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Cowboy Crackers

Echoes of the American Western in Contemporary Southern Fiction

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Contents

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Part One:

History, Myth, Literature, and Masculinities

1. Introduction

Southern fiction is alive and kicking, and critics and academics are straining to keep up with it. As Matthew Guinn has noted, "postmodernity has come late to southern literature," and even in this new millennium, academic battles are still being waged over what constitutes southern literature and what school of Southern Studies is the right one. Trenches have been dug—on one side the so-called "Rubin generation" who insist on "treating contemporary fiction as a seamless extension of past works" by looking for "the stock motifs of history, place, and community."[1] On the other side are the renegade poststructuralists who seek to break down the hegemony of the old school and expose the gaps and inconsistencies in the new fiction.[2] As Guinn points out, the South still produces much of the best fiction around, "but the forms and intent of this fiction have evolved significantly." As examples he points out Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* and Richard Ford's *Independence Day*, award-winning novels by southern writers, but books "set in the Southwest and the urban Northeast, respectively, and which exhibit the influence of Ernest Hemingway and John Updike more than that of William Faulkner" (ix-x).

It is exactly this significant change in southern fiction that I wish to examine. More specifically, I want to explore a tendency so far overlooked in contemporary southern literature, namely the way in which many male southern writers use aspects of the American

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[1] Matthew Guinn, *After Southern Modernism: Fiction of the Contemporary South* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi), pp. ix, x.
[2] Some examples of these are: *Southern Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Jefferson Humphries (1990), *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, eds. Ane Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (1997), Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998), Patricia Yager's *Dirt and Desire* (2000), *South to a New Place*, eds. Suzanne Jones and Sharon Monteith (2002), and Martyn Bone's *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005).

Western as a formula for their stories that are set in the South.[3] By Western I mean the recognizable popular genre featuring cowboys and Indians, and not the novels of e.g. John Steinbeck and Willa Cather that take place in the West. Richard Gray has pointed out how each southern writer is involved in "a vaster regional and transregional geography of speech" and how each southern text "exists within an equally complex web of *intertextual* relations." Each text is "engaged in a conversation—friendly or argumentative, but always intimate—with other works, many but by no means all of them southern."[4] While Gray and most other critics in Southern Studies often tend to focus on the southern aspects of these intertextual relations, my focus here is on those Western texts, be they film, literature, or cultural discourses that have shaped some of the recent southern fiction.

Even though the Western is a distinct genre, it is by no means fixed and it is directly connected to some of the larger principal American myths. The Western is built on the historical ideas of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism. The genre took its shape over decades and through various outlets: from Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, thousands of dime novels, over popular paintings by George Caleb Bingham, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Remington and to Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, just to name a few. But the genre crystallized and took its recognizable formulaic form with the publication of Wister's *The Virginian* in 1902 and the emergence of *The Great Train Robbery*, the first movie Western, in 1903. From then, a steady

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[3] By "overlooked" I do not mean that I am the first to spot this tendency. As I will mention below, Robert Brinkmeyer's *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West* (2000) discusses the Southern writers who place their texts in the West. In *Southern Aberrations* (2000), Richard Gray also mentions the tendency. And Lisa Kay Miller has examined earlier Southern writers and the frontier in *The Artist as Historian: The Southern Frontier and the Writing of History in the Fiction of William Gilmore Simms, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty* (1987).

[4] Richard Gray, *A Web of Words: The Great Dialogue of Southern Literature* (U of Georgia P, 2007), pp. 5, 6.

stream of literary and movie Westerns have resulted in a universal familiarity with the genre.

Richard White calls this collective fantasy of America "the imagined West."[5]

Given the easy recognition and popularity of the Western, it is tempting to talk of it as a genre complete in itself, but it is important to point out how flexible and "tolerant" the genre actually is. The best example of this is the fact that one of the most popular sub-genres, if not the most dominant one since the 1960s, has been termed the anti-Western. In other words, the Western is capable of containing both an ideology that celebrates Manifest Destiny and the historical genocide against Native Americans as well as one that celebrates the indigenous peoples and debunks many of the traditional myths of the genre. Mattias Bolkéus Blum rightly notes that, "the imagined West must be understood as a storehouse of once imagined tropes denoting the historical West." But equally belonging the imagined West are "idiosyncratic and iconoclastic rejections of the mythic West such as Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969) or works that remythologize the West such as Cormac McCarthy's Border trilogy (1992-1998)."[6] So while my study takes its departure in the influence of the American Western on southern fiction, I will frequently draw on texts that are not Westerns in the modern sense, such as Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, thereby skipping the formulaic Westerns of the 20th century and going directly to the source that inspired the genre. The same can be said of my frequent references to the frontier myth, a phenomenon that precedes the Western genre but at the same time serves as one of the genre's cornerstones. So when I refer to Western texts that might seem to fall outside the cowboy genre, it is not because of a loose definition on my behalf, but simply because the Western cannot be separated from the many sources—mythical, fictional, historical—on which it builds. However, when I use the term traditional Western, I mean the type

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[5] Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1991), pp. 613-632.
[6] Mattias Bolkéus Blom, *Stories of Old: The Imagined West and the Crisis of Historical Symbology in the 1970s* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1999), pp. 15-16.

of popular Western that emerged in print and in film at the beginning of the 20th century and that dominated the genre until the 1950s and 1960s when more complex and eventually revisionary Westerns took over.

In her reconstruction of the Western genre, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, Jane Tompkins asserts that Western aesthetics have saturated American society over the past century. The well-known arch-images of the genre—such as the gunfight, the cowboy on his horse, the good-hearted saloon girl, the immensity of the landscape—have pervaded, overpowered, and inspired an entire culture, sometimes without our awareness.[7] To this day the traditional Western is visible in the novels of southern writers like Barry Hannah, Larry Brown, Lewis Nordan, Chris Offutt, Ron Rash, and William Gay—writers who are mostly compared to and contrasted with William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and other canonical southern writers. They are thereby placed in an almost inescapable southern tradition, which many of them long to escape from.[8] But this generation of writers, like the rest of their generation reared on television, has been shaped by the aesthetics of the Western, and their fiction, consciously or not, bears traits from the traditional Western along with the proud tradition of Faulkner and O'Connor.

In the following I will examine some of the contemporary southern novels that I find "Western-flavored" and ask how and why they are so. The novels are: Lewis Nordan: *The Sharpshooter Blues* (1995), Larry Brown: *Father and Son* (1996), Chris Offutt: *The Good Brother* (1997), William Gay: *The Long Home* (1999), Barry Hannah: *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001), and Ron Rash: *One Foot in Eden* (2002). In my selection of novels, I focus on those set in the South (and not, like those examined by Robert Brinkmeyer, in the West[9]), and since I focus on contemporary writers, I limit my selection to books published within the last ten years from the

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[7] Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), pp. 5-6.
[8] See my discussion of the writers' various attempts to escape Faulkner's ghost on pp. 50-58.
[9] Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr., *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2000). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Remapping*.

outset of writing this dissertation. While other writers, such as Tom Franklin and Dayne Sherman, also seem relevant to this study, I did not come across their work until fairly late, so I include them only in passing. There may be other writers, unknown to me, whose works may display even more Western influence than the chosen novels. But the above six texts were the ones that I found most relevant in regard to their relation with the Western.

Since the writers in question are all male and white, my selection may seem limiting at first. However, given the history of the Western genre and the ideology behind it, it can come as no surprise that it appeals mostly to white men. The traditional Western emerged as a bulwark against women's influence and it rests on a historical base of aggressive imperialism against "inferior races." Still, some of the contemporary women writers in the South have employed certain traits that can be seen as "Western," a tendency I will discuss in chapter 3. While women writers have been able to use parts of the Western myth in their narratives, the same does not seem to be the case for black southern writers. As Michael Kreyling has pointed out, to the black southern writer, there is, "understandably, nothing affirmative in the figure of the white male hero." He is ultimately "the figure of death."[10] To my knowledge, only one black southern writer, Percival Everett, has confronted the Western directly and not surprisingly with an ironic twist. His novel *God's Country* (1994) is a very humorous debunking of the hegemonic myths of the genre, a Western that allows more space to blacks and women than previously.

By drawing on analytical and theoretical works on the American Western by, among others, Jane Tompkins, Richard W. Etulain, Lee Clark Mitchell, Will Wright, and Richard Slotkin, I will sketch the traditional formula of the Western and explore how the formula corresponds to traditional southern themes. Jane Tompkins' *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (1992) will serve as a key text throughout. I should immediately point out the weaknesses of

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[10] Michael Kreyling, *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987), pp. 186, 185. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Figures*.

Tompkins' book, for there are several. For one, the range of texts and films she uses to back up her arguments is simply not broad enough. As William Kerrigan sums up in his review, "it seems defensible to center on Wister, Grey, and L'Amour, but why ignore completely Fenimore Cooper, Francis Parkman, Hamlin Garland, Bret Harte, Bernard DeVoto, Vardis Fisher, Wallace Stegner… Larry McMurtry, and N. Scott Momaday?" [11] (132). But I am aware of these shortcomings, and I supplement them by including other texts, such as the much more extensive discussions and analyses found in the works of, among others, Richard Slotkin and Lee Clark Mitchell. Mitchell also criticizes how Tompkins prompts "provocative observations she can neither prove nor disprove."[12] But it is exactly these provocative observations (in particular about masculinity and gender roles) that are the strength of Tompkins' book, in my view. And while Tompkins' claims and assertions about gender roles are mostly speculative, her arguments are backed up by much of the gender theory I employ, which justifies the extensive use of her text.

Along with *West of Everything*, Lee Clark Mitchell's *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (1996) concludes that the primary concern of the Western is to explore the problems of what it means to be a man, how manhood can be retained, and how it can be maintained. As Tompkins points out, "what is most interesting about Westerns… is their relation to gender, and especially the way they created a model for men who came of age in the twentieth century" (17). The southern writers examined here have written predominantly about the lives of southern males, lives that are dictated primarily by the conducts of traditional masculinity, close to that of the Western hero. In my exploration of the Western's influence on the southern texts, my main interest is the many aspects of masculinity that appear, be it in the characters, the language, or otherwise. The American Western has always been a male-dominated room that only allowed women and other others a subordinate and peripheral role. At heart, the genre is a white man's

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[11] William Kerrigan, "The Western Hero and the Christian Woman," *Raritan* 12:4 (Spring 1993): 132.
[12] Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), p. 11.

fantasy, a narrative that has suppressed, silenced, and excluded a long line of others, and this is exactly why it seems disturbing to me that Western literature and film have helped shape not just a nation's but half a world's cultural and moral perceptions.

In the process of defining the Western and southern novels' preoccupations with masculinity, I will draw on masculinities theories and specifically the Australian social scientist R. W. Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity as well as sociologist Michael Kimmel's extensive work in the field. Both Connell and Kimmel are key figures in the field of masculinities studies, which has been informed by feminist theory. Its main objective, in Michael Kimmel's words, is "to treat masculinity not as the normative referent against which standards are assessed but as a problematic gender construct."[13] When transferred to literary criticism, this means to critically focus on the representation of men in literature, to examine how literature by men represents men. As John Christopher Cunningham puts it, "Literature is one mode of writing among many putting forward ideas about what men have been and what they can be."[14] And there are plenty of men to study in contemporary southern fiction. A pioneering work in the field is *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts* (1997), edited by Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson. In their introduction to the book, they place the collection "in the new cultural approach to history," which "insists upon 'the active role of language, texts, and narrative structures in the creation and description of historical reality." The book's essays reveal what Foucault termed "'a multiplicity of discourses' about manhood and womanhood in the South," and they demonstrate "how practices and narratives of southern masculinity and femininity have in fact been plural, unstable, and subject to bewildering shifts ever since the eighteenth

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[13] Michael Kimmel, "Introduction," *Changing Men: New Directions in Research on Masculinity*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel (London: Sage Publications, 1987), p. 10.
[14] John Christopher Cunningham, *Race-ing Masculinity: Identity in Contemporary U.S. Men's Writing* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.

century."[15] One of the goals of this dissertation is to discuss the "multiplicity of discourses" about manhood that appear in the southern novels, and discuss to what extent they derive from or debunk the culturally pervasive and overpowering white male Western hero. Although southern literature is by many considered a traditionalist venture forever caught up in a mythic past, several contemporary southern writers have begun to challenge that notion. Discussing postmodern historical fiction of the South, Matthew Guinn asserts that "the new stance in contemporary Southern fiction… evinces a broad "iconoclasm." Through "class-based, feminist, and cultural critiques," the new southern writers, Guinn argues, debunk the mythic heritage of southern literature and history.[16] The six writers I will be taking a closer look at range from the very postmodern and rebellious, such as Barry Hannah to more traditional practitioners of the trade like Larry Brown and William Gay. To what extent the writers live up to the above assertions will be examined in full below.

As may be obvious already, this dissertation situates itself within a poststructuralist tradition. It does not necessarily mean that I have chosen sides in the trench-war of Southern Studies. As will become clear, I also point out and draw on the established tradition of southern literature. But while I acknowledge its existence and importance, I also want to challenge it, to expand it, or perhaps even rupture it. In that sense, my work, much like Matthew Guinn's *After Southern Modernism*, constitutes "a middle road" between the two camps (Guinn x). The advantage of the poststructuralist perspective is its inherent critique of essence thinking. Meanings are not given in advance and a search for one final answer is in vain. The poststructuralist perception invites readings that deconstruct, detraditionalize, and open up for

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[15] Donaldson, Susan V. and Anne Goodwyn Jones, "Haunted Bodies: Rethinking the South through Gender," *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, eds. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1997), p. 6.

[16] Matthew Guinn, "Writing in the South Now," *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*, eds. Richard Gray and Owen Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 573. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "Writing."

individual interpretations. In that sense, the following chapters should not be seen as a cumulative gathering of "evidence" that results in an all-concluding statement. It is part of my goal to actively challenge a number of widely accepted "truth claims," not just about southern literature, but also about manhood and what it entails.

When dealing with depictions of gender, and in my case masculinity specifically, the poststructuralist perspective is very constructive. The challenge, as summed up by Schoene-Harwood, is that "only male experience is commonly granted a universal truth-claim in generic terms. Representations of female experience, on the other hand, are invariably viewed as 'a case of special pleading'… as gender-specific and hence devoid of the same universal applicability."[17] One way out of this simplistic and obstinate binary thinking is to turn to the post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler's idea of performativity. As Butler notes, "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourses produce the effects that it names."[18] There is, in other words, an understanding that discourse is a constituting force, that language does not blindly represent reality but constructs and constitutes a "truth" on the basis of the given discourse. Reality, then, is constructed, and we always interact from within a given cultural context. Masculinity is one of these contexts, and an underlying basis of this study is the belief that masculinity, like femininity, is by and large a social construction.

As Judith Butler argues in her influential *Gender Trouble*, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."[19] Ben Knights follows Butler's argument of gender as performative and asserts that being "a man is as much a matter of style, of

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[17] Berthold Schoene-Harwood, *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from* Frankenstein *to the New Man* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), p. 47.
[18] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.
[19] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 43.

intentionally or unintentionally reproducing collective power, as it is one of innocently inhabiting a particular kind of consciousness."[20] Yet obvious as this may seem, this belief is not widespread, as R. W. Connell points out in his book *Masculinities*:

> Mass culture generally assumes there is a fixed, true masculinity beneath the ebb and flow of daily life. We hear of 'real men', 'natural man', the 'deep masculine'. This idea is now shared across an impressive spectrum including the mythopoetic men's movement, Jungian psychoanalysts, Christian fundamentalists, sociobiologists and the essentialist school of feminism.[21]

In line with Butler, Connell too stresses that masculinity is a gender *role* and as such a complex social construction, which makes it useless to talk of masculinity in the singular form. Rather, there are multiple masculinities, "black as well as white, working-class as well as middle-class," and so on. But it is crucial to stress that there is not just "*a* black masculinity or *a* working-class masculinity." The deconstruction of the idea of a single form of masculinity led to Connell's term "hegemonic masculinity," which covers those forms of masculinity that are able to marginalize and dominate not only women, but also other men, on the grounds of, for instance, class, race, and sexuality. But as is the case with masculinity itself, hegemonic masculinity "is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather," Connell explains, "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (76). However, it is not always the most powerful people who are the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity. Instead, they may be prototypes, such as film actors, or they can even be fantasy figures, such as film characters (77). The mythic Western hero is an obvious example of a fantasy figure that displays a tremendously powerful hegemonic masculinity.

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[20] Ben Knights, *Writing Masculinities: Male Narratives in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 14.

[21] R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 45.

Until recently, men and masculinity remained untouched; a given. But sociologists and gender researchers like R. W. Connell and Michael Kimmel have been instrumental in shaping Men's Studies or, as it is now called, Masculinities Studies. This growing field covers issues ranging from politics to the private, but a branch of masculinities studies also deals with literature. Books like Ben Knights' *Writing Masculinities* (1999) and Berthold Schoene-Harwood's *Writing Men* (2000) have attempted to demolish masculinity's normative status and explore some of the ways in which male writers re-imagine themselves beyond the confines of traditional gender formations.

As James D. Riemer points out, just as feminist literary criticism and theory brought about changes in the way women are perceived, "as characters, writers, and critics—so can men's studies approach affect and broaden the way we view men in American literature .… Approaching American literature in the light of the concerns and attitude of these studies can change not only our perceptions of male characters and manly ideals but the focus of literary criticism as well." Riemer stresses that an important implication in reading American literature from a masculinities studies perspective is "the possibility of viewing a significant portion of American literature, both popular and 'mainstream' works, as social documents reflecting our society's ideals of masculinity .… Such studies," Riemer states, "would reinforce the notions that there exists a multiplicity of ideals of American manhood, some of which at times conflict with one another." [22] Reading Western/southern literature from a masculinities perspective opens up the texts in new ways compared to traditional patriarchal literary readings.

When dealing with a genre as male-dominated as the Western, it is impossible not to attempt to come to terms with its inherent macho fetish. Jane Tompkins stresses the way Westerns suppress "the inner life" of its male characters, thereby painting itself into a corner

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[22] James D. Riemer, "Rereading American Literature from a Men's Studies Perspective: Some Implications," in *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men's Studies*, ed. Harry Brod (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 289, 290.

where the hero cannot enjoy "living with himself and other people" (127, 128). Since the

cowboy's place in the American cultural consciousness and public discourse is overwhelming, and

since the perception of the Western hero as macho "speaks to something shared and visceral in

the public consciousness and unconsciousness,"[23] it is interesting to examine to what extent that

cultural baggage of masculinity has been passed on to southern fiction.

The masculine values inherent in the iconographic Western hero were accurately summed

up by Robert Warshow, who in 1954 wrote:

> Those values are… the image of a single man who wears a gun on his thigh. The
> gun tells us that he lives in a world of violence, and even that he 'believes in
> violence.' …. [But] it is not violence at all which is the 'point' of the Western movie,
> but a certain image of man, a style, which expresses itself most clearly in violence.
> Watch a child with his toy guns and you will see: what most interests him is not (as
> we so much fear) the fantasy of hurting others, but to work out how a man might
> look when he shoots or is shot. A hero is one who looks like a hero. Whatever the
> limitations of such an idea in experience, it has always been valid in art.[24]

The kind of masculinity that the Western hero represents is, in other words, a hegemonic

masculinity, one that is claimed by a particular performance of manhood, a sheer physical style.

Violence looms threateningly in the background as a constant means of support in order to

maintain the authority. The message that the Western hero gives to those watching is simple but

powerful: act like me, and you too will be in power. The message is not lost on Chris Offutt, who

accurately sums up the connection between masculinity and the conducts of the Western hero in

his memoir *The Same River Twice*: "American boys are raised knowing that a horse between your

legs and a low-slung pistol are a guarantee of manhood."[25] As Offutt's observation suggests, the

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[23] Hubert Cohen, "'Men Have Tears in Them': The Other Cowboy Hero," *Journal of American Culture* 21:4 (Winter 1998): 58.
[24] Robert Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Western," [1954] *The Western Reader*, eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman (New York: Limelight Editions, 1998), p. 47.
[25] Chris Offutt, *The Same River Twice: A Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 67.

Western's concern with manhood is equally significant in contemporary southern fiction, drawing on a long and strong southern tradition which favored patriarchy as its natural authority.[26] However, in spite of the dominance of male cultures in the South, both in culture and literature, very few attempts have been made to deconstruct the normative role of masculinity and examine it more closely.

Male southern fiction has always been occupied with questions of masculinity, honor and violence; so much that it is perhaps taken for granted. In *Writing Masculinities*, Ben Knights elaborates on this general paradox of dominance and invisibility, stating that "given the cultural dominance of men's voices… there is a sense in which masculinity can be taken so for granted as to be invisible" (1, 3). This is what Michael Kimmel refers to as "the privilege of invisibility."[27] Knights echoes both Kimmel and Schoene-Harwood when he points out that we as readers traditionally have "been addressed as gendered beings—but gendered according to a spurious universality attached to the male gender" (3). Linguist Sally Johnson also laments this tendency, arguing that "whilst women continue to be the object of problematization, men adhere to a position characterized by *normalization*. Yet it is precisely men's status as 'ungendered representatives of humanity' that is the key to their hegemony." Johnson calls for the urgency of discriminating "between men as unselected representatives of humanity, on the one hand, and as constructed, gendered individuals, on the other. We need to differentiate between the *implicit* and *explicit* study of masculinity."[28] To study masculinity explicitly is exactly one of the objects of this dissertation. I wish to challenge and, in Ben Knight's words, deny "the gendered subject

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[26] For a discussion on the patriarchal tradition in the South, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986); also Robert J. Haws' "Sex, Class and Masculinity in Southern Culture," *The Many Souths: Class in Southern Culture*, ed. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 2004), pp. 45-55.

[27] Michael Kimmel, *The Gendered Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), p. 7.

[28] Sally Johnson, "Theorizing Language and Masculinity," *Language and Masculinity*, ed. Sally Johnson and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 12, 13.

position so often purveyed to us (both men and women) by texts and by the institutions and

conventions of reading" (3).

In examining the depictions of Western/southern masculinities, I also wish to challenge

some of the preconceived notions about southern male writers, such as that expressed by Fred

Hobson in *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*. Here Hobson presents Cormac

McCarthy, Harry Crews, and Barry Hannah as novelists who "write a sort of neo-Southern

Gothic."[29] Writers like Larry Brown and William Gay could easily have been included in this group.

While Hobson's categorization, limited as it is, may be justified, it is more difficult to validate his

claim that "the problem for the neo-Gothic novelist is that southern social reality, broad and

representative reality, no longer so dramatically supports his fiction" (7). Although the writers in

focus here all use elements of the grotesque and the gothic, there is a deep concern with the

individual and his or her place in, what Hobson calls, "southern social reality." In addition,

southern male fiction is much more than yet another bad country song. In his *New York Times*

review, Richard Bernstein sums up Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* as "a strenuously

pulpy series of vignettes from the lower strata of a small Mississippi town where fishing, drinking,

fornicating and fighting are the chief activities."[30] Likewise, in his review of Larry Brown's *Fay*,

Albert Mobilio states that Brown's males are predisposed "to overheated lives of hunting, boozing

and hopeless love," and enrolls Brown, along with "Harry Crews and Barry Hannah, in

Hemingway's 3-F club of fishing, fighting and fornicating."[31] It is this casual generalization, this

snide trivialization of male southern fiction that I want to challenge.

It seems so easy to write off southern fiction by categorizing it as these critics have. I

therefore wish to examine and evaluate to what extent the writers and their characters and plots

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[29] Fred Hobson, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World* (Athens, Ga.: The U of Georgia P, 1991), p. 7. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Postmodern*.
[30] Richard Bernstein, "Giving In to the Urge to Do Bad in the South," *The New York Times* (10 July, 2001): E7.
[31] Albert Mobilio, "Biloxi Bound," *The New York Times* (16 April, 2000): Section 7, p. 18.

are grounded in cultural ideals concerning masculinity, and how that affects the texts and characters. I will look at the roles traditional southern culture and the southern literary tradition play in the writers' constructions of masculinities, and how this relates to the aesthetics of the Western. Just as the Western has served to map out cultural anxieties, especially concerning the making of manhood, the male southern writers discussed here each takes on the constantly changing forms of manhood and masculinity, and their texts present us with various complex and ambivalent images of individuals and the confusion, frustration, and alienation they feel.

As readers, Ben Knights notes, "we are not simply passive consumers but active collaborators in meaning. In proposing awareness of and resistance to stereotypical masculinities, I would stress that texts are rarely, if ever, monolithic. Their gaps, inconsistencies and contradictions give us our starting place" (9). It is precisely the gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the novels of this dissertation that I will examine closer. Important questions need to be asked of the texts: how does the preoccupation with manhood manifest itself? Why is there so much violence? Is it merely sensationalism or does it serve a deeper purpose? And what do these obsessions tell us, not only about the writers and their works, but also about the state of southern fiction today? Are the novels simply amalgamations of a history steeped in violence and "Hemingway's 3-F club of fishing, fighting and fornicating," or do the writers have something new and profound to say? I will, of course, also examine to what extent the texts themselves fall into the trap of the hegemonic masculinity that they attempt to grasp. In other words, are they themselves monolithic patriarchal narratives, or are there sub-texts or counter-texts that suggest otherwise? Are men simply portrayed as victims, or do the texts suggest alternative masculinities? Are there sociopolitical critiques embedded in the portrayal of contemporary manhood? Furthermore, I ask, is there any room in these scripts for women and other Others?

Structure

The dissertation is divided into three main parts. Part One includes chapters 1 and 2 and serves to introduce the subject and to ground the dissertation both historically, theoretically and research-wise. Part Two includes chapters 3 and 4 and focuses on language and structure in terms of the Western and how it applies to the southern texts. Part Three consists of chapters 5, 6, and 7 and discusses the use of plain folk and the role of landscape in the texts, again with the Western tradition in mind. Finally, Lewis Nordan's *The Sharpshooter Blues* is discussed on its own terms, a discussion that draws on the previous chapters. My intention has been to focus thoroughly on all six novels in different chapters. However, Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden* will not receive the same "special treatment" as the five other novels. At the outset of writing this dissertation, I had, admittedly too hastily, placed Rash as another southern writer who used landscape in the tradition of the Western. I had thus planned chapter 8, "Southern Landscapes and the Western Tradition" to be primarily about *One Foot in Eden*. However, after a closer reading, it would be hard to press the statement too far, so the chapter will deal with all six novels, and while *One Foot in Eden* does receive more space than the other novels in the chapter, it does not occupy as central a position in the dissertation as I had hoped.

In **Chapter 2**, "Southern Literature and the Frontier Myth," I go back in time to look for possible answers to the current southern fascination with the West. I first trace and discuss the historical similarities as well as differences between the South and West. I then outline the emergence of the Western myth, better known as the Frontier Myth, from James Fenimore Cooper, Buffalo Bill, and the countless dime novels to Owen Wister's seminal Western *The Virginian*. I move on to some of the literary precursors in the South who have written about the frontier experience, starting with William Gilmore Simms and Mark Twain, and including the Agrarians as well as writers like William Faulkner and Eudora Welty. I then discuss the six

contemporary southern writers and the strong and sometimes suffocating traditions they write

out of and up against. By discussing their various reactions to the sometimes forced pigeonholing

along with Faulkner and O'Connor, I show that there is in fact plenty of room in these works for

other traditions and experiments than what is often expected and acknowledged. I also briefly

move beyond the male focus to show how much of contemporary southern women's writing also

display signs of the Western's aesthetics. This chapter draws especially on Richard Slotkin, Richard

Etulain, Michal Kimmel, Michael Kreyling, and Robert Brinkmeyer.

    Chapter 3, "Language and Anti-Language," explores the apparent discrepancy between the

southern penchant for talk and the Western's distrust of language. Despite the southern tradition,

and in line with the Western tradition, many of the male characters in southern novels consider

language a factor not to be trusted, and they act accordingly. But how do the writers themselves

consider language? As Peter Schwenger points out in *Phallic Critiques*, an interesting paradox

appears when we look at the language of male writers and their characters: Since language itself

is traditionally and culturally considered a threat to male integrity, both the Western and the

southern novels are full of men who act but are silent. I examine to what extent the writers

themselves are aware of this paradox. The novels will be discussed in the light of language and

gender theories by Deborah Cameron, Jennifer Coates, and Peter Schwenger.

    Chapter 4, "Opposing Players: The Western Structure in Southern Novels," explores one of

the ways of exposing the presence of Western traits in southern texts. By employing Will Wright's

theory of structural analysis, I give a detailed structural reading of Brown's *Father and Son* and

Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* to show how they both answer to and resist the structure of

the Western. While structural analysis does not cohere with my overall post-structural

perspective, I defend the use of structuralism here, since I use it as one way of prying apart the

southern texts. And I don't claim the results as final proof, but as suggestions that support my thesis.

In **Chapter 5**, "Plain Folk," I take on the much-needed discussion of class in southern literature, again with echoes in the Western. Richard Gray has noted a shift in southern literature from the patriarchal plantation novel and its offshoots to a more populist tradition with a focus on plain folk. It is this tradition that have been employed by the writers I focus on. Inherent in the words "cowboy" and "crackers," which I use in the title, is a sense of plain folk, be they hard-working cattle wranglers or poor white sharecroppers. Both words are symbolically loaded and promise more than they ultimately keep. Just as most of the heroes in Westerns are not actual cowboys, i.e. poorly paid seasonal laborers, but more accurately, gunslingers, so the male protagonists of the southern novels I am exploring are not all crackers, i.e. poor whites. But most of them are plain folk who live outside the big cities, and this indicates an increasing interest in the issue of class which until very recently has been ignored in the discussion of southern literature. It was dwarfed by such trademark issues as race, history, and, more recently, gender. I begin the chapter by exploring the historical origins of both the traditional southern hero and the Western hero, which turns out to be one and the same. I discuss how these two since parted ways, and how and why the "common man hero" of the West is now used by southern writers. Through close readings of Offutt's *The Good Brother* and Gay's *The Long Home*, I trace both Agrarian and Western influences, and I search for markers of class, which is ultimately tied to ideas or performances of masculinity.

Chapter 6, "Southern Landscapes and the Western Tradition," examines the use of landscape in the novels and the Western and southern traditions behind it. In order to escape from the burden of the past, literary and historical, that also clings to the southern landscape, many writers attempt to reclaim the landscapes from the mythic confines of Faulkner and co.

They do this by insisting on a particular, concrete landscape, which is then used as a moral test of strength, much in the tradition of the Western. While Ron Rash also tests his hero against the landscape, his novel invokes not so much the formula-Western as the broader Virgin Land myth that precedes it and which Rash ultimately undermines.

Chapter 7, "(Mis)using the Western Myth in Lewis Nordan's *The Sharpshooter Blues*," looks at the many ways Lewis Nordan plays with the Western myth. Nordan's novel shares many similarities with the 1962 John Ford movie *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, but ultimately they reach different conclusions. While Ford's film, albeit its complexity, is ultimately a praise of the hegemonic values inherent in the male West, Nordan eventually dismisses these values and opens up for a much broader and inclusive understanding of the myth of the West.

Apart from elucidating the Western/southern connection, this study also sees it as its purpose to give much needed academic attention to writers who are rather overlooked in the criticism of American literature. While all of the writers are well known within the field of southern literature, and while some of them are taught in universities nationwide (and even world-wide), most of these writers remain fairly anonymous in the general public's view.

As the title proposes, my dissertation explores *one* of the influences that animate contemporary southern fiction, namely the American Western. It is not meant as a monolithic statement, but as one way to approach the works. As all good literature, most southern fiction is informed by a multitude of influences. The Western is one of these, but its echo is strong enough and so consistent that it warrants further exploration.

2. Southern Literature and the Frontier Myth

One of the few previous studies of the contemporary southern/Western literary connection is Robert Brinkmeyer's *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West* (2000), which explores how an increasing number of southern writers have begun writing about and placing their novels in the American West; a tendency Brinkmeyer characterizes as "a startling break in the Southern literary tradition" (*Remapping* 3). Although I will naturally draw on some of Brinkmeyer's discussions, this dissertation is not an expansion of his thesis, since the novels in focus here all take place in the South. This is rather an exploration into the background for the newfound interest in southern literature in the West. As will become clear, the South and the West have a long tradition of inter-relations.

By comparing 'the Western hero' to the male protagonists of the southern novels, I will examine how masculinity is played out and what effects it has on the reading of the novels. One way of doing this is to go back and examine the foundations of these masculine myths and their role in the frontier myth. The frontier is, in Brinkmeyer's words, "the heartland of American mythology… the dangerous zone where borders and boundaries blur, where society is always under construction, where the civilized mixes with the savage," and he asserts that "there is no better place from which to witness America's ideological construction—and destruction—at work" (*Remapping* 32-33). What is interesting in relation to my discussion is that part of this ideological construction took place on southern soil.

Historical Connections

Before exploring contemporary southern writers and their connection to the Western genre, a quick look at some of the historical connections between the South and the West will prove valuable. It is important to remember that the South was in fact the frontier at one point. Georgia was the westernmost of the original thirteen British colonies, and for years after the 1783 Treaty of Paris, Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi marked the southern line of the frontier. To the settlers in the East, this area was synonymous with the West. America simply did not reach any farther west at this point, a fact epitomized in the title of James Kirke Paulding's 1832 novel *Westward Ho!*, which follows Virginians into Kentucky.

Since the early nineteenth century, Mark S. Graybill points out, the West has "occupied a special place in the southern imagination."[32] Graybill cites Richard Slotkin who notes how southerners in particular have mythologized the frontier as a new Garden of Eden. "Like other Americans in 1784-1820," Slotkin notes, "Southerners had seen the vast territory between the mountains and the Mississippi as a grand field of economic expansion."[33] Yet, as Slotkin points out, because of the slave economy of the South, the southern perception of the frontier ultimately differed from what was to become the prevailing Frontier Myth. Where the North saw the yeoman farmer as a heroic frontier figure, in the South, Slotkin writes, "the military aristocrat was the Frontier hero—a chevalier, a conquistador, subduing and subordinating the masses of a savage race, the conscious agent not of individual ambition alone, but of corporate will" (*Fatal* 141). But, as Lisa Kay Miller shows, there were attempts to merge the two myths. Frederick Jackson Turner's idea of the frontier as a seminal influence of the American character also influenced southern historians. One of them, Ulrich B. Phillips's, a student of Turner, incorporated

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[32] Mark S. Graybill, "Peeping Toms on History: *Never Die* as Postmodern Western," *Perspectives on Barry Hannah*, ed. Martyn Bone (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2007), p. 120.

[33] Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (Middletown: Weslyan UP, 1985), p., 141. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Fatal*.

the frontier myth into the southern plantation myth and saw the two, frontier and plantation, as forces in the development of southern character. According to Miller, Phillips believed the plantation to be the greater force in the South and its influence is the reason for some of the differences between the South and the rest of the nation. But like Turner, Phillips believed that the American national character was largely a product of the frontier experience (Miller 39-40). While there are still clear strains of the aristocrat hero in the South, the writers I am looking at have clearly employed the plainer hero, who may be derived from the yeoman farmer but who clearly draws on the mythic cowboy as he became known in regular Western fiction and films throughout the latter half of the 20th century. I will return to this aspect later.

It should be noted that the South has often played a key role in Westerns, emphasizing again the direct connection between two distinct regions. Southerners figure prominently in seminal Western texts and movies: Owen Wister's Virginian, the seminal Western hero, is a southerner, and Edward Buscombe furthermore notes that the "Western is full of discontented Southerners: Benjamin Tyreen in *Major Dundee*, Stonewall Torrey in *Shane*, Ben Allison in *The Tall Men*, Josey Wales in *The Outlaw Josey Wales*," and, of course, John Wayne's former Confederate soldier Ethan Edwards of *The Searchers*.[34] Likewise southern fiction has seen its share of characters with Western traits. The unrelenting Thomas Sutpen of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Twain's Huckleberry Finn, as well as many contemporary characters, to whom I will return toward the end of this chapter.

The historical connection between South and West is also emphasized by Barry Hannah in an interview. Here he points out that "after the Civil War… Confederate cavalrymen from the Western armies rode all the way up to Montana and settled it. About a third of Montana was settled by runaway Confederates who did not want any government." But apart from the physical

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[34] Edward Buscombe, *The Searchers* (London: BFI Publishing, 2000), p. 9.

presence of southerners in the West, Hannah also indicates that part of the Westerner's revered individualist trait can be traced to the South: "That [anti-government] strain is also in your Westerner. He's neither Republican, Democrat, socialist. He doesn't care. He simply wants to make a fortune and build a new personality. Survivalists still hide out there; they hide for the end of the world."[35] The survivalists are, in fact, part of the subject of Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother*, in which the protagonist flees Kentucky and lands in the arms of Montana militiamen.

Offutt too has emphasized the connection between South and West. In talking about the historical significance of Kentucky as a frontier state, he calls the Appalachian Mountains "a barrier to the West," and elaborates: "The people who chose to live in the eastern Kentucky mountains were essentially the outcasts of the European outcasts." Offutt points out how the clash between cultures in Kentucky resulted in a unique culture: "The Scotch-Irish came here and intermingled with the Indians—the only place in the country where the white man didn't come in and start a wholesale slaughter. They brought their culture and intermixed with the Indians and stayed there in relative isolation …. They respected the Indians… and they learned from them a lot. At home, Indian blood is a sign of pride, whereas in other parts of the country it's looked down upon."[36] As Hannah's and Offutt's comments indicate, apart from the similarities, in any discussion about the South and West, some basic differences are immediately apparent.

As Robert Rebein points out, with Leslie Fiedler in mind, the central image in southern writing is "the ruined or decaying plantation house," whereas "the central image in Western writing is… the lone rider traversing the western landscape."[37] Brinkmeyer makes a somewhat similar distinction in opposing southern culture with the rest of the country: by using a popular image of the Western, American society can be defined as "a wagon train moving progressively

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[35] Personal interview with Barry Hannah, May 26, 2006.

[36] Louis H. Palmer III, "Chris Offutt Comes Home," *Appalachian Journal* 26:1 (Fall, 1998): 24.

[37] Robert Rebein, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction after Postmodernism* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 110-111.

west. Southern society, on the other hand, is the walled fort the wagon train leaves behind" (*Remapping* 4). Despite obvious differences, and apart from the concrete historical connections, the South also has an interesting literary connection to the Western that I will return to shortly. Let me end this summary of similarities and differences with Peter Applebome's suggestive characterization of a distinct region:

> Think of a place that's bitterly antigovernment and fiercely individualistic, where race is a constant subtext to daily life, and God and guns run through public discourse like an electric current. Think of a place where influential scholars market theories of white supremacy, where the world 'liberal' is a negative epithet, where hang-'em-high law-and-order justice centered on the death penalty and throw-away-the-key sentencing are politically all but unstoppable. Think of a place obsessed with states' rights, as if it were the 1850s all over again and the Civil War had never been fought.[38]

The individualistic, gun-toting, "hang'em-high" region is not the militia West of Chris Offutt's novel, but the South as experienced by Applebome. These characteristics, he asserts, "have always described the South. Somehow, they now describe the nation" (8). This characterization emphasizes the close ideological relationship between South and West and points to the difficulty in defining rigid distinctions of South and West—especially when it comes to the Southwestern region. Although I agree with Applebome's characterization, I would still argue that the American West still claims a copyright in the national (and international) consciousness when it comes to "themes" like antigovernment, individualism, guns, and "hang-'em-high law and order."

The Frontier Myth

Having established a historical connection between South and West and also some obvious differences, let us now take a closer look at the authoritative myth of the West that has so

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[38] Peter Applebome, *Dixie Rising: How the South is Shaping American Values, Politics, and Culture* (San Diego: Harvest Books, 1996), p. 8.

dominated American culture, also in the South. The myth of the West, also known as the Frontier Myth, is deeply embedded in the American consciousness, as Richard Slotkin asserts: "The Myth of the Frontier is our oldest and most characteristic myth, expressed in a body of literature, folklore, ritual historiography, and polemics produced over a period of three centuries."[39] The myth was given historical significance by Frederick Jackson Turner, who in his Frontier Thesis both declared the frontier closed but also acknowledged the frontier as essential in forming the American national identity: "The existence of an area of free land," Turner stated, "its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."[40] It was in the borderland between the urban and civilized and the wild and violent wilderness that the true American character found its shape. Turner viewed the frontier as an area that created a new sense of freedom and opened new opportunities for Americans. It was here that the basic idea of American democracy was born. The frontier was a place where men were finally freed from the European influence. Here an unusual man was formed (the myth is, as always, the story of a white man), a man that would become mythologized in various shapes: pioneer, gunslinger, trapper, cowboy, and farmer.

Ironically, Turner's death sentence over the frontier created a renewed interest in the frontier experience. Since Turner had emphasized the frontier as the essential part of the American national identity, it was only natural that people returned to the frontier, if not physically then through fantasy and myth. Just as Turner had asserted that the Wild West was history, the creation of the myth of the Wild West took shape in earnest. It has already been going on in dime novels and in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, but now that it had been declared

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[39] Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK.: U of Oklahoma P, 1998), p. 10. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Gunfighter*.
[40] Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," [1893] *Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), p. 31.

dead, there was suddenly a breeding ground for a nostalgic mythmaking that would turn into the dominant and archetypical American genre in the 20th century.

As a clear indication of the influence of the myth, Slotkin notes how "the terminology of the Myth of the Frontier has become part of our common language, and we do not require an elaborate explanatory program to make it comprehensible." He furthermore explains that myths are stories drawn from history. By being used over many generations, these stories have acquired "a symbolizing function central to the culture of the society that produces them .... they become structural metaphors containing all the essential elements of a culture's world view."[41] Rooted within the Frontier Myth is a violent seed. As Slotkin tells us, the first colonists saw America as a place to "regenerate their fortunes, their spirits, and the power of their church and nation;" however, violence ultimately became the means to that regeneration, "and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience." This is why "men like Davy Crockett became national heroes by defining national aspiration in terms of so many bears destroyed, so much land preempted, so many trees hacked down, so many Indians and Mexicans dead in the dust."[42] A crucial factor in the production of what would become the Western myth was James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales,[43] which in many ways spelled out some of the ground rules of the myth.

As John Cawelti sums up, in his "exploration of the dialectic between advancing civilization and the free and natural life of the wilderness, and in his attempt to synthesize these forces,

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[41] Richard Slotkin, "Myth and the Production of History," *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, eds. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), pp. 72, 70.

[42] Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan UP, 1973), p. 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Regeneration*.

[43] "The Leatherstocking Tales" is used for Cooper's series of novels focused on Natty Bumppo: *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841).

Cooper invented the Western."[44] Natty Bumppo, the hero of the popular Leatherstocking Tales,

reflected Cooper's own paradox. According to Cawelti, Cooper was divided between "his belief in

a traditional social hierarchy and the dream of a free, spontaneous life in nature," and Natty

Bumppo had originally been developed "in terms of two distinct aspects… the loyal servant of the

great family, a man of simple Christian virtues who has no desire to challenge the traditional

social order" and "the marginal, lonely man of the wilderness who hates the restrictions of society

and who fears, above all, the operations of a social authority that he does not understand or feel

he needs" (*Adventure* 201). Educated by the Delaware Indians, the white Natty Bumppo, like

countless Western heroes preceding him, has a strong identification with the wilderness.

An equally important trait in Natty, and one that can be found in the many Western heroes

molded after him, is his unflinching sense of right and wrong: In *The Prairie* we are told that Natty

"was a man, endowed with the choicest and perhaps rarest gift of nature, that of distinguishing

good from evil, his virtues were those of simplicity…."[45] This natural gift has provided a century of

Western heroes with a justification for their actions, for moving outside the law in order to

uphold it. Their unswerving belief in their own moral compass is what grants them their natural

role as hero. Add to this "gift" the iconic power that Cooper also imbued his Leatherstocking hero

with, as in the following excerpt from *The Prairie* shows:

> … the whole party was brought to a halt, by a spectacle as sudden as it was
>
> unexpected. The sun has fallen below the crest of the nearest wave of the prairie,
>
> leaving the usual rich and glowing train on its track. In the centre of this flood of
>
> fiery light a human form appeared, drawn against the gilded background, as
>
> distinctly, and seemingly palpable, as though it would come within the grasp of my
>
> extended hand. The figure was colossal; the attitude musing and melancholy, and the
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> situation directly in the route of the travelers. But embedded, as it was, in its setting

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[44] John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976), p. 195. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Adventure*.
[45] James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie* (New York: The Library of America, 1985), pp. 1006-07.

of garish light, it was impossible to distinguish its just proportions or true character.
(893)

Here Cooper depicts Deerslayer in all his mythic and pseudo-divine status; an image that would resonate powerfully in literary and movie Westerns to come. This heroic being is, in Cawelti's words, "the true western hero" (*Adventure* 200), and the iconic image would be copied by, among others, Zane Grey in *Riders of the Purple Sage*, a novel that further cemented the Western's central position in the American imagination. Here, the heroine "wheeled and saw a horseman, silhouetted against the western sky, coming riding out of the sage… in the golden glare of the sun."[46] Similarly, the first on-screen appearances of cinematic Western heroes like *Stagecoach*'s Ringo Kid and Shane point back to Cooper's Leatherstocking.

As the passages from both Cooper and Grey make clear, the landscape in which the hero resides is also crucial to the genre. According to Cawelti, the most defining element of the Western is "the symbolic landscape in which it takes place and the influence this landscape has on the character and actions of the hero." This landscape is "a field of action that centers upon the point of encounter between civilization and wilderness, East and West, settled society and lawless openness." The well-known element, the frontier settlement, constitutes a point in both in space and time: Geographically, it represents a group of pioneers living on the edge of a wilderness, just barely linked to the civilized Eastern society. Historically, Cawelti argues, "the Western represents a moment when the forces of civilization and wilderness life are in balance, the epic moment at which the old life and the new confront each other and individual actions may tip the balance one way or another, thus shaping the future history of the whole settlement." This epic confrontation of forces, says Cawelti, "brings forth the hero, who, whether Leatherstocking, cowboy, gunfighter, or marshal, is defined by the way he is caught between contrasting ways of life. Most often, the hero is a man of the wilderness who comes out of the old 'lawless' way of life to which he is

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[46] Zane Grey, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912. New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 8.

deeply attached both by personal inclination and by his relationship to male comrades who have shared that life with him." The most important feature of the Western is the relationship between the hero and the opposing forces of civilization and wilderness. It is "in the changing treatment of this conflict, so basic to American thought and feeling, that the Western most clearly reflects the attitudes of its creators and audiences at different periods" (*Adventure* 193-94).

The borderlines between wilderness and civilization and those of Indian and White are crucial to the Frontier Myth that supports the Western. As Richard Slotkin explains, crossing these borders is necessary in order for the hero to experience a regression to a more primitive state that will lead to a regeneration resulting in a "new, purified social character… Although the Indian and the Wilderness are the settler's enemy, they also provide him with the new consciousness through which he will transform the world. The heroes of this myth-historical quest must therefore be 'men (or women) who know Indians'—characters whose experiences, sympathies, and even allegiances fall on both sides of the Frontier" (*Gunfighter* 14). The hero's association with wilderness separates him from all other characters associated with civilization, and it positions the Western hero as good and strong, simply because, as Will Wright explains, "he is involved with the pure and noble wilderness, not with the contaminating civilization of the East." The East, in Westerns, is always associated with "weakness, cowardice, selfishness, or arrogance."[47] Yet despite the strengths and advantages that come with first-hand knowledge of the wilderness, the hero inevitably becomes an outsider.

Literature as Myth

While Cooper was instrumental in communicating his version of the Western myth to the American public, other factors played a crucial part. Over several decades bona fide frontier hero

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[47] Will Wright, *Sixguns & Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1975), p. 57.

William Cody's immensely popular "Buffalo Bill and his Wild West Show" traveled the country and formulated a mythic story of adventure, drama, and competition that to this day remains what Richard Etulain calls "a notable Creation Story of American history."[48] As Slotkin points out, and Buffalo Bill is a fitting example, American myths, and especially tales of heroes, often turn out to be the work of "literary hacks or of promoters seeking to sell American real estate by mythologizing the landscape" (*Regeneration* 6). This kind of myth found its embodiment in the popular dime novel, which flooded the American reading public from 1860 to the turn of the century. Etulain notes how the often faceless dime novelists discarded Cooper's emphasis on class differences and instead advocated strength and courage as the motivating force of westerners. By emphasizing that success was determined by courage more than class backgrounds, the dime novel narratives "echoed the democratic, individualistic themes of Buffalo Bill and his traveling Wild West" (17). The themes of democracy and individualism were crucial to Owen Wister, an Easterner writing about the West, who created what would become one of the most influential heroes of the 20th century: his unnamed cowboy hero in his novel *The Virginian* (1902), generally regarded as the first "real" Western.

The Western genre has changed drastically since the publication of Wister's novel, so it is impossible to talk of a fixed Western formula. There are, however, fixed themes that the Western employs again and again. One of the archetypical and crucial elements is the hero role. The nameless hero in *The Virginian* set the standard for a century of Western stories. Wister's cowboy was a tribute to the knightly Anglo-Saxon of Walter Scott's fiction, and also, as Etulain illustrates, an embodiment of traits from Daniel Boone, Cooper's Leatherstocking, and the heroes of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Lacking aristocratic background, distinguished family, and an education, the hero

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[48] Richard W Etulain, *Telling Western Stories: From Buffalo Bill to Larry McMurtry* (Alberquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1999), p. 16.

nonetheless proves himself a man among men, both through physical power and common sense

(68).

If we go back and take a look at some of the literature of the antebellum South, yet another

connection between South and West becomes apparent. In chronicling the literature of "the

Western South," Jay Hubbell notes the strong influence of James Fenimore Cooper and Sir Walter

Scott's romantic view,[49] just as was the case with Wister's *The Virginian*. Scott's influence has

always been strong in the South, in part because of the many Scottish immigrants in the South

and their strong sense of pride in traditions. Michael Kreyling aptly sums up the critique of the

style of antebellum southern writing: "the style was simply and lazily borrowed from Scott with a

few unimaginative changes to fit the American locale, and Cooper did it first and better" (Figures

9). But we must remember that Scott's legacy is apparent in the Western. The cowboy figure is

partly, as Rebein notes, "a knight errant, an embodiment of the medieval chivalry southerners

picked up from reading too much Sir Walter Scott" (115).

One of the few antebellum southern writers to rise above the influences, and probably the

most famous literary chronicler of southern frontier life, was William Gilmore Simms, whose

romance novels of the 1830s gave a heroic account of the Revolution in the Carolinas. As Lisa Kay

Miller shows, Simms relied on the American Frontier Myth and used it with very little variation.

Like Cooper before him and Frederick Jackson Turner after him, Simms acknowledged the frontier

as a crucial factor in creating and developing the ideal American.[50] However, as Michael Kreyling

points out, there is a crucial difference in the way Cooper and Simms perceived the role of the

hero. While Simms praised the way Cooper employed the hitherto unused "resources" of

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[49] It should be noted, however, that other Southern writers, like Charles Brockden Brown and Robert Montgomery Bird contradicted Cooper in their portrayal of Native Americans as "cunning wild beasts." Jay B. Hubbell, *The South in American Literature: 1607-1900* (Durham: Duke UP, 1954), p. 314.
[50] Lisa Kay Miller, *The Artist as Historian: The Southern Frontier and the Writing of History in the Fiction of William Gilmore Simms, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1987), p. 42.

American history in the creation of his Leatherstocking hero, he also had strong reservations

against what he identified as lack of a "strong social element." As Kreyling notes, the Cooper hero

is a solitary creature who rarely partakes in social contact. According to Kreyling, the model

behind this depiction of "moral individuality in solitude" mirrors an "accompanying national

cultural construction that Simms does not wholeheartedly endorse." Simms' major concern with

the Cooper hero is that he does not "create a people; they do not forge a corporate 'we' through

love or mutual identification." He does emit a fascinating and heroic aura that draws people in,

but the relationship between the hero and the community is still askew. He becomes "an icon

revered by a group of inferiors, a potential 'us' who look to the hero for identity and direction. Yet

we cannot love this hero, for he scants his social contacts and clings to his individuality," as

Kreyling puts it (*Figures*, 33-34). Instead of Cooper's anarchist hero, Simms developed his own

hero, what Kreyling refers to as "the genius-hero." This is a man for the people; someone who

awakens the genius of his people and assumes the status of cultural icon. "His presence," Kreyling

states, "ensures corporate identity and order; he makes the people a self-conscious, functioning

group" (35).

In the French knight Chevalier Bayard, Simms found the epitome of the heroic male, and

wrote him into a southern tradition: "In person, Bayard was tall, straight, and slender. His

countenance was mild and gracious. His eyes were black, his nose inclining to aquiline, and his

complexion fair."[51] As Kreyling points out, this outline of the hero "is deeply engraved in the

cultural mind of the Old South," and his traits can be traced through real-life aspirants such as

Robert E. Lee and George Washington as well as fictional heroes from Edward Grayson, Ned

Hazard, and, of course, Faulkner's Sartoris family (36-37).

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[51] William Gilmore Simms, *The Life of The Chevalier Bayard* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1847), p. 400. Qtd. in Kreyling *Figures*, p. 37.

While the southern frontier fiction, such as that of Simms, can be traced from the early 19th century all the way to today, it is merely a small sub-genre. As Hubbell notes, the Western states of the South developed their own literary tradition—what is now known as "Southwestern humor" (316). The best known purveyor of Southwestern humor is, of course, Mark Twain, who, although a midwesterner, became associated first with the West and later with the South. In his Western sketches, Twain tapped into the already existing tradition of men's westward flight from the trappings of civilization; the very escape Huckleberry Finn eventually undertakes. Twain thus became one of the scores of voices who celebrated the West. While many writers had tried to copy James Fenimore Cooper's popular stories, Twain went in the opposite direction and outright ridiculed the Leatherstocking series, creating in the process the groundwork for the Western parodies that would flourish in the 1960s and 70s in novels like Ishmael Reed's *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), Richard Brautigan's *The Hawkline Monster* (1974) and in movies like Elliot Silverstein's *Cat Ballou* (1965) and Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* (1974).[52]

Twain's popular *Roughing It* (1872) and its illustrations became yet another means by which American society worked to come to terms with the "newest" portions of its "new world." As Joseph Coulombe notes, the West, more than any other region, "captivated people with stories of towering mountains, endless deserts, exotic natives, and ruthless desperadoes." The region offered plenty of material for myth-making and storytelling, especially to a nation coming to terms with the horrors of the Civil War. After 1865, the West could be shared by the North and South.[53] After his depiction of the West, Twain slowly changed his focus, and in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) he describes, among other things, the southern

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[52] For Twain's most direct attack at Cooper, see his "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," [1895] in *The Portable Mark Twain*, ed. Bernard DeVoto (New York: Viking, 1968), pp. 541-556.
[53] Joseph L. Coulombe, *Mark Twain and the American West* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2003), p. 10.

psyche. In this way Twain became a celebrated chronicler of both the West and the South, and Huck Finn became one of the first amalgamations of a southern character with Western traits.

The Frontier Myth in 20th Century Southern Fiction

If we look at the history of southern literature, we find here a tradition of discussing the clash between wilderness and civilization. As Richard Gray shows, the use of frontier mythology in Southern fiction can be traced all the way back to Edgar Allan Poe, whose mythic West lies beyond "the valley of the Shadow."[54] Gray traces a traditional southern notion of the West, which in literature "identifies the frontier experience with anarchy, chaos, and waste." Apart from Poe, this notion is apparent in the works of Southern Renaissance writers such as John Peale Bishop, Andrew Nelson Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren (*Aberrations*, 437-38).

Another shared characteristics between the South and West is the connection to place. According to Brinkmeyer, during the 1920s and 1930s, southerners' strong sense of place was reoriented from a north-south orientation to an east-west orientation. The South was now aligned as the East, and the North as the West. Thus, the West took on the negative characteristics of the North, such as imperialist exploration, expansion, and industrial capitalism. This "geocultural shift" is most evident in the work of the Nashville Agrarians, who went to great lengths to link the South to premodern, traditional Europe and to establish the South as "an embodiment of settled societies linked with the forces of the East" (Brinkmeyer 5, 6). The Agrarians lamented the booming industrialism, which they feared would eventually undo the traditional society. In this way, they saw industrialism as a modern-day manifestation of the pioneering spirit. So unlike many Americans, the Agrarians did not see "explorers and pioneers as heroic figures of manifest destiny," but rather "found them to be the embodiment of selfish

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[54] Edgar Allan Poe, "Eldorado," [1849] *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), p. 95.

individualism, destructive expansionism, and never-satisfied wanderlust," in other words, the

embodiment of progress (Brinkmeyer 8). The way the traditional South saw itself as caught in a

conflict of traditional values versus progress to some extent mirrors the seminal element of the

Western: the conflict between wilderness and civilization, and the way the hero reacts to these

contending forces. This conflict was used by James Fenimore Cooper to create the backbone of

the Western.

The use of the frontier in southern literature was firmly established in the works of William

Faulkner. Lisa Kay Miller finds echoes in his writing of both Cooper's tragic vision and Turner's

romanticized frontier (96), and she notes how Faulkner used the frontier for the same reasons as

Cooper and Simms: "it embodies the central conflict of human beings in a social setting—the

individual against society, moral law pitted against civil law, and Progress vying with nature" (93).

In his essay "Mississippi," Faulkner describes the history of his native state:

> In the beginning it was virgin—to the west, along the Big River, the alluvial swamps
> threaded by black almost motionless bayous and impenetrable with cane and
> buckvine and cypress and ash and oak and gum; to the east, the hardwood ridges and
> the prairies where the Appalachian mountains died and buffalo grazed; to the south,
> the pine barrens and the moss-hung liveoaks and the greater swamps less of earth
> than water and lurking with alligators and water moccasins, where Louisiana in its
> time would begin.[55]

Here Mississippi is depicted as the frontier it literally was at one point, a dense wilderness, a virgin

land with all the pastoral and Jeffersonian allusions that phrase connotes. Mississippi becomes as

mythic as the West; here too roamed vast herds of buffalo as well as Indians: "the wild

Algonquian—Chickasaw and Choctaw and Natchez and Pascagoula;" frontier outlaws made the

region unsafe, and the struggle to civilize the wilderness, to introduce "civic security" by force

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[55] William Faulkner, "Mississippi," *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), p. 11.

took place here as well (13, 18). Faulkner further describes how the local Indians were dispossessed by the French, Spanish, and Anglo-Saxons, and how the wilderness diminished year by year, a victim of inevitable progress. Faulkner's wilderness is also a male sphere; a place where hunters can initiate themselves into a masculine world of "rough food and the rough sleeping, the life of men and horses and hounds among men and horses and hounds…" (36). The wilderness becomes both a testing ground and a playground for masculinity, and in this way mirrors the popular notion of the West.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), the depiction of Thomas Sutpen's arrival in Jefferson draws heavily on the mythology of the West, in this case the mythological pioneer hero who merges from the landscape without a past but with a stern determination and depicted in a clearly recognizable iconography: "He was already halfway across the Square when they saw him, on a big hard-ridden roan horse, man and beast looking as though they had been created out of thin air and set down in the bright summer Sabbath sunshine…"[56] The connection between man and land is further elaborated in the description of Sutpen's face: "…his pale eyes had a quality at once visionary and alert, ruthless and reposed in a face whose flesh had the appearance of pottery, of having been colored by that oven's fever either of soul or environment, deeper than sun alone beneath a dead impervious surface as of glazed clay" (33). Sutpen could just as well be a Western hero, because, as Tompkins explains, "The qualities needed to survive on the land are the qualities the land itself possesses—bleakness, mercilessness… To be a man in the Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving" (73). And Sutpen does, indeed, survive on the land. Like other pioneers, he has arrived to tame the wilderness, in this case "a hundred square miles of some of the best virgin bottom land in the country" (34).

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[56] William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936. New York: Vintage, 1995), p. 32.

Miller sees Faulkner's tragic depiction of the frontier in *Absalom, Absalom!* as an echo of Cooper's works, both in its recognition and exploration of "the moral implications of westward expansion" and in its portrayal of the frontier as "a moral wilderness" (95). Furthermore, she considers Sutpen a parody of the American Adam and proof that any idea of a new Eden is but a romanticized dream. Faulkner, like Cooper, stresses the importance of environment upon the individual, holding it as the primary difference, not only between Americans and Europeans, but between southerners and the rest of the nation (94-95).

Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* (1940) also deals extensively with the experience of the American frontier. It features a kind of Leatherstocking hero, Sam Fathers, who functions as a guide to the wilderness in "The Bear," the best known chapter/story from the book. But where Natty Bumppo was a white man raised by Indians, Sam Fathers is part black, part Indian, a trait that gives him a specific southern characteristic. As Miller argues, Faulkner shows the tension and paradox embodied in the experience of the American frontier. On one hand are the positive traits of the frontier, such as the opportunity for independence, democracy, and material wealth. On the other hand, just as Wister showed in *The Virginian*, the frontier is also able to breed greed, violence, and destruction. Miller points out this paradox—the fact that the very environment that encourages the dream also makes it unattainable—as one of the central themes of the novel (95-96). She reads the novel as a "romantic, idealistic counterpoint to the alarming changes in southern society," and states that the views of the novel are much closer to Turner's than to Cooper's. However, Faulkner takes it a step further than Turner by casting a more critical glance at the "ambiguity and paradox inherent in the frontier past." According to Miller, Faulkner refuses to "reject the darker truths in favor of an absolute myth" and instead attempts to merge the two views (97).

While this attempt is not successfully fulfilled in *Go Down, Moses*, Faulkner comes closer in *Requiem for a Nun* (1950), which Miller sees as Faulkner's "most complete examination of the nation's development from wilderness, through frontier, to modern, industrialized society." In the prose sections of the novel Faulkner combines the romantic idealism of Turner with the tragic realism of Cooper, while at the same time using the frontier as a means of placing southern history within the larger context of national history (Miller 94). In the prose sections, Miller states, Faulkner offers "his most complete examination of the frontier's role in the nation's development, placing civilization in the context of nature and the individual within the context of society, while combining the tragic view that dominates *Absalom, Absalom!* with the idealism inherent in *Go Down, Moses*" (97-98).

One last Faulkner novel deserves to be discussed in some detail. In *The Unvanquished* (1938) Faulkner is not, like in the above-mentioned works, concerned with Mississippi as frontier and the fate of the diminishing wilderness. *The Unvanquished* is in many ways a typical southern story that depicts life in the South during and after the Civil War. The novel is an initiation story of Bayard Sartoris as well as a portrayal of his father, the charismatic and quasi-mythic war hero Colonel John Sartoris. However, one of the main conflicts of the story echoes that of numerous Westerns: honor and violence. At age fifteen, Bayard is initiated into the southern code of honor after his grandmother is killed. Since his father is not there at the time, the community as well as the code of the old South expects him to track down her killer and avenge her death. Conforming to this pattern of violence, Bayard trails Grumby, the killer, for two months and finally finds himself in a classic standoff, immortalized in countless Westerns. Bayard kills Grumby and thereby completes the task put on him by society. The community cherishes the act and Bayard is met with respect: "Ain't I told you he is John Sartoris' boy?" his uncle cheers.[57] Later, however, he

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[57] William Faulkner, *The Unvanquished* (1938. New York: Vintage, 1996), p. 213.

thinks back on the act and finds that he was far too young to become a killer, that he "had had to perform more than should be required of children because there should be some limit to the age, the youth at least below which one should not have to kill" (254).

The killing leaves a mark of the old code on Bayard's soul, and for years he struggles with the moral implications of his deed. He realizes that his father has been involved in several cold-blooded killings, all justified by the ethics of the code of honor and violence ("I let them fire first" (238)) and under the guise of "working for peace through law and order" (239). However, in the last days of his life, John Sartoris rejects the inhumanity of his earlier killings. He is about to face Redmond, his former business partner turned rival, in a duel, but he has had enough of violence: "I am tired of killing men, no matter what the necessity nor the end" (266). He excuses his past actions with different moral beliefs: "I acted as the land and time demanded …. But now the land and the time too are changing." The old code of honor and violence is no longer valid, and any future battles should be fought in the courtrooms. Since Bayard is training to become a lawyer, his father expects him to follow the civilized way, and he then declares that he will face his rival Redmond unarmed (266).

When Redmond kills the unarmed John Sartoris, Bayard once again finds himself torn. Realizing that he is now "The Sartoris" (247), Bayard knows that he is required to act in accordance with the family's code, which means amending his father's murder by killing Redmond. However, Bayard has begun to doubt the justification of the Sartoris code, realizing that it goes against everything the Bible preaches. Watching his dead father, Bayard finally comes to terms with his father's actions and begins to repudiate what he stood for. He sees his father's hands covered with "the invisible stain of what had been (once, surely) needless blood," and understands that those hands had performed such "fatal actions… so much more than they were intended to do or could be forgiven for doing…" (272).

So Bayard chooses not to avenge his father's death, but at the same time he does not want to be branded a coward by the community. As he says, "I must live with myself, you see" (276). He lives up to the old code as far as confronting Redmond, but he declines to carry a gun or to make hostile gestures. Bayard is clearly aware of the courage it takes for him to face Redmond unarmed. Redmond fires twice, but the shots are not aimed at Bayard. After the last shot has rung out, Bayard stops; "it was done then" (287), he thinks and watches Redmond get up and leave the office and town forever. As Judith Wittenberg points out, "both men pay lip service to the traditional mode of behavior but put it forever behind them."[58]

Back outside the awaiting crowd is first astounded, but they accept what Bayard has done. George Wyatt, one of the Colonel's old men and one of the unrelenting defenders of the old order tells Bayard: "You ain't done anything to be ashamed of. I wouldn't have done it that way, myself .… But that's your way or you wouldn't have done it," and Wyatt even admits, "Maybe you're right, maybe there has been enough killing in your family…" (289). As Bayard crosses the square, a group of men raise their hats, acknowledging that he has acquitted himself honorably. It is important to note, however, that Bayard is accepted because he did not entirely reject the old code. He merely transcended it. As Cleanth Brooks notes, Bayard has still done everything the old code demands: he risks his life and shows even more courage than an armed man would have. But in refusing to kill again, he manages to live up to both his personal honor and that of the community.[59] This spectacular transcendence of violence into law and order debunks both the southern and Western code.

And interestingly enough, the change is vehemently opposed by a woman, the traditional symbol of domesticated civilization and usually the most vehement opponent of violence. In this case, it is the Colonel's wife, Drusilla, who is presented as a "priestess of a succinct and formal

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[58] Judith Bryant Wittenberg, *Faulkner: The Transfiguration of Biography* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1979), p. 164.
[59] Cleanth Brooks, *William Faulkner: First Encounters* (London: Yale UP, 1983), pp. 40-41.

violence" completely infatuated with the traditional masculine code of honor. She tries to force Bayard to accept the pistols for his vengeance. Faulkner almost goes out of his way to show her faith in the old code and her desire for bloodshed: She emanates "something voracious" and she watches Bayard with eyes that are "brilliant and voracious." When Bayard still refuses to adhere to the old code her eyes are "filled with an expression of bitter and passionate betrayal" and she breaks out in a manic scream (269, 274, 275).

It should be noted that Drusilla is no ordinary Southern Belle. She is, in fact, one of Faulkner's most fascinating and complex female characters. Since childhood she has defied traditional behavior when it comes to southern women. In order to avenge the death of her fiancé and her father she performs a risky act of gender bending when she dresses up like a man and joins Colonel Sartoris' troops on the battlefields. This act is unheard of in a culture whose gender norms were as rigid as in the antebellum South. Clearly, the only acceptable thing for Drusilla to do is mourn her loss by staying at home wearing black and weeping for her lost loved ones. When she returns from the war, however, the women of the community force her back into her dress, and Drusilla's rebellious nature is subdued.

But while her gender bending violated the old order, Drusilla is simultaneously a firm defender of the southern cause and the traditions behind it. In a central scene of the novel, Drusilla walks up to Bayard who is standing by his father's coffin. She holds out two dueling pistols and in a voice "fainting and passionate with promise," she urges him to take them, watching him with a "passionate and voracious exaltion." The moment is charged with erotic undertones that mingle with Drusilla's bloodlust for vengeance: "Do you feel them?" she asks Bayard, "the long true barrels true as justice, the triggers… quick as retribution. The two of them slender and invincible and fatal as the physical shape of love?" (273).

This scene is an exact reversal of the iconic scene in Wister's *The Virginian*, where Molly Wood, the heroine, begs and pleads the Virginian not to face the villain in a duel: "'…but you can come away!' she cried. 'It's not too late yet. You can take yourself out of his reach …. I'll go with you anywhere …. Oh, won't you listen to me?' She stretched her hands to him …. Her hands clung to his. 'No, no, no. There's something else. There's something better than shedding blood in cold blood.'" When the Virginian refuses to put down his guns, Molly falls to "his feet, clutching him. 'For my sake,' she begged him. 'For my sake'" (308, 310). This scene, which has been mirrored in countless Westerns, can be seen as one of the blueprints to the hierarchical gender order in the Western.

In both *The Virginian* and *The Unvanquished*, it is not just a question of staying true to tradition by living up to the old order. What is really at stake here is male honor, which in many ways equals manhood. The Virginian has been insulted, and the only way to defend his honor and regain his manhood is through action. That is why the escape that Molly suggests is out of the question. That would brand him a coward in the eyes of the community, a shame worse than death to a man of honor. In his study of honor and violence in the Old South, Bertram Wyatt-Brown asserts that what concerned "those zealots determined to retrieve honor… was the necessity for valiant action. Without it, the rest of the world (they asserted) would deem the white populace cowardly and their leaders recreant to duty" (29). It is not only a question of fulfilling one's own wishes, but as much, if not more, a question of how other people look at you, a point also stressed by Wyatt-Brown: "At the heart of honor lies the evaluation of the public," he states and goes on to structure honor into three components. The first is "the inner conviction of self-worth," in other words individuality. Second is "the claim of that self-assessment before the public, and the third element is "the assessment of the claim by the public, a judgement based

upon the behavior of the claimant. In other words," Wyatt-Brown spells out, "honor is reputation" (14).

In the case of the Virginian, his self-worth matched the convictions of the community, and by facing Trampas in the street and shooting him down, he fulfilled both his own wish and lived up to the code of honor in the eyes of the community. In Bayard's case, however, the predicament lies in his refusal to follow the old code because he finds it morally wrong ("I must live with myself," he argues (276).) and his fear of being branded a coward by the community. His manhood is at stake and his solution enables him to be able to live with himself and still be considered a man of honor in the eyes of the community. In fact, by facing Redmond unarmed, Bayard displays even more courage than if he had faced him with a gun. So, just as Drusilla did, Bayard simultaneously debunks and reinforces the old code, and escapes with both his conscience and manhood intact.

Since honor and manhood are so intrinsically linked, it is also worth noticing that the performance of manhood can be structured in much in the same way as Wyatt-Brown's construction of honor. Here the eyes of the public are just as important, only this time the public means men only. In his discussion of the construction behind the performance of masculinity, Michael Kimmel asserts that men "are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood. Manhood is demonstrated for other men's approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance …. Masculinity," he concludes, "is a homosocial enactment. We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood."[60] This is especially obvious in the Western genre, where there are so few women present and where the

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[60] Michael S. Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity," *Theorizing Masculinities*, eds. Harry Brod ans Michael Kaufman (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications, 1994), pp. 128-29.

theme of male bonding is emphasized again and again. In the Western, men perform masculinity

almost exclusively for other men. In Bayard's case, he performs his heroic deed in front of the

men of the community while simultaneously pushing away Drusilla's advances. His action is

clearly meant for the men of the community.

Consequently, apart from the well-known and distinctly southern themes of Faulkner's

fiction, he examined throughout his work both the influence of the frontier on the individual as

well as the complex construction of gender. Both themes continue to reverberate in

contemporary southern fiction, but neither is usually connected to Faulkner.

Eudora Welty also used the frontier as both subject and symbol. In *The Robber Bridegroom*

(1942), her first published novel, Welty takes a Brothers Grimm fairytale and places it in

Mississippi, on The Natchez Trace. Most of the stories in her collection *The Wide Net* (1943) also

take place on the mythic Trace. Welty's re-creation of the frontier experience, in this case life on

the Natchez Trace is, according to Alfred Appel, "another version of the retreat from civilization

that has been a continuous theme in American literature—in Cooper, Melville, Thoreau, Twain,

Cather, Hemingway, and Faulkner."[61] In her stories, Welty used well-known historical figures—in

"A Still Moment" she depicts an imaginary meeting between the evangelist minister Lorenzo Dow,

the ornithologist and painter John James Audubon, and the Natchez Trace outlaw James

Murrell—and thereby drew on the mythology already inherent in them. Lisa Kay Miller examines

how Welty built her philosophy upon the American frontier mythology of Cooper, Simms, and

Turner. In fact, Miller asserts, Welty may even surpass Cooper "in showing that the particular

environment of the frontier dangerously nurtured the worst elements of human nature and

perhaps made America less civilized than Europe" (190). In "A Still Moment," the fanatical

evangelist Lorenzo connects the wilderness of the Natchez Trace to that of man, as he shouts into

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[61] Alfred Appel, *A Season of Dreams: The Fiction of Eudora Welty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1965), p. 175.

the treetops: "These wild places and these trails of awesome loneliness lie nowhere, nowhere but

in your heart."[62] The Natchez Trace is described as a wilderness in terms that call to mind the

West more than the South: "All life used this trace, and [Audubon] liked to see the animals move

along it in direct, oblivious journeys, for they had begun it and made it, the buffalo and deer and

the small running creatures before man ever knew where he wanted to go…" (193). In her frontier

stories, Welty carved out of the powerful mythology of the West a place of her own imbued with

her own ideas about history in time and place.

Madison Jones, who published his first novel *The Innocent* five years before Faulkner's last

novel, is one of the contemporary southern writers who have continued the frontier theme in

southern fiction. *Forest of the Night*, his second novel, is an unromantic and demythologizing

frontier novel, depicting an American Adam of the early 19th century Tennessean frontier.[63]

Jones' novel is an amalgamation of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales and Faulkner's "The Bear," and

in that sense an interesting precursor of the conflation of the southern and Western traditions at

the core of this dissertation, especially considering Larry Brown's open admiration for Jones.[64]

The focus on the importance of nature and wilderness at the heart of these southern

frontier novels also echoes the Agrarian's fight against industrial and capitalist progress. Instead

of giving tribute to the pioneering spirit, the Agrarians lionized the Native Americans, whom they

saw as victims of the same pioneering spirit that was weighing down the South. As Brinkmeyer

points out, in a romantic and rhetorical way, John Ransom Crowe found "the icon of the Noble

Savage useful for celebrating traditional culture and attacking the modern spirit." Brinkmeyer

points out two examples of southern writers who use Native American culture "as rebukes to

modern society and the breakdown of traditional culture by the forces of westward-moving

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[62] Eudora Welty, "A Still Moment," *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (New York: Penguin, 1983), p. 191.
[63] Madison Jones, *Forest of the Night* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1960).
[64] In his essay "Chattanooga Nights," Larry Brown uses four pages to praise Madison Jones and his writing, especially his descriptions of landscape. *Billy Ray's Farm* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2001), pp. 32-35.

progress" are William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* and Caroline Gordon's *Green Centuries* (*Remapping* 10-12). Among contemporary southern writers, Josephine Humphreys turns to the Lumbee Indians of South Carolina in her novel *Nowhere Else on Earth*. The novel depicts the hardships of both the Civil War as well as miscegenation between Whites and Natives. Yet the novel is unmistakably southern in its focus on place, already apparent in the title. Most recently, Charles Frazier's *Thirteen Moons* (2006) takes place on the southern frontier during the 19th century and tells the story of the Will Cooper, a white orphan who is adopted by the Cherokee Nation. *Thirteen Moons* can be read both as a revisionary Western and as a nostalgic southern novel in its focus on history and place.

According to Brinkmeyer, the powerful sense of place that saturates so much literature of the Southern Renaissance creates a suspicion of the westward movement that characterized America. Using the Agrarians, as well as Faulkner, Caroline Gordon, Robert Penn Warren's *All The King's Men*, Katherine Anne Porter's Miranda stories, and Eudora Welty, Brinkmeyer notes an "oppositional interplay between the South and the West and their imaginative manifestations— place and space, community and individualism, despair and hope, standing still and moving about, an unchanging past and the eternal present," that can be found in "much of the writing of the Southern literary renaissance" (*Remapping* 14, 20). Yet despite the seemingly obvious contrasts, it is exactly these contradictory dynamics which animate the Western and serve as the backbone for the entire genre. As Cawelti notes, "the Western affirms the necessity of society" by showing the hero as an essential instrument in the foundation of society. In forming the society, the hero must first resolve the classic American conflict of progress and success versus "individual honor, heroism, and natural freedom."[65] Place, community, and despair are not only southern trademarks, but essential features in the myth of the West as well, and indispensable in the

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[65] John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH.: Bowling Green U Popular P, 1970), p. 80.

binary structure of oppositions that is crucial to the Western, and to which I will return in chapter 4.

Contemporary Writers

Whereas the southerners of the past were intrigued by the opportunities of the actual frontier, today's southern writers must suffice with the imaginative powers inherent in the myth of the frontier. But where the literary works of Cooper and Scott inspired and animated a century of literature, a new art-form would take over. Richard Slotkin claims, with due right, that the Western movie and its television spin-offs of the 1950s and '60s became "the most prevalent genre of popular-culture narrative" (*Fatal* xi). Like the rest of their generation reared on television and Saturday movie matinees, the southern writers of this dissertation have been shaped, unconsciously or not, by the aesthetics of the Western.

When asked about the influence of popular Westerns on their own lives, many of the writers acknowledged the power of the movie and television Westerns in influencing their lives somehow: Chris Offutt points to *Bonanza* and *Perry Mason*, his two favorite TV-shows as a child, as influences. While *Perry Mason* is clearly not a Western, the values are the same. Both shows are about lone guys righting wrongs.[66] Lewis Nordan also admits the influence of television Westerns: "I grew up on Western movies on Saturday mornings," he says, "It was all the culture we had, really… we didn't do much else. So that's very much influenced who I am."[67] Barry Hannah also remembers the Westerns of his youth: "Westerns were it," he declares, "I grew up on those movies; they cost a dime in my home town." When asked if those Westerns have shaped his worldview, Hannah's answer points to the way the Western myth has become an all-American myth: "In the kind of all-American way… in that a good man who has got a low-slung pistol and a

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[66] Personal interview with Chris Offutt, June 28, 2006.
[67] Personal interview with Lewis Nordan, May 14, 2006.

good horse goes into a town. And he can make a difference. He can change that whole town, like Clint Eastwood …. We want to believe a single man can go in and blow away twenty evil people and leave something beautiful behind, if not beautiful destruction. Beautiful destruction is a big American theme" (Personal interview 2006).

Larry Brown also turns to Western movies when asked what role films have played in his storytelling: "I've got a couple of favorites that I watch over and over again…" Apart from *Dr. Strangelove* and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Brown emphasizes some of the classic Westerns: "I saw *Shane* when I was probably about twelve or thirteen …. I watch *Shane*, and I still watch *Once Upon a Time in the West* about once a year. That's one of my favorites. You know, I've got all these old ones that I still like. Some of those movies just can't be beat. *The Searchers* with John Wayne, that's one of my favorites. *Red River* is one of my favorites."[68]

William Gay too sees a direct link between his work and the Western movies of his youth: "I think in *The Long Home*, I was influenced by Western movies that I'd seen, more so than Western novels that I'd read. I've been influenced by a lot of Westerns." Gay especially points out Marlon Brando's *One Eyed Jacks* as one of his "favorite movies. I've probably been influenced by that… the relationship between Marlon Brando and Karl Malden, where Karl Malden is the older guy who steers him wrong, and then he's gonna get revenge on him. I think *One Eyed Jacks* has influenced my stuff. And the movie *Shane* is another one of my favorite movies. I can't see that in my stuff, but it's one of my favorite movies anyway. The idea of a hero or somebody who's uncorrupted or uncorruptible, like Shane was."[69]

Likewise, Ron Rash admits the influence: "Yes, I did grow up watching westerns. My favorite movie when I was a young teen was *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, a John Ford Western, a

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[68] Tom Rankin, "On the Home Front: Larry Brown's Narrative Landscapes," *Conversations with Larry Brown*, ed. Jay Watson (Jackson, MS.: UP of Mississippi, 2007), pp. 101-02.
[69] Personal interview with William Gay, June 7, 2006.

movie that subverts the western myth as much as expressing the myth. The movie remains one of

my favorites." Rash elaborates on the way the genre's values have influenced him: "I do think the

western idea of individual responsibility, the idea that 'law' and 'civilization' fail us when most

needed, rang true to me within the southern/Appalachian culture I grew up in. I recognized, sadly,

the too easy resort to violence that remains one of the most disturbing aspects of America, its

glorification."[70] While Rash acknowledges the allures of the genre, he also stresses the darker side

of the popular myth, a tendency that becomes apparent in *One Foot in Eden*—discussed in

chapter 8.

As I will discuss in detail in the forthcoming chapters, the Western myth is played out in

various ways in the writers' works: Barry Hannah has written a grotesque pastiche of a traditional

Western (*Never Die*, 1990), and while placed in contemporary Mississippi, his *Yonder Stands Your*

Orphan draws heavily on several Western themes; Chris Offutt's novel *The Good Brother*, which

he considers "a contemporary western" (Personal interview), moves from the hills of Kentucky to

the flat west of Montana; William Gay refers to his novel *The Long Home* as "almost a Western"

(Personal interview), and apart from often expressing his love for the genre, Larry Brown's *Father*

and Son reads like a contemporary amalgamation of *Shane* and *Hondo*—furthermore, Brown

often included direct references to Westerns in his novels;[71] Lewis Nordan's *The Sharpshooter*

Blues figures a bona fide Western gunslinger in the Deep South of the 1950s. And finally, Ron

Rash's *One Foot in Eden*, while the least Western-flavored of the above-mentioned novels,

includes a sheriff that in many ways resembles a traditional Western hero.

The Western formula cannot be transferred directly to the southern novels, of course, but

the similarities are many and often so striking that they call for a comparison. Just as the Western

novel spans from the traditional to the experimental, the southern novels span from sticking close

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[70] Personal interview with Ron Rash, May 16, 2006.
[71] In Brown's *The Rabbit Factory* (2003), Arthur, one of the main characters, enjoys watching old Western movies.

to the traditional Western to debunking it and playing with the genre. In all instances, however, the novels still respond to the Western aesthetics; most traditionally in Larry Brown and William Gay; most experimentally in Barry Hannah and Lewis Nordan.

The contemporary writers I will be exploring all grapple with the conflict of traditional values and modern forces, a paradox that writers like Cooper, Faulkner, and the southern Agrarians recognized and tried to resolve. In other words, the writers write out of the strong tradition of America as an agrarian paradise, pointed out in Henry Nash Smith's seminal *Virgin Land*. But they are also painfully aware of the "machine in the garden," as Leo Marx has termed the clash between technology and pastoral ideal.[72] One can find a strain of the insistence on community and traditional society as opposed to ruthless progress in the contemporary southern writers. Some of their books, like Rash's *One Foot in Eden* and Gay's *The Long Home* can be seen as tributes to an agrarian era gone by; others, like Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* and Offutt's *The Good Brother* are more aggressive attacks on the contemporary tradition of an ostensibly homogenous and progressive America.

Escaping the Southern Tradition

In any discussion of southern literature or culture, the inevitable question is, of course, whether it is still credible to talk of the South as something distinct, especially, as Richard Gray notes, "with the growth of cultural pluralism and the accelerating nature of social and economic development."[73] And the logical next question is whether southern fiction constitutes a niche of its own. During the Southern Renaissance of the 1920s through to the late 1940s, the trademarks of southern fiction were defined in a canon that has later been criticized, expanded, and

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[72] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1964).
[73] Richard Gray, "Recorded and Unrecorded Histories: Recent Southern Writing and Social Change," *The Southern State of Mind*, ed. Jan Nordby Gretlund (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1999), p. 67.

deconstructed. These trademarks are also seen as characteristics of the southerner, as Fred

Hobson sums up: "a greater attention to the past, an acceptance of man's finiteness, his penchant

for failure, [and] a tragic sense" (*Southern Writer* 3). Today's southern writers are faced not only

with these rigid and seemingly fixed features, but also with looming literary presences like

Flannery O'Connor and especially William Faulkner, the "Godfather" of southern fiction. Already

in 1960, Flannery O'Connor made her famous statement that "the presence alone of Faulkner in

our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do.

Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down."[74]

In his lifetime Faulkner already overshadowed all other southern writers, and every new writer

was held up against the old master for comparison.

In 1966, four years after Faulkner's death, Leslie A. Fiedler noticed, that with the occurrence

of a new wave of southern (mostly women) writers, "the obsessive concerns of Faulkner,"

including the mixture of southern gothicism and historical fact, had been passed on to form a

"living tradition." Because of these new writers, Fiedler argued, Mississippi became a strong

symbolic image of the gothic, once attributed to Italy. "Against a background of miasmic swamps

and sweating black skins, the Faulknerian syndrome of disease, death, defeat, mutilation, idiocy,

and lust continues to evoke in the stories of these writers a shudder once compelled only by the

supernatural."[75] It seemed that the new writers had been capable of using the familiar world that

Faulkner had staked out, and in it create their own original stories and characters. Despite that,

their work was still being compared to that of Faulkner.

More than three generations after Faulkner, contemporary southern writers are still up

against "the Dixie Limited." As Michael Kreyling points out in his controversial *Inventing Southern*

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[74] Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (1969. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000), p. 45.
[75] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966. Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997), p. 475.

Literature, "if 'The South' is a cultural entity, then 'Faulkner' is its official language …. The domination of 'Faulkner' in southern literature leaves a mark on everything made under its influence."[76] The southern writers examined in here are all aware of the powerful tradition looming over them, and they react to it in various ways.

Barry Hannah both acknowledges and resists the challenge of Faulkner's high mark in southern literature and the burden of southern history. In the semi-autobiographical *Boomerang*, the narrator complains: "All the generations of wonderful dead guys behind us. All the Confederate dead and the Union dead planted in the soil near us. All of Faulkner the great. Christ, there's barely room for the living down here."[77] The passage has become one of the most quoted of Hannah's, which says something about the power of Faulkner's legacy in contemporary southern fiction. When a "new" writer dares to openly distance himself from the old master, it compels attention right away.

Hannah has also commented directly on his relationship with Faulkner's shadow. In an essay he admits: "I shied away from Faulkner, who was at once remote and right there in your own backyard, the powerful resident alien… I sensed I would be overcome by him, and had a dread… that he might be the last word. That I would wind up a pinning, third-rate, echo, like many another Southerner."[78] But Hannah still acknowledges the quality left by Faulkner, as he explains in an interview: "What I like is the high mark that is expected after Faulkner. You don't have to love Faulkner, but there is a high mark that folks shoot for."[79] So to Hannah, Faulkner's legacy can be used positively, as a yardstick for literary craftsmanship, instead of a limiting categorization of Mississippi as a worn out postage stamp of soil where new writers are forced to reuse

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[76] Michael Kreyling, *Inventing Southern Literature* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1998), pp. 127, 128.

[77] Barry Hannah, *Boomerang* (New York: Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 1989), pp. 137-38.

[78] Barry Hannah, "The War We Can't Win, We Can't Lose, We Can't Quit," *Why I Write*, ed. Will Blythe (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), p. 178. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "The War."

[79] James Lilley and Brian Oberkirch, "An Interview with Barry Hannah," *The Mississippi Review* 3:12 (November 1997): 4.

stereotypical characters. Furthermore, Hannah is not afraid of making fun of Faulkner. A fine

example of the literary parody that informs much of Hannah's fiction can be found in *Boomerang*.

Here Hannah ends a rambling passage with: "… where the shit is the end of this sentence,

Faulkner?" (100).[80]

Unfortunately, as Fiedler notes when discussing Erskine Caldwell, Faulkner's presence also

created writers that vulgarized and exaggerated Faulkner's grotesque world towards the

deliberately shocking, creating what Fiedler calls "a special brand of horror-pornography (grandpa

eaten by the hogs, while brother is seducing sister in the splashing swill)" (475). Even though

Fiedler's analysis of Caldwell may itself be an exaggeration, his point is well taken, and the writers

I focus on are all aware of the many clichés of southern fiction.

Elaborating on the southern clichés, Lewis Nordan said in an interview that "the fat deputy

sheriff… sweet black kids swinging on a tire swing, and people eating black-eyed peas and

cornbread, that's what... Ellen Douglas calls riding the Southern Pony. And you don't want to do

that. You don't want to deny your Southernness either, in the way that Chekhov couldn't deny his

Russianness. To deny the Southernness is a tremendous mistake, but to just take those

conventions that have been useful to Southern writers is a tremendous mistake."[81] The solution is

to find a balance between old traditions and one's own style. Nordan admits that in his fiction he

continues to "play off of certain conventions," but he does not believe them to be necessarily

southern (Ibid 379-80). When it comes to his attitude to Faulkner, Nordan has a bit of fun with

him in *The All-Girl Football Team*, his second collection of stories. Placed after four Sugar Mecklin

stories, "The Farmers' Daughter" is eligible to compete in the "Faux Faulkner" competition. It is

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[80] For more on Hannah's use of parody in language, see Michael Kreyling's *Inventing Southern Literature*, pp. 161-163; Kenneth Millard's *Contemporary American Fiction*, pp. 186-199; and Martyn Bone's "Faulkner, Hannah, Neo-Confederate Narrative and Postsouthern Parody," *Mississippi Quarterly* 54:2 (Spring 2001): 197-211.

[81] Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, "Interview with Lewis Nordan," in *Mississippi Quarterly* 54:3 (Summer 2001): 379. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "Nordan."

written in the dense, weaving Faulkner trademark style and clearly stands out from the other

stories in the collection. The story is about a girl feeling more at home in Faulkner's fictional world

than in her own. Dixie Dawn feels "immobilized, impotent, helpless, fixed, until she [can] secrete

herself among the pages of *Absalom, Absalom!* or *The Sound and the Fury* or the other Southern

Gothic that filled her shelves and her mind...."[82] She lives "on the periphery of a bowdlerized

Faulkner novel. All [the] place needs is a dwarf" (67). The story shows that Nordan is well aware

of the great southern tradition he enters into, but that like Hannah, he is not daunted by the task,

and uses parody as a way of writing himself out from under the shadow of Faulkner and company.

Until his death in 2004, Larry Brown, like Hannah, lived in Lafayette County, immortalized

by Faulkner as Yoknapatawpha County. Yet, as Brown noted in an essay, "the world Faulkner

wrote about was vastly different from the one that exists now .... Black folks don't say 'yassuh'

any more, and at this moment I would have no idea where in all of Lafayette County I could find a

good mule."[83] Brown too is aware of the proud tradition he is writing out of, but he does not want

it to govern his fiction. In fact, "Discipline," one of his stories from *Big Bad Love*, is about a writer

put on trial for plagiarizing O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, and worst of all, "secretly copying

Faulkner, at *night*, under the covers, with a flashlight" (131). Mr. Lawrence would labor along, "in

the 'great southern gothic tradition,' using heavy, frightening imagery …. ignoring punctuation,

running whole pages of narrative together, incorporating colons, semicolons, hyphens, making

[his] characters talk like Beeder Mackey on LSD" (131-32). Brown has called "Discipline" "more of

an exercise, an experiment in form," rather than an actual story.[84] It is a humorous parable on the

trials southern writers face whenever they publish a new piece of fiction, and although Brown's

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[82] Lewis Nordan, "The Farmers' Daughter," *The All-Girl Football Team* (1986. New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. 59.
[83] Larry Brown, *Billy Ray's Farm*, (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2000), pp. 4-5.
[84] Michael Manley, "Telling Stories: An Interview With Larry Brown," *Delicious Imaginations: Conversations with Contemporary Writers*, eds. Sarah Griffiths and Kevin J. Kehrwald (West Lafayette: NotaBell Books, 1998), p. 128.

later fiction has had a much more serious tone, "Discipline" nevertheless shows that he was keenly aware of the pitfalls a southern writer must avoid.

Where Hannah, Brown and Nordan all hail from Mississippi and therefore have had to fight extra hard to escape Faulkner's shadow, Rash, Gay and Offutt are not bogged down by the Mississippi-connection. Ron Rash belongs to the Appalachian tradition of southern writing, which is fighting its own stereotypes, such as those displayed in films and television shows like *Deliverance* and *The Dukes of Hazzard*. His position as an "Appalachian" writer and the distance that brings to the southern literary establishment may explain why Rash can admit to striving towards the high marks of the southern literary tradition. While he asserts that he is "a little leery of any adjective in front of writer—whether it's Jewish writer or southern writer,"[85] Rash still sees himself as working in the southern tradition: "The tradition I would want to follow, and I'm not comparing myself to them, is the tradition of O'Connor and Faulkner and Welty, because those are writers who achieved great regard and a wonderful readership outside the region, not just inside it."[86] Rash even evokes Eudora Welty, another Mississippi giant, in an essay with the Welty-like title "The Importance of Place." Here Rash quotes Eudora Welty who asserted that "One place understood helps us understand all other places better," and stresses how "the most intensely regional literature is often the most universal."[87] But Rash is also skeptical of the type of southern literature based on stereotype and farce: "The one thing that bothers me about that title 'Southern writers' is that it sometimes comes with a certain assumption that you're going to have a crazy aunt in the attic, and a corpse has got to show up somewhere. And I think that's probably the easiest and the least interesting kind of writing, where it relies more on what makes the

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[85] Roger Birnbaum, "Birnbaum v. Ron Rash," *The Morning News* (November 7, 2005). <http://www.themorningnews.org/archives/birnbaum_v/ron_rash.php>.
[86] Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, "'The Natural World Is the Most Universal of Languages': An Interview with Ron Rash," *Appalachian Journal* 34:2 (Winter 2007): 226. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "Natural."
[87] Ron Rash, "The Importance of Place," *Marly Rusoff Literary Agency*. <http://www.rusoffagency.com/authors/rash_r/ron_rash_onwriting.htm>.

culture odd" (Bjerre "Natural" 226). So by transcending place and resisting the powerful

stereotypes of the region, Rash establishes his own voice while staying true to the southern

tradition.

Like Rash, Kentucky-born Chris Offutt is often labeled as an Appalachian writer, but he too

resists pigeonholing and insists that he is not representative of a culture: "I am not a regional

writer," he persists. "I don't speak for all eastern Kentuckians. I speak for me… I just use the hill

country as a canvas to paint my difficulties on" (Palmer 25, 29). More so than most other

contemporary southern writers, Offutt almost viciously rejects belonging to a southern tradition

and uses history as justification: "Eastern Kentucky is not technically the South. It was a border

state in the Civil War, a neutral state. It's above the Mason-Dixon line. It's not part of any grand

Southern tradition, any Dixie sort of thing." Instead of the southern tradition, Offutt claims a

kinship with the West; "the independence of people and spirit" in Kentucky is similar to that in

the West. Again Offutt uses history as an explanation: "Kentucky was a frontier state. The

mountain men of the far West—a lot of them came from Kentucky or from that part of the

country—people who were looking for more room, more wilderness, greater freedom" (Palmer

25, 26). In this way, Offutt rejects the shackles of the southern literary tradition and instead

inscribes himself into the mythic lore of the West and all its freedom-loving connotations,

something that is quite apparent in his novel *The Good Brother*.

While Offutt turns down any inclusion in the southern league, Tennessean William Gay

seems eager to be included in a southern tradition; the rough southern tradition, that is. Gay

identifies at least "two kinds of southern writing." On the one hand there is what Gay calls the

"polite southern writing" like "Walker Percy and people who write about women at the garden

club, talking about their husbands. And then there are people that I wanted to be identified with,"

Gay states, "More like the stuff Larry Brown did and obviously [Cormac] McCarthy. We're like

people working different sides of the tracks. We're not doing Eudora Welty-type stuff, which has

no interest for me." The "we" in that statement clearly indicates how strongly Gay identifies

himself with the rough school of Southern writing. Gay then digs the trenches even deeper and

situates himself firmly on one side when he says that "I guess there's the right side of the tracks

and the wrong side of the tracks… And luckily I'm on the wrong side of the tracks. But I like it

down here" (Personal interview). Gay's faithful allegiance to the bad boys of southern fiction

places him firmly in the southern tradition, so firmly that many critics have a hard time

distinguishing his voice from that of Faulkner and McCarthy. In other words, the distance that

most contemporary southern writers place between themselves and their muses is at times

indistinguishable in Gray's writing.

In *The New York Times*' review of Gay's first novel *The Long Home*, Tony Early—himself a

southern writer—points out that "Gay is a writer of remarkable talent and promise, but at the

same time his veneration for McCarthy occasionally lapses into near imitation."[88] The same

complaint is highlighted in *The Washington Post* review of Gay's second novel, *Provinces of Night*.

The title of the review, "All the Pretty Phrases," is itself a pun on one of McCarthy's best-known

novels. In the review Madison Smartt Bell—yet another southern writer—asks why the narrative

should "be written in such perfectly faithful imitation of McCarthy's style? More generally, why

would any writer enslave himself to another in this way?"[89] Unlike the other writers examined

here, Gay does not seem to mind the criticism and sees no need to deny his very obvious

southern influences. In chapter 3, I will examine Gay's style more closely.

As already mentioned, the New South is a far cry from the South of Faulkner and O'Connor, but

today's southern writers still write about their region, including its past. Some set their fiction in

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[88] Tony Early, "Mephisto Tennessee Waltz," *The New York Times* (November 12, 1999): Sec. 7, p. 12.
[89] Madison Smartt Bell, "All the Pretty Phrases," *The Washington Post* (January 14, 2001): T5.

the past, be it the Civil War or the 1950s, while others cast a critical eye on the homogenized

southern culture of today. The best southern writers are still writing out of and up against the

southern literary tradition and in that way they make up the distinct genre that is southern

fiction. The above examples more than justify Matthew Guinn's assertion that, "the most salient

trend in contemporary Southern fiction is one of discontinuity with the immediate literary past, a

deliberate effort to break from tradition" ("Writing" 573). And even those writers, like Gay, who

still write out of the southern tradition are not necessarily chained to it. As Richard Gray points

out,

> Southern writing... has consistently been produced by writers who resisted the
> [Southern] monolith—not least because they worked from both inside and outside of
> their culture .... Writing both in and about their culture(s) and the changes, [Southern
> writers] dramatize what it means to be a Southerner now. In the process they tell us
> what it means to live in history, Southern or otherwise, and potentially out of it; they
> offer the possibility of experience with understanding. (*Aberrations* 376, 374)

As should be obvious by now, this dissertation is written in the belief that southern fiction does

constitute a genre worthy of distinction. But what I will argue is that in the works of especially

male southern writers, consciously or not, an echo is apparent, one that is far from the southern

literary tradition of Faulkner and O'Connor; and that is an echo of the Western. That southern

writers choose to tell their stories by applying the language, themes, or characterizations from the

Western genre, tells us as much about the iconic power of popular culture as it does about the

South or, for that matter, the West.

Since this dissertation focuses on male writers, I should point out that the Western

aesthetics can also be found in the works of southern women writers. In *West of Everything*, Jane

Tompkins argues that the traditional Western was an answer to the domestic novel; "the

antithesis of the cult of domesticity that dominated American Victorian culture" (39). The

domestic novel is still alive and well in the South, at least on the surface. This is evident in the works by writers like Kaye Gibbons, Josephine Humphreys, Dorothy Allison, and Pam Durban, whose novels fit parts of Tompkins' outline of the domestic novel: "a woman is always the main character, usually a young orphan girl, with several other main characters being women too. Most of the action takes place in private spaces, at home, indoors, in kitchens, parlors, and upstairs chambers." However, the traditional domestic novel also concerned "the interior struggles of the heroine to live up to an ideal of Christian virtue—usually involving uncomplaining submission to difficult and painful circumstances, learning to quell rebellious instincts, and dedicating her life to the service of God through serving others" (38). These submissive traits are, not surprisingly, scarce in contemporary southern women's writing. Instead, the previously solely male tradition of escaping from the family, the tradition at the heart of the Western, has now crept into women's writing as well, both in the works of those Richard Gray label "homekeepers and household chroniclers" and "mavericks and rebels" (*Aberrations* 377-90).

In the fiction of Dorothy Allison adolescent girls figure prominently. Cissy of *Cavedweller* (1998) is a character Brinkmeyer calls "a modern-day (female) version of the classic American frontier hero—the person who seeks out space away from culture to test and renew himself through ordeal." The cave in which Cissy spelunks becomes "her mythic West, her place for testing and rebirth."[90]

Ellen Foster, the eponymous protagonist of Kaye Gibbons' first novel, is an abused child who "would think of ways to kill [her] daddy."[91] The harsh clash with patriarchy runs through all of Gibbons' work. The four generations of women in *A Cure for Dreams* (1991) are portrayed as strong individuals intent on keeping their integrity in the male-dominated world that views them

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[90] Robert H. Brinkmeyer, "Class as Race: Representations of Poor Whites in Modern Southern Literature," *The Many Souths: Class in Southern Culture*, ed. Waldemars Zacharasiewicz (Tübingen: Staffenburg, 2003), p. 154.
[91] Kaye Gibbons, *Ellen Foster* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1987), p. 1.

as secondary. Likewise, *On the Occasion of My Last Afternoon* (1998) tells the story of a daughter's struggle with her dominating father.

Seventeen-year-old Lucille Odom, the narrator of Josephine Humphreys' *Rich in Love* (1987), tries to hold her family together after her mother has abruptly left home and her sister returns to South Carolina with a Yankee husband and a baby on the way. In this novel, the mother is the rebel who escapes the constraining confines of family and thereby illuminates that all is not well in the domestic sphere.

The same reversed dynamics are apparent in the works of Pam Durban, whose female protagonists battle the limitations placed on them by a patriarchal society. In *The Laughing Place* (1993), recent widow Annie Vess returns to her South Carolina hometown after her father's death only to discover that her father, whom she adored because of his strong principles, led a double life, one that betrayed what he apparently believed in and lived for. Fed up with her mother's forced "make-believe world of appearances, a world of graciousness and beauty and truth," Annie is determined to break free of those confines and drop "the pretense of innocence." Once she has crossed the line, Annie sounds like a genuine Western hero: "There were no limits, no boundaries to what I was capable of. I was free of those now, fallen and free."[92] As this quote shows, many of the main female characters in contemporary southern fiction are virtually female Huck Finns, rebels on the verge of lighting out for the Territory, either literally or symbolically, leaving behind the constraining tradition of the Southern Belle. Add to this list adolescent female characters like Jo Spencer of Jill McCorkle's *The Cheer Leader* (1984), Sam Hughes of Bobbie Ann Mason's *In Country* (1985), Clover in Dori Sanders' novel of the same name (1990), Bone of Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), and Harriet in Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend* (2002), and the tendency is only supported. However, while this trend seems to grow, it should be pointed out

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[92] Pam Durban, *The Laughing Place* (New York: Picador, 1993), pp. 227, 229, 231.

that rebellious women have always been a part of southern fiction: The best know are, perhaps, the headstrong Scarlet O'Hara in Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936); Drusilla Sartoris of Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* (1938) who dresses like a man and rides with Colonel Sartoris's troops as a common soldier in the Civil War; and, of course, the headstrong Jem of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960).

As the above few pages suggest, and as Brinkmeyer has also shown in his book, the Western allure to southern writers does not express itself solely through male writers. However, my focus is on the male writers and how and to what extent they incorporate Western traits into their southern settings. As this chapter has shown, the lines of regional influence originally ran in the opposite direction since the South *was* the frontier before there was an American West. And while southern writers from Simms and Faulkner to Josephine Humphreys and Charles Frazier have dealt with the southern frontier experience, that aspect has never become an integrated part of the trademarks that make up southern fiction. But it is there, and in that sense, the tendency of contemporary southern writers to write about the West, as Brinkmeyer has discussed, or, as is my focus, to set their fiction in the South but draw on certain stock Western traits is not necessarily a unique break away from the southern literary tradition but in a sense a continuation and elaboration of themes in southern literature that have been hidden behind more generally accepted ones. But when coupled with the attempts to escape the southern literary tradition—the Faulkner tradition—that some of the writers display, a picture emerges of a group of male writers who are perhaps as much inspired, consciously or not, by a somewhat lowbrow popular culture tradition—the Western—as they are by the more highbrow southern literary tradition.

Having traced the historical and literary traditions between South and West, I now wish to look closer at the six writers in question, beginning with their relationship to language.

Part Two:

Language and Structure

3. "Put an Amen to It": Language and Anti-Language

Language and Masculinity

One of the trademarks of the Western, both literature and film, is its resistance to language. In her book, Jane Tompkins examines this strained relationship. "The Western is at heart antilanguage," she asserts. "Doing, not talking, is what it values …. Westerns distrust language," she continues, because "words are weak and misleading, only actions count; words are immaterial, only objects are real" (50, 49). This ideology is rooted, of course, in the male hegemonic tradition—described in Chapter 1—that systematically excluded everything traditionally coded as feminine, such as language and emotions. As Tompkins points out, this creates an interesting paradox: "In order to exist, the Western has to use words or visual images, but these images are precisely what it fears. As a medium, the Western has to pretend that it doesn't exist at all, its words and pictures, just a window on the truth, not really there" (51). The same can be said of Western novels, of course, and here the paradox is even more striking. Books are nothing *but* words, yet many Western novels display the same opposition to language as their celluloid cousins.

But does the Western's distrust of language fit into southern literature and a southern culture, which is, at heart, as Gretlund puts it, "an oral and aural culture"? In Westerns, Tompkins explains, "the impassivity of male silence suggests the inadequacy of female verbalization" and silence thereby establishes male dominance (59). Not so in the South: "The sound of silence has always startled the Southern ear," Gretlund asserts. "Silence is experienced as an unnatural absence." [93] Likewise, Barry Hannah elaborates on the southerner's need to talk: "There seems to be a need, it's not a weakness but a joy in sharing lively tales" (Personal interview 2006). Here

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[93] Jan Nordby Gretlund, "Southern Silence?" *Frames of Southern Mind* (Odense: Odense UP, 1998), p. 161. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Frames*.

Hannah hints indirectly at the patriarchal tradition of seeing language as weak, something I shall return to shortly.

Bertram Wyatt-Brown gives a historical account of southerners' proclivity for talk. In the Old South, he points out, "thought and speech had an intimate relationship that literate cultures no longer sustain. Acquired virtues were therefore most especially recognizable if a man was an eloquent orator, enchanting storyteller, or witty raconteur. These attributes aroused deep admiration" (32). The attributes Wyatt-Brown mentions have continued to flourish in southern literature. Gretlund draws on a long line of southern writers who have shunned silence, from Edgar Allan Poe and to the Vietnam War generation of southern writers, such as James Dickey. According to Gretlund, the reason is that "knee-high in tall-tales, narrative poems, family legends, sentimental pastorals, family legends, or just personal memories most Southerners know that what they communicate is not only entertainment, but also instruction. The ceaseless flow of sound is the process by which a sense of the past is integrated with the sense of place" (162).

Like Gretlund, Richard Gray emphasizes the southern literary tradition and its penchant for talk, from Twain to Faulkner over Welty and to the writers of the 1990s. True to tradition, all these writers have "seen the need to talk as not just a moral imperative but an existential one." To these southerners, Gray stresses, talk was something human beings "had to do if they were fully to function as human" (*Aberrations* 416). And as W. J. Cash has stressed, "rhetoric… became less and less a form of speech strictly and more and more a direct instrument of emotion."[94] Michael Kreyling too, points out how the traditional southern hero was one whose power was manifested as much through speech than through physical action (*Figures* 62). All this obviously sounds as quite the opposite of the tradition of the Western, where talk is often frowned upon and considered a danger by the hegemony, which is always male and almost often the hero.

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[94] W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (1941, New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 79.

Of course, today's southern literature is still full of talk and tall-tales. Male and female writers alike are just as enchanting storytellers and witty raconteurs as those of the Old South described by Waytt-Brown, and their characters are as talkative as any of Twain's, Faulkner's or Welty's. A quick look at works by contemporary writers like Clyde Edgerton, Kaye Gibbons, Lewis Nordan, Jayne Anne Phillips, Dori Sanders, and Robert Morgan show that people still talk in southern fiction. And as mentioned earlier, the very act of writing can be seen as an affront against silence.

Yet something is happening, particularly among contemporary male southern writers; a tendency that warrants a closer look. This chapter will examine the six contemporary southern writers in terms of language; their apparent attitude towards language as expressed in essays and interviews, the language of their characters, and the actual language of their texts. In looking at the various forms of language, I will employ the theories of masculinites studies, in particular those of linguists Jennifer Coates and Deborah Cameron, and thereby scrutinize the language for signs of masculine hegemony.

Coates and Cameron both analyze real conversations by men in various settings and contexts to examine whether the traditional stereotypes of male talk and male language (strong and silent or compulsive bragging) are to be believed or not. Both linguists argue that men construct their masculinity in talk, and furthermore, as Coates puts it, that "men's talk sustains and perpetuates 'hegemonic' masculinity, that is, 'approved ways of being male.'"[95] Deborah Cameron follows up on this notion of language as a means of performance and notes that speech "is a 'repeated stylization of the body'; the 'masculine' and 'feminine' styles of talking identified by researchers might be thought of as the 'congealed' result of repeated acts by social actors who are striving to constitute themselves as 'proper' men or women." In many cases, Cameron

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[95] Jennifer Coates, *Men Talk: Stories in the Making of Masculinities* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), p. 4.

continues, "men are under pressure to constitute themselves as masculine linguistically by avoiding forms of talk whose primary association is with women/femininity."[96] While this is true of traditional patriarchy, some male writers, as Berthold Schoene-Harwood notes, "have become highly self-conscious of the gender-specificity of their writing and have started to search for constructive solutions to men's double bind dilemma of being at once both chief perpetrators and self-professed victims of patriarchal oppression."[97] To what extent this is the case with the contemporary male southern writers will be examined below.

Granted, there are still plenty of southern writers who write in another tradition closer to the South: the humorous tradition of Mark Twain and the ornate and elaborate tradition of William Faulkner. The works of Barry Hannah, Lewis Nordan, Cormac McCarthy, and William Gay display both humor and an obvious love of language. But in many cases the language has changed into something less ornate and more crystallized, more tough. This is, in part, due to the immense influence of minimalism, the literary style that sprang to life in the 1960s and reached its zenith in the 1980s. Stylistically minimalism drew on the sparse style of Hemingway, but philosophically there was a distinct change. Instead of employing Hemingway's famous "tip of the iceberg" technique, minimalism expressed what has been called the "whole ice cube effect," in which "all that is seen is all that there is."[98] There were no tricky postmodern experiments, just plain and taut writing about plain people. The most celebrated practitioner of this style was Raymond Carver, whose short stories became vastly influential and whose style can be traced directly to

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[96] Deborah Cameron, "Performing Gender Identity: Young Men's Talk and the Construction of Heterosexual Masculinity." *Language and Masculinity*. Eds. Sally Johnson and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), pp. 49, 60.

[97] Berthold Schoene-Harwood, *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from* Frankenstein *to the New Man* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), p. 101.

[98] Cynthia Whitney Hallett, *Minimalism and the Short Story: Raymond Carver, Amy Hempel, and Mary Robison* (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), p. 1.

contemporary southern writers like Barry Hannah, Jayne Anne Phillips, Larry Brown, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Chris Offutt.

However, a common tendency in both styles of writing by contemporary southern men is that their characters display a distrust of language that mirrors that of Western heroes. The motives behind this change—simply put, from the tradition of Faulkner toward that of Hemingway—may be found in the cultural implications of being a male writer. And once again, the influence of the Western plays a role.

In his book *Phallic Critiques*, Peter Schwenger looks at the traditional depiction of what he calls masculine and feminine writing styles. While this smacks of essentialism, Schwenger is not claiming an archetypal difference between the sexes: A "masculine style… is not a style 'natural' to man," he notes, "but one that is artificially created" (12). He links the construction of these styles of masculinity to the changing societal norms put upon the sexes throughout history. As an example, he mentions that while in the 18th century it was "downright fashionable to be a 'Man of Feeling' and to cry publicly at any suitable provocation," the 19th century saw a change in the idea of masculinity, which resulted in the rise of the "stiff upper lipp" (3).

In examining the link between fashion and literary style, Schwenger points out the change in "masculine" sentences" from the 19th to the 20th century. Where the former was characterized by "parallel and antithetical structure; its fondness for abstract vocabulary; its sententious utterances… as a masculine sentence this will not do in the twentieth century" (6). The masculine role in the 20th century, Schwenger argues, "has become that of the 'natural' man," whose gestures are less civilized." This particular masculine role, built on the traditional traits of the male working-class "designates a certain toughness of language as appropriate (9, 14). Tompkins identifies the same dynamics at work in the Western: despite the genre's mistrust of language and its tireless creation of "situations whose message is that words are weak and

misleading," that "only actions count" and that "words are immaterial… the next thing you know, someone is using language brilliantly, delivering an epigram so pithy and dense it might as well be a solid thing" (49). Tompkins gives a list of examples of Western men's tough sayings, such as "A Texan is nothin' but a human man way out on a limb" from *The Searchers* (1956) or "You haven't gotten tough, you've only gotten miserable" from *Cowboy* (1958). She points out that these tough quips all have as their purpose to "bring you down …. The sayings puncture big ideas and self-congratulation; delivered with perfect timing, they land like stones from a slingshot and make a satisfying thunk" (50).

It is this tradition that Schwenger examines in the American literature of the 20th century. He identifies a construction he calls "the language of men" sired by Ernest Hemingway, passed on to writers like Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, and James Dickey, and brought into its third generation by writers like Jim Harrison and Tom McGuane as well as other members of the so-called School of Virility (13). As Schwenger reminds us, the very act of writing is traditionally considered a feminine activity; a "real man" is supposed to be a man of action; a male writer cannot afford to jeopardize his perceived virility by being too articulate, by showing too much comfort with and control over language (18). Confronted by this tradition, the consciously manly writers may try to resolve this paradox, according to Schwenger, by selecting not only a manly subject matter but also a style of writing, "a certain toughness of language," that shows without doubt he is in fact a man of action (14).

Hemingway's language is a good example of the "tough style" Schwenger identifies: terse and spare, void of the long and elaborate words that became Faulkner's trademark, it reflects the macho ideal of a writer as not *too* articulate. But Hemingway was not the first to use this kind of macho-language, of course. He was just the most famous purveyor of it in literature. As poet and critic Delmore Schwartz has pointed out, Hemingway's style is "a poetic heightening of…

masculine speech. Its reticence, understatement, and toughness derive from the American masculine ideal, which has a long history going back to the pioneer on the frontier and including the strong silent man of the Hollywood Western."[99] Of course, Hemingway's style should not be reduced simply to one of "reticence, understatement, and toughness", but those traits are the most prevailing in his writing style. So even writers inspired by Hemingway's style are vicariously continuing the tradition of the Western and its latent values of hegemonic masculinity.

A closer look at the southern writers in focus here reveals that many of them, consciously or not, seem to conform to patriarchy's cultural implications of being a male writer. In memoirs, essays, and interviews the writers in varying degrees depict their profession as a quasi-heroic task to be accomplished not intellectually but almost physically, thereby removing the act of writing from the abstract realm and placing it firmly in the concrete world. By doing this, writing inevitably takes on masculine connotations instead of being an emasculating trait. This is not a new tendency, however. Already in 1941, in a discussion of Faulkner's introduction to *Sanctuary*, Delmore Schwartz pointed out American writers' seeming necessity to speak in a "tough lingo" when discussing "their work and their profession."[100] More than forty years later, Schwenger shows that the same still holds true. "Writing is an arena," he writes, "in which one fights the continuing battle of manhood. One fights in order to acquire more nerve, and acquires it for no other purpose but to have that nerve, which is so large a part of being a man" (28). As will become clear below, all the southern writers examined here admit, consciously or not, to attempting to achieve "that nerve."

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[99] Delmore Schwartz, "The Fiction of Ernest Hemingway: Moral Historian of the American Dream." *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz*, eds. Donald A. Dike and David H. Zucker (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970), p. 259.
[100] Delmore Schwartz, "The Fiction of William Faulkner," *Selected Essays of Delmore Schwartz*, eds. Donald A. Dike and David H. Zucker (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970), p. 274.

The Writers on Language

In Chris Offutt's memoir *The Same River Twice*, Offutt equals writing with an initiation into manhood. By turning the act of writing into a physical ordeal and inscribing it with a quasi-mythic pioneer-like status, Offutt manages to make language trustworthy. His decision to become a playwright is reached after his westward journey has taken him as far west as possible, to the California coast: "My entire life had led to this decision," he declares, "At land's edge, I'd found my true calling" (86). Speaking of his prolific journal writings, Offutt notes that "I never reread an entry. They represented the past, and my journal was proof that I existed in the present …. Each mark was a gesture toward the future, a codification of the now. Through this, I learned to trust language" (98). Employing language in writing becomes a spiritual odyssey, resembling that of a fearless pilgrim. When Offutt dreams of becoming a playwright, he hopes to write "a single script that would… nullify the prevailing theater," and that "one play would mortar my manhood into a wall" (115). The way he describes it, Offutt is not merely writing, he is actively working towards something, in this case even rebelling, and thus writing, traditionally seen as static, becomes imbued with action and drive.

It is the same rebellious tendency that forces him to give up his dreams of being a playwright: "It was not free enough," he complains and instead turns to poetry, which he also instills with tough and reckless qualities: "As in hitchhiking, there were no rules in poetry. What few poems I'd read had dispensed with punctuation, logic, and rhyme—all severe restrictions to my dormant creativity" (127). In this way Offutt turns poetry-writing—an art form considered very unmanly by patriarchal standards—into an act of courageous rebellion. Even when he is not writing—due to writer's block—the process is instilled with mythic and forceful undertones: "My mind was a tornado. I ceased to bathe, eat, or shave. I simply continued to write without writing"

(146). By constantly infusing the act of writing with an almost heroic and always active task, Offutt changes the image of the writer from a passive scribbler to a trail-blazing pioneer.

When asked whether the act of writing in the small Kentucky community where he lived made him less of a man in cultural terms, Offutt insists that "it wasn't about masculinity or femininity. It was so unusual, period." Yet Offutt then immediately stresses those tough and masculine traits that redeemed him:

> I was never regarded as less than masculine because I wrote, because I was tough, I was very reckless, and… I would be first to do the most reckless thing. And I got in trouble, I was a discipline problem at school. So these things sort of offset any lack of masculinity. But writing, in the culture that I am from, was so far removed that no one knew what to think of it. They thought it was interesting. (Personal interview)

Again, Offutt turns the act of writing into a rebellion, thereby defusing any threat of emasculation.

Larry Brown employed a technique similar to Offutt's in his approach to language and the act of writing. In *On Fire*, his memoir of his firefighting days, Brown acknowledges the lack of respect that writing achieves: "It's such an improbable and foolish-sounding thing to say in front of anybody: 'I'm going to become a writer.'"[101] But, like Offutt, Brown then turns writing into a hard, physical act, with all the traditionally masculine images it connotes: "I figured writing might be like learning how to build houses or lay brick, or even fight fires. I had one burning thought that I believed was true. If I wrote long enough and hard enough, I'd eventually learn how" (viii). That Brown succeeded and that he did so mostly on his own, without going through an MFA program, only made his achievement all the more impressive, and the "self-taught" writer became a brand his publishers used tirelessly throughout his career.

To Barry Hannah, writing also takes on a dangerous edge, thereby removing it from the feminine sphere and into the masculine. In an essay on writing, Hannah recalls his first experience

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[101] Larry Brown, *On Fire* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 1994), p. vii.

on the art of writing: "This was where the action was. Frightened, illicit, sullen …. The first hit of art is a kick, like junk …. Illicit, frightening, exquisite freedom from consciousness… It was always life intense I was after, life as its own comment when drawn well enough, never much else."[102] By comparing the art of writing to something illegal and dangerous and on top of that removing it from the shackles of consciousness, Hannah ultimately depicts language in traditionally masculine terms. Gone are the traditionally feminine traits, such as sensibility and a focus on the inner life rather than "the life of action in the world," as Schwenger puts it (5). "I find life too vivid for thought," Hannah declares in another essay, "Thus I go about preaching, of course, that thought is overrated" ("The War" 172). Hannah praises Dylan Thomas' wild style—"It seemed to me a fine thing to get drunk and just start being Welsh and crowing surrealism"—especially when opposed to "the sullen bitchery of Holden Caulfield" (178). Drunken debauchery over feminized emotion. This stylized attitude links Hannah to the mentality of the obvious masculine Western hero. As Jane Tompkins points out, to the Western hero, "the reflection and negotiation that language requires are gratuitous, even pernicious. The hero doesn't need to think or talk; he just *knows*. Being the hero, he is in a state of grace with respect to the truth" (52). This, of course, points back to Leatherstocking's "gift of nature," as discussed in the previous chapter. This revered trait is the one Hannah aims for in his fiction. He singles out Miles Davis and Jackson Pollack for their ability to merge with their art. And for inspiration he looks to his movie idols William Holden, Burt Lancaster, and Montgomery Clift, even though he does not "recall a word they said. But," Hannah states, "I sure as hell remember how they *were*. I would go to them for the ideal power I expect from art, even very meekly and frighteningly my own. The power beyond words themselves. And I hope it might be said that my work, too, was remarkable life" ("Mr. Brain" 75). It is exactly this transcendence over words that plays right into the tradition of the Western.

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[102] Barry Hannah, "Mr. Brain, He Want a Song," *The Eleventh Draft: Craft and the Writing Life from the Iowa Writers' Workshop*, ed. Frank Conroy (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), pp. 74-75.

The same technique is championed by Lewis Nordan, who believes in telling "that critical, analytical side of the brain, close down for now, and let the intuitive, imaginative side of the brain explode …. When you've got all the rules about point of view and all the structural notions and everything down, that's all right. But then you've got to say goodbye to all that, and let another, almost translate, part of the mind take over." (Bjerre "Nordan" 376). While it could be argued that Nordan casts aside rules in this way in line with the above-mentioned belief that "the reflection and negotiation that language requires are gratuitous," that would be neglecting Nordan's obvious appreciation and understanding of language and what it can do, something I will return to later in this chapter.

William Gay's style of writing is far from the tough style that Schwenger identifies. Instead it is baroque, ornate, and very poetic, an obvious homage to the tradition of Faulkner and McCarthy. Gay does not excuse his style; to him, "the fun of [writing] was using the language …. So if I just had to do away with all the baroque language and just tell Dick and Jane… it was like a job… it was like punching a time card and going to work…" (Personal interview). Yet, despite Gay's obvious love of language, his often violent subject matter and his insistence on his turf on "the wrong side of the tracks," his deliberate wish not to be associated with "polite southern writing" (Personal interview) but rather with bad guys like Larry Brown and Cormac McCarthy, displays an obvious strive towards rebellion that smacks of the macho-oriented writers that Schwenger examines.

Ron Rash, who is as much poet as novelist, turns to metaphors of stamina and even pain when describing the hardships he must endure in writing a novel. When he realized that a short story he had begun needed more space and that he had to write a novel, he "felt like a sprinter being asked to run a marathon." The image of an athlete completing a marathon is quite different from that of a novelist scribbling away at his desk. Rash further downplays his strength by

claiming, "I didn't want to write a novel; I didn't even believe I *could* write a novel. All I knew was that I had to try, because for some inexplicable reason I owed it to that man in the field."[103] Making the task at hand seem overwhelming further enhances the achievement of success, in this case finishing the novel. And Rash succeeded, of course, and has now written four novels.[104] He still stresses that he does not enjoy the writing: "The novels are the things I hate the most," he says, "I hate writing them. There are days when I'm writing novels where I'd rather just stick the pencils right in my eyeballs than try to write another sentence. They're grim, horrible things to do. Every time I finish one I swear I'll never do another" (Personal interview). Whether consciously or nor, Rash creates an image of himself as a writer who must battle "grim, horrible things" in order to overcome the task of writing a novel. Although meant as a joke, the metaphor of sticking a pencil in one's eyes to avoid writing points to the extreme hardship, but more importantly, the tremendous and admirable feat, it takes to be able to complete that task. The examples used by Rash in his joking analogy all demand a certain kind of toughness, in other words a "real man," in order to overcome them.

While all of the writers in various ways attempt to depict their profession in both masculine and heroic terms, it should be pointed out that they all profess their love of language, which of course is also clearly evident in their writing. As Barry Hannah explained in an interview: "The main thing is that I love the English language very much .... I'm always trying to get as much as I can out of words."[105] The same is true for the other writers as well. There is a fascinating paradox here, of course, one that points to the above-mentioned paradox that permeates the Western genre: that while the Western is extremely suspicious of words and language, it has to express itself by using what it fears. The solution is, as Tompkins and Schwenger have shown, to employ a

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[103] Ron Rash, "The Story Behind the Book: *One Foot in Eden*," *Marly Rusoff Literary Agency*. <http://www.rusoffagency.com/fiction/foot_in_eden/behind_foot_in_eden.htm>.
[104] *Serena*, Rash's fourth novel, will be published in October 2008 by Ecco Press.
[105] R. Vanarsdall, "The Spirits Will Win Through: An Interview with Barry Hannah," *Southern Review* 19 (1983): 341.

certain tough language that creates an apparent hegemony in both text and characters. The paradox is not necessarily as prevailing in the southern writers as, for instance, in the writings of Jack Schaefer or Louis L'Amour, but it is definitely worth taking into account.

Although none of the southern writers in focus here are as macho-oriented as Hemingway or Norman Mailer, Schwenger's discussion of the relationship between content and context can be applied here as well. "Style does not happen in a void," Schwenger reminds us, "but interacts with content and from it acquires significance. Masculine or feminine subject matter, then, will influence any style" (11). Since the writers in question here all deal predominantly with males and the male psyche, it is reflected in their respective styles. Furthermore, one of the governing aspects of masculinity is hegemonic masculinity, in which "violence often underpins or supports [the] authority" that men seek to gain over women (Connell 77). It is not surprising then that the fictional world I am focusing on here is often permeated by acts of violence and a general atmosphere of looming violence, both in the language and the world the language creates.

Before exploring this so-called 'masculine language' further, it should be pointed out that especially pro-feminist linguists working with language and gender reject the idea of a basic 'male' and 'female' language.[106] One of these linguists, Sally Johnson, asserts that "we must abandon the search for trivial structural reflections of whatever we believe to be typically 'male' or 'female' language. There is no such thing as a 'men's language.'" But just as importantly, Johnson states: "This does not mean that the notion of 'difference' has no part to play in the study of language and gender." Johnson does recognize the reason for the apparent binary opposition, namely that it is the result of a long tradition in linguistic thinking with roots in structuralist approaches to language. This eventually created what Johnson calls "a simplified understanding of gender as it relates to language, characterized by the view: if women talk one way, then men must do the

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[106] See *Language and Masculinity*, ed. Sally Johnson and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997).

opposite."[107] With time, this tradition of men and women as polar opposites—both in behavior

and language—is now perceived as something of a truism.

While dismissing this oppositional structure, Sally Johnson points out that "language does

not simply mirror gender; it helps constitute it—it is one of the means by which gender is

enacted… the written or visual text is an equally valid arena for 'doing masculinity.'" In their

"performance of gender" through language, many men and women, Johnson says, will inevitably

draw

> upon linguistic resources which they *perceive* to be appropriate to their gender
> group—in the same way that the two sexes may dress in a manner which conforms to
> gender expectations. This is why, over time, ways of speaking or dressing will come
> to be associated with one sex or the other, although they may, of course, be resisted
> by some groups or individuals. In this particular sense, the binary oppositions
> traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity are very real, and highly
> pertinent to any discussion of gendered behaviour. Thus, men who invest heavily in
> hegemonic masculinity will invariably try to talk in ways which they consider to be
> typical of, and appropriate to, men. More significantly, perhaps, they will also aim to
> avoid those ways of talking which they perceive to be typically feminine… or
> typically feminine in certain contexts. (23)

The same can be said of fictional performances of gender. As Ben Knights notes, "the narrative

enactment of masculinity has encoded a fantasy of rising above and proving superior to the forces

of biology and of history" (5). The kind of male that Knights has in mind has pervaded popular

culture in the 20th century, whether in form of the Western hero or more contemporary male

icons like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger, their successors Jean Claude Van

Damme and Steven Seagal and their heirs of the new millennium, such as Vin Diesel and The

Rock. The hegemonic masculinity at play and display in these supermen in many ways harks back

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[107] Sally Johnson, "Theorizing Language and Masculinity," *Language and Masculinity*, ed. Sally Johnson and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), 25, 15.

to the tradition of the Western; one of the prime examples of hegemonic masculinity at play in both language and content.[108]

The kind of masculinity that is being passed on through generations is not only one of style and abstract ideas. Rather, it has come to serve as a guideline for many men, as Tompkins also notes: "The Western's hatred of language is not a philosophical matter only," she asserts, "it has codified and sanctioned the way several generations of men have behaved verbally toward women in American society. Young boys sitting in the Saturday afternoon darkness could not ride horses or shoot guns, but they could talk. Or rather, they could learn how to keep silent" (59). One of the most obvious problems with the venerated silence of the Western hero is that while it displays an apparent "demonstration of masculine control over emotion," as Schwenger puts is in his discussion of Hemingway's male characters, "it is also and ultimately self-destructive. When emotion finds no release outwards, it turns inward on its possessor (or possessed)" (45). Tompinks concurs and asserts that the "Western hero's silence symbolizes a massive suppression of the inner life" (66). Since language itself is traditionally and culturally considered a threat to male integrity, both the Western and the southern novels are full of men who act but are silent. The crucial factor is, of course, to what extent today's southern writers are aware of this construction of hegemonic masculinity; whether their male characters can be seen as critiques of the tradition or whether some of the writers "believe" in the powerful myth of manhood. Most of the writers admit that the aesthetics of the Western has somehow influenced them, just as it has entire generations. But because the Western has at its core traditional patriarchal morals, it is likely that these beliefs have rubbed off somehow. These questions and more will be examined

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[108] While many of these popular action movie stars have not starred in actual Westerns, some of their movies, such as Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood* (1982) starring Sylvester Stallone, Steven Seagal's *On Deadly Ground* (1994), and Kevin Bray's *Walking Tall* (2004) starring The Rock, can easily be seen as contemporary town-tamer Westerns in their recognizable plot of a strong and honest man who rids a town of villains.

and discussed in the following sub-chapters that will take a closer look at the language of the characters as well as language of the texts themselves.

The Language of the Characters

Lewis Nordan's *The Sharpshooter Blues* features an interesting discourse on the way language can make or break adult males who battle feelings of insecurity and emasculation. Dr. McNaughton is a man who always wears "a suit and tie, even at night, when he [is] home alone" (91). Alienated from both his son and wife, he has resigned himself to watching television at night, while his wife is having sex with her young lover, Morgan the Sharpshooter, in the same house. One morning McNaughton realizes "just how unhappy he had been, and for how long. How narrow and pathetic life seemed." He believes that "renewal seemed possible at Monday Music," which is the local term for morning coffee at the drug store (103). What pulls McNaughton to Monday Music is "the proximity of male voices, male laughter, old stories" (103). He has lived outside the traditional male codes for so long that he needs to start his journey back into manhood at a place that epitomizes masculinity.

As in so many southern towns in the 1950s, the local drug store is the place where men catch up on what is going on in their society. Monday Music is "a man's world, like the rest of Arrow Catcher, Mississippi, like the rest of the world, maybe" (105). It is a collective of heterosexual masculinity, a place for the men to retreat and validate themselves. As Jonathan Rutherford reminds us in his study on masculinity, male bonding is "a collusion amongst men to resist the Other." Men fear that women will expose their weaknesses and undermine the myths and illusions that found men's claim to superiority. They have thus created cultures evolving around drinking and sports, trying to shut out some of the many problems of male

heterosexuality. An entire language has been formed, one that reduces women's influence on their lives.[109]

Furthermore, Monday Music is a place for bragging and tall tales. As Peter Schwenger points out, people make themselves vulnerable by talking and thereby opening up to another person. Once we put words to an emotion, that emotion, by patriarchal standards, becomes feminized. However, "as long as the emotion is restrained, held back, it hardly matters what the emotion itself is; it will retain a male integrity" (44). But this does not mean that men cannot talk. As long as they stay away from private and emotional subjects they are safe. Linguist Deborah Cameron who has conducted analyses of conversations between men, explains that "what counts as acceptable talk for men is a complex matter in which all kinds of contextual variables play a part" (61). Based on her research, Cameron notes that in a setting consisting of men only, there are no women for the men to differentiate themselves from, but there is always the danger of homosexuality. Thus women and gay men become a contrast group that the males can define themselves against. Since men constantly seek to display their heterosexual orientation, the most appropriate way to do this in a place like Monday Music is to gossip about sexual exploits with women or to make sexist and homophobic jokes (61).

This is part of the reason that Dr. McNaughton has reservations about going to Monday Music for the first time in years: "There was bound to be gossip, jokes. He himself was probably the subject of all that male talk and laughter" (104). And there is plenty of it in Monday Music. A choir of male voices ruminates about the two dead Texas desperados, whether or not Morgan is "a fairy" and concludes that "Zachary Scott ain't no fairy. Zachary Scott's too ugly. Zachary Scott never would get a date if he had to rely on men. How come you reckon a woman will go out on a date with anybody as ugly as most of you boys? Women ain't got no taste" (106).

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[109] Jonathan Rutherford, "Who's That Man?" in *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, eds. Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), pp. 52-54.

When Dr. McNaughton speaks out, he breaks the unwritten code of Monday Music. Instead of continuing the accepted superficial banter, McNaughton bares his soul: "I see now that I've pretty much wasted my life," he says, out of the blue. All of a sudden the complicated problems of male heterosexuality come crashing into Monday Music, the very function of which is to keep those problems out in the first place. After a long silence, one of the men finally says what has to be said: "Uh, Dr. Toby, generally confession is heard out at William Tell .... Out on the Highway, see? At William Tell. Never at Monday Music." After this "the other men looked up... [and] allowed themselves to take a breath" (111).

It is obvious that the truth is not welcome at Monday Music. But as Margaret Jones Bolsteri shows in her affectionate, yet critical reflection on the South, the problem with anecdotes and tall tales is that they are entertaining and instructive, but do not evoke any real response. By drawing attention to images and memory, stories "hinder the exchange of information so vital to conversation, undoubtedly the reason Southerners are so adept at telling them. When there are so many topics that could get you killed, best deal in fiction and be safe. And although everybody may know it's the truth that's being told, whatever is presented in a story gets treated as fiction."[110]

It is not that the men do not want to hear about McNaughton's problems: "You could draw a pretty good crowd, I expect—with you wasting your life, and then Miss Ruthie and the sharpshooter carrying on like they do," Leonard tells him (111). It is simply that in Monday Music men are allowed to be "real men," bragging, telling tall tales, clinging to the traditional codes of manhood, while generally enjoying a sanctuary from the world outside, which is sometimes too complicated to grasp. McNaughton's attempt to break back into this closed male world fails because he does not understand the rules, one of which is the distrust of talking.

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[110] Margaret Jones Bolsteri, *Born in the Delta: Reflections on the Making of a Southern White Sensibility* (Knoxville: UP of Tennessee, 1991), p. 47.

When McNaughton finally opens up to his son, it is Louis's determination to force his father to speak to him that yields results in the end. McNaughton discovers that he does not have to feel emasculated when sharing his inner thoughts with someone. Crying can lead to strength instead of being a sign of weakness. Fatherhood is another form of masculinity that McNaughton has not discovered the pleasures of. He realizes that his life becomes richer when he shares his thoughts with his son, and their newfound communication is a sign of hope in a novel, where gunfire and death prevail—this will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

The prologue of Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* introduces us to a small unlicensed roadhouse, where men gather to drink overpriced liquor. The atmosphere here is not unlike that of Nordan's Monday Music. The place is a male sanctuary that offers "absolute freedom from a woman's touch" (2). The roadhouse is, in other words, a collective of heterosexual masculinity, a place for the men to retreat and validate themselves. Like Monday Music, the roadhouse is a place of male bonding. It is where men come to hear tall-tales and fishing news from the owner Leon Jr. who "was neither happy nor sad from repeating the same stories" (1). These yarns and tall-tales are what protect Leon Jr. from vulnerable exposure. But Hannah goes below the surface of the innocent tall-tale and exposes the darkness in the hearts of the men and their society.

The men visiting the roadhouse hail from villages now "shut and dust-windowed. As if a neutron bomb had fallen on the towns." All that is left are "hunkering men turned to nagging barbershop hags, monologues about niggers, niggers, and other niggers, beneath their talk a yearning for homicide, themselves included" (3). The two guests soon discover that the old rituals are growing darker. Instead of the expected news about "spinners, plastic lizards, worms, jigs, live bait," Leon Jr. confronts the two with a home-made videotape, "Teenage Lesbian Comedown," and its promise of "fine young nookie." After some initial doubt the men buy the tape. On their

way out, they complain about the changes they are seeing around them: "This place had a purity

to it. Lowdown but pure," Robbie says. Leon agrees: "Nostalgia, shit, me too. I got it every second.

Nothing new looks worth a shit to me… We're dirty old men already… And even the dirt don't

seem as tasty as it used to" (1, 4, 5). Both men are clearly appalled by the rapid changes around

them, changes that have brought on an increasing perversion, which they, nevertheless, find

themselves attracted to.

The opening sets up Hannah's attack on the New South, but it also presents a world that, in

many ways, invokes a remnant of the male frontier and an echo of an American male tradition in

which "a repudiation of the feminine" is a definition of manhood, as Michael Kimmel has shown.

In the middle of the 19th century, the American man found himself frustrated by his feeling that

the home was becoming increasingly feminized. Because of the family structure where father was

the breadwinner and mother the homemaker, it was up to mother to raise their children, and in

the case of sons, to teach them how to become men. One reaction against this feminization of

American manhood was, like Huck Finn, to light out for the territory, away from the civilizing

women. Newspaper editor and politician Horace Greeley's 1865 advice "Go West, young man,

and grow up with the country,"[111] was followed by thousands of young men eager to prove their

manhood around other men in a woman-free environment. As Kimmel notes, "it was the

homosocial life, a world full of 'rude freedom' outside the conventional boundaries of civilization

and away from wives." While many men were unable to go West, they were able to escape

through fantasy, brought on first by the dime-novel, and later by Western novels and not least

Western movies.[112] It is within this tradition that the people in Hannah's novel seek out the

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[111] While this saying was popularized by Greeley, it actually originated from John B. L. Soule, who used "Go West, young Man!" it as the title to his 1851 *Terre Haute Express* editorial. Robert C. Williams, *Horace Greeley: Champion of American Freedom* (New York: New York UP, 2006), p. 40.
[112] Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), pp. 59-64. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *Manhood*.

roadhouse. While the passage is obviously humorous, Hannah ultimately exposes the revered

male sanctuary as not only hollow but as dark, amoral, and potentially dangerous.

The fear of words and emotions that Schwenger and Tompkins discuss is also spelled out in Larry

Brown's *Father and Son*. Both Bobby, the hero and Glen, the villain, belong to the group of men

who believe that action speaks louder than words. Summing up the masculine Western code,

Tompkins explains: "Language is gratuitous at best; at worst it is deceptive. It takes the place of

things, screens them from view, creates a shadow world where anything can be made to look like

anything else" (52). The Western is full of silent or at least tough-talking men; best known

perhaps is Clint Eastwood's No-Name character from Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns.

The tacit belief that silence equals machismo is evident in the first confrontation between

Glen and Sheriff Bobby Blanchard: "Glen was trembling and he didn't trust his voice" (14). Bobby,

on the other hand, offers to make peace with Glen, telling him: "'Now if you want to, we'll shake

hands like grown men. Put all this behind us'" (14). He then offers Glen his hand, but, as he stands

there in the empty silence waiting for a response, his half-brother spits, then snarls, "'You take

that badge off for five minutes and I'll stomp your ass in the ground.'" Instead of acting out of

anger, however, or with the righteous indignation of a lawman taunted by an ex-convict, Bobby

simply withdraws his hand, says, "'You wouldn't win,'" and walks back to his cruiser (15). The

issue is not whether Bobby lacks the desire or courage to respond to such threats. He simply

restrains himself in order to keep the moral upper hand. Verbal insults are not enough to start a

fight; not for the hero, at least. But as Mitchell points out in his discussion of *The Virginian*,

"language and action always exist in a fragile balance, requiring that words be backed by actions

just as much as silence is." The Virginian can be cool and silent precisely because he knows "when

words need to be backed by action and when not" (101). The same can be said of Sheriff Bobby.

He can walk away from Glen, without taking up his challenge because of his absolute confidence that he would win.

Being the villain, Glen does not possess the same kind of confidence about language. When confronted with his three years in jail and condolences for his dead mother, his reaction is typical: "Glen didn't say anything. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, plucked a bit of tobacco off his tongue" (5). When his brother tries to reason with him, Glen tells him to drive him somewhere he "can get a beer and shut up" (15). In Glen's world, talking does not solve any problems; it merely reveals weakness. When he does talk, it is in the tough, sparse language of countless Western heroes and villains, like *Shane*'s villain Wilson who growl's "Prove it" before drawing, John Wayne's sardonic "That'll be the day" in *The Searchers*, or in *One-Eyed Jacks* where Marlon Brando's Rio perhaps utters one of the best Western insults: "Get up, you scum-suckin' pig." Jane Tompkins calls this type of minimalist language "a desperate shorthand, comic, really, in its attempt to communicate without using words" (51). Of course, to Glen, there is nothing comic about it. Language is very much a matter of life or death to him. In Glen's world of physical retaliation, revealing a weakness can have fatal consequences. He needs to display physical power. And paradoxically, as Tompkins explains, "For the really strong man language is a snare; it blunts his purpose and diminishes his strength" (51). While there is plenty in the text that supports reading *Father and Son* as a continuation of the Western tradition's strained relation with language, there are also scenes that serve to undercut Bobbby's role as hegemonic male hero. As I will show in the next chapter, Bobby's relationship with his mother ultimately questions his role as traditional male hero. But when it comes to the male characters' use of language, they do continue the tradition of the Western's taciturn men.

In Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother* we also find examples of characters who distrust language. A conversation between Virgil Caudill, the novel's protagonist, and Marlon, his brother-in-law, spells out exactly the male fear of women's language that saturates the Western: After a while where "[b]oth men were quiet," they soon get to talking about women's talk: "Way them women talk we can always use more of something," Marlon declares. "Full of plans, ain't they," Virgil agrees. "For other people," Marlon says and continues, "They'll lay their ears back like a cat eating, and knock you down with talk. A man can't pay that much mind" (45, 46). Later on, we get an example of Virgil's crippled relationship to language. Standing at his dead brother's grave, Virgil thinks back on his reaction to Boyd's death: "He'd only cried once, after seeing the expression on his mother's face at losing a son. His tears had been for her. Now… Virgil could feel his own grief rising through him." His reaction lives up to traditional male conduct in that he tries to repress what he considers effeminate emotions through a combination of macho traits: "'Fuck you,' he said. 'You son of a bitch. Look at you now. Goddam fucking dead. Fuck you, Boyd. Fuck you'" (80).

This explicit use of swearing, or "taboo language," as linguist Jennifer Coates terms it, is a way of performing hegemonic masculinity. As Coates point out, "Swearing and taboo language have historically been used by men in the company of other men as a sign of their toughness and of their manhood" (46). Swearing then, contributes to the desired emotional restraint, which Coates calls "one of the key values inherent in hegemonic masculinity" (47). For Virgil, the emotions take over, and his tough pose loses out. When he starts crying he feels "somewhere deep inside… the instinct to shut it off… like doubling a hose to choke his sorrow …. Virgil stood and began kicking the granite headstone. He kicked until his foot hurt" (80). The reaction, again, follows traditional male behavior. Instead of accepting the inevitable emotions and letting the sorrow lose by crying, Virgil wishes he could choke it. The word "choke" is significant because emotions (sorrow) is directly associated with words and thereby language. Virgil's reaction sums

up Jane Tompkins' point that men who live by traditional forms of male conduct "would rather die than talk, because talking might bring up their own unprocessed pain or risk a dam burst that would undo the front of imperturbable superiority" (67). Virgil's reaction when the dam does bust is a fit of physical violence, a last macho attempt to expunge any form of emotion.

Together with his colleagues Rundell, Dewey, and Taylor, Virgil performs a distinct type of male working-class bravado that serves to sustain a certain sense of dignity through a performance of male hegemony based mostly on bragging, cursing, and verbal affronts against their jobs and superiors. Taylor sums it all up when he arrives late for work, unshaved and in wrinkled clothes. "Boys," he says, "I feel like I been shot at and missed, shit at and hit." When asked why he showed up at all, he answers, "Hell, I wrecked my car last night. I woke up still in the ditch and I was closer to work than the house. I just come in for a drink to feel better" (25-26). This is a clear example of how, as Jennifer Coates puts it, "men's stories align them with hegemonic norms." Based on her research, Coates sums up a pattern of male storytelling which focuses on achievement. Telling stories in all-male groups is itself "a competitive activity, with speakers competing to boast about their triumphs or their cock-ups." Young men, she argues, "tell stories which exaggerate feats of aggression and getting the better of authority figures (e.g. by kicking down a door at work, about skiving off work, about a fight with a workmate)…" (56). But even in this male sphere where language is welcome as long as it is loud, lewd, and bragging, Virgil holds back. When Taylor points out a good-looking girl by stating, "I'd eat a mile of her shit just to see where it came from," and then challenges Virgil to join his little game with a "Wouldn't you?," Virgil does not play along. His response is a taut "Don't reckon" (28).

When Virgil flees Kentucky and heads west, he has not yet decided where to settle down. But at a bar in Missoula, Montana, he is taken in by "a grizzled man" whose "voice held the jocular camaraderie shared by single men eating public meals alone. In that instant, [Virgil]

decided to stay in Missoula" (127). The male camaraderie that the voice promises reminds Virgil of his male work sphere at home, which was likewise based on a certain male banter. Furthermore, the stranger's voice also promises the absence of women, and both are part of the reason Virgil decides to settle down in Montana. And the grizzled man is not an exception. Ty Skinner, the man Virgil rents his log cabin from, has a voice "low and thick, as if unaccustomed to speech" (128). It is telling that Ty becomes Virgil's closest friend in Montana.

As is clear from the above examples, Virgil finds himself in a dilemma. On the one hand, he wants to feel at home among the rough and jovial male discourse around him, but on the other hand, his apparent need to repress any form of emotion in language turns him into an outsider. In this sense he is not too different from the traditional laconic Western hero who is surrounded by babbling hordes. However, while Offutt depicts Virgil as tough, he also hints at the limitations of repressing language and emotions to the extent Virgil does.

One of the most blatant examples of a male character's demonstration of masculine control over language can be found in Nathan Winer, the young protagonist of William Gay's *The Long Home*. Even though we learn that Nathan reads Carl Sandburg poems, he is the silent type who, when he speaks, goes straight to the point. His first exchange with Amber Rose, his romantic interest, encapsulates Nathan's relationship to language. After having paid her a compliment, she tells him: "Well, you can talk. I didn't know if you could or not. You ought to try it more often." While her comment is delivered teasingly, it contains a seed of the patriarchal gender ideology of the Western, where women try to assert their ideology over the man. Nathan's reply, "I might if I had someone to talk to .... No need in telling myself things I already know" (142), is exactly as terse and distanced as is expected, and in the tradition of Western hero's laconic quips; it "cuts people off at the knees," to borrow Tompkins' phrase (51). However, the situation is complicated when

we are told that to Nathan, "all his words sounded dull and clumsy" (142). So even though he displays a masculine control over language, it is merely a performance meant to cover a basic insecurity when it comes to language; an insecurity that explains his strained relationship with words.

Nathan's impatience with language is further emphasized when compared to Motormouth Hodges, his friend and a character who serves as comic relief in the novel. Motormouth is basically a fool, and he is repeatedly depicted as someone who cannot stop talking. Riding in the car with Motormouth, Nathan feels "imprisoned… by the compulsive timbre of Motormouth's voice, a drone obsessed with spewing out words without regard for truth or even for coherence, as if he must spit out vast quantities of them and rearrange them to his liking, step back, and admire the various patterns he could construct" (154-55). Again, Tompkins's discussion of language in the Western can be applied. The language that Motormouth spews out is "gratuitous at best; at worst it is deceptive. It takes the place of things, screens them from view, creates a shadow world where anything can be made to look like anything else" (Tompkins 52). The real problem with Motormouth's drone is, at it says, that there is no truth to it, which in Nathan's view makes it merely a redundant show of language. When Motormouth later tells Nathan that he looks like a man picking cotton, except "you grabbin trouble with both hands and stuffin it in a sack and never once lookin over your shoulder" (175), he again displays an affinity for language, in this case one that requires thought. The parable is an example of the "reflection and negotiation that language requires," as Tompkins puts it, and exactly those qualities are what the Western find superfluous and even destructive (52). And Nathan seems to be of the same opinion, as he lets Motormouth know: "I never was one for parables and hard sayings," he sneers, "You got anything I need to hear just say so straight out" (175). His command echoes countless Western heroes, who favor action over words. One of the best examples can be found in *The Searchers*

where Ethan Edwards, eager to get on his horse and pursue the killers, rudely tells an older woman to "get to the point," and later tells the hymn-singing mourners to "put an Amen to it."

At the same time as Nathan's impatience with words serves to portray him as more of a man than Motormouth, his use of words further cements his tough masculinity. When Nathan confronts the ruthless killer Dallas Hardin about his right to date his step-daughter Amber Rose, he uses tough words to challenge him and to assert authority: "Don't hand me that daughter shit, save it for somebody that believes it." It must be mentioned that the entire community fears Hardin, for good reason, and that nobody would dare talk to him that way. And Hardin himself is surprised: "Nobody talks to me that way anymore," he tells Nathan. "I done growed out of puttin up with it" (178). As is the case with Western heroes—and as in the discussion of *Father and Son*'s Bobby Blanchard's use of language—Nathan uses language only when necessary, and his use of tough, confrontational language is based on his belief that he can back it up with physical action. Even after he has been severely beaten up by Jiminiz, Hardin's henchman, Nathan proves his manhood by continuing to verbally threaten Hardin. Lying in a pool of his own blood, Nathan boldly proclaims "You better make him kill me …. Because if I live you won't. You're a dead man" (211). The fact that Nathan is only beaten up further after this threat does not undermine the legitimacy of his words nor that of the failed action behind it. Because Nathan intends to go through with his threat. And that he is not scared off by the heavy beating he takes, serves, of course, to manifest his manhood further. This will be discussed further in chapter 5.

In Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden*, Sheriff Will Alexander, one of the narrators, is fully aware of the importance of language and uses it to his own advantage. Even though his wife flinches when he uses "hillbilly talk… it was the way most folks still spoke in Oconee County," and Alexander knows that "it puts people more at ease when you talked like them" (7). Likewise, Alexander knows how

to decipher other people's language, as when he is interrogating Billy Holcombe, a suspected

killer. When Billy denies, Alexander can tell that "the heat in his voice argued otherwise." When

he asks his question, Alexander does not give Billy "as much as a second between questions,"

thereby using his own language as a means of stressing the suspect (32-33). He knows the power

of words and, more importantly, how to use them. The same is not the case for Billy. He considers

words a danger best suppressed. His wife Amy is quite aware of this predicament. Because the

two cannot have a child, Amy has slept with another man, and she is now pregnant. Billy is aware

of this, but he has not commented on it, and Amy knows why: It is "as if it couldn't really be true

without he made notice of it with his words, that silence could hide almost anything between two

people" (90). And Billy himself is aware of the reasons behind his silence: "I'd known once it was

words something would come of those words… I'd been like a man in his field who sights a

tornado hauling towards him and puts his head down reckoning if he don't look up and admit to

its coming it might some-ways pass him by" (117). To Billy, words only complicate matters further,

which is why he chooses silence. When he finally does use words ands ask her whose child it is,

Amy's answer leads to the confrontation and Billy's ultimate killing of Holland Winchester.

The above examples of the way the various writers depict their characters' relationship to

language illustrate a high awareness of the power of language, and the way that language or

rather the lack of is used by men both to establish dominance as well as to safeguard man's

emotions. This mirrors the way language is used in the Western genre, as Tompkins explains: "The

impassivity of male silence suggests the inadequacy of female verbalization, establishes male

superiority, and silences the one who would engage in conversation." Furthermore, "Silence

establishes dominance at the same time as it protects the silent one from inspection and possible

criticism by offering nothing for the interlocutor to grab hold of" (Tompkins 59, 60). In other

words, the six writers all display an overall awareness of the dynamics of language, gender, and power.

The Language of the Writers

If we look beneath plot line and characterization and focus on the language itself, an interesting dichotomy occurs. While the writers examined here all have their own unique style, they can roughly be divided into two vastly different style categories: those whose language "shows" and those whose language "tells," or in other words, what seems like writing versus what seems like reality. In *Deadly Musings: Violence and Verbal Form in American Fiction*, Michael Kowalewski quotes Walt Whitman, who declared: "I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtains. What I tell I tell for precisely what it is."[113] Whitman's statement could very well be the credo of the traditional Western hero, and as Kowalewski shows, a long line of American writers echo Whitman's sentiment.

The discussion inevitably intermingles with Schwenger and Tompkins' discussions of macho language. But one of Kowalewski's points is to avoid ideological readings and focus on the style of the texts only. In his insistence on avoiding biographical, historical, and ideological aspects, his method is close to New Criticism. The strength of that method lies in a fresh and innovative look upon such literary giants as Hemingway, Faulkner, O'Connor, and Pynchon, writers whose works have been chewed to the bone by countless scholars over the decades. However, my is exactly the opposite of Kowalewski's. Where he shuns ideologies, my main goal is to locate the ideological remains of the Western, partly in the language of today's southern writers. But despite our conflicting goals, Kowalewski's discussion of style is still relevant to this chapter.

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[113] Walt Whitman, "Preface 1855 – *Leaves of Grass*, First Edition," *Leaves of Grass*. Eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. Norton Critical Editions (New York: Norton, 1973), p. 719.

While Kowalewski does not go into any discussion about the gendering of language, without meaning to, he still sums up the link between what Schwenger calls "tough language" and a deliberate performance of a tough masculinity. What Schwenger calls "the language of men" is, essentially, what Kowalewski defines as "realistic writing," that is, "language and a grammar that are undistinctive [sic], anonymous, and self-effacing" (Kowalewski, 29).

Furthermore, Kowalewski echoes Tompkins' above-mentioned observation about the Western's "antilanguage:" She notes that the Western's "attack on language is wholesale and unrelenting, as if language were somehow tainted in its very being" (52). Kowalewski reaches the somewhat same conclusion in his examination of American writers of realistic fiction. These writers, he argues, "want, or so it would seem, to do away with language all together, to free themselves from the very means by which they intimate that such freedom is necessary and suggest that it might be possible." Furthermore, realistic writing "frequently takes shape as an act of imaginative violence against language and books," Kowalewski argues (35, 40).

And while he still does not go into the gendered ideologies beneath the role of language, he does suggest that the reason we read realistic fiction is to "reassure ourselves that the books we read are not too bookish, that we are not insulated from a world that does not conceive of or judge itself in literary terms" (39). Again, this can be tied into the tradition of the Western and its suspicious view on language. As Tompkins argues, the male Western heroes "don't have the large vocabularies an expensive education can buy …. Language tends to be wielded most skillfully by people who possess a certain kind of power: class privilege, political clout, financial strength" (51). This mistrust of class privilege is also an inherent trademark of realistic fiction, as Kowalewski shows. He points to the equation in American fiction of reality with "the recalcitrant and the unpleasant" which results in "the promise of a life free from illusions and self-deceptions. It also constitutes a kind of conceptual hierarchy with 'reality' placed strategically over dreams, idealism,

and abstractions, over 'nerds,' 'eggheads,' and the 'academic'" (39). This hierarchy can be traced back to the ideologies at the heart of the Western, as Tompkins showed.

It becomes increasingly clear that the unmentioned aspect in Kowalewski's discussion is gender, or more specifically, masculinity. In fact, Kowalewski's text itself is one of many examples where the male aspect is a normative assumption. The anti-intellectualism referred to goes hand in hand with a certain image of manhood, one that spurns abstraction in favor of hard, physical facts and that inevitably will present a macho attitude towards life and language. In other words, the "tough style" that Schwenger examines. To be "bookish" or "academic" is, of course, to be a certain type of man that is not really a man, at least not a "real man" in the traditional sense of the term.

What Kowalewski is arguing then, apparently without being aware of it, is that realism in American fiction equals tough masculinity. Tompkins states that "silence, sexual potency, and integrity, go together" in Westerns (54), and the same is true for much realistic fiction. Not only would Western writers like Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour agree, but so would macho-writers like Norman Mailer.

In the following I will discuss the language and style of the six writers. Apart from excerpts from the novels, I will briefly mention some of the blurps being used to market these writers. This gives an idea of the way the writers present themselves (or the way their publishers present them) and is part of the larger performance that results in the construction of the writers as we experience them. But mainly I will give examples from the novels and discuss to what extent the style of the language shows signs of a Western aesthetics.

As mentioned above, the writers can be divided into two groups: those whose writing is realistic and those whose writing is somehow artificial. To the first group belong Larry Brown,

Chris Offutt, and Ron Rash. To the latter, Barry Hannah, William Gay, and, slightly less obvious,

Lewis Nordan.

When dealing with fiction, realistic writing might sound like a paradox, but what is meant, of

course, is that realistic writing is fiction that seems real. Or, as Kowalewski explains it, the "very

possibility of realism in fictional description depends upon writing that generates and sustains the

illusion of realistic action and life, and that illusion springs from the verbal effects that are kept

from impinging upon it as well as from those that initiate it." He goes on to explain that realistic

writing must display an "illusion of representational purity." And the way to achieve that purity is,

according to Kowalewski, to use "language and grammar that are undistinctive, anonymous, and

self-effacing. Its effectiveness is measured by its lack of verbal 'interference'" (26, 29).

Larry Brown's writing is a good example of the style Kowalewski defines as realistic. He has

been marketed as a writer whose prose is "unflinching," "stark," "dark," "blunt," and "clear,

simple and powerful."[114] In other words, if we are to believe the publishers, Brown, like Whitman,

does not shape or manipulate his language to sound elegant or otherwise "literary" in the

snobbish sense of the term. He speaks the truth as he sees it in his simple but powerful language,

which has developed into the style his publisher has proudly named "Grit Lit."

Speaking of his own language, Larry Brown has said: "Finding your voice is what every

writer is looking for. I think it's really more a matter of gaining control of the language and

assuming authority so that you can assume any voice you want to and become whatever

character you want to …. I'm trying to develop it more and get it right whenever I'm trying to tell

something. There's so many things you can do with the language. You're unlimited" (Manley 124).

Brown's comment suggests that his main impetus is to use language to create convincing

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[114] Dust jacket of *Fay* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2000).

characters. Even though he does not comment on his actual style, he uses the term "get it right," which hints at his talent for realism.

Brown's writing in many ways lives up to Kowalewski's definition of realistic writing as sequences that "are meant to seem verbally empty in order that they can be imagistically flooded by a reader... Words are meant to fade and attenuate in realistic descriptions, as the world comes rushing in" (29). One example is the disturbing description of the rape scene in *Father and Son*, where Glen attacks Erline, a female acquaintance who misjudges his initial kindness:

> He caught her by the hair and walked her backwards to the bed, watchful for kicks to the balls, keeping the hurt hand behind him to protect it. She was screaming but there was nobody to hear …. He pushed her back down on the bed with her entire body fighting against him, every muscle and fiber, her fingernails seeking his eyes and her own eyes wild like a trapped animal. He pinned both her wrists behind her head with one hand while she tried to bite him with her flashing white teeth. He laughed at that and they struggled and shook the frame of the bed. It was hard to stop her from moving. (114)

What we have here is a string of sentences that are practically verbally empty. The pronouns "she" and "he" serve as markers that the text moves around. Brown serves up a list of directional descriptions ("down on the bed," "behind her head," etc.) letting the reader know what happened and how, but he avoids loading the words with his own meaning. Despite the violent content, the words are void of any brutal significance. Words like "pushed," and "bite" may connote violence, but there are no startling images that shake the text out of its realistic setting. It is up to the reader to interpret and to judge. Since the quotation is taken out of context, it should be pointed out that, even though it is written from a third-person point of view, the point of view still leans towards that of Glen. This explains why Erline is described in animalistic terms. Rather than criticizing Brown for being misogynist, this is a case of Brown depicting his character's state of mind. Glen's misogynism will be discussed further in Chapter 5. Other places in the novel,

Brown describes situations from the point of view of several other characters, both male and female.

Like Brown, Chris Offutt writes in simple language that still harbors both wit and poetry. He is labeled as "a fierce writer," who displays both "humanity and wit" as well as "style and grace." His language is summed up as an amalgamation of wilderness and poetry in Tobias Wolff's appraisal of "the thorny, particular music of his voice."[115] The following passage from *The Good Brother* displays Offutt's stripped-down language and tight structure, which fits Kowalewski's definition of realism. Virgil, the protagonist, has snuck up on Rodale, his brother's killer, and is ready to kill him:

> Virgil wanted Rodale to talk or move, give him a final reason to fire. Every molecule of his body was at war with itself. He had the sensation that the pistol was part of his body, that the bullets it contained were made from his marrow.
> The television flickered.
> Rodale glanced at the change in light and Virgil squeezed the trigger. Rodale's head bounced against the cushions. A hole appeared in his face and Virgil continued to fire the pistol until the room filled with the smell of cordite and the hammer was clicking against an empty chamber. The couch glistened with fresh blood. Rodale's legs were twitching and part of his face was gone. (120)

What strikes the reader here is, of course, the extreme violence. But like the Brown passage discussed above, the text does not seek to explain or interpret. Words like "bounced," "hole," "fire," "glistened," "blood," and "twitching" do connote the violent act, but they are not necessarily startling in themselves. Apart from the metaphorical aspect in the first three lines (molecules at war, pistol part of his body), the passage itself is pure description. There is nothing in Offutt's language that seems to have been shaped or manipulated or in other ways calls

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[115] Dust jacket of *The Good Brother* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

attention to itself. By using undistinctive language and grammar and a lack of "verbal interference," as Kowalewski puts it, the passage displays an "illusion of representational purity," and as such mirrors the macho language of many Westerns.

While I have placed Ron Rash in the "realistic writers" category, like Brown and Offutt, I should point out that his writing does display a more poetic touch in the traditional sense. But because his language still adheres to Kowalewski's definitions, I still maintain his status as a realistic writer. This trait is also highlighted on the cover of *One Foot in Eden*, where fellow Appalachian writer Lee Smith declares that "each voice rings as true as the sound of an axe in the cold morning air."[116] The metaphorical connection between "true" and "axe" emphasizes that Rash's language displays the "representational purity" that Kowalewski mentioned. The image that Smith connotes is clear and precise; it is, in other words, real, as opposed to abstract or academic. In the front matter of the novel, Fred Chappell, yet another Appalachian writer, praises the novel. It is, he declares, a "story of wild, almost primitive force and yet it is neatly and ingeniously put together." Again, the focus on the natural world ("wild" and "primitive") seems to guarantee reality despite the construction behind it.

The following example from *One Foot in Eden* is narrated by Sheriff Alexander:

I got in the patrol car and bumped down the dirt road. I thought again about what Holland had said to me two weeks ago about some men being better able to stand things when the shooting starts. I knew he was talking about more than just not getting killed or maimed so bad you wished you'd been killed. Holland was talking about how some men weren't much bothered by the killing. I had been, and I carried with me the glazed eyes of every Japanese soldier I'd taken the life from on Guadalcanal. But I'd fought with men like Holland who seemed bred for fighting the same way gamecocks are. Their eyes lit up when the shooting started. They

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[116] Cover of paperback version of *One Foot in Eden* (New York: Picador, 2004).

were utterly fearless, and you thanked God they were on your side instead of the other. Like Holland, they'd wanted souvenirs from their kills, mainly gold teeth carved out with Ka-Bar knives, leaving the mouths of dead Japanese gapped-toothed like jack-o'-lanterns. (16-17)

The passage displays a language that clearly adhere to Kowalewski's definitions of realistic writing. The first line presents an easily recognizable scene using straightforward, even colloquial language, such as "bumped down." And even though we move into the narrator's thoughts, the language remains lucid and free of abstractions. The similes used (comparing Holland's fighting skills with those of gamecocks and describing the dead Japanese as jack-o'-lanterns) are equally simple and easily recognizable. And as in the passages by Brown and Offutt, there are, to use Whitman's words, no curtains hanging between the language and its subject matter. It is not the language that lends the passage its dark tone of violence; it is the subject matter it describes. The narrator's thought of killing and especially the straightforward description of the gruesome acts of the soldiers might even make some readers think of the similar atrocities committed against Native Americans, such as described in, i.e. Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

Barry Hannah is the most difficult writer to pinpoint. His language is so original that reviewers are split in two: either they praise it, or they complain that there is no plot behind the language. Either way, both sides have problems looking beyond the language because it is so dominant. The latest blurps show words like "exciting," "interesting," "searing," "wailing genius," "bold and original," and "racy, raw, yet curiously baroque."[117] The last blurp is by far the most interesting because it eloquently sums up Hannah's language. Even though Hannah writes about sex and violence, he does it in a language that is both tough and archaic at the same time.

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[117] Dust jacket of *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001).

In contrast to the realistic writing of Brown, Offutt, and Rash, where the words fade and attenuate in order to fire the reader's imagination, Barry Hannah's writing refuses to "fade" or "seem empty." On the contrary, his language insists upon being noticed and tasted by the reader. Kowalewski defines realism as "a series of details that seem to emerge from and offer proof of the world in which they exist. These perpetual fragments seem completely natural and plausible within a given scene because they do not seem to have been shaped or manipulated or preselected by an author" (28). In Hannah's case, he will play along for a while, creating what is seemingly realism, but he will then throw language in the sentences that jerks the reader away from any notion that what is on the page is "natural and plausible."

Even though Hannah is most often praised for his language, his ability to create startling and original sentences, few critics have dared to go into detail with his sentences. It seems that once they have asserted that this is his true force they leave it at that and move on to the weaknesses, which are often plot-related. Sven Birkerts and Kenneth Millard are some of the few who have tried to wrestle with Hannah's language.[118] Hannah's interest in language more than plot is apparent in most of his works, and a Hannah sentence is always shaped and manipulated in order for the language to burn as brightly as possible. A good example of what Hannah can do with language is the following passage from *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, which depicts a confrontation between the killer Man Mortimer and Frank Booth:

> A stiletto knife, which he used for a letter opener though mail was rare for him, was tucked in the sun visor, the handle above his right hand. It was a cultural item like from Sicily. It was the first time Mortimer had taken up any deadly weapon. He rammed the stiletto into Frank Booth's left side. This was the side of the liver, he thought he recalled from a movie. The liver brought quick death. He did not expect it to go in so smoothly. Booth, he thought, was suddenly a cadaver, promptly

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[118] See Sven Birkerts, "Southern Discomfort," in *The New Republic* 216 (February 10, 1997): 40-41; and Kenneth Millard, *Contemporary American Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 186-199 for their take on Hannah's language.

delivered out of the night. Wet ghoul. Mortimer was up to the hilt in him. He heard

the song "Mack the Knife" in his head. European-like, a jazz killing, so here it was.

Or leaving him bad-off wounded. (63)

Instead of Brown's of Offutt's taut and almost empty sentences, Hannah provides us with a

wealth of details about the stiletto and even Man Mortimer's habits of correspondence, a

technique that pauses the action and causes the reader to be caught off guard when Mortimer

suddenly rams the stiletto into Booth. As experienced readers we expect some sort of build-up to

a climactic scene, but Hannah debunks that habit. The tone then turns conversational albeit

clinical in its description of the body functions. The language then starts to become slightly

incoherent with short, fragmented sentences with abstract metaphors and violent, startling

images, like "wet ghoul" and the enticing "jazz killing," that make the descriptions much more

subjective and complex than Brown's and Offutt's. Hannah tries to make us feel what Mortimer

feels in Mortimer's own confused words in the moment of his first attempt at homicide. In line

with Mortimer's state of mind, the sentence structures begin to break down, while

simultaneously emitting a sort of crooked poetry. The above example justifies Denis Donoghue's

praise that Hannah "is afraid of nothing in experience. He runs to meet life and to transform it."[119]

There is nothing "undistinctive, anonymous and self-effacing" (Kowalewski 26) about Hannah's

language and grammar, and as such it is far from realistic.

Hannah's lack of plot as well as his "confusing" narration suggests that rather than the

common misunderstanding of labeling his fiction as misogynistic—Brock Clarke has pointed to

"the deeply ingrained (although often self-critical) misogyny in Hannah's fiction"[120]—it would

perhaps make more sense to go in the other direction and read his fiction as anti-phallogocentric.

Ann Rosalind Jones has defined phallogocentrism in literature as the male writer's appropriation

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[119] Front matter of paperback version of Barry Hannah, *Airships* (1978. New York: Grove Press, 1994).

[120] Brock Clarke, [Review of Ruth D. Weston's *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic*] *South Central Review* 18:1/2
(Spring - Summer 2001): 151.

and domination of the world through verbal mastery. "Symbolic discourse… is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else—including women."[121] I want to suggest that in *Yonder*, Hannah does exactly the opposite. In his reading of form in *Yonder*, John Kachuba points out that the form of the novel "grows from the binaries seen in the figures of mother and the motherless (the orphan), presented through a series of linked literary conventions. That Hannah does not privilege either one of the figures over the other produces a story whose meaning remains elusive and inconclusive, and indices a state of vertigo and confusion in the reader." Furthermore, the narratives "unfold piecemeal in episodes that do not necessarily take place in an orderly chronological procession but tend to drift freely in time."[122] In this sense, *Yonder* can be read like Schoene-Harwood reads Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, whose chaotic and dream-like narration has frustrated generations of critics. Schoene-Harwood argues that Conrad's narration not only interrogates but subverts the phallogocentric discursive means that Jones has defined (31). By refusing to follow the climax-driven path of traditional men's literature, and by critically debunking the notion of a normative oppressive and dominating male point of view, Hannah's language, ironically, hints at what Schoene-Harwood terms *écriture masculine*, that is, a type of men's writing that interrogates and deconstructs "the predecessor's often stereotyped and profoundly androcentric conceptions of masculinity" (xiii). The irony here is that Hannah's subject matter, often sex and violence, has come to overshadow the complex deconstruction that takes place beneath the shocking surface, a surface that has earned Hannah his label as a tough writer.

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[121] Ann Rosalind Jones, "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *L'Ecriture Feminine*," *Feminist Studies* 7:2 (Summer 1981): 248.
[122] John B. Kachuba "Breadcrumb Trails and Spider Webs: Form in *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*." *Mississippi Quarterly* 58:1 (Winter 2004-05): 75, 76.

William Gay is perhaps the writer whose language is most obviously shaped, manipulated, and preselected. Barry Hannah's praise of *The Long Home*—"Handshaped fiction of great power…"[123]—points out exactly the conscious style of Gay's writing. Judging from some of the reviews and blurps, it seems that this mix of high- and lowbrow culture is reinforced. In other words, Gay's poetic language is often imbued with a certain toughness. In his review of *The Long Home*, Rick Kleffel fuses Gay's prose with the harsh landscape that he writes about: "Gay's prose is often quite beautiful …. It's stern beauty, stark like the rocky quarries dotted with dead pines."[124] Words like "stern," "stark," "rocky," and "dead" are heavily loaded and connote everything but what one would traditionally associate with poetic. By imbuing Gay's prose with natural elements, Kleffel succeeds both in disarming the possible "danger" of poetic language and in depicting Gay as a writer who has somehow grown out of the harsh environment in his fiction. This move mirrors the relationship between men and landscape in the Western, as Jane Tompkins points out: "The qualities needed to survive on the land are the qualities the land itself possesses—bleakness, mercilessness …. To be a man in the Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be unforgiving" (73). This very relationship and all the "manly" qualities it connotes lie concealed in statements like Kleffel's that merge a writer's prose with the land itself.

Some of the blurps on the covers of *The Long Home* continue this tendency, which suggests that the publisher, if not Gay, is interested in exactly this image. "A force this strong had to break through," declares *Mirabella*, thereby connoting images of strength and endurance, while *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* calls the novel "intensely lyrical [and] darkly comic" (Back cover). Again,

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[123] Back cover of William Gay, *The Long Home* (Denver, MacMurray & Beck, 1999).
[124] Rick Kleffel, "The Long Home," *The Agony Column Book Reviews and Commentary* (October 9, 2002). <http://trashotron.com/agony/reviews/2002/gay-the_long_home.htm>.

the suggestion seems to be to counterbalance any feminine connotations with adjectives that suggest manly strength, such as the "intensely" placed before "lyrical."

But let us take a look at the writing itself, like this example from *The Long Home*:

> Motormouth came out of the pasture past the looming bulk of the barn and halted where the moon threw cedared shadows, paused a moment to gain his bearings. A thin figure propelled by sheer anger dark to dark and shadow to shadow past the barn and on to the house. The world lay in a grail of silence, the only color a square of yellow light a window threw misshapen into the yard. One shadow among others less mobile, he moved past the truck in a soundless lope through unprotected light, the gun clasped across his chest, gaining invisibility momentarily in the accumulation of shadows against the wall. (55)

It is imminently apparent that Gay's style is far from the simple and terse style of Brown and Offutt. Instead of simple description using simple plain words and a simple grammar, we are faced here with a complex sentence structure, and words such as "propelled," "grail," "less mobile," "lope," and "accumulation," all of which makes it clear that the language here is obviously manipulated and staged in order for the reader to perceive it as language. In other words, there is plenty of Kowalewski's "verbal interference" and none of his "illusion of representational purity" to be found here. But while this might disqualify Gay's writing as being tough or masculine, his subject matter is violent enough to compensate. Words like "looming," "anger," "dark," "misshapen," and "gun" hint at the inherent darkness at the core of Gay's writing, which again points back to Schwenger's discussion of style and content matter. Gay's working-class characters and their violent lives provide a "masculine" counterbalance to his baroque language, and that, together with Gay's self-claimed position as belonging on "the wrong side of the tracks," shows an insistence on a certain type of tough masculinity, the kind inherent in the Western.

Lewis Nordan's language is perhaps somewhere between that of Brown and Hannah. His voice is substantially different from the somber realism of, say, Brown, Offutt and Rash, and closer to Hannah's playful tone. As Nordan told me: "... my writing is for the ear more than for the eye… when my writing is working, it's working because you hear somehow in your head rhythms and the music of what the words sound like and what their relationship to each other is. Whereas in many a writer… you don't hear that, you just see the information come up off the page" (Bjerre, "Interview" 373). The direct link between text and ear suggest a playing down of the intellectual aspect, however, Nordan points out how his language works as an artificial creation.

Ultimately, the musicality of the language results in a style that is more "sensitive" than masculine, according to traditional standards. As shown above, Nordan's fiction contains much "unmanly" dialogue by men, and this "gossipy" side of his characters, along with blurps like "intelligence," "compassion," "blatant delicacy," "musical," and "hallucinatory"[125] clearly indicate that Nordan has no interest in the tough lingo practiced by many male writers. In fact, Nordan is unafraid—or simply honest enough—to include the feminine sides of himself in his writing. As he explained to me, he grew up in a women's world, where

> the role models were all women …. [A]n ironic consequence of this was that all my
> writing was about longing for a male love. I felt totally secure in women's love but
> was scared to death of men, because I had seen so few of them …. I just had no idea
> what it was like to be a man, really, and so I wrote about yearning for a man's love.
> But also because I had this feminine influence that was completely me, I also
> thought of myself more relative to my mother than I did my father. I thought of
> yearning for a father …. But I think that the gender confusion really has to do with a
> kind of hyper-developed side of me, a feminine side of me that informs everything I
> do. (Personal interview 2006)

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[125] Dust jacket of *Lightning Song* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 1997).

There are several instances of gender confusion in Nordan's works, for instance in the story "The All-Girl Football Team." where the high school decides to put on an all-girl football game. The sixteen-year-old male narrator is elected cheerleader, despite his objections. His father helps him dress up in the costume, complete with "lacy underpants . . . skirt . . . makeup" and "tiny false breasts . . . with perfect nipples on the end." After initially feeling "like a fool," he takes to the task and during the game he feels a significant transformation: his penis "was also a moist opening into the hidden fragrance of another self . . . My arms were woman-arms, my feet woman-feet, my voice, my lips, my fingers. I stood on the sweet sad brink of womanhood, and somehow I shared this newness with my father." On his way home from the game, seeking "the safety of [his] father's room," he experiences a kind of epiphany which reassures him: "I was not a woman. I did not feel like a woman. I was not in love with a boy. I was a boy in costume for one night of the year, and I was my father's child . . ."[126] As is often the case in Nordan's fiction, the male narrator ultimately strives for his father's acceptance. This is also the case in *Lightning Song*, where we find another case of gender confusion. Leroy, the twelve-year-old narrator, realizes that his younger sister Laurie seems wise beyond her years, and he begins to look to her for guidance. This results in some gender confusion and Leroy agrees, after initial protests, to join Laurie on a baton twirling camp "for girls . . . three through ten." When Leroy lays hands on the baton, it becomes "irresistible to him." This small epiphany creates a wish in Leroy "to renounce himself, his whole identity, and to be a girl . . . For the first time in his life he thought that there might be something wrong, something sinful and irredeemable, about being born into the world a male child and not female. . . . He didn't mind the humiliation of changing his mind, of chasing a girl's dream." For a brief moment, Leroy goes against the very bedrock of patriarchal society: he renounces masculinity and embraces the feminine. In this limbo of reversed gender norms the

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[126] Lewis Nordan, "The All-Girl Football Team," *The All-Girl Football Team* [1986] (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989), pp. 118-19, 120, 124, 125.

masculine becomes the sight of projected shame and inferiority.[127] While the gender confusion is not apparent in *The Sharpshooter Blues*, that novel does feature a gay romance, which again suggests that Nordan's fiction is far removed from the traditionally tough school of American literature.

Another element that adds to the "sensitivity" of Nordan's fiction is his use of magical realism, a trait mostly seen among Latin American writers. In magical realism, realistic and descriptive passages are interwoven with fantastic and dreamlike elements to create a fiction that, as the name suggests, is realistic but with a touch of magic. These magic passages occur in Nordan's fiction both when he is dealing with the gruesome and violent death of a child or with simple comic passages. A typical example from *The Sharpshooter Blues* depicts Morgan, the sharpshooter showing off his amazing sharpshooter skill:

> There was no remembering Morgan's hand moving from his side, or the silvery pistol leaving his belt. Everybody was watching, even the boy, and especially Hydro, but they just didn't see it. There was no slow motion, or stop-action, none of the usual ways of seeing a thing that you can't see except in the memory of it. No blur, even, no glint of chrome in the afternoon light.
>
> Only one moment, Morgan standing at ease on the back porch, with his hands by his side and speaking of his truck, and the next moment a roar, an explosion of high caliber ammunition, and a streak of fire a foot long blazing out of the end of the barrel.
>
> In Hydro's memory, the explosion in Morgan's hand was a single report, boom, like a cannon, loud enough to cause a lengthy echo and cause the circling birds overhead, above the sugarcane, to tilt in the air from the sound as it reached them, but in fact what he heard was not one shot but six, faster, closer together, than he could imagine a trigger being pulled twice, or even once, let alone six times in succession. Hydro stood there in amazement and love. (28)

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[127] Lewis Nordan, *Lightning Song* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1997), pp. 167, 169, 170, 171-72.

Here the tone is more conversational than formal. We get the sense that the narrator is not one person but rather the community, which downplays any sense of authoritarian or hegemonic control over the text and the reader. Furthermore, the use of related words like "remembering," "watching," "didn't see," "seeing," "memory," and "imagine" adds to the uncertainty or confusion about how or where the text is grounded. This is a typical technique of Nordan's, as Robert W. Rudnicki demonstrates in an essay discussing Nordan's complex awareness of language and its connection to "his narrative structure, his thematic concerns, and to his theories of the relationship of fiction and memory." Rudnicki uses the Nordan character Gilbert Mecklin as an example and takes as his starting point the story "The Sears and Roebuck Catalog Game. Rudnicki argues that, "once Gilbert… 'begins to see' that his relationship to the natural world is conditioned by language, then he can no longer return to his earlier position. Gilbert struggles with the dialectic of language, imagination, and memory, while his son, Sugar, as older autobiographer, fluidly and lyrically moves among all three. Sugar as storyteller is Nordan's mouthpiece, while Gilbert is a Sugar who never masters the ability of language to reinvent the world—an ability with both therapeutic and destructive potential.…"[128] This struggle with language is, in a sense, what the reader often experiences when reading Nordan. It is often as if the ground shifts underneath your feet, and you are not sure how or where to ground yourself in the text, or, as Jack Butler so eloquently has phrased the experience: "… the boundaries of his creations waver like the edges of *The Twilight Zone*—strange music rises, things go invisibly surreal."[129]

In a convincing essay, Marcel Arbeit, has argued that Nordan uses lies as a structural element and a uniting principle of his fiction. "From the artistic point of view," Arbeit asserts, "lies

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[128] Robert W. Rudnicki, "'I Think I'm Beginning to See:' The Rustle of Lewis Nordan's Fiction," *Southern Quarterly* 41:4 (Spring 2003): 51, 57-58.
[129] Jack Butler. "Still Southern after All These Years." *The Future of Southern Letters*, eds. Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe (New York: Oxford UP, 1996), p. 40.

can join creative fantasy in the search for truth …. A good imaginative lie can always send people on another hunt for a truth that can never be attained, but always must be searched for."[130] Unlike the writers of pure realism, like Brown, Offutt, and Rash, Nordan's lies, then, are a deliberate means of using language in a way different from the writers of realism. These postmodern elements clearly place Nordan outside the tough, laconic, Western-inspired school of writers, and even though some of his characters display attitudes towards language that mirrors that of the Western genre, they do no represent Nordan himself.

Having looked at various aspects of language related to the six writers, it is obvious that their relationship to language and their use of it, both through their characters and their texts themselves, vary. However, there does seem to be a common point of reference in the way the writers actively navigate the dodgy zone of language, gender, and power. In various ways, all six writers exemplify the tendency pointed out by Schwenger, in which the traditionally feminine act of writing is masculinized and thereby granted power and authority. In itself this does not necessarily suggest a Western influence, but it is, in a way, the first step if the goal is to write about tough men in a tough way. And all six writers do write about tough men, but the way they do so differs immensely. Some of the writers, like Hannah, Nordan, and Rash, use the language of their characters to point out the problems of this distorted power structure, and they also emphasize how some men become victims of a hegemonic language structure that demands a suppression of feelings in form of silence or tough macho utterances. But the inherent critique is not that obvious in the case of Gay, Offutt, and Brown. Rather, there is a sense that the specific "male language" of the protagonists is used to emphasize them as heroic characters. Thereby the three writers perpetuate the idea that "real men" are men of few words, men who, when they

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[130] Marcel Arbeit, "Lies as the Structural Element in the Fiction of Lewis Nordan," *The Southern State of Mind*, ed. Jan Nordby Gretlund (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1999), pp. 176-83.

talk, only do so in accordance with a rigid set of controlled "rules." These writers' characters become not parodies of John Wayne and the like but rather earnest impersonators, eager to live up to the hegemonic (anti)language order embodied by the traditional Western heroes.

When it comes to the actual language the writers employ in their texts, all six writers to some extent draw on the Western's tradition of language, but the result varies between a support and a debunking of the tradition. A clear distinction can be made between those who tell and those who show, a distinction grounded in realistic writing versus a more artificial writing style. I have labeled Brown, Offutt, and partly Rash as realistic writers, in Kowalewski's sense of the term. This also means that their writing displays a sense of tough masculinity that, at least when it comes to Brown and Offutt, suggests another form of Western-flavored influence, one that is rooted in hegemonic masculinity. In the case of Hannah, Nordan, and Gay, their writing is obviously crafted not to appear realistic, and this creates an interesting tension between content and style. While Gay's complex language is far from the simple Western-style, his violent and masculine universe is dominant enough to bog down the text. Not so with Hannah and Nordan. In fact, their language eventually subverts the hegemonic order by questioning its insistence on coherence and climax.

While language is the starting point for any text, there are several other levels where the Western influence can be traced. One of them is in the structure of the text, which is the subject of the next chapter.

4. Opposing Players:

The Western Structure in Southern Novels

Structuralism and the Western

This chapter takes a closer look at the structural construction behind the Western narrative, and examines to what extent the structure is visible in southern novels. Thanks to the immense popularity of the genre, the Western formula has rubbed off on southern writers as well, and it appears in their fiction—sometimes deliberately, other times not. Either way, both are examples of the power of the Western myth. While the focus will be on Larry Brown's *Father and Son* and Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, the novels of the other writers will be discussed as well, albeit more briefly.

As John G. Cawelti pointed out more than thirty years ago, one of the strengths of the Western formula is that it "lingers on," and even though it evolves and changes with time, it is "still basically recognizable."[131] In his essay, Cawelti examines the structure behind the Western formula. He compares the Western to other popular formulas, such as "the detective story" and "the secret agent adventure," in that all three resemble "the world of a game with its clear opposing sides, restricted patterns of action, heightened suspense and certain resolution in victory and defeat." With the traditional Western in mind, Cawelti sketches out three basic characteristics of the formula as follows:

> 1: There must be "clearly opposing players" that "form basic moral reference points."
>
> 2: As a formula story, the Western lays down a set of rules that indicate which actions are legitimate and which are not: "one of the most important rules is that the hero cannot use violence without certain justifications."

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[131] John G. Cawelti, "Prolegomena to the Western," [1970] *Critical Essays on the Western Novel*. Ed. William T. Pilkington (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1980), p. 66. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "Prolegomena."

3: The Western "depends on a particular kind of setting, an abstracted social structure and landscape which give meaning to particular actions" (67-68).

Cawelti then presents the three players: the good group consisting of law-abiding townspeople, who symbolize the values associated with civilization; the villain(s), who are opposed to the values embodied by the townspeople; and finally the hero, who is "the man in the middle." He possesses the savage skills of violence, but he acts on the side of civilization. Cawelti goes on to say that "there must be a series of acts of violence to set the three-sided game in operation and to provoke and justify final destruction of the villain in such a way as to benefit the good group" ("Prolegomena" 68).

The binary opposition of Cawelti's phrase plays into sociologist Will Wright's structural study of the Western film and its underlying myths.[132] Wright traces the changes in the genre by employing the sociological methodology of content analysis. He bases his study on around sixty Westerns from 1931 to 1971, all of which have grossed at least $4 million in the US and Canada. His study is useful because it identifies some key structural elements in the Western. This, of course, makes the structural bricks easier to trace in other genres, such as the southern novels of interest here. In examining how the Western myth has seeped into southern literature, I will rely on both Cawelti's and Wright's analyses. The apparent weakness of Wright's painstakingly excessive study is that it is based on popular Westerns only and that it only examines the plots and plot structures of these films. In several instances, one can argue against Wright's general assertions, but if taken as a loose indicator of the structure of the genre, the study is useful. And since the plot structure is central to this chapter, Wright's analysis comes in handy.

I am also aware, of course, that structuralism, Wright's preferred method, is the very antithesis of the poststructuralist approach of this dissertation. The main problem with Wright's

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[132] Will Wright, *Sixguns & Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1975).

approach is the way he totally omits the counter-texts that often run beneath the surface of many Westerns, no matter how traditional. As Lee Clark Mitchell points out, "Wright's exchange of isolated texts for a master plot ends up confirming instead how much individual details always do matter" (11). With these reservations in mind, I do want to point out that Wright expands the rigid aspects of structuralism, which I will discuss below. Wright's analysis proves useful to this chapter because he identifies some basic structural elements in the Western genre; elements that can then be used as a vantage point for a discussion about the influence of the Western plot in the southern novels in question here. In line with the poststructuralist tradition, I agree with Mitchell that reducing the many facets of the Western to one "master plot" is a mistake, and I do not intend to claim that the southern novels discussed here rigidly follow the functions lined out by Wright. But using Wright's list of functions is one way of many to look at how traits from the Western has seeped into southern fiction, and to discuss what these traits are doing there.

Wright considers Westerns as myths that serve the same purpose as ancient myths: to satisfy a society's need to—through the myths—act out and solve its conflicts. By setting up problems and then solving them within the world of the myth—and in a way that is acceptable to this world—the myth comes to function as a model for people's behavior in society, or as Wright puts it, "a model of appropriate social action" (24). As is often the case with film and literature, the fiction deals more with its contemporary present than with the historical time in which it is placed. So even though Westerns by definition take place in the latter part of the 19th century, the problems shown and solved are often related to contemporary ones.

As Wright argues, a myth, like any form of communication, must be heard and interpreted correctly; "this means that myth must have a structure, like the grammar of language, that is used and understood automatically and through which meaning is communicated" (16). As a way of defining this structure, Wright looks to the structural studies of Claude Lévi-Strauss but with a

stronger emphasis on order and communication. His goal is "to show how the myths of a society, through their structure, communicate a conceptual order to the members of that society" and to "exhibit the structure of a myth in order to discover its social meaning" (17).

In order to explain "the interaction between symbolic structures and the possibility of human action," Wright turns to the literary analysis of Kenneth Burke who reads characters of a narrative as representatives of "social types acting out a drama of social order. In this way," Wright states, "interaction… is never simply interaction between individuals but always involves the social principles that the characters represent." As an example, Wright mentions how "a fight in a narrative would not simply be a conflict of men but a conflict of principles—good versus evil, rich versus poor, black versus white" (19). Wright finds Burke's interpretation of narrative particularly appropriate to myths, so his theory is ultimately "an adroit merger of the theoretical insights of Burke with the methodological suggestions of Lévi-Strauss" which offers a fitting framework for his analysis of myth and social action (19).

After having reduced the various characters in Westerns to social types, Wright then divides the social types into three groups/sets of characters who differ in their "recurring or defining points of conflict and opposition" (49). The three sets of characters are: "the hero, the society, and the villains." Since each group of characters… acts essentially as one with respect to the other group or the hero," it is only necessary to look at these three basic characters in order to get a general depiction of the action (40).

Wright uses Lévi-Strauss' method of looking for the structure of myth in terms of binary oppositions, and he follows Saussure's idea that symbols are diacritical. As Wright explains, "when an image of a thing becomes a symbol, we know more about what it does mean if we know exactly what it does not mean. This is because the symbolic meaning created by an assumed dichotomy of images is determined only by the differences in the images." Because myths rely on

"simple and recognizable meanings which reinforce rather than challenge social understanding...

a structure of oppositions is necessary," Wright states. The structure of the Western uses this

opposition to present "a symbolically simple but remarkably deep conceptualization of American

social beliefs." Even when more than two characters appear in a myth, they appear as

"contrasting pairs, not as coequal representatives of alternative positions" (22-23). As an

example, Wright uses a typical cast of a gunfighter, a group of homesteaders, and a rancher.

"Instead of representing equally valid, conflicting life-styles," Wright states, "these characters

would be presented as pairs of oppositions with each pair having a different meaning." Below is

an illustration of Wright's examples, where each two characters are identified on one axis and

contrasted on another. The characters in bold and the meaning they represent are shown directly

below:

The gunfighter	opposed to	T**he homesteaders**
Individual independence	opposed to	Social domesticity
New axis:		
the homesteaders	opposed to	**The rancher**
Progress, communal values	opposed to	Selfish, monetary values
GOOD	opposed to	BAD

As Wright notes, the above structure allows for interaction between the social types as well as

resolutions of conflicts between social principles, but the structure does not allow a situation

where all three characters are "equally good, equally domestic, and equally opposed" (23-24).

The oppositions will tell us what values the character types represent but not what the

characters will do. Their actions are revealed in the set of **functions** that Wright sets up,

depending on the **type** of Western in question. This part of Wright's study follows Vladimir

Propp's somewhat rigid study of narrative functions in *The Morphology of the Folktale* (1968). But

where Propp only had a single sequence of functions for the fairy tale in general, Wright loosens

up on the rigidness and expands his analysis to take into account the various deviations found in the Western. This is one of the reasons why I can justify using a structural analysis in a reading that is otherwise poststructural. As Fredric Jameson points out, for Wright, "deviation from a given sequence is meaningful and can only lead to further analytical activity, where for Propp it is simply 'noise' and an aberration, something which cannot be accommodated by his system."[133] Wright proposes the following four variants of the Western: "the classical plot," "the vengeance variation," "the transition theme," and "the professional plot." I would still argue that each "type" is still a generalization and that there are exceptions to all of them. With that in mind, Wright's four types can be summarized as follows:

"The classical plot" is the prototype of all Westerns. It is the classic story of the lone stranger who rides into town and cleans it up, thereby winning "the respect of the townsfolk and the love of the schoolmarm." This well-known theme saturates Western films from 1930-1955 and includes films like *Shane*, *Duel in the Sun*, *The Far Country*, and *How the West Was Won*. The classical plot that defines the genre and the three other plots are all based on its "symbolic foundation and depend upon this foundation for their meaning" (32). For "the classical plot," Wright lists sixteen functions, which need not occur in the order listed, and some of which are optional. The functions are:

1: The hero enters a social group.
2: The hero is unknown to the society
3: The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability (skilled gunfighter, etc)
4: The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given a special status
5: The society does not completely accept the hero
6: There is a conflict of interests between the villains and the society
7: The villain is stronger than the society; the society is weak

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[133] Fredric Jameson, "Ideology, Narrative Analysis, and Popular Culture," *Theory and Society* 4:4 (Winter 1977): 551.

8: There is a strong friendship or respect between the hero and a villain

9: The villains threaten the society

10: The hero avoids involvement in the conflict

11: The villains endanger a friend of the hero

12: The hero fights the villains (always alone)

13: The hero defeats the villains

14: The society is safe

15: The society accepts the hero

16: The hero loses or gives up his special status (either by leaving the society or marrying and settling down) (48-49).

These functions "describe the narrative structure of the classical Western, which presents a dramatic model of communication and action between characters who represent different types of people inherent in our conceptualization of society" (49).

"The vengeance variation" develops out of the classical plot and is in many ways a variation upon this structure. Here, the hero abandons his fight because of the values of society and he ultimately leaves the society because of his strength and their weakness. Films using the vengeance variation include *Stagecoach*, *The Man from Laramie*, *One-Eyed Jacks*, and *Nevada Smith*, and Wright sets up the following thirteen functions:

1: The hero is or was a member of society

2: The villains do harm to the hero and to the society

3: The society is unable to punish the villains

4: The hero seeks vengeance

5: The hero goes outside of society (to get revenge he must leave society)

6: The hero is revealed to have a special ability

7: The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero: the hero is given a special status

8: A representative of society asks the hero to give up his revenge

9: The hero gives up his revenge

10: The hero fights the villains

11: The hero defeats the villains

12: The hero gives up his special status

13: The hero enters society (69)

The vengeance variation represents a deterioration in the relationship between hero and society, a deterioration that will continue with increasing strength in the next two types of plots.

"The transition theme" is in many ways a direct inversion of the classical plot. The hero is inside society at the start and outside society at the end. The hero is forced into fighting against society, which is more or less identified with the villains of the classical story. Also, the woman no longer serves to reconcile the hero with society. Instead she joins him in his fight and his separation from society. Films employing the transition theme are *Broken Arrow*, *High Noon*, and *Johnny Guitar*. Since the theme was only apparent in these 1950s films, Wright does not set up a list of functions.

The final type is "the professional plot," which is in many ways similar to the classical plot. But the heroes are now professional fighters who defend society only as a job they accept for pay or for love of fighting, not from commitment to ideas of law and justice. Furthermore, the social values of love, marriage, family, peace, and business are things to be avoided, not goals to be won. This plot can be found in movies like *Rio Bravo*, *The Professionals*, *True Grit*, *The Wild Bunch*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Wright set up the following narrative functions:

1: The heroes are professionals

2: The heroes undertake a job in return for money

3: The villains are very strong

4: The society is ineffective, incapable of defending itself

5: The job involves the heroes in a fight

6: The heroes all have special abilities and a special status

7: The heroes form a group for the job

8: The heroes, as a group, share respect, affection, and loyalty

9: The heroes as a group are independent of society

10: The heroes fight the villains

11: The heroes defeat the villains

12: The heroes stay (or die) together (113)

The conceptual or classificatory meanings of the three character types become clear when the oppositional structure of the Western myth is revealed. Wright does this by pointing out four basic oppositions, "each differentiating between at least two of the characters" (49). The basic oppositions are as follows:

1: **Hero/society**: This separates the hero from the society and is an opposition between those who are outside society and those who are inside society.

2: **Good/bad**: This separates the society and the hero (both good) from the villains.

3: **Strong/weak**: This distinguishes the hero and the villains (both strong) from the society.

4: **Hero/everybody else**: An opposition between wilderness and civilization. Wright calls this opposition "a typical American aspect of the Western. (49)

According to Wright, these four oppositions compromise the basic classifications of people in the Western myth. The oppositions are fundamental to 20th century America, he claims, and therefore remain unchanged throughout the various Westerns Wright discuss. But how the three social types relate to each other in these oppositions depends on the type of Western in question.

By employing Will Wright's narrative functions and in part John Cawelti's list of characteristics, and with the already mentioned reservations in mind, this chapter will examine how some novels by southern writers, consciously or not, have structured their characters and narratives in ways that echo the Western, whether the objective is to pay tribute to the genre or to debunk it.

Larry Brown's *Father and Son*

In *Remapping Southern Literature*, Robert Brinkmeyer compares Larry Brown's second novel, *Joe* (1991), to Jack Schaefer's Western classic *Shane* and considers Brown's novel an example of a Western set in the South, a tendency that started perhaps with James Dickey's *Deliverance* (34). *Shane* is a good vantage point for talking about the influence of the Western on Larry Brown. Not only does Brown consider *Shane* one of his favorite movies (Rankin 101-02), but the impact was so great that he named one of his sons after the mythic gunfighter. However, while *Joe* does justify comparisons with *Shane*, Brown's third novel, *Father and Son* (1996), is even more obviously a Western set in the South and can perhaps best be compared to *Hondo*.

In *Father and Son*, Brown presents us with a simple story of mythic proportions. The themes are stripped down to bare essentials: love and hate, forgiveness and revenge, good and evil. The result is something close to a morality play set in the South of the 1960s. The novel tells the story of ex-convict Glen Davis, who returns to his hometown bent on revenge. His half-brother, Sheriff Bobby Blanchard, is the man who put him away and the man who must now deal with Glen's wrath. Both men are in love with the same girl—Jewel Coleman. The plotlines and the characters form exactly the sets of problems at the heart of numerous Westerns, and they make it by far Brown's most formulaic novel. Throughout most of the novel, Brown relies on the classic Western conventions, but, as will become clear, he also subverts some of them to fit his own purpose.

Even a brief description of the plot brings to mind the plotline of *Hondo* (be it John Farrow's movie starring John Wayne and Geraldine Paige, or the Louis L'Amour novel based on the screenplay) and to a certain extent, and once again, Jack Schaefer's *Shane* (which was adapted into one of the most enduring Western films by George Stevens). If the Indians are stripped away, *Hondo* is a domestic drama akin to a ménage a trios in the desert. The eponymous hero falls in love with a woman who has a son. But to win her love, he must first fight her no-good evil

husband. Needless to say, he conquers both, first by killing her husband and then by taking over

the household and assuming responsibility for raising the boy to become a man. While *Shane*

employs the same structure, the crucial difference is that Shane's illicit love is never expressed or

acted out because the husband is a good man. And because Shane is a gallant knight in clad

deerskin, his code of honor does not allow him to trespass on another man's property,

symbolically speaking.

When applying Will Wright's narrative functions to the plot of *Father and Son*, it becomes

clear that Brown adheres, to a large extent, to "the classical plot," with some crucial exceptions.

An attempt to reduce *Father and Son* into Wright's rigid set of functions produces this result:

1: The hero is a member of society

2: The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability

3: The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is
   given a special status

4: The society does not completely accept the hero

5: There is a conflict of interests between the villain and the society

6: The villain is stronger than the society; the society is weak

7: There is a strong friendship or respect between the hero and a villain

8: The villain threatens the society

9: The hero avoids involvement in the conflict

10: The villain endangers a friend of the hero

11: The hero does not fight the villains

12: The villain is defeated by society

13: The society is safe

In this narrative structure, functions from "the classical plot" merge with those of "the vengeance

variation." The main deviations from "the classical plot" are apparent in point 1: the hero is

already a member of society; he is not the lone stranger who rides into town. Instead narrative

function 1 from Wright's "vengeance variation" can be applied ("The hero is or was a member of

society"). Some of the points have been stretched a bit, but this will all be discussed in the following. The most interesting deviation occurs in # 8 and forward. In "the classical plot," the hero fights the villain(s) alone and defeats them, thereby securing the safety of society. But this is not the case in *Father and Son*, a very interesting aspect, which I will return to in my discussion of the novel.

In the introduction to *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*, Lee Clark Mitchell defines the Western as an endlessly recurring set of problems: the problem of honor, of law or justice, "enacted in a conflict of vengeance and social control; the problem of violence, in acknowledging its value yet honoring occasions when it can be controlled; and subsuming all, the problem of what it means to be a man…" (3). The sets of problems that Mitchell mentions all occur in *Father and Son*, very much a story of honor, justice, violence, and the definition of manhood. Throughout the novel, the various male characters can be said to constitute an oppositional structure in which they seem to function as models or anti-models, as moral guideposts or their antithesis.

Before going into the structure of the novel, let us first consider the two main players of the game. The novel features "clearly opposing players" that "form basic moral reference points" (Cawelti "Prolegomena" 67). On one side we have Sheriff Bobby Blanchard, the indisputable hero of the novel. Being the sheriff of the community, Bobby fulfills the first point in the list of narrative functions: he is a member of society. According to Brown, Blanchard is "a really good man. He's that voice of reason in the book."[134] Throughout the novel, Bobby is the embodiment of kindness and decency. This emphasis on "good" serves to create an extra distinction between him and the antagonist. This contrast between good and bad supports the reading of the novel as a Western structured according to Wright's binary oppositions.

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[134] Kay Bonetti et al., eds. *Conversations with American Novelists: The Best Interviews from* The Missouri Review *and the American Audio Prose Library* (Columbia, Mo: U of Missouri P, 1997), p. 247.

Readers familiar to Brown's fiction will recognize the sheriff character. Bobby Blanchard is a fleshed-out version of the peripheral but kind sheriff Earl in *Joe*, who tried to talk sense into Joe; a predecessor of the highway patrolman Sam Harris in *Fay*, all three of them lawmen who do their best to be loyal to their job and to themselves. But Bobby is not only an archetypal righteous Brown hero; he is also, in many ways, the embodiment of the traditional Western hero, as introduced in Wister's *The Virginian* and formed through a century of literary and film Westerns. As already mentioned, despite his lack of aristocratic background and distinguished family lineage, the Western hero "proves himself a man among men," both through physical power and common sense" (Etulain, *Telling* 70). The "common sense" that Etulain refers to is termed "code of honor" by Michael Blake in his discussion of Will Kane, the Sheriff of *High Noon*. Blake asserts that "the men of the West who wore a badge were a breed unto themselves… all had a code of honor." In today's "more pessimistic society," Blake argues, "the cowboy's code of honor is seen as something facile or primitive."[135]

In a postmodern age where tradition and authorities are constantly questioned and debunked, blind loyalty to a specific doctrine is rarely considered a positive trait. It smacks of conservative anachronism and lack of an independent mentality. But Will Kane, Blake stresses, "understood what it meant to wear a badge and the responsibility it invoked. He also had his own personal code of honor, which went hand in hand with that of a lawman. Despite the cost, he had to stand up for what he believed was the right thing to do." Blake also separates Kane from the more shallow Western heroes of the B-movies. Unlike for instance, infallible cowboys like Tom Mix, Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, Kane "has real feelings; he is afraid, nervous and worried that he will die" (49-51, 52).

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[135] Michael F. Blake, *Code of Honor: The Making of Three Great American Westerns* (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2003), p. 49.

As it turns out Bobby, the hero of *Father and Son* adheres to this most important of Western traits. He embodies "common sense" and "a code of honor." His gentleman behavior and his self-restraint enrolls him in the group of revered lawmen that legendary sheriff of Dodge City, Bat Masterson, described as "just plain ordinary men who could shoot straight and had the most utter courage and perfect nerve—and, for the most part, a keen sense of right and wrong" (Blake 49). The sense of right and wrong points to the Western hero's moral superiority—the Leatherstocking legacy—a trait that is almost always taken for granted in the Western and that helps define the hero as exactly that, a hero. These abilities will prove important in the life-or-death decisions Bobby faces throughout the novel, and together with the crucial ability of self-restraint, it makes Bobby the equivalent of a traditional Western hero.

Serving as a counterpoint to the moral decency and integrity represented by Bobby is Glen Davis, the villain of the novel. He too embodies some of the classic Western traits. As described in Chapter 3, his use of tough speech and his general mistrust of language places him in an obvious Western tradition. Furthermore, his vindictive behavior towards women mirrors that of the typical Western villain, as does the conflict that arises when hero and villain desire the same woman. Not surprisingly, much of the emotion in the book arises over the right to Jewel. Despite his obsession with Jewel, Glen is not really interested in her, but he does feel threatened by Jewel's wish to start a family. He does not want to take on the role as father for his son, he does not even "like looking at him" (108). "I know what she wants," he says, "Same thing ever woman wants. Get married" (58). To Glen, marriage is a threat because he—in line with the tradition of the Western—associates it with female authority and as such fears to lose his power. The only way for Glen to solve his problems is physically, so he sets out to regain control over Jewel. He has hit her before, and rationalizes that it is his right as a man. "The few times he'd hit her she'd been asking for it anyway. *Where you been, who you been out with, what's that on you?* He got tired of

listening to that shit" (110). When Jewel has asked about his whereabouts, she has threatened his masculinity by trying to impose her rules on his life. Glen is eager to turn the balance of power around, so he can be in control of Jewel. He does this through sex, which becomes a way for him to possess her. This is also the reason he does not want Bobby to "have" her.

Looking at Glen's murderous killing and raping spree, it is hard to find any commendable traits. However, Brown concedes to Glen a certain amount of dignity, by digging below the stereotypical surface and explaining Glen's life of violence with reference to a tragic background that sealed his fate at a young age. Glen accidentally shot his younger brother and ever since has lived with guilt, as well as anger at his father for keeping the gun loaded. When his mother later commits suicide, Glen blames his father, who was having an affair with Bobby's mother. All these frustrations simmer within Glen, boiling up into uncontrollable wrath, which can appear in no form other than a violent one.

Having established the moral opposition of the main players, let us now move on the structure of the plot, according to the list of narrative functions. In function 2, the hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability. Bobby's positive character traits mentioned above set him apart from most of the other characters in the novel, to such a degree that we can talk about "an exceptional ability." Here, the third point can also be included: "the society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given a special status." Bobby's moral superiority places him in a category of his own when compared to the rest of the community.

However, exactly because of his moral superiority, Bobby is not fully accepted by the society—point 4 on the narrative function list. This is often the curse of the Western hero, whose solitary status often hints at loneliness. In a sense, he is simply too good to function socially. Likewise, Bobby's sense of duty creates a division between him and the men who wish to take the law into their own hands to get back on Glen for the hurt he brought on the community. While

the instigator of the vigilante craving is the father whose son Glen killed in a drunk-driving accident, the other men silently agree, and Bobby is made an outsider because of his badge (103-06). Furthermore, it can be argued that Bobby's deviating life makes him somewhat of an outsider, a lone hero. Even though he is depicted as a stoic and masculine hero, he is nevertheless a grown man who lives with his mother and has an affair with a woman already in a relationship.

The fifth narrative function is the conflict of interests between the villain and the society. This conflict can be summed up as lawlessness versus law and order. Glen Davis represents a chaotic and violent amorality that, if unchecked, threatens to flood the community. As function 6 describes, the villain is stronger than the society. This is obvious in *Father and Son*, where Glen's reckless machismo places him in a position of power, which is ultimately based in fear. The community dare not confront him and those who ponder vigilantism never put action behind their words. Again, this is what sets the community apart from both hero and villain.

While Bobby and Glen are adversaries, they are also intrinsically connected by way of blood. Not only have Glen's father and Bobby's mother rekindled the forbidden romantic relationship of their youths, but it is hinted that their sons may be half-brothers. Before Glen was born, his father had an adulterous relationship with Bobby's mother, and shortly thereafter Bobby was born. This crucial relationship makes up function 7 on the list: "There is a strong friendship or respect between the hero and villain." Granted, their relationship is far from friendly, but at least Bobby is very emphatic when it comes to Glen.

Having established the two opposing players and their role in the community as well as their mutual relationship, we can move on to function 8, in which the villain threatens the society. The first twenty pages of the novel set up several conflicts: those between Glen and Bobby, between Glen and Jewel, between Glen and Barlow (an old bartender enemy), and between Glen and Virgil, his father. In each case, Glen stands out as the morally inferior character against those who,

in one way or another, embody decency and communal values. Furthermore, the plot follows Cawelti's formula by setting up "a series of acts of violence to set the three-sided game in operation and to provoke and justify final destruction of the villain in such a way as to benefit the good group" ("Prolegomena" 68). By killing a bartender and his innocent assistant, raping a young girl, and threatening and repudiating his father and son, respectively—all within forty-eight hours of his release—Glen Davis supplies the "acts of violence to set the three-sided game in operation," and the consequent showdown is soon to follow.

Despite Glen's violent spree, Bobby does not stop him right away, simply because he does not have proof enough to do so. In that sense, function 9—the hero avoids involvement in the conflict—is accomplished. As explained above, Bobby's loyalty to his duties demand that he follow protocol. Taking the law into his own hands, as some of the men of the community want to, would undermine all that he stood for. The Western code enumerates a set of rules dictating which actions are legitimate and which are not, and, as John Cawelti points out, "one of the most important . . . is that the hero cannot use violence without certain justifications" ("Prolegomena" 68). Whenever Bobby is tempted to use violence, he manages to restrain himself, and thus upholds the Western code. Even though he often comes close to breaking them, reason and restraint finally keep him on solid ground. Apart from the early confrontation discussed in chapter 4, in which Bobby offers to make peace with Glen, who reacts by threatening him, there are several passages that reveal that if it were not for his badge, Bobby would already have engaged Glen: "Maybe Glen would stay out of the way and leave Jewel alone. And if he wouldn't he could always take his badge off for five minutes. Five minutes. You could hurt somebody real bad in five minutes. But he hoped it wouldn't come to that. All he wanted was for Glen to leave Jewel alone" (310).

It must be mentioned here, that Bobby's restraint is all the more remarkable considering his ethnic heritage. As a white southerner, Bobby belongs to a strong patriarchal tradition where personal honor was literally worth dying for, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown has shown (142-153). Bobby must show restraint in other situations as well. When an abusive husband and father, a man who has murdered his own child and buried it behind his trailer, tries to kill him, his restraint stretches to its breaking point. Bobby points his gun at the man and, for a few seconds, at least, debates whether or not to kill him. Finally, though, he checks himself, deciding to arrest the man instead—but "in that tiny second when he decided not to kill him he became very sad" (279).

Bobby thus offers us still further examples of an honored attribute that goes all the way back to Cooper's Natty Bumppo. Such exhibitions of manly restraint are crucial to the Western, Mitchell points out (155), adding that it helps distinguish the hero from other men: "indeed, it requires the distinction of others whose lack of restraint provides a foil to the true man's achieved coherence" (166). Mitchell also points to the obvious paradox that restraint can be understood only upon contrast with surrounding chaos; it "can only be demonstrated through narratives of excess." Without scenes of such excess, scenes in which "this supposedly masculine virtue" is roused and tested and "strained to the breaking point," the "blankness of the hero's countenance expresses only blankness, not the deliberateness of prudent intention or the saving power of self-control" (167). In other words, Glen's violence spree and his aggressive behavior serve to further enhance the positive impression of Bobby. His self-restraint becomes all the more impressive when faced with tough moral decisions, such as the child-killer above and Glen's atrocious deeds.

This dynamic explains much of the violence in the novel, something Brown has often been criticized for in all of his work. But usually the violence serves as a sort of moral testing ground for his hero or heroine. The young Gary in *Joe* is surrounded by violence, but he ultimately comes

through. Likewise, the eponymous protagonist of *Fay* must struggle her way through all kinds of

abuses and violence before she can claim her freedom. As Brown himself has explained, all his

characters face "some kind of struggle," which forces "a resolution or an ending." Brown uses a

technique he calls "sandbagging," and makes "things as hard on them as I can so then I'll see how

they're going to react and what's going to happen and what the story's going to be about"

(Manley 125). Without the surrounding chaos of violence, Brown's characters could not prove

their moral worth. Bobby Blanchard comes out on top, a prime example of a masculine hero who

can shoulder any burden. Brown, in short, is interested in seeing how humans react when their

backs are against the wall or when they have been pushed to the limit. Their violent reactions not

only push them farther along in the plot but also offer insights into the cruelty of mankind for

both readers and the characters themselves. For Bobby, the "things that people did to each other

didn't surprise him anymore, ever since he'd learned they were capable of doing any thing you

could imagine and some things you couldn't" (51). He has become a wiser man than most, which

again supports the reading of him as a morally superior character, just like the Western hero.

However, despite Bobby's self-restraint and his avoidance of Glen, things get personal when

narrative function 10—the villain endangers a friend of the hero—is set in motion. As already

mentioned, both Glen and Bobby are fighting over the same woman, Jewel Coleman, a character

who has much in common with the traditional Western heroine. Jewel is a young woman who

cuts her grass "on weekends in her swimming suit, barefooted, dust coating her red toenails"

(91)—a male fantasy come to life, in other words. To Bobby she is pure and chaste, Grace Kelley's

Quaker grade-school teacher from *High Noon*, while to Glen she is anything but, Claire Trevor's

prostitute—without the obvious possibility of redemption—from John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939).

Furthermore, as in the traditional Western, Brown transforms Jewel from an independent woman

capable of taking care of herself and her son into a woman ready to take her place in a family. As

the novel progresses, she comes to rely more and more on Bobby, and at the end, she has been

incorporated into a traditional family pattern. As Cawelti concludes in his analysis of women in

the Westerns of Wister, Zane Grey, and William S. Hart, the ultimate result of the hero's

confrontation with "wild nature and violent men" is "an affirmation of such traditional American

values as monogamous love, the settled family, the basic separation of masculine and feminine

roles" (*Adventure* 240). With the exception of Bobby's mother Mary, whom I shall return to

shortly, *Father and Son* seems to advocate exactly these traditional values. After Glen's final acts

of violence, in which he rapes Bobby's mother and is killed, Brown offers, on the last pages of

Father and Son, an almost Edenic image of family bliss, which also serves to fulfill function 13,

"the society is safe": As "the last sinking tip of the sun sends light up," Glen's father Virgil rocks his

sleeping grandson in his lap on the porch. He has apparently kicked his alcoholism all of a sudden

and has formed a relationship with Bobby's mother, Mary, who has just arrived with Bobby and

Jewel. As Virgil holds his grandson "close to him as if to protect him from any harm," the sun

literally sets on the new happy family. Any trace of the traumatic experiences everyone has just

gone through, have seemingly evaporated along with the "scattered clouds" in the sky (346-47).

However, in order to achieve this happy ending, Bobby must first "win" Jewel, and to do so,

he must face the wrath of Glen. And as mentioned above, this must be done in accordance with

certain codes, both the legal code and his own moral codes. Thus the stage is set for a battle over

male possession of a woman. In this male-dominated world, the woman becomes the motive for

the ensuing violence, just as is true of many Westerns, where "women are the motive for male

activity (it's women who are being avenged, it's a woman the men are trying to rescue) at the

same time as what women stand for—love and forgiveness in place of vengeance—is precisely

what that activity denies" (Tompkins 41). This pattern can be found in many of the classic

Westerns. A woman is being avenged in Clint Eastwood's *High-Plains Drifter* and *Unforgiven*; and

a woman is being rescued in Ford's *The Searchers*, Richard Brooks's *The Professionals*, and Leone's *Once upon a Time in the West*. With Jewel as the motive for the male activity, *Father and Son* is as male-driven a novel as the above films are male-driven Westerns.

Jewel is the reason for the confrontation between Bobby and Glen, as she is aware herself: "She was afraid there was going to be trouble between Glen and Bobby and she didn't want to be the cause of it, never had meant to be" (242). As a way of projecting his guilt, Glen blames Jewel for his troubles: "He thought it might be better for all of them if he just went away somewhere, but the thought of Jewel was a magnet forever pulling him toward her" (238). Furthermore, Jewel, like other women in the novel, is described in animalistic terms: Ashamed of her sexual longing for Bobby, Jewel tells herself, "You're worse than a damn cat in heat" (242). When Glen recalls having sex with her, he remembers "the whimpers she made and the soft animal sounds that had no description to them, so natural and pure they were" (163). The girl that Glen rapes is described as "a little demon of flashing eyes" who has "the quickness of something raised in the woods;" her eyes are "wild like a trapped animal," and she has "flashing white teeth" (114). To Glen, women are some wild Other that must be conquered and tamed.

Mary, Bobby's mother, is another woman who feels Glen's wrath upon her own body. For Glen, the only saintly woman is his own dead mother. He reveres her to the extent that he compares her to all other women, whom he considers whores. Jewel "ain't nothing but goddamn whore," and the same goes for the other women Glen encounters. Bobby's mother, Mary, is a "whore" who "need[s] her ass whipped too. Or worse" (160). These sentiments result in the climax of the novel, when Bobby's mother kills Glen during his attempt to rape her.

Tompkins describes how the hero, when provoked, always resists the urge for retaliation until he has been pushed "too far." When the hero finally retaliates violently, the reader wants it to happen, and this is the point at which "retaliatory violence becomes not simply justifiable but

imperative" (228). This is the point where "the hero fights the villain," as Will Wright puts it in his narrative function. The final scene, in which Glen rapes Bobby's mother, would be a good example of a point where "retaliatory violence becomes justifiable and imperative," and the reader expects Bobby to come to the rescue at the last minute. After all, a violent confrontation between hero and villain has been building throughout the entire novel. Yet this is where Brown departs from the formula he has adhered to throughout most of the novel. Bobby never comes to the rescue. He is safe, asleep in his boyhood room, in his mother's house, unaware of the atrocities occurring just outside in the barn. This points to an interesting subversion of Bobby's role as hero—as well as to the counter-narrative that runs throughout the otherwise recognizable male narrative that constitutes the novel. Despite all his masculine traits, Bobby, like Glen, suffers from a dominant mother bond. He still lives in his boyhood room and his mother wakes him up in the morning and makes him breakfast. Both are aware of the uncanny situation, as his mother teasingly asks Bobby: "When you gonna find you a nice girl and get married? You can't live with your mamma your whole life" (99). Napping in his bed, Bobby considers the situation: "This room had been his for as long as he could remember, his and his alone. But he wanted to sleep in another bed now, forever and always" (315). Even though Bobby does show some sign of a mature individuality in his wish to leave his boyhood home and his mother, the depiction of him napping in his bed while his mother is being raped severely debunks the heroic image that Brown has been building up throughout the novel.

The classic showdown between hero and villain, therefore, does not occur in *Father in Son*. Instead, Bobby's mother manages to kill Glen while he rapes her. One could argue that Brown works against the stereotype by deflating the sheriff's heroism, thereby removing his story from the "heroic code" that "imprisons the Western," as Tompkins puts it (5). Does this deviation from the code occur because Brown is reluctant to taint the goodness of Bobby? Or is he merely

debunking the reader's expectations, just as he does in the short story "Falling Out of Love" from

Big Bad Love?[136] Brown faces a dilemma here. If Brown had placed Bobby at the scene of his

mother's rape, Bobby would have had sufficient reasons for killing Glen, but it would have tainted

his innocence. But by keeping him away from the scene, Brown is able to preserve Bobby's

innocence and thereby his position as the novel's truly moral character and its voice of reason.

The deviation can also be seen as the culmination of the counter-narrative, which

challenges the traditional masculine narrative. Ben Knights defines a masculine narrative as one

that organizes events in a way "which permits the subject to move from dependence to

autonomy. Such narratives both reinforce and promulgate a normative manhood characterized by

a high degree of management over the calls the world makes upon a man's identity and inner

resources" (126). While much of the narrative follows these lines, the climactic ending severely

disturb them and force us to reconsider the entire text.

Taken to the extreme, Brown's counter-narrative is a rebuttal of a certain type of masculine

narrative, what Knights calls "a potent strand in fiction," which "provides us with a model of man

taking revenge upon women for the insults the world has heaped upon him." This underlying

narrative, Knights argues, "proposes that on the female body can be revenged the institutional

oppression, the proud man's contumely, all the injustices to which a man has been or believes

himself to have been subject" (127-28). Knight calls this type of male revenge "one simple

mutation of the narrative of masculine assertion," and he laments that as "an agent of this

reordering process, the protagonist of the male narrative turns all too easily into the loner, the

maverick, the embittered hero returning to wreak revenge upon those who have humiliated him.

At its extreme… the narrative may underlie the punitive fantasy of the mass murderer. As men we

have for too long colluded in allowing ourselves to be scripted by this archaic narrative of

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[136] The title of the story "Falling Out of Love" about two lovers down on their luck and breaking apart, is finally a joking literal reference to the last page of the story, where the two lovers are falling out of their car while making love.

punishment and revenge" (128). While Knights looks at novels in which the protagonist is the violent avenger, his observations are still of value to the discussion of *Father and Son*. Here the violent avenger is, of course, clearly defined as the antagonist, but his pattern of behavior follows a recognizable misogynistic pattern, whose climax is literally undercut when Brown places Mary into the equation, replacing her with Bobby, whom we expected to resolve the rising conflict, through justified retaliatory violence.

Instead of Bobby coming to the rescue, Mary is raped but stabs Glen during his climax: "He was heavy on her and he was pushing her deeper into the hay and she opened her eyes to see his teeth gritted and his lips bared in what looked to be almost a snarl …. When he started shivering and shaking and moaning into her ear she raised the knife and turned it to his throat and pushed it all the way in. Suddenly blood was pouring down onto her face and she felt him pull out of her, heard him groan" (340-41). There are several interesting aspects to this passage. First, notice how Glen, who has constantly reduced women to animals, is now the one described in animalistic terms. This creates an ironic balance to Glen's misogyny—he gets a taste of his own medicine, so to speak. Secondly, and most importantly, instead of enjoying the fruits—the climax—of his hard-won labor—the rape—Glen is stabbed to death. It is not his semen but his own blood that drains from his body, and he pulls out of Mary only to die. The abrupt and violent interruption of his climax can be seen as a literal break with the dominant and phallic masculine narrative into which *Father and Son* in many ways inscribes itself. As such, the stabbing emphasizes the validity of the counter-narrative that runs throughout *Father and Son*.

But as Knights also points out, even when a text seeks to question "phallic supremacy," it is "liable to be re-absorbed into its own myth" (131). This is certainly true in *Father and Son*. For despite the anti-phallicism of the counter-narrative, which undermines the role of the male hero instead reinforcing the role of the woman, the narrative still relies on the myth of violent resolve.

Furthermore, the physical and psychological power granted to Mary is very much at her own

expense. In my attempt to fit this twist into Wright's list of functions, I have replaced the hero

with the society, so the function reads: "the villain is defeated by society." The understanding is

that Mary serves as a representative of the society to which she belongs.

In line with the deflating of the Western code in the end, Brown also mitigates Glen's evil by

having him apologize to Mary just before he dies. To be sure, Brown kills off the villain, but before

Glen dies he is able to confess his sins, as it were. "I'm sorry," he tells Mary, "and she believe[s]

him" (377). In this way Brown redeems Glen at the moment before his death, and thus turns Glen

into a tragic character, worthy of sympathy. It is this tragic dimension that finally removes the

story at least halfway from the pattern of the morality play. As James Gilligan argues, "morality

plays reduce the question to that of 'innocence' versus 'guilt' (the 'good guys' vs. 'the bad guys')"

(8). The same argument can be used of the traditional Western, whose "clearly opposing players…

form basic moral reference points" (Cawelti "Prolegomena" 67). But Brown's empathy and

compassion for his characters, even the killers, finally produce a complexity that is more typical of

the anti-western, whose anti-heroes began appearing on-screen in the form of Clint Eastwood

and Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns, and whose literary characters reached a terrifying zenith

in Cormac McCarthy's brutal *Blood Meridian* (1985).

What remains of the traditional Western and the morality play is the good and innocent

Sheriff Bobby. He is still untouched by the violence of the final showdown. Given that Brown was

a writer striving for realism, the character of Bobby Blanchard is problematic, something that

Brown made up for in the much more flawed, but still basically good character of Sam Harris, the

highway patrolman of *Fay*.

Just as Westerns are ultimately about the construction of manhood, *Father and Son* is about

a theme as common as that of men behaving badly versus making the right decisions enacted in

accordance with moral guidelines. The male characters in *Father and Son* are cowboy crackers that incorporate both working-class codes and stock traits from the traditional Western. The hero is someone who protects himself and those around him, especially the women, but he does so according to a clear set of moral guidelines. What Brown ultimately creates by using the Western formula for his story is a clearly driven plot and a distinct set of moral codes that match his characters, good and bad.

The novel is both a formulaic page-turner and a statement of hope and humanity in the context of violence and despair. The hero Bobby is presented as the ideal man, a yardstick character whose common sense and moral strength and virtues are further emphasized by the violent excess around him. Most of this violence is embodied by the villain Glen, who repudiates his family and lashes out in blind anger and extreme violence against anyone he feels threatened by. He is Bobby's opposing player and at first sight the equivalent of a traditional Western villain. But in Brown's world, even the most morally degenerate characters portray a sort of stoic dignity, forcing us to recognize the lives of the overlooked so-called "white trash" of America. This sympathetic trait removes the novel somewhat from the traditional Western formula, but the insistence on Bobby's purity leaves one foot in the West.

Father and Son is an example of a contemporary southern writer who not only echoes the overshadowing tradition of Faulkner and company, but who has also been shaped by a less respectable but more influential tradition—the American Western. Even though horses have been exchanged for dented pickup trucks, a clear line runs from the American Western to Brown's violent South.

Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*

Next to Brown's epic tale of good and evil, Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* is a much

more complex work, but because Hannah is trying to deflate the myth as we know it, he uses a

structure similar to the one identified by Will Wright. As a southerner Barry Hannah grew up

surrounded by myths of the valiant heroes of the Civil War. But he was also infused with Western

myths from the local cinema. "That was about all I saw growing up," he has said (Personal

interview 2001). The traditional Western hero masters the balance between heroic behavior and

mere violence. This fine line is one that Barry Hannah explores in most of his fiction; his

characters often veer from one side of the line to the other in a confused quest for meaning. As

Hannah's characters search for meaning in life, their pursuit finds expression in foolhardy

attempts at heroism and sporadic bursts of violence. Much of his fiction is permeated by

characters who, in various ways, try to live up to the hegemonic myths inscribed in both the Lost

Cause and the West and the masculine codes of honor and heroism they connote. This paradox is

clearly expressed in Hannah's Civil War stories and especially in the figure of J.E.B. Stuart, "the

Confederacy's greatest cavalry officer."[137] As both Kenneth Seib and Mark Charney have shown,

Hannah's portrayal debunks the traditional image of the southern hero by a harsh and satiric

unmasking of the old myths and values. Hannah's picture of Jeb Stuart is one that supports some

parts of the Confederate myth, but it is eventually a rebuttal of the popular picture of a brave and

courageous soldier. As Charney observes, Stuart ultimately "symbolizes for the vainglorious South

an almost comic mixture of foolishness, humor, and noble intentions."[138]

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[137] Kenneth Seib, "'Sabers, Gentlemen, Sabers': The J.E.B. Stuart Stories of Barry Hannah," *Mississippi Quarterly* 45 (Winter 1991-92): 41.
[138] Mark J. Charney, *Barry Hannah* (New York: Twayne, 1992), p. 27.

The same debunking of myth is displayed in *Never Die*, Hannah's absurd anti-Western set in 1911 outside of Dallas.[139] At first glance, the setting and cast of *Never Die* comply with the conventions of the Western genre: A small frontier town with a mayor, two sheriffs, a priest, a gun-toting hero and a villain, and two women to fight over. However, it soon becomes apparent that Hannah's cast defies all traditions. There are no moral characters and no heroes, with whom the reader can sympathize. This is a remarkable shift in characterization from the pillars of moral strength and identification that we see in Brown's law keepers. Instead, all are ridiculed and parodied.

After *Never Die* it would be ten years before Hannah wrote his next novel. After two collections of short stories, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* was published in 2001. That novel is, at heart, a vicious attack on the New South; the casino-South that has infected people with a state of zombie-hood and where people become "depraved instantly if they don't hit the jackpot" (Personal interview 2001). Even though the novel is a return to the Deep South and even to a place and characters previously used by Hannah, the novel retains a powerful Western mythology, albeit a twisted and grotesque one.

Plot has never been the driving force behind Hannah's fiction. The language comes first, then come the characters who must then form a plot. At times this priority results in a loose, if not weak, structure, and *Yonder* has been accused of this as well.[140] However, behind the large cast of supporting characters and the many asides is a plot structure that can be teased out. In his examination on the form of *Yonder*, John B. Kachuba asserts that even though "Hannah does not privilege either one of the figures over the other," the novel is still "built upon the narrative lines

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[139] Barry Hannah, *Never Die* (Houghton Mifflin / Seymour Lawrence, 1991).

[140] See John B. Kachuba, "Breadcrumb Trails and Spider Webs: Form in *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*." *Mississippi Quarterly* 58:1 (Winter 2004-05): 75-87; as well as the following reviews: Richard Bernstein, "Giving in to the Urge to Do Bad in the South," *The New York Times* (10 July, 2001): E7; Anthony Quinn, "Food for Worms," *The New York Times Book Review* (5 August, 2001): 12; Nina King, "Games of Chance," *The Washington Post* (19 August, 2001): BW6.

of Mortimer and Raymond…" (75). When stripped down, these two narrative lines form a plot that, in some ways, is reminiscent of a Western story. In that sense, the weak Christian saxophonist Max Raymond is the unlikely and involuntary hero who must save his small lakeside community against the wrath of the killer Man Mortimer.

When applying Will Wright's narrative functions to the plot of the novel, we see that the structure is an amalgamation of "the traditional plot" with "the vengeance variation," but with some important ironic twists. Stripped down, the plot structure of *Yonder* is as follows:

1: The hero is a member of society

2: The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability (Christian, saxophone player)

3: There is a conflict of interests between the villain and the society

4: The villain is stronger than the society; the society is weak

5: The villain threatens the society

6: The hero avoids involvement in the conflict

7: The hero does NOT fight the villain

9: The villain is defeated by society

10: The society is safe

11: The hero loses or gives up his special status

What is significant in the plot structure is that Hannah uses the Western formula to debunk the myths inherent in that very genre. He sets up a recognizable conflict and then shows how the traditional ways of violent resolve fall short.

The first chapter of the novel, in which the main characters are introduced, sets up a set of oppositions that plays right into the Western tradition and into both Cawelti's "clearly opposing players" that "form basic moral reference points" ("Prolegomena" 67), as well as Will Wright's notion of binary oppositions. We meet Max Raymond and Man Mortimer who are both in the same "little white steepled" church. The church is placed in a literal wilderness of "jungle

swamps" where "loud birds and alligators" groaned. The image is a startling example of the

contrast between civilization and wilderness at the heart of the Western myth. This is the Deep

South, but the parameters are the same and this contrast links up with the one between male and

female spheres established in the prologue and discussed in the previous chapter. When Melanie,

"a pretty old woman" and recent widower, involves herself with the old men at the pier, "the

men almost quit their lies when she appeared" to the disgust of Sidney, a bitter old man, who

feels that the presence of a woman in the midst of his homosocial sphere "squeezed him into a

church pew" (30). The church may stand for civilization, but it is exactly the civilizing and

feminizing aspects of civilization that men have traditionally escaped from.

Inherent in the Western genre is a deep distrust for organized religion that can be traced

back to one of the seminal texts, Wister's *The Virginian*, where the hero ridicules a fundamentalist

preacher. Perhaps this distrust is best summarized in the already mentioned funeral ceremony in

John Ford's *The Searchers*. Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) is restlessly waiting to ride out to hunt

the Indians who have slaughtered his family and kidnapped his niece. He impatiently interrupts

the assembly's singing of "Shall We Gather at the River" with a curt "Put an Amen to it. There's no

more time for praying." The Western's impatience with religion reached an explicit and bloody

peak in the beginning of Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*. The Temperance Union is having a

revival, and after the town's mayor has preached piously about the sinfulness of drinking, the

union parades through town singing "Shall We Gather at the River," an obvious nod to Ford. But

unlike in *The Searchers*, where a disgruntled order sufficed as a denunciation of religion,

Peckinpah kills off the devout in a blaze of bullets. The temperance followers get caught in the

crossfire between the Wild Bunch and the reckless bounty hunters pursuing them.

Tompkins argues that the Western rejects "organized religion and a belief in spiritual

power" and instead invokes a belief in "physical facts" and "physical force." She continues:

"Exchanging the cross for the gun is a theme replayed countless times in Western films as part of an ongoing guerilla war against the church as an institution" (34, 35). While this is certainly the case, I should point out, since Tompkins does not, one of the genre's many contradictions: despite its seeming secularity, many Westerns depict their heroes as obvious Christ-figures. This tendency is obvious in i.e. *Riders of the Purple Sage*, *Shane*, and *High Plains Drifter*.

While southern fiction does not attack organized religion in such direct and bloody ways, there is a strong tradition of treating organized religion with suspicion, at least. In most of Hannah's work, religion is viewed with mistrust or outright ridiculed. In *Ray*, the preacher Maynard Castro kills the narrator's true love and is given this description: "In their secret hearts, such perversities as Maynard know there are things they can never have, things they have wanted with all their hearts. So they kill them. Most preachers are this way. Their messages seem benevolent, but they are more evil than the rest of us walking pavement" (54). But in *Yonder*, Hannah displays a new spirituality that also affects his main character. In the Western, even though (female) civilization wins out in the end, the rough male frontier values are obviously preferred. This explains the nostalgia that saturates so many Westerns, from *Shane* onwards. As will become clear, however, in *Yonder*, it is finally the small church and the values it connotes that win out over the traditional macho ideals of the frontier.

While the first chapter introduces the main characters as well as the many supporting characters of the novel, chapter 2 explores more fully the two opposing players, Max Raymond and Man Mortimer. Before looking further at how *Yonder*'s plot structure fits into Wright's narrative functions, I wish to spend some time on the two opposing players and the diverging moral values they symbolize.

We first meet the ex-doctor Max Raymond in church, something that clearly associates him with the community. In that sense he fills in the first of Wright's functions: he is a member of

society. But as any traditional Western hero, from Leatherstocking to Hondo, he has a foot in each

camp. He may be a part of the community, but Raymond lives surrounded by wild nature: his

house sits on a

> small hill, with its vine-wrapped fence, its bee-loud honeysuckle, dwarf magnolias and
> the palmettos farther into the dark of the riverine bayous behind. At night you could
> hear the bull gators, *hunka hunka*, and the bullfrogs …. At dusk, against this forest
> night, you saw a crane take flight, big as a spread greyhound and purest white. (39)

Furthermore, Raymond's wife is Cuban and goes under the name "the Coyote." She is "attuned to

the old precept of the Indian. Life was a river, not a ladder…" (37). In Western terms, their

relationship is the equivalent to Western heroes such as Louis L'Amour's Hondo, who is married

to a squaw and through her is initiated into the spiritual life. The landscape surrounding Raymond

is clearly southern, but it nonetheless attributes him with, if not Leatherstocking traits, then at

least a closeness to nature that is significant when opposed to Man Mortimer, the antagonist,

whom I will return to.

Wright's second narrative function in which "the hero is revealed to have an exceptional

ability" can be applied here, but it need some explanation, since Raymond's special ability will not

get him very far in a Western. In fact, Hannah takes great pains to show that, however much he

wants to be one, Raymond is far from a traditional masculine hero. While it is not clear that Max

Raymond should be the hero to Mortimer's villain, the opposition is clear in the first chapter,

where Raymond is in church. Man Mortimer is also there, but he is "slightly drunk" and only in

church because of a "spell of nostalgic spite" (9). The first page thus sets up a conflict between a

repenting Christian and a drunk and reckless pimp. Using Will Wright's analysis, we are clearly

dealing with two opposing players, even though the protagonist falls short when it comes to

embodying the traits of the traditional Western hero.

Raymond is a doctor turned saxophonist who is described as "a sullen middle-aged creature [that] seemed to stand knee-deep in unseen wreckage" (35). The fact that his wife is young and beautiful only baffles him and Raymond begins to feel "unmanned by their lovemaking .... He was both voyeur and actor when he took her, in all her spread beauty, but the part of voyeur was increasing and he knew he was a filthy old haint, as far from Christ as a rich man" (37). As Laura Mulvey points out in her discussion of voyeurism, "at the extreme, it can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms, whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other."[141] Voyeurism's inherent threat to virility, that universal sign of male power, is what causes Raymond to feel emasculated. Raymond's insecurity really derives from his fear that Mimi's ex-boyfriend Malcolm will return. After having recuperated from the stroke partly brought on by Raymond, Malcolm is now walking the streets again, and the threat of vengeance haunts Raymond. In an attempt to boost his confidence he turns to the supreme cultural sign of male power and buys a gun. "*Be a man*," he tries to convince himself, "*use your new long-barrel .38, stuffed in the trousers*" (178). Even though carrying a gun is supposed to boost Raymond's sense of masculinity, it does not have quite that effect.

Max Raymond is yet another Hannah male who constructs his identity through music, poetry, women, and sex, but is wracked by frustrations and self doubts.[142] However, as mentioned above, Raymond is also a further development of the Hannah male in the sense that he is ultimately more spiritual than his antecedents. This can perhaps be ascribed to the fact that during the process of writing the novel, Hannah himself "had an intense dream where the Savior

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[141] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 60.
[142] The connection between Max Raymond and other Hannah characters is also apparent in his name, which contains echoes of other Hannah narrators: Raymond Forrest of *Ray* and Ned Maximus of the story "Ride, Fly, Penetrate, Loiter" in *Captain Maximus*.

appeared very physically." Hannah says of Raymond: "He wants to be a Christian very badly, but he is like me. I needed material evidence" (Personal interview 2001). [143] Raymond is in church, we are told, "to worship, and to repent," yearning "for a solid thing to witness… because his faith was by no means confirmed" (9). Not only does Raymond's worship violate the Western hero's rejection of religion, but his complete lack of certainty further debunks the image of Raymond as hero, which is exactly the point. The unalterable conviction by which Western heroes act—their insistence that they are entitled to shoot because they are right—is a crude sign of a hegemonic masculinity and one that Raymond ultimately does not embody.

In the complex figure of Max Raymond, Hannah manages to create an unlikely hero who at the same symbolizes a critique of the hegemonic and expansionist culture of 21st century America. Raymond becomes the driving force in the counter-narrative that runs parallel to the dominant and recognizable heroic narrative. As in my discussion of the counter-narrative in *Father and Son*, Ben Knight's observations are useful here as well. Knights suggest that "narratives where male success is ironised provide a way of mapping the norms by contrast with which their own counter-narratives are told." Any narrative, Knights asserts, "carries around with it the ghostly lineaments of the narratives it is not—the other narratives to which it alludes, and whose difference from it constitute part of its own meaning" (121). This is the case in point in *Yonder*. Raymond's "shortcomings" as hero are so startling to the reader who read the novel as a dominant masculine narrative of good versus evil. In that sense, Raymond's anti-heroism makes sense when compared to the recognizable structure of the Western and other heroic narratives that *Yonder* participates in.

While his beliefs are contrary to that of the Western hero, Raymond's critique of the New South mirrors the dilemma of the traditional Western hero who is caught between the natural life

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[143] For more on Hannah's dream/vision, see his essay "Christ in the Room," in *The Oxford American* 48 (Winter 2005): 70-75.

and the encroaching civilization. The hero stands outside civilization, but he is the one who introduces law and order in the wilderness. This very activity brings civilized society back on his doorstep, and he must once again flee to a new wilderness.

If we are to decipher the moral value of Raymond, he does symbolize decency and communal values, and most importantly, he tries to do the right thing, which places him exactly opposite of Man Mortimer. In this sense, Raymond shares the moral values of the Western hero, even though their values are based on divergent ideologies. Early in the novel we learn of Raymond's fight against evil, a battle that echoes multiple Western-heroes, but with a clearly ironic twist. In this case, the evil emanated from his wife's violent ex-boyfriend Malcolm. When they were still a couple, Raymond had been Malcolm's attending physician. High on drugs, Raymond was "certain he had identified intransigent evil in Malcolm," and urged him to commit suicide, sending him off with several prescriptions. As a result, Malcolm suffered a stroke and is only barely getting by (36). Hannah has thus set up a dubious hero. Just as his "exceptional ability" is his music, Raymond's need to fight evil, albeit inspired by his crush on Mimi, attributes him with a moral codex similar to that of the Western hero and sets him up as a possible opponent to Mortimer and his evil deeds.

Most of Hannah's male characters fit the pattern of men who, in Mark Gerzon's words, "consume certain images of manhood even though the world from which they are derived may have disappeared—if it ever existed." Borrowing stock terms from the Western myth, Gerzon argues that "in comparing themselves to the dashing figure riding off into the sunset… ordinary men in everyday life cannot help but feel overshadowed."[144] What makes life so difficult for Raymond is his failure to understand that traditional models of masculinity are no longer relevant. He may dream of some heroic "macho" ideal, but at the same time he is aware that this dream, as

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[144] Mark Gerzon, *A Choice of Heroes: The Changing Face of American Manhood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), p. 5.

Ruth D. Weston observes, "is based on cultural falsehoods they have internalized."[145] This awareness forces him to seek untraditional ways of obtaining masculine power, such as through religion, music, and even poetry. Raymond is described as "a sort of Christian, but he despised striving, waited for visions. And was a poet …. He knew his poetry was not good, like his life, but he waited through the weak words for a vision and an act …. He could get higher, higher to God, by his saxophone…" (36). Apart from poetry and music, Raymond has tried to find other forms of intense feeling: he has become dependent on "the evil" he feels "close at hand to know [he is] alive" (94). Indeed, he plays in a band at the casino because, to Raymond, the casino is a symbol of evil. He "needed music, the Coyote and God. And he needed to live close to evil" (36). This need to be close to evil exposes the hero-villain symbiosis inherent in the Western. Both hero and villain are necessary in order to create the conflict out of which comes the solution that is the point of the Western myth. In staying close to evil, Raymond unwittingly acknowledges his role as hero. So far, so good. This is where Hannah begins to debunk the recognizable myth he has set up. Obviously Raymond is no gunfighter. His weapon against evil is beauty in the form of music. This becomes his "exceptional ability;" Wright's narrative function 2.

To sum up, the hero of *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* is a deeply confused man who is "still doing homework for his soul in his forties" (171). Because he attempts to embrace so many different kinds of masculinities, Raymond's life becomes a blurred mess. Waiting for a religious vision, playing the saxophone, and driving around with a gun in his pants are all attempts to reach an understanding of himself. Needless to say, none of these half-serious attempts leads to anything like a coherent or singular sense of identity; on the contrary, they only further confuse his quest for a perfect masculinity.

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[145] Ruth D. Weston, *Barry Hannah: Postmodern Romantic* (Raton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1998), p. 22.

The antagonist of the novel, and thereby Raymond's opponent, is the pedophile pimp and murderer Man Mortimer. Hannah's fiction has always featured a wide array of killers, from the racist Whitfield Peter of *Geronimo Rex*, the decapitator Ralph White of *Nightwatchmen*, the preacher Maynard Castro in *Ray*, Judge Nitburg and Edwin Smoot of *Never Die*, to characters from several short stories. A killer always stalk Hannah's world, which may be why the rest of the men are often armed. However, his most intriguing and complex killer is the charismatic and startlingly original Conway Twitty look-alike Man Mortimer, who seems to epitomize all the traits of Hannah's previous killers.

As an oppositional player to Max Raymond's wanna-be hero-character, Mortimer fits into Wright's structural analysis. Where Raymond lives surrounded by an almost primal wilderness, Mortimer cannot find any comfort in the solitude of nature: he is "indifferent to trees. Soil was hateful to him, as was the odor of fish" (49). Instead of hugging nature, he wants to spit at it, "wishing more of it was a rug and smelled like new cars. He was satisfied that he had never caught a largemouth bass or even thrown at one…" (70). Mortimer even reads a magazine, "*New Deal*, the organ for reformed country people who now hated nature" (125). And where Raymond's home is situated in the middle of nature, Mortimer yearns for homes "like mausoleums beside highways, no grass and not a stick of a tree in sight. Paved lawns" (125). This animosity to nature suggests a coupling in Mortimer's mind of nature with femaleness. Since femaleness, as I will discuss below, is a complex threat to Mortimer, eradicating nature in exchange of a sterile environment enables him to create a sense of self-control. That Mortimer prefers to live in such sterile surroundings is ironic in light of his castration, something I will also return to shortly. Furthermore, in the division between Raymond's wilderness and Mortimer's paved lawns, the thematic oppositions of the Western can be applied. Because of the genre's inherent nature of oppositional conflict, Western villains are often Eastern entrepreneurs, corrupt

urban businessmen out of touch with nature and the wilderness as opposed to the agrarian frontier values. Even when the villains are gunslingers, like Jack Wilson in *Shane*, they symbolize civilization as opposed to the hero. In Jack Wilson's case, he is provided with both a last name and past (he comes from Cheyenne), so he has more of a background and home than Shane. Furthermore, he comes to town wearing a black hat and looking like a gambler from the city out of place in the isolated valley (Wright 51). Where Raymond drives an old Sedan, Mortimer "favored a rotation of expensive foreign sports utility vehicles" (9). Mortimer is truly Hannah's epitome of all that is bad about the New South.

According to Will Wright, Western villains represent the ruthless selfish market interest, which threatens to overtake society's more decent and kind market interest. The villains, like the hero, are individuals who seek their own self-interest and who are not dependent on the will of others. They are "the proprietors of their own persons and capacities. They are strong and independent" (141). The villains are often involved in the institutions of the society they are a part of—saloons, ranches, or other kinds of business. Yet as Wright points out, the villains, though they are associated with social institutions, are never completely "*in* society" because he does not share its morality (141).

Lonely as he is, Mortimer does try to make friends and join the club formed by the denizens around the lake. But after they have heard him scream like a woman during a snake attack, he is turned down by Max Raymond: "You can't come aboard. Not now we've heard you over there like that …. [t]here weren't any rules until you went over the line" (154). While Mortimer's high-pitched scream is not the real reason he is being dismissed, Raymond deliberately uses it as a way to attack Mortimer's manhood, the state of which is already literally injured. The reason the small group does not want Mortimer to join them is because—as Wright says of Western villains—"their self-interest is destructive of social needs and values." But because "individualism and self-

interest are required by market-centered institutions, villains are inherent in society and society is weak compared to their strength" (141-42). Despite the rejection, Mortimer gets the last word, and both his business and the terror he unleashes on the community displays the true nature of the relationship between villain and society.

Mortimer clearly represents part of the greedy capitalist regime that is rearing its head in the New South. His empire is built on the selling of flesh; he is "a gambler, a liaison for stolen cars and a runner of whores, including three Vicksburg housewives" (9). His unscrupulous business is spread out over various suburb homes and SUVs, and in the course of the novel Mortimer preys on the young orphan girls in an attempt to have them appear in the porno videos he produces. By definition of his profession and morality (or lack thereof) Mortimer represents the modern world in all its insanity.

In an eloquent speech, which in its very nature serves to ridicule himself, Sheriff Facetto sums up the nature of middle-aged killers like Man Mortimer:

> The world is full of middle-aged men who seek revenge. The anger passes for most when they see there is no way …. For some, there is a bigger engine of hate… running at the red line and very vigilant toward what they might consider insults or even bossiness. They aren't just having it, the engine, like the others. They *are* it. (100)

The reason for Mortimer's "engine of hate" can be found in a deeply insecure masculinity. When Mortimer is stabbed in the crotch with a stiletto (63-64), he loses his potency and thereby one of the most powerful symbols of masculinity. Furious and frustrated—"*For God's sake, what is a man with no dick!?*" (64)—Mortimer begins cutting people at random. His obsession with knives and the consequent penetration of flesh clearly serve as a vicarious exercise in sexual intercourse. Painfully aware of his emasculation, Mortimer develops, to use Schoene-Harwood's words, "a neurosis of compulsive self-assertion." Discussing the deformative potential inherent in the

masculine ideal, Schoene-Harwood points out that within patriarchy men feel compelled to "maintain an attitude of self-contained mastery, if necessary by means of violence" (109). This is very much the course that Mortimer takes. The tragic-ironic point here is, of course, that Mortimer is attempting to live up to what Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin calls "the fictitious phallus and its *hard-(w)on* masculinity, that precarious and ephemeral power that has to put itself constantly on the line to prove itself and to merit its status,"[146] but his castration only serves to emphasize the extent to which hegemonic masculinity is a construction, but one towards which many men ultimately strive. In Mortimer's case it is even more obvious how much of an impersonator he ultimately is, an emasculated shadow of hegemonic masculinity. Of course, just because it is a performance does not mean that Mortimer does not see it as a natural course to take, and in any case, his violent actions are only too real.

As was the case with Glen Davis, the villain of *Father and Son*, Mortimer fits into Jonathan Rutherford's classification of "Retributive Man;" someone who embodies the struggle to reassert traditional masculinity. "Retributive Man" believes in "a destructive machismo as the solution to men's problems," and he violently lashes out at any threat. To him the world has "gone soft, pacified by traitors and cowards, dishonorable feminised men" who disrupt his ideas of manhood and honor and thereby threaten his understanding of himself. His efforts to restore order and suppress the forces that threaten him are reduced to violent actions (28-29). Mortimer is a man out of place in this world, and Hannah's portrayal of him exposes a severe crisis of masculinity. His adult life has been formed by two crucial events in his past. The first was at age fifteen when he saw a pornographic picture, the fascination of which "had never diminished. He looked for it behind every curtain of culture, of law" (50). In the wake of his introduction to pornography, Mortimer's appetite for sex was also aroused. Because of his resemblance to 1950s teen idol

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[146] Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, "The Male Body and Literary Metaphors for Masculinity," *Theorizing Masculinitites*, eds. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications, Inc., 1994), p. 254.

Fabian, Mortimer "attracted many girls, then women, often several at once" (50). But Mortimer's sexual appetite never solidifies into love of any kind. Mortimer does not love, but "the language of love came fluid to him. He never even had the puppy kind of love. He was jaded before he had a crush. He was a pimp before he comprehended what a pimp was" (51). Mortimer's view on women leaves little room for love or family of any kind. He wants to have sex with them, but is "horrified of progeny" (51). He does "not like the hearth, smells from the kitchen, an old friend for a wife, small talk. It all seemed a vicious closet to him" (49). Again, this misogyny mirrors the tradition of the Western. So when a woman confronts him with a six-year-old child, claiming he is the father, Mortimer denies. As a result, the woman shoots her son, then herself. This is the second crucial occurrence in Mortimer's life. Shocked, he drags the two bodies to the trunk of his car and has someone else drive it into the lake (51). Seven years later, at the time the novel begins, the discovery of the bodies gets the story started.

Apart from his well-established "business," Mortimer has developed a mean streak, nurtured by years of misogyny and beginning frustrations over middle age and loneliness. "[L]ike many another man forty-five years in age, he wanted his youth back …. It was only when his looks started to go, at age forty-three, that he became hungry for all the life he had missed" (49, 52). Mortimer wants back "the good past. The times that woman had taken from him, eight years back" (295). It is obvious to anyone but Mortimer that what he is going through is a male mid-life crisis. As his body weakens, he begins to realize the inevitable fact of his own mortality. By seeking out young women, Mortimer is trying to accomplish two things: he attempts to live up to the hyper-masculine ideal of the Don Juan, and he hopes that the youth of the girls will somehow infuse him with a vicarious youth. Instead of accepting the inevitability of age, Mortimer vents his frustrations through random acts of violence.

Having looked closer at the two opposing players and the values they represent, let us return to the plot structure of the novel and to Wright's narrative functions. The third function on the list describes "a conflict of interests between the villain and the society." Clearly, Man Mortimer's pimp business has infiltrated the small community of Eagle Lake: his penchant for using local housewives as prostitutes, his attempt to lure underage orphan girls into his porn movies, and his murderous rampage visited upon the community are all increasingly shameless and shocking intrusions upon the lives of the local denizens.

Once the conflict of interests between villain and society has been established, the next narrative function shows that the villain is stronger than the society, which is portrayed as weak. This is apparently also the case here, but again, Hannah debunks the notion later on. At first, however, we are presented with a community at loss with how to confront Mortimer's stronghold on them. The senile and disease-ridden "old geezers" by the pier are obviously no match for Mortimer and his thugs.

Like *Father and Son*, Hannah's *Yonder* follows the pattern described by John Cawelti, in which a series of violent acts gets the plot going. In this case, Mortimer's violent rampage shocks the community. In fits of jealousy, Mortimer stabs several men, slashes his girlfriend's thigh, and finally decapitates Pepper Farté, the bait store owner, thus paving the way for function 5 in Wright's list: "the villain threatens the society." Raymond has no interest in getting involved in Mortimer's nasty business, thereby fulfilling function 5: the hero avoids involvement in the conflict. Like the rest of the community, Raymond relies on the law to deal with criminals. However, as a striking example of function 4, the depiction of the local sheriff leaves little faith in the upholding of law and order.

With the community saturated in blood and violence, the local sheriff enters the scene. The inclusion of a sheriff immediately calls to mind the Western, but the sheriff of *Yonder* would have

a hard time surviving in the old West. Sheriff Facetto is an outsider in the community, but he is far from Western heroes like Shane who are outsiders that clean up the small town. Instead, Hannah has fun turning traditional stereotypes upside down, just like he did in *Never Die*. The inhabitants of Eagle Lake display the proud southern skepticism of outsiders, and they never accept their sheriff as a hero. With a "master's in criminology from a school in Mexico," and interests in "psychology and the demographics of crime," thirty six-year-old Facetto is far from a traditional hero (44, 87). The skeptical locals consider him a "New Breed" (87), and Facetto tries to blend in by "borrowing a southern accent," although "when he neglected to modulate his voice, he did not sound even remotely southern. Delaware, maybe" (44, 87). Furthermore, the sheriff acts in the local theater and has an affair with Melanie Wooten, a seventy-one-year old widow. It is no wonder that "the people of the county were not clear on what man they had." Even though he "was handsome and very verbal[, t]hese things were measured against him. Many women, however, wanted to see his warm gun and dreamed, since there was little else to do" (101).

The men of the community count Facetto's looks and talkativeness against him because he does not follow the traditional rules of male conduct. For one, he dates a woman much older than himself. At least *High Noon*'s marshal Will Kane had the decency of finding a woman much younger than himself, thereby not challenging the patriarchal order. Furthermore, Facetto defies one of the most important rules of a real man: he must be silent. As discussed in chapter 4, talking and thereby opening up to another person makes one vulnerable. In this way not talking becomes a sign of "masculine control over emotion" (Schwenger 45). Because of Facetto's eloquence, the men of the community view him as effeminate, and their repugnance of him affects the talkative sheriff. He begins to have grave doubts about his job, and desperately wants people to look up to him: "*Help me*, he thought. *I've acted my way into this job. I am now an officer and a coward*" (137). Facetto's failure to act is commented by Hannah in an interview, in

which he states that the novel is not one "where the white hats win" (Williams, 263). The mention

of "white hats" points directly to the Western tradition that Hannah employs only to debunk it.

As the violent acts begin to escalate, Facetto becomes afraid, which is acceptable for a man,

as long as he is brave enough to face his fears. After all, *High Noon*'s Will Kane was also afraid, but

he still faced off the villains at high noon. This is not the case for Facetto, though. In a sense,

Facetto is Will Kane turned upside down. Where Kane was an aging, ultimately courageous man

married to a young woman, Facetto is a young coward who has a romance with a 71-year old

widow, much to the contempt of the community. On the last page of the novel we are told that

"Facetto soon left town for a far, far state" (336). Like the man in Hannah's short story "Water

Liars" who opens up emotionally to the other men and is told to "tell [his] kind of story

somewhere else,"[147] there is no room in the macho-driven community for a man like Facetto, who

does not understand or does not want to obey the simple rules of male conduct. Because Facetto

is the town sheriff, he is also in many ways the symbol of the town's strength. It is then obvious

that Man Mortimer is stronger than Facetto, or as Will Wright's function 4 states: "The villain is

stronger than the society."

Even though Raymond does not actively seek out a confrontation with Mortimer, it happens

nevertheless. In line with Hannah's debunking of the Western myth, Raymond is pulled into the

violent vortex by accident. Convinced that he is stalking his wife's ex-boyfriend Malcolm,

Raymond ends up facing Man Mortimer. Even though the confrontation takes place in a

restaurant, Hannah's language clearly echoes the tight tension of the Western's numerous high

noon showdowns in dusty main streets: "They were the only ones still in the dining area. The hour

was desolate, dim, redolent of fried meals. Scorched crust of meat in the nostrils" (184). Again,

Hannah's technique is obvious. He builds up a recognizable scenario but midway suddenly

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[147] Barry Hannah, "Water Liars," *Airships* (1978. New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 7.

undercuts the reader's expectations by debunking the life-or-death moment so seminal to the Western with an impertinent remark that makes us question the validity of the myth. Surely, *High Noon*'s Marshal Kane did not worry about culinary smells.

But Hannah returns to the genre mode again, having the two men talk it out Western-style: "You want some of me?" Mortimer inquires, to which Raymond replies, "I came to destroy you. I don't know much, but I know you're bad straight through." Mortimer then challenges Raymond, telling him "You ain't got the goods, sonny" (184). Here, the tradition of southern honor plays in as well. Mortimer is basically calling Raymond a coward, and any "decent" southern man would defend his personal honor against such a blatant attack. But these lines, so recognizable in their confrontational macho style are once again followed by a sudden twist. Instead of taking action or at least coming back with a terse reply, Raymond's move is unexpected, unforgivable for a hero, be it southern *or* Western: "I'm going home,' said Raymond. He was shaking" (185). Like Bobby Blanchard, Raymond does not follow the tradition of southern honor. And likewise, it could be argued that he simply demonstrates the self-restraint so crucial to the Western hero. Surely, by walking out on a fight, Raymond displays moral superiority. But something is lacking. As described above, Sheriff Bobby of *Father and Son* also walks away from a fight, but he was certain that he could win it. He displayed self-restraint in order to keep the moral upper hand. And where Bobby was certain of the physical power behind his words, the same is not the case for Raymond. His reason for stepping down is simple and unheroic: he is scared out of his mind. He knows that he does not have what it takes to back his words with action, and function 7—"the hero does not fight the villain"—is fulfilled.

After he has withdrawn, Raymond turns away from Mortimer, "relieved totally and sopping wet under his arms" (185). What starts out as a classic confrontation is ruined because one of the players does not live up to the unwritten code. One of John Wayne's laconic quotes sums up the

code: "Courage is being scared to death—and saddling up anyway."[148] But Raymond refuses to saddle up, and instead takes the "cowardly" way out, as John Wayne would surely put it. And he is immediately punished for it. When he walks away from the confrontation, Mortimer stabs him in the back with a penknife. A series of humiliating acts follows. Staggering out the door and into the gravel, Raymond remembers his gun, but it is out of reach as it has "slipped into the crotch of his underwear." This degrading state reduces Raymond to a "monster of pusillanimity," who is forced to reconsider his wane macho dreams of becoming a poet warrior (185). Clearly the mythic showdown between hero and villain is just that; a myth, and Raymond's withdrawal is not a defeat but a victory over the macho myth that salutes violence as the solution to any problem.

After the embarrassing encounter with Mortimer, Raymond lays down his guns even though "his disgrace, the stab wound… still throbbed in his buttock when he walked or played the sax…" (225). Raymond still yearns for revenge, to be "taken into a different room of heaven with Mortimer's blood on his hands" (309), but the wish remains a male fantasy even though he believes that he "could stand being a coward only just a little bit longer" (227). Ultimately, Raymond knows he does not have the courage to live out his revenge fantasy.

Even though Raymond gives up his role as hero, it does not mean that the villain disappears. Man Mortimer is still very much there. Instead of the local sheriff it falls on the community itself to do something about the ensuing mayhem in the wake of Man Mortimer. Hannah explains this in an interview: "I don't think that evil ever is truly punished. It has its own end. I have also noticed that the law… as much law as we have… often can't touch really the evil, and that evil itself is absorbed by a community and it lives with it."[149] Mortimer meets his match when he is severely beaten up by the junk yard-owner Peden. The humiliating beating puts an end to his

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[148] Benjamin Darling, *Fear Not: Thoughts on Courage* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2002), p. 9.
[149] Robert L. Hall. "Motorcycles, Hamburgers, and Lines You Can't Forget: An Interview With Barry Hannah." *Southern Scribe* 2: 11 (November 2001). <http://www.southernscribe.com/zine/authors/Hannah_Barry.htm>.

middle age, and he has now "graduated into old" (295). This new perspective makes him ponder

the reasons behind his murderous desires: "*Maybe I cut because I want them to have no face too.*

Because if you've got somebody else's face, you never had one, there ain't no memory of you"

(295). Mortimer reaches a conclusion that may point to the actual reason behind his murderous

desires. His entire life he has been likened first to Fabian, then to Conway Twitty. He has never

had a chance to develop his own image of himself as a man. A deep insecurity about his own

masculinity has caused the loneliness, which subsequently enhances his violent streak.

Again, we can bring in Ben Knight's discussion of the revenge-theme in masculine

narratives. Earlier I discussed how Glen Davis of *Father and Son* fits into a recognizable pattern of

"man taking revenge upon women for the insults the world has heaped upon him" (Knights 127).

But where Glen Davis was in many ways a "loser" with nothing to lose, Mortimer is an ambitious

businessman. Knights suggests that "male narratives, with their propensity to violent resolution

and so often thought of as driven by aggrandisement and success, can as well be driven by the

fear of revenge and humiliation" (125). As Mortimer's decline suggests, his male narrative is

driven as much by fear of revenge and humiliation as by traditional male ambition. In that sense,

Raymond and Mortimer share the experience of "the male unraveling under his own gaze," as

Knights calls it, referring to Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* as well as to a tendency in

much contemporary literature by men (124).

Bakhtin has also discussed the tendency of self debasement in Dostoyevsky, and his

observations are relevant to Mortimer's experience. Bakhtin sums up the orientation of the

Underground Man's confession as the "destruction of one's own image in another's eyes… as an

ultimate desperate effort to free oneself from the power of the other's consciousness and to

break through to one's self alone …. The Underground Man hates his own face, because in it he

senses the power of another person over him, the power of that other's evaluations and

opinions."[150] The same is true for Mortimer and his realization that he has never been allowed his own face. Mortimer has a dream, "in which his own mirror told him he was an impostor in the body of Conway Twitty" (255). His resemblance to Fabian and later to Conway Twitty has compelled people to read another person into Mortimer, to overwrite his personality with a fictional Fabian, thereby denying Mortimer any sense of his own personality.

To make matters worse, Frank Booth, one of the first victims of Mortimer's knife, has had his face radically reconstructed to look "exactly like Conway Twitty, midcareer…." Seeing Booth's new face, "Mortimer quivered and nearly lost his legs, weak, firing with nerves …. *His* face" (263). Mortimer's unraveling coincides with his revelatory insight into his own psyche, but rather than setting him free, Mortimer continues on his path of destruction, eager to rid himself of that which holds power of him. And, ironically, he succeeds. The final confrontation between Mortimer and Raymond takes place in the bait store and is deflated of any hint of climax or heroism. The previously so recognizable and vicious killer is now depicted as a fully emasculated shape who is apparently no threat to the society. Raymond watches him "climbing down from the stool. A head with a wig, exempted from blame, by a shape totally shifted into sickness. He might as well be a little girl, almost unbalanced by his large hair" (324). But Mortimer is far from done with his violent ways. His problem is that he cannot find any individual personality after he has rid himself of the oppressive Conway Twitty resemblance. All he has left is his instinctive propensity to violence, to which he clings even more strongly now as he continues his downward spiral of debasement.

In fact, he unravels to a state of near non-being after having slashed Ronny, a former employee who uses a sarcastic tone with him. Ronny does not recognize Mortimer at first and is "astounded by his thinness and wild high hair" (327). Mortimer then seeks out Peden, the man

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[150] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984), pp. 232-35.

who beat him up, in search of meth "to tide [him] over" (327), yet another aspect of his unraveling. Mortimer's father is visiting Peden, but neither will acknowledge the thin ghost in front of them. Rather than having created his own identity, Mortimer has succeeded in erasing himself, and twice he tries to insist to Peden and his father: "I exist, man," to which Peden responds, "You're the demon itself" (328).

In what is both an attempt to disprove his non-being and simultaneously a fulfillment of Peden's assertion, Mortimer engages in a final act of high-scale violence: together with his goons he hijacks the old people's pleasure barge and attacks the orphan camp. The attack culminates in Mortimer's decapitation of Penny as well as his mother's death. After this orgy of violence, Mortimer's unraveling seems complete. As Knights explains, the textual figure who unravels under his own gaze is fascinated with his own degradation and creates a fantasy to go with it: "To contemplate the self, this underlying fantasy seems to suggest, is to be compelled to tell the story of the self's own debasement: the disgust once directed outwards upon a man's objects is taken back within the boundary of the self to become—perversely—a badge of pride, a sort of heroism of the abject." Central to this "drama of abject manhood," Knights argues, is "the recurrent theme of punishment, the expectation that punishment is indeed central to its own claim to existence" (125). Mortimer is not killed off, but his former powers are stripped off him, and he ends up in jail, an emasculated echo of his previous self, reduced to a "thing that was hardly anything but a big head with a mass of hair on it." He "would not stop talking [and] kept reciting his misdeeds" (336). The constant talk is, of course, another sign of his unmanliness, but it also displays the fulfillment of Mortimer's twisted fantasy. Trying to rid himself of an other, he found nothing beneath that shell except a talent for violence, which he then turned into his badge of pride.

Unlike Brown's Glen Davis, who apologizes to his victim right before he dies, nobody wants to listen to Mortimer. His strain of terror and violence has left everyone full, and he is never

redeemed. Even the town's new sheriff does not have the strength to go through a trial and simply accepts "the town's certainty that Mortimer was the killer and left it at that" (336). There is a startling lack of closure to the narrative. Especially since it has employed traits from the Western, there is an expectation that good will triumph over evil. As Hannah himself explains, "evil itself is absorbed by a community and it lives with it. And it just sort of 'wears out' the evil" (Hall). It is in this way that Wright's narrative function "The villain is defeated by the society" comes into play. There is no showdown, where evil is gunned down by good. But Mortimer does end up behind bars, thereby bringing on the next of Wright's narrative functions: "The society is safe."

Even though there is no iconic showdown in the novel—or maybe because of it—Max Raymond eventually stands out, not only in Hannah's fiction, but in the tradition of male heroes. After his initial confusion, he accepts the fact that he cannot possibly live up to society's ingrained models of masculinity. He manages to survive his encounter with Man Mortimer, and from then on his life becomes quiet and mellow. He joins the little church run by the reformed biker Egan. According to Hannah himself, "[t]he only real hero" of the novel "is the church itself" (Williams, 262). This points back to the beginning of the novel, where Raymond and Mortimer were introduced in the church. But unlike the Western's ideological distrust of religion and the communal values it connotes, Hannah's sympathies lie exactly with the people of the small church. In *Yonder* it is society that prevails over obstinate individualism. In that sense, the wilderness/civilization dichotomy at the heart of the traditional Western is turned upside down. So while Hannah employs the Western formula, it is in order to expose the faults inherent in it. In that way he lets the genre reveal its own weaknesses.

Despite all the gore and violence in *Yonder*, the novel, ultimately, does not employ the traditional—and therefore expected—Western climax where violence is justified as a means to

subdue the villain. Granted, Mortimer is beaten up by Peden, but he is not killed or forced out of town. With Mortimer incarcerated, law and order ultimately ensues. In this way, *Yonder* is yet another of Hannah's attempts to debunk popular myths. The novel with its concrete setting and grotesque characters is unmistakably southern, yet many of the underlying myths derive from the traditional Western: the various oppositions, such as wilderness/civilization and hero/villain. Once Hannah has established these well-known myths and applied them to the southern characters and their setting, he shows how the traditional—and expected—macho conduct does not lead to any form of closure but only to more violence. The days when the hero gunned down the villain at high noon are over, at least in Hannah's world. This does not mean, however, that everything is peachy in Eagle Lake.

Despite Raymond's resolve to lay down his guns, and despite the incarceration of Mortimer, the darkness seems to be encroaching much too fast on the despairing characters, perhaps as a result of the violent mayhem they have experienced from Mortimer. In an interview Hannah talks about the community's reaction to the evil in that Mortimer embodies. "[T]he people of the Cove just simply take" the evil, he explains, "They do take it, and it's a miracle that they do take it. It takes support often like a little church. It takes a reaching out of hands, and these people have not completed reaching out to each other even as the book ends. It's also about the fact that evil really cannot be put in prison" (Williams 263). This explains the dark coda of the novel. Mortimer's reign of terror has obviously rubbed off on the community and in the wake of the slashings and killings, it is no surprise that their lives will not return to normal. The tone of resignation and sufferance that the novel ends on stands in remarkable contrast to the positive escapism that ended Brown's *Father and Son*. In *Yonder*, "Harvard and Melanie were married by Peden on the pleasure barge. Their marriage was that of pals after a fight and long silence. It had

become too late in time for fights, and often even memories. They clung" (336). This new tone of desperation is perhaps the most significant development in Hannah's thirty-year career.

The Western Structure in Other Southern Novels

The main focus of this chapter has been on Brown's *Father and Son* and Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*—novels that in their narrative structure to some extent echo the Western—with important exceptions—and whose characters can be read as symbolic in that they to some extent represent various social principles. The remaining novels should be mentioned briefly here, since some of them do not adhere to the basic plot structure that Wright identifies. William Gay's *The Long Home* does, however. Since chapter 5 will deal extensively with that novel, I will only briefly sum up the structure of it here. At first, the opposing players consist of the young Nathan Winer and the evil Dallas Hardin. Hardin is a severe threat to the community, and even though Sheriff Bellwether is depicted as an honest and noble man, he is unable to arrest Hardin because he has bribed and threatened the local top officials. Like Hannah's Man Mortimer, Dallas Hardin represents greedy capitalism at its worst. His honky tonk preys on the weak community, which is unable to fight him. Furthermore, Hardin has killed Nathan's father several years earlier, a fact that is not disclosed until the end of the novel. In the meantime, Nathan Winer tries to stay out of the conflict and even starts working for Hardin, but when he falls in love with Hardin's step-daughter Amber Rose, the step-father asserts his authority and tells Nathan to leave her alone. This is where the conflict begins to accelerate. But it is also the point where the old man William Tell Oliver takes over Nathan's role as the hero. Oliver emerges as a Leatherstocking character who has remained passive to Hardin's evil for too long. But when he realizes that Nathan's life is in danger, he decides to right his past wrongs by taking on Hardin. Oliver kills Hardin, thereby making society safe again, and then retreats back into the wilderness from whence he came. If

Oliver is seen as the hero throughout the novel, it is possible to apply Wright's functions for "the classical plot" for *The Long Home*.

However, not all the novels examined here adhere to this structure. Still most of them employ the binary structure of "opposing players" in ways reminiscent of the Western. But as is already obvious, the heroes do not always that live up to their expectations; their roles and behaviors vary immensely. The villains in Westerns often carry a symbolic weight and are used as examples of moral deviancy, which helps to justify their inevitable destruction. But just as the anti-Western debunked this traditional structure and dismissed any talk of morality, not all of these southern novels use the opposing players as moral chess pieces. And the structures of these novels do not necessarily match Wright's lists of functions for Westerns.

In Lewis Nordan's *The Sharpshooter Blues*, there are no real heroes and no real villains. And those who fill out the traditional roles of the would-be hero and villain do not act accordingly. The depiction of Marshal Chisholm, a minor character, is closer to the traditional depiction of the quirky southern sheriff. We recognize him from TV-shows, such as "The Dukes of Hazzard" (Sheriff Roscoe P. Coltrane) and "In the Heat of the Night" (Sheriff Bill Gillespie). Those roles were based mostly on stereotypes, and Nordan comes very close to the stereotype of what he himself calls the "fat deputy sheriff" (Bjerre, "Interview" 379): Webber Chisholm is "a giant… six feet ten inches tall, three hundred fifty pounds." He has "forearms like fence posts, legs like bridge pilings," and a gut like "a big enormous fat tub of guts" (87). Nordan barely avoids the stereotype by giving us some insight into the life and thoughts of Webber. The first time we meet him, he seems like a slightly eccentric "good ole boy," but when we see him wash his bloody clothes at night, stripped bare of clothes and eccentricities, he turns out to be a lonely and fragile man. Feeling alien in his enormous body, Chisholm has grave doubts about his abilities as a protector. "There ain't no safety in all the land," he tells his wife and asks her, "How am I going to be safe?" (90). At heart,

Chisholm is as insecure and lonely as Nordan's other characters. The common task for all the law keepers is to stay on the right side of the law, despite urges that compel them to do otherwise. When confronted with violent offenders, they must keep a cool head, but for some the pressure becomes too much. The consternation they face at times makes them feel out of touch with humanity. As will be discussed in chapter 6, the sharpshooter Morgan, the most obvious hero of the novel, turns out to be a self-created mythic cowboy, whose myth deflates dramatically.

In Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden*, we are presented with both a hero and a villain. At first sight, it might be difficult to argue that the novel employs traits from the Western. But the characteristics are there, albeit more peripheral than in the other novels I am looking at. Will Alexander, the High Sheriff, is both a southern stoic and a Western hero. He shares his symbolically laden first name with *High Noon*'s sheriff Will Kane, and both possess that seminal yet burdensome talent: they have what it takes to kill. Will Alexander served in World War II, where he learned to control his fear and kill when necessary. When he returns to his hometown in North Carolina, the sheriff hires him as deputy because, as he says, "if it comes to the have-to you can kill a man" (29). In this way, Will shares the honored but burdened trait with numerous Western heroes. This trait becomes his—in Wright's words—"exceptional ability."

On the first page, Will is reading a "book on the Cherokee Indians" (3). This arguably creates an image in certain readers' minds of cowboys vs. Indians, but in this case, there is, of course, no conflict. And the sheriff is removed from the historical conflict by time. It could also be argued that by reading about the Cherokees, Will is engaging in a dialogue with the Indians. In that case, the traditional image of cowboys (the sheriff) vs. Indians is debunked, and Will becomes more of a Leatherstocking character, something that his relationship with nature reinforces—this will be discussed in full in chapter 7.

Another reference that places Will somewhat in a Western environment is his confrontation with the local thug with the Western flavored name Holland Winchester. Both Will and Holland are war veterans (World War II and Korea, respectively) but Holland is still struggling with his personal aftermath of the war. When Will arrives at a honky-tonk where Holland has been involved in a fight, he finds Holland dressed in his uniform. He shows the sheriff the contents of his leather pouch: a collection of dried human ears. This barbaric collection points straight back through the dark underside of American history. The American West was not "civilized," as Gregory McNamee notes, "by the clean-living, brave, square-jawed individualists our movies, schools, and other myth-making factories portray. No, the West… was created by scavenging armed gangs whose horses and carts forded the rivers of blood they spilled."[151] This has become increasingly clear in revisionary Westerns such as Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*, the *Deadwood* television show, and in novels like Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. In *Blood Meridian*, the group of renegade scavengers that the protagonist joins is described as "wearing scapulars or necklaces of dried and blackened human ears… the whole like a visitation from some heathen land where they and others like them fed on human flesh" (86). Several critics have noted allusions between McCarthy's violent West and the search-and-destroy missions of the Vietnam War. Likewise, in *Gunfighter Nation*, Richard Slotkin points to the connection between the vulture-like robbing of dead and maimed citizens at the beginning of *The Wild Bunch* with "the taking of ears from dead Vietnamese by soldiers verifying their body counts or acquiring souvenirs of victory" (598).

Bringing this horrendous tradition completely up to date, a 2003 article in *The San Francisco Chronicle* entitled "Necklaces of Human Ears through History: The Scalping Party, *Blood Meridian* to Iraq" traces a line from the historical frontier violence that McCarthy depicts, to the covered-

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[151] Gregory McNamee, "The Bloody Southwest: *Blood Meridian*," *Tucson Weekly* (May 14 – May 20, 1998). <http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tw/05-14-98/book1.htm>.

up slayings of civilians by American soldiers in Vietnam, a "Korean version of the Wounded Knee massacre," and finally to Iraq. As Mike Davis concludes, the Glantons "still have their place in the scheme of Manifest Destiny, and the scalping parties that once howled in the wilderness of the Gila now threaten to range far and wide along the banks of the Euphrates and in the shadow of the Hindu Kush."[152] All this brings us back to Holland Winchester's collection of human ears. He too, belongs to a shameful tradition of the American West, but Rash does not turn him into a clichéd villain. Instead, Holland comes across as yet another victim of national warfare. As he tells Will: "These here [ears] won't let me forget what I did over there. I don't take it lightly killing a man but I ain't afraid to own up to it either. All I did was what they sent me there to do." And as a jab at the apparent ease with which Will survived the war, Holland adds, "There's some that gets through it easier than others when the shooting starts, right, Sheriff?" (7). Even though this is the extent of their confrontation, it still establishes Sheriff Alexander as the stoic of the two, while Holland Winchester follows in the footsteps of traditional villains who hide their weakness behind a shield of toughness. In this case, Holland admits to it: "Sometimes when a man's hurting on the inside a good bar fight can help him feel some better," he tells Sheriff Alexander (5). While Sheriff Alexander is clearly depicted as a hero, the villain is given a human face and a complex history that robs him of any moral function.

Another villain in *One Foot in Eden*, at least technically, is Billy Holcombe, the man who murders Holland Winchester and disposes of his body. Sheriff Alexander and Billy square off several times throughout the novel, and it can be argued that they are the opposing players. The oppositions are also obvious when it comes to their masculinities. Next to Sheriff Alexander's strong and stoic masculinity, Billy embodies a frail and literally crippled masculinity. As a result of polio he walks with a limp, and he is unable to give his wife a baby. As Amy puts it, "I knew he felt

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[152] Mike Davis, "Manifest Destiny: Necklaces of Human Ears through History: The Scalping Party, *Blood Meridian* to Iraq," *The San Francisco Chronicle* (Nov. 23, 2003): D-3.

less a man for not being able to plant his seed in me" (64). Billy also admits to being a coward

when it comes to dealing with his wife sleeping with Winchester. He compares himself to a farmer

in the field "who sights a tornado hauling towards him and puts his head down reckoning if he

don't look up and admit to its coming it might some-ways pass him by" (117). When he finally

decides to face Winchester, he has grave doubts about his courage. "I didn't know if I was a brave

man …. I didn't know if I could kill a man" (124-5). It becomes more and more clear that Billy is not

a typical villain. His imperfect masculinity does not serve to boost the Sheriff's and to reinforce

Billy as villain. In fact, since the novel is narrated from five different points of views, the

traditional dichotomy of good and evil, so familiar in the Western, is discarded here. Instead, both

the Sheriff and Billy are allowed to tell their stories, as is Billy's wife Amy, the deputy, and the son

Amy had with Winchester. The result is complex and multifaceted characters that refuse to

submit to preconceived and stereotypical notions of good and bad. One example is Amy's

description of Billy, whom the other narrators see in terms of his handicap. Not so Amy. After

admitting that his legs were the first thing she noticed, she focuses on his upper part: "I saw the

brown hair and gray eyes, the sun-browned face, high-boned and handsome. I saw the strength in

his arms, the muscles that wrapped around his bones like muscadine vines …. You could tell those

arms and shoulders was able for more heavy sweat than many another man's" (82). According to

this description, Billy is not merely a cripple, but embodies a masculinity that also connotes

physical strength and stamina.

Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother* sets up several conflicts and several opposing players. At

first, the obvious villain is Billy Rodale, the man who has killed Virgil's brother. The local sheriff

does not have any hard evidence and is unable to make an arrest. But all the rumors point to

Rodale, and the sheriff indirectly encourages Virgil to kill Rodale and both his sister and mother

silently concur. The conflict then, is rather one of personal honor than a threat to society, and the

sheriff hardly figures in the equation. Eventually, Virgil does kill Rodale and then leaves Kentucky

for god to start a new life in Montana with a new identity. Here we are met with a new conflict

and a new villain, Frank, the militia leader. Frank and his militia are certainly a threat to the

society, but Virgil does not consider it his fight to take on. Only when he becomes involved with

Botree, who is also involved in the militia, does he consider taking on Frank. But in the end, Virgil

takes the peaceful way, surrendering to the federal forces that storm the area, rather than going

out in a blaze of glory. Eventually, the conflict that the novel sets up is more Virgil's internal

conflict than it is one between hero and villain.

While Will Wright's structural analysis of the Western can be useful in pointing out some of the

Western's recognizable plot structures in the southern novels, this chapter has shown that

structuralism is, after all, not a sufficient "tool." The attempts at fitting *Father and Son* and *Yonder*

Stands Your Orphan into Wright's rigid structure did yield results but also exposed the

shortcomings of that theory. Just like the novels I used, so many Westerns feature counter

narratives that Wright does not take into account, or does not know how to deal with. The idea of

basing everything on binary oppositions is, ultimately, a lack of imagination and robs the texts of

many layers of meaning and interpretation. It seems fair to conclude that the southern novels

certainly contain structural plot elements reminiscent of the Western, but the structural analysis

is too flawed to function as a final proof of the Western influence. Instead, it serves as a

suggestion of one of the ways in which some southern writers have found inspiration in the

Western. As the next chapters will serve to show, language and structure are not the only ways

through which the Western has inspired southern writers. One example is the way the southern

hero has evolved from an elitist to a common man.

Part Three:

Men and Landscapes

5. Plain Folk

The Evolution of the Southern Hero

As noted in the introductory chapter, southern fiction has displayed an increasing interest in the "plain folk" of the region. However, the official story of the South does not leave room for these plain folk. This invisibility of the common man mirrors the recent successful development in the South. As Richard Gray explains, "the story of the recent prospering of the South has been mostly a story of the suburbs and the metropolitan business districts… above all, what has been called 'the Interstate 85 corridor' stretching from Richmond to Atlanta. Other places, notably the Deep South states of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas, have done less well" (*Aberrations* 346). The South may have prospered economically, but away from the success of the cities and suburbs lies a bleaker and more hidden story of the countryside. The story of the countryside and its people is usually the one told by contemporary southern writers. "The South has changed dramatically," Richard Gray asserts, and "white males in particular have felt this exposure" (*Aberrations* 349). A few southern writers, like Tom Wolfe, may take on the big cities and the corporate world, but most focus on the more anonymous lives in the rural areas of the South.[153]

The current interest in "plain folk" constitutes a break with the genteel tradition of the southern plantation novel and points perhaps to the influence of the Western, in which the (apparently) common man is heralded as hero. If we look at the origin of both the traditional southern hero and the Western hero we will find, however, that they hail from the same background in history and class. This "kinship" may explain the allure of the Western tradition to contemporary southern writers.

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[153] Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full* (1998) focuses on the tension between big business and politics in Atlanta at the close of the millennium, and pays particular attention to the demise of macho businessman Charlie Croker. In *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), Wolfe does describe the life of a plain North Carolina country girl, but the novel almost exclusively takes place at a fictional Ivy League campus in the north-east.

In *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative*, Michael Kreyling traces the figure of the hero in southern literature from the early 1800s to the 1980s and shows how "the force of the heroic figural system" has accumulated over time. Kreyling credits William Gilmore Simms with codifying the narrative form of the southern heroic. Inspired by the chivalric romances of Sir Walter Scott, Simms looked to the French knight Chevalier Bayard, in whom he found the epitome of the heroic male and subsequently wrote him into a southern tradition: "In person, Bayard was tall, straight, and slender. His countenance was mild and gracious. His eyes were black, his nose inclining to aquiline, and his complexion fair" (Simms *Chevalier* 400). As Kreyling points out, this outline of the hero "is deeply engraved in the cultural mind of the Old South," and his traits can be traced through real-life aspirants such as Robert E. Lee and George Washington as well as fictional heroes from Edward Grayson, Ned Hazard, and, of course, Faulkner's Sartoris family (36-37).

One of the important aspects of the hero, and one stressed again and again, was that of "pure blood." Robert E. Lee was held up as a shining example of a true southern hero in the flesh, someone whose bloodline guaranteed his status as hero. Kreyling explains the logic behind this thought: "The pattern of heroic behavior prominent in southern narrative and biography was last seen in medieval times, and readers attuned to such patterns will readily acknowledge the direct bloodlines from Chevalier Bayard to the eternal southern hero." Therefore, "[t]he closer one reaches the splendid past, the stronger is one's case for natural heroism. The heroic figure is not an accident in history, tossed up randomly from a chaos of genetic and environmental factors. He is necessary…" (108). Kreyling goes on to show how this idea of the southern hero has infused southern literature all the way up to the works of Walker Percy. But if we leave the southern region and look westward, it becomes clear that the traditional southern hero, as sketched out by Kreyling, in many ways mirrors the Western hero that originates in Wister's *The Virginian*. Seeing how the Virginian is a southerner, this should perhaps not come as a surprise.

In physical appearance the Virginian echoes Kreyling's comment on Lee: "As a specimen of selective breeding, Lee is as near to physical perfection as the hero can be" (110). In the narrator's descriptions of the handsome Virginian, it is clear that we are dealing with a remarkable specimen of mankind. His first glance shows a man who moves "with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin." The awestruck narrator goes on to describe this "slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures," and points out "the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength." Elsewhere, the narrator calls him a "handsome, ungrammatical son of the soil" and once again focuses on his "tiger limberness and his beauty [which] were rich with unabated youth" (Wister, *The Virginian* 11, 12, 13, 17, 53). Apart from his physical perfection, which is obviously the result of "selective breeding," the Virginian embodies important traits that serve to cement his perfect masculinity: He is skillful, a gentleman, self-disciplined, responsible, dutiful, trustworthy, displays good judgment, and only talks when absolutely necessary.[154] But below all these characteristics of manhood is one overarching aspect that is so taken for granted as to be invisible; that of race.

In his introduction to the novel, Robert Shulman notes that Wister's mythic West is "not a place of hard labour and antagonism between large and small ranchers and farmers, or the site of racial and national diversity, but an Anglo-Saxon preserve and 'a great playground for young men.'" Pointing out that Wister was the grandson of Fanny Kemble, who was married to slave-owner Pierce Butler, Shulman argues that "implicitly in his creation of an all-white Anglo-Saxon West, Owen Wister was to continue the Butler family tradition of racism, a tradition his grandmother Kemble vehemently opposed."[155] Jane Tompkins also points out the novel's

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[154] For examples of these traits in the text, see Owen Wister, *The Virginian* (1902. New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), e.g. the following pp.: self-discipline (100, 146, 147), good judgment: (89, 136, 139, 140, 151, 154, 165), skillful: (11, 12), gentleman (17, 38, 45, 53, 89, 93, 154, 166), responsibility, duty (42), trustworthy (45), silent: (21, 28, 42, 53, 63, 78-79, 92-93, 98, 130-35.
[155] Robert Shulman, "Introduction," *The Virginian*, p. x.

inherent racism and reliance on white male hegemony. The Western hero's "superior status is won through the hero's actual performance only secondarily;" she argues, "in the final analysis, it is his birthright. His mastery is projected backward to the moment of conception and beyond; for the hero belongs to a race of heroes, which is to say, he belongs to the dominant race" (145). Wister himself made this clear in his essay "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," originally published in *Harper's* in 1895. The essay serves as a fascinating insight into the both racist and imperialistic ideologies at the heart of *The Virginian*. Here Wister argues that the rugged cowboy descends directly from the Anglo-Saxon knight-at-arms:

> … in personal daring and skill as to the horse, the knight and the cowboy are nothing but the same Saxon of different environments, the nobleman in London and the nobleman in Texas …. Destiny tried her latest experiment upon the Saxon, and plucking him from the library, the haystack, and the gutter, set him upon his horse; then it was that, face to face with the eternal simplicity of death, his modern guise fell away and showed once again the midiæval man. It was no new type, no product of the frontier, but just the original kernel of the nut with the shell broken.[156]

The heroic traits that the cowboy embodies, then, are daring and skill, but his "unpolished" appearance is also part of the heroic image. After this triumphant comparison, Wister moves on to the darker aspects of the Saxon ideology.

The propensity for imperialism, which Wister, of course, considers a strength, is rendered harmless by portraying it as a matter of healthy playfulness: "Adventure, to be out-of-doors… to enjoy independence of spirit or mind or body… this is the cardinal surviving fittest instinct that makes the Saxon through the centuries conqueror, invader… explorer, colonist…" (335). In a similar manner and quite in line with the ideas of the time, the obvious racism that supported

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[156] Owen Wister, "The Evolution of the Cow-Puncher," *The Virginian*, pp. 333-36. Hereafter cited parenthetically as "Evolution."

manifest destiny is erased and turned into an intrinsic need for male bravado that must be exercised at all costs:

> The adventurous sons of Kentucky and Tennessee, forever following the native bent to roam, and having no longer a war to give them the life they preferred, came into a new country full of grass and cattle. Here they found Mexicans by the hundred, all on horses and at large over the flat of the world .… Soon [the Saxon] had taken what was good from this small, deceitful alien, including his name, *Vaquero*, which he translated into Cowboy. He took his saddle, his bridle, his spurs, his rope, his methods of branding and herding—indeed most of his customs and accoutrements—and with them he went rioting over the hills. His playground was two thousand miles long and a thousand wide. (Wister, "Evolution," 332-35)

The West, in other words, is merely a playground for an adolescent (white) American manhood that needs to test its boundaries. Like the Native Americans, the Mexicans are merely part of the wilderness, there to be used or discarded as the white man pleases. So it is obvious, as Tompkins notes, that to Wister the valor and toughness that characterized heroic manhood were intrinsically connected to the question of race. In fact, while the Western hero typically appears to have an unknown background, adding to his heroic mystique, he does in fact hail from the dominant race and class. One of his social functions is to guarantee the continued control of those already belonging to the power elite. In this sense he serves "as a bulwark, a fortress against dangers from without and from within." Part of the Western's racism, along with its "assertion of Anglo-Saxon superiority," is the underlying fear of the "race contamination" that comes with miscegenation (Tompkins 145-48).

The fear of miscegenation was nowhere more pronounced than in the South, and as Michael Kreyling shows, the construction of the southern hero emphasized "pure blood" as a must. Already in the fiction of William Gilmore Simms, the genius-hero's aim is not only to defeat the enemy but also "to obtain the ideal mate" who matches the noble and pure hero. The

exaltation of Lee as the emblematic southern hero owes much to his "stubborn blood of a race of thoroughbreds," as one of Lee's hagiographers put it (*Figures* 39, 57). Great care was taken by these hagiographers to point out his honorable pedigree. Douglas Southall Freeman pointed out that throughout the six generations the Lee family had been in America, they had only married below their status a couple of times. "The result," Freeman argues, "was the steady maintenance of the physical stamina and intellectual vigor of the stock for generations until its perfect flowering in one of the greatest human beings in modern times, Robert E. Lee" (Qtd. in Kreyling, 108-09). The idea of race purity was intrinsic in southern culture, especially in the construction of a national hero, but it was not, of course, uniquely southern. It would be a mistake to argue that this ideology of race purity was carried over to the Western solely by way of the South. The fear of polluting the white blood was of national concern at the end of the nineteenth century. And as Michael Kimmel explains, that fear was closely connected to the idea of manhood. By excluding "the masses of immigrants flooding America's cities and the streams of blacks migrating north at the same time," many white American men hoped to preserve their gender identity (*Manhood* 89-90).

It was this broadly accepted ideology that Wister carried with him into *The Virginian*. "The notion of race was important to Wister's construction of the Western hero (and of himself) in *The Virginian*," Jane Tompkins asserts, "and it has played a significant role in the racial politics of the genre ever since" (147). However, while race, or rather, whiteness, has continued its hold on the genre, the aristocratic traits of the hero have been noticeably washed out. The pure bloodline of the Western hero has come to suggest whiteness, rather than nobility, although the two can be argued to be one and the same in a racist terminology. What I am getting at here is the fact that the image of Western hero has gradually changed from a man of noble background into a common man of the people. In other words, he has moved closer to his historical roots as a hard-

working laborer while maintaining his powerful myth of rugged individualism. This aspect can also be found in the Virginian, who, in Tompkins' words, "belongs to a stronger breed identified with the men of the South and the West, who are uneducated, antireligious, agrarian, and populist" (142). In other words, the model Western hero embodies all the traits that the southern boys and men try to emulate, as Richard Etulain sums it up: "In his physical appearance, in his ability to handle his opponents, in the strength that radiates from his movements, Wister's hero is nature's nobleman" (68). It is exactly because of his lack of formal education and lack of aristocratic background that the Virginian's accomplishments are so significant.

Owen Wister—along with his friend Theodore Roosevelt—believed in the influential powers of the strenuous life. The type of man that Wister and Roosevelt saw as an ideal is well-known in American culture. Michael Kimmel refers to him as the "Artisan Hero," and calls him one of the most dominant ideals of American manhood in the nineteenth century (the other two being the Genteel Patriarch and the Self-Made Man). Like the gallant knights that served as models for both southern and Western heroes, the Artisan Hero also originated in Europe but has been Americanized, and he can be traced to the mythic pioneer, "the masculine primitive [who] is still humble and beholden of his origins" (64). In Kimmel's description we can see how the traits of all three types of heroes blend together in a common shape: "Independent, virtuous, and honest, the Heroic Artisan is stiffly formal in his manners with women, stalwart and loyal to his male comrades. On the family farm or in his urban crafts shop, he was an honest toiler, unafraid of hard work, proud of his craftsmanship and self-reliance." It should be noted that Kimmel uses the term "artisan" in a broader sense; "What distinguishes the artisan… is his autonomy, his sense of integrity in manual labor, his calling." His definition therefore includes "the nation's independent farmers, the celebrated yeomen of Jeffersonian republicanism…" (*Manhood* 16, 368). While many of the characters in contemporary southern fiction are not exactly successful artisans but more

often manual workers, many of them embody ideals that are clearly those of the Artisan Hero. And there is certainly a touch of the more "plain" working-class in the Artisan Hero, who, according to Kimmel, "saw himself as deeply embedded within a community of equals, a 'shirtless democracy…'" (*Manhood* 29).

In the Artisan Hero is also the seed to the anti-intellectualism that has flourished ever since in American hegemonic masculinities. Kimmel notes how Andrew Jackson, a Heroic Artisan politician who appealed to the working-class, constructed his 1828 campaign as a battle between one "who can fight" and one "who can write," in this case John Quincy Adams. In this sense, Jackson pitted "the plowman" against "the professor" (*Manhood* 34). Kimmel describes how manhood increasingly became a political currency used in campaigns. A good way of smearing an opponent was to focus on their effeminate traits, be it beardless chins, shrill voices, or affinity for European aristocratic tastes. After "the bearded and deep-voiced Abraham Lincoln parlayed his plain-spoken humble origins into a national myth," succeeding American presidents would "for many years, claim the mantle of the artisanate, a descendent of the agrarian yeoman farmer" (*Manhood* 39).

While the ideals of the Self-Made Man came to dominate American manhood, the self-made man often serves as the villain in southern fiction. His ideals can be found in Man Mortimer, the merciless capitalist and killer of Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* as well as in the ruthless and corrupt Dallas Hardin in William Gay's *The Long Home*. While it can be argued that the Western hero is a self-made man, his historical background makes him an artisan hero. And in many Westerns, the dichotomy between hero and villain is exactly that of artisan hero and self-made man. As Mitchell explains, the cowboy represents a stable "agrarian work culture" and offers "a throwback to the idea of precorporate capitalist structure, when journeyman

apprentices felt primary loyalty to shop and supervisor, and work space intersected with family

and living space as well" (26).

The connection between the "plain folk" of West and South is apparent in the title of this

dissertation: "Cowboy Crackers" points out two types of historical plain folk behind a popular

label: the hard-working cattle wranglers and poor white southerners. With time, myth and

ridicule have served to obscure the actual history of the people they represent, but the fact is that

they represent a common trait: hard-working plain folk. Lee Clark Mitchell points out the reality

behind the romanticized myth of the cowboy as rugged individualist. The "actual working

cowboy," he asserts, "was an odd choice for a national hero." Cowboys were merely hired hands

on horseback. They were "overworked, underfed, poorly paid, ill-educated laborers," whose daily

routine was "monotonous and uneventful, more so than most occupations" (24-25). Similarly,

behind the derogatory term "cracker" is a real person, someone who does not match the idiom.

Daniel Hundley, in his 1860 ethnographic study *Social Relations in Our Southern States*, describes

the common southern man as someone whose only "inheritance… is the ability and the will to

earn an honest livelihood… by the toilsome sweat of their own brows." But it is important that

this character exhibits "a manly independence of character" and will not "under any

circumstances humiliate himself to curry favor with the rich or those in authority."[157] The focus on

the everyman is linked, of course, to the rural tradition that infused not only southerners but rural

people all over America.

In a similar vein, Fred Hobson lists "a religious sense, a closeness to nature, a great attention

to and affection for place, a close attention to family, a preference for the concrete and a rage

against abstraction" as shared characteristics of any rural people who have inhabited a traditional

society over a long period of time (*Postmodern* 3). Since Hobson speaks of traditional southern

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[157] Daniel Hundley, *Social Relations in Our Southern States* (1860. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1979), p. 199. Qtd. in John Shelton Reed, *Southern Folk, Plain and Fancy: Native White Social Types* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1986), p. 34.

characteristics ranging back to the 17th century, the same traits are not necessarily obvious today. The religious sense he mentions is hard to find in today's southern fiction. Granted, writers like Madison Jones, Randall Kenan, and Barry Hannah have written about religion, but it is not the first thing one associates with their fiction.[158] Furthermore, the close attention to family that was once a southern trait is not common in male southern fiction. While southern women writers such as Kaye Gibbons, Josephine Humphreys, Anne Tyler, Pam Durban, and Alice Walker often place their novels in and around the household or a community that features both men and women, male southern fiction often depicts lone men on the loose from civilized society. There are still male writers, such as Clyde Edgerton and Robert Morgan, whose fiction revolves around entire communities, but they seem to be the exception. Even when male novels depict a specific community—such as Eagle Lake in Hannah's *Yonder*, Oxford in Brown's *Father and Son*, and the unnamed rural community in Gay's *The Long Home*—they focus almost solely on the male characters and their problems. Only rarely does family enter into the equation.

What is left of Hobson's characteristics in today's southern fiction are traits that are not only traditionally southern but also echo some of the Western's trademarks: a closeness to nature, an affection for place, a preference for the concrete, and a rage against abstraction. But perhaps the most characteristic trait is the focus on "plain folk" and especially men who have, to use Hundley's words, "the ability and the will to earn an honest livelihood… by the toilsome sweat of their own brows" (199). This is a quality that is particularly revered in the Western. In her discussion of the qualities required of the Western hero, Jane Tompkins uses Louis L'Amour's *Heller with a Gun* to point out how "physical strength" is an ideal in the Western. As is the case in most Westerns, the protagonist embodies qualities similar to that of a successful manual worker: In fact, she states, "all the qualities required of the protagonist are qualities required to complete

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[158] Randall Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), Barry Hannah, *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001), Madison Jones, *Herod's Wife* (2003).

an excruciatingly difficult task: self-discipline; unswerving purpose; the exercise of knowledge, skill, ingenuity, and excellent judgment; and a capacity to continue in the face of total exhaustion and overwhelming odds" (12). As will become clear below, several of the male southern writers imbue their protagonists with this sort of mythic male power, itself a performance of masculinity that leaves no one in doubt about the qualities of the men who possess it.

Where many of southern writers, such as Faulkner, Caldwell, and O'Connor, have depicted the poor white working class in more or less ridiculing ways, the new southern writers draw on another tradition in their depiction of the working class. Just as is the case with the traditional Western, the (anti) hero in male southern fiction is the common man, he who does not hold high-paying jobs or hail from the best families, and most importantly, he is a man of exceptional skill and is not afraid of hard work.

This chapter will consider the plain folk of some of the southern novels and discuss to what extent they echo the ideologies and traditions of the Western. After a brief overview, Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother* and William Gay's *The Long Home* will be discussed at length.

It is tempting, of course, to see the rural characters in contemporary southern fiction as a continuation of the southern Agrarian tradition. It could be argued that by criticizing industrial progress and by re-creating a lost rural culture, Ron Rash places himself in the tradition of Agrarians such as Andrew Nelson Lytle, who spoke melancholically of a lost era, a rural, backward-looking place of farms and small towns. But where Lytle's Agrarian paradise was an elitist utopia, Rash's lost world is one of poor mountain people. This would not sit well with the Agrarians, who marginalized proletarian writers like Erskine Caldwell and, to a certain extent, Carson McCullers. Richard Gray describes how, in the 1930s, the accepted view of poor whites was that they "did not exist; or if they did, they existed outside of 'civilization.' They were irredeemably 'others,' marking the outer limits of the culture…" Discussing Agrarian Donald Davidson's omission of

literature about poor whites, Gray states that for many of the Agrarians, "to write of the
'unknown people' of the Southern countryside was not to write as a Southerner; it was doubtful if
it was even to write as an American" (*Aberrations*, 160-61). This marginalization of poor whites
has, to a large extent, continued until very recently. As Matthew Guinn notes, Harry Crews'
shocked the literary establishment with his string of novels in the late 1960s and early '70s. The
poor-white perspectives of their novels left "Southern criticism… unequipped to evaluate" them.
And the "virulently anti-pastoral images" of Cormac McCarthy's early novels from the same
period left traditional critics furious at what they considered an all-out attack on tradition and
culture ("Writing" 571). But as Guinn argues, "'declaring war' on community and myth went on to
become one of the defining approaches to postmodern Southern writing, and authors writing
from a poor-white perspective "proliferated like ragweed throughout the 1980s and 1990s"
("Writing" 571, 572). Still, critics were straining to keep up, and in 1999, Fred Hobson stated that
class was the "least openly and honestly addressed" aspect of southern culture.[159] In recent years,
however, several publications have done their share to correct this.[160]

Larry Brown is one of the most obvious examples of a southern writer who tells his stories
from the perspective of poor whites. The stock Western traits with which Brown endows his
characters in *Father and Son* also parallel certain traits of the southern, if not broadly American,
working class. This fusion of the working-class narrative and the Western aesthetic is apparent
even on the dust jacket of the novel's first American edition, which shows a black-and-white
close-up of a man's waist, complete with an oversized belt buckle, jeans, a coarse shirt, and a
rough-hewn left hand, its finger nails grimy with grease or perhaps dirt, clutching a smoldering
cigarette. He could be the average blue-collar worker on a break, or he could just as easily be a

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[159] Fred Hobson, *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1999), p. 134.
[160] See for instance Patricia Yager's *Dirt and Desire* (2000), Richard Gray's *Southern Aberrations* (2000), and *The Many Souths: Class in Southern Culture*, ed. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (2003).

lone cowboy relaxing as he gazes over the prairie. In the end, they are essentially one and the same.

Sheriff Bobby Blanchard actually belongs to the middle-class, but as John Shelton Reed explains, since there are no readily recognizable social types for the southern middle-class, they have the freedom to choose what class they want to associate themselves with. They can move upwards and pretend to belong to the upper class, or "they can choose to be good old boys and girls, peppering their speech with… 'Southern provincialisms'… buying Emmy Lou Harris [sic] tapes for the car stereo, and whooping it up at college football games."[161] And while it would seem most appealing to move upwards, Reed points out the inherent dangers in being a southern gentleman. He quotes Florence King, who stated that every southern man "harbors a certain resentful fear of the Southern-gentleman image. It smacks of the drawing room and the dancing master; it suggests… that he is over-civilized, over-housebroken, even foppish. One part of him wants to squire the ladies in style, and another part of him wants to get away from them and take to the woods"[162] (72). While King's claim is delivered in her trademark witty style and based solely on personal experience, it does indicate something about the construction of a certain type of masculinity. The stereotype of "the good old boy," Reed notes, is considered the most masculine of the positive southern social type (75). This corresponds to Peter Schwenger's claim (discussed in chapter 3) that the typical masculine role of the 20th century is built on the traditional traits of the male working-class (9).

This might explain why Bobby is closer to the working-class hero, despite his position as a middle-class sheriff. He is a purer version of other Larry Brown heroes, such as *Joe*'s Joe Ransom and *Fay*'s Sam Harris, in that he does not possess the kinds of human flaws that make these characters more credible. The values that Bobby embodies—honesty and courage, in particular—

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[161] John Shelton Reed, *Southern Folk, Plain and Fancy: Native White Social Types* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1986), p. 68.
[162] Florence King, *Southern Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), p. 58. Qtd. in Reed, p. 72.

position him as, using John Shelton Reed's terms, an "authentic, indigenous working-class hero," a "good old boy," a young southerner who is "positive, independent, competent, and strong" (35). Granted, he is not exactly the antebellum yeoman that Reed sees as the foundation of the working-class hero, but Bobby's predominantly optimistic and morally flawless behavior does qualify him for inclusion in Reed's terminology.

Yet *Father and Son* also features a cast of lower-class types, many of whom have much more rowdiness about them than the hero. As Reed would have it, the cast ranges from Bobby the "working-class hero" over "the redneck" Glen to "poor white trash" also called "the hillbilly" as embodied by Glen's brother Puppy. Bobby's half-brother Glen is what Reed terms a "redneck villain," for he has "an outlaw quality that the good old boys lack" (38). Glen's violent strain and his indifferent attitude to the world around him clearly make him an outlaw, and the contrast between his sheriff half-brother could hardly be more distinct. Reed explains that the redneck's "essential characteristic" is "meanness." He "fights because he wants to *hurt* somebody, often somebody helpless." The violent redneck, Reed argues, even became—to a certain extent—the dominant American view of the working-class white southern male, not least thanks to his regular appearance in popular culture (40).

As already mentioned, Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden* also features a cast of plain folk, and one of the central conflicts in the novel is the clash between the community's townspeople and its farmers. The conflict is very much embodied in Will Alexander, the High Sheriff, who struggles morally with his profession. Will does not flaunt his badge in pride. In fact, his title is more a burden than a sign of macho power. When he became a lawman, he moved from the family's tobacco farm in the Jocassee Valley into the town of Seneca. He thereby made the significant shift from farmer to thinker, estranging himself not only from his father and brother, but also from part of himself. Will does not harbor any sentimental memories of the hard farming life; in fact his

recollection paints a bleak picture of the farmer: "To farm a man did have to act like a mule—keep his eyes and thoughts on the ground straight in front of him. If he didn't he couldn't keep coming out to his fields day after day …. Don't pretend you miss such a life as this," Will tells himself (15). Yet he still does not feel at home in the town where he lives. Looking at the sky to check the weather, he feels ashamed that he does not need to worry about that. He gets a "certain paycheck come rain or drought" (10).

When he realizes that he is "little more than a stranger" to his father, and that the family farm will "one day vanish completely as a dream," Will Alexander makes a moral decision: He will serve out his term as High Sheriff and then go back to farm on his family's land: "I'd farm this land until Carolina Power ran us all out and drowned these fields and creeks and the river itself. However long that was, it would give me some time to be a son and a brother again, maybe even learn how to be an uncle (40). Will's wife Janice does not share her husband's longing for the country. The different class backgrounds of the two have created conflicts that have led to a stranded marriage. Janice flinches when Will uses "hillbilly talk" (7), and she still plays "the role of the wealthy doctor's daughter" (41). She too has fallen prey to class-prejudices and has been called "Mrs. White Gloves" by a town councilman who jokes that she is probably "home teaching the sheriff the proper way to unfold a napkin" (41). Will is very much aware that his decision to move back to the farm will mean a divorce since his wife will not move down the social ladder. But to Will, and in Ron Rash's fiction in general, place and family mean more than prestigious titles, including that of doctor's daughter. Like Bobby Blanchard of *Father and Son*, Will Alexander is another Sheriff-hero who embodies all the traditional masculine traits of the "good old boy."

Where *Father and Son* featured a redneck villain, *One Foot in Eden* is not structured on binary oppositions to the extent that Brown's novel is. As discussed in the previous chapter, Billy Holcombe may be claimed as the villain, because he committed the murder Sheriff Alexander is

trying to solve, but he is rarely depicted as a villain. Will sees him as an opponent, for sure, but

Billy does not possess the meanness that in Reed's terminology is inherent in the redneck villain.

Quite the opposite. In many ways, Billy is depicted as a "good old boy," a hard-working farmer

whose relationship with his horse Sam echoes that of the Western hero: "I'd been with Sam

longer than I'd been with Amy. Even after me and her got married I spent more waking hours in

the springs and summers with him than I had her …. I believed he'd had a reckoning of what I was

saying …. That reckoning was me and him working together hard as we could to make a living

from this scratch-ankle mountain land…" (138). Billy's relationship with Sam echoes a long

tradition in the Western of comparing women to horses and ultimately valuing horses higher. This

discussion stretches out over a century of Westerns, from Gray's *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1913),

Howard Hughes' *The Outlaw* (1943) to L'Amour's *Hondo* (1953) and even Walter Hill's recent TV-

Western *Broken Trail* (2006). In that sense Billy's relationship with his horse Sam can be seen as a

continuation of the Western tradition's male flight from female authority which often turns into

this particular relationship between man and horse. But the description of him also shows us a

certain kind of honest, hard-working man who would not ordinarily kill another person.

Through several narrators we come to understand Billy's motives for killing Holland

Winchester, and it becomes clear that he acts very much out of tradition and honor. Just as his

profession as farmer links him to the land, so his actions link him to a long southern tradition.

When Holland slept with Billy's wife, he challenged Billy's manhood and thereby set in motion an

age-old plot, the outcome of which even Holland acknowledges. When Billy faces him with a

shotgun, Holland grabs the barrel: "'Here,' he said, pushing the barrel against his chest. 'I'd have

killed a man who done to me what I done to you.'" When Billy's hands shake, Holland steadies the

barrel against his chest and challenges Billy: "'Settle it one way or another, Holcombe… because

this here is the only way to keep me from claiming what's mine'" (126). To understand the

background of this behavior, we can again turn to Bertram Wyatt-Brown's examination of honor and violence in the Old South.

In the antebellum South, Wyatt-Brown explains, the ritual of the duel was "a means to demonstrate status and manliness." He continues that almost all duels arose "because one antagonist cast doubt on the manliness and bearing of the other, usually through the recitation of ritual words—liar, poltroon, coward. The stigma had to be dealt with or the labels would haunt the bearer forever." While most southerners were opposed to the ritual of the duel, it was often excused on account of male honor. Wyatt-Brown gives a striking example of this paradox, in a quote from Sergeant S. Prentiss of Mississippi who declared: "'I am no advocate of duelling, and always shall from principle avoid such a thing… but when a man is placed in a situation where if he does not fight, life will be rendered valueless to him, both in his eyes and those of the community,' then the only option was to fight" (147, 155, 145). So even though Billy has grave doubts about his abilities as a killer, especially when compared to a war veteran like Holland (124-25), he still follows through and pulls the trigger because of the ingrained notion of honor. This does not justify it, of course, and both Billy and Amy struggle with the consequences of the killing for the remainder of the novel. In this way, and as we will see Offutt do in *The Good Brother*, Rash suggests that rather than a comforting history, tradition can be a domineering and suffocating force.

By way of introduction, I have sketched out some of the characteristics of the plain folk in Brown and Rash's novels, I now wish to take a closer look at Offutt's and Gay's novels and discuss their depiction of plain folk and the relationship to the Western.

Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother*

The Good Brother is the only of the novels I examine that is placed partly outside the South. Where

the other novels take place solely in the South, two-thirds of Offutt's novel is set in Montana. But

since the first third of the novel takes place in Kentucky, I feel it is justifiable to include it as an

example of a southern novel set in the South that displays obvious influences from the Western. As

in all of Offutt's fiction, *The Good Brother* depicts the lives of "plain folk," first in a small Appalachian

community in Kentucky and later in a small Montana community. The first hundred pages introduce

us to the small hill community of Blizzard where Virgil Caudill, the protagonist, lives. Virgil's brother

Boyd has been killed, and the entire community, including the sheriff, expects Boyd to avenge the

murder. So we are obviously placed in a well-known southern dilemma right from the start. The rigid

code of southern honor that haunted Bayard Sartoris in Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* as well as Billy

Holcombe in Rash's *One Foot in Eden*, is apparently alive and well in areas of contemporary

Kentucky. Yet despite his obvious southern roots, Virgil Caudill also embodies masculine traits

characteristic of the Western hero. The way he attempts to blend into the West after his escape to

Montana makes an interesting study of the performance of masculinity, especially when compared

with the militia-leader Frank, who takes Virgil under his wings in Montana.

In his review of the novel, David Breeden called the character of Virgil Caudill "a frighteningly

accurate portrait of the American Everyman."[163] The "American Everyman" is obviously what Reed

termed "plain folk." And Virgil's status as "plain" is made obvious early in the novel. He has dropped

out of the community college in Rocksalt, and he now works on the college's maintenance crew as a

garbage man. To begin with he "had spent two years taking courses while working part-time at

maintenance, but hadn't fit in with the students. An hour after sitting in a classroom, he'd be on his

knees in the front of the same building, painting the curb yellow" (28). Virgil's decision to drop out of

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[163] David Breeden, *San Antonio Express-News*, front matter of *The Good Brother*, paperback edition, 1998.

college is bound up with a distinct Appalachian notion of class, which the students are only too aware of: "The majority of students came from the surrounding counties and tried to conceal their hill-bred traits, a doomed enterprise since everyone recognized not only the habits but the attempts to hide them. Virgil's presence was a reminder of what they wanted to leave behind" (28). By dropping out, Virgil is submitting to the expectations projected onto him and people of his class, the so-called hill people. It is one of the examples of him being "weak," especially when compared to his dead brother.

However, as a way of hiding his acquiescence, Virgil creates a logic that justifies his decision to "quit school and stay in garbage:" "What Virgil enjoyed was that no trash man could pretend he was more than he was. Education was like a posthole digger, a good tool, very expensive, but worthless unless you needed postholes dug" (28). By distancing himself from institutional education, Virgil draws on the powerful myth of the working-class man as the only "real man," someone who cherishes the freedom and vigor of physical labor as opposed to the fenced-in world of academia. This means that even though the job as garbage man is a step down in status in the eyes of the community as well as at the bottom of the maintenance workers' hierarchy, which places "electricians at the top, followed by carpenters, painters, landscapers, and garbagemen" (23-24), Virgil can feel comfortable in this distinctly male sphere. As described in Chapter 3, together with his work buddies Virgil finds a certain sense of comfort and, more importantly, dignity through a performance of male hegemony based mostly on bragging, cursing, and verbal affronts against their jobs and superiors. In line with this tradition, the workers' superior is simply described as "the Big Boss," someone who reminds Virgil of "a kid trying to hide a cigarette." Again, it is Taylor who is most blunt: when the Big Boss leaves after rebuking the crew, Taylor spits and calls him a "short little fucker" who "can go to hell. I never met a boss I liked" (33).

In this environment Virgil emerges as someone superior to the trite and perpetual animosity between worker and superior. He does not join this banter because he considers himself above it. "He had always worked," we are told, "beginning in grade school when he raked leaves for quarters from his mother. Later he had dug ditches, shoveled manure, and repaired fence. He enjoyed the exhaustion that followed labor, the strain in his limbs, the satisfaction of seeing the result of his work." Most importantly, Virgil values a job that is "necessary," whether it is moving garbage or, as in Montana, hauling supplies to firefighters. And both jobs offer "a measure of autonomy." Working on the firecrew in Montana, Virgil feels "grateful for the patterns of work—rising early, performing a task, being an equal among men who worked. He appreciated the clear hierarchy of command and duty, the shared sense of responsibility. His presence was needed" (265, 268). This sense of drawing existential meaning from hard labor is also connected to a certain sense of masculinity. As the last quote shows, Virgil clearly mirrors the archetypal Artisan-Hero who, as mentioned above, is characterized by his "autonomy, his sense of integrity in manual labor, his calling." Just like the Artisan-Hero, Virgil is unafraid of hard work and sees himself as belonging to a "shirtless democracy" of equals (Kimmel, *Manhood* 16, 29). Virgil believes that what a man learns through physical labor are traits he can take with him through life, unlike the narrow results from college. When his mother calls him "an educated hillbilly …. The best of two worlds," Virgil's response is "maybe the worst" (117). He is both embarrassed of being a hillbilly, but also of having committed hubris in the sense of betraying his humble background by attempting to take a college degree.

In his memoir *No Heroes*, Offutt explains that "[d]oing well is a betrayal of mountain culture." He elaborates on the rigid code of his small hill community: "According to hill culture, you were a sinner or an outlaw, a nice girl or a slut, lived with your folks or got married, worked at maintenance or went to college …. That I was simultaneously engaged in both attending college and working at maintenance astonished my coworkers and faculty alike." The tendency of the

working class to look down upon those with an education is summed up by Offutt: "B.A. stood for 'Big Assholes,' B.S. stood for 'Bull Shit,' and Ph.D. stood for 'Piled High and Deep.' At MSU the wisest people worked for maintenance and the stupidest had the most letters after their name."[164] This suspicion of educated people plays into a long American tradition, which is based in certain assumptions of gender. It is obviously connected with the male distrust of language that is particularly obvious in the Western. Here the dichotomy between the strong and silent hero and the intellectual and effeminate banker, salesman, or lawyer has become stock elements in most narratives.

The distrust is not exclusive to the Western. Bertram Wyatt-Brown notes the paradox of the strong anti-intellectual streak that permeated antebellum southern society. Southern ideals of education, Wyatt-Brown points out, placed the study of classical literature as sufficient learning when it came to books. However, "learning itself was not greeted with… enthusiasm. Easy reference to Homer, Plato, Horace, and Livy assured Southern gentlemen of one another's trustworthiness, but only so long as the quotations and allusions were familiar." In other words, a gentleman's knowledge of the classics should only be used as catchwords to be included in everyday conversation, "along with familiar lines from Shakespeare and Scott's *Lay of the Last Mistrel*." To show to what extent knowledge of the classics saturated southern culture, Wyatt-Brown humorously notes how even gamblers and hunters drew on the "education" by naming their horses Bucephelas and their dogs Scipio. So a southern gentleman had to know his classics, but he could not use it for actual intellectual purposes. Too much learning, Wyatt-Brown states, "spoiled the result." The strong anti-intellectual streak was perpetuated by generations of college-students to assure that "sociability—and reputation for manliness—would have no rival (44-46). So the tradition of considering masculinity as something practical and physical and

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[164] Chris Offutt, *No Heroes: A Memoir of Coming Home* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), pp. 43, 20, 25.

opposing it with intellectualism, which is coded as feminine, is not exclusive to the Western; it has deep roots in southern culture as well.

Thus, when Virgil refers to the term "educated hillbilly," he recognizes the feminization of both words. Just as educated people have been feminized, so the term hillbilly carries certain emasculating traits. John Shelton Reed explains how hillbillies are "the last acceptable ethnic fools," who for centuries have served as amusement for non-southerners and upper-class southerners. The hillbilly, then, is a distinct other, considered both comic and contemptible by his or her "moral peers." The hillbilly's principal characteristic, Reed asserts, is laziness (43, 42). And laziness is perhaps the main reason for the emasculating force of the term hillbilly. To be lazy is to go against one of the prime characteristics of what many consider essential masculinity. Freud equated masculinity with activity and opposed it to feminine passivity. From an essentialist point of view, "real men" are supposed to be intelligent, aggressive, risk-takers, focused, loyal, vocally reserved, etc. Almost all these qualities smack of action, which is the one trait the laziness of the hillbilly does not connote. (Connell, *Masculinities* 68). No wonder, then, that Virgil does not feel comfortable being called an educated hillbilly. It cuts too close to the bone, especially considering that Virgil has always been the "good brother" when opposed to Boyd: "Boyd was the restless one, the wild brother, the one who'd leave one day. Virgil had grown up letting Boyd do the talking and later the running around acting crazy. He drove fast, drank hard, played cards, and chased women. Finally, Boyd had done the dying" (19). While Virgil does not wish to follow in Boyd's footsteps completely, there is definitely a hint of envy at the pure macho bravado that Boyd embodied.

It does not help that Virgil feels trapped in the community he lives in. He has never crossed the county line, and the town he has lived in all his life is depicted in terms that spell out stasis: "… the town was gone, along with its barbershop, saloon, train station, and doctor. Most of the

families were gone, too" (18). What's more, the strong southern traditions that engulf Virgil are described as suffocating: The entire community expects him to avenge Boyd's murder. As Taylor, one of his colleagues tauntingly states, "Only one thing to think of a man lets his own brother rot without doing nothing. He's chicken …. Cluck… Cluckety-cluck" (54). His family is not as forward, but "Virgil saw in their eyes what they wanted him to do." Sara, his sister, considers it "natural" that he kills Rodale (38, 43). Even his girlfriend Abigail has made it clear that she will support him if he chooses to avenge the murder. To add to the pressure, she has also begun to talk about children. Virgil considers her wishes a threat to his individuality, and figures that "she was trying to snare him when he was preoccupied with other matters—murder or marry, like a judge who tells a drunk to do the time or take the cure" (45). The expectations of parenthood also come from Virgil's mother who expects him to make her a grandmother: "There would be no pictures of Virgil [on her wall] until he produced kids or died" (37).

Despite his moral objections to avenging his brother's murder, Virgil goes ahead and kills Billy Rodale and then escapes to Montana, where he assumes a new identity. I wish to suggest that his reason for killing Rodale is not merely acquiescence, but rather an example of a male escape from female authority. Killing Rodale becomes a means to an end for Virgil, but also a way of fooling himself about what he is doing. Virgil tells himself that he is merely doing what everyone expects him to, but rather than avenging Boyd, he is creating a situation that allows him to escape the confines of the domineering women around him. His motivation becomes clear in a conversation (which Virgil considers a confrontation) between him and Abigail, where she announces that she has received a promotion and a raise, which she wants to use to buy a house with extra bedrooms. Instantly, Virgil feels his male honor under attack: He "didn't know what to say. She already drew a bigger paycheck that he did." And at the indirect mention of children, "Virgil wondered what the cutoff age was to join the army" (44).

So the reasons for Virgil's transformations are complex, but they all boil down to his view of himself as a man and his yearning to change. Unlike the lazy hillbilly, Virgil undergoes a transformation that not only demonstrates action but is also a very distinct performance of masculinity. The type of masculinity that Virgil strives to construct echoes that of the typical Western hero. By heading west to escape his past and to start over, Virgil follows a long tradition in American history where men such as Davy Crockett headed West to escape personal humiliation. The idea of the West as a cultural safety valve was inherent already in Horace Greely's now famous advice from 1865 "Go West, young man, and grow up with the country," but it was formulated directly in 1892 by the writer Hamlin Garland, who wrote that for "more than a half century, the outlet toward the free lands of the West has been the escape valve of social discontent …. Whenever the conditions of his native place pressed too hard on him, the artisan or the farmer has turned his face towards the prairies and forests of the West."[165] Out West men could reinvent themselves and, like Davy Crockett, end up as part of the powerful Western myth. As Michael Kimmel explains, this dream of freedom is in part based on "the repudiation of the feminine, a resistance to mothers' and wives' efforts to civilize men." Kimmel calls this resistance to feminization "masculinism," which he describes as involving "an effort to restore manly vigor and revirilize American men by promoting separate homosocial preserves where men can be men without female interference" (*Manhood* 60, 384). There is clearly a strain of this ideology behind Virgil's decision to escape West. And the idea of the West as a place that promises a new start and the opportunity for redemption and rebirth is still alive today, as Virgil's decision shows.

On his way west he feels the mythic sense of freedom ahead of him: "The debt was now discharged. He was free …. He no longer had a future or a past. There was only the inescapable now." Crossing the Mississippi River becomes a symbolic act in which he steps out in the water

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[165] Hamlin Garland, *Jason Edwards, an Average Man* (Boston: Arena Publishing, 1892), p. v. Qtd. in Kimmel, *Manhood*, p. 88.

and drinks from the river. However, already here we find signs that the mythic West might not be as promising after all: along the bank of the river he passes "beer cans and condoms lying in the weeds" (122, 123). But Virgil remains optimistic and a few days after leaving Kentucky, he arrives in Montana, where his new life as Joe Tiller can begin. At this point, Offutt only refers to Virgil as Joe Tiller, but for clarity's sake, I will continue using the name Virgil.

The opening of chapter 12 begins: "On the third day Joe Tiller rose early and walked the wide streets of Missoula, his breath visible in the cold air" (126). The obvious reference to Christ's resurrection[166] suggests that Virgil will come to serve as a savior. This is a common theme in Westerns, perhaps most blatantly expressed in *Riders of the Purple Sage* and *Shane*, both of which mix Biblical imagery with a rugged pioneer masculinity. Most often, it is a woman who is to be saved, and this is apparently also the case in *The Good Brother*. But just like the Mississippi River turned out to be more grittily realistic than mythic, so the West of Montana turns out to be far from the mythic space promised by centuries of stories and celluloid dreams.

At first, though, Virgil does what he can to live up to the mythic ideals of Western masculinity. He begins by renting a log cabin. Earlier we have learned that Virgil's father "had grown up in an ancient log cabin that was still standing two counties over …. Virgil had long wanted to buy the cabin …. [He] had been saving money for five years. He had never told anyone his plans" (53). But like most of his plans back in Kentucky, his log cabin dream came to nothing, bogged down by the idleness that seemed to be Virgil's fate; an idleness that was a direct result of living in the shadow of his brother's dynamic persona. But set free from that burden, Virgil marks his arrival in the West with the renting of a log cabin. The log cabin holds a special place in American mythology, as Richard White sums up: "Through the log cabin, [Frederick Jackson] Turner linked pioneers with Indians and wilderness. By the 1890s the log cabin had been the chief

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[166] Matthew 28:5-10; Mark 16:9; Luke 24:12–16; John 20:10–17; Acts 2:24; 1 Cor 6:14.

icon of the nineteenth-century frontier, if not American culture itself. It marked both regression,

as the wilderness mastered the settler, and the beginning of the recapitulation of civilized

progress."[167] In *The Good Brother*, the regression that White mentions is taken as a badge of

honor. The novel seethes with an only slightly repressed anti-industrialism that would make the

Agrarians proud: Virgil's impressions of cities are clearly acerbic: "Automobile exhaust mixed with

the heat and the general smell of a city—many humans compressed into small space. There were

no trees on the street …. Finding his car took half an hour. In the woods he could locate a tree

he'd touched years ago, but in Lexington he was immediately lost." As for the city mall, "Virgil

couldn't imagine a worse place to spend time." He sees Lexington as "a field of cement, patched

with sections of grass, bordered by the buildings where people lived and worked. He could almost

imagine living there if no one was around" (84, 86, 90, 93). Once settled in the cabin with a box of

used books, Virgil acts out his anti-progress beliefs by using the "books on computers and

economics… for kindling, a page at a time" (148).

Ty Skinner, the man who rents out the cabin, clearly shares Virgil's disgust with cities and

progress. He is depicted as an authentic natural man, a contemporary Leatherstocking, who is as

much—in this case more—at home in the wilderness: "A man stepped from the woods, wearing a

flannel shirt with sleeves ripped away at each elbow. He carried an ax in a casual manner. Joe was

chilly in his jacket, but the man seemed impervious to weather." When the men have finished

their business, Ty "walked into the woods. The tall pines took him swift as sudden dusk" (128,

130). Ty Skinner obviously embodies myths ranging from Leatherstocking to Paul Bunyan, the

common denominator being self-reliance in the wilderness. As such he becomes an instant role

model to Virgil, and to Offutt as well, it seems. As Richard White points out, a "cabin, built with

simple tools from local materials, proclaimed self-reliance and a connection with place. Usually

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[167] Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill," *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994), pp. 20-21.

isolated, it stressed the courage of the builder and the challenge that the surrounding wilderness represented" (21). After renting the cabin, and thereby taking the first step in his recreation, Virgil continues his transformation into frontier man. He buys "a snakeskin belt and a leather buckle imprinted with a royal flush in diamonds," and declares, "I'll be back for a pistol" (130). However, it does not take long before Virgil's dreams of Western freedom are checked by the harsh realities of the contemporary West. He is told that to purchase a pistol, he needs a Montana driver's license and that there is a five-day wait. Then, at the local bar, he sees firsthand the current state of cowboys and Indians: "An Indian woman slept at the bar, wearing a faded jacket bearing the name of a tavern. Beside her slumped a skinny cowboy with a dog at his feet. The back of the cowboy's neck was scarred. His huge ears had several holes in them, and [Virgil] realized they'd been hit with a load of small buckshot" (139). Adding to the de-mythification of the West, Virgil's rented cabin does not provide the sense of personal freedom he had dreamed of. Instead he feels caged in, trapped in a cabin not his own, and alienated by a landscape unknown to him: "There were hills and trees and a creek, but none of it was his. He thought of his father's log cabin and he knew he'd never live in it. It was the only thing he'd ever truly wanted. He wanted to cry…" (143). Realizing that his cabin is but a pipe dream, his only comfort left is to stay in motion: "Driving offered comfort, the motion itself was a form of solace, and when he reached his cabin, he didn't want to go in. It was a pathetic-looking little shack, cold and dark…" (150). Thus alienated from his new home, Virgil is all the more desperate for some kind of belonging. He seeks out a strip bar where he feels "the first desire in months." But when he attempts to talk to one of the strippers, he ends up "feeling as rejected and ignored as he had in high school" (159). The next day at the deserted local tavern, Virgil flirts with the female bartender, but when she begins to take charge of the situation and pushes herself against him, the female embrace becomes too smothering for

Virgil, and he abruptly flees, "hearing her laugh as he went out the door" (166). Clearly, Virgil is still struggling with his fear of domineering women.

After spending the months of winter in his cabin with Ty Skinner his only occasional company, Virgil meets the coming of March with a decision to part with his old self symbolically by burying the stuffed possum he brought with him from home. He takes to the woods where he is confronted with another unpleasant aspect of the modern American West. Virgil has already come upon various pamphlets promoting the right to bear arms mixed with images of white supremacy. But in the woods he comes face to face with the violent reality behind the ideas. He is shot in the leg by a member of a militia. After some initial confusion, the men decide to keep Virgil under watch. When they carry him to their car, Virgil feels "oddly close to them" (183). This is ironic, of course, but given Virgil's fear of emotion, which he considers feminine, there is a twisted logic in his embracing the people who shot him. It is yet another example of male affection through violence, a tendency that saturates the Western—think of the apocalyptic fight in *Shane* between Shane and his good friend Joe Starrett—perhaps most explicitly in the climax of Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948). Here John Wayne's manic and tyrannical patriarch ends up in a grandiose fistfight with Matt, his sensitive son. The fight is broken up by Matt's girlfriend, who insists that the two men love each other. It is symptomatic that it is a woman who speaks the word "love." Clearly the men cannot utter the word. Instead they have shown their affection physically by beating each other up; a striking example of a stubborn masculine "tough love." Dunson can finally acknowledge his son. Ironically, it is because of Matt's defiance that Dunson acknowledges him as a man. It takes courage to go up against a giant like Dunson, and Matt's initiation from boy to man is not complete before he has been accepted by his father. Matt has changed from a soft and sensitive boy to a tough man of action. In this way it is possible for the

film to condemn Dunson's tyrannical macho manners while simultaneously presenting that sort of masculinity as fundamental.

The Good Brother does not offer the same kind of oedipal themes as *Red River*, but the tendency for men to express their emotions through violence continues. It is not only Virgil who acts this way. The militia group does not accept him until Virgil has displayed a both dangerous and foolish example of machismo. Because the bullet is right against the bone, it can only be removed at a hospital. But neither Virgil nor the militia are interested in that, so Virgil takes a pistol, presses the barrel into his wound and pulls the trigger. When he wakes up with a busted knee, he has been taken in by the militia. He is nursed by Botree, the sister of the man who shot Virgil. From here on Virgil's life is torn in opposite directions. He begins to feel attracted to Botree, but at the same time he becomes more and more involved with the militia, which he dislikes.

His relationship with Botree also serves to debunk Virgil's belief in the myth of the West. When he makes a comment to her about Montana still being the Wild West, she recognizes that some of the young people believe in "that Code of the West stuff," but asserts that "it's a big crock." As she explains, "All those guys were from the East—Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill Hickok, Doc Holliday, Wyatt Earp …. Families from the East sent their crazy sons out here. That lawless time only lasted about twenty years" (227). But to the dedicated members of the militia, Montana is obviously still the Wild West.

The militia is an example of what happens when the sacred American individualism goes one step further and becomes totalitarianism. The militia that takes Virgil in are eagerly awaiting the next great war against the government. Frank, the leader of the militia, is a frightening example of the white Western hero as a worst case scenario. Frank is not the typical villain. He is endowed with amiable traits, and at no point does he threaten to harm the protagonist. He is kind to those around him, but nevertheless we learn that not all is right. "Frank is a frigging

lunatic," Ty Skinner warns Joe, "a genuine psychopath. Frank is special, like Custer. He can't wait

to die in a blaze of glory. So watch your ass around him" (277). Before this warning, Frank has

explained his version of democracy and individualism to Joe: "We don't recognize the authority of

the federal government over private citizens …. We aren't afraid to defend our freedom …. And

now our freedom is up for sale …. I believe in democracy and freedom. But I don't trust the

government and I'm afraid of the police." Frank intrinsically connects the idea of freedom to the

West: "People know what's happening here. They've always come west for freedom, same as

you, Joe. To start again. To be free." When he stops talking, Joe feels "entranced by the man's

charisma, which surpassed that of the best preachers he had heard at home" (214-15). This is not

the only time Frank is compared to a preacher. At a Fourth of July picnic, when talking to Joe,

Frank "focused his entire being on Joe, prepared to smile or become serious. Joe had seen a

preacher act the same way toward a man whose soul he was bent on saving" (245). And later at

the picnic, Frank leads the crowd in a prayer that makes Joe feel "as he had when attending

church at home—glad to be part of the group, though possessing less faith than most" (247).

This lack of "faith" is ultimately Joe's strength. He is less capable of being won over by

rhetoric. And when it dawns on him that Frank is distributing racist pamphlets, he confronts him,

which causes Frank to show his real face: "I shed blood for this country and look what it's

become—a multicultural welfare state run by FEMA and the UN. We have to stick together ….

white men got to protect their own because the government's busy protecting the mud people."

Frank then calls Joe "a good soldier" and urges him to read the racist pamphlets in order to

educate himself. When Joe refuses because "those things are evil," Frank's reply discloses the

lunatic strain that Joe had been warned about: "What do you know of evil? The Four Horsemen

are riding black helicopters over Skalkaho Pass." (289, 290, 291). When Joe goes against Frank and

his ideology, he unwittingly resists one of the corner stones of the Western myth: white male superiority.

At the same time Virgil's relationship with Botree has become serious, and perhaps because she has not demanded anything of him, Virgil has overcome the fear of female dominance that previously crippled him. Rather than fleeing once again, he takes on the role as the family protector, and his resoluteness is depicted in a lush scene of epic proportions, worthy of a Western hero: He "decided to stay. He'd already left a place once. Now he had people to stay for …. Behind him the sun was fading in the west, striping the horizon with bands of scarlet ash" (282). However, this idyllic fantasy of masculine self-reliance is soon undercut, thereby creating an ironic comment on the idea of the determined hero while simultaneously sustaining the very idea of the patriarchal hero. When the militia gets ready for the big battle with government agents—"The time has come," Frank announces, "The forces of evil are upon us" (287)—Virgil feels "trapped in another battle that wasn't his" (310) and decides to get out and take Botree and her sons with him. Since home "had ceased to exist except in his mind," Virgil decides on Alaska: "He would convince Botree to sell her share of the ranch, and they could homestead with the kids" (312, 316). When the government agents move in on them and the firing begins, Virgil chooses to surrender rather than take up a fight that is not his.

The novel ends with Virgil opening the door and poking out a broom handle with a white dish towel on it, hoping "the men in the yard wouldn't shoot" (317). The ending is highly ambiguous and interesting in the way it both debunks and upholds the myth of the West. Obviously, Virgil goes against the ideology of violence by surrendering, but he does so only to be able to achieve a higher sense of freedom, one that can only be found in Alaska. Alaska's cultural status as the "last frontier" gives it tremendous symbolical weight. The fact that Ty Skinner has lived there for ten years makes it all the more appealing to Virgil. After hearing Ty talk about the

freedom he experienced there, Virgil often dreams of Alaska whose promise "struck him as a last resort, like poison that a terminal patient keeps handy" (262). This pathological metaphor speaks volumes about the self-conceit behind Virgil's dreams of Alaska, something Brinkmeyer also points out: "Heading west, [Virgil] knows now, offers not new beginnings but merely fanciful illusions…" (*Remapping* 79). That Virgil finally decides to go there is an obvious indication of the continuing power of the Western myth in the American consciousness. Even after discovering that the American West is nothing like its myth, Virgil still refuses to give up his belief in that myth. His wish to homestead shows the extent of his obsession with the myth of personal freedom.

So ultimately *The Good Brother* ends with a foot in each camp. In many ways, Offutt turns the structure and ideology of Wister's *The Virginian* upside down. Wister portrayed a naïve Eastern tenderfoot who went west and was captivated by the rugged Virginian cowboy, who symbolized white supremacy, and all along Wister placed the Virginian on a pedestal for the reader to admire and learn from. In *The Good Brother*, Offutt gives us a southern hillbilly who escapes west and is initially captivated by a group of people, who, as it turns out, are the results of the kind of fundamental ideology inherent in the Western, an ideology that has been allowed to evolve unchecked in the isolated areas of Montana. Unlike Wister, what Offutt eventually emphasizes, even though he shows empathy, is the futility of that ideology. In that sense, his "Western novel" takes on the characteristics of an anti-Western. But as is often the case with anti-Westerns, the role of the hero is not fully debunked. In Offutt's case, Virgil is depicted with a foot in both camps; he is both the tough, stoic cowboy who flees west to escape the strains of female authority, and he is the confused and homesick tenderfoot who falls in love with a strong Montana woman. This depiction mirrors Virgil's attitude towards language, as discussed in Chapter 3. He is obviously carrying a lot of repressed emotion, both in terms of repressed language, and in Montana, in terms of longing for his family in Kentucky.

William Gay's *The Long Home*

Like Chris Offutt and Larry Brown, William Gay populates his fiction mainly with poor whites who live in the rural backwaters of Tennessee. The characters of Gay's *The Long Home* are, with few exceptions, all plain folk, and several of them are imbued with the heroic traits also found in the Western hero. Sheriff Bellwether, one of the minor characters of the novel, is a genuine hero, who was wounded at Pearl Harbor and received a "Purple Heart and a Distinguished Service Cross." Bellwether's body is proof of his physical heroism: "He had a series of scars climbing the length of his right leg and a starshaped explosion of scartissue on his back where shrapnel had struck him. He was a local boy. The best thing you could say about him," we are told, "was that he was honest, the worst that he was a sorry politician" (48-49). Yet since honesty is one of the most revered traits, and since the word politician smacks of both intellectualism and power-abuse, being a sorry politician becomes a badge of honor for Bellwether. In a county where most politicians are corrupt and owned by the villain Hardin, Bellwether mirrors the countless tiresome individualist Western heroes who dare to stand up against oppression. Bellwether "washed his hands all by himself. He did not work well with the local judges, both of whom Hardin carried folded like banknotes in his pocket. He had been born poor and doubtless would so remain" (49). In other words, besides being a hero in the spirit of Western cowboys, Bellwether is also a "good ole boy," which is just as important.

Nathan Winer, the young protagonist, is son of a carpenter and in line with the above-mentioned tendency to praise working-class skills, he is not afraid of hard labor. "You go at every job as if it were the last one and you're trying to finish up," his boss commends him. In fact, Nathan is depicted as exceptional because he is not lazy as the rest of the workers around him. "You must be a throwback or something. A mutant," his boss ponders (27). But not only is Nathan a hard worker; he enjoys the work and, more importantly, respects the tradition behind it.

Handling his tools, Nathans hands are "gentle and respectful" and he finds in the tool itself "awesome, almost occult, ageless, in this sheer condensation of knowledge" (116). When he starts working for Dallas Hardin, Nathan emerges as a natural carpenter, one who takes pride in his perfect work: He "discovered an affinity for planes and angles, for the simple rightness of things. His corners formed perfect squares and they stood plumb as a level could plumb them" (129-30). This sums up Nathan's attitude towards the world; the same attitude reflected in his use of language, as discussed in chapter 3. Nathan's world is one of clear angles and straight talk. There are no hidden agendas and what you see is what you get. In that sense, his ideology is reminiscent of the Western hero's, as Tompkins sums it up: "hard work is transformed… from the necessity one wants to escape into the most desirable of human endeavors: action that totally saturates the present moment, totally absorbs the body and mind, and directs one's life to the service of an unquestioned goal" (12).

The pride in physical labor also points to part of the Agrarian tradition. In the Introduction to *I'll Take My Stand*, the southern Agrarians claim that the "first principle of a good labor is that is must be enjoyed …. The act of labor as one of the happy functions of human life has been in effect abandoned," they lament, "and is practiced solely for its rewards."[168] Nathan Winer is, it seems, the last of a dying breed. Soon, Nathan's sense of self-consciousness merges with his work: "I am a carpenter, he thought. He was something, somebody, there was a name he could affix to himself. And there was a routine and order to these days that endeared them to him, they were long, slow days he would remember in times to come when order and symmetry were things more dreamt than experienced. I am paying my way, he thought, carrying my own weight…" (167-8). While Nathan certainly embodies an Agrarian trait, he is also an example of a self-made man, an artisan hero with roots in the mythic pioneer.

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[168] "Introduction: A Statement of Principles," *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1977), pp. xl-xli.

Opposed to the joyful labor performed by skilled hands, Gay also depicts—in line with the Agrarian view—the degrading aspects of industrial labor. One example is the scene where Nathan and Motormouth have been hired to catch chickens in order to empty the enormous chickenhouses: "Weary arms loaded with somnolent chickens upraised for the packer to take. Fourteen chickens to the crate, an inordinate amount of empty crates to be filled …. In the hot, fetid dark the air was full of down and small feathers drifting in the windless air and they stuck to the sweaty skin of the catchers and in their hair and eyelashes and in the white fluorescence the catchers took on a look curiously alien, like vaguely sinister folk lightly furred" (40). Here we have the ugly face of industrial labor which not only degrades people but robs them of their individualism. In this kind of assembly-line work, even an exceptional worker like Nathan is close to breaking: "Winer's arms grew weary. He was used to working and he knew to pace himself but even so six thousand chickens is a lot of chickens and the pace they had to keep was numbing" (40). But he stoically pulls through without losing face. The same cannot be said of Motormouth, Nathan's friend. Just like the use of language was used as a means of distinction between the manly Nathan and the effeminate Motormouth—see chapter 3—their different attitudes towards work serve to distinguish between man and fool. Compared to Nathan, Motormouth "fared far worse. He grew hot and sweaty, his face so infused with blood he looked flayed …. [H]is thin arms trembled spasmodically and he had a panicky look in his eyes as if he worked always a few degrees past the limits of his endurance" (40). While the description obviously serves to contrast Motormouth's lack of physical stamina to Nathan's masculine and stoic endurance—something I will return to in detail below—it is still a harsh criticism of an industrial society that values gain and profit over the well-being of the individual.

Gay's critique turns even harsher in the scene where Nathan and Motormouth seek employment. The two head to the town of Clifton and seek out the docks, where strong men load

railroad ties onto a barge on the river. Gay's description of the workplace paints a bleak and uninviting picture of men trapped in a dreary landscape who perform almost mechanically in a job that resembles assembly-line work:

> The barge rocked in the cold gray water, a wind… blew scraps of paper past them and aloft over the river like dirty stringless kites. Nameless birds foraged the choppy waters and beyond them the river's farther shore looked blurred and unreal and no less bleak and drear than this one …. Two men in the aft of the boat took the ties as they came off the chute and aligned them in stacks. The chutes seemed always to have a tie coming off, a tie sliding, another one being loaded on. An almost hypnotic ritual of economic motion. The workers were big men, heavily muscled, even in this cold wind off the river they worked in their shirtsleeves. (184-85)

This is a small-scale example of the evil industry of the cities that the Agrarians raged against. They complained that "under the industrial regime," the modern worker's "labor is hard, its tempo fierce, and his employment… insecure." In the industrial regime, they warn, "labor becomes mercenary and servile," and they regret the fact that "many forms of modern labor are accepted without resentment though they are evidently brutalizing" (*I'll Take My Stand*, xl-xli). The brutalizing aspect becomes clear when one of the workers tries to free a tie that has jammed the chute. Another tie slams into his hand and severs four of his fingers. Gay's depiction of this mangling is clearly an echo of the Agrarian mistrust in the industrial order. However, Gay's men are not mere slaves to the system. He imbues them with a dignity that further confirms his allegiance with the working class, the plain folk. After the worker has lost his fingers, his "eyes were closed and his face ashen and it wore an expression of stoic forbearance" (185). Here, Gay has created an archetypal masculine hero, one for others to admire and learn from. He serves as a critique of one hegemonic order ("the industrial regime," to use the Agrarian phrase) but at the same time he establishes a new form of hegemony; working-class masculinity.

In *Masculinities*, R. W. Connell echoes the critique of the industrial system, arguing that "industrial labour under the regime of profit uses up the workers' bodies, through fatigue, injury and mechanical wear and tear." Connell also points out the paradox that the manual worker's vulnerability "comes from the very situation that allows them to define masculinity through labour. Heavy manual work calls for strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity and toughness, and group solidarity. Emphasizing the masculinity of industrial labour," he adds, has served as a means of survival "in exploitative class relations" (55). William Gay's male characters, at least those we are meant to sympathize with, all embody these distinct working-class traits, and Nathan more so than the rest. After having witnessed the accident, Nathan and Motormouth turn the backs on the prospects of working at the docks. Since Nathan has already established himself as a natural when it comes to work, his rejection of the work at the docks is in itself a major condemnation of the industrial ideology behind it.

Before the accident, we have yet another situation where Nathan is depicted as exceptional, and again, Motormouth serves as the blank screen upon which Nathan displays his superiority. Watching the workers at the docks, Motormouth displays his ignorance by claiming, "Hell, they ain't nothin to it." But Nathan knows otherwise. His natural ability as a true worker allows him to take stock of the situation. And once again, he refuses to acknowledge Motormouth's jabber with words: "Winer didn't reply. He was studying the ties. They were nine-by-twelve green oak he judged to be ten or twelve feet long and they had a distinctly heavy look about them despite the deceptive ease with which they were slung onto the chutes" (184). Even from a distance, Nathan is able to decipher the inherent danger in the work that Motormouth considers easy money. And Nathan's intuition proves right moments later when the worker is mangled in the accident.

As discussed in the above sub-chapter on *The Good Brother*, anti-intellectualism is part of the working-class masculinity that many of the male protagonists embody. The anti-

intellectualism that surfaces in Offutt's novel also appears in *The Long Home*. Adding to Wyatt-

Brown's discussion of anti-intellectualism mentioned above, Marcel Arbeit explains that "in

Southern country and small town areas, 'intellectual' is a dirty word. It implies the formal

education that alienates the good country boy or girl from their roots and makes them feel

superior to their former peers."[169] The tendency is emphasized in the scene where Nathan clashes

with his mother's boyfriend Leo Huggins who is a salesman of "waterless cookware" (131). Leo is

not too impressed with Nathan's profession as a carpenter: "I reckon it's all right if you can make

any money at it," he tells Nathan. "I never could make a livin at public work. Had to do what I

could with my brains," to which Nathan thinks to himself: "And your mouth," once again coupling

intellect and verbal eloquence, both considered negative characteristics to Nathan. Leo is not

exactly an intellectual, but his distinction between brain work and body work does create a clear

dichotomy. Nathan is equally unimpressed with Leo's trade, which he considers feminine work:

"he caught himself staring at the big white hands that did not look as if they'd ever done an hour's

labor, the fingers soft and freckled as bleached sausages, the still upturned palms tender and

virginal as a baby's" (132). Clearly, Leo has made the mistake of attempting to rise above physical

labor to intellectual work.

What we are witnessing here is two opposing performances of masculinity by Leo and

Nathan. Leo constructs his masculinity around an idea of intellect and therefore considers men

who rely on their hands as inferior. Nathan, on the other hand, equals manual labor with true

masculinity, and by that definition any other type of work is believed to be un-masculine or

feminine. For the logic behind this performance, we can again go back to R. W. Connell's

explanation of how heavy manual work demands "strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity

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[169] Marcel Arbeit, "'Send the Bloody Intellectuals to Gym': Harry Crews's Educated Super(wo)men and Victims of Both Sexes," *The Many Souths: Class in Southern Culture*, ed. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag, 2003), p. 167.

and toughness, and group solidarity," and how this performance of working-class masculinity has been used as a means of survival (55). While both sides of the opposing notions of masculinity are presented to us, there is no doubt that Gay is on Nathan's side, since Leo comes off as a snobbish buffoon. It is the same dynamic we see at work in many Westerns, where, as Tompkins point out, "salesmen and politicians, people whose business is language" are treated with contempt (51) and often depicted as effeminate next to the hard-working cowboy who defines his masculinity through physical acts such as horse-riding and cattle-branding.

After having established Nathan as an exceptional working-class hero, in line with both the Western and southern traditions, Gay re-establishes his masculinity by placing him in a climactic position well-known to the Western hero: He is beaten up by the villain. This is quite a common occurrence in the Western, Mitchell points out. He notes an "almost obsessive recurrence of scenes of men being beaten—or knifed and whipped, propped up, knocked down, kicked in the side, punched in the face, or otherwise lacerated, clubbed, battered, and tortured into unconsciousness." The purpose of the violence done to the hero, he argues, ties in with the genre's celebration of the male physique. But why then, asks Mitchell, does violence so often destroy the male body? Basically, it is all about display. These "beating scenarios," repeated countless times in a century of Westerns, are of "central importance… in the Western's construction of masculinity," Mitchell argues. In that sense, Western heroes are beaten and knocked down, "simply so that they can recover in order to rise again… so that we can *see* men recover, regaining their strength and resources in the process of once again making themselves into men. The paradox," Mitchell points out, "lies in the fact that we watch them become what they already are, as we exult in the culturally encoded confirmation of a man again becoming a biological man." The traditional Western has tirelessly promoted an essentialist view of gender, a belief that gender is natural and unchanging. The irony is, of course, that the Western again and

again undermines that ideology through plots that demand the creation and re-creation of manhood. "That ongoing process," Mitchell points out, "draws into question the assumption everywhere else reinforced—that a 'man's man' always exists before the effect of cultural processes are seen" (169-75).

The two pages describing Nathan being beaten up by Jiminiz, Hardin's henchman, reads like a classic Western saloon brawl. After having been knocked down, he struggles on all fours and manages to get up again but only to be hit "full in the face" and "hit the floor limbernecked with his head slapping the hardwood flooring…" (210). Even though he has been beaten, Hardin recognizes Nathan's fighting spirit: "He'll get up …. He ain't got sense enough to lay down and quit." As predicted, Nathan refuses to give up and even threatens Hardin and Jiminiz: "You better make him kill me …. Because if I live you won't. You're a dead man." And then Nathan gets up, "blood welling in his mouth and his eyes had a slick, shiny look like glass." Jiminiz moves in on him again, "and the last thing [Nathan] saw was the dark bulk of Jiminiz coming on and Jiminiz hit him some more but he had stopped feeling it" (210-11).

Immediately after the beating, a scene follows where Nathan washes his wounds and studies "his cuts in the mirror," while Oliver watches. Nathan downplays his role as victim in the fight, claiming that he started it himself and saying, "I had some idea I was tougher than I turned out to be" (211). This again is part of a performance that, by understating his efforts, serves to enhance the image of Nathan as a man of resolve, someone who does not let others push him around and who is not afraid to bleed and hurt for what he believes in. Nathan may have been beaten and, as Oliver puts it, he "shore ain't goin to be much in the purty department for a good long while" (212), but his broken face is itself a mask in a performance of a resolute masculinity, one that Nathan plays out by various means throughout the novel.

A few other male characters besides Nathan Winer need to be mentioned. As I have already made clear above, Nathan's friend Motormouth is used to emphasize Nathan's superiority as a man. Motormouth's lack of "true" manly skills further enhances our image of Nathan as a "real man." This method, in part, grows out of the tradition of male bonding in American literature, which Leslie Fiedler pointed out in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Fiedler points to Rip Van Winkle and his flight from "the drab duties of home and town toward the good companions" as the vantage point of this tradition, and it is obvious how the Western has turned these specific traits into the genre's cornerstones: Ever since Rip, Fiedler asserts, "the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid 'civilization,' which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall to sex, marriage, and responsibility" (26). Fiedler focuses on the cross-racial aspect of the bond, from Melville's Ishmael and Queequeg, Cooper's Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, and Mark Twain's Huck Finn and Nigger Jim.

Continuing Fiedler's discussion, Michael Kimmel brings the list of cross-racial male couples into the twentieth century with examples like the Lone Ranger and Tonto, *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, and Lt. John Dunbar and Kicking Bird of *Dances with Wolves*. Kimmel argues that the cross-race male bond serves as a way "to present screens against which white manhood is projected, played out, and defined" (*Manhood* 66). Lee Clark Mitchell also discusses this structural device, focusing on the Western. He argues that the restraint that the Western hero embodies "sharply distinguishes him from other men—indeed, it requires the distinction of others whose lack of restraint provides a foil to the true man's achieved coherence," just as excessive violence by others is used to point out the hero's self-restraint. By listing numerous examples from Westerns such as *Destry Rides Again* (1939), *Stagecoach* (1939), *Red River* (1948) and *The Far Country* (1954) featuring marginalized men "defined by hypersensitivity, social affectations,

and verbal exorbitance," Mitchell points out the Western's traditional structure of posing

"inadequate men" against "the upright hero." What these inadequate men enact, he argues, is

"not so much the failed man… as an unworkable combination of masculinity and feminine excess"

(166). It is exactly this construction that is employed in *The Long Home*, and Motormouth is

depicted as embodying this "unworkable combination." And throughout the novel it is Nathan

and his performance of masculinity that gain from Motormouth's insufficiency. Motormouth is

the weak other against which Nathan's superior manhood is projected.

It is not that Motormouth does not wish to be seen as a man. In fact, as we learn early in

the novel, his idea of manhood is based on the iconic masculinity displayed by the Western hero.

Motormouth is desperate to get his hands on a certain pair of cowboy boots. Because, as Lee

Clark Mitchell observes, talking about the cowboy's elaborate costume, "clothing properly worn

conveys a personal, highly gendered meaning" (164). In Motormouth's case, he believes that once

he puts on those boots, he will simultaneously step into a certain type of tough masculinity, with

all the heroic and mythic masculine ideals the cowboy connotes: "They had cunning silverlooking

chains draped about the ankles that had a Mexican look and… he'd think of the musical clinkling

the chains would make as he strode into the poolroom" (41). Clearly Motormouth's image of

himself in the boots is based directly on the iconographic masculinity embodied by the traditional

movie Western hero. And inherent in Motormouth's fantasy of entering the poolroom is, of

course, his wish that the men and women in the poolroom will look at him. He dreams, in other

words, of being looked at, taken in, and taken for a real man. Continuing his examination of the

cowboy's costume, Mitchell argues that "one of the reasons the cowboy attracts so much notice

is precisely because of this sensitivity to the power of the gaze, of looking itself. He draws our

attention… by positioning himself as an object worth gazing upon." And this is where

Motormouth's cowboy boots fit in. For, as Mitchell points out, the cowboy's dress has become "a

kind of language, signaling in fiction the kind of moral, emotional being he is" (164-65). It is this "language" that Motormouth hopes to "speak" by obtaining the boots. Yet as expected, his dreams of achieving a state of "true" masculinity come to nothing, at least the way Gay presents him next to Nathan. The point Gay seems to make is that where Motormouth must seek artificial ways of obtaining a mask of manhood, Nathan simply *is* a man.

All of Motormouth's attributes are somehow feminized, be it his penchant for senseless talking, his lack of physical stamina (both mentioned above), in fact, his entire personality. Hardin sums up Motormouth's failure to act like a man, when he tells him, "You let people run over you. You don't stand up for yourself" (220). Again, Motormouth's behavior is exactly the opposite of Nathan's. He acts instead, for which Hardin respects him, despite their antagonism. Motormouth's failure to stand up for himself is emphasized when he chooses to escape to Chicago to stay clear of his ex-wife's new man who is looking to beat him up. That he chooses a big city like Chicago also speaks volumes. In both the Western as well as in much of southern literature, the big cities are places of corruption, greed, and, of also, paradoxically, female authority. Still it can be argued that it takes a certain amount of stamina to make it in Chicago, so it comes as no surprise when Motormouth returns to Tennessee some months later having suffered something close to a nervous breakdown. Whether in the city or rural area, Motormouth does simply not have what it takes, but at least his lacks have a purpose: they serve to point out Nathan's many natural strengths and thereby depict him as a unique exemplar of masculinity.

Another minor character, but one with a bigger role to play, is William Tell Oliver, the old solitary man at the margins of the story, who considers himself a father figure to Nathan. Oliver's role as father figure is played out throughout the novel and mirrors the father-son relationships in classic Westerns like *Shane*, *Hondo*, and, as Gay acknowledges, the relationship between Rio and Dad Longworth in Marlon Brando's *One Eyed Jacks* (Personal interview). In much the same way as

the Western heroes, Oliver passes on his knowledge to a boy he considers his son. Not only does

he initiate Nathan into the ways of nature by teaching him how to find ginseng in the woods, he

also passes on his ideological wisdom, which again mirrors the rugged individualism of the

traditional Western hero: "When you come right down to it, a man's always by hisself anyhow" he

tells Nathan. "When push comes to shove all you got's yourself" (87). It is exactly this ideology of

individualism that causes Nathan to want to kill Hardin. Also adding to the tension, of course, is

the particular southern burden of male honor, which has already been discussed in above

chapters.

While Nathan is the protagonist of the story, it is actually Oliver who turns out to be the

actual hero of the novel. After the prologue, *The Long Home* opens with the words "William Tell

Oliver came out of the woods…" and after he has acted and killed the villain, in the final pages of

the novel, Oliver concludes that "I never needed nobody anyway," instead relying on the various

phases of nature as his only company, since they "were the only things that lasted" (256, 257). In

many ways Oliver is reminiscent of a traditional Frontier hero, as described by Richard Slotkin,

who sums up the general pattern:

> The protagonist is usually represented as having marginal connections to the
> Metropolis and its culture. He is a poor and uneducated borderer or an orphan lacking
> the parental tie to anchor him to the Metropolis and is generally disinclined to learn
> from book culture when the great book of nature is free to read before him. His going
> to the wilderness breaks or attenuates the Metropolitan tie, but it gives him access to
> something far more important than anything the Metropolis contains—the wisdom,
> morality, power, and freedom of Nature, in its pure wild form. (*Fatal*, 374)

It is worth noting that not only Oliver, but Nathan as well fits into this pattern. Nathan's dead

father and indifferent mother practically make him an orphan who is taken under Oliver's wings.

In addition, the Frontier hero's disinclination to book learning is mirrored in the anti-

intellectualism discussed above. But it is Oliver who most obviously embodies the traits of the Frontier hero. In his marginal connection to the community and not least in his relationship with nature it certainly makes sense to see him as a Frontier hero, in other words, a Leatherstocking figure. His body is proof of his intimate relationship with nature: "skin so weathered and browned by the sun and aged by the ceaseless traffic of the years that it had taken on the texture of some material finally immutable to the changes of the weather… a kind of whang leather impervious to time or elements, corded, seamed, and scarred, pulled tight over the cheekbones and blade of nose that gave his face an Indian cast" (10). Apart from obviously echoing the language of Faulkner, this passage presents Oliver as a man who not only resembles an Indian, but whose knowledge of nature is literally inscribed on his body.

To add to his status as traditional hero, Oliver mirrors Cawelti's description of Cooper's Leatherstocking hero as a "marginal, lonely man of the wilderness who hates the restrictions of society and who fears, above all, the operations of a social authority that he does not understand or feel he needs" (*Adventure* 201). Oliver's voluntary status as recluse is based on his mistrust of society and not least the corruption he witnesses in the judicial system and among the local police. From his spot in the woods, Oliver looks down on Hardin's lot, and he has witnessed much of the crime and corruption that has taken place there: "Oliver was never surprised anymore and sometimes he thought he'd seen all there was to see…" (11). His mistrust of the system has grown into a state of indifference about society in general.

Furthermore, Oliver's shady past makes him an ideal Western hero, in the traditional sense. Cawelti describes the classical hero as "a man of the wilderness who comes out of the old 'lawless' way of life to which he is deeply attached…" (*Adventure* 193). We get several examples throughout the novel of Oliver's past, some from himself and others from various people whose idea of him is based on old rumors that have no doubt grown into tall-tales. Motormouth, always

the bearer of loose talk, tells Nathan a story of how in his youth Oliver caught his wife with another man named Ingram. "He may not now but he used to be rough," Motormouth says, "They took to scufflin… and he pulled a gun on Oliver. They was fightin over it and somehow Ingram got shot through the heart." When Oliver is out of jail on justifiable homicide, Ingram's brother attacks him with a pocketknife, and according to Motormouth, "Oliver jerked a axehandle out of a barrel and like to took his head off" (38-39). Stories like these are the stuff myths and legends are made of, and Oliver emerges as a figure whose violent past lends him an aura of myth.

Richard Slotkin elaborates on the pattern of the violent Frontier hero, explaining how the hero's violent spirit, "and the violent means by which he has gained his wisdom are inseparable from the regenerative process he initiates." The hero can therefore only serve as a social benefactor, Slotkin argues, "when he operates on the edge of society, where it confronts the unsocial wilderness" (*Fatal*, 374-75). This aspect becomes important as the novel progresses and a confrontation between Nathan and Hardin seems inevitable. This is where Oliver emerges as the hero of the novel. His friendship with young Nathan Winer brings a sense of humanity back to the old outcast, and more importantly, a sense of duty. Because of his apathy, Oliver has neglected to expose the most crucial of Hardin's many secret crimes: the killing of Nathan's father. Throughout most of the novel, Oliver yearns to take action: "Course I got to do something," he thinks, "Wrongs needed someone to right them and words ought to be said but he did not feel worthy of saying them" (70). His hesitation is bound up in a previous confrontation with Hardin in which he ended up on the ground, bloody. The humiliation of the outcome leaves his mind in "*a torrent of rage and disbelief,*" and he ponders revenge: "*I will lay for him and shoot him,*" he thinks, but the threat is empty because "*he knew already he wouldn't. I am old, he admitted for the first time, old, tired of it all. All I want is to be let alone, all I want is for things to*

run along smooth. All I want is peace, and an old man ought to have that, if nothin else" (120). Yet

despite the resignation that has kept him from getting involved, Oliver is concerned for Nathan

and worried how the young man will react if his father's killer is exposed.

The concerns bring about a change in old Oliver: "If he ever finds it out nothin won't stop

him from killin Hardin and he'll live out his life in the pen, Oliver thought. If I wasn't soft in the

head I'd a killed him myself a long time ago" (71). It is not until the truth about Hardin's killing is

out and it is only a matter of time before Nathan hears it and confronts Hardin that Oliver finally

decides to act. Like a retired gunslinger whose guns were put to rest ages ago, Oliver gets back in

the saddle, so to speak, for the final confrontation that will correct his past wrongs and rid the

community of their fear. "God knows somebody's got to do it," he thinks to himself, "And it looks

like it's goin to have to be me" (235). This humble logic points directly back to the traditional

Western hero who, after first trying to avoid involvement in a conflict, finally lives up to the

responsibility granted him and carries out the duty he was created to perform. Oliver sets up a

trap for Hardin, and even though the trap backfires and Hardin beats him up, Oliver manages to

shoot and kill him.

By relying on the wisdom gained by past violence, and by using that violence actively, Oliver

kills off Dallas Hardin, the brutal and selfish entrepreneur who has kept the community in a

deadlock for years. In this way, Oliver acts in the pattern of the Western hero who goes outside

the law in order to uphold it and who thus serves as a regenerative force. However, like other

Western heroes before him, after fulfilling his duty, Oliver must then retreat back to the

wilderness from which he came. This retreat can both be seen as a continuous denunciation of

civilized society, but there is also a touch of tragedy to the lone hero forced by his past burdens to

live a life in solitude. Gay too, makes use of this aspect, when he describes Oliver's self-chosen

exile: When Oliver concludes, on the last page of the novel, that he does not need anybody else

and that the natural world around him is all that matters, it is "a spare and bitter comfort" (257).

In other words, Gay recognizes the continuous burden of Oliver's sacrifice, a burden that he must

carry alone, just as numerous Western heroes before him, perhaps best embodied in the

archetypical Shane, who gave up his romantic dream and returned to his former life of violence in

order to redeem the small community. At the end of both novel and film, Shane rides away from

the people he had come to like, away from a boy who idolizes him, and away from the woman he

secretly loves.

Jane Tompkins sees this act of sacrifice as one of the key elements of the Western. The

sacrifice is bound up with the hero's numbing of his own feelings; a result of the violence and

horror he has witnessed and the personal losses he has experienced. In Oliver's case, the mythic

status of his violent past is checked by his actual memories of his dead son and his resulting failed

marriage. This background serves to make him a full character for the reader, and it provides a

telling comment on the invisible yet tragic ingredients in the making of myths and legends.

Without the numbness of the hero, Tompkins continues, he would not be capable of inflicting

pain on others. However, unlike the villain, the hero is still able to feel something, despite all the

horror and violence he has endured, and this distinguishes him from his antagonist. But in line

with the strict rules of masculinity that govern the genre, the hero is not allowed to express his

feelings openly. Here lies the seed to the tragic element of the Western hero: "The numbing of

the capacity to feel," Tompkins states, "requires the sacrifice of his own heart, a sacrifice kept

hidden under his toughness, which is inseparable from his heroic character." This, of course,

makes the Western hero a Christ-figure, despite the genre's rejection of Christianity. Nowhere is

this more obvious than in *Shane*. Finally, having "renounced his heart so that others might keep

theirs… he rides away alone. And he must do this not because he is a murderer and therefore not

to be trusted, but because having hardened himself to murder, he can no longer open his heart to

humankind" (218-20). This is what makes the Western hero such a tragic figure, and Oliver follows in his footsteps. And that Oliver realizes the reality of this tragedy—the "spare and bitter comfort" he finds in his solitude—only makes him more of a hero because it further enlarges the scope of his sacrifice. By exiling himself he sets free the community and especially Nathan who has left town to pursue his romantic interest.

So ends *The Long Home*, a novel that, like the other southern novels discussed here, is populated by plain folk—a suggestion that the writers have looked to the Western to find inspiration for their protagonists. Rather than the chivalric hero of earlier Southern literature, the plain man of today's male Southern fiction is, of course, rooted in the region's many plain folk, the lives of which have been the subject of recent academic studies. But as the discussions of the male characters above show, the southern male hero is also a descendant of the mythified Artisan Hero such as the hard-working cowboy with impeccable moral convictions. But let us move now from the hard-working plain folk to the landscapes they inhabit.

6. Southern Landscapes and the Western Tradition

One of the seminal elements of the Western is the landscape. John Cawelti argues that what most clearly defines the Western is "the symbolic landscape in which it takes place and the influence this landscape has on the character and actions of the hero." Cawelti sees the symbolic landscape as "a field of action" for the genre's central conflicts (*Adventure*, 193). Lee Clark Mitchell adds to the assertion, arguing that the Western is "devoted to the terrain from which it takes its name, focusing the reader's glance on landscapes apparently as numerous as Westerns themselves" (34). The same could be argued of southern fiction, where detailed landscape descriptions are abundant. The attention to local landscapes has formed one of the most distinct trademarks of southern literature, where the importance of place has long been one of the dominant themes.

Imbedded in place, of course, is the focus on the land and nature surrounding the writers and their characters. Along with the shadow of Faulkner, "the importance of place" is a looming presence in the southern tradition, which a new writer must face and come to terms with, whether writing in the South or outside of it. Hannah, Brown, Gay, Rash, Offutt, and Nordan all place their fiction in the South. And many of their characters are so firmly rooted in place that they fit Louise Y. Gossett's assertion of Faulkner's characters: They are people "so strongly rooted in one place that they are free to become symbols of universal human nature."[170] And while Hannah's fiction is the least regional in the sense of detailed landscape descriptions, all the writers deal with the land in remarkable ways, evoking both the past and the future of the South, while making statements about the state of the region today.

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[170] Louise Y. Gossett, *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction* (Durham: Duke UP, 1965), p. 29.

In this chapter I will examine to what extent the writers draw on the tradition of the Western in their use of landscape. Mitchell argues that the Western's frequent and consistent descriptions of landscape serve a clear purpose: they render credible the otherwise implausible "explosions into violence" that characterizes the Western. The descriptions lend "an illusion of realism to otherwise outrageous plots (soliciting 'our credulity' by reducing the implausible to 'trifling acts'" (34-35). Once again, we can go back to Cooper to find the source of this tradition. As Mitchell explains, "Cooper presented landscapes for the reader's 'aimless glance,' providing an apparently recognizable space where incredible narratives" could both be credited as well as given a national flavor (53). Whether Mitchell's succinct observation is also true of today's southern fiction will be discussed below.

First, I will discuss how some of the writers reclaim the southern landscape from the burdens of history and the tradition of Faulkner, thereby creating a new canvas for them to fill. Some of the writers clearly employ the Western's tradition of making the land a testing ground of manhood, while others, such as Ron Rash, draw on the more subtle agrarian yeoman tradition that is linked both to the West and—via the southern Agrarians—also to the South.

When talking about Western and southern landscapes, some obvious differences immediately come to mind. First of all, there is a distinct difference in the very characteristics of the landscapes. As Richard Dyer notes, there is a spatial contrast "between the openness in the West and the enclosedness in the South, wide open spaces rather than low down shrub and jungle, the exhilaration of the great outdoors rather than the claustrophobia of the mansion."[171] While there are few mansions in contemporary southern fiction, the claustrophobic elements are still apparent. In Ron Rash's *The World Made Straight* (2006), the renegade protagonist Leonard has carried the phrase "*Landscape as destiny*" in his head for years. Living in the South Carolina

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[171] Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 35.

Appalachians, Leroy "knew what it meant here, the sense of being closed in, of human limitation. So different from the Midwest, where the possible sprawled bright and endless in every direction." The people in his region lived "in the passive voice, as if their lives were not really happening but instead were memories fixed and immutable."[172]

While some of Rash's characters may experience the familiar as encroaching and limiting, Chris Offutt's are at home in the hills, but have trouble leaving the region for the unknown. When arriving in the West, Offutt's protagonist Virgil instinctively feels the difference between his familiar Kentucky hill landscape and the West. In Kentucky, Virgil had "spent half his childhood in the woods …. Among the oak and maple, pine and hickory, he had a sense of belonging that always eluded him in the company of people." But in the West there is no comfort of familiar woods. Instead there is a vast and alien landscape stretching before him; first Iowa and Nebraska: "On every horizon lay a treeline. Abruptly he didn't know where he was;" then South Dakota: "The empty landscape was flat as tin. He felt like a bug exposed when someone lifted a flat rock;" and finally Montana, where Virgil "enjoyed a physical sense of insignificance. The landscape had an inviting quality, seductive but lethal …. It was the harshest land he'd ever seen" (55, 123-24). Here Offutt clearly inscribes Virgil into the Western's tradition of pitting man against landscape, something I will return to.

Secondly, the sense of history and myth behind the landscapes differs severely. Because traditional Westerns by definition are set in a specific time (usually between 1865 and 1890), the landscape of the American West did to some extent warrant the term "Virgin Land." In the frontier ideology, the Native Americans already living there were simply perceived as part of the landscape. Of course, this traditional myth has been challenged and debunked over the years, especially with the emergence of the "new Western history" school of the 1970s. A new

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[172] Ron Rash, *The World Made Straight* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006), pp. 156, 157.

generation of historians and critics refused challenged the master narrative of the West—in Donald Worster's words, that of "stagecoach lines, treasure hunts, cattle brands, and wildcattlers"—and instead pointed to the dark underside of Western history; "the violent, imperialistic process by which the West was wrested from its original owners and the violence by which it had been secured against the continuing claims of minorities, women, and the forces of nature."[173] However, as necessary and correct as these "new" studies are, they still have not managed to dismantle the traditional Western myth from its pedestal. The myth of the West has become blurred and muddled and now includes everything from Manifest Destiny to revisionist works like Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Patricia Limerick's *Legacy of Conquest*, and McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. But it cannot be overlooked that the values inherent in the traditional myth are still being praised in numerous Western novels and films that have appeared after the emergence of the new western history. Louis L'Amour's immensely popular novels are one of the most blatant examples of how popular the old myth still is.

The South is a different story. Here the landscape is a potential symbol of a repository for past horrors, shames, and violent crimes, as Patricia Yaeger reminds us: "Place is never simply 'place' in southern writing, but always a site where trauma has been absorbed into the landscape… [B]odies of water are never simply sites for leisure or hauling cotton or crossing over but sites for recycling sadness"[174] This aspect is especially apparent in Barry Hannah's fiction. In the fictional memoir *Boomerang*, Hannah brings back history from the ground when he mentions how, during hurricane Camille, "water came all over the towns and corpses from graveyards hung in the trees" (71). This points to the dominant function of the landscape in Hannah's fiction: it is a

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[173] Donald Worster, *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), pp. 11-12.

[174] Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing 1930-1990*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000), p. 13.

reminder of the past, an integral part of the southern identity, more than an individual power. The terrible destruction of the hurricane brought the dead back from the past. One could go even further and see the corpses hung from the trees as a reminder of the lynchings in the South. But either way, nature is the past, and the soil below Hannah's characters constantly testifies to this. Once again the much quoted passage from *Boomerang* qualifies here: "All the Confederate dead and the Union dead planted in the soil near us. All of Faulkner the great. Christ, there's barely room for the living down here" (137-38).

In *Yonder Stands Your Orphan*, the history behind, or rather below, the landscape takes on a more horrifying feature. It has now become a hiding place for past horrors; a mute witness to our history of evil. The Confederate and Union dead resting in the ground have been joined by other victims of horrible crimes: "Scores of corpses rested below the lakes, oxbows, river ways and bayous of these parts, not counting the skeletons of Grant's infantry. The country was built to hide those dead by foul deed, it sucked at them. Back to the flood of 1927, lynchings, gun and knife duels were common stories here. Muddy water made a fine lost tomb" (20-21). By depicting the southern landscape as a repository for past horrors and shameful deeds, Hannah continues a long tradition in southern literature. As Suzanne Jones notes, "for modern southern white writers, beginning most prominently with William Faulkner, the [southern] rural landscape has conjured up unsettling guilt about a way of life that flourishes on the backs of the black people who tilled that land. And not surprisingly, for many black writers the southern rural landscape has been the repository of troubled memories...." She notes how "the rural South still remains the repository of racism in the American imagination" and points to the task at hand for contemporary southern writers: "How to reclaim this landscape haunted by racism, how to rejuvenate the soil soaked with blood, sweat, and tears of slavery and segregation, and how to make a space for white liberals and all African Americans to call their themselves southerners and to return to the South

has been the work of a number of contemporary novelists who grew up in the rural segregated

South."[175] While Hannah still depicts the southern landscape as a place of trauma, he also creates

a uniquely original landscape, as do other southern writers in an attempt to reclaim the southern

landscape from the mythic literary landscape of Faulkner and the like.

Reasserting the Landscape

The immediate landscape in which Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* takes place is far

removed from any notion of an agrarian paradise. Even though the small community of Eagle Lake

is situated in potential idyllic surroundings, the land is a testament to the physical and moral

decline, not just of the region but of the nation. Eagle Lake seems to sum up Hannah's vision of

the decrepit state of the South; a place where casinos and pawnshops have ushered in a "*Cash for

Your Title civilization*" and "*pawnshop villages*" (116-17) with "Quick cash, a lot of crack heads, a

lot of people you didn't see before. Kind of dirty and needy folk in a new way …. They're depraved

instantly if they don't hit the jackpot" (Personal interview 2001). In the novel the Mississippi Delta

is depicted as vacant of any significant life, let alone culture. Hanna describes it as a place where

casino musicians, "although mistaken for the living by their audiences, *were* actually dead. Ghouls

howling for egress from their tombs" (37-38); a place where zombies patronize "the bad

restaurant" which "served food for the dead," and a place where zombies wait behind the

counters of the countless pawnshops, "quite obviously dead and led by someone beyond" (175).

As Jerome de Grot points out in his review of the novel, some of the land is "recognizable, but the

searing, saturated, sweaty weirdness of it all is unique."[176] Hannah certainly reasserts the

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[175] Suzanne W. Jones, "I'll Take My Land: Contemporary Southern Agrarians*," South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture*, eds. Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2002), pp. 121-22.

[176] Jerome de Grot, "Barry Hannah Sows the Bad Seeds," *Bookmunch*. May 5, 2008. <http://www.bookmunch.co.uk/view.php?id=1211>.

Mississippi landscape and creates in the process a perverse inversion of the frontier myth. This is not a landscape of regeneration but of decay, physically, morally, and spiritually.

Although haunted by death, the Mississippi Delta of Nordan's *The Sharpshooter Blues* is not as dismal as Hannah's. Like Hannah, Nordan mentions the watery Delta landscape as a conduit between past and present: "… nearly a hundred years ago, ironclad vessels floated here, warships of the Confederate and Union navies." Furthermore, Hydro imagines that "there were looseherds of wild horses and herds of buffalo, not so long ago, and maybe a wild Indian or two…" (3, 11). While Hydro's imaginative landscape may echo Faulkner's description in his essay "Mississippi" (quoted on p. 35), Nordan takes it a step further. Having acknowledged the history behind the landscape, Nordan sets that landscape free by allowing it, in Suzanne Jones' words, "to reassert itself" (134). While *Wolf Whistle*, Nordan's previous novel, depicted a landscape fraught with racial traumas, the same is not the case in *The Sharpshooter Blues*, where race is virtually non-existent. In the opening pages of the novel, Nordan depicts the landscape of the Mississippi Delta as a wilderness of strange and exotic creatures; not exactly a virgin land, but a land seemingly untouched by human history. On this watery frontier, Mr. Raney resides on an island, which is nothing but "a strip of high ground far out in a strange bayou, the vast, unbounded backwaters of many lakes and rivers …. The water seemed limitless, everywhere… it was a black mirror, colored from the tannic acid that seeped into it from the knees of cypress trees." The bayou is home to beavers "the size of collies," whose dams and houses are "as big as igloos, or tepees;" in the air "[t]urkey buzzards floated above the swamp like prayers," and blue

> herons and cranes and snowy egrets stood on long legs and ate snakes and
> minnows in the shallows. Cottonmouth moccasins hung in the willow branches,
> turtles sat on the logs, alligators lounged in their big nests …. Rats the size of
> yellow dogs clung to the bark of trees by their toenails and yapped like puppies
> …. Somehow dolphins, porpoises, whatever they were, had made their way up

here to the Delta… and they swam and bred and gave birth and fed upon the

million carp and mullet and the other bony fish that populated the swamp. (1-2)

This is not a landscape bogged down by historical shame and trauma. It is a landscape crawling

with life, real and imagined. In this way, Nordan reinvents the southern landscape as a hyperreal

place that allows for the magic realism that characterizes his fiction. But besides the wilderness

aspect, Nordan does draw on an obvious Western tradition in his depiction of the landscape and

the people inhabiting it.

In Offutt's *The Good Brother*, the landscape is not magical, but it portrays no visible signs of

a historical burden. In fact, whenever history is mentioned in connection with landscape, it is a

history so ancient that it serves to make the land timeless and almost mythic. The trees are "huge

and ancient," and Virgil tries to imagine the hilly Kentucky landscape "when it was flat across the

hilltops, before a million years of rain chewed the dirt to make creeks and hollows" (56, 16). In

such a landscape, Virgil is free to reinvent himself in the fashion of the frontier hero.

Likewise, the southern landscapes of Larry Brown's fiction are not visibly burdened by the

traumas of southern history. In fact, as Paul Lyons argues in his essay on *Joe*, "Brown's blistering

landscapes overgrow or reclaim historical reading itself" and the Jones family appears "like fallout

from time and tradition." Lyons goes on to show how the dirt-poor southerners in Brown's fiction

embody a "culture" of "not knowing." He concludes that "lacking cultural memory, this South

cannot feel nostalgia or feel that there is any former dignity to be upheld."[177] *Father and Son* does

not deal directly with people as poor as the Joneses, but, apart from a few scenes in the

graveyard, Brown depicts a landscape that is not in any way linked to a southern past. In fact, as

was the case in *Joe*, the landscape is literally being cleared away: "[I]n places it looked as if a

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[177] Paul Lyons, "Larry Brown's *Joe* and the Uses and Abuses of the 'Region' Concept," *South to a New Place: Region, Literature, Culture,* eds. Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2002), pp. 109, 110.

bomb had been dropped except for the lack of any craters, the land open and catching full sun and dotted with stumps and shattered tree trunks, the tracks of dozers that like some gargantuan beast had devoured the shade" (68). This is obviously an indictment of the industrial threat to nature, but clearing the landscape of historical burdens also creates a tabula rasa in which the characters can perform their moral battles.

Landscape as Moral Test

In the chapter entitled "Landscape" in *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins stresses the crucial importance of landscape to the Western: "In the Western as in Genesis, the physical world comes first. The only difference is that instead of being created by God, it *is* God," she asserts, and goes on to describe the typical desert Western landscape as "an environment inimical to human beings, where a person is exposed, the sun beats down, and there is no place to hide. But the negations of the physical setting—no shelter, no water, no rest, no comfort—are also its siren song. Be brave, be strong enough to endure this, it says, and you will become like this—hard, austere, sublime …. The landscape challenges the body to endure hardship—that is its fundamental message at a physical level…. Its spiritual message is the same: come, and suffer" (70, 71). While Tompkins makes the mistake of basing most of her argument on the desert landscapes of Louis L'Amour's Westerns, and not, for instance, the many Westerns that take place in greener pastures such as Wyoming, her point is still valid. Mitchell too stresses "the role of landscape" in Western novels" in defining "the moral stature of different characters" (30). When applying Tompkins' and Mitchell's readings of the Western landscape to the southern novels, it becomes clear that Larry Brown, Chris Offutt, William Gay, and to a certain extent Ron Rash all use the southern landscapes in this Western way.

One of the most obvious southern heirs to the Western tradition of using landscape as a moral test of manhood is Larry Brown. The technique is not only apparent in *Father and Son*. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Brown deliberately "sandbagged" his characters to make things as hard on them as possible. While this technique included surrounding the hero with excessive violence in order to point out his self-restraint and thereby his moral superiority, throughout his works, the landscape takes on its own life and becomes a violent, oppressive force that is set up against the already burdened ("sandbagged") characters. In this way, Brown uses landscape in accordance with the Western formula.

In the climax of *Dirty Work*, Brown's first novel, a couple is killed when they are caught by a rainstorm in their car parked at the bottom of a dry creek that soon fills up. In *Joe* nature is presented as two extremes; either as a hell-like scenario of unearthly heat and parched desolation or as an almost biblical flood of rain. In Brown's writing, both of these extremes take on a life of their own, as they rage against the toiling humans. The opening paragraph sets the drifting Jones family under a "burning sun" that has them "almost beaten." They cross "a creek that held no water," and it is "as if no one lived in this land or ever would again..." (1). From the very beginning, nature is at best indifferent to the humans, at worst trying to crush them. Another passage describes the landscape as harsh and uninviting: "Noon. The field bordering the road lay baking beneath a white sun, pale green rows of little plants that merged far away. The earth seemed to be smoking and it had no color, so dry was it, as if it had never known rain. It seemed dead as old bones …. The old man scowled up at the blistering sky" (45). The description of the landscape, the "smoking," colorless, "dry," and "dead" earth, and above it "the blistering sky" to which the old man scowls recalls not only the popular image of hell, but also a familiar Western scenario. Thus the landscape becomes a force to reckon with, not just a backdrop for the action to unfold against.

In *Father and Son*, Brown continues drawing on the landscape tradition of the Western. The Western has often infused landscape with rejuvenative powers; as Mitchell notes, "landscape is not only a model but a medicine" (104). The same is true in *Father and Son*, in a central scene where it is hinted that nature can cure Glen of his vices. Fishing with one of his few friends, Glen is content for the only time in the novel: "Glen didn't say anything… the old familiar pleasure came back into him like those distant mornings on the river with his old man. He smiled now…" (222). The landscape surrounding Glen is of almost Edenic beauty and the descriptions are like taken out of a Zane Grey novel:

> He saw the trees above the water and the way the wind was moving through the branches. He looked at the dark water and the small ripples that lapped at the bank. He looked at a hawk soaring lazily by the cypresses on the other side of the lake, the beds of water lilies floating in their mats of stems. (223)

When Glen catches a ten pound fish, he decides to turn it loose, "He never done nothin to me," he says (224). But the episode is only a singular oasis of peace in Glen's troubled life.

Just as nature is rejuvenating, it is also larger than life, even in the South. Jane Tompkins describes nature as "the one transcendent thing, the one thing larger than man… the ideal toward which human nature strives" (72). In *Father and Son*, the descriptions of man and nature mirror those of the Western, as when Brown writes of Virgil walking "beneath the sky and on top of the land, a tiny figure moving like an ant" (65-65).

But nature is also violent, and has been ever since Cooper's Leatherstocking tales and in Wister's *The Virginian* and Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*. Brown uses nature as a way to test his characters, to burden them further. As in *Joe*, Brown attributes nature with the same man-crushing powers: the thunder crackles, like gunfire, and there are even explosions. Nature is also attributed with human emotions, it has a purpose, and that is to destroy mankind, to devour man and make him one with nature. However, in *Father and Son*, the landscape descriptions are left

out until the climax of the story. Thus *Father and Son* comes across as a much more schematized

novel, especially when compared to the more organic tone of *Joe*. In other words, it has

Hollywood written all over it, as Gretlund has already pointed out (*Frames* 240). The violence

mostly takes the form of physical action between the characters. Nature, this time, is pushed to

the background, reduced to some angry growls, like a soundtrack to a movie. We almost reach

page 300 before Brown uses the landscape in a naturalist way. In the scene where Bobby is

digging up the bodies of two children killed by their parents, nature unleashes its forces upon

him:

> A thunderbolt barked far off. A dry rumbling cracking that seemed to be heading this
> way with one purpose and that to split the heavens open and devour him and
> everything in the world that was under it. He could hear it forming up in the distance
> and thunder building on thunder and it began to rain …. The lightning moved in and
> it began to arc down to the land. He heard a bolt explode nearby. He felt that he was
> about to be struck and with one quick movement he stood up and unbuckled the gun
> and pitched it away running and dove to the ground…. (277-78)

The hellish scenario almost destroys Bobby, but his quick, instinctive reaction shows that he is

indeed a match for the raging forces of nature. The passage could easily have been taken from

one of Louis L'Amour's Westerns, where the landscape, in Tompkins' words, challenges the body

to endure hardship. And clearly, Bobby is brave and smart enough to endure it. Having thrown

himself on the ground, he rises among the ruins: "He stood up in the midst of it… half blind and

near deaf…" (278). Bobby may be bruised and battered, but that only makes his resurrection all

the more impressive. Having his characters battle the natural elements is one way in which Brown

tests them for moral and physical strength. In that sense, Brown uses the same technique as

numerous Western writers, as Tompkins points out: "The qualities needed to survive on the land

are the qualities the land itself possesses—bleakness, mercilessness …. To be a man in the

Western is to seem to grow out of the environment, which means to be hard, to be tough, to be

unforgiving" (73). Bobby is one of those men, although his self-restraint keeps the tough elements

at bay.

After the passage quoted above, however, Brown only uses nature as a foreboding of plot

events and to support moments of tension or climax in the characters or the action, and his

descriptions of nature rarely succeed in sounding like anything but clichés: When Glenn is

confronted by Jewel, Brown writes: "He didn't give her any answer for that. It was rumbling

thunder outside and the air had darkened again" (283). After he leaves, a scared Jewel leans

against the counter: "It was still raining and in the distance she could hear the storm gathering in

a voice that was low and angry" (285). Shortly after, Glenn has knocked out Bobby's mother and

dragged her into the barn. He "looked up through the rafters and could see specks of light

through the tin roof even though it was still cloudy and the promise of more rain was in the sky"

(294). Brown then leaves the reader hanging for two brief chapters, and nature is put on hold too:

"He looked up at the house. Nothing was stirring up there. Not even the wind riffling the leaves in

the trees. All was still" (297). Meanwhile Bobby is cleaning up after the find of the dead children,

unaware yet of the confrontation he must soon face. Above him the "sky was still dark and he

watched for it to come up blue again, but it never did" (299). Back in the barn, Glenn is ready to

rape Bobby's mother. Kneeling, he hears "a distant rumble of thunder that promised more rain"

(324).

During the actual climax where Mary manages to kill Glenn, nature is left outside, but in the

last brief chapter, after the climax, nature is allowed to show itself from its best side. As was often

the case in the traditional Western, *Father and Son* ends—as I have also described in chapter 4—

on a note of almost Edenic bliss, complete with a sinking sun: As "the last sinking tip of the sun

sends light up," Glen's father Virgil rocks his sleeping grandson in his lap on the porch. Mary has

just arrived with Bobby and Jewel. As Virgil holds his grandson "close to him as if to protect him from any harm," the sun literally sets on the happy new family. (346-47). With this ending, Brown ends a novel that often draws on the Western. In the process, Brown creates a landscape that is at once fresh and recognizable, both real and symbolic, and one which both tests and rejuvenates his characters.

In Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother*, landscape also plays a crucial role. Like Larry Brown, Offutt also infuses the southern landscape with rejuvenative powers in the tradition of the Western: Struggling with a severe hangover, Virgil, the protagonist, "stepped into the woods," where the "effort to negotiate the woods made him forget how bad he felt" (79). Like a true Leatherstocking, Virgil feels more at home in nature than among people. The woods are "the one place where he felt safe;" the only place where "he had a sense of belonging that had always eluded him in the company of people" (55). In fact, Virgil is repeatedly depicted as a pathfinder, albeit a contemporary one. The novel opens with the line: "Virgil followed the rain branch off the hill and drove to the Blizzard post office" (15). But away from the post office is where Virgil feels most at home. He knows how to mimic the sound of the barred owl, his favorite bird, and he "had always been able to see well at night" (43, 45). This focus on seeing clearly points back to Cooper's Natty Bumppo, whose nickname is also "Hawkeye." As Mitchell explains, Bumppo's "true eye" is repeatedly "featured as his most distinctive trait, confirmed by his ever ready ability to shoot all but invisible objects." Mitchell argues that this "capacity to see clearly, to hit the most distant of targets, to discover all but invisible signs of an enemy becomes at last a moral injunction, equated with the capacity to draw sharp ethical distinctions." This "ethical view of landscape" is, according to Mitchell one of Cooper's strongest legacies to the Western, in which "moral discernment is always signaled by a visual knowledge of surroundings" (29-30).

Getting ready to leave his Kentucky home, we get a sense of the symbiotic relationship between Virgil and the land, and once again a depiction of him as a pathfinder: "He knew every tree along the way, recognized the bend of bough, each new scale of bark. He entered the woods as if stepping into a house …. He followed a game trail to Shawnee Rock. Gray moss furred the north face. He sat within its shadow…" (115). Once in Montana, feeling alien and locked up in his cabin, Virgil seeks to the woods to find his place: He "looked around for somewhere to go. The woods at home had always served as solace and he decided to see Rock Creek. A faint path wove through the cottonwood and pine. Trees grew farther apart than in Kentucky, and groundcover was thin." He sees gnaw marks "left by a beaver. [Virgil] admired the beaver's ambition, the boldness necessary to make such an attempt. He wondered if it was a bad sign to envy animals" (133). The answer, of course, is no. It is significant that despite feeling exposed in the flat landscape, Virgil is able to find his way in the wild: "He followed [the elk] trail as it wound through the saddle of a gap, then left it for the summit" (136).

It should also be noted that Virgil's attempt to assert his new identity in Montana as Joe Tiller takes place in the wild nature: "Beyond the water, green moss glittered on the granite bluffs. Joe spoke for the first time that day. 'My name is Joe Tiller and this is where I live.' He repeated himself over and over. His voice mixed with the hum of the creek, and his words swept into the woods" (146-47). Like the son of Leatherstocking that he is, Virgil manages to adapt to his new surroundings. Despite feeling alien in the Montana landscape, Virgil's inherent ability to be one with it earns the respect of the local militia, themselves men who are like "the land itself." The men inquire about Virgil's background, telling him, "You just sort of leaked out of the landscape on us" (210). In this way, Offutt clearly places Virgil in a long line of Western heroes who emerge out of the landscape like they were part of it—from Cooper's Leatherstocking and Lassiter in *Riders of the Purple Sage* to filmic heroes like Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* and Shane.

In William Gay's fiction, the landscape surrounding the characters is described as a looming, ever-present force. Not only is it indifferent to people, it might possibly be hostile. A telling passage reveals people as mere puppets in a landscape they have no control over: "The men looked like animated miniatures, unreal, against the muted winter landscape they milled and moved without purpose about one of their number who had fallen and lay unmoving, a puppet unstrung perhaps, or one who had fled at last the exhortations of a mad puppeteer" (223). While this passage, like the similar one from *Father and Son*, suggests people's insignificance compared to nature, a few exceptional characters stand out.

Dallas Hardin, the villain of *The Long Home*, appears in the community after an earthquake has opened a brimstone-smelling abyss in the ground. Gay thereby suggests that Hardin has been spewed from the ground, like the devil incarnated. This would suggest an inversion of the typical Western hero emerging from the landscape—a fitting entrance for a villain, especially when compared to William Oliver Tell, one of the heroes, who enters the novel coming "out of the woods" (9). Like Virgil in *The Good Brother*, Oliver displays an obvious familiarity with his natural surroundings and he passes his knowledge of the natural world on to Nathan.

Like Brown did, Gay places his characters in extreme surroundings. The opening of the novel finds William Tell Oliver surrounded by harsh weather: "The rain fell in sheets, sluicing off the unguttered tin, dissipated to spray the wind took. Thunder boomed almost directly above him, a few scattered pellets of hail fell and lay gleaming white as pearls in the mud. The trees were in constant motion, all the world he could see was animate. The chaff-filled air seemed electric, unreal" (14). But the old man is at home in nature—as discussed in chapter 5, he embodies many of the Leatherstocking traits—and the violent storm does not faze him; while it rages he eats dinner and drinks coffee outside on the porch, an obvious display of a man in control.

The first time we meet Nathan, the other protagonist, he too is surrounded by violent weather, but this time the descriptions are much more intense. He wakes up in the middle of the night to lightning "staccato and strobic" which disappears "in abrupt negation to a world of total dark so that the room and its austere furnishings seemed sucked down into some maelstrom and consigned to utter nothingness, to the antithesis of being …. Ovoid and tracking west [the clouds] look composed of some gleaming alloy, a vast armada visiting upon the world a plague of fire then fleeing on to some conjunction of all the world's storms" (20-21). Apart from evoking the neo-Biblical language of Cormac McCarthy, the examples illustrate that Gay's use of landscape points to Tompkins' comments on the Western landscapes, where "the physical world comes first" and where that physical world is hostile to the people inhabiting it (70-71).

It should also be mentioned that apart from the violent weather the characters are immersed in, a literal wilderness exists close to the small community. The Harrikin, as it is called, is "a land in ruin, a sprawling, unkept wood of thousands of acres …. a country where civilization had fallen and vanished" and where the "faint vestigal imprint of where a road had been" is "choked by the willows lowering upon it" (155). This wilderness does not feature prominently in the novel—it is used much more extensively in Gay's third novel *Twilight* (2006)—but its presence does create a historical echo of the South as a frontier.

Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden*

Where several of the writers I am looking at draw on the Western's tradition of pitting man against landscape as a test of morals and masculinity, Rash's interests lie elsewhere. His use of landscape does not readily conform to the Western tradition that Tompkins and Mitchell discuss; a tradition that Brown, Offutt, and Gay evoke more directly. As Kara Baldwin has shown, there is a strong Celtic tradition at play in Rash's fiction as well, particularly in his descriptions of

landscape.[178] There is also an obvious Agrarian vein in Rash's fiction that places him in the

tradition of Faulkner and Madison Jones. *One Foot in Eden* even emulates Jones' *A Buried Land*

(1963), in which an unwanted pregnancy leads to a crime that is covered up when the TVA floods

the valley. Both novels display outrage at the destruction of the land and at the disgrace of having

to remove graves that have been buried for centuries, thereby uprooting history. But rather than

calling Rash the last Agrarian, it makes more sense to include him with writers like Ellen Douglas

and Madison Smart Bell, who, as Suzanne Jones points out, both echo their agrarian predecessors

while simultaneously expanding the agrarian vision. Where Douglas and Bell, according to Jones,

"desire both to conserve southern rural landscapes and to create new, more racially inclusive

southern communities" (124), the racial aspect is never in focus in Rash's fiction. The simple

reason for the apparent blank spot is the specific demography of the part of Appalachia where

Rash's fiction takes place. But Rash does share Douglas and Bell's wish for social change.

　　Before dismissing any connection between Rash's use of landscape and the Western

tradition, I should point out that there are elements of the tradition to be found throughout *One*

Foot in Eden. As I will discuss below, Rash draws on this tradition in the depiction of Sheriff

Alexander's relationship with the land and his ability to overcome the forces of nature. But *One*

Foot in Eden's focus on the farming community evokes a broader, more general Western myth;

what Donald Worster calls the principal myth of the West: "a story about a simple, rural people

moving into an extraordinary land… and creating there a peaceful, productive life"(6). There is,

perhaps an echo of Henry Nash Smith's "Virgin Land" thesis to be found in *One Foot in Eden*. What

Smith recognized was that Turner's frontier thesis was "developed out of the myth of the

garden," in other words, the agrarian myth. Smith argues that Turner's "emphasis on agricultural

settlement places [the frontier thesis] clearly within the stream of agrarian theory that flows from

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[178] Kara Baldwin, "'Incredible Eloquence': How Ron Rash's Novels Keep the Celtic Literary Tradition Alive," *The South Carolina Review* 39:1 (Fall 2006): 37-46.

eighteenth-century England and France through Jefferson to the men who elaborated the ideal of a society of yeoman farmers in the Northwest from which Turner sprang." And while Smith points out the unfortunate "archaic assumptions" inherent in Turner's hypothesis and dares to call it myth, he does acknowledge the validity of the myth itself, "because it expressed beliefs and aspirations as well as statistics."[179] Donald Worster elaborates on this argument, asserting that rather than dismissing a myth as simple falsehood, "popular belief and historical reality are joined together in a continuous dialogue, moving back and forth in a halting, jerky interplay" (6). It is in this intersection that Rash operates and plays out his story, and his use of landscape at times draws on traits inherent in the Western myth, but more often it does not.

Behind the tradition of the Western lies the idea of the frontier as a virgin land, a "tabula rasa," where, as Tompkins puts it, "man can write, as if for the first time, the story he wants to live" (74). This notion has long since been contested, of course, but even contemporary Westerns still draw on the tradition of the empty landscape and its promise of regeneration. According to Tompkins, the "apparent emptiness makes the land desirable not only as a space to be filled but also as a stage on which to perform and as a territory to master" (74). While Ron Rash draws on certain traits of the Western in his depiction of Sheriff Alexander and in his characters' attitudes towards language, his depictions of the landscape of South Carolina displays anything but a tabula rasa.

A consistent trait in Rash's writing, be it poetry or fiction, is his focus on the rural landscapes of North and South Carolina. Rash elaborated to me on this fascination: "I think writers who write about a rural landscape are often viewed as being kind of provincial, but to me the natural world is the most universal of languages" (Bjerre, "Natural" 224). In many ways, Rash's take on the southern landscape mirrors Ellen Douglas' landscape descriptions and the way she reasserts the

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[179] Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970), p. 251.

landscape in order to, as Suzanne Jones puts it, "unburden it of Faulkner's mythic figuration"
(134). As Jones argues, Douglas uses "specific localization" and detailed landscape description to
distinguish her fictional place from the mythic landscapes already familiar to readers. By doing so,
Jones argues, Douglas "resists her readers' inclinations to mentally conjure a generic southern
place without registering the words that make it a very specific geographical locale" (135).

One Foot in Eden offers plenty of landscape descriptions that link the novel to a certain
place both geographically and historically. Will's descriptions of the Jocassee Valley clearly imbue
the landscape with an inescapable sense of history and tradition: "The word [Jocassee] meant
'valley of the lost' to the Cherokee …. The road I followed had once been a trail, a trail De Soto
had followed four hundred years ago when he'd searched these mountains for gold …. I took
another right and passed fields where men once hid horses during what folks up here still spoke
of as the Confederate War" (10-11). This is as far from a tabula rasa as one can get. Instead, the
characters' connections to the land are strong and tied directly to a distinct sense of tradition.

In fact, the connection to the land is so forceful that it creates one of the central conflicts in
the novel, that between the Old and the New South. "Like almost everything else up here," Will
notes, "the road was little different than it had been in the 1860s. But change was coming, a
change big enough to swallow this whole valley" (11). The change is also embodied in Will, as
mentioned in the discussion of his class conflict in Chapter 5. Will's decision to move back to the
farm is ultimately a wish to seek back to his roots, to literally join history by becoming part of the
land itself before it is too late. When he dies he hopes to be buried in the family

> grave before they built the reservoir so when the water rose it would rise over me
> and Daddy and Momma and over Old Ian Alexander and his wife Mary and over the
> lost body of the princess named Jocassee and the Cherokee mounds and the trails De
> Soto and Bartram and Michaux had followed and the meadows and streams and
> forests they had described and all would forever vanish and our faces and names and

deeds and misdeeds would be forgotten as if we and Jocasse had never been. (56-57)

The intense merging of past and present and the insistence on place serves here as a bulwark

against the threatening historical amnesia that the flooding will bring on. While Rash's landscapes

are tied to history, they are distinctly unique, and the geographical South of *One Foot in Eden*

never feels like Faulkner's or O'Connor's South.

Apart from feeling connected to the history that the landscape describes, the also express

their emotions and experiences in terms of the natural world. This is especially true for Amy who

feels her "face blush up red as a moonseed berry." Later, when arguing with her husband Billy,

she feels as if their "words was clouds gathering up for a storm." And when talking to the Widow,

Amy experiences her words as "cold and hard as winter turnips." When she witnesses Billy

shooting Holland, she sees "Holland's face [go] white as August cotton bolls." And finally, when

making love to Billy, Amy describes their "bodies swirled together like two creeks becoming one"

(72, 74, 77, 91, 96). Again, we can bring in Suzanne Jones' discussion of Ellen Douglas' use of

landscape. The technique of describing human feelings in terms of the natural world, Jones

argues, reminds readers that "although our experience of the natural world is mediated by our

cultural perceptions, nature is not passive in the relationship." Discussing Douglas' *The Rock Cried

Out*, Jones writes that "the forces of nature take on an active role in the working-out of the plot,

reminding readers of nature's power and of the need for careful management of land and natural

resources, but also that place is not just myth but also a reality" (136). She might as well have

been discussing *One Foot in Eden*. Not only do the characters have an intimate relationship with

the land around them; the land plays an active part in shaping their lives, and plotwise the

landscape plays a part as well. Holland Winchester's body is hidden in a tree for years, and it is

the heavy rain combined with the flooding of the valley that kills Amy and Billy. And symbolically

the flooding occurs simultaneously with Isaac's decision to reveal the truth about his real father,

thereby disclosing twenty years of secrets and repressions. By indirectly comparing the consequences of Isaac's disclosure with the flooding, Rash enhances both the forces of nature and the power of human emotions.

The last chapter of the novel is set in the early 1970s, after the Jocassee Valley has been flooded and turned into Jocassee Lake. The last words in the novel are those of the deputy: He thinks to himself: "This wasn't no place for people who had a home. This was a place for the lost" (214). While the novel is in part a nostalgic elegy to the lost land, it also becomes a testament to a specific time and culture. By writing the lost land back into existence, Rash insists on its importance, even today.

While Rash's landscape apparently does not allude to the Western, Rash sets up a conflict between his characters and their surrounding environment in a way that echoes part of the Western tradition. At times some of the characters rise above the challenge and appear as morally superior. But throughout the novel, Rash instills his characters with a dignity that transcends any notion of good and evil. Billy Holcombe, who murders Holland Winchester and disposes of his body, is given his own voice and comes across as a full-dimensional character. As readers we understand his predicaments and sympathize with the rough farming life he lives.

While the novel often refers to and depicts the lives of poor farmers who toil on the land and are challenged by it, it is, once again, Sheriff Alexander, who is the most apparent link to the Western. Alexander's relationship to the land and the way he is pitted against nature's forces make him a modern Western hero transplanted to Appalachia. Throughout the novel, Will must fight the elements to disclose the body Billy Holcombe has hidden. Will is also battling time: he must find the body before the valley is flooded and every trace erased.

There is no doubt that Will is competent match for the landscape surrounding him. In fact, we should no see him so much as an opponent of the land, but more as someone who works with

it, sometimes against odds, to achieve his goal. Like yet another modern Leatherstocking-

character, Will has an astute awareness of nature. We even learn that he was baptized in the local

river when he was ten years old. Already at that age he "hadn't been afraid," the long while he

was held under water. "I had felt the power of that river and believed it nothing less than God

Himself swirling around me," Will thinks (54), thereby infusing the landscape with a religious

sense. In his adult life, Will embodies a unique understanding of the landscape surrounding him.

As murder suspect Billy Holcombe tells us: "He stood at the end of the row I'd been working, not

looking at me but across the river. He looked like he was twice reading something to make sure it

said what he thought it said" (146). This "reading" of the landscape links Will directly to Cooper's

Leatherstocking and his countless Western hero offspring like Hondo and others. And once again

we can bring in Mitchell's idea about the "ethical view of landscape" (30), that equates the hero's

capacity to see clearly with his ability to draw the right ethical conclusions.

This idea is reinforced a few pages later when Sheriff Alexander takes off his glasses to get a

closer look at Billy, the murder suspect. Here is how Billy experiences it: Sheriff Alexander "just

looked up and let his gray eyes fix on me like a hawk's eyes on a meadow mouse" (148). The

allusion to Hawkeye, one of Natty Bumppo's many names is probably not coincidental. Even when

Will puts on his glasses, he is still compared to an animal. "They made his eyes bigger, not so

much anymore like hawk's eyes as owl's eyes …. [W]ise eyes that don't miss a thing" (148-49).

While the glasses may suggest a lack of vision, we are told that even without the glasses, Will's

eyes are those of a hawk.

Another element that links Sheriff Alexander to the Leatherstocking tradition is his dual

connection with civilization and wilderness. As mentioned in chapter 6, Will has moved from the

family's tobacco farm in the Jocassee Valley into the town of Seneca, estranging himself not only

from his father and brother, but also from a part of himself. Although respected in the

community, Will does not feel at home in the town where he lives. Looking at the sky to check the weather, he feels ashamed that he does not need to worry about that. He gets a "certain paycheck come rain or drought" (10). There is also the sense that a purer, more timeless world exists outside the town. Returning to town from a visit to the valley, Will glances at a newspaper and its reports of world crises. "But these events seemed somehow farther away than when I'd read about them this morning. It was as if being in Jocassee had taken me out of the here and now" (21). As a result of these conflicting emotions, Will Alexander makes the moral decision to serve out his term as High Sheriff and then go back to farm on his family's land (40). Will realizes that his decision to move back to the farm will mean a divorce since his wife will not move down the social ladder. The predicament echoes one of the central themes of the Western: the male flight to the wilderness away from civilizing women. But while Rash may play along with this theme, it is never reinforced or given credence. Any idea that "the wilderness" can offer solace is undercut in this novel by the constant awareness of the impending flooding and destruction.

Will's function as a Leatherstocking character continues throughout the novel's two-decade span. The chapter entitled "The Son" takes place almost twenty years after the killing of Holland. Carolina Power has evicted people from the valley, and the flooding is about to commence. At the last minute, Isaac, the illicit son of Amy and Holland Winchester, decides to tell the truth and to reclaim his father's body with the help of his "father" Billy Holcombe. When Sheriff Alexander confronts the two men about their business, Billy admits that he killed Holland: "'You can handcuff me if you want …. But I ain't going to run. I never figured to do that, even in the worst of it.'" Instead of pursuing justice to the very end, Alexander offers to ignore the twenty year old crime: "'It's too late, Billy,'" he says in a gentle voice and continues, "Let's get out of here, Billy. Whatever's been done has been done. We're too old to change it now. Let the water cover it up" (192-93). When Billy insists, Alexander agrees to help them recover the body. And once again, his

eyes indicate his intimate relationship with the land: He "looked at the water that covered the lower part of the field. His eyes followed it across the river bed and to the foot of Licklog. 'This isn't going to be easy. That river's deeper now.'" (193-94). The small party moves out in a landscape mired in "a cold rain, the kind that soaked to your bones …. The clouds looked low enough to touch …. The rain suddenly came harder, like a big knife had slit the sky open. [Isaac] couldn't see but a few feet in any direction" (195-96). After Isaac has found the few remaining bone pieces of his father, the party turns back, only to find that the water has risen and that the river is muddy, making it impossible to see where they step.

Once again, Sheriff Alexander takes control, his teeth chattering from the cold. He again tries to convince Isaac to leave his father's remains in order to prevent a murder case. Isaac takes a moral decision and drops the sack of bones in the river's strong current. Then the party begins crossing the river, the cold water reaching their chests and Sheriff Alexander barking orders while holding the rope. And then everything goes wrong. Billy's foot gets caught in some timber and the current pushes him under. Amy goes under too and soon Isaac as well. He tries to save his mother, but soon the cold water numbs him: "I felt the water cover me and for a few moments everything became dark and peaceful. Then I felt hands on me, strong hands, pulling me back to the surface, dragging me toward shore" (200). The strong hands belong, of course, to Sheriff Alexander.

Waiting back at the farmhouse and unaware of what has just happened, the deputy sees "someone coming across what had been bottomland, carrying something in his arms. I couldn't put no face on him because the rain flailed down so hard it was like looking through a waterfall. The water he came plodding through was shallow, so shallow he looked to be walking on it, like he was a haint riding from the river" (206). The passage both evokes images of Christ as well as the iconic cowboy emerging out of the landscape at the opening of countless Westerns, be it

novels or films. This time, though, it is the hero emerging from a landscape he has just defeated. This suggests an association with the particular link between man and landscape that Tompkins discusses, namely how the qualities inherent in nature, such as "power [and] endurance," are the ones that the hero strives to possess (Tompkins 72). Even though the tone is not one of triumph—after all, two people have lost their lives in the river—the depiction of Sheriff Alexander as iconic hero remains. And the fact that he is suffering from hypothermia and shock and still insists on going back to look for Amy and Billy only enhances the magnitude of his heroism. But let me again point out that Sheriff Alexander is only one of the narrators of the novel, and he is in no way the main protagonist. And while Rash draws on some of the heroic imagery connected to the Western hero and his relation with the land, Sheriff Alexander never comes to dominate, and the novel is not structured as a story about a hero's fight against a villain. The focus is on the small community around Seneca, about an agrarian lifestyle that is doomed to vanish, and about how the people deal with that situation.

It could be argued that the elegiac tone of the novel—the doomed, lost land—shrouds the narrative in myth. In fact, the central conflict in *One Foot in Eden*—the conflict between the yeoman existence and industrialized society—is also one of the central conflicts in the traditional myth of the West, as Nash Smith showed. But even though Rash evokes the myth, he never succumbs to it. By allowing the characters to become fully human and three dimensional, the mythic aspects are undercut, and we are left with some of both. This is, perhaps what the title connotes: One foot in a mythic agrarian Eden, and one foot in harsh reality. And if I were to push the analogy further and force it into a Western discourse, *One Foot in Eden* becomes an anti-Western. It uses the well-known myths but in a subversive way; in order to show how those myths do not represent the reality of the people it represents.

While the six novels do not all rely on a landscape drawn from the Western, several of them do employ it. And all of the writers seem determined to create their own unique landscape, if not a tabula rasa, at least their own landscape, one that breaks with the mythic southern landscape of their literary ancestors. In the tradition of the Western, several of the writers describe the land in terms that echo the frontier. Furthermore, landscape is used as a physical and moral test for the characters, a trait most obvious in Larry Brown's fiction. The overpowering landscape also test the characters of Offutt, Gay, and Rash, and those who are able to fight it and work with it emerge as exemplars of the Leatherstocking tradition. So while there are no dry desert plains, no deep canyons or sagebrush in the southern landscapes, the writers still manage to draw on parts of the Western's landscape tradition while describing a landscape that is uniquely—and recognizably—southern.

7. Messing with the Myth:

Lewis Nordan's *The Sharpshooter Blues*

While the previous chapters have been thematically guided and have focused on several novels, this brief chapter will, in a sense, connect the various themes and focus solely on one text, Lewis Nordan's *The Sharpshooter Blues*. The previous four chapters have already discussed the novel in terms of language, structure, class, and landscape, but this chapter will take a step back and examine more generally how Nordan (mis)uses the Western myth in the novel. Just as is the case with the other southern writers I am looking at, the growing body of Lewis Nordan criticism has so far been concerned mainly with placing him in a southern tradition—be it race, humor, or otherwise. And this is understandable given that Nordan *is* a very southern writer. But in *The Sharpshooter Blues*, Nordan dismisses the usual southern narratives as a backbone of the story, and instead draws on another popular myth to tell his story—that of the American West. The novel is another of Nordan's portraits of the grotesque lives in the fictional town of Itta Bena, as well as a lyrical meditation on America's gun culture. What immediately makes the novel interesting to this dissertation is the fascinating appearance of a bona fide Western hero, the sharpshooter Morgan. Since the novel takes place in the Mississippi Delta of the 1950s, Morgan is a character out of place, and his story provides an interesting discussion about the power of the cowboy myth as well as the relationship between myth and truth.

Morgan is a humorous example of the creation of a mythic Western hero. He is clearly a parody of that hero, which becomes clear in the first description of him: "Morgan was tiny as a midget, almost. He was a foundling, got raised up by a hoodoo woman, and it stunted his growth. He looked like a department store dummy, perfectly shaped. Nineteen years old, with yellow hair

and rosy cheeks and red lips" (24). It is clear that Morgan is very much a character of the southern

grotesque tradition. But behind his tiny stature, which bestows on him an aspect of "freakiness,"

lies the makings of a real man. His perfect shape as well as his yellow hair and healthy-looking

face make him an obvious Anglo-Saxon hero in the tradition of Wister. And a brief stay in Texas

brings out the inherent hero-material. Morgan is yet another southerner who has gone West to

escape a personal problem, in this case a wrecked affair with the married woman Ruth. After his

return to Mississippi, Morgan has brought with him some of the mythic aura of the West,

especially summed up in an adventurous story that serves as Nordan's parodic spin on the

American legacy of conquest. Morgan's claim to small-town fame is a tall tale of how he killed a

Mexican in Texas in order to get his truck. Although nobody in town "wanted to ask whether or

not he killed the Mexican," everyone seems to agree to believe that he did (28). Granted, there is

a long way from Morgan's story to the historical genocide of the Native Americans, but both

Morgan and the townspeople clearly see his act as a remnant of the "heroic" battle between

cowboys and Indians that has fired the imagination of white Americans for centuries. And the fact

that Morgan might have killed the Mexican in the process only enhances his heroic status in the

eyes of the community ("What's a wetback doing with a truck in the first place," as Morgan asks

rhetorically (28)).

Even though they are fooling themselves, the townspeople seem so eager for excitement in

their lives that they are willing to believe in Morgan's myth. And they act accordingly by being

mesmerized and most of all humbled that a genuine Western hero has graced their town with his

presence. Their yearning for excitement surfaces again and again and it illustrates how they

clearly inscribe Morgan into a familiar narrative of Western heroes. Anticipating Morgan's display

of his sharpshooting skills, Hydro asks if it is "going to be some Wild West Show shooting," and

after Morgan has been accused of killing the Misfit couple who robbed the Grocery, the

community is quick to refashion the events so they fit into a narrative worthy of Morgan: "Morgan is the Lone Ranger, ain't he," Marshal Chisholm asks, and Mr. Raney responds, "He cleaned up Dodge and rode out of town." The men's admiration of his sharpshooter skills is expressed in Western terms as well: "Morgan can shoot, though. Morgan could join the Wild West Show. He could marry Annie Oakley" (28, 72, 73, 107). But not only does the community indulge in Morgan's exploits, they get so carried away by the powerful myth he represents, that they start making up their own exotic stories about him. Discussing the killing of the two "Texas desperados," which they believe to be Morgan's work, the local men's conversation turns to the Sharpshooter, who, as one asserts, has "got ice water in his veins." Another praises Morgan's act and then establishes him as an all-American hero: "I always knowed he would do well in life. He didn't start out with nothing. Found in a canebrake. Raised up by a hoodoo lady." A fellow denizen agrees and mixes frontier imagery into the conversation: "The ones with humble beginnings, them's the ones rides with Destiny." His expression "rides with Destiny" is mistaken as a reference to a Western movie starring Randolph Scott, which again makes one of the men add to Morgan's myth: "Randolph Scott's the one taught Morgan to sharpshoot that pistol. He worked on Randolph Scott's ranch down in Texas" (105-106). The movie the men are referring to is most likely Robert N. Bradbury's *Riders of Destiny* (1933) starring John Wayne. Although Randolph Scott did not appear in that movie, he was one of Hollywood's most popular Western stars, which might explain the mix-up.

With his reputation severely boosted by his supposed mythic exploits out West, Morgan has succeeded in recreating himself in the image of the classic Western hero. The focus has shifted from his freaky characteristics to those that connote a hegemonic manhood, and Morgan's is apt at backing up his performance by both attire and attitude: "Ever since he got back from Texas Morgan wore white shirts and a black leather vest and cowboy boots" (24). Aside from the

cowboy outfit, Morgan performs a distinct form of silent gunslinger machismo: When the chatty

Preacher Roe attempts to strike up a conversation with Morgan, the Sharpshooter "just looked at

him." Later Roe tries again, and Morgan's response echoes the impatience with words that

characterizes numerous Western heroes: "Morgan spun the pistol on his finger. He flipped it over

to his left hand and spun it again. He shrugged and didn't say anything else" (24, 26). When he

breaks his silence it is with typical macho assertions such as "Hydro can shoot like a motherfucker,

cain't he, four-eyes?" and "[a]in't no skin off my ass" (37, 39). Again, we can bring in Robert

Warshow's observation that the Western is all about performance: "A hero is one who looks like a

hero" (47).

It is obvious that Morgan's masculinity draws upon the powerful symbolic force of the gun,

one of the most used symbols of male power. The pistol is not only a physical object; it carries a

heavy symbolical weight, most of it masculine and powerful. Handling a gun gives the otherwise

shy and freaky Morgan comfort and a sense of power, and as we learn, it is the very origin of his

successful rebirth: "If he had not found sharpshooting in Texas, he believed he would have

checked out of this life along time ago…" (140). And even in his current reincarnation as macho

gunslinger, Morgan needs the symbolic power of guns to sustain his fragile self-confidence: When

incarcerated, "Morgan was trying to think how he could get his hands on that pistol, it would

make him feel a little better" (167). A recurrent theme in *The Sharpshooter Blues* is how shooting

a gun can somehow ease a person's pain. Hydro's father, Mr. Raney, practices the art of shooting

at his refrigerator. "Sometimes there was just nothing as satisfying as shooting a gun inside a

house," he believes. "It relieved stress. It cemented relationships, strangers or partners in

marriage …. It cleared the air." To fire a shot "through the ceiling, when you were singing the

blues, when you had lost your dear wife in childbirth and your only son had come out a

waterhead, well, there was not a thing in the world to criticize about shooting off a pistol in that case…" (62).

The tragic undertones of the characters in the novel are in sharp contrast to the triumphant legacy of the Western. It soon becomes clear that Nordan's interest lies, not in paying tribute to the beliefs behind the Western myth, but rather to question the validity of the myth. Once Nordan has established Morgan as a Western hero simulacrum, he immediately begins to debunk his status. We begin to see the sharpshooter in quite a different light than suits a traditional hero. We learn that Morgan lives in the Belgian Congo, which is "the Darktown section of Arrow Catcher." Here, in "a shack, an unpainted cabin with a crumbling chimney, a cockeyed stoop, a cinder block or two for steps," Morgan lives with his Aunt Lily, the woman who found him "in a canebrake when he was a baby, like Moses in the bulrushes, and raised him up as her own, although he was white" (137). While it can be argued that this cross-racial relationship echoes the white Western heroes raised among Indians (e.g. Leatherstocking and Hondo), the very specific racial structures of the Deep South society of the 1950s means that Morgan's origins would by no means be considered an advantage.

Furthermore, Morgan begins to regret his made-up myth. Not only does he confess that his myth is based on a lie (he did not kill any Mexican), but Nordan skillfully exposes the mechanisms behind Morgan's myth. By demonstrating how the community decides to overhear reality and prefer the myth, Nordan shows the enduring power of the Western myth. The famous phrase from John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*—"When legend becomes fact, print the legend"—runs like a leitmotif through *The Sharpshooter Blues*.[180] In fact, some of that movie's plot lines as well as its preoccupation with the construction of myth can be found in *The Sharpshooter Blues*, although Ford's and Nordan's objectives are quite dissimilar.

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[180] *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, dir. John Ford (Paramount, 1962).

In Ford's movie, the unmanly, and therefore unlikely hero, lawyer Ransom Stoddard (played

by James Stewart) guns down the villain Liberty Valance and is hailed as the town's savior and

hero, thereby claiming the throne from the macho gunslinger Tom Doniphon (played, of course,

by John Wayne). Stoddard's newly won reputation as hero helps him in his political life, and he

eventually becomes a senator. However, as it turns out, it was not Stoddard, who shot Valance.

Rather, it was the real hero, Tom Doniphon, who hid in an alley and fired the killing shot.

Doniphon tells this to Stoddard soon afterwards, so throughout his entire political career

Stoddard is painfully aware that his life and career is built on a lie; his myth is hollow.

John Ford's indignant point is that while Stoddard has lived the sweet life in Washington,

Tom Doniphon, the real hero, has been completely forgotten. Nobody in town remembers him,

and except for the company of the loyal Pompey, he died alone. This is the price paid by the real

heroes of the West, Ford argues. Even though they were the ones who paved the way for civilized

society, they were not met with gratitude. Individualists like Tom Doniphon could not lead a

society based on democratic values. Instead of praising the man whose toughness, endurance,

and physical strength both created and protected the community, that very community has

chosen the lawyer and politician as their hero. This was a mistake, in Ford's eyes, and Ransom

Stoddard himself knows this, too. He has lived with the lie, which has slowly eaten him up over

the years. As Michael Coyne sums it up, "In the end, there is no escape from the manufactured

myth—[Stoddard] is a hero to a society which prefers the romantic lie, and with that realization

dies Ransom Stoddard's last illusion of hope and his last shred of innocence."[181] Ford's movie is a

tribute to the forgotten hero of the American West, a type of man who embodies a hegemonic

masculinity based on race, physical appearance, and sheer strength. The classic Western hero is,

of course, all but forgotten in the mythic West, but Ford's movie was meant as a wake-up call to

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[181] Michael Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western* (New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1997), p. 109.

the contemporary American society of the 1960s. "*Liberty Valance* is so disillusioned with civilization," Coyne asserts, "that it may almost, by default, resemble a paean to primitivism" (109). In *The Sharpshooter Blues*, Lewis Nordan uses some of the same techniques as the film to reach a conclusion that is the opposite of Ford's.

In the novel, a similar misunderstanding takes place. Because of his sharpshooting skills and his heroic status in the community, the townspeople take for granted that Morgan killed the two Texas desperados, when in fact it was the town idiot Hydro who killed them in self-defense. Morgan was not even present, but he is hailed as a hero who acted to protect the town and its citizens. But the validity of Morgan's mythic status is soon challenged by ten-year old Louis McNaughton. But the fact that it is a child who sees through the adult community's infatuation with Morgan (and with their own self-delusion) should not be seen as an example of innocence versus corruption. Louis witnessed the killing and knows that Hydro did the shooting, but because Morgan is having an affair with Louis' mother, Louis, as an attempt at revenge, deliberately accuses Morgan of killing the two Texas desperados in cold blood. "Morgan is a murderer," he exclaims and stuns the crowd at the Grocery. When he tells his version of the killing to the men in the Grocery, the Texas desperados, who raped Hydro and were about to kill him, are turned into "two lovely children" who "didn't do a thing… were nice" and merely "wanted to buy a can of Dinty Moore" beef stew. However, Louis reveals himself, when he turns to comic-book imagery to describe the imaginary killing: "Right before he pulled the trigger, Morgan looked like he got hit by *a sizzling voltage of secret current*." This produces "some head-shaking, some chin-scratching" among the men, and Morgan's reputation as hero is intact (107-110).

It is not long, though, before Morgan himself begins to question his status as local Western hero. He feels uncomfortable that his ever increasing reputation is based on, if not lies, at least misunderstandings. "He had never claimed to kill anybody," he ponders, "just to steal a truck"

(138). The reason for his discomfort is that he is losing control of his own myth. His mother keeps referring to it, and the local townspeople add to it at random. Morgan's lack of control turns into frustration, and in a rant to his mother, he desperately attempts to claim the myth as his own while simultaneously exposing the creative power behind any myth, thereby expressing the futility of his desire for control:

> Stop blaming me for the Mexican. Hell with the Mexican, if you ask me. I gave that little son-of-bitch life. Me! Nobody else! Wouldn't nobody have ever heard of that little wetback, without me. Without me, he never would have had a truck in the first place. Wouldn't know how to drive. I can take away his truck if I want to. I can if I'm the one give him the truck. I can kill him too. I can do anything I want to with that particular Mexican. That particular Mexican is mine, all mine, nobody else's but mine. (148)

As much as he wants to, Morgan is unable to control the powerful myth he has created. It has taken life and belongs in the public sphere, where it will act according to society's needs and wishes. But only too late does he realize this, though. Ironically, at that point, the myth he has created has caught up with him and has resulted in his incarceration. Because Morgan, as the expert sharpshooter he is, is the only possible suspect in the case of the killing of the Texas couple, he is taken into custody. Here he has ample time to ponder what went wrong, and his anger turns to remorse: "All them lies about killing a Mexican—why did Morgan tell those lies? And stealing a truck? He never stole no truck. He paid good money for that raggedy old truck ….They was coming back to haunt him now, the lies" (166).

Unlike Random Stoddard of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Morgan actually exposes the lie that his own myth is based on. It is the only way he can set himself free. In a startling statement that is at once a rebuttal of the entire Western myth as well as a continuation of it, Morgan announces to his mother: "Come with me, Mama, to Texas. I'm gone get me some self-

respect. I'm gone put the past behind me. I'm gone study for the GED. I'm gone throw this pistol in the Rio Grande …. Mama, I'm through with violence. I'm changing my life. I never want to hold a gun on nobody again for the rest of my life" (244-45). Here, Morgan maintains the idea of the West as a place of redemption and regeneration, but significantly, to borrow from Richard Slotkin's term, it is a regeneration through education rather than violence. By putting down his gun and relinquishing the violence inherent in it, Morgan chooses to give up the most significant symbol of his masculine performance. Furthermore, by asking his mother to join him, Morgan fully renounces the traditional patriarchal patterns of the male Western hero, including the traditional escape from women that is inscribed into the mythic narrative of the American West.

Morgan's escape becomes one away from lies and ignorance and towards enlightenment and family reconciliation. The last lines of the novel mirror this re-characterization of the American West as a place of family rather than lonely masculinity: "… Morgan and old Aunt Lily, barreling on down the road, some road, some highway, in Morgan's raggedy old truck, with blue smoke blowing out the tailpipe, up under wide blue Western skies …. They were singing every Texas song they knew …. Morgan was saying, 'Are you happy, Mama? Are you glad to be getting out?' Aunt Lily was saying, 'Git on down the damn road!'" (291).

Despite the refreshing change to a worn-out cliché this image connotes, Nordan is not blind to reality. Morgan may have changed his mind, but the majority has not, as we are told:

> Most people in Arrow Catcher never really got it straight that Morgan wasn't a hero, let alone that he might be guilty of anything. Nobody at Monday Music connected the gossip that passed among them with anything that happened or had consequences in the real world—everything was just a story, at Monday Music …. Soon there would be another story, one about Morgan shooting his way out of jail, and yet another about him shooting the refrigerator in memory of Hydro, or in honor of Hydro's daddy. As long as there was a story, that's all that really mattered. It didn't have to be true, or to make much sense. (237-38)

Apart from the obvious direct reference to the Western myth, as embodied in Morgan, another more subtle yet still powerful critique takes place. The other sharpshooter of the title is Hydro Raney, who, like most boys, is captivated by the mythic aura surrounding Morgan. Watching Morgan shooting at a cantaloupe, the crowd is mesmerized by the sharpshooter's almost supernatural display of sheer skill:

> There was no remembering Morgan's hand moving from his side, or the silvery pistol leaving his belt …. There was no slow motion, or stop-action, none of the usual ways of seeing a thing that you can't see except in the memory of it. No blur, even, no glint of chrome in the afternoon light.
> Only, one moment, Morgan standing at ease on the back porch, with his hands by his side and speaking of his truck, and the next moment a roar, an explosion of high caliber ammunition, and a streak of fire a foot long blazing out of the end of the barrel. (28-29)

The terms "slow motion" and "stop-action" are significant here because they invoke cinematic techniques used to portray, among other things, gunfights in Westerns. Because the crowd only knows of gunslingers through popular fiction, such as the movie Western, they can only try to understand what they are seeing by applying that medium's idiom. Hydro in particular, is spellbound; he "stood there in amazement and love" (29). But when Hydro is held up at gunpoint by the Texas desperados, his innocent fascination with gunslingers and speeding bullets clashes violently with the reality behind the powerful myth. Nordan paints a shattering picture of the consequences of becoming a killer. The scene leading up to the killing is one of complete degradation for Hydro in which Cheryl, the girl, presses a pistol to his head and rapes him. The experience is one of total humiliation for Hydro. When she says, "Fuck me, waterhead," Hydro pleads, "Don't make me. It will ruin my life," and "I don't know how" (209). Hydro is "filled with fear and disgust and yet hard" (210), and when it is over Cheryl lets him know how disgusted she

is, thereby completing the humiliation. Uncertain of how to respond to what has just happened to him, Hydro acts swiftly. He shoots the girl's head off, and then shoots her partner.

The act is spelled out in all its uncomfortable details, which lie far from the romantic image the community holds. Gone is any trace of apparent heroism, and a reference to *Shane* only serves to show the huge gap between fictional heroism and murder in the real world. Trembling behind a pantry door like a voyeur, Louis witnesses the entire act, from rape to murder. His presence calls to mind two memorable scenes from *Shane* where the young boy Joey Starrett peers out through a set of saloon doors in the saloon to watch his father and his hero Shane take on the villains in a brawling fistfight, and later Joey again watches from beneath the saloon doors as Shane kills the villains. Lee Clark Mitchell describes these scenes as examples where "the difficulty of maturing into a desirable sort of man is… associated with threshold situations." Yet the type of man that Shane embodies, in Mitchell's words, the mythic "hero undeterred and undamaged by the violence that would destroy a lesser being," (209) is nowhere to be found in Nordan's fiction, except in the wishful projections that the community cast onto Morgan, but which he eventually rejects. Instead, Nordan shows us the ugly, gory reality that is murder: When Louis tries to get another look at the naked girl, he instead sees Hydro shooting the heads off the girl and boy. He sees "the back of Cheryl's head blow off and go flying past him, blood and hair and bone, and onto the wall of the store, in amongst the canned goods." As for Cheryl's partner, he "was dead before the light and shape of the foot-long flame of the second shot could have registered on his optical nerve; his brain pan was already resting among the canned corn beef and Dinty Moore and Campbell's pork and beans…." Louis watches it all in a detached, analytical way, believing it to be "by far the most interesting thing that he had ever seen," but also knowing that "the sight of it would… ruin his whole life forever if he did not tell someone." His sister Katy is out of the question, because "just hearing it might ruin her life too…" (58, 59).

It is hard not to draw connections to Huckleberry Finn's refusal to talk about the

Grangerford-Shepherdson family feud turned massacre: "I ain't agoing to tell *all* that happened—

it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night, to

see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them—lots of times I dream about them."[182] Both

Twain and Nordan are concerned with man's inhumanity to man, and the destructive powers

behind. Most of Nordan's adolescent boys have been shocked into maturity, and the ripples of

that shock continue to haunt them as grown men.

The entire experience destroys Hydro. After the shooting, Hydro is sitting on his bed, looking

at his right hand, "the one that held the gun …. It was a man's hand. He had expected to see a

child's hand, for some reason. He looked at the finger that had pulled the trigger. He put his hand

to his nose and breathed in, to discover its smell. There was nothing. No gunpowder, no death, no

sex. What had happened tonight?" (15). This is Nordan's bleak statement. After the killing, there

are no heroics, as we have come to expect from watching our Western heroes in action. There is

only a numbing sense of loneliness and guilt that no blazing guns can remove. In this case, there is

also the taboo of male sexual shame, brought on by the rape. When his father sings him a lullaby

that mentions the sexual innuendos "squeezin'" and "teasin'" Hydro breaks down: "At the

mention of sex, Hydro began to scream. He screamed and screamed, like his daddy had never

heard …. He would not be comforted" (19). Unlike the mythic Western heroes who simply gun

down the bad guys and ride out of town, Hydro is faced with the stark reality behind the glossy

myth. He must live with having killed two people, and this is exactly what he is unable to do. He

tries to find solace with his father, who mistakes his confession for a bad dream: "I'll live forever

with the blood of them two lovely children on my hands and wont nobody even let on that I done

it" (18). Consumed by feelings of shame and guilt, Hydro later drowns himself as a final way out of

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[182] Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 1885. Eds. Sculley Bradley, et al. Norton Critical Editions, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 94.

his misery. Only in death can he find solace from the consequences of his actions. Contemplating

his suicide by drowning, Hydro imagines that he might find "the boy and girl there, beneath the

surface, the lovely children, alive again, and that they would love him and speak to him of Texas

and tortillas and love and Dinty Moore" (3).

Hydro's reaction undermines the Western myth's careless attitude to violence. Where John

Ford, and numerous other Western directors and writers have praised the manly courage and skill

of Western heroes (who by definition kill the villains), Hydro is traumatized by the violence he has

committed. Where the Western most often depict the heroes gunning down the villain(s), they

hardly ever examine the effects on the heroes of all these killings (A notable exception is Clint

Eastwood's revisionary Western *Unforgiven*, which, as I explain below, still fails to carry its

message through). Granted, part of the Western hero's curse is often that he has been tainted by

the killings he has committed. This is why he cannot settle down and become part of the society

that he has made safe by killing. But very rarely does a Western delve deeper into this matter.

Another touchy aspect of the Western that is rarely explored in detail is the theme of male

homosocial relationships, one of the genre's cornerstones. In discussing the term "homosocial,"

Eve Sedgwick states that it is "applied to such activities as 'male bonding,' which may, as in our

society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality."[183] In the

same way, Jonathan Rutherford argues that male bonding is, "a collusion amongst men to resist

the Other. This collective of heterosexual masculinity adorns itself with the trappings of male

power and prestige but is in fact a sign of men's trepidation, a place to which men can retreat in

search of reassurance and validation. It is men's culture pitted against women's nature" ("Who's"

52-54). The traditional Western is such a "men's culture" with a language of its own. While the

genre has a long tradition of patriarchal dominance over women, the structure began to change

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[183] Eve Sedgwick. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), p. 1.

with the anti-Westerns of the 1960s and '70s. In the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, the fight for women's rights, and The Vietnam War, the Western turned more cynical. It's response to the nation's demand for diversity and inclusion was a striking example of escapism: While blacks and Mexicans were featured more often in Westerns, when it came to women, the genre in many ways closed in on itself. It increasingly excluded women from its narrative and began to focus solely on the male bonds. Instead of the lone hero, Westerns featured groups of men that fought their enemies together. It was the internal bond, the camaraderie, which came to carry the story. The teamwork created strong ties, so in many ways the Western had returned to Wister and Roosevelt's dream of the West as the place where manhood is reborn. Finally men could once again play with their guns and blow up stuff without the women interfering.

In *The Wild Bunch*, the male solidarity is the only thing that makes sense in a violent an amoral world. Pike Bishop, the gang leader, does not have the moral superiority that characterized earlier Western heroes. And that is exactly why he clings almost manically to a masculine code, whose only rule is blind loyalty. As he explains to his gang: "When you side with a man, you stay with him! And if you can't do that, you're like some animal, you're finished! We're finished! All of us!" Eternal allegiance to "real" men is the only way forward. Even Robert Ryan, the leader of the posse chasing the wild bunch, is infused with a nostalgic longing to be surrounded by "real" men, as he tells his paltry posse of "gutter trash": "We're after men - and I wish to God I was with them." In this way any sort of morals are disregarded in favor of an absolute ideology that pays tribute to the "right" kind of man, criminal or not.

The bond between the men is so strong, and the man cult so elevated, that the highest ideal becomes that of dying together. This is emphasized in the numerous Alamo-movies as well as in movies like *The Wild Bunch* and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. The Wild Bunch is finally gunned down in an until then unbelievable orgy of violence, but it is obvious that the men are

proud to end their lives together like that. Butch and Sundance are frozen in the last frame of the film. We hear the many shots that kill them, but on the screen they are still together, their male bond intact and eternal.

The structure of multiple male heroes brought forth a male homoeroticism, which carried the story. Surprising as this may seem in a genre by many considered traditional and conservative, male homoerotic desire played a significant part in Wister's seminal novel *The Virginian*. The Eastern tenderfoot narrator is taken aback by the Virginian, whom he describes as "a slim young giant, more beautiful than pictures …. No dinginess of travel or shabbiness of attire could tarnish the splendor that radiated from his youth and strength …. Had I been the bride," the male narrator informs us, "I should have taken the giant, dust and all" (4-5). As Lee Clark Mitchell correctly states, Wister's novel initiated the male body as a desirable object, worthy of sexual interest. This not surprisingly overlooked tradition directly opposes Laura Mulvey's attack on Hollywood's patriarchal depiction of women as passive, sexual objects in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Here Mulvey states that "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" (63). But the Western has proved her wrong, at least in that respect. Just think of the young Robert Redford and Paul Newman in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). Yet despite the intense sexual objectification of the Western male hero, there was never any doubt about his sexual orientation. Both Butch and Sundance, as well as The Wild Bunch seem eager to display their heterosexual orientation, so as to leave no doubt. They may prefer the company of men, but by God, they're not gay.

Ever since Wister's *The Virginian* with its subtext of male homoerotic desire, many Westerns have balanced the line between regular male bonding and homoerotic desire. Some films almost tip the scales towards the "forbidden" side, such as Edward Dmytryck's *Warlock* (1959), starring Henry Fonda and Anthony Quinn. The movie can be read as a homosexual variant of the Wyatt

Earp and Doc Holliday story as can, of course, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. The sexual

objectification of the Western hero and the threat of homosexuality that comes with it (the wink

in the eyes of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid) remained repressed throughout the 20th

century, and it was not until Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) that gay cowboys were

admitted into the mainstream Western. The movie successfully perforated the otherwise tabooed

homoeroticism that has been inherent in the genre since its beginning. However, it is doubtful if

we will see a fluidity of masculinities as a result. Brokeback Mountain aside, it is still the hyper-

masculinity of John Wayne that dominates the genre.

This history of male bonding and homoerotic desire in the Western is a way of getting to

Lewis Nordan's treatment of the subject in *The Sharpshooter Blues*. As I have already discussed,

Nordan severely debunks the heroic hyper-masculinity that is the bedrock of the genre. But he

does not stop there. Where most other Westerns remain elusive about homosexuality, Nordan

invites it into his text directly. Apart from the sharpshooters of the title, Morgan and Hydro, as

well as the other characters discussed here, the novel features Leonard Reel, "an extra-fat

melancholy man" who "picked up truck drivers at the Shell station… and usually wanted to kill

himself after sex with them." Leonard is a regular at the confessions at the William Tell Grocery,

where he comes to "confess his sins to Almighty God" (23). The local community treat his

confessions as an exotic event, and they simultaneously secure Leonard's place in the community

as an other.

Nordan depicts the homophobia that thrives in the male spheres in Arrow Catcher. As

described in Chapter 3, the men of Arrow Catcher retreat to Monday Music, the drug store for

breakfast. The place is described as "a man's world, like the rest of Arrow Catcher, Mississpipi, like

the rest of the world, maybe" (105). But it is a severely normative form of "man's world," one that

does not include other forms of masculinity than the accepted hegemonic one. To ensure the

integrity of the male sphere, and to ward off the slightest hint of doubt about their own "correct masculinity," the men define themselves against others, such as women and gay men. As Deborah Cameron notes, since many men are constantly eager to emphasize their heterosexual orientation, the easiest way to do so is to brag about sexual exploits with women and to ridicule gays (61). The men at Monday Music get around to joking about Morgan being "a fairy" and tease each other with "Oo-la-la"s (106). The irony is that Leonard is part of the crowd. And he has no choice but to accept the rigid rules that govern the place. After Dr. McNaughton has made a fool out of himself and embarrassed everyone else by disclosing his private problems of male inferiority, it is telling that it is Leonard who breaks the silence: "Uh, Dr. Toby, generally confession is heard out at William Tell …. Never at Monday Music" (111). More than anyone else, he is painfully aware of the blind loyalty to code that must be followed in the store.

But apart from displaying the homophobia apparent in almost any male crowd, Nordan also shows people who are able to overcome their prejudices. Such as when Leonard sucks on a sugarcane and Preacher Roe tells him: "Don't let that sugarcane be reminding you of nothing Leonard." What might seem as a homophobic joke turns out to be mere friendly banter between the two men, and the "two smiled together at the small joke" (31). And Nordan does not stop here. We get to know Leonard, and we learn of his sad love life, his hopes and longings. Late in the novel we meet him in his trailer, naked, "surrounded by his own melancholy" and feeling like a walrus, "so enormous, so sad and blue" (230-31). The reason for his guilt and remorse is that he has just had sex with a man named Kevin, "a broad-shouldered, muscular white man with several homemade tattoos scattered around his body" (231). Kevin tries to get Leonard to loosen up. As he tells him, "It's best to talk about your feelings or else you'll end up whipping the monkey shit out of yourself" (232). And Leonard finally opens up and admits his self-loathing as well as a feeling of guilt for Hydro's death. Kevin asks him to "Reach out" and offers to go with Leonard to

Hydro's funeral. "You just lean on me," he tells him. And then the two make "love one more time

that morning, in the tiny Airstream bedroom. They like to kicked out the windows" (236). The

couple then make a hearty breakfast. Where Westerns have held back when it came to critically

scrutinizing and possibly reconstructing the male bond at the heart of the Western, Lewis Nordan

has no reluctance with the taboos. Male homoerotic love is granted full acceptance in Nordan's

world, despite some of the citizens' attempts to keep the "phenomenon" repressed and reduced

to an exotic and laughable triviality.

By focusing on the aspects of the Western myth that have been glossed over, Nordan in

effect creates an anti-Western that is even more anti than most anti-Westerns. Those books and

movies are often characterized by an ambiguous attitude toward the hero and violence. They

wish to debunk the glamorous aspects, but at the same time they are often caught up in an

obvious fascination, if not infatuation, with the hero, that results in works like Clint Eastwood's

Unforgiven, which has been hailed as a Western with an anti-violent message, despite the ending

where Eastwood's very human character rises to the status of myth and guns down an entire

saloon full of armed men without receiving as much as a scratch. The resistance to going all the

way in the debunking of the heroic aspects of the hero is typical of the anti-Western, but Nordan

is not affected by it. And unlike the structure of the Western, where most of the characters have a

function (cf. Will Wright and Chapter 4), the characters in *The Sharpshooter Blues* serve no such

purpose. For instance, the Texas Desperados, the obvious villains of the novel do not have a moral

function. In fact, if they are meant to *mean* anything, it is that life is meaningless, or at least that it

is random and indifferent. Their "evil" actions cannot be translated into any system of comfort for

the society. Hydro was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the same can be said of

the Misfits. Just as importantly, the destruction of the villains has no function in the novel. The

death of the Misfits does not serve to solve society's conflict, quite the opposite. It is when Hydro

kills them that the tragedy begins. The entire community is wrecked because of the killings, and Hydro's pain is two-fold. He must live with having been raped and having killed two people.

If some kind of morale is to be forced out of *The Sharpshooter Blues* it is exactly the opposite of that at the heart of the Western tradition. The novel is a lyrical and sympathetic call for greater communication between people, men and women, men and men, parents and children. It is a manifest against violence as a solution to society's problems, the way it has been advocated throughout the frontier tradition. The novel is, of course, not as naïve and simple as this sounds, and I hesitate to use the above simplification. In most contemporary fiction, one should hesitate in assigning characters with moral functions, so my point is simply that in not doing this, Nordan is actively working against the ingrained structure that defined the influential Western genre, even though he uses some of its characteristics.

Conclusion

As a distinct genre, the American Western has not maintained the dominant position it held in American culture in its heyday of the 1940s and 50s. However, its ideology has continued to reverberate in American culture ever since. The Western is a result of more than two hundred years of myth-making, so it is no surprise that it can be traced in other genres such as science fiction, crime thrillers, and, as I have tried to show, contemporary southern fiction. In *A Web of Words*, Richard Gray examines "the different layers of intertextuality at work in any southern story… the ripples of conversation that flow out from the local to the regional to the national and the transnational" in an attempt to map out "the levels of voice that surround, the series of echoes that can inhabit, any southern text" (x). One of the echoes that Gray does not examine is the one I have focused on here; that of the American Western. Robert Brinkmeyer has already pointed to the tendency of contemporary southern writers placing their texts in the West rather than in the South. The novels I have discussed are all placed in the South but still display an obvious echo of the Western, be it through language, structure, characterization, or its use of landscape. While I have situated myself mainly in a Southern Studies context, the dissertation is also suggestive of the continuous power of the Western myth, and as such, it belongs also in a Western context. And of course, my overall focus on the masculinities aspects places the dissertation in the ongoing gender debate.

One of the immediate difficulties in my examination of the Western influence on the southern texts was how to balance the connection. Historically, the South was "the West" at one point, so it has been hard to distinguish where one begins and the other ends, to determine to what extent a certain trait can be said to be Western, or whether it was southern before it became associated with the West. And when dealing with issues such as masculinity, violence,

and honor, all equally dominant in the South and West, the lines become even more blurred. However, in chapter 2 and 5, I have shown how both the history and myths of South and West have taken on different shapes throughout the centuries. Today, the myths of the South and West are markedly different despite historical similarities. So when I claim certain traits to be Western, even though they may be southern historically, time and myth-making have associated them with the West rather than the South.

The six writers discussed here have been inscribed in a southern literary tradition already. As shown in Chapter 2, many seek to escape the ghost of Faulkner, distancing themselves from him either through parody or, as Brinkmeyer has shown, geographical displacement. My point has been to point out another literary (and cinematic) tradition these writers have inscribed themselves into, perhaps as a result of the narrow pigeonholing that the "southern" adjective can sometimes result in. This change of tradition in effect constitutes a sort of rebellion, one that has led to a move into a new frontier of southern fiction. By drawing on themes, structures, and characterizations that derive from the Western, the southern writers create something fresh, yet simultaneously well-known and they achieve a new sense of freedom; a freedom from an oppressive literary tradition that expects certain things from southern writers, old and new. And just because a novel takes place in contemporary Mississippi or North Carolina does not mean it cannot be called a Western. John Cawelti states that "the Western is essentially defined by setting," but not "a particular geographic setting like the Rocky Mountains or the Great Plains, but to a symbolic setting representing the boundary between order and chaos, between tradition and newness. It is this setting which generates certain kinds of crises which involve certain kinds of characters and call for the intervention of a particular kind of hero." Thus, following Cawelti's definition, the southern novels I have looked at fit into what he calls "Post-Westerns;" that is,

films and novels that use "Western symbolism and themes but in connection with contemporary urban or futuristic settings."[184]

Inscribed in the tradition of the Western, in many ways the cornerstone of the genre, is a certain ideology of manhood. This ideology is a patriarchal and domineering structure that positions a recognizable tough and relentless working-class masculinity as a hegemonic structure against which everything and everyone else is inferior and other. Given the cultural power of the Western myth, one of my main concerns has been to examine how and to what extent this hegemonic masculinity has been carried over into southern fiction and how the writers have responded to it. This has proved to be another difficulty, initially at least, and one I hope I have overcome. Since masculinity is still widely treated as the normative referent rather than a problematic gender construct, it is taken so much for granted that it often becomes invisible. The challenge lies in making the invisible visible, which demands that one becomes a resistant reader. This has taken some practice and it is still a work in progress, but I trust that the result speaks for itself.

Richard Slotkin ends his trilogy on the myth of the frontier in American culture by calling attention to the need for a readjusted myth, one "in which every American victory is also necessarily an American defeat" and one that "will help us acknowledge that our history is not simply a fable of sanctified and sanctifying progress, but that our national experience, and the space we inhabit, has been constructed out of what 'we' have won and of what 'we' have lost by our manner of 'winning the West.'" The new myth must enable us to make sense of "the history we have lived and the place we are living in" and must "respond to the demographic transformation of the United States and speak to and for a polyglot nationality" (*Gunfighter* 658, 655). The six writers I have discussed here have all, to some extent, drawn upon the Western

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[184] John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green U Popular P, 1999), pp. 9, 103.

myth in their works, and they have all in some ways rejected the idea of, to use Slotkin's words, "a false pastoral of pure harmony" (658) that the myth offers. Of course, the idea that Slotkin proposes of seeing American victory as American defeat is already well-known to southerners and has been ever since 1865. So in a sense that aspect is already indirectly apparent in the novels I have discussed. But the writers' project is not to create a new myth from scratch; I doubt if it is even their intention to examine the Western myth. But unconsciously or not, the myth has rubbed off on their fiction, and the writers deal with aspects of it.

The need for a new myth can also be applied to the myth of masculinity, which, like the frontier myth or Western myth, has suffered from rigid, hegemonic, and normative definitions. Slotkin's call for a new national myth ties in with the call for a readjusting of the masculine myth. We need to see masculinity as a gender construct instead of a biological given and a normative referent. Furthermore, the idea of masculinity needs to be dismantled from its monolith, to be reconstructed and opened up to include other versions of masculinity than the dominant and culturally acceptable tough hegemonic masculinity that applies to "the real man" and that has been perpetuated to generations through countless Westerns. Michael Kimmel asserts that the "American manhood of the future cannot be based on obsessive self-control, defensive exclusion, or frightened escape." He calls for "a new definition of masculinity for a new century …. A definition that is capable of embracing differences among men rather than excluding them. A definition that centers around standing up for justice and equality instead of running away from commitment and engagement. We need a democratic manhood" (*Manhood* 333). Comparing Slotkin and Kimmel's visions, the inseparable connection between the myth of the West and the myth of masculinity once again become crystal clear.

Having read the six novels in search of echoes of the Western and its inevitable henchman, hegemonic masculinity, it has become obvious that contemporary white male writers from the

South have indeed been inspired by Westerns, especially when it comes to the role of masculinity. It is in their depictions of white masculinities that the southern novels offer critical and revisionist views of the hegemonic male Western hero, who has infused American culture to become the normative male, an impossible ideal towards which generations of men have nevertheless strived.

The performance of the particular masculinity embodied by the Western hero can be traced in the language itself, and, as I have shown, especially Larry Brown, Chris Offutt and Ron Rash employ a kind of tough prose that can be linked back to the Western. But the writers are not merely uncritical purveyors of a monolithic myth. Even those who are obvious fans of the genre do not go all the way, and in most of the novels there are counter-narratives that challenge the dominant narrative.

When it comes to the depiction of male protagonists, the traditional Western hero has obviously been an influence that writers have used for different purposes. William Gay and Larry Brown are the most uncritical in the way they depict their "plain folk" heroes. In many ways Gay merely passes on the familiar Leatherstocking hero in all his hegemonic glory and the same could be said of Brown, except for the crucial counter-narrative that serves to undercut the legitimacy of his too-good-to-be-true hero. In that way, Brown ends up with a foot in each camp, just as Chris Offutt's Leatherstocking hero does. In *The Good Brother*, Virgil reinforces the traditional male hero while carefully suggesting a readjustment. On the other hand, the male protagonists of Hannah's, Nordan's, and Rash's novels tell a different story about American manhood. While Hannah's would-be hero clearly aspires towards an idealized and violent hegemonic masculinity, the text makes it clear that he is a fool to do so, and he eventually mellows. Nordan shows us how the traditional ideal of masculinity becomes a crippling force in the lives of many males, who feel overwhelmed and ultimately beaten by the expectations. And finally, Rash refuses to grant his sheriff the normative power, reducing him instead to one of many voices in the novel.

Robert Brinkmeyer concludes his examination of contemporary southern novels set in the West by asserting that these writers interrogate and revise the frontier mythology, "offering in a vision of community an alternative to radical individualism. Theirs is not a community enforcing restraint… but a community recognizing and nurturing the independence, the wildness, of the human spirit" (*Remapping* 108). But is the same true for the writers I have looked at? Several of them certainly apply Western traits only to debunk them, showing in the process the insufficiency of the myth to represent real people today. Others seem to uphold the mythic image of a hypermasculine male hero who may have certain flaws but who still continues to right wrongs. In any case, I am not sure that the writers generally offer "a vision of community" as "an alternative to radical individualism," as Brinkmeyer suggests (*Remapping* 108).

In his discussion about the southern writer in the postmodern world, Fred Hobson argues that unlike Faulkner and his generation, the new generation of southern writers does not write with the assumption that the South was defeated. The southern writers of the seventies and eighties, Hobson asserts, faced a "suddenly Superior South, optimistic, forward-looking, more virtuous and now threatening to become more prosperous than the rest of the country" (*Postmodern* 8). However, in stark contrast to the "Superior South," the fictions of contemporary male southerners convey a sense of defeated or at least deconstructed manhood. Just as the South has changed, so have the traditional roles of masculinity. Many of the contemporary male southern writers explore this change and its effect in their fictions, and once again the imaginative West offers a vast playground for these explorations. While some writers revel and let their characters boast about in the masculine sphere, others are much more critical towards the hegemonic tradition. It should also be pointed out that the writers' depictions of the contemporary South do not live up to Hobson's "Superior South"; quite the contrary, in the novels

there is a strong voice of condemnation, a lurid portrayal of the South, where physical prosperity

equals moral bankruptcy and where greed and degeneracy are slowly corrupting society.

Rather than solely writing in a southern tradition, the writers borrow from other genres,

such as the Western, both as a way of escaping the Southern Tradition, so limiting to many of

them, and also because the myths inherent in the Western genre have become the myths of

America. By employing some of these traits, the novels become not just southern novels but

American text. By drawing on well-known traits from the Western, such as the clash between

individualism and society, progress and nature, violence and order, the southern writers are able

to put a fresh yet recognizable spin on their examinations of the processes taking place in the

South today.

One striking feature of nearly all the novels discussed is the almost complete absence of

race. While Offutt does confront the issue, apart from John Roman, the black Vietnam veteran in

Hannah's novel and Jiminiz, the Mexican henchman in Gay's *The Long Home*, the texts are

virtually cleared of anything but white characters. As mentioned in my discussion of Rash's novel,

the specific demographics of the southern settings may explain the absence of ethnic characters.

However, given the South's notoriety for racial problems, it seems striking that none of the texts

attempt to take on this issue. Maybe the writers deliberately avoid the issue as a means of

escaping the literary tradition of the South, but since several of them have written specifically

about race before—e.g. Hannah's *Geronimo Rex* (1972), Brown's *Dirty Work* (1989), Nordan's

Wolf Whistle (1993)—the present absence does seem conspicuous. Perhaps the Western's

tradition of ethnic exclusion has rubbed off on these southern texts to such an extent that there is

no place for race in the narratives occupied with the (un)making of white manhood.

This dissertation is focused on six white male writers from the South whose fiction not only

echoes southern literature but also the Western. As I discussed in chapter 2, the omission of black

and women writers in this dissertation is not a result of narrow-mindedness on my behalf; with very few exceptions, the Western does not seem to appeal to black or women writers. The six writers, who have all grown up in a time where the Western was *the* dominant narrative in popular culture, have all been infused with the values and ideologies inherent in the popular genre, to such an extent that it remains visible in their fiction today, be it as critical interrogations or as more straight forward tributes. But as proof of just how deep-rooted the Western myth is in American culture, there continues to be white male southern writers who draw on the Western in their fiction set in the South.

Ron Rash's forthcoming novel, *Serena* (2008), takes place in the North Carolina mountains in the 1930s and is focused on the ruthless lumber industry that destroyed a large part of the wilderness. But the novel also features Serena, an iconic female Western heroine, , who "had been born in the Colorado and lived there until sixteen, child of a timber man who'd taught his daughter to shake hands firmly and look men in the eye as well as ride and shoot."[185] Serena creates an East-West conflict similar to the one at the heart of so many Westerns, but because she is a woman the otherwise familiar myth is given a significant twist.

Dayne Sherman, a new southern writer whose first novel, *Welcome to the Fallen Paradise* (2004), qualifies as a "town-tamer" Western set in the contemporary South, has stated the following about being compared to Cormac McCarthy and William Gay: "… we do share a number of things, I think. A love for the land. Stories with plot. A kind of innate nostalgia for rural America. A love for the South. A willingness to write unflinchingly about pain and bloodshed, evil."[186] The "innate nostalgia for rural America" that Sherman mentions is apparent in much southern fiction. In a time when the South is becoming more and more homogenous and wealthy,

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[185] Ron Rash, *Serena*. Unpublished galleys, p. 12. [To be published by Ecco/HarperCollins, October 2008].
[186] Dan Wickett, "Interview with Dayne Sherman," *Emerging Writers Forum*, November 17, 2004.
<http://www.breaktech.net/EmergingWritersForum/View_Interview.aspx?id=107>.

the West seems like the last place where the myth of individual freedom and open space is kept alive, despite the fact that the West itself has become industrialized, something Cormac McCarthy's Border Trilogy examines obsessively.

McCarthy is perhaps the best known contemporary southern writer to take on Western themes in his fiction—most notably in *Blood Meridian* and his Borderland Trilogy. But where those novels where quite obvious revisionary Westerns, both in setting and structure, *No Country for Old Men* (2005) seemed to be a change of direction for McCarthy. At first sight, the novel is a suspense thriller about drug trafficking. But in postmodern fashion, McCarthy borrows from established genres such as crime fiction, pulp fiction, the Gothic, as well as the Western. Read as a Western, the novel becomes an anti-Western, where the two likely heroes turn out to be inept. The Leatherstocking character Llewelyn Moss is killed off, apropos of nothing, and the world-weary Sheriff Bell realizes that he does not dare face the monster and he eventually throws in the towel: "*Now I aim to quit and a good part of it is just knowin that I wont be called on to hunt this man*," he admits.[187] At the end of the novel, Bell is bitter and shameful, and the killer Chigurh is still on the loose, much like the Judge in *Blood Meridian*.

McCarthy is a veteran in southern literature, but there are plenty of new southern writers who continue the Western trend. Alabama-writer Tom Franklin is an obvious example. In several of the stories in *Poachers* (1999), the male characters find escape from the complications of everyday life through acts of daydreaming. These dreams involve male bonding rituals such as hunting and fishing. In "Blue Horses," Earl dreams of the romantic cowboy-life, and "Alaska" is one long daydream of the ultimate male escape west, in this case to the last wilderness of the title. And while Franklin's debut novel *Hell at the Breach* (2003) takes place in the rural Alabama of 1897, it features several Western-inspired characteristics: Sheriff Billy Waite is yet another

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[187] Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* (New York. Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), p. 283.

lawman caught in a conflict between civilization and a kind of wilderness. And the violent ending

of the novel reads like Sam Peckinpah at his bloodiest. In his latest novel *Smonk* (2006), Franklin

goes all the way and creates a both violent and cartoonish Western-pastiche set in Alabama in

1911. As James G. Thomas Jr. has noted, the "settings and characters throughout Franklin's work

remind his readers that while the South was once part of the nation's frontier, there are parts of it

that still remain so."[188] Even the publishers stressed the Western connection, stating that "*Smonk*

creates its own category: It's a southern, not a western....."[189] To some extent, the six novels I have

discussed can be placed in this "new" category of "southerns," which imply a Western-flavored

text in a southern setting.

Other recent examples are Louisiana-writer Dwayne Sherman's first novel, *Welcome to the*

Fallen Paradise (2004), which reads like a town-tamer Western set in the South. The hero, with

the Western-flavored name Jesse Taddock, returns to his small hometown to become a deputy

sheriff and reunites with his high school sweetheart. But things turn ugly when the villain Balem

Moxley claims Jesse's land and threatens to kill him. Rather than acquiescing, Jesse chooses to

stay and fight, with the help of his uncle, and the novel soon comes to resemble the explosive

climax in Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo* (1959). Even in an obvious crime noir writer like Ace Atkins,

we find obvious traces of the Western. In Atkins' *Crossroad Blues* (2001), the hero Nick Travers

"made a grand entrance, swinging both heavy doors wide open like a cowboy in a saloon."[190] And

it is not just in physical appearance that Nick Travers resembles a Western hero. He also thinks

like one, or rather, he associates with cinematic Western heroes: "… Nick knew he had to honor

the agreement. It was like what William Holden said in *The Wild Bunch*: 'When you side with a

man you stay with him and if you can't do that, you're like some animal'" (210). And finally,

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[188] James G. Thomas Jr., "Tom Franklin," *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 9: Literature*, eds. Charles Reagan Wilson and M. Thomas Inge (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2008), p. 274.

[189] Front and back flap of Tom Franklin, *Smonk* (New York: William Morrow, 2006).

[190] Ace Atkins, *Crossroad Blues: A Nick Travers Mystery* (1998. London: Robinson, 2001), p. 204.

Thirteen Moons (2006), Charles Frazier's follow-up to *Cold Mountain*, is a story set on the southern frontier of the 19th century and tells the story of a white boy, Will Cooper, who is sent to the Cherokee Nation, where he befriends the Native American Bear. The novel reads partly like *Dances with Wolves* and is clearly yet another example of a revisionary Western set on southern soil.

As the above examples show, the Western lives on, albeit transplanted, in contemporary southern novels by white men. As is the case with the six novels I have discussed in detail, I do not mean to suggest that these "southerns" be read as simply that. They are, of course, a lot of other things and can be read as southern novels, American novels, as crime novels, some as postmodern novels, etc. My claim of southern texts as Westerns is not meant as an absolute statement, as I hope to have made clear, but as a suggestion to read the texts in new and refreshing ways in the light of the well-known southern tradition.

While my focus has been on southern writers, the masculinities aspect should not stop here. There is still a need to further unravel the depictions of masculinity in fiction, also outside of the South. Think only of the hegemonic male characters in canonized writers like Ernest Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, Philip Roth, and Don DeLillo, to mention a few. Likewise, given the immense cultural impact of the Western—as this entire dissertation is proof of—it should be possible to trace echoes of the Western's hegemonic ideology in other genres, such as today's popular action and science fiction movies, and critically examine to what extent hegemonic masculinity is being perpetuated in the 21st century. They say that old legends die hard. But by critically scrutinizing them, we can come to a better understanding of the construction behind them and the power structures upholding them.

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Summary

This dissertation explores the influence of the American Western on contemporary southern fiction, especially male white southern writers. The underlying basis is the feminist-oriented masculinities theory, which I employ in order to examine the writers' take on various forms of masculinity, if they merely pass on the Western's monolithic and hegemonic world view, or if they somehow create a new picture of American manhood. The dissertation uses six primary novels: Lewis Nordan's *The Sharpshooter Blues* (1995), Larry Brown's *Father and Son* (1996), Chris Offutt's *The Good Brother* (1997), William Gay's *The Long Home* (1999), Barry Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001), and Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden* (2002). In Chapter 1, I present the problematics behind the dissertation and introduce the theory employed. Chapter 2 examines the historical and mythical connections, differences, and similarities between the South and the West and shows how the frontier myth came to be a cornerstone in a general American myth. I argue that "southern frontier" fiction constitutes a subgenre throughout 20th century southern fiction, but one that was not included in the accepted canon of southern literature. As a continuation of the subgenre, the six contemporary writers draw on the frontier myth as a way to escape an oppressive literary tradition. In Chapter 3, I look at the six writers in terms of language and examine to what extent the tradition of the Western's anti-language can be traced in the six writers. It becomes clear that the writers' views on language, unconsciously or not, mirror the patriarchal "tough language" tradition of the Western. I then look at the language of the characters in the novels and conclude that they live up to the "language codes" of traditional Western characters. When it comes to the actual language of the six texts, the picture becomes more blurred. I identify the style of three writers as "tough" or "realistic" and the style of the remaining three as more "artificial." When taking into account the content of the texts, it is possible to point out the writers who seem to perpetuate the Western's hegemonic code of language—the writers who employ both tough language and a certain macho content, such as violence (William Gay, Larry Brown, Chris Offutt) and those who challenge it and even debunk it by using language as a counterweight to the content (Barry Hannah, Lewis Nordan, Ron Rash). In Chapter 4, I employ Will Wright's structural analysis of the Western to take a closer look at the structure of Brown's *Father and Son* and Hannah's *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* in order to determine to what extent they can be claimed as Westerns. While it can be argued that both novels follow Wright's list of Western functions, the novels' counter-narratives, something Wright does not take into account, ultimately debunk the Western ideologies inherent in the structure and question to what extent the texts can

be claimed as Westerns. In Chapter 5, I trace the connection between the southern and Western hero—both of whom started as aristocratic figures. However, while the southern hero continued in the genteel tradition, the Western hero evolved into a plain working-class hero. This plain type of hero is the protagonist in the two texts I discuss at length, Offutt's *The Good Brother* and Gay's *The Long Home* and I trace the influence of Cooper's Leatherstocking, the archetypal Western hero, in these protagonists. Moving from the plain men to the landscape they inhabit, Chapter 6 examines to what extent the southern writers draw on the Western tradition in their use of landscape. I first show how the writers attempt to reassert their southern landscapes from their literary predecessors, how they make it their own. In some cases, the writers obviously draw on frontier imagery in their landscape descriptions, and some use the landscape as a moral test for their male characters, as is the tradition in the Western. I then discuss Rash's *One Foot in Eden* and shows how Rash's depiction of Sheriff Alexander draws on the Western tradition of pitting man against the land in order to emphasize his moral and physical stature. But rather than presenting the sheriff as a dominant male voice in the novel, Rash allows other voices to become central as well, thereby creating a much more complex picture of the characters and in a sense debunking the Western myths that the text evokes. In Chapter 7, I read Nordan's *The Sharpshooter Blues* as a revisionary Western that begins by evoking the familiar myths only to debunk them one by one, ending up with a text that is much more open generous than Westerns; one that includes gays and advocates communication instead of violence, and one that does not assign moral functions to its characters.

In the last chapter, I draw together my findings from the previous chapters and conclude that there are clear echoes of the Western to be found in contemporary southern fiction, especially by white men. The echoes suggest the immense influence of the Western, especially on the generations that grew up in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. Despite the Western's current status as old-fashioned and peripheral, its ideology still reverberates in popular culture in genres like science fiction, action movies, crime noir, and, as I have shown, southern fiction. But where some writers more or less uncritically pass on the Western's hegemonic ideology of masculinity, there are several writers who employ traits from the Western in order to question the myths that make up the genre and thereby question general American myths.

Resumé

Denne afhandling undersøger den amerikanske Westerns indflydelse på nutidens sydstatslitteratur, navnlig mandlige hvide sydstatsforfattere. Ved at tage udgangspunkt i den feministorienterede maskulinitetsteori, vil jeg undersøge hvorledes forfatterne tackler diverse former for maskulinitet, om de blot videregiver Westerngenrens monolitiske og hegemoniske verdenssyn, eller om der er tale om et nyt billede af amerikansk manddom. Afhandlingen bygger på seks primærtekster: Lewis Nordans *The Sharpshooter Blues* (1995), Larry Browns *Father and Son* (1996), Chris Offutts *The Good Brother* (1997), William Gays *The Long Home* (1999), Barry Hannahs *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* (2001) og Ron Rash: *One Foot in Eden* (2002). Kapitel 1 præsenterer problematikken og introducerer teorien. Kapitel 2 undersøger de historiske og mytiske forbindelser, forskelle og ligheder mellem Syden og Vesten og viser hvordan *frontier*-myten kom til at danne grundlag en generel myte om Amerika. Jeg argumenterer, at "sydstats-*frontier*" fiktion udgør en undergenre i det 20. århundredes sydstatslitteratur, men én der ikke blev inkluderet i sydstatslitteraturens accepterede kanon. De seks nutidige forfattere fortsætter denne undergenre ved at trække på *frontier*-myten som et led i at frigøre sig fra en dominerende litterær tradition. I Kapitel 3 undersøger jeg de tre forfattere med udgangspunkt i sproget, og jeg undersøger hvorvidt Westernens tradition for "anti-sprog" kan spores i de seks forfattere. Det er tydeligt, at forfatternes syn på sproget afspejler Westernens tradition for et patriarkalsk "hårdt sprog". Jeg kigger endvidere på karakterernes sprog i romanerne og konkluderer, at de lever op til den traditionelle Westerns sprog-kodeks. Når man kigger på selve sproget i de seks romaner, kompliceres billedet dog. Jeg identificerer tre af forfatternes stil som "hård" eller "realistisk" og de tre resterende forfatteres stil som mere "kunstig". Når man inddrager teksternes indhold bliver det muligt at udpege de forfattere, der synes at videreføre Westernens hegemoniske sprog-kodeks—de forfattere der anvender både et hårdt sprog og en bestemt type macho-indhold, såsom vold (William Gay, Larry Brown, Chris Offutt) og dem, der udfordrer og endda underminerer det ved at bruge sproget til at opveje for det voldelige indhold (Barry Hannah, Lewis Nordan, Ron Rash). I Kapitel 4 anvender jeg Will Wrights strukturelle analyse af Westernen til at undersøge strukturen i Browns *Father and Son* og Hannahs *Yonder Stands Your Orphan* for at redegøre for, hvorvidt de kan karakteriseres som Westerrns. Man kan argumentere for, at begge romaner følger Wrights liste af Western-"funktioner", men romanernes mod-fortællinger, noget Wright ikke tager højde for, underminerer i sidste ende de strukturens iboende ideologier og sætter spørgsmålstegn ved, hvorvidt teksterne kvalificerer som Westerns i stedet for anti-Westerns. I Kapitel

5 opridser jeg forbindelsen mellem sydstats- og Westernhelten, der begge oprindeligt var aristokratiske figurer. Men hvor sydstatshelten fortsatte som dannet, udviklede Westernhelten sig til en almindelig arbejderklasse-helt. Denne almindelige type helt er hovedperson(er) i de to romaner jeg diskuterer, Offutts *The Good Brother* og Gays *The Long Home*, og jeg sporer indflydelsen fra Coopers Læderstrømpe-helt, den arketypiske Westernhelt, i romanernes hovedpersoner. I Kapitel 6 bevæger jeg mig fra de almindelige mænd og til det landskab de indtager. Her undersøger jeg hvorvidt forfatterne trækker på Western-traditionen i deres brug af landskabet. Jeg påviser først, hvordan forfatterne forsøger at styrke sydstatslandskaberne i forhold til deres litterære forgængere, hvordan de gør det til deres eget. I nogle tilfælde trækker forfatterne tydeligvis på *frontier-*billedsprog i deres landskabsbeskrivelser, og nogle bruger landskabet som en moralsk prøve for deres mandlige karakterer, sådan som der er tradition for i westernen. Jeg diskuterer Rashs *One Foot in Eden* og viser, hvordan Rashs beskrivelse af Sheriff Alexander trækker på western-traditionen hvor manden bliver sat op imod landskabet for at understrege hans moralske og fysiske format. Men i stedet for at præsentere sheriffen som en dominerende mandlig stemme i romanen, tillader Rash, at andre stemmer bliver centrale i fortællingen, og han skaber derved et meget mere kompleks billede af karaktererne og underminerer på en måde de western-myter, som teksten selv fremmaner. I Kapitel 7 læser jeg Nordans *The Sharpshooter Blues* som en "revisionær" western, der starter med at fremmane de velkendte westernmyter blot for at underminere dem en efter en og ende som en tekst, der er meget mere åben og storsindet end westerns; en tekst der inkluderer bøsser og advokerer kommunikation i stedet for vold; en tekst der ikke tilskriver sine karakterer moralske funktioner.

I sidste kapitel sammenholder jeg mine resultater fra de forrige kapitler og konkluderer, at der findes tydelige ekkoer fra westernen i nutidig sydstatslitteratur, især af hvide mænd. Ekkoerne er tegn på westernens enorme indflydelse, især på de generationer, der voksede op i 1940erne, '50erne og 60erne. Til trods for westernens nuværende status som gammeldags og perifer så giver den stadig genlyd i populærkulturen i genrer som science fiction, actionfilm, *noir*-krimier og, som jeg har påvist, sydstatslitteratur. Men hvor nogle forfattere mere eller mindre ukritisk viderefører westernens hegemoniske maskulinitets-ideologi, så er der flere forfattere, som bruger karaktertræk fra westernen for at sætte spørgsmålstegn ved de myter, der ligger til grunds for genren og derved sætte spørgsmålstegn ved selve myten om USA.