example of the type of literary satire found in Return of the Virginian. It also illustrates the way "reactionary" satires differ

from parodic novels such as A Talent for Loving and The Ballad of Dingus Magee. Utilizing the framework of Wister's novel, Smith spoofs not only The Virginian but the Western literature and criticism which have followed it.

Obviously, there is more to Return of the Virginian than parody alone, for it is much more than just a bitter attack against the literary establishment. Although Smith retains the thread of the "feud" between Jefferson Cordee and Rustler Smith throughout the course of the novel, he soon moves beyond the mimicry of The Virginian into other areas. The story becomes a surrealistic account of a water-witching pig, Emily, and the conflict between her supporters--Grady, Oldbuck, Cordee, and others--and the townspeople who want to protect their own water-witching interests by lynching the pig. Emily's opposition is led by Grady's wife, Fern ("The Mobeetie Monster"), a rock-throwing nymphomaniac who "has always had lovers among the able-bodied and a few of the crippled" (p. 67). Grady's wry and self-deprecating comments about himself as husband and lover reveal a likable, believable man and his misanthropic narrative tone is one of the novel's best achievements.

The satirical range of Return of the Virginian is broadened, of course, by the contemporary perspective which enables Smith to lampoon a number of contemporary issues

unrelated to the province of the Western. However, he does devote considerable attention to conventions and stereotypes which are gleaned from the genre. The Western parody can be in the form of casual allusions, as in Grady's request for "a fiery horse with the speed of light" (p. 75), or direct references such as his description of Asia Battle as being as hard as Calamity Jane (p. 196), or his depiction of the blue-suited villain as "the Lone Ranger gone bad" (p. 196). The parody can also be as understated as a reference to a library containing a book by Richard Condon--a subtle greeting to another author interested in debunking the Western. Whether the Western references are implicit or explicit, Smith makes constant use of the genre's universal familiarity.

The Western parody in Return of the Virginian takes a decidedly eerie twist when a leisurely horseback ride by Grady and Cordee results in a sudden meeting with Mattie Ross, who still carries her father's cap-and-ball pistols and continues her search for Chaney who has miraculously survived the final scene of Portis' True Grit. Mattie reports that Rooster Cogburn has died of "the night-hoss disorder," but that the man she is riding with has agreed to help her. Grady notices that the aging man is wearing an ancient, cracked leather outfit and two black Colt pistols. The man remarks that he is looking for the Mormons

who have kidnapped his sister, threatening that "I will find the cur . . . the low-dawg Maw-mun that drug Milly Erne to hell. I will ram one of my pistols down his throat and the other up his behind and farr them off soze the bullets will meet in his low Maw-mun gizzud" (p. 115). Commenting on the man's "kentry-and-Western style of talk," Grady maintains that "no single-gallused rube . . . ever twanged such a twang as this man twung" (p. 115). After giving Mattie and her escort directions to Assáche Creek, Grady finally recognizes the old man in the creaking leather costume: it is Lassiter, doggedly continuing the quest begun over fifty years earlier, in Zane Grey's Riders of the Purple Sage. This Barthian device of marching out characters from other works is doubly ironic, considering Smith's numerous denigrating references to Barth's fiction.

Smith later offers another example of the merging of Western fiction and fact through the character of Idaho Tunket. Idaho has some wonderful moments in the novel; he is a compulsive talker, an anti-stereotype of the solemn, taciturn cowboy. (Wister tells us that even the gregarious Virginian was so affected by his love for Molly that he went nine days without talking.) Idaho Tunket is a different breed; he has trouble holding his tongue for nine minutes, even when under an edict of silence from his boss, Mungo. Idaho juggles three conversations at once while he

mentally schemes to start others. At the "showdown" at the end of the book, Asia Battle reports that after only moments in the field, the troops are already complaining about the lack of water. Idaho seizes the opportunity to flaunt his knowledge of Texas history and takes the floor: "At the Alamo . . . they had somethin' like sevendy-three kags of pork meat and they opened 'em up . . . and the maggots had got to all that meat and it was spoiled. They didn't complain a bit, John Wayne and Chill Willis and Boeey and them" (p. 217).

In another parodic treatment of a familiar Western convention, Smith exposes the actual reason that cowboys tend to be close-mouthed and withdrawn. The occasion is Grady's horseback ride with Cordee:

We hadn't paid a bit of attention to the scenery. Two cowboys riding side by side on a lengthy journey don't commonly do much talking. They might speak briefly of the quality of their horses, or the brand of beer they favor, or what a horse turd the foreman is, but otherwise they exchange few words. They generally just ride along in silence, each man thinking his private thoughts. There's a reason why they seldom talk. They don't have anything substantial to talk about. And when they think their private thoughts, those thoughts are of such a poor quality that they wouldn't be worth talking about. (p. 109)

Another stereotype which Smith effectively re-examines through humor is the irresponsible, shiftless rustler. Rustler Smith is perhaps the first cattle thief to not only

admit his profession, but to brag about it. In Rustler's monologues about cattle rustling, Smith manages to spoof the nostalgia which underlies all Westerns, the hazy belief that earlier times produced better, truer, more dedicated men. Rustler's description of the family business sheds light on some of the long-overlooked skills and ambition which the cattle thief had to possess, and the perilous dangers he faced. Rustler's defense of his father, Trampas, begins to sound like an after-dinner booster talk right out of Babbitt:

He wasn't no outlaw. He was only a rustler. the same like I become when I grew up. I follered in my father's footsteps. . . . The American Way. It's what they call free enterprise. Ever' man for himself. You go out with a runnin' arn and change the brand on a cow and that takes a lot of savvy and hard labor and stayin' up late . . . and maybe you burn the bejesus outa your hands. For what? You're entitled to a profit, ain't you? So whirr you gonna git it if you don't take the cow? It's as simple as that. If the former owner ain't got any more sense than to leave his cow run around loose like a wild animal . . . then it's what we call tough tiddy. (p. 158)

After reading Rustler's impassioned defense, what reader can look without sympathy upon the industrious rustler working late into the night to claim his share of the American Dream? The situation is especially lamentable because, according to Rustler Smith, the kids of today aren't interested in honest rustling and doing a good job.

They'd rather go into "electrommics," servicing computers; the only rustling being done today is cactus rustling, when city dwellers lurk about in the dead of night to steal exotic cacti for their gardens and flower pots.

Through comic invention, Return of the Virginian disputes Wister's essential optimism regarding the possibilities of the West. Of course, Wister knew that the time of the cowboy was all but over; this fact enabled him and others to mythologize the bygone era. As "the Prince of Wales" observes, the West was "a playground of young men" (p. 45). The key word here is "young," and Smith's Return of the Virginian emphasizes the adolescent, romantic appeal of the West by satirizing it in his novel. The most interesting characters in Smith's novel are the middle-aged Forsyte Grady and even older Mungo Oldbuck. Their defense against the invading force of water-witches creates a scene which points out Smith's rejection of the timeless romantic world of The Virginian. Rallying to Oldbuck's defense are six tall men, old-time cowboys, "Authentic Cattlemen of the True West" (p. 214). The epic West seems to be abandoned unofficially when Mungo orders his stalwart range riders to mount up and gird themselves for the attack. The men flatly assert that if they have to get on horses they will leave, that the day of the horse is long gone in the West, and they demand to ride in a car. They advise Mungo to catch

up with the times, to "grow a moustache, quit wearing socks, and get with it" (p. 214).

The Return of the Virginian breaks new ground in Western satire by not only dealing with widespread formulaic elements but also focusing its parody on the most influential Western ever written. However, there is a double-edged irony in Smith's novel which makes it more than a burlesque of The Virginian's antiquated themes and character types. By directing his broadsides at writers of the New Journalism and the New American Novel, Smith actually ends up aligning himself more with the unassuming, straightforward, discreet fiction of Wister than the "dragass prose" of contemporary writers. Smith's good-natured ribbing of The Virginian is not intended to vanquish Wister's classic novel, but to make room for another kind of Western which can succeed on its own terms. Both types of Westerns remain intact, coexisting in the fertile plains of Western fiction.

As we have noted, H. Allen Smith's spoof of The Virginian comprises only a portion of the novel's satiric scope. Smith's willingness to attack virtually every aspect of society has prompted comparisons to Chaucer, Ring Lardner, and H. L. Mencken; Elton Miles has declared Smith "the most indigenous contemporary American humorist."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>The Best of H. Allen Smith (New York: Trident, 1972), pp. 1-2.

Smith's apparently limitless supply of subjects in this and other works places him in the popular tradition of the American humorist. The other writer of "reactionary" Western satire to be considered in this chapter is John Seelye, who comes from an altogether different literary tradition. Seelye is a university-based writer; his vantage point is that of the academic insider. Seelye's fiction is actually much closer to that of Barth and others, writers whom Smith openly derides. Yet these two apparently dissimilar writers produce versions of "reactionary" satires. This curious fact illustrates the potential of the Western when filtered through the imaginations of inventive writers, a condition supported by an examination of Seelye's multi-leveled novel.

Like Return of the Virginian, John Seelye's 1972 novel, The Kid, relies on the reader's familiarity with American literary history. However, Seelye's novel is more complex and ambitious; whereas Smith is concerned with retelling only one work--The Virginian--Seelye manipulates scenes and characters from a number of classic American novels by writers such as Mark Twain, Herman Melville, James Fenimore Cooper, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark. In addition, Seelye lampoons the literary theories of Leslie Fiedler and spoofs numerous Western conventions as well. By any standard, The Kid is an ambitious novel, although some critics have read

it as a "straight" Western, missing the understated satiric vision. A professor of American Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Seelye's first book, The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, served notice of his penchant for revamping our consideration of American literature and criticism. One reviewer called it "a unique work . . . best . . . described as picaresque criticism"; Seelye's Huck Finn explains that his book is different from Twain's: "Mark Twain's book is for children and such, whilst this one here is for crickets. And now that they've got their book, maybe they'll leave the other one alone."<sup>13</sup>

Although Seelye takes advantage of his close knowledge of Huckleberry Finn in The Kid, it is obvious that he has broadened his range of reactionary satire to lampoon other novels and their "crickets." Michael Anania has observed that what Seelye is doing is revising our Western mythology by weighing it against the rest of American literature and the extravagance of criticism: "In making the West susceptible to the whole pantheon of American literary characters, Seelye is reconsidering the assignment of roles and the arrangement of stories and themes. . . . This is an ingenious book and an important one."<sup>14</sup> Although Seelye

<sup>13</sup>"Huckleberry Jam," rev. of The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by John Seelye, Time, 2 March 1970, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup>Michael Anania, "The Winning of the West," rev. of The Kid, by John Seelye, Partisan Review, 39 (1972), 630-31.

would doubtless scoff at the comparison, it is nevertheless true that his shuffling of literary sources is reminiscent of nothing so much as T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land. However, because The Kid lacks such pretentiousness, it might be better to describe its assemblage of spare parts from other novels as a literary Frankenstein with a sense of humor.

Mary Alice Money has written an excellent study of The Kid, and interested readers are enthusiastically directed to her work. Although her focus and emphasis are quite different from those of this study, we do cross paths at certain points, such as on the significance of the novel's four epigraphs, which are:

Sunt . . . nobis . . . Haedorumque dies servandi.  
--Virgil

The old days, the happy days, when Wyoming was a Territory with a future instead of a State with a past, and the unfenced cattle grazed upon her ranges by prosperous thousands. . . .  
--Owen Wister

I heard, four years ago, that he was justice of the peace in a remote village in Montana, and was a good citizen and greatly respected.  
--Mark Twain

To understand the West as somehow a joke comes a little closer to getting it straight.  
--Leslie Fiedler<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> John Seelye, The Kid (1972; rpt. New York: Dell, 1973), n. p. All further references to this work appear in the text.

Money's explication of the epigraphs is as follows:

The quotation from Virgil, "the days of the Kid should be observed by us," is both a pun on "kid" (meaning, to Virgil, two stars in the arm of the Charioteer) and a hint that perhaps the reader should pay attention to this apparently plain story. The second epigraph, from Owen Wister, recalls the romantic West of The Virginian--a Wyoming which was much less ideal than many writers would imply; some twentieth-century versions of nineteenth-century history deserve to be disputed. The third epigraph is Mark Twain's final word on Huck Finn. In The Autobiography, Twain states: "I heard, four years ago, that he [the boy on whom the character Huck was based] was justice of the peace in a remote village in Montana, and was a good citizen and greatly respected." The final epigraph is Leslie Fiedler's comment on Western novels, taken from The Return of the Vanishing American. Perhaps, then, the days of the kid should be observed, but not taken entirely seriously; the novel is, among other things, an extended academic joke.<sup>16</sup>

The reader does not have to recall the Twain epigraph or the nature of Seelye's first book to suspect a Huck Finn connection in The Kid. When the blond youth enters the Wyoming town with the giant black man, it is apparent that there are a number of possibilities at work. (Seelye even teases us with an earlier literary story in the Old Testament: the black man, Ham, is named after the father of the Egyptians; the Kid--or Blondie--recalls Joseph, the shepherd and favored of pharaoh;<sup>17</sup> the impression is supported by the

<sup>16</sup>Money, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup>Rev. of The Kid, by John Seelye, Time, 17 April 1972, p. 96.

Kid's later "sermon" on the efficacy of sheep herding in Wyoming.) But it is the strong suggestion of Huckleberry Finn which dominates the early part of the novel through the figures of the black servant and the white youth and the recollection of Huck's determination "to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest."<sup>18</sup> This suggestion is reinforced in Seelye's novel by the character of the Judge who has had his office building moved so that his window faces the road coming from the East. When we discover that the Judge spends all his waking hours gazing down the road waiting for a black man and a white boy, it confirms our suspicions that "the Judge is a much older, demented Huck Finn, still waiting for an eternally youthful Tom Sawyer and his own Nigger Jim to meet him somewhere out in 'the Territory.'"<sup>19</sup> Later, we find that the Judge is a non-reader who makes his legal decisions the same way Huck made his moral ones--from the heart.

The Kid is hardly a mirror image of Twain's novel, however; the relationships with Twain's work go off on too many tangents. For instance, the narrator, Winky, often sounds like Huck himself, assuming a narrative voice remarkably similar to Twain's. In a fine passage, Seelye captures Huck's painfully ambivalent feelings about Blacks through Winky's depiction of the stranger, Ham:

<sup>18</sup>Twain, p. 245.

<sup>19</sup>Money, p. 93.

He was a pleasant enough looking nigger, with a wide, open face, not all scowls and stubbornness like some you see. Especially since the War, you know, which give them a lot of fool notions about their worth. Used to be a nigger knew what he could bring, in dollars and cents, and that kept him satisfied and quiet, but all this freedom just brought on dissatisfaction and uneasiness, with a nigger thinking he was worth a whole lot but not able to find anybody who could give him an exact figure. This Ham was different. You could tell he was proud of hisself, walking high even though he was wore out, on account of being allowed into a white man's saloon. . . . He'd been raised right, you could tell.

Then Blondie begun talking sign language to him, and Ham got very serious-looking, like a nigger will when you give him some little thing to do and he acts like he's hanging on every word you say, only he's likely to come back in about ten minutes and ask you to tell him all over again. It's their way, and you can't learn them any different. (p. 59)

In The Kid, Ham is even given qualities similar to Jim's in Huckleberry Finn. Although Seelye has other reasons for making Ham deaf and dumb, his affliction is reminiscent of that suffered by Jim's daughter, Elizabeth, in Twain's novel. Ham also shares Jim's belief in signs and prophecy. Huck doubts Jim's trust in the prophetic nature of bees, body hair, etc., but Jim's prediction of rain based on the erratic flight of birds proves to be accurate.<sup>20</sup> In Seelye's novel, the "electromagnetic African" has the power to read minds and find hidden objects; his powers are directly responsible for their gold

<sup>20</sup>Twain, p. 42.

strike. Incidentally, the supernatural powers of the black man also suggest the voodoo magic of the Loop Garoo Kid in Ishmael Reed's Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down, another satirical Western.

The friendly relationship between Ham and the Kid is an obvious duplication of Huck's and Jim's; that is, it is obvious until the end of the novel when it is discovered that Blondie is a girl (a reversal of Huck's feminine disguise as "Sarah Williams"). Seelye's depiction of the black-white sexual relationship will be treated later in this discussion when we consider the impact of Leslie Fiedler's critical theory.

Besides its relationship to Huckleberry Finn, The Kid also suggests some parallels with the works of James Fenimore Cooper. As Fiedler notes in Love and Death in the American Novel, Cooper's representation of non-sexual masculine love is often presented, as it is in The Leatherstocking Tales, as the "anti-female alliance of outcast and savage in an atmosphere of make-believe, of 'playing Indians.'"<sup>21</sup> Cooper's fear of miscegenation is also parodied in The Kid. Fiedler has pointed out Natty Bumppo's insistence that Cora and Uncas cannot meet in the afterlife, that to pretend that they can is the same as pretending that

<sup>21</sup>Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Criterion, 1960), p. 211.

it does not snow in winter.<sup>22</sup> Cooper's sentiments are shared by the residents of Besterman, Wyoming, who insist that the bodies of the Kid and Ham must not share the same coffin. Winky's is the only dissenting voice, complaining that it is silly to waste more lumber just to prevent a white woman from being buried with a black man (p. 159).

The fate of the Kid is also suggestive of the end which awaits women in Cooper's novels who, like Blondie, deny their proper female qualities of delicacy, passivity, and gentleness. In The Kid, Blondie is killed for avenging the mob's illegal murder of Ham. Kay Seymour House has charted a similarly dire fate for Cooper's assertive women: "The woman who departs radically from the woman described here can only be comic or grotesque; she ceases to be a woman. If she has, for whatever reason, betrayed what he considers her true nature, Cooper usually sees to it that she suffers for her abnormality."<sup>23</sup>

Even more pointedly, Seelye directs us to a re-examination of Cooper's work by deliberately transferring the end of one of Cooper's novels to The Kid. According to George Dekker, in about 1846 Cooper became obsessed with the bestial and depraved side of mankind. His misanthropic

<sup>22</sup>Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, p. 205.

<sup>23</sup>Kay Seymour House, Cooper's Americans (n.p.: Ohio State University Press, 1965), pp. 17-18.

feelings prompted him to rewrite his most idealistic and patriotic romances, The Red Rover and The Water Witch.<sup>24</sup>

The result was Jack Tier, a story of Captain Stephen Spike, a thoroughly reprehensible pirate, and his shipboard companion, Jack Tier. Fiedler cites James Grossman's description of Cooper's book:

In the novel, there is sketched an erotic relationship between two males--old buddies they seem at first glance. . . . Cooper seems on the verge of treating candidly the kind of feeling that, romanticized and idealized, had lent an attractive ambiguity to the companionship of Chingachgook and Natty Bumppo; but at the very last minute, he . . . "reveals" that the evil captain Spike's strange friend, Jack Tier--is really a woman, Spike's wife.<sup>25</sup>

Except for the marriage bond, Grossman's summary of Cooper's book fits The Kid remarkably well, and there is little doubt that he grafts the ending of Jack Tier onto his novel partly to recall for the reader the influence of Cooper on American literary thought.

Besides the posthumous revelation of the Kid's sexual identity, there is one more link between Seelye's novel and Cooper's, a relationship which helps to introduce yet another usurpation of a classic American novel in The Kid. This connection becomes clear when we consider the character

<sup>24</sup>George Dekker, James Fenimore Cooper: The American Scott (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), pp. 212-213.

<sup>25</sup>Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, p. 212.

of Captain Spike, who represents Cooper's cynical conception of mankind at the time he wrote the novel. Spike is consummately evil and acts "under impulse of the lowest and most grovelling nature."<sup>26</sup> As a manifestation of his unchecked evil, in one scene he throws passengers overboard to decrease his ballast and escape his pursuers. Kay Seymour House explains that Cooper believed such flawed natures could be controlled only by their superiors in rank and morality who would be able to restrain the baser impulses while utilizing available skills. House believes that Melville may have been deliberately challenging Cooper's thesis in Billy Budd, another sea novel which considers the question of natural good and natural depravity with altogether different conclusions.<sup>27</sup> Seelye's familiarity with Melville (he has published a scholarly book on Melville) is evident in the theme and structure of The Kid.

Several aspects of Billy Budd are found in The Kid, most notably the conflict of innocence and evil and the nature of justice. Seelye provides a number of heavy handed clues to insure the reader's awareness of the similarities, beginning with the name of the Wyoming town. It had originally been Fort Besterman, but had been changed to Invincible (Captain Vere's ship in Billy Budd is christened the Indomitable). Blondie's hair, fair complexion,

<sup>26</sup>House, p. 191.

<sup>27</sup>House, p. 192.

and "blowed-in-the-glass innocence" (p. 66) are akin to those of Billy, of course; Blondie is compared to a preacher on a number of occasions, and Billy is called a peacemaker. Even the Blondie/Baby nicknames they acquire are similar.

The characterization of the Kid and Billy is not the only parallel between the two works. Another similarity is evident when Winky provides his homely description of the black stranger, Ham, as "real big. . . . He stands like he was made to pick high apples" (p. 29). Melville's recollection of a certain Handsome Sailor he once glimpsed in Liverpool proffers more than a coincidental similarity of height: the man was "a common sailor, so intensely black that he must needs have been a native African of the unadulterate blood of Ham . . . [he was] much above the average height."<sup>28</sup>

Another set of paired characters in the two novels is found in the villainous personalities of Melville's Claggart and Seelye's Fiddler Jones. Claggart is a product of "natural depravity," often described in symbolically demonic terms such as "a scorpion for which the Creator alone is responsible," "a serpent," "a snake."<sup>29</sup> Fiddler Jones' evil nature is designated more literally, but to the

<sup>28</sup>Herman Melville, Billy Budd (1924; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 8.

<sup>29</sup>Melville, pp. 40, 58, 59.

same purpose: he is "a regular devil" (p. 30); and "wherever Jones was, he was the resident devil . . . and nobody else cared to apply for the job" (p. 33).

In addition to the similarities of character in the two novels, there are fundamental likenesses of plot development and description. Billy Budd's stammering prevents him from responding to Claggart's accusation with words, so he responds with his fist. The mute Ham is also denied a verbal protest to Fiddler Jones' behavior, so he, too, strikes with his fist. Even the descriptions of the two blows are almost identical, using the same metaphorical image. Both Claggart and Jones are struck dead by a single blow to the forehead: Melville likens Billy's punch to "the flame from a discharged cannon";<sup>30</sup> Seelye describes Ham's punch by comparing it to the effect of a cannon called a Parrott gun (p. 117).

Another similarity is found in the manner in which others are affected by the deaths of the youthful protagonists. In Melville's novel, Captain Vere dies murmuring Billy's name; Billy's memory is commemorated by a sea chant called "Billy in the Darbies"; in addition, the sailors keep track of the spar from which he was hanged, eventually cherishing chips from it as if they were from the Cross.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup>Melville, p. 58.

<sup>31</sup>Melville, p. 87.

In Seelye's novel, Blondie's memory resonates with the biblical image of the shepherd, as the Captain returns from his exile with a flock of sheep (Blondie's "gospel" had been the value of sheep ranching in Wyoming). Of course, both characters become the subjects of books, too.

The most significant parallel with Melville's work in The Kid is the consideration of the nature of justice; it forms the thematic core of both novels. The theme is presented through the arguments of yet another pair of characters--Captain Vere of Billy Budd and the Captain of The Kid. Captain Vere is described as an inveterate reader whose brooding intelligence earns him the joking title "Starry Vere"; he is often found alone on the quarter-deck, absorbed in his private thoughts. Winky's former superior, known only as the Captain, is also a military man who isolates himself physically in his room. He, too, is a dedicated reader, as indicated by his quotes from Blackstone and Winky's own complaint that "the Captain was always . . . quoting poetry at me. The poetry was the worst part. I'd rather be cussed at and damned for a fool any time. . . . When a man quotes poetry at you, all you can do is stand there and look like a sick jackass till it's over and you can crawl away" (p. 21).

The similarity of Seelye's Captain to Melville's Captain Vere is most pronounced at Ham's trial. Like Vere,

the Captain is faced with the issue of intent vs. consequences and, like Vere, he feels obligated to argue against emotional appeals in the case. The painful performance of legal duty is the ultimate responsibility of both men, and their arguments are all but identical. They both claim the necessity of acting for the common, not individual, good. For them, the letter of the law takes precedence over its spirit. Vere's remarks are predicated by recent mutinies such as that of the Nore and the exigencies of the wartime situation. In The Kid, the Captain's remarks hinge on a similar belief, that their Wyoming town is on the border of civilization where lawlessness is a constant threat to order. Like Vere, the Captain insists that the act, not the motive behind it, is the only criterion for judgment. In fact, both Captain Vere and the Captain admit that "higher law" would undoubtedly find the defendants innocent, but man's law must find them guilty.

Although the logic of the two men is identical, the efficacy of that logic is not. In Billy Budd, Captain Vere's arguments sway the members of the drumhead court and Billy hangs; in The Kid, the same arguments fail to bring about Ham's conviction, and he is set free. The reason for the different verdicts is that Seelye introduces a final arbiter who was conspicuously absent in Melville's novel-- a character known only as the Judge. The Judge refuses to

concede the Captain's by-the-book logic and relies on another criterion. The identification of the Judge with Huck Finn has been made, but must be briefly reconsidered to explain Seelye's use of a cast and plot gleaned from a variety of works. Like Huck, the Judge "judged with his heart . . . looking at things clear and deep, taking them like they was, not like . . . they should be" (pp. 51-52). And, like Huck, the Judge questions the value of being too civilized; if that means a dogged reliance on laws which refuse to differentiate between moral and legal justice, then it is better to turn away from "civilized" law. The simplicity of the Judge's rejection of the Captain's dispassionate justice emphasizes a common sense wisdom which both Vere and the Captain lack. The Judge says, "Well, they's got to be exceptions, Cap'n, or the world would be so damned civilized a body'd be better off dead" (p. 146).

By inference, then, Seelye uses the courtroom arguments of The Kid to dispute the defense of expediency voiced by Vere in Billy Budd. The Captain's later return to town with a flock of sheep symbolizes his conversion from an unquestioning obeisance to man's law to a new faith in the higher law of nature.

Despite Seelye's reconstruction of the arguments and verdict of Billy Budd, it would be a mistake to assume that

The Kid is a satisfactory resolution of the dilemma of man's law vs. nature's. The problem is that The Kid does not conclude with the acquittal of Ham; in fact, the violent action which follows his release is even more chaotic and terrifying than that which precedes it. As spectators surge out of the courtroom hollering and celebrating the Judge's compassionate defense of natural law, they are met by another group which interprets the pandemonium as a response to the anticipated guilty verdict. Sloshing through the mud of the street, the second mob overcomes the first and tries to hang Ham. The chaos which follows begins with Ham's death when a man sinks the claw end of a crowbar into his skull. This grisly act is only the first of a number of violent, unexpected deaths which leave both Blondie and the Judge dead.

This example of extra-legal violence in The Kid is in keeping with the Western's fundamental structure; the necessity for extra-legal action often reveals the skill and moral superiority of the Western hero. Although lawmen can be the heroes of Western fiction, more often than not the heroes act out of a personal, not legal, sense of justice. This is the case in such famous novels as Max Brand's Destry Rides Again and Jack Schaefer's Shane. In The Virginian, Judge Henry's interior monologue about the implementation of lynch law is Western fiction's most

sustained defense of relative good and evil. The necessity of extra-legal violence was a foregone assumption until it was soundly challenged in 1940 by Walter Van Tilburg Clark's important novel, The Ox-Bow Incident. The scene of mob "justice" at the end of The Kid is a direct parallel to the mistaken violence which marks Clark's novel; there are other points of comparison as well, for The Kid borrows from The Ox-Bow Incident in setting forth its uncharacteristic vision of the West.

Both novels begin with the arrival into a Western town of two riders who are escaping a long winter in an outlying line shack. The early action of both works involves a card game and an ensuing fistfight; in the space of twenty-four hours, mob vengeance wrongfully claims the lives of innocent men. In fact, there is even a similarity in the number of deaths resulting from the miscarriage of justice: both works show the deaths of four men who do not deserve to die; both works also show the death of one man who instigates the violence which brings about his own demise.

As was the case with the other novels alluded to in The Kid, there are enough similarities to make them recognizable; but they are sufficiently altered to force the reader to re-evaluate the nature of the original work. Early in the novel, Seelye indicates a couple of variations to be sure we do not take it all too seriously. One

noticeable difference in the two works is that, unlike Art and Gil who are mounted on horses in The Ox-Bow Incident, the Kid and Ham enter town astride mules, a sure tip-off of a departure from the Western formula; Winky will not let the incongruity escape our notice: "Mules? . . . There ain't a self-respecting cowpuncher in the Territory rides a mule" (p. 24).

Another indication of their differences is found in the names which each author gives to his Western town. Clark calls his town Bridger's Wells, suggesting the famous Western explorer, Jim Bridger, who discovered the Great Salt Lake and gave his name to the Bridger Mountains, Bridger Pass, and Bridger National Forest.<sup>32</sup> Before undergoing a name change, the town in Seelye's novel was called Fort Besterman. Mary Alice Money has pointed out that Fort Besterman is meant to depict the historical Fort Fetterman which was actually located where Winky places it, between the towns of Douglas and Casper, Wyoming. The real Fetterman was Lt. Colonel William Judd Fetterman who foolishly led his men into a Sioux massacre.<sup>33</sup> The Fetterman massacre is familiar enough to have been alluded to in David Markson's strictly parodic novel, The Ballad of Dings Magee, where

<sup>32</sup>Wayne Gard, "Jim Bridger," Encyclopedia Americana, 1977 ed.

<sup>33</sup>Money, p. 87.

Dingus betrays his contempt for cavalymen by referring to them as "Fettermans." In The Kid, Winky relates the deplorable history of the man for whom their town was named:

A lot of new people didn't much admire the old name, which the Army had borrowed off a colonel who didn't need it any more on account of being teased out into the hills one day by Spotted Tail, far enough out so the Injuns could take their time massacring him and a hundred others, not counting horses, mules, and a dog. The new people didn't like calling their town after a soldier who got whipped by Injuns, and they also thought "Besterman" had a sort of Hebrew ring to it and just didn't have the right Western sound.  
(p. 20)

Although it would seem unlikely, the subsequent names given to the town move it farther and farther apart from the lucky town which could claim a tie with the great Jim Bridger. Some pretentious (and anti-Semitic) citizens change the name to Invincible until some cowpuncher with a can of paint changes the signs to read Invisible. After that, it was simply referred to by the name which designated the dilapidated gin mills and whorehouses--the Hog Ranch.

In the light of such basic departures from The Ox-Bow Incident, it is not surprising that Seelye should present a fundamental alteration of Clark's basic theme. As Fiedler has noted, from The Virginian on, Western fiction has voiced a plea for extra-legal violence to determine true justice in a world which knows the corruption of authority and the

ever present savagery which can explode at any moment.<sup>34</sup>

The flaw in this concept was revealed in The Ox-Bow Incident --that without judicial procedure, vigilante justice can all too easily become mob hysteria; and that although there is no shortage of superheroes in the popular Western, they are all too absent in everyday life. In Clark's story, according to Jenni Calder, "frontier aggression is seen in its most sinister form, that of mob vengeance. . . . Independence is seen only in terms of freedom from formal laws."<sup>35</sup> Extra-legal violence was satisfactory as long as the side with the greatest might also served right, and this was always the case before The Ox-Bow Incident. Clark expresses his distrust of personal vengeance through the conscience of Davis, the most active opponent of the illegal actions which allow the murder of three innocent men. Davis argues for due process because "most men . . . don't really think. They haven't any conception of basic justice."<sup>36</sup> In dramatizing the tragic consequences of mob rule, Clark makes a compelling argument for the need of an impartial legal system which civilization can provide. In this sense, Clark is unlike the writers of formula Westerns

<sup>34</sup>Fiedler, Return of the Vanishing American, pp. 138-39.

<sup>35</sup>Calder, p. 122.

<sup>36</sup>Walter Van Tilburg Clark, The Ox-Bow Incident (1940; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 199.

who view civilization as a threat to the preferred state of nature and natural law. Clark, on the other hand, argues for civilization as the best way of preventing the irrational behavior depicted in The Ox-Bow Incident.

Seelye's manipulation of comparable events and themes in The Kid reveals that justice is more complex than the easy enforcement of the letter of the law. If that were the case, then the arguments of the Captain would have been correct; but the comparison of Billy Budd and The Kid has shown that an insistence on a rigid adherence to an inflexible body of laws is an unsatisfactory system, too. The Judge's ruling from the heart seems to be the more satisfactory method, but even this device is an oversimplification, as illustrated by Seelye's refusal to allow the compassionate verdict to close the novel happily. As we have seen, the Judge's humane decision is misinterpreted by the mob which kills Ham. The Kid then avenges the murder by killing the leader of the mob; whereupon the Judge kills the Kid and then turns the gun on himself. At best, these events indicate that neither human nor legal justice is possible, that they inevitably nullify each other. Therefore, neither the Captain nor the Judge nor the mob acts correctly. This depressing fact is registered by the grotesque hopelessness which Winky discovers in the Judge's face:

The look the Judge had on his face when he died was one nobody should ever have seen. . . . It was a long time before that face stopped haunting me like some graveyard ghost. The kind of look it was was like . . . sinners suffering in hell, only worse, much worse. There wasn't no artist had the guts to draw a look like that on paper. I only seen one like it once before, and it was on the face of a woman, an Injun that had just had her baby cut in two by a trooper's saber as he rode by. Zip, like that, without warning. (p. 157)

There is only the irrational decision of the Captain to return to Wyoming with a herd of sheep, against all logic and common sense, which offers the slightest hope for the "sinners suffering in hell."

It is thus apparent that Seelye's novel is a deliberate, sustained reaction to the classic American fiction which precedes it; in a modest way, his incorporation of elements from Huckleberry Finn, Jack Tier, Billy Budd, and The Ox-Bow Incident forces the reader to view these works with binocular vision: one eye taking in the reappraisal of the classic American novel, the other focusing on the nature of the popular Western. The result of this peculiar duality of vision is a merging of the two views into something quite different, something which accommodates both. In critical terms, Seelye is blurring the traditional distinctions between the artistic and the popular novel.

If this refusal to compartmentalize literature into high art and pop art sounds familiar, it is meant to; it is

the critical position which Leslie Fiedler has expressed in a number of works such as his essay, "Cross the Border, Close the Gap."<sup>37</sup> The connection with Fiedler's theories is not coincidental; The Kid is dedicated to Fiedler. Seelye's novel contains several reflections of the theories regarding the nature of the American novel, and the Western in particular. For instance, it is easy to identify the central thesis of Love and Death in the American Novel: that from the first, our best writers have shunned the topic of passion and physical love, turning from society to nature in order to avoid a confrontation with courtship, marriage, and childbearing. Writers such as Cooper, Poe, Melville, Twain, Crane, Hemingway, and others find a female substitute in the wilderness; that substitute is "the natural man, the good companion, pagan and unashamed-- Queequeg or Chingachgook or Nigger Jim";<sup>38</sup> or, in The Kid, Ham.

Fiedler maintains that the inability to treat physical love between men and women leads directly to an archetypal relationship which haunts the American psyche--the close companionship of a black man and a white man in the American wilderness. "They have forsaken all others for the sake of

<sup>37</sup>Fiedler, "Cross the Border, Close the Gap."

<sup>38</sup>Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, pp. xx-xxi.

the austere, almost inarticulate, but unquestioned love which binds them to each other and to the world of nature which they have preferred to civilization."<sup>39</sup> This archetypal relationship is the obvious model for Ham and the Kid. They emerge from their winter's isolation unscathed; they are innocent of evil until they encounter it in civilization. And it is the unquestioned, inarticulate love of Ham for Blondie which precipitates the death of Fiddler Jones and subsequent events. Both the Captain and the Judge agree that the relationship between Ham and the Kid is representative of the state of nature. The Captain admits that in "the state of Nature . . . the primitive values of friendship and decency do indeed maintain sway" (p. 141). The Judge concurs, stating that Ham "kilt a white man in the name of fren'ship, which nobody else had the guts to do" and he is thus "on the side of Nature" (p. 145).

There are several other indications of Fiedler's theories, such as his contention that a substitute for physical passion is often found in the Western's sublimation of the drive into the violence of guns. Another means of maintaining an asexual passion is to make eunuchs of characters, as do Hemingway and Faulkner.<sup>40</sup> In The Kid, Seelye

<sup>39</sup>Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, p. 187.

<sup>40</sup>Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, pp. 332-42.

takes Fiedler's comment all too literally, making Winky the victim of castration at the hands of the Sioux, an occasion which Winky coolly describes as "a tolerable slow half hour" (p. 16). He takes solace in the fact that his condition will keep him out of a lot of unnecessary trouble. As a result, Winky dedicates his life to serving the needs of his Captain.

In fact, until the "revelation" scene at the conclusion of the novel, the world of The Kid is all but exclusively masculine. Although we hear that there are prostitutes about, they remain shadowy presences, noticeably absent from the day's events in Bradley's saloon. The two brief references to women only serve to document another Fiedler observation, that American fiction is the fiction of adolescents running away from home and getting even with the women who would hold them. The scenes with women in The Kid are clear examples of an anti-female, adolescent humor. We hear secondhand that Fiddler Jones once painted a schoolmarm's buttocks and ran her up the flagpole for the town to see. The second reference to women occurs at the end of the novel when pellets from the Kid's shotgun blast pepper the behinds of a number of anonymous women who carry on "like a picnic party that has just sat down to say grace on a nest of yellow jackets" (p. 155).

Besterman is a model for Fiedler's womanless frontier, so perfect that it suggests an ironic intent. Winky dotes on the bachelor Captain who treats him with a curious sort of reserved affection. The Judge is also a bachelor, waiting faithfully for the arrival of the black man and white boy he is sure will someday arrive from the East. Like Winky, these major characters also bear the signs of physical mutilation, commonly a symbolic suggestion of castration. The Judge has survived a scalping which has left a colorful purple scar on his bald head; the Captain has lost a hand to an Indian arrow.

But it is the relationship of the Kid and Ham which most clearly demonstrates Seelye's reactionary satire of Fiedler's theory of asexual/homosexual love. Readers familiar with Fiedler's thesis cannot help but think that Seelye has conned his mentor, dutifully following a step-by-step guideline of the male-male/black-white/man-boy relationship, only to turn it all upside down with the final disclosure of Blondie's sexual identity. It is a tribute to Seelye's dexterity that he can simultaneously adhere to Fiedler's theories even as he concocts an elaborate joke at Fiedler's expense.

In addition to satirizing aspects of the classical American novel and literary criticism, The Kid spoofs a number of Western conventions as well. Some examples have

been revealed in earlier discussions, such as the substitution of the unstately mule for the noble horse and the gross exaggeration of the traditional Western theme of vengeance. This examination of The Kid will conclude with a brief consideration of two representative parodies of Western conventions: the obligatory gunfight and the myth of the Garden of the West.

In an earlier discussion we found that even novels with parodic dimensions (such as True Grit and A Talent for Loving) will often rely on the deus ex machina device of the six-gun to resolve the threat of evil and to offer evidence of the hero's superior skills. Even a strictly parodic novel such as The Ballad of Dingus Magee follows the Western formula by concluding with a burlesque of the familiar showdown of villain and hero. In The Kid, the concluding gunfight is both comic and grotesque, denying any heroic manifestations of its characters.

The escalating violence of Seelye's novel concludes with the Judge's horror-stricken face after he has shot the Kid from an upstairs window and then committed suicide. The preceding incidents are equally uncharacteristic of the formula Western. When the mob sashes through the mud, trampling and shoving in a tug of war to hang the acquitted Ham, the Captain--the town's law officer--attempts to prevent the violence by resorting to the usual solution, the

six-gun. But the similarity with formula Westerns ends just as it begins to take a familiar shape. Winky records the Captain's bold confrontation with the mob, with these surprising developments:

The Captain headed right for the center, waving his arm. . . . I seen he had his pistol, but it was all covered with mud from where he had fallen down, and I said to myself, Christ, I hope he don't try to use that, but he did. He pointed it above the heads of everybody and pulled the trigger.

It went off like a bombshell, but without hardly any more sound above the general commotion than a firecracker. It busted into a thousand smithereens, and the Captain just stood there, looking at his hand which was still pointed in the air, holding onto the remains of the gun.  
(p. 149)

The Kid's revenge of Ham's murder moments later is equally unheroic. Not only does the Kid not use the traditional six-gun--he fires both barrels of a stolen shotgun--but he flagrantly violates the etiquette of fair play which is at the heart of the gunfight. He kills Ham's murderer by firing point-blank at the unarmed man as he is escorted to jail, held helpless by men on either side. The scene is more than a little reminiscent of Jack Ruby's execution of Lee Harvey Oswald. At any rate, Blondie's violent gunplay even ends ignominiously, as the recoil of the twin blasts "set Blondie back onto the boardwalk, ass-end first" (p. 155).

The second convention which Seelye parodies is what Henry Nash Smith labeled the myth of the West as Garden of the World, "the image of an agricultural paradise . . . embodying group memories of an earlier, a simpler, and it was believed, a happier state of society."<sup>41</sup> In fact, it is impossible to visualize a Western which does not in some way take full advantage of the landscape and frontier society in presenting its epic tale; certainly, the strongest aspect of Zane Grey's work is its sense of nature, and man's heroic attempts to tame nature form the core of much of his fiction. The dominant presence of the Western wilderness is reflected in the very use of a geographical location to describe a particular type of literature: the Western.

The Kid, however, is a misguided proponent of Western expansion; he is a disciple of the actual theories of a General James S. Brisbin who authored in 1881 a book entitled, The Beef Bonanza; or, How to Get Rich on the Plains. Mary Alice Money has documented Seelye's use of Brisbin's book, including several direct borrowings.<sup>42</sup> The theory of the Garden of the West is lampooned by Brisbin's naïve exaggeration of Wyoming's ideal climate for the raising of livestock; the Kid's uninformed acceptance of

<sup>41</sup>Henry Nash Smith, p. 139.

<sup>42</sup>Money, pp. 88-90.

such lies is underscored by the weather which he has just experienced. The Kid takes place following the disastrous winter of 1887 which sealed the fate of many Wyoming ranchers who lost two-thirds of their stock (p. 117). The Kid and Ham have spent the entire winter trapped in a line shack, and riding to Besterman they pass countless carcasses of animals already dead, and many more dying, but these facts fail to alter his faith in the temperate Wyoming climate.

Although the setting of The Kid is nineteenth-century Wyoming, as was The Virginian's, Seelye purposely ignores the possibilities of the panoramic vistas and grandeur and danger of nature. His failure to utilize the natural setting automatically diminishes the stature of his characters. Martin Nussbaum is one of many writers who have observed that the beautiful landscapes, open spaces, valleys, canyons, mountains, and other majestic scenery of the American West breathes heroism into the men who go there.<sup>43</sup> Even an unheroic novel such as The Ox-Bow Incident makes generous use of the outdoor locale to heighten its action.

In defiant contrast to popular Western practice, The Kid is set almost entirely in a shabby saloon; its only

<sup>43</sup>Nussbaum, p. 25.

outdoor scene is the depiction of multiple murders in the muddy street. The occupants of the town are as uncharacteristic as the setting; its cowboys are the cowboys who are too lazy to leave or too stupid to recognize that the cattle business is over. Winky's memorable description of Bradley's saloon will suffice to illustrate Seelye's parody of the majesty of men and mountains:

The place was stuffed full of cowboys . . . and the air was full of smoke and smells of horseshit, cowshit, sweat, beer, and whiskey, and had that other flavor, too, the one you get if you throw open a hanger full of dirty clothes and stick your beezzer down into it. That was a gamy bunch, all round. . . . It did look like Jones had growed more friends than his ass had pimples.  
(pp. 129-30)

The esthetic effect of natural grandeur is effectively undercut in Seelye's novel by situating the sordid and tawdry events in an obscure, ugly town. But Seelye is not only implying that "civilization" brings out the worst in men, since that point has been made by Western writers since Cooper. Seelye challenges the theory that nature is somehow more conducive to the development of noble men, a theory obvious in Zane Grey's The U. P. Trail, where the Easterner pits himself against wild nature and is ennobled by the experience. In keeping with its satiric depiction of the West, The Kid rejects this Big Sky theory; not only does Seelye deny it, he professes just the opposite: that nature is a negative influence.

It is impossible to overemphasize the influence of the natural frontier on American thought, literature, and history: it is the cornerstone of Frederick Jackson Turner's theory and its representation in countless books and films --Western and non-Western--has made it an all but instinctive belief. The very prevalence of the faith in the positive influence of the natural frontier makes Seelye's refutation of it all the more significant. As the following conversation between Winky and the Captain reveals, Seelye proposes that the West does not magnify man's virtues, but rather it encourages his aberrations. The Captain's remark that the Kid is "crazy as a loon" prompts Winky's recitation of the unstable characters in Besterman:

This town's a regular bughouse, it seems like. . . . There's the Judge, to begin with, up there waiting for his nigger to show up, which most likely is dead long since, and then there's Bradley, over there giving out credit to dead-beats, hoping to get rich quick by going into debt, to say nothing of this whole damn town, sitting here waiting for a railway to run through it which will probably go five miles south. And what about Brisbin, an educated man, too! What about him?

"I have a theory," said the Captain. . . . "It's space that gets to people out here. There's just too much sky, and people swell up like frogs in a vacuum jar. . . . A man . . . back East might just have a little germ of madness somewhere in him that wouldn't ever really amount to anything. . . . But out here, things grow." (p. 95)

The violent carnage at the conclusion of The Kid gives credence to this anti-nature view, as does the Captain's own irrational return with the flock of sheep he knows will perish in the brutal Western climate.

It is evident, then, that writers such as John Seelye and H. Allen Smith take the Western novel to areas unexplored by writers interested only in parody. Smith and Seelye include traditions of American literature and criticism in their fictional products, and their inclusion encourages the reader to reconsider his own attitudes and theories. Like T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative," the juxtaposition of two known elements makes us review both, and find some way of merging the two into something which is more than the sum of its parts. The result of such works is a new kind of Western novel which is significant and valid in its own right. These novels make us re-examine the mythological interpretation of the old West, as well as the works which helped create that mythology. In addition, their irreverent attitudes toward theories of criticism insist upon the viability of the Western genre as a source of art as well as entertainment.

Although "reactionary" Western satires are considerably more complex than pure parodic ones, they share a common dimension: they both rely on the subjects of their satire to provide a springboard for their "new" versions of the

Western novel. The writers to be examined in the next chapter, Robert Flynn and Thomas Berger, also rely on the literature that precedes their work, but they manage to escape the environs of that literature and create comic novels with a depth of vision which merits their inclusion alongside our best fiction.

## Chapter V

### COMIC WESTERNS

The final type of Western novel to be considered is the comic Western which uses parody and satire to observe and comment upon the human condition. Novels such as North to Yesterday and Little Big Man succeed as serious literature because they move beyond the mere distortion of conventions to concentrate on elements of character and theme. Although they also rely to some extent on a familiarity with the popular Western formula, the relationship is less parasitic than that of the satiric types previously discussed--the pure parody and the reactionary satire. The comic Western novel is less conventional, embodying a more complex vision of the human experience.

The identifying characteristic of the comic Western is its concern with subjects beyond the scope of the traditional Western; it attempts more than a purgation of outworn clichés and stereotypes, although, as we shall see, it uses them to achieve new dimensions. Cawelti has identified the difference between popular formulas and unique works of art as being one of psychological content; unique works of art tend to explore latent psychological

implications, the formulas tend to disguise and conceal them.<sup>1</sup> By utilizing satire to probe beneath the stereotypes and clichés, writers such as Robert Flynn and Thomas Berger do more than mock the romantic Western formula; as Thomas Lask points out in his review of North to Yesterday, such books slyly insinuate the realities behind the heroics.<sup>2</sup>

Like Thomas Berger's Little Big Man, Robert Flynn's 1967 novel, North to Yesterday, employs the traditionally satiric structure of the picaresque tale. Flynn holds a tighter rein than Berger, however, limiting both setting and character to the events of a cattle drive in the 1890s. The cattle drive novel has been a staple of the Western since Andy Adams' realistic treatment in Log of a Cowboy in 1903, one year after The Virginian's romantic depiction of a cowboy in a curiously cowless world. Western films such as Howard Hawks' Red River have done much to perpetuate the mythic dimensions of the cowboy, and his symbolic value remains intact despite a number of "realistic" films such as Delmer Daves' Cowboy and Dick Richards' The Culpepper Cattle Company, which have attempted to portray some of the tedium and monotony of the long trail drive. In spite of

<sup>1</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Lask, "You Can't Go Home Again," rev. of North to Yesterday, by Robert Flynn, NYT, 13 June 1967, p. 45.

such attempts at historical accuracy, it is not surprising that the Western audience prefers the heroic treatment of the cowboys. The 1960s television series, Rawhide, gave its considerable audience a weekly glimpse of life on the trail. It attracted enough notice to launch the spectacular career of Clint Eastwood, who played one of the drovers.

One of the reasons for the continuing popularity of the cowboy hero, according to William Savage, Jr., is that America's image of itself is bound inextricably to the myth which surrounds the cowboy: "The cowboy is a symbol for many things--courage, honor, chivalry, individualism--few of which have much foundation in fact. But the cowboy is today less important for what he was than for what he is thought to have been."<sup>3</sup>

It is obvious that in North to Yesterday, Flynn is working with a familiar and popular Western subject. Jenni Calder effectively summarizes the expected ingredients:

The cattle owner and his loyal men struggling against odds human and natural to build up his herd and bring it to market. . . .

. . . . .  
There is something magnificent about the great stream of moving cattle, the rising dust, the lively cow ponies, the nightly camps, and it is this picture of steady animal movement that illuminates the attraction of the myth.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>William W. Savage, Jr., Cowboy Life: Reconstructing an American Myth (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), p. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Calder, pp. 75-78.

The fact that Flynn is, in part, reacting to what Calder terms "the attraction of the myth," is evident in the opening lines of North to Yesterday. It is through the description of Lampassas, the trail boss and owner of the herd, that we begin to suspect a satirical impulse. The general attitude of the trail boss overlooking the cattle moving below him is familiar enough, but the specific details are at odds with those of the conventional Western heroic figure:

Lampassas reined up his rat-tailed, jug-headed, cow-hocked pinto horse on the little rise beside the lone, gnarled, mesquite which had not yet admitted the end of winter. . . . Lampassas was a little man, wrinkled, dried up, and soured, and even on his horse he looked old and frail.<sup>5</sup>

Lampassas does not feel old, though; he is finally fulfilling a long-held dream to drive a herd of longhorns to the railroad line at the famous cow town of Trails End. But the time is the 1890s, after Frederick Jackson Turner's declaration of the close of the frontier. Lampassas is unaware that the era of the longhorn and the trail drive ended ten to fifteen years earlier, and that ranchers have adopted fenced pastures and purebred Herefords. But Lampassas is nothing if not determined, and his dedication

<sup>5</sup>Robert Flynn, North to Yesterday (1967; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1970), p. 1. All further references to this work appear in the text.

to an outdated ideal, like Quixote's, forms the central conflict of the novel. His determination springs from his many years as an unhappy storekeeper, listening to the stories of the cowboys who had made the epic journey to Trails End. He has heard the stories so often, believed them so intensely, that he feels that he knows every danger, every river, every blade of grass, every water hole.

The aged Lampassas lacks more than the youth and strength of the usual Western hero; he also lacks shrewdness and intelligence, a fact which is quickly taken advantage of by his willing neighbors. When his wife dies, giving him the opportunity to make the long-awaited drive, Marvin Darsey sheds his name and chooses the more appropriate "Lampassas." He hurriedly sells his store to a man who immediately charges him double for the supplies and gear which Lampassas had owned moments earlier. To purchase the required herd of longhorns, Lampassas needs all of his money and has to borrow five hundred dollars from the delighted owner of the cattle who had been so exasperated that he had resorted to killing them just to be rid of them. Lampassas fares little better in rounding up his motley crew of trail hands. They are so destitute that he has to buy their horses, clothes, and even the single gun which is taken on the long drive north. To make matters

worse, the majority of the hands seize the first opportunity to desert on the horses he has provided.

Flynn's creation of a cowboy hero as a misguided, foolish old man living in the past is not his only misrepresentation of Western conventions. The preceding description of Lampassas pictured him astride a "rat-tailed, jug-headed, cow-hocked" horse; and as if the sorry condition of his steed were not enough, Flynn goes even farther, removing horses from the story altogether. Although the horse might conceivably be omitted from works with town locales--High Noon is an obvious example--the setting of the outdoor Western is indubitably linked to the sense of freedom and majesty which the horse transfers to its rider. The cowboy mystique is, in part, measured by his presence above the earth. The horse enhances the cowboy's power and grace. Cawelti relates the impact of the horse on the Western to the fundamental freedom it provides:

The hero is a man with a horse and the horse is his direct tie to the freedom of the wilderness, for it embodies his ability to move freely across it and to dominate and control its spirit. Through the intensity of his relationship to his horse, the cowboy excites that human fantasy of uniting with natural creatures.<sup>6</sup>

The horse is all but absent from the trail drive in North to Yesterday, and what little evidence there is of

<sup>6</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, p. 57.

the animal only serves to diminish the character of the man who rides it. First, Lampassas is sold a bunch of animals every bit as spindly and antiquated as himself. However, he remains undeterred, remembering the tales of the oldtime cowboys who came into his store and "could remember every horse in their string when they went up the trail--Churn Head, Aunt Betty, Maida the Castrator" (p. 12). Thinking back on his own early days as a cowpuncher, Lampassas warmly recalls "the deep-throated grunts of a bronc trying to throw its rider, the satisfying creak and jingle and clop of riding" (p. 10). But such reminiscences are soon abandoned when the progressive Brazos County Cattleman and Stockraiser's Association, embarrassed by the wild and unattractive herd of longhorns, rustles the horses. In the confusion, the one cowhand with a gun, June, shoots the only horse they have managed to retrieve.

After the horses are lost early in the drive, Lampassas has hopes of procuring more in a town with the likely sounding name of Mustang Springs. First, they learn that since the farmers took over, the springs filled with silt and the mustangs disappeared. Their long walk to Mustang Springs not only fails to produce horses, but adds to their humiliation as well. Second, their "bunch of cows" (the sheriff feels that the term "herd" is an overstatement) has just "stompeded" through town when the cowboys make their

untimely appearance: "On a day of surprises, the cowboys were no disappointment. Natural they might look on a horse, but afoot, on a Sunday morning, in a wrecked town, they were picturesque. They had left their chaps and spurs in the wagon, but they limped on the high-heeled boots" (p. 52). They are greeted by a sheriff with an unwelcome sense of humor who remarks, "You must a been chasing them cows pretty hard to a wore your horses down to where your feet touch the ground" (p. 53). This unkindest cut of all is the last we hear of horses, however, and the remainder of the drive (208 pages) is performed on foot.

Besides extricating horses from his trail drive novel, Flynn all but eliminates another vital ingredient of the formula Western--the gun. We have already seen how writers such as Portis, Condon and Markson have parodied the gun-fighting skills of both outlaws and lawmen. But as William Savage, Jr., points out, the gun remains omnipresent in most Westerns. In fact, it was necessary to make the gun a part of the cowboy's identity before the figure could attain mythic significance:

By taking up the gun, the cowboy ensured his future as America's most persistent, and therefore most significant, myth. The cowboy in fiction thenceforth carried his action on his hip, so that even the most pedestrian western plot could be enlivened by a little zesty gunplay. . . . Shooting more and talking less was a rule of thumb in cowboy books and

films. . . . The cowboy . . . has thus become supremely interesting. The eye is drawn to him because he packs iron, and one never knows when he will cut loose and shoot something or somebody.<sup>7</sup>

In blatant disregard of the cowboy mystique, Flynn takes the gun from his novel. Only June, a hired hand, has one, and Lampassas has to buy that for him. June's insistence on having a weapon is traced to an earlier incident, when he joined a posse which went after an old hermit who had killed a townsman. June is, for the first time in his life, accepted as an equal. Prior to that, June had been a lowly stable hand, kidded unmercifully about the manure on his boots and pants and the odor which followed him wherever he went. But the camaraderie he feels with the drunken posse members changes all that, and June equates his newfound status with the gun he carries. Not that the experience with the posse is very uplifting: from a safe distance they shoot through the walls of the hermit's shack, continuing their fire long after he is dead. This shameful display of gunplay causes only one casualty to the posse--a Roscoe Pennyworth, who shoots himself in the foot while scratching his piles with the front sight of his pistol.

June's experiences as designated gunman on the cattle drive are equally preposterous. During the stampede of the

<sup>7</sup>Savage, p. 10.

remuda, June shoots two cows and the only horse they have managed to catch. When the men hear a moaning from the wounded cows, June is ordered to take his gun out into the night and bring in the wounded "rustler" so they can hang him. In uncharacteristic cowboy fashion, June argues against the idea, reasoning that "if I shot him he might be mad at me" (p. 41). In later incidents, June is reluctant to use his gun, even on animals; as keeper of the gun, it is his responsibility to kill the calves which are born on the trail and would otherwise slow down the herd. June cannot do it, although he pretends that he does. Another time, he is ordered to kill a sheep which insists on following the herd. June tries to bluff the stupid animal, threatening that "I've killed before and I'll do it again" (p. 179), but the sheep ignores him. Only when confronted by the prospect of having his precious gun taken away does June reluctantly shoot the animal, and then he is so frightened by his actions that he looks around guiltily and flees in panic.

Another convention parodied in North to Yesterday is the Western's genteel treatment of women and the cowboy's callow shyness in the presence of the opposite sex. Flynn burlesques the Victorian attitude in two ways: first exaggerating the feminine purity of the Western heroine, then reversing it.

The first technique--overstating feminine daintiness--is accomplished in the description of the omnipresent Western schoolmarm. In this case, the gentle lady is Miss Fairy Nell Prosper, schoolmistress of Mustang Springs. It is Miss Prosper's habit to awaken from her prim and gentle sleep before dawn, so that her momentary transition from night clothes to day clothes can be effected in total darkness. She has trained her body to perform its necessary functions either predawn or postdusk, so that no one might observe her in the compromising position of walking to the privy. This requires severe discipline in the lengthy daylight hours of summer. To this purpose, Miss Prosper makes her way in the dark with a straw flower basket under her arm. She picks a half dozen flowers, taking care to locate the last one near the outhouse door; pretending to smile down upon it, she backs into the darkened privy, slamming the door behind her.

Flynn's burlesque of the impossibly modest women of Western fiction carries over to the treatment of such pure creatures by the self-conscious cowboy heroes. As Savage observes, the purpose of including gentle ladies in the rough Western world is to allow trail bosses and cowhands the chance to demonstrate just what gentlemen they really are.<sup>8</sup> Certainly, this is one of Molly Wood's functions in

<sup>8</sup>Savage, p. 9.

The Virginian and Marian's in Shane, where the heroes are enlarged by their chivalric treatment of their ladies. Flynn parodies such depictions of sagebrush etiquette in a speech by Pretty Shadow, one of the trail hands. The occasion is Pretty Shadow's elucidation of the fallibility of book learning. He speaks to Lampassas' son, Jamie, a well-read boy:

Books don't never tell you what you want to know. . . . I reckon I have read everything written about women from Ruth to Calamity Jane, and I ain't never found out nothing helpful. They don't never tell you what all them little hooks and buttons is for, and which ones count and which ones don't. . . .

And another thing you won't find nowhere in a book is how a man is supposed to excuse himself when he is sitting in a parlor with a lady and needs to be excused. And where to go when he can't get out of sight of the house. . . . And it don't tell how to ask, neither.

There are lots of complexities to being a human being that a feller wouldn't know just being a man. Like which words are proper and which ain't, where to put your hands when you're boosting a fat gal into a wagon, and how to inquire after a lady's condition.

Now me, I was writing a book, I'd fill it up with things a feller would like to know. The first chapter would cover what's a bustle and what ain't. I have seen seasoned cowboys take up with hunchbacks thinking it was a new style of dress. Then I would cover parlor conversation and what to talk about after there's nothing to look forward to, how a feller can undress hisself and his gal at the same time, and where to look when a girl loses her sachet.  
(p. 29)

By stretching the propriety of the genteel female convention out of all proportion, Flynn exposes the

ludicrousness of the Western's sanctified attitude toward women. The second method which Flynn uses to parody the stereotype is to create a woman who is the reverse of the proper lady. Her name is Covina.

Pretty Shadow's reverential opinion of womanhood and the attendant obligations of the male are shared by the other men on the drive. And although Pretty Shadow is well aware of "other" kinds of women--his own beloved Diamond Annie is a saloon girl--the prevailing masculine sentiment is that "a women is the opposite of a man, and the more opposite she is, the better a woman she is" (p. 152). This attitude makes Covina's personality all the more unnerving: she is an unrepentant unwed mother who wears men's clothes and swears worse than the men. In refutation of Lampassas' argument that a man who works with cows all day has a right to cuss, she maintains that "I'm just as good as any goddam man, and I've got the same goddam rights" (p. 102); her conversation is spiced with words like "bastard," "son of a bitch," and her favorite epithet--"bullshit."

Covina's unladylike nature reaches in other directions, too. She is incapable of nursing her infant, a circumstance which requires the men to perform the one chore cowboys most despise--milking cows. The situation is considerably magnified by the fact that the cows which they must coax milk from are mean, thirsty, unfettered longhorns with no

more than a cup of milk available at any one time. The only way that the men can tolerate the chore is to justify it as preventing a stampede, a likely result of the baby's unchecked wailing. Covina also is unwilling to assume the accepted women's role as cook and dishwasher, insisting that although she knows nothing about cooking, she can herd cows as well as any man. The proud Lampassas is affronted by the bold suggestion that she do a man's work; he is so nonplussed that he can only repeat over and over, "It ain't done" (pp. 94-101). But Covina refuses to submit to their expectations, arguing: "Can't you get it through your head that I don't intend to be a nice girl that carries slops, and washes dishes, and looks like hell? I don't aim to clean up after a bunch of men. I aim to live just like you do. Any damn way I please" (p. 102). And she does, swearing and sweating her way to Trails End with the rest of Lampassas' outfit.

It is apparent that Flynn treats Western conventions such as the youthful cowboy hero, guns, horses, and the feminine ideal with satiric intent. It might be argued that a Western without guns, horses, or heroes is hardly a Western at all, at least not in the usual sense. But North to Yesterday has to be considered a Western in the tradition of the trail drive Western. Flynn fuses elements such as the grueling work, the camaraderie of the dedicated men,

and the overriding sense of mission into a product far superior to the formula novels. By removing obligatory conventions such as guns and horses, Flynn demonstrates that the spirit of the Western can succeed even without its props.

North to Yesterday contains yet another departure from the popular formula, a denial of the action and adventure which constitutes the basic appeal of conventional Westerns. Trail drive Westerns, even the best of them, such as Emerson Hough's North to 36 (Flynn's title is an obvious allusion), take full advantage of the action scenes which the subject suggests. In 1937, Bernard De Voto identified the factors which had already exiled the cowboy novel to the regions of melodrama. In outlining possible areas of concern for the serious American novelist, De Voto claimed that: "It will probably not be a fiction of the cattle kingdom. Thirty years of cheap fiction about cowboys, rustlers, evil sheriffs, roundups, stampedes, six-guns, and branding irons have created an inertia which serious literature finds it hard to overcome."<sup>9</sup> Even recent attempts to portray cowboy life in a grittily realistic manner--novels such as Jack Schaefer's Monte Walsh (1963) and William Decker's To Be a Man (1975)--invariably spend considerable time describing the action and challenge inherent in life on the range.

<sup>9</sup>De Voto, p. 8.

Forty years after De Voto's remarks, Jenni Calder could summarize the essential features of the trail drive novel in much the same way: "Every trail drive has its stampede, its thefts, its Indian attacks, its encounters with Kansas raiders or rustlers, and probably its conflicts with a rival outfit."<sup>10</sup>

These familiar sources of conflict are noticeably absent in North to Yesterday. There are no real rustlers, no rival outfits (other cattlemen had the good sense to quit fifteen years before), no Indians, no gunfights--in fact, no real villains at all. The novel lacks the predictable conclusion which Cawelti maintains is found in even the most diverse of Western plots: the ultimate confrontation with an antagonist.<sup>11</sup> When Flynn does introduce an outside "antagonist," it is always with parodic purpose. A good example of Flynn's comic handling of the traditional Western elements of adventure and danger is found in his treatment of the lynching incidents so closely tied to cattle novels. The convention appears in two separate incidents, neither of which reaches the expected conclusion.

<sup>10</sup>Calder, p. 78.

<sup>11</sup>John G. Cawelti, Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 192-93.

In the first scene, the victim is a Mexican sheepherder named Inocente. The cowmen are enraged by the sheep droppings which have fouled the water supply (a fact which Lampassas dramatically discovers when he swallows some "sheep pills" in a cup of water). The polluted spring raises a new threat for the thirsty herd, and Lampassas proclaims that there is just cause for hanging the malefactor, ordering June to take his gun and bring him in. Inocente's crimes are labeled "crimes against nature"; but they are venial when weighed against his later actions. Turning the scoundrel over to the outraged men, June reports that on their return to camp, they came upon the men who were undergoing the dreaded struggle of milking an angry longhorn for Covina's baby. As June dutifully helped the men, the captured shepherder blithely drank what little milk they had managed to get. Upon hearing this, "all signs of human compassion, generosity, and forgiveness disappeared from the men's faces as for the first time they looked upon total depravity" (p. 170). Pretty Shadow is so incensed that he demands that the heinous Mexican be tied to the wagon and suffer the baby's cries, but Lampassas decides that legally and humanely, all they can do is hang him.

From this point, things become even worse. There isn't a tree within a day's ride, so they have to improvise, pulling the wagon tongue straight up in the air; the victim

has to stand on the wheel, then jump off with a man hanging on each leg for the needed weight. Of course, none of the men have the heart for such violence, and they are only going through the expected motions. They are only too happy when they have the chance to trade his life for a nanny goat (a welcome milk supply). Lampassas makes a poor bargain, however, as is his habit; for now they are followed by the Mexican's three hundred sheep, and they have to try to herd the cows in front of them and the sheep in back. To escape the predicament, they end up giving Inocente their only fancy shirt and two dollars to take the sheep off their hands.

The second lynching scene is equally farcical. The victim this time is Martin Foster, a starving farmer who believes that his prayers have been answered when a stray steer steps through his sod roof during grace. He takes this as a sign from God and immediately serves it to his malnourished family which gorges itself into illness. When the hide is discovered and Martin is caught, the outfit is determined to conduct the lynching in proper Western fashion, although Lampassas observes that they haven't had a lot of luck with hanging lately. Covina explains that that's because they take all the fun out of it: "For a real good lynching, you got to get all worked up. Dancing, and singing, and speech-making. If we're not going to

enjoy it, there don't seem to be a whole lot of point in doing it" (p. 216). But they seem to have learned nothing about the ritual, and their slapstick attempts to position Martin on the wheel only succeed in getting Lampassas suspended by one arm in mid-air. June complains that people don't tell you how much work goes into a hanging. The beef-gorged Martin has to interrupt the proceedings to relieve himself in the bushes. When he voluntarily returns (they had hoped he would have the good sense to escape), they anxiously conclude that the cow he ate had a broken leg, and he did them a favor by putting it out of its misery. They are all relieved when he agrees, and hastily turn him loose.

The minor character, Martin Foster, is a good example of Flynn's deft use of the picaresque mode to satirize Western stereotypes. The grim description of his squalid farm, his bony wife, and his dirty, hungry, scaly-headed children is an effective travesty of the pastoral wonders of homesteading. Flynn even goes the stereotype one better, using Martin to spoof what Cawelti labels the predominant characteristic of the Western hero who has become "a vanishing symbol of individualism in an age of togetherness and conformity."<sup>12</sup> Flynn looks beneath the romance of

<sup>12</sup>Cawelti, Six-Gun Mystique, p. 4.

individualism and finds an inherent flaw, as evidenced in the description of Martin Foster's selective independence:

Martin Foster was independent, and he was proud. He had never asked for anything; he had merely taken. Whatever land was vacant, whatever house, or tent, or dugout was empty, whatever woman was available, whatever food one of his women or wives had managed to beg for a hungry child. Whenever his independence had been threatened, Martin had moved on. He had left a string of abandoned children, pregnant women, and unpaid bills across six states and territories; but his pride and independence were still intact. He had seen his children go naked and his wives starve, but he had never lowered himself to ask for help. (pp. 210-11)

This comic re-examination of the Western hero's most admired quality concludes when, following the abortive hanging, Martin once more feels his independence in jeopardy when his dugout caves in on his sick wife and children. He moves on, and Lampassas and the others have to stay for two weeks to dig a new dugout, harvest the corn, and nurse the family back to health. When the outfit departs, they leave a few head of cattle behind.

We have seen that Flynn parodies several of the familiar conventions of the Western as well as its reliance on action and violence. North to Yesterday is a novel about unheroic characters who trudge behind a herd of anachronistic longhorns toward the dissipated town of Trails End. The novel is certainly not a mythic interpretation of the West. Neither is it a documentary account

of the true life of the cowboy, on the order of Log of a Cowboy; there is too much parody for that to be the case. Neither is it a straight parody of the Western, although the preceding analysis may give that impression. What qualifies North to Yesterday as more than mere burlesque is Flynn's complex, sometimes ambiguous character analysis, and his treatment of a universal theme which transcends the parochial world of the popular Western.

An examination of characterization and theme in North to Yesterday can be best approached through a consideration of the existential philosophy which underlies the novel. In tracing the existential elements, we will rely on four fundamental tenets of existentialism which Robert G. Olson proposes in his Book, An Introduction to Existentialism. Olson surveys the prominent existential thinkers and explicates their unifying principles. The four tenets to be considered in this study are: the necessity of choice; the hopelessness of ultimate victory; the absurdity of death; and the values which are gained through existential action.

Although Olson's work synthesizes the concepts of a number of thinkers, he relies heavily on Sartre, who maintains that man is the "incontestable author" of his being.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Robert G. Olson, An Introduction to Existentialism (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 122.

The cornerstone of existential philosophy is the belief that man determines his fate by the choices he makes or chooses not to make; that what we are is the result of past choices and what we will become is the result of present or future choices; choice is man's right and responsibility. In North to Yesterday, every major character has freely chosen to shape his future by making the drive to Trails End, the Golden City of the West. Their choices are determined by their individual dreams. Lampassas views the journey as his chance to realize a lifelong ambition, to justify his mental image of himself as an intrepid leader, and to make a man of his studious son, Jamie, whom he calls The Kid. Jamie does not share his father's dreams, but does see the drive as his chance to finally join the railroad which reaches Trails End. Covina decides to leave behind her father's intolerance and cruelty and her own self-pity: "'It's a lot of crap,' she said, resolving to do whatever she had to do to raise the child" (p. 198). Gattis is escaping the incredible dreariness of an arranged marriage to a dull and humorless woman and a life spent behind the backside of a mule on a Georgia farm. June, as we have seen, dreams of being a gunslinger, cultivating the mean-looking scar on his face to enhance the image; he has taken the initiative in escaping the jeers and "the stable smells . . . of horses and despair" (p. 180). Pretty Shadow, the

only authentic cowboy, wishes to keep his fifteen year promise to return to Trails End, repay his ten dollar debt to Diamond Annie, and marry her. The Preacher believes that Trails End is the Ninevah which awaits his unique type of gospel. All of these characters embody the existential faith in man's capacity to create his own history by the choices he makes in determining his goals. All have actively chosen an image of themselves, and their actions in North to Yesterday are determined efforts to realize that image, regardless of the cost.

The second existential element of North to Yesterday is the principle which acknowledges the ultimate hopelessness and anguish of the individual's struggle to achieve selected goals. This condition of human futility is referred to by Olson as man's "painful striving."<sup>14</sup> Flynn's portrayal of man's unfulfillment is especially noteworthy because it pointedly refutes the traditional happy ending of the Western. In the formula Western, the conflict is always resolved, even if it requires a sacrifice of the hero. In North to Yesterday, as in all existential works, man's best efforts are often met with despair and frustration. Man's identity is defined by his awareness of unhappiness and suffering, and the existential man must

<sup>14</sup>Olson, p. 14.

face up to his own inadequacies and the ultimate futility of his struggle. Even when the struggle meets with some success, it is minimized by the knowledge that it is short-lived and that the struggle inevitably begins again.

The incessant nature of man's "painful striving" is superbly symbolized by Flynn's depiction of the hungry, dusty, thirsty, exhausted condition of the cattle and the men who drive them. The following passage illustrates the effectiveness of the metaphor as it reveals the respective suffering of those who toil at the front of the herd (point) and those who work at the rear (drag). The narrative begins with Pretty Shadow's reflections on working the point:

Even though he was far ahead of those working in the drag, they had some comfort in thinking perhaps those ahead had already reached water. There was a special despair in being on the point, able to see across the dust for miles ahead and see no water.

Because he was on the point, Pretty Shadow was one of the first to eat when they threw the herd off the trail. And even though his tongue was swollen, it was small comfort to be the first to the food and water, because there was nothing more to anticipate, and it only reminded him of how long it would be before he ate again.

Pretty Shadow began his watch by promising himself that he would only make one or two circles about the herd, and then he would slip off somewhere and lie down to sleep. He lost track of the rounds he had made, and still he promised himself sleep after one more round. His feet were so sore he could not walk without limping; and even if this had not been so, he would still have had to limp because of the broken-down condition of his boots. The sweat ran down his calves, burning the sores on his ankles. The places had

itched, and by flexing his boots, he had scratched them into open sores. . . . The salty sweat was irritating them, setting them to itching and burning again. Bending over, Pretty Shadow thrust his hand into his sockless boots and clawed at the sores until they bled. (p. 231)

It may be more than coincidence that the description of the ill-fitting boots so closely resembles the "business" with boots in Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot, another work with serious existential overtones and comic technique. For Pretty Shadow and Lampassas and the rest, respite is always temporary, and the agony of the point is every bit as endless as that of the drag.

The frustration of unrealizable goals in North to Yesterday is not suggested in symbolic terms only; it is reflected in the unsuccessful attempts of the characters to accomplish the various goals they have chosen. For Lampassas, the dream of a majestic trail drive and a new cattle empire is met by the derision of the residents of Trails End. Once more he is bargained out of the true value of the cows; the surviving hands get just under one hundred dollars each for all their hardships. Gattis and Pretty Shadow die before completing the drive, while June is killed immediately thereafter. There is no lucrative saloon job for Corvina; she unexplainedly agrees to marry the Kid, who has all but abandoned his hope of being a railroad engineer and has opted for a job cutting weeds

along the track. The Preacher is beaten and robbed; the only request for his religious instruction comes from a con man who plans to bilk the tourist trade.

The existential belief that man can never hope to accomplish his goals is often depicted through the absurdity of death. In North to Yesterday, there is a bitter irony at work in each of the deaths described, as if death is having the final joke at the expense of man's aspirations. Gattis, the only swimmer, drowns at the river crossing and is trampled into the earth he had resolved to escape; at the same crossing, June, who had foolishly refused to remove his boots and gun, is so weighted down that he is able to stroll underwater to the opposite bank and safety. Pretty Shadow, the only legitimate cowboy in the outfit, is gored to death by an undersized steer with misshapen horns. June, incapable of shooting calves or sheep, is killed by a nervous lawman who mistakes him for a vicious gunman. In typically absurd form, nothing, not even death, happens as it should.

The existential attitude toward life as an unresolved struggle and death as an absurd event is contained in a stunning passage which comes toward the end of the novel. Gattis is dead and Pretty Shadow has just died. Lampassas overcomes the sadness and bitterness of the moment by recapturing some of his former confidence. His optimism

and faith are mocked by the events which intrude upon his all too brief moment of triumph. Flynn's writing has an unrelenting power, and the scene is one of the most significant in the novel. Lampassas leaves the grieving outfit to wander alone under a star-filled sky overlooking the now peaceful cattle, a scene which reminds him of an illustration from an old family Bible:

Lampassas rested in the quietness of the moment. He was tired, very old, and he had very nearly lost. The horses were gone and over half the cattle he had started with. Gattis and Pretty Shadow were dead. But he was going to make it now. He had won. He tried to feel what it was like to have won. He waited for relief, for triumph, for joy. Below him a broken-backed cow thrashed in the draw, grotesquely tried to rise on its forelegs, and then fell back in the water. "June," he called, his forlorn voice echoing along the draw. "Go down there and shoot that damn cow." (pp. 257-58)

An unwilling June reluctantly obeys. Lampassas' brief moment of quietude and victory is swallowed up in the ensuing nightmarish scene, as June slips in the darkness and falls into the water on top of the thrashing cow:

Rolling over in the water, he fired at the cow, that crawled after him on broken stumps of legs. Again and again he shot at the groaning and trembling cow and in the flash of powder saw blood running from the empty eye that loomed above him. He fired until the gun was empty and then he beat at the cow with the barrel until it was still.

Only after he got to his feet did June discover that the cow lay on its side, its twisted head

upstream, and that it had been trying to get away from him, to escape his bullets. In darkness and fear, he had shot the cow six times in the rump. Leaning against the bank, June threw up the bitter water of Ruby Draw. (p. 258)

This scene is a foreshadowing of future disappointments and failures which await all of the characters at Trails End. The town appears bright and shiny in the early morning sunlight, but as they draw closer they find it dilapidated and all but abandoned. As we have already noted, none of the characters realize their dreams. Events at Trails End emphatically refute Lampassas' sentimental devotion to the past and the Kid's romantic vision of the future, and all the dreams in between.

Although Flynn portrays the futility of man's efforts and the absurdity which marks his existence, North to Yesterday is not a celebration of despair. This is explained by the fact that the values of existentialism are not equated with the realization of goals but with the quality of one's efforts to achieve them. Olson states that "a life of frustration, insecurity, and painful striving itself generates values . . . the only ones actually realizable and genuinely worthy of human pursuit."<sup>15</sup> For the existentialist, the values to be gained through endless struggle are courage, dignity, and

<sup>15</sup>Olson, p. 14.

freedom of choice, qualities very evident in North to Yesterday. The Preacher provides a homespun version of the myth of Sisyphus, a commonly cited example of existentialist efforts: "Every man has his own horses to ride . . . what counted wasn't the kind of horses a man rode, or how many times he was thrown, but how many times he got back in the saddle" (p. 257).

This dedication to the struggle is declared at one time or another by almost all of the principal characters in North to Yesterday. In each case, the observation comes back to the same recurring principle: that however fruitless the effort, the most important issue is that one must not stop trying. Lampassas states it simply: "When you take something up, you got to lay it down" (p. 130). "It ain't a question of how much a cow is worth. . . . It's a question of how much it's worth to a man to get his job done" (p. 137).

It is important that this all-important principle not be obscured by the financial and emotional disappointments suffered in the drive to Trails End. What is important is that they got the job done, and that is the measure of their success. More importantly, they are willing to continue their struggles in spite of their apparent defeat. The Kid stands by his dream in the face of his father's opposition; he still hopes to be a railroad engineer,

although he knows that achieving his dream is more difficult than he realized. Covina still has charge of her own life and her baby's, free of dependence and self-pity. The Preacher continues to search for a worthy congregation; and Lampassas still drives his forsaken herd.

It is apparent, then, that the characters in North to Yesterday are more than parodic caricatures of Western stereotypes. Although they are often foolish and weak, the nobility of their efforts raises them above their foibles. In the existential context, they have not lost because they have not abandoned the struggle. Their frequent setbacks and frustrations may be treated humorously, but their resolve uncovers a trace of dignity and courage as well. These interwoven themes--man's foolishness and nobility--are obvious in the final scene. We recognize the folly of Lampassas' revived dream of bringing the three escaped cows back to Texas and raising a new herd from his castrated bull. But we recognize something else, too--the indomitable human spirit.

Of the seven novels considered in this study, Thomas Berger's Little Big Man (1964) has received the most critical attention. A sampling of opinions includes the following:

It is a Western to end all Westerns, with all the Western's cliches neatly reversed into something quite new.<sup>16</sup>

It is, of course, a satire on Westerns, told with high humor.<sup>17</sup>

Berger has in some manner put together a variety of techniques and infused them with a spirit so that . . . it is a functional and successful piece of literature. It is one of the best of American Western novels.<sup>18</sup>

If Buster Keaton had been a novelist, he might have written Little Big Man.<sup>19</sup>

This smattering of reactions indicates the variance of opinions regarding the nature and worth of the novel. The one area of agreement, however, is that it has a satiric core; beyond that, criticism splinters off into theories which espouse romantic, mythic, tragic, parodic, and absurd interpretations. Such a range implies a literary depth which is verified by close examination. While admitting the plausibility of the various interpretations, this study

<sup>16</sup>William James Smith, "In the Vein of Mark Twain," rev. of Little Big Man, by Thomas Berger, Commonweal, 20 November 1964, pp. 294-96.

<sup>17</sup>Robert Edson Lee, From West to East: Studies in the Literature of the American West (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966), p. 156.

<sup>18</sup>Delbert E. Wylder, "Thomas Berger's Little Big Man as Literature," in Literature of the American West, ed. J. Golden Taylor (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 74.

<sup>19</sup>Guy Davenport, "Tough Characters, Solid Novels," rev. of Little Big Man, by Thomas Berger, National Review, 26 January 1965, p. 68.

will focus upon the satiric dimensions of the novel, illustrating Berger's parody of Western conventions, and then discussing its non-Western satire. It is this latter area which carries Little Big Man beyond the level of mere parody; on one level, it is a condemnation of the weaknesses of human nature; on another level, it is a serious indictment of American institutions, culture, values, and even history itself.

One of the subjects of debate for readers of Little Big Man is the novel's interweaving of myth and history. These two elements are apparent in the titles of two essays which discuss the novel in detail: Leo E. Oliva's "Thomas Berger's Little Big Man as History" and Delbert E. Wylder's "Thomas Berger's Little Big Man as Literature." These essays and others draw attention to two facts: first, that the novel is historically accurate, Berger having researched sixty or seventy Western historical accounts before starting his book;<sup>20</sup> second, that the coincidences and exaggerations of the picaresque structure distract from the historical reality presented. Brian W. Dippie describes Berger's unique coordination of the opposing elements of Western fiction:

<sup>20</sup>Max F. Schulz, Black Humor Fiction of the Sixties: A Pluralistic Definition of Man and His World (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1973), p. 74.

In Little Big Man, Berger is faithful to both the West of history and the West of myth. Each contributes in its own way to the aura of plausibility that so enriches the basic tale. . . . The surface accuracy, the correctness of detail, the verisimilitude that he conveys derive from a book-learned, factual knowledge. But Little Big Man rests upon a foundation of myth.<sup>21</sup>

The opposing entities of history and myth are bound together by Berger's humorous narrative which has fun with our historical and mythical expectations without denying the validity of either. As Jack Crabb, the one hundred and eleven year-old narrator explains, "I'm telling the truth here, and the truth is always made up of little particulars which sound ridiculous when repeated."<sup>22</sup> Crabb's narrative follows the picaresque format which is the key to understanding its satiric content. Berger uses the tone and shape of the picaresque tale to shape Crabb's dual function: to participate in events and to comment on their significance. And although the events he recounts are described realistically and with historical veracity, the picaresque format allows for the accompanying extraordinary comment. As L. L. Lee has noted, "the picaresque, with its wide

<sup>21</sup>Brian W. Dippie, "Jack Crabb and the Sole Survivors of Custer's Last Stand," Western American Literature, 4 (1969), 202.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Berger, Little Big Man (1964; rpt. New York: Fawcett, n.d.), p. 245. All further references to this work appear in the text.

range of action and of society, is another way of making a microcosm."<sup>23</sup> Berger has chosen his narrative structure well, for it is sufficiently broad and stylized to accommodate both Western and non-Western themes. Crabb's alternating experiences with white and Indian cultures allows him the perspective to satirize both, and in so doing, satirizing all of mankind.

Although North to Yesterday is picaresque in its presentation of episodic scenes and succession of minor characters, Little Big Man is an even better example of the picaresque novel. Jack Crabb is an excellent model of the picaresque hero defined by Matthew Hodgart: the perennial outsider who "can find no regular occupation or fixed place in a stratified society. He is forced to . . . keep moving both horizontally in the novel and vertically in society."<sup>24</sup> It is hard to imagine a picaro who better satisfies Hodgart's definition. In the twenty-six years covered by the novel, Crabb is buffeted between the societies of the Indian and the white man. In the course of the narrative, Crabb portrays a number of familiar Western roles: adopted Indian, muleskinner, prospector, gunfighter, army scout,

<sup>23</sup>L. L. Lee, "American, Western, Picaresque: Thomas Berger's Little Big Man," South Dakota Review, 4, No. 2 (1966), 35.

<sup>24</sup>Matthew Hodgart, Satire (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), p. 218.

con man, entrepreneur, buffalo hunter, gambler, and even town drunk. He finds no permanent role in either world. His adventures share the varied nature of the picaresque, and the constant juxtaposition of the customs and life styles of both societies helps to achieve the tension which Hodgart feels is necessary for a satirical work.<sup>25</sup>

Another difference between the protagonists of North to Yesterday and Little Big Man is that Lampassas falls more within the mold of the quixotic hero who is rather innocent and nobly motivated, qualities which make him easy prey for unscrupulous enemies. We have seen that Lampassas' innocence and good nature cost him money and property on a number of occasions. The picaresque hero, on the other hand, is more often shrewd and cunning, frequently the equal of those who try to outwit him. Both types of characters can and do parody the traditional Western hero. Jack Crabb is no romantic Western hero along the lines of the prototype described by Kent Ladd Steckmesser--genteel, possessed of great physical courage, and worthy of epic consideration through comparison to classical heroes.<sup>26</sup> Crabb is only 5'4 and slight; he confesses that "I ain't big, but I'm shrewd" (p. 64). He is well aware of his physical limitations, creating an imposing figure through

<sup>25</sup>Hodgart, 221.

<sup>26</sup>Steckmesser.

his choice of apparel; he wears two inch built-up boots and a Mexican sombrero which adds another six inches; he says that in outline he is six feet tall, but most of that is air (pp. 167-68).

Crabb makes up for his meager build by cultivating his cunning beyond the modest level of Western characters such as the Virginian; Crabb's cunning is far more sly and frequently immoral. In the course of his adventures, he lies, steals, bluffs, and begs, as these means suit his needs of the moment; at one point he even out-cons a con man, and develops a ring trick to help him cheat consistently at cards. These devious methods occur while in the white society, but such devices are employed against his Indian companions as well. One incident shows the attempts of Cheyenne boys to outdo one another in bravery by piercing their skin with pointed sticks and tearing off the flesh. Jack admits that he never could get very interested in hurting himself, so he devises an illusory feat of even greater masochistic proportions. Breaking an arrow in half, he holds the feathered end against his stomach and clenches the protruding arrowhead end between his buttocks. Apparently skewered, he cleverly gains a reputation for bravery and stoic suffering without undergoing the uncomfortable consequences (p. 65).

The preceding scene prompts Crabb's remark that "Indians did not go around expecting to be swindled, whereas they was always ready for a miracle" (p. 66). This observation suggests one of the remarkable traits of this peculiar Western hero--a garrulous nature which delights in offering humorous insights on any variety of subjects. This loquaciousness is at odds with the Western convention noted by Cawelti: the taciturn hero who lets his actions speak for him.<sup>27</sup> Besides spoofing the stereotype, Berger uses Crabb's verbal wit to produce some wonderful aphorisms. The narrative voice of Little Big Man is a source of much of the book's humor and has reminded at least one critic of Twain's style, particularly in Huckleberry Finn.<sup>28</sup> The comparison is not farfetched; both writers share a delightful comic diction based upon wry understatement. Because even a casual perusal of the novel will exhibit its verbal wit, only a few samples will be given here. It constitutes what Delbert E. Wylder has described as epigrammatic satire.<sup>29</sup> Some examples are:

On sincere curiosity in others: It is a rare person in the white world who wants to hear what the other fellow says, all the more so when the other fellow really knows what he is talking about. (p. 117)

<sup>27</sup>John G. Cawelti, "The Gunfighter and the Hard-boiled Dick," American Studies, 15, No. 21 (1975), 50.

<sup>28</sup>William James Smith, p. 294.

<sup>29</sup>Wylder, p. 73.

On morality: If you want to really relax sometime, just fall to rock bottom and you'll be a happy man. Most all troubles come from having standards. (p. 164)

On self-preservation: I might go on for hours relating the incidents of war, but whereas they are every one different in the actual occurrence and never dull when your own life is at stake, they have a sameness in the telling. (p. 101)

The cynical humor of such aphorisms tells us much about the character of Jack Crabb, the sole survivor of the Battle of Little Bighorn. The last example on self-preservation points out a very important characteristic of this atypical Western hero: his main interest is in survival, not advocating a moral position. For Crabb, as Kerry Ahearn has observed, life is not a matter of moral choices, but expediency.<sup>30</sup> Nussbaum points out that the Western hero has long been the arbiter of moral law, even if it opposes judicial law.<sup>31</sup> Jack Crabb suffers no such burden. Granville Hicks has noted that Crabb is really just a fairly ordinary fellow who is placed in extraordinary circumstances and is bright enough and brave enough and lucky enough to survive them.<sup>32</sup> The key word here is

<sup>30</sup>Kerry David Ahearn, "Aspects of the Contemporary American Western Novel," Diss. Ohio University 1974, p. 108.

<sup>31</sup>Nussbaum, 27.

<sup>32</sup>Granville Hicks, "Paleface in the Cheyenne Camp," rev. of Little Big Man, by Thomas Berger, Saturday Review, 10 October 1964, p. 40.

"survive," for that is always foremost in Crabb's mind, more important than weighty moral considerations such as those pondered by Shane and other formula heroes. This characteristic is evidenced when, after years of living with and growing to like the Cheyenne, Crabb immediately throws down his weapon during a cavalry charge and turns himself over to the whites. On the eve of Custer's Last Stand, Crabb does give thought to his rightful allegiance, but even such commendable contemplation soon gives way to his principal concern: "Well, I have spoke about my worries for the Indians and then my disinclination to see these soldiers massacred, but I have so far not mentioned my growing concern for my own arse" (p. 387).

In addition to his parody of the formula hero in the fictitious Crabb, Berger parodies a number of historical figures as well. The debunking in Little Big Man is aimed at two separate targets: Western figures and literary figures. We have already seen that Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp were depicted as a couple of frightened bandits in Markson's The Ballad of Dingus Magee. Berger's parody is less farcical, suggesting the realm of probability, so that his version of Western legends seems every bit as believable as the popular one. A case in point is Berger's characterization of Wyatt Earp. Following a day of buffalo hunting, Crabb and his companions share the company of other

hunters. One of the strangers was Earp, who suddenly confronted Crabb, demanding to know why Jack had spoken Earp's name. Jack explains that he hadn't even known Earp's name; all that he had done was belch.

Other historical Western figures also fall short of their legendary images. Kit Carson is bandylegged and foulmouthed, capable of unprovoked violence (p. 161). Calamity Jane is even more foulmouthed, as well as being "the ugliest woman in the world. . . . She had a face like a potato and was built sort of dumpy." Crabb's first glimpse of Calamity Jane is during her resounding victory in a fistfight with Crabb's sister, Caroline (p. 351).

Wild Bill Hickock is an important minor character in the novel. A wary friend of Crabb's, Hickock is reputed to have killed all six members of the McCanles gang in a glorious showdown. Upon hearing this, Crabb reflects on the probability of such an event, and his thoughts tell us much about the mythification of the gunfight in popular fiction and films:

I immediately reduced that by half in my mind, for I had been on the frontier from the age of ten on and knew a thing or two as to how fights are conducted. When you run into a story of more than three against one and one winning, then you have heard a lie. I found out later I was right in this case: Wild Bill killed only McCanles and two of his partners, and all from ambush.  
(p. 293)

Hickock is a fanatic on the operation of guns; his conversations revolve around holster types, cartridge loads, barrel length, and other technical matters. Crabb tells us that "Hickock was a marvelous observer of anything which pertained to killing" (p. 298). Before his death, Hickock deteriorates into an overweight, jowly owner of a sleazy Wild West Show.

General George Armstrong Custer is an even more important minor character. He is shown to be a foolish tactician whose arrogance demoralizes his troops (they call him Hard Ass). Custer directs the massacre of peaceful Indians and over eight hundred horses. In Crabb's version of the Last Stand, Custer is spared the expected scalping and Crabb assumes that this is in deference to his valor, but he is told that it is only because "the long haired darling" was going bald (p. 372).

The second type of debunking in Little Big Man is directed at literary figures; in many ways, this suggests the technique found in the reactionary Western satires such as Smith's Return of the Virginian, although it is not developed as fully in Berger's novel. In addition to the humorous touch, this device allows another dimension of characterization. For instance, Custer's comments on James Fenimore Cooper accurately describe the romantic fantasy of the noble savage which Little Big Man spoofs. At the same

time, it reveals Custer's mental instability--his remarks are addressed to no one and come while he and his men are being overrun at the Little Bighorn:

It is to be regretted that the character of the Indian as described in Cooper's interesting novels is not the true one. Stripped of the beautiful romance with which we have been so long willing to envelop him, transferred from the inviting pages of the novelist . . . the Indian forfeits his claim to the appellation of the noble red man. . . . We see him as he is . . . a savage in every sense of the word. (p. 418)

Characterization is also revealed in Crabb's opinions of literary figures, disclosing both his sense of propriety and naïveté about literature. He describes learning about his sister Caroline's crush on a male nurse during the Civil War, a genuinely cultivated man who writes poetry of burning passion in his spare time. Unfortunately, Caroline learns that the man's passion is for a drummer boy. Crabb's gentlemanly refusal to name this writer of "robustious verse" only draws attention to Walt Whitman and his sexual preferences. (This seems to be a rather vicious attack on Whitman; but there may be another purpose, in light of Berger's extensive research into his topic. Perhaps Berger is so critical of Whitman because of his opportunism: within twenty-four hours of receiving news of Custer's defeat, Whitman had mailed his poem, "A Death Song for

Custer," to the New York Tribune with an enclosed bill for ten dollars.<sup>33)</sup>

While journeying up the Missouri River on a steamship piloted by a Captain Marsh, Crabb recalls that "there used to be quite a body of legend about riverboating . . . and Marsh was part of it, not having been hurt any by being a friend of an author named Mark Twain who wasn't noted for understatement" (p. 359). In another scene, Jack displays his innate courtesy and desire to please Mrs. Pendrake when she reads some of Alexander Pope's poetry. Young Crabb pretends to be impressed by the verse, but inwardly feels that it sounds like the trotting of a horse. He does not really understand the lines, but what he "did savvy seemed right opinionated, like that fellow had the last word on everything" (p. 133).

These examples illustrate Berger's debunking of literary figures as well as Western ones. This kind of spoofing is directed only to stereotypes of the white world, although Little Big Man mocks Indian stereotypes, too. The dominant Indian conventions parodied in the novel are the Indian as noble primitive and ruthless savage. It will be noted that the only other Western satirist discussed in this study who parodies the Indian is Richard Condon in

<sup>33</sup>Paul A. Hutton, "Custer's Last Stand," TV Guide, 26 November 1977, p. 40.

A Talent for Loving; and even Condon's treatment of the Indian constitutes but a fraction of the book's satire. There doesn't seem to be as much interest in satirizing Indians as there is in Western conventions of the white world. This observation holds true for parodies in film and television as well. However, some satire of Indians does appear in films such as Michael Gordon's Texas Across the River and Mel Brooks' Blazing Saddles; television's F Troop series contained a running spoof of Indians in its Heckawe tribe. It appears that the change in attitude toward the Indian does not encourage parody, but a new perception of the Indian's victimization by white America. Another explanation for the paucity of Indian parody is that because Indians were traditionally treated as "the enemy" and seen only during battle, there just isn't enough common knowledge of Indian life to provide a basis for satire.

However, Berger manages to satirize existing stereotypes of the Indian through techniques of exaggeration and reversal. His all too vivid descriptions of such Indian practices as scalping and mutilation may, in fact, be realistic and not exaggerated, but his objective reporting of the sounds and gore which accompany these acts results in a sense of absurdity which at least appears to be exaggerated. One example of Indian humor is when Younger Bear,

a lifelong rival of Crabb's, offers Jack his hand at the end of a battle. Unfortunately, the gesture is literal, for Younger Bear has pulled his own arm up his sleeve and when he walks away laughing, Jack is left holding the severed hand of a soldier. In another scene, the convention of the uncanny Indian trackers is concealed by an apparently realistic treatment which gradually moves from the believable to the exceptional to the improbable to finally, the ludicrous. The scene Crabb describes is a familiar one--an Indian brave squinting across the plains at approaching riders:

One time when . . . us boys was out hunting prairie chickens, we saw some moving objects a couple miles off that I took for buffalo, but Little Horse, with his Indian eyes, said no, they was white men, that one had yellow hair, was armed with a shotgun, and rode a bay that was slightly lame in the left fore-foot, and the other wore a beard and was mounted on a roan with a saddle sore. Also, they was lost, but he could see that the bay had got the scent of water and shortly they would strike the river and know where they was. (p. 78)

The second technique for parodying Indian stereotypes is reversal, a device that Berger uses to good effect. Readers long accustomed to the inscrutability and quiet menace of the Indian brave are surprised by the initial description of Old Lodge Skins, the Cheyenne chief:

The fellow in the plug hat was their leader. He wore one of those silver medals that the government give out to principal men at treaty signings; I think his showed the image of President Fillmore. He was older than the others and he carried an ancient musket with a barrel four foot long.  
(p. 31)

The comical image is extended when Jack's sister Caroline shakes the chief's hand "so hard you can see the pain travel up through his hat and down the other arm" (p. 31). It is difficult to reconcile this undignified portrait with the commonplace perception of a noble Indian leader. It becomes more farcical when Crabb describes Old Lodge Skins' reaction to the whiskey foolishly proffered by the men of the wagon train. Instead of a ferocious, uncontrolled frenzy, the reader witnesses this result:

Old Lodge Skins took the tin cup . . . and drained it in one swallow, as if it was water or cold coffee, tilting his head back so far the plug hat fell off. The drink was already down his gullet before he altogether comprehended the nature of it, and you might say simultaneous with that recognition he became instantly drunk, his eyes swimming with liquid like two raw eggs. He fell over backwards on the earth and kicked his feet so hard one moccasin flew off and hit the cover of our wagon. His musket dropped, muzzle down, and packed some dirt in the end of the barrel. (p. 33)

Although this humorous scene does end in the murder of the men and rape of the women, the scene never rises above the level of farce, due to the tone and detail of the

description. Strange as it sounds, it is a comical scene of violence and bloodshed.

Another convention familiar to the Western audience is the Indian camp on perpetual guard against intruders. If the enemy attempts to enter the camp, it does so at extreme risk; the usual method of approach is to crawl on one's belly, exercising great caution. Another accepted approach is to enter openly and be immediately surrounded by a number of armed braves who appear out of nowhere. Old Lodge Skins seems to be aware of the Indian reputation for vigilance, and observes the amenity of the second method, although it turns out to be an unnecessary gesture. Crabb and Old Lodge Skins approach the Cheyenne camp:

We pulled up on the knoll above, so as to give them time to identify us as ourselves rather than Crow come to run off the Cheyenne ponies. Old Lodge Skins was full of such courtesies--which is what this could be called, because nobody around that camp was ever alert for intruders; at least once a week they were successfully raided by horse thieves from enemy tribes, sometimes in broad daylight. (p. 49)

Little Big Man undermines another Indian stereotype in its handling of the relationship between braves and squaws. Although white females in the Western often serve only as the subject of the cowboy's chivalry, the Indian woman has traditionally received even less attention. If seen at all, it is as a background figure stooped over a gigantic kettle

or serving the men. It is true that Indian maids with acceptable white features are sometimes allowed to be the love interest of the white hero, but such cases are infrequent and invariably result in the death of the Indian woman. Even a recent "serious" Western film such as Sydney Pollack's Jeremiah Johnson devotes relatively little time to the love and marriage themes and predictably leads to the death of the Indian wife, freeing the white hero for even greater adventures. There has never been much dispute that the Indian world is, in every sense, a man's world. But Berger spoofs the masculine supremacy concept in a number of incidents. First of all, Crabb tells us that contrary to belief, the Cheyenne brave is actually quite chaste. There is virtually no premarital sex or adultery, and even the married men swear off sex before going to war, which was most of the time, so that "the Cheyenne were pretty hard up for tail at any given time. That's why they was such fierce warriors, or so they believed" (p. 97).

Besides an unsatisfactory sex life, the Cheyenne braves are the victims of their brash women. In one scene, the fierce Younger Bear is berated and ridiculed by his kidnapped wife, who impugns his virility and intelligence in front of the Indian's major rival, Crabb. She calls him a "good-for-nothing loafer" and threatens to physically abuse him (p. 241); even more strangely, Younger Bear

suffers her taunts. As noted earlier, this scene is greatly reminiscent of one which appeared in Condon's A Talent for Loving. It seems obvious that Berger borrows considerably from the earlier parody.

The practice of merciless nagging is not limited to hostage white wives, however; Crabb observes the same behavior from an Indian girl named Nothing whom he once courted. Nor do the married squaws limit their insults to their husbands. Crabb tells about the inspired language of his Indian wife, Sunshine, who verbally attacks the warriors who make insulting remarks about Crabb's failure to join war parties. Her ruthless humiliation of her husband's detractors draws sympathy even from Crabb:

Sunshine would cast reflection on the young fellow's potency and speculate unfavorably on the quality of his endowments, etc., with the other women laughing nearby, maybe including some young girl he had a crush on, and away he'd slink, poor devil, having arrived a hero and departed a buffoon. (p. 232)

Berger's parody of Indian stereotypes extends beyond the treatment of character traits to include the Indian environment as well. In most cases, the Indian camp suggests a proximity to nature which is lacking in the civilized white world, a view which traces back as far as the Leatherstocking Tales. Indians do not intrude upon their environment with permanent dwellings, but live in

harmony with it. There has always been something pastoral about the Indian camp in Westerns; it is no accident that the ecology-minded youth of the 1960s turned to Indian dress, jewelry, and even communal living to express an affinity for a more natural life style. Berger discounts our preconceptions, however, through Crabb's revulsion upon seeing his first Indian camp:

At the first sight of an Indian camp the stoutest heart is likely to quail. . . . You tend to think: well, I see their dump, but where's the town? And the smell alone is very queer, it isn't precisely a stench as white people know one, but a number of stinks melding together into a sort of invisible fog that replaces the air, so that with every breath you draw in all the facts of life concerning mankind and the foot-footed animals. Right now it had a principal odor, owing to our pony stalling under us at that very moment. Except in the case of such a particular event nearby, no smells predominated. (p. 50)

Moments later, Crabb discovers that he has not yet suffered the worst. The inside of a tepee is even more unbearable, "like trying to breathe underwater in a swamp" (p. 52).

It is apparent that one of the purposes of Little Big Man is to spoof Western conventions which have grown up around both white and Indian societies. However, Berger's novel transcends Western satire alone, encompassing universal human traits. In commenting upon this aspect of the novel, William T. Pilkington says that "while it often depends for its effect on the absurd and the grotesque, it

sheds revealing light . . . on the human condition as well."<sup>34</sup> The method that Berger uses to satirize mankind's limitations is to locate the same weakness in both white and Indian societies, thus testifying to its human, not cultural origin. There are a number of such non-Western satirical targets in Little Big Man, and this study must focus on a select few.

Perhaps the most overriding human weakness attacked in Little Big Man is the propensity for violence in both societies. The Indians happily mutilate the bodies of their victims; the whites conduct a dispassionate extermination of an entire race. For the Indians, fighting is an integral part of life; for the whites, it is an expedient solution. This basic difference in the two cultures is complicated by the fact that neither side has any conception of the enemy's motives, nor do they really care. This results in an absurd cycle of violence which is never directed at the guilty party. Crabb explains that the circle of violence commences when some well-meaning but confused Indians come into a fort to apologize for the murderous actions of other Indians. The soldiers proceed to punish those who apologized, never the ones who committed the outrage. The Indians then retaliate by revenging

<sup>34</sup>Pilkington, 217.

themselves on white people who had no connection with the soldiers; and so on. Because neither side is really interested in stopping the cycle, Little Big Man is, as Ahearn puts it, a testimony to the essential unity in violence of all men.<sup>35</sup> This unity is brutally evident in the parallel massacres at the close of the novel. At the Washita, Custer's troops annihilate an unsuspecting tribe; the situation is then reversed at Little Bighorn.

Man's propensity for violence discloses another universal flaw, one which sometimes accounts for violent acts: both Indians and whites display the commonly tragic flaw of pride. In battle, the Indians' pride is evidenced by the practice of taking scalps and counting coup; one counts coup by engaging with the enemy, but only touching him with a harmless object instead of killing him. This takes great courage and gains considerable glory for the successful brave. Custer shows a different kind of pride in the white man's approach to the violence of war. Custer's mad monologue on the Little Bighorn is in part due to his incredulity that others, especially Indians, could be capable of courage in the high degree. Even as he is being destroyed, Custer praises his ability to compute disparate information coolly and effectively. The dramatic irony

<sup>35</sup>Ahearn, p. 110.

of the scene is emphasized by the knowledge that Berger has taken the obnoxious remarks straight from Custer's self-serving autobiography, My Life on the Plains.<sup>36</sup> The General's arrogance is both comic and pathetic:

I have been called impetuous. I resent that. Everything that I have ever done has been the result of the study that I have made of imaginary military situations that might arise. When I become engaged in a campaign and a great emergency arises, everything that I have ever read or studied focuses in my mind as if the situation were under a magnifying glass. My mind works instantaneously but always as the result of everything I have ever studied being brought to bear on the situation. (p. 399)

Before leaving the discussion of the human foibles exposed in Little Big Man, we shall consider two significant satirical targets which distinguish this comic novel from novels of pure parody. Berger offers insight into two universal themes: man's sense of history and the dilemma of modern man in a "civilized" world.

In describing the debunking of Western heroes (Wild Bill Hickock, Calamity Jane, etc.) and literary figures (Mark Twain, Alexander Pope, etc.), we saw that in Little Big Man the "legends and the romanticized history of the West are comically disassembled like Hamlets seen from backstage."<sup>37</sup> As Crabb is fond of observing, we have been lied to so often

<sup>36</sup>Dippie, 199.

<sup>37</sup>"Jack Crabb, Oldtimer," rev. of Little Big Man, by Thomas Berger, Time, 16 October 1964, p. 128.

and so well that the facts appear strange and sound ridiculous when we hear them. For instance, we saw that Custer escaped scalping not out of respect, but for a more mundane reason--he was going bald. Berger's handling of literary figures is further evidence of his disrespect for our prestigious predecessors.

Besides his charges against our clay-footed heroes, Berger also satirizes the interpretations of historians who have peddled their erroneous theories as fact. Charles B. Harris states that Little Big Man thus debunks man's methods of recording and ordering his past. And although Crabb's version of history is not necessarily the correct one, it casts doubt upon the official version.<sup>38</sup> Berger's spoofing of history is mainly directed at white history, but there is evidence that the Indians' approach is every bit as faulty. Cheyenne history is inseparable from its myths, tales, and legends; it is always interpreted in such a way as to make the Cheyenne the handsomest, bravest, and best people on the earth. An example of this subjective history is found in the scene when Crabb, acting as an Indian brave, throws down his weapons and turns himself over to the cavalry. When he returns to the tribe years later, he finds that his actions have become mythologized to the degree that he is now a greater hero than ever. A product

<sup>38</sup>Harris, pp. 129-31.

of the white man's chronological recording of events, Crabb is constantly complaining about the Indians' exasperatingly imprecise sense of time.

The white man's history is equally inaccurate. One example of its questionable veracity is found in the historians' insistence on finding ulterior racist motives and a grand scheme in the actions of the buffalo hunters. Crabb, who had been such a hunter, envisions the task as just a job, not some Machiavellian scheme to abolish the Indian way of life:

We was just trying to make a living, and all we cared about was the market price of hides. Sometimes you get the idea from accounts of this enterprise, wrote by men who wasn't there, that the great army of hunters went out to exterminate every bison on the continent so as to clean up the range for cattle grazing, or to whip the Indians by destroying their source of wild food. These things happened, of course, but it wasn't by our plan. We was just a bunch of fellows carrying Sharps rifles, and if you ever topped a rise and seen a gigantic ocean of sheer buffalo covering maybe twenty miles, you couldn't believe the day would come when a few thousand of us had caused them millions to vanish utterly. (p. 336)

Crabb's account is less imaginative than the historians' hindsight, but it rings true: his explanation suggests the simple motives of a daily worker, not those of a mad genius bent on genocide.

The most prominent example of Berger's satire of historical truth is the continuing absorption with solving

the mystery of the events at the Little Bighorn, an interest which the historians share with novelists, film makers, and television producers. There are dozens of novels which take up the subject, perhaps the best being Ernest Haycox's Bugles in the Afternoon. As recently as 1976, Douglas C. Jones broached the topic in his "what if" historical novel, The Court-Martial of George Armstrong Custer. Television took its turn with the short-lived 1960s series, Custer. But the film has been the most significant contributor to the legend of Custer, portraying Custer as everything from national hero (Raoul Walsh's powerful They Died with Their Boots On, 1940) to mad egocentric (Arthur Penn's screen version of Little Big Man, 1970). Still other Custer films include Thomas H. Ince's Custer's Last Fight (1912), Louis Weiss' Custer's Last Stand (1936), and Robert Siodmak's Custer of the West (1968).

Such consistent attention to the Custer legend makes Crabb's simple interpretation somewhat anticlimactic, but nevertheless more plausible than heroic versions: the Seventh Cavalry was destroyed by poor reconnaissance, lack of modern communication methods, and the difficult terrain. Custer's madness at the end, his inability to comprehend being outnumbered more than a hundred to one, is only an interesting sidelight to the event which has no bearing on

the outcome. Crabb describes the faulty attempts of historians and others whose muddled efforts give us our history:

And of course you can read of the Little Big-horn battle itself in a couple hundred different versions, for it is being argued up to this time. First come the newspaper stories, and next there was a military investigation. . . .

And then come the accounts of officers and men who served in the other part of the field, and that of the Crow scout Curly. Other fellows went about the reservations, interviewing Indians who had fought on the hostile side. This naturally resulted in a mess. . . . Some Indians thought they would be punished if they made it sound too bad; some, out of courtesy, told the investigator what they thought he wanted to hear. . . .

Last of all the scholars went to work, some setting up residence on the battlefield, which become a national monument, and going over the ground with tape-measures and surveyors' instruments. . . . For every question there are ten answers, pro and con on every detail.  
(pp. 436-37)

What tremendous historical irony--that the scene of the United States' most crushing military defeat should become a national monument! But Berger doesn't leave his satire of history at that; he then turns it upon his own narrator. As Crabb ends the preceding account, his "God's honest truth" is made suspect by the concluding phrase, "so far as recollection serves" (p. 437). The recollection of a one hundred and eleven year-old man is dubious, at best. The reader is left holding shadows after all.

Berger's multi-level attack on claims of absolute historical truth is given another turn of the screw by his initial persona, Ralph Fielding Snell (the middle name is an obvious giveaway to Berger's satiric intent). A self-proclaimed "man of letters," Snell appears in the foreword and epilogue to introduce Crabb and this "major document of the American frontier" (p. 12). In the epilogue, Snell points out historical inaccuracies in Crabb's account which he has checked against available references. He prides himself on being able to personally dispute Crabb's claim that Crazy Horse did not wear a war bonnet. In the tradition that has given us many titleholders to the Brooklyn Bridge, Snell betrays his gullibility and unreliability: "As to Crazy Horse's not wearing feathers, we know that statement to be erroneous--his war bonnet . . . presently reposes in my own collection: the dealer who sold it to me is a man of the highest integrity" (p. 447).

By using Fielding and Crabb as a persona within a persona, Berger adds a new dimension to Little Big Man. As narrator of the "frame," Snell is removed in time and space from the nineteenth-century events described by Crabb. Stanley Kauffman contends that the foreword and epilogue only distort Crabb's tale into an unbelievable fantasy.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Stanley Kauffman, "O'Hara and Others," rev. of Little Big Man, by Thomas Berger, New York Review of Books, 17 December 1964, p. 21.

However, when viewed as a satirical representation of twentieth-century America, and even the human condition, the frame device proves to be an effective technique.

L. L. Lee has perceptively suggested that Snell and his father may be caricatures, but they are living symbols of America's changes between the Sunday afternoon of 1876 (Custer's Last Stand) and 1963 (when Snell presents the final manuscript). Although never actually appearing in the story, Snell's father is depicted by his son as a rich, powerful, insensitive figure--an entrepreneur strongly suggestive of the robber barons of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bold and determined, these men carried the single-mindedness and ambition of a Custer into the battlefields of the corporate world. The next generation finds everything a bit easier, producing offspring such as the younger Snell--an affected intellectual, "a bit of a coward, a fool, an obvious decline from the older type of American."<sup>40</sup> Trundled about like a child by his medical nurse, the morose victim of his loquacious housekeeper, Snell feels compelled to defend his bachelorhood and heterosexuality to the reader, even giving assurances that he does not own a dressing gown (p. 12). Beset by a deviated septum, weak lungs, migraines, and nightmares,

<sup>40</sup>L. L. Lee, 36.

incapacitated for ten years by the death of his father and the discovery of a bastard half-brother, Ralph Fielding Snell is a model for the collective neuroses of the twentieth century. In spite of his obvious failings, the dilettante Snell thinks of himself in grander terms. The foreword is filled with his smug recollections of petty victories over the bureaucrats of Crabb's nursing home.

Although Snell's victories are achieved through bluff and blackmail, he compares his tawdry triumphs to those of epic heroes. In one scene, Snell recounts his modest role in wangling permission to interview Crabb. In reconstructing the incident, Snell would have us place him in rank with the men of Custer's Seventh Cavalry. Snell describes his stoic martyrdom when bombarded by geranium pollen in the doctor's office:

My prescribed nose drops were a hundred miles away. My straightened right septum ached; the incision had hardly healed. Yet there was a moral lesson in this eventuality. . . . Each of us, no matter how humble from day to day finds himself in situations in which he has the choice of acting either heroically or craven. A small elite are picked by fate to crouch on that knoll above the Little Bighorn, and they provide examples for the many commonplace individuals whose challenge is only a flat tire on a deserted road, the insult of a bully at the beach, or a sneezing spell in the absence of one's nose spray. . . . Yet my will never wavered. (pp. 20-21)

When seen as a means of satirizing twentieth-century America's dearth of boldness and challenge, the frame becomes an effective device for pointing out our unheroic age. Jack Crabb was a little man with a number of flaws who was big in heart and spirit; Ralph Fielding Snell is just a little man. In the mid-twentieth century, Crabb is locked in by hospitals, doctors, psychologists, old age homes, televisions, wheelchairs, and more. What a bitterly ironic end when compared to the noble demise of Old Lodge Skins. And what reader can be assured that his end will be any more honorable? It is all the more pathetic that death should hold ignominy for the ancient Crabb, who knows what it means to die with honor.

The foregoing analysis has shown how the satiric methods dominate the novel and cast their reflections on the major themes. Little Big Man is more than a parody of stereotypes of white and Indian Westerns; it speaks out against universal human evils which are possessed by all men. The novel's satiric scope also includes an attack against the ways we interpret history and the unheroic status of modern man. Although Berger illustrates again and again that the Cheyenne and the whites are bound by identical flaws, he does not assess equal guilt to both cultures, an assertion made by Ahearn who maintains that Little Big Man exposes the absurdity of both societies.

There are, after all, degrees of guilt, and Berger's novel is not simply a nihilistic condemnation of all human potential. In a number of ways, the white society is shown to lack the moral base which supports Indian society. Through ironic contrast, Berger satirizes the "superior" moral standards of white civilization without obscuring the failings of Indian life. In a world divided into white and Indian values, there is little doubt that Berger would choose the Indian ones. An examination of the moral integrity of both cultures will reveal Berger's predilection.

One of the traits which runs through the white society, and not the Indian one, is hypocrisy. Even an idealized character such as Mrs. Pendrake, the minister's wife, is revealed as an adulteress with a crude soda shop operator. Caroline, Jack's sister, is indignant when the Indians refuse to rape her. There are numerous additional examples of the fragility of white civilization's moral standards when they conflict with personal desires. One of these examples of hypocrisy is a microscopic view which unveils the greed permeating all levels of society. The white man's hypocrisy in dealing with his own kind as well as the Indians is shown when Crabb describes the fate of the Hang About the Forts, the Indians tamed into submission by treaty promises. The Indians lie about the fort in a drunken stupor induced by a ready supply of alcohol. They

prostitute their women to pay for whiskey, and subsist on government handouts which are half the legal allotment. The other half is withheld by Indian agents who sell it to white settlers or the Army. The Army has need of the Indians' share because its supplies are often embezzled by the Eastern dealers or the officers at the fort. Berger finally ends the cycle of greed and hypocrisy, but not before the reader is aware of the shameful results of the white man's promises to the Indian and to his own kind. The Indians fall more easily to the white man's legal trickery and decadence than they do to his bullets. It should be noted that it is in the white culture that Jack Crabb is bankrupted by cheating business partners, rewarded for his gambling dishonesty, and driven to alcoholism.

In describing Berger's satire, Guy Davenport has observed that the "satire, like that of Aristophanes, Rabelais and Chaucer, needs a hard moral base from which to flail all that wobbles and stinks."<sup>41</sup> It is ironic that one of Berger's prime targets of satire is found in the white man's arbiters of morality--preachers. The first religious target encountered in Little Big Man is Crabb's father, an illiterate preacher. His religious beliefs are unorthodox: indulging in "a shot or three" of whiskey

<sup>41</sup>Davenport, p. 68.

while conducting services in a saloon, the senior Crabb tolerates gambling and womanizing. In fact, the only evil he recognizes is that which "makes a man into a mean skunk who will cuss and spit and chew and never wash his face" (pp. 25-26). As long as a man was clean, he could indulge in any pursuit he desired. Killed after foolishly giving whiskey to the Indians, Crabb's father dies believing that he could have converted his murderers if he had been able to speak their language--Hebrew.

At the other end of the religious spectrum is the Reverend Pendrake, a staunch clergyman. Engulfed in religious dogma, the obese Pendrake is comfortable only when devouring enormous quantities of food. Unlike the tolerant Crabb, Reverend Pendrake is very precise in labeling sinful enterprises which consist of all works of the flesh and sundry others: "adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revelings, and such like" (p. 140). So intent is Pendrake on avoiding sexual sins that he abstains from relations with his wife, resulting in her adulterous affair. Of course, Pendrake's colossal gluttony removes any semblance of righteousness from his dictates.

In direct opposition to Pendrake's prohibitive, joyless religion, is the Indians' acceptance of all things human. There are only two crimes in the Cheyenne culture, and Crabb tells us that they are very seldom committed: adultery and the killing of one's kinsman. This contrast between the Indians' humanity and white society's stultifying religion is pointed out when Pendrake enumerates the many sins which comprise his faith. Jack remarks that except for envy, the list of faults perfectly describes the character of a successful Indian.

Despite their lack of a structured religion or a legal code such as that of the whites, the Cheyenne gain our admiration in ways that the corrupt white society fails to accomplish. The reason for Berger's preference for Cheyenne values lies in the two overriding principles which rule Indian life: individualism and dignity. L. L. Lee has noted that the major positive theme of the novel is that "the truly worthy man is the individual--individualism, for Berger, meaning to have the courage and strength to live one's own life."<sup>42</sup> This observation is supported by the fact that the only admirable white man in the novel is General Custer, a fiercely determined individual who remains true to his convictions. He is brave and goes his own way--

<sup>42</sup>L. L. Lee, 36-37.

two qualities which would have served him well had he been an Indian. Crabb grudgingly attributes greatness to Custer, a man with the courage to stand up even to the President of the United States.

It is significant that Crabb has no success when he attempts to explain Custer's sense of independent spirit to Old Lodge Skins. The reason for the Indian's lack of comprehension is central to the virtues promoted in Little Big Man: to the Cheyenne, independent behavior is the rule, not the exception. Custer is an exception because the white society suppresses independent action. Crabb does admit that this quality in the Indian can sometimes lead to chaotic action, for if "you give an Indian a choice . . . he is sure to take the reckless alternative: he is inclined to let anybody do what they want" (p. 86). Nevertheless, compared to the white man's submission to authority and conformity, we admire the Cheyenne's independence.

In addition to the Cheyenne's high regard for individualism, there is a corresponding concern for the dignity of each person; this quality is expressed in an unbounded loyalty between members of the tribe, and even in the treatment of their enemies. The fact that there is no concern for the dignity of others in white civilization is evidenced when Crabb recalls his period as a drunk, singing and dancing to a jeering crowd in exchange for a drink of

whiskey: "the Cheyenne would have been depressed to see a fellow tribesman gone to rot; they would have believed it reflected discredit upon all Human Beings. On the contrary, an American just loves to see another who ain't worth a damn" (p. 209). In the Cheyenne scheme of things, one cannot claim dignity for oneself by denying it to others. Berger's preference for Indian values is reflected in the translation of the word "Cheyenne": it means the Human Beings.

The contrasting regard of the two societies for the individuality and dignity of its members is represented by the Cheyenne's treatment of their homosexuals (heemanehs). They are understanding of the heemanehs and value them as welcome and necessary members of their society. The Indians' consideration of human rights is nowhere more obvious than in their treatment of this traditionally abused minority. In a society where dignity is earned, not granted, there is no need for one person to humiliate another. Even in war, the Cheyenne acknowledge the enemy's dignity; the purpose of fighting is not to "show him up or make him eat dust, but rather to kill him altogether" (p. 129). This attitude is quite different from Wild Bill Hickock's, whose life is dedicated to finding opportunities to prove that he was a better man than his opponent.

In contrasting the moral values of white and Indian cultures, we have seen that the Indian culture gives considerably more importance to honesty, individualism, and personal dignity. Although the Cheyenne are guilty of many of the same human weaknesses as the whites, there is little doubt that Berger favors the moral tenets which the Cheyenne represent. However, it is wrong to assume that Berger is therefore launching a crusade for the preservation of the noble savage or a return to primitivism. Rather, he would have us consider what it means to be a decent human being. In Little Big Man, this reconsideration of human values begins with a new awareness of our Western myths. Berger brilliantly manages to effect this new awareness without romanticizing Old Lodge Skins or the Indian way of life. However, as we get to know both in the course of the novel, our opinions change considerably. This is illustrated by Jack's changing view of Old Lodge Skins: initially, he sees him as a farcical buffoon; as he gets to know him this view changes to that of a wise, sympathetic man that he respects and loves. By the time he greets death, Old Lodge Skins has reached epic and tragic dimensions; his blindness, like Tiresias', allows him greater vision than ordinary men. The same shift in perception can be seen in Jack's evaluation of the ambiance of an Indian camp. We have seen his first reaction to the suffocating

stench of the Cheyenne camp, an almost physical revulsion. However, he tells us that it soon became his reality, and when he returned to white society, he missed the odor of what seemed life itself (p. 51).

In a similar manner, all aspects of the "savage" way of life are re-evaluated by Jack--and the reader. The picaresque structure allows comparisons between white and Indian societies, showing us the strengths and weaknesses of both. One of the great weaknesses of white culture is, as Max F. Schulz points out, that it is goal oriented; the strength of Indian culture is that it is identity conscious.<sup>43</sup> One way that this basic difference is illustrated is in the fact that the Indians, unlike the whites, do not wish to gain power over another's spirit, but to achieve self-fulfillment. Old Lodge Skins shows us this dichotomy when he contemplates the victory at the Little Bighorn which he realizes will mark the end of the Indian way of life:

Yes, my son . . . it is finished now, because what more can you do to an enemy than beat him? Were we fighting red men against red men . . . it would now be the turn of the other side to try to whip us . . . that is the right way. There is no permanent winning or losing when things move, as they should, in a circle. . . . But white men, who live in straight lines and squares, do not believe as I do. With them it is rather everything or nothing. . . . And because of their

<sup>43</sup>Schulz, p. 77.

strange beliefs, they are very persistent. They will even fight at night or in bad weather. But they hate the fighting itself. Winning is all they care about, and if they can do that by scratching a pen across paper or saying something into the wind, they are much happier.

They will not be content now to come and take revenge. . . . Indeed, if we all return to the agencies, they probably would not kill anyone. For killing is part of living, but they hate life. (pp. 441-42)

The satire of Little Big Man, then, is more than a parody of stereotypes or a misanthropic attack against all humanity. It is a serious reconsideration of what it means to live well. Crabb tells us that twice while he was with the Cheyenne he was "at the center of the earth," a Cheyenne concept which expresses one's awareness of the circular nature of things, the unending unity of things past and present, life and death. To be at the center of the earth is to be at complete peace with oneself and others. It is a persistent condition for the Cheyenne, but it is a unique experience for Crabb. He is thrilled by the sense of tranquility and contentment. Berger's satire in Little Big Man shows us how white civilization, ambitiously pursuing the transformation of the world, has forgotten what it is to live, to be a human being at the center of the earth.

Little Big Man, like North to Yesterday, is, then, a satirical novel which transcends the narrow focus of Western fiction, exploring themes concerned with man's

potential and the nature of human values. Both novels project unique satiric perspectives onto Western myths to produce literary works which cannot be defined as parody or history or myth, but a blend of all three. Certainly, these comic novels are grounded in satire; but the satire is only an instrument by which they measure the limits of human striving. They accomplish more than the other forms of satiric Westerns because they attempt more. They are not content with simply spoofing the romance of the formula Westerns, which is the intent of the parody Westerns. Neither are they satisfied with muddying the waters of literary criticism by grafting onto the popular Western an existing body of literature and literary theory, which is the purpose of reactionary Western satires. The comic Western admittedly uses these satiric techniques, but in doing so, attempts to project new considerations of universal themes. In this way, they bridge the gap between popular and serious literature, and speak their truths to all of us.

We have seen, then, that since 1960 there has been a sustained literary interest in satirizing the formula of the popular Western, and that such efforts fall into at least four recognizable patterns, according to the author's purpose: novels such as True Grit add parodic elements without changing the fundamental formula of heroic action

and the triumph of good over evil; parodic satires such as A Talent for Loving and The Ballad of Dingus Magee expose the absurdity of Western conventions by either exaggerating or reversing them; reactionary Western satires such as The Return of the Virginian and The Kid resurrect certain Western novels, only to burden them with the complexity of literary traditions and theories of criticism; and comic Westerns such as North to Yesterday and Little Big Man use satire as a framework to appraise man's foibles and aspirations. Finally, these four types of satiric Western novels comprise a viable sub-genre of Western fiction, one which makes a generous contribution to contemporary literature.

John Wayne, long the cinematic embodiment of the West, was once asked if he thought that the Western could survive in the face of great change. He replied: "Will Shakespeare ever die? Neither will the Western. It's our folklore. It's tradition."<sup>44</sup> Wayne is undoubtedly right, for the Western has come to be more than an adventure story where good always triumphs over evil after a suitable display of violence and action; it has become an expression of America's vision of itself. What the writers of satiric Westerns have done is to breathe new life into the old

<sup>44</sup>Kenneth Turan, "Lonesome Cowboys," The Progressive, 40, No. 3 (1976), 39.

conventions of Western folklore, suggesting an ambiguity which is refreshing and believable. In doing so, it has not vanquished the formula Western, but enriched it. By proving that the Western myth can be revitalized, expanded, and reinterpreted in terms of the modern sensibility, Western satirists have shown that the genre can accommodate a broad range of artistic invention.

Far from banishing the traditional Western to obscurity, satirical novels such as those examined in this study help to rescue the Western from lifeless stereotypes and over-worked themes. America's changing perception of itself demands that if the Western is to mature as a literary form, it must undergo corresponding changes and reflect contemporary concerns. These satirical novels keep the Western from becoming anachronistic by insisting on the relevance of a human, not epic, approach.

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