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Frontier Re-Imagined: The Mythic West In The Twentieth Century

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FRONTIER RE-IMAGINED: THE MYTHIC WEST IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

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DEDICATION

To my mother, Lisa Waller: thank you for believing in me.

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I wish to thank the following people. Without their support, I would not have completed this project. Professor Emeritus David Cowart served as my dissertation director for the last four years. He graciously agreed to continue working with me even after his retirement. I am honored to call Dr. Cowart my director, mentor, and friend. Professors Brian Glavey, Tara Powell, and Bradford Collins served on my dissertation committee. Their advice and flexibility proved indispensable as I neared the end of this project. I hope they will call on me if I might ever repay their kindness.

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ABSTRACT

The author begins by reviewing Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 "Frontier Thesis" and by surveying the twentieth-century consensus of the "New Western Historians." The author then poses a question: even though the physical frontier "closed" in the late-nineteenth century, did American writers turn away from the imaginative frontier? To a great extent, the writers of literary fiction did turn to other material during the modernist period. Simultaneously, however, Westerns began to dominate popular fiction and film. More notably, writers such as Raymond Chandler began to transform the traditional Western. In Philip Marlowe, Chandler created an urban cowboy; this cowboy locates his roots in dime novels and popular cowboy tales. In novels such as *The Big Sleep*, Chandler rigidly abides by a personal code that looks very similar to the one practiced by the mythic cowboys. Nonetheless, the reader discerns that the rapidly-disappearing frontier has already made this urban cowboy an anachronism. Cormac McCarthy, in *All the Pretty Horses*, also features a protagonist who abides by the code. In this "traditional" Western, John Grady Cole embraces the cowboy way of life, but his experiences in Mexico prompt the reader to examine traditional nationalistic myths. For a more postmodernist Western, the author turns to Robert Coover's *Ghost Town*. This parodic novel contains none of the nostalgia and romance of *All the Pretty Horses*. Coover's hero, "the kid," travels across a surrealist landscape that includes all of the familiar Western tropes: gunfights, train robberies, cattle rustling, poker games, et al. In a sense, the kid becomes the avatar of all cowboys; his experiences "pile up" to

demonstrate that the Western genre has become exhausted. As the twentieth century gave way to the twenty first, the prolific writer Percival Everett attempted to create a new Western paradigm. In works such as *Wounded* and *Half an Inch of Water*, Everett looks at the mythic West with suspicion while also creating something fresh. Everett's aim thus turns the Western away from Coover's deconstructionist project and toward something modernist. In this "new Western," Everett's heroes begin to form collectivist partnerships that embrace relationship, respect for the environment, and diversity.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The Turnerian Narrative

First presented in Chicago at a special meeting of the American Historical Society during the World Fair's Columbian Exposition in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" sent shockwaves through the academic community. "American development," he argued, had

exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West (Turner 4).

Turner's arguments represented a marked departure from those of other American historians such as Charles McLean Andrews and Herbert L. Osgood, who, in describing the American ethos, had attempted to connect the character of the United States to its European customs and traditions and/or to the cultural, economic, and racial divide

between the North and the South. Turner, however, turned away from Europe as he unequivocally declared that it was the American West that had given its citizens the ambition and dynamism to form a great nation. Moreover, Turner explicitly departed from Andrews and Osgood's Anglo-centric interpretations of American history when he declared that Westward Expansion "decreased our dependence on England" and that American history demonstrates a clearly discernible "steady movement away from the influence of Europe" (5, 17). In addition to this vigorous debate, Turner's thesis also caused alarm because it reinforced the notion—first introduced in the 1890 census—that the frontier was now "closed." If the frontier was so pivotal to the spirit of America, as Turner had argued, what would now replace it? What would keep American ingenuity, ambition, democracy, and individualism alive? As it turned out, a couple of candidates emerged to attempt to fill the void in the twentieth century: upward mobility and Hollywood.

The New Western Historians

Turner's hypothesis dominated scholarly and popular discussion for close to a century; however, in the 1980s scholars began to adopt a more nuanced view of frontier history. The "new western historians" attacked Turnerian history on two fronts: They argued, first, that Turner's analysis privileged the white, male perspective, and, second, that it was reductive and too linear. Thus, they attempted to take a broader, more-inclusive look at the frontier. Patricia Nelson Limerick emerged as one of the strongest of these voices. In *The Legacy of Conquest* Limerick says that "Turner was, to put it mildly, ethnocentric and nationalistic. English-speaking white men were the stars of his story; Indians,

Hispanics, French Canadians, and Asians were at best supporting actors and at worst invisible. Nearly as invisible were women, of all ethnicities” (21). She also says that Turner was so concerned with the role of farming in the settlement of the West that he forgot to mention the key roles played by mining, towns, frontier government, etc. (21). Stephen Aron concurs on this point, arguing that “the Western history that has been written in a Turnerian key neglected the experiences of the majority of westerners (who were not all white men)” (6).

Though Turner focused primarily on the role of white men in the “settling” of the West, Aron discusses how multiple “Wests” existed prior to the 1893 thesis (i.e. different geographical Wests, different cultural/racial Wests, different class Wests, etc.). He also criticizes Turner for being too myopic in his east to west analysis. This simplistic approach, Aron says, neglected the importance of “borderlands” to frontier history (5). These borderlands were crossroads where “cultures not only collided, but also coincided” (5). Leonard Thompson and Howard Lamar also point to the limitations of Turner’s linear, singularly-focused historical analysis, arguing that this “has created a tendency for mainstream historians to refrain from questioning some of the fundamental assumptions that are current in their own environments” (3). Not surprisingly, Thompson and Lamar declare “the experience of the indigenous society...as significant as the experience of the intrusive one” (4)¹. Limerick, Aron, Lamar, and Thompson agree that the real story of the West includes men and women of many nationalities and faiths (Christians, Mormons,

¹ In *The Frontier in History: North America and South Africa Compared*, Lamar and Thompson rely on a comparative approach as they attempt to define “frontier not as a boundary or line, but as a territory or zone of interpenetration between two previously distinct societies” (7).

Jews, the adherents of several Asian religions), African-Americans, and Native Americans from a multitude of tribes.

Critical Considerations

The analysis of the new western historians paralleled the transformative philosophy of structuralist thinkers in the latter half of the twentieth century. The skeptical views of philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have forever changed the way we view literature, art, politics, etc. Most pertinent to the current discussion is the postmodern questioning of “grand narratives.” Jean-Francois Lyotard characterizes a grand narrative or metanarrative as an all-encompassing or totalizing account that purports to explain a major aspect of society, history, religion, science, etc. Such explanations, in Lyotard’s estimation, fail to account for their component parts—those voiced by the subaltern “other.” Furthermore, a grand narrative often bolsters the power of the current ruling class or government. I classify Turner’s thesis as a grand narrative since it informed scholarly and popular interpretations of the frontier throughout much of the twentieth century (and since it continues to be debated today). In addition, Turner assisted greatly in creating myths surrounding the West, cowboys, pioneers, etc. In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard explains that one of the main characteristics of postmodernism is “an incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv); therefore, new western historians such as Limerick reflect the critical mood of the day when they criticize and problematize Turner’s findings (as well as other widely-accepted beliefs about the frontier). Postmodernism scholar Steven Connor says that political and class changes during the postmodern era have precipitated like changes in history and art:

Authority and legitimacy were no longer so powerfully concentrated in the centers they had previously occupied; and the differentiations—for example, those between what had been called ‘centers’ and ‘margins,’ but also between classes, religions, and cultural levels (high culture and low culture)—were being eroded or complicated. Centrist or absolutist notions of the state, nourished by the idea of the uniform movement of history towards a single outcome, were beginning to weaken. It was no longer clear who had the authority to speak on behalf of history . . . it seemed to many reasonable to assume that equivalent changes would take place in the spheres of art and culture (3). As a result, historians no longer treat Turner’s thesis as *the* authoritative interpretation of western history, choosing to give voice to multiple viewpoints of the West instead.

Still, scholars have continued to recognize the impact of Turnerian history. George Rogers Taylor claims that “[e]ver since the late 1920’s scholars have been arranging a decent burial for the Turner thesis. But the hypothesis, though continuously threatened, has refused to die and is today as much alive as it was when first announced by the young history teacher at Chicago in 1893” (vii). Ray A. Billington agrees that Turner’s work has played a pivotal role in American historiography, but he qualifies his praise by arguing that westward expansion is, in many instances, a story of community rather than individualism. He posits that cooperation among the settlers was “essential,” and he says “that privacy . . . was virtually unattainable” (165, 173). And Aron, while highly critical of Turner’s ethnocentric focus, admits that “Turner’s thesis, despite its age, omissions, and errors, has some lessons to impart to students of any or all of America’s Wests” (6). Regardless, and more to the point, few if any scholars appear to be

downplaying the importance of the frontier to American history, even if they debate *how* we should view western expansion. The frontier may have “closed” in 1890, but its significance has never waned. The West (or the frontier²), a crucial setting and symbol long before Turner’s thesis, remains a vibrant part of literature as well, a creative wellspring whereby many authors, relying on frontier tropes that have been around since Columbus arrived in the New World, have experimented and honed new literary forms. Interestingly, though the new western historians began probing traditional interpretations of frontier in the last two decades of the twentieth century, American writers had begun problematizing and transforming the frontier/wilderness aesthetic even earlier. The frontier, it seems, allows these authors to co-opt and/or dismantle popular and archetypal western myths. The frontier setting also gives these writers opportunities to blur the line between high and low culture, to experiment with geography and time, and to subvert traditional interpretations of race and culture. The 1890 census and Turner’s subsequent thesis may have announced the closing of the frontier, but the frontier, remarkably, became an even more important literary setting and symbol over the course of the next century.

² I will treat the terms *wilderness*, *frontier*, and *The West* as somewhat interchangeable for the remainder of this study. In some ways, these terms are synonymous. However, for ease of discussion, I will characterize “wilderness” as the land that lay between the east coast of the United States and the Mississippi River prior to 1803. This designation is pertinent to the discussion in Chapter One. The difference between the terms “frontier” and “The West” is a little hazier. I will generally refer to those lands west of the Mississippi as the “frontier,” while reserving the appellation “The West” for discussions about myth and narrative.

Organizational Framework

From the age of exploration and colonization to the early twentieth century, views of wilderness shifted dramatically, yet its importance to literature never diminished. In fact, one may argue that the frontier played *the* key part in the creation of a uniquely American literature, particularly in the formation of enduring archetypes. In chapter I, I will discuss the rise of the frontier in literature and the formation of these motifs and archetypes, with particular attention to their appeal to writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries who have featured, problematized, and/or subverted them. Furthermore, in conducting this survey, I will look at the frontier/wilderness from multiple angles, attempting to avoid the temptation to treat frontier literature as synonymous with the “Western.” The Western certainly bears mention; however, I will limit the bulk of my discussion in Chapter I to texts representative of their respective literary periods.

In Chapter II, I turn to what may seem a surprising choice for inclusion in this study: the “hardboiled” detective story. The novels of Raymond Chandler, in particular, invite perception as twentieth-century “Westerns.” Chandler’s hero Philip Marlowe appears to be a modern-day cowboy as he navigates the violent, urban frontier of Los Angeles. Indeed, Marlowe bears a striking resemblance to frontier heroes such as Natty Bumppo and dime novel protagonists such as Deadwood Dick. In this chapter, I will trace the literary evolution from exemplary frontiersman to detective hero (and from frontier novel to its hardboiled congener) that occurred between the early-Romantic period and the Modernist period. Before turning to Chandler’s works, however, I begin with another modernist novel set in Los Angeles: Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*. Here, we see how the City of Angels has become a sort of modernist/surrealist frontier. Los

Angeles represented the terminus of Westward Expansion mere decades before and is now a place where echoes of the Old West continue to haunt the landscape. Fittingly, West's *The Day of the Locust* and Chandler's first novel, *The Big Sleep*, both appeared in 1939. In novels such as *The Big Sleep*, *Farewell, My Lovely*, *The High Window*, and *Playback*, Philip Marlowe moves among the same sad cowboy simulacra that West catalogs. Chandler may locate his novels in twentieth-century Los Angeles, but his protagonist's ties to the cowboys of yore remain unmistakable. Even as he is faced with corruption and vice from all quarters, Marlowe adheres to a personal code that closely resembles the "cowboy code."³ In addition to his stoicism and rugged individualism, Marlowe practices a strong work ethic, always putting pleasure and contentment aside until he has completed a case. Still, also like many of the cowboys of myth, Marlowe is perfectly willing to operate in an ethical gray area to "get his man." These links between Marlowe and the archetypal cowboy—besides merely highlighting some of the links between literary epochs—also foreground the notion that the frontier and the cowboy way of life are no more. As Marlowe works in the urban landscape of Los Angeles, the city that represents the furthest reaches of the West, the reader begins to discern that this is the place where myths such as Manifest Destiny and the American Dream have come to die.

³ To demonstrate parallels between Marlowe and earlier cowboys, I draw on material from Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* and *Last of the Duanes*. My purpose in choosing these novels is twofold: first, they are foundational Westerns, particularly *The Virginian* and *Riders of the Purple Sage*; many of the myths, characters, and themes of the Western genre originate in these novels. Second, by including material from these Westerns early in my study, I am further establishing a theoretical framework that will inform my discussion in Chapters III and IV as well. Before studying how the Myth of the West is questioned, dismantled, and ultimately reinvented, I need to continue to define what a Western actually is.

In Chapter III, I will turn to the postmodern modifications of a more “traditional” Western. Critics are often tempted to view Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses* as a traditional Western, only in modern dress. Some critics, labeling it as a western “romance,” place it beside the novels of Owen Wister and Zane Gray. I will argue, however, that McCarthy’s novel calls into question many myths about the frontier and its heroes. Furthermore, *All the Pretty Horses* demonstrates a distinctive “mingling of old and new” as well as a shifting in time and/or place of the frontier, a shifting that allows McCarthy to raise questions about traditional interpretations of history. Steven Connor argues that in postmodernism “the past appears to be included in the present, or at the present’s disposal, in which the ratio between present and past has therefore changed” (10). Indeed, at various times and in various ways, this novel possesses the “feel” of a late-nineteenth-century Western. John Grady Cole could pass as an archetypal cowboy figure, and he possesses the code traits of rugged individualism, unwavering courage, loyalty to God and country, and stoicism in the face of hardship. If the reader is not careful, he/she will quickly forget that the setting of this novel is twentieth-century America (roughly 1949). No matter, the forces of modernization soon pull this hero into the postmodern present. And in this postmodern present, we learn that new battles are being fought on new frontiers.

Though *All the Pretty Horses* undoubtedly questions many Western myths, the reader may safely infer that McCarthy views his hero John Grady Cole with a sense of nostalgia. After reading a fellow 1990s Western, Robert Coover’s *Ghost Town*, the reader will be unable to make the same accusation of the author. In Chapter IV I discuss *Ghost Town* as a postmodernist Western. In this ribald, surrealist tale, Coover exhibits no

fondness either for his cowboy protagonist or for the Myth of the West. Indeed, by creating a postmodernist “playground” of heterotopian elements, intertextuality, worlds under erasure, and pastiche, Coover prompts the reader to question several traditional histories and narratives. Simply put, in *Ghost Town* Coover sounds the death knell for the grand narrative of the West.

His deconstructionist project complete, Coover leaves a literary void, a space where the Western might be reimagined. Percival Everett successfully fills this void with his novel *Wounded* and his short-story collection *Half an Inch of Water*. Thus, in the second half of Chapter IV, I turn to the works of Everett, arguing that he has created a new Western paradigm, particularly in his post-2000 works. Like Coover, Everett completed his own deconstructionist project in 1994 with the publication of *God’s Country*, a parody of the Western that shares much in common with *Ghost Town*. However, in the next two decades, Everett pivoted away from postmodernist concerns and toward something we might term modernist. To be certain, Everett attempts to create a Revised Myth of the West in *Wounded* and *Half an Inch of Water*. In Everett’s heroes, we may hear echoes of the cowboys of old, but these cowboys have rejected individualism in favor of a love of community, the environment, and diversity.

CHAPTER II

SURVEY OF FRONTIER LITERATURE: 1492-1900

Foundations

Frederick Jackson Turner, in his 1893 “Frontier Thesis,” announced the end of westward expansion and the closing of the frontier. Jackson’s thesis caused concern in academic and political circles because the frontier had been, from the very day Columbus spied the New World in 1492, such a vital part of the American ethos. American-naturalism scholar Mary Lawlor says that the closing of the frontier “fostered an extensive sense of loss in U.S. public discourse” (41). Turner, who credited the frontier with the formation of America’s democratic spirit and with the emergence of the rugged individual, called for a new vision to keep those characteristics alive. Lawlor, while admitting that much of “Turner’s argument would be refuted by subsequent generations of historians,” discusses how the frontier served as “a vital cultural symbol” and a “space in which key promises of a democratic national narrative could be acted out” (41).

In literary circles, the closing of the frontier had serious ramifications as well. The frontier had been an important trope of American literature from the very beginning. Indeed, from Columbus’s first descriptions of the New World to the naturalist writings of Crane and London in the late nineteenth century, the frontier had alternately served as primary setting, chief antagonist, and the vehicle by which authors and poets had experimented with style, form, and literary philosophy. More important, the

frontier/wilderness had been pivotal in giving rise to a uniquely-American mythology. Much of Richard Slotkin's argument in *Regeneration Through Violence* parallels that of Turner, at least insofar as it emphasizes the importance of the frontier in creating an American identity:

In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who (to paraphrase Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*) tore violently a nation from the implacable and opulent wilderness . . . Their concerns, their hopes, their terrors, their violence, and their justifications of themselves, as expressed in literature, are the foundation stones of the mythology that informs our history. (4)

Thus, Slotkin asserts that the American Myth (along with the nearly synonymous Myth of the West) was birthed not in 1776 with the signing of the Declaration but instead may be traced back to the early writings of the exploration and colonization period, three centuries before the United States became a nation.

Columbus's letters to Spain, following his discovery of the New World in 1492, exhibit early evidence of a frontier mythology. For example, in his *Letter to Lord Raphael Sanchez*⁴ we see the image of America as a New Eden, an image with tremendous historical and literary consequences for centuries to come. Columbus's description catalogs the abundant resources and the beauty of the new lands: "All [the islands] are most beautiful, of a thousand shapes, and all accessible and filled with trees

⁴ Full title: *Letter to Lord Raphael Sanchez, Treasurer to Ferdinand and Isabella, King and Queen of Spain, on His First Voyage* (1493)

of a thousand kinds” (27).⁵ Columbus goes on to catalog the “many kinds of birds and a great variety of fruits” and, knowing the appetites of his audience, the “many mines of metals” (27). Mentioning the generosity of the indigenous people, he even implies that they might cheerfully surrender the contents of those mines. The natives, he assures his correspondent, pose no threat: “[t]hey have no iron or steel or weapons, nor are they capable of using them” (27). Though Columbus is careful to adopt a respectful tone toward the natives, his depiction of their gullibility and lack of fighting prowess foreshadows the European thinking that would cause Native Americans to suffer for centuries to come. Furthermore, Columbus’s idea of America as a New Eden, a land of abundance and limitless opportunities, persisted for the next 400 years. This view would eventually become a central tenet of the frontier/wilderness mythos.

Though Columbus demonstrates some measure of restraint toward the indigenous peoples of the New World (if not its resources), the same cannot be said of Sir Walter Raleigh. His “advertisement,” *The Discovery of Guiana*, written over a century after Columbus’s letters, also features images of abundance and riches (most prominently the mythic El Dorado), but he shows none of Columbus’s moderation.⁶ His antagonistic

⁵ Excerpts from Columbus, Raleigh, and Smith feature antiquated spellings and diction. I have attempted to quote them faithfully.

⁶ Raleigh led two expeditions to the New World. In 1584, he attempted to establish a settlement at Roanoke Island, off present-day North Carolina. After Raleigh’s departure, the remaining colonists mysteriously disappeared (presumably killed by Indians). In 1595, Raleigh and his men traveled further south, to the mouth of the Orinoco River in South America. This trip became the subject for *Discovery of Guiana*, a book that failed to garner enough money for another expedition, even though, as Giles Gunn observes, “no work produced during the age of exploration and discovery better represented what one scholar has described as ‘the shimmering mirage of gold and glory through which the sixteenth century saw the New World’” (65).

attitude toward the New World and its native inhabitants prefigures the aggression that would drive Americans westward until the frontier was no more:

Guiana is a countrey that hath yet her maydenhead, never sackt, turned, nor wrought; the face of the earth hath not bene torne, nor the vertue and salt of the soyle spent by manurance. The graves have not bene opened for golde, the mines not broken with sledges, nor their Images puld downe out of their temples. It hath never bene entered by any armie of strength, and never conquered or possessed by any christian Prince. It is besides so defensible, that if two forts be builded in one of the Provinces which I have seene, the flood setteth in so neere the banke, where the channel also lyeth, that no ship can passe up but within a Pike's length of the artillery...

(70)

Raleigh's tendentious description serves as a reminder of the European mindset during the era of exploration and colonization: Europeans had a God-given right to journey to the New World, conquer its people, and take possession of its lands. In Raleigh's fevered description, another piece of the frontier myth takes shape. Raleigh seeds, as it were, the idea that, two centuries later, would be called Manifest Destiny. Suggesting that Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana* laid the foundation for the "American dream" myth in literature, a myth that has enjoyed literary prominence up to and beyond Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Gunn argues that Raleigh's "book helped to inspire . . . and set in motion the plunder of the New World and its peoples" (66).

Captain John Smith's *A Description of New England*⁷ adds to the picture painted by Columbus and Raleigh; nevertheless, this text is perhaps more notable for its sections on individualism and work ethic, both key aspects of the frontier mythos. A young man, Smith reasons, can come to America and own land; he is free to hunt and fish; he can farm the lush soil to feed himself and his family; and, above all, he can enjoy the abundance of the land's natural resources, natural resources that Smith is careful to catalog in great detail. Money and title are not requirements, Smith continues; in fact, they are oftentimes hindrances: "Heer nature and liberty affords us that freely, which in *England* we want, or it costeth us dearely" (99). In the New World, the man with nothing can have everything as long as he is willing to work hard and as long as he possesses the right kind of spirit. In short, this land has no kings or princes, but a man might live like one. Though careful to warn potential settlers about the inherent risk and hard work involved in trying to make a new life here, Smith suggests that danger may be one of the New World's chief attractions, for "[w]ho can desire more content, that hath small meanes; or but only his merit to advance his fortune, then to tread, and plant that ground hee hath purchased by the hazard of his life?" (98).

Thus, roughly two hundred years before the creation of the United States, many, if not all, of the frontier mythology's characteristics were clearly defined. From Columbus we have the notion of America as a New Eden and as a place of limitless opportunities; from Raleigh we have the relentless pursuit of riches and opportunities; and from Smith

⁷ Following his famous 1607 expedition that resulted in the founding of the Jamestown colony, Smith returned to England to recover from an injury. He made a second voyage in 1614, when he explored and surveyed the New England region. Smith apparently fell in love with the area, and he promoted its settlement in his next two books. He also offered to lead the Pilgrims to the New World, but they declined his proposal.

we have the emphasis on self-reliance and individualism. Traces of this frontier mythos are of course present throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But it is in the nineteenth century that these aspects starkly crystallize. For it is in the nineteenth century that we witness the rise of American literature.

The Romanticist Frontier

Assisting in the emergence of a uniquely American literature—one distinguishable from its European counterparts—was the frontier/wilderness, a backdrop that provided America with conflicts and themes much different from those in Europe. In fact, one could argue that the American frontier played the most important role in the rise of cis-Atlantic literature. After all, the 1800s were a time of restless westward expansion, a time when Americans came face-to-face with the frontier and its character-shaping hardships. Critics and authors are often tempted to reduce the frontier to its simplest terms when looking back at the nineteenth century; the Hollywood westerns have conditioned the modern mind to mythologize the frontier as a place of gunfights at high noon and battles with Indians on the plains. In truth, the literature of this period was much more complex and multi-layered.

In the early 1800s, as American writers attempted to break from European conventions and from the previous century's rationalism, they began to look to the wilderness as a kind of antidote or corrective to bloodless pastoral. A few distinctive views of wilderness emerged during the era of American Romanticism. Authors Washington Irving and, later, Nathaniel Hawthorne treated the wilderness as a place of mystery and darkness. Irving and Hawthorne mined the distant past—distant at least in

American terms—for material. The Puritan captivity narratives, sermons, and tracts of the 1600s and 1700s present the wilderness as a province where the devil reigns, where witches meet in secret covens, where godless “savages” carry out bestial acts in the darkness. Slotkin credits early Puritan writings such as Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative with creating an American mythology “in which the hero was the captive or victim of devilish American savages and in which his (or her) heroic quest was for religious conversion and salvation” (*Regeneration* 21). Jonathan Edwards’ 1741 jeremiad “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Slotkin adds, exhibits evidence of this emerging mythology with images of “invisible devils haunt[ing] the outskirts like Indians waiting for the chance to assault” (*Regeneration* 97). This mythology and view of wilderness crystallize a century later in some of Irving’s early Romantic works. Perhaps the most striking example is his quasi-German folktale “The Devil and Tom Walker.” Irving places his “hero” outside the friendly confines of Puritan Boston where he is more susceptible to the temptations of the devil, also known as “Old Scratch,” a figure clothed in the unmistakable garb of a Native American. The reader pauses here to note the insinuation. This wilderness locale allows Irving to take us through a laundry list of the dark deeds practiced in these woods. In the story’s exposition, we learn that Captain Kidd’s treasure is buried nearby, and we see the ruins of an Indian fort, which was violently besieged and taken during King Phillip’s War. Tom Walker sits near a tree and picks up “a cloven skull with a tomahawk buried deep in it.” (253). Old Scratch approaches Tom and offers him Kidd’s treasure in exchange for his soul. Tom agrees to the pact, foolishly ignoring the fact that Scratch has just claimed the soul of a “Deacon

Peabody” upon his death. The reader understands that Scratch will one day claim Tom’s soul as well.

At first, Irving’s tale continues the Puritan tradition of privileging the town over the wilderness; after all, Tom travels to the forest to meet with Scratch. Nevertheless, once he agrees to Scratch’s terms, Tom returns to the city in order to hold up his side of the bargain. Irving’s subtle portrayal of the city as a place of corruption and vice foreshadows the attitudes of later nineteenth-century writers, and, of course, it represents an important departure from Puritan beliefs. In the burgeoning city of Boston, Tom begins working at the local stock exchange, and he charges his clients absurd interest rates on their debts. The story becomes a cautionary tale as Tom’s greed soon consumes him. Predictably, Scratch eventually comes for Tom and takes him into the wilderness where he disappears forever.

Hawthorne’s seminal short story “Young Goodman Brown” follows a similar pattern but explores with greater subtlety the certainties of Puritanism and the complexity of evil. Goodman Brown, an upstanding, recently-married Puritan, travels into the woods where a dark figure, presumably the devil, tempts him to apostasy. But Hawthorne’s devil may be a psychological projection, Slotkin suggests. The Puritan wilderness, he says, is a “land of the terrible unconscious, in which the dark dreams of man impress themselves on reality with tragic consequences” (*Regeneration* 475).

Like Irving in “The Devil and Tom Walker,” Hawthorne catalogs the sins of those who frequent these woods. In this wilderness locale, Brown encounters his catechism teacher and his pastor, both of whom are in the woods to commit dark deeds. Brown also

learns that his Puritan ancestors committed acts of violence against both Quakers and Indians. The devil-figure says,

Good, goodman Brown! I have been as well acquainted with your family as with ever a one among the Puritans; and that's no trifle to say. I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem. And it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip's War. They were my good friends . . . (1200)

This exchange represents an important step in Brown's spiritual decline. He had previously believed that he hailed from a family of "righteous stock," but the mysterious figure tells him otherwise. The reader also recalls an important historical/biographical parallel: Hawthorne's own great-great grandfather served as a judge during the Salem Witch Trials.

The tale culminates with Brown's witnessing some sort of black mass or witches' coven, presided over by the devil figure. There, Brown sees his allegorically-named wife, Faith, causing him to become bitter and paranoid for the rest of his life. In terms of myth, "Young Goodman Brown," like "The Devil and Tom Walker," continues to paint the wilderness and its inhabitants as a dark place that must be tamed rather than respected. Drawing on material from the early-American period, Hawthorne says that a "devilish Indian" might be hiding "behind every tree" (1199). This pessimistic view of wilderness does yield to other views in the nineteenth century, but certain aspects linger, particularly the dichotomy between Christian Whites and Native Americans.

The Frontier Hero

More-positive portrayals of wilderness also emerged during the Romantic epoch. We find the first of these in James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking romances. Rather than a genre or style, it is Cooper's protagonist, Leatherstocking or Natty Bumppo (among other names), who exemplifies this positive perspective. Leatherstocking was born to white parents, but he spent his childhood among the Native Americans of upstate New York. As a result, he becomes a bridge figure between "the civilized" and "the wild," between formal education and nature's teachings, and, most important, between encroaching and relentless westward expansion and the unspoiled wilderness. Lawlor says that Leatherstocking "negotiates the gap between settled and wild territories, just as Lewis and Clark . . . do" (37). Natty embodies a distinctively American manifestation of the "noble savage" ideal, defined by William Harmon as "[t]he idea that primitive human beings are naturally good and that whatever evil they develop is the product of the corrupting action of civilization" (339). In essence, by living and working in the wilderness (primarily), Natty is both more innocent and more heroic than his civilized counterparts. Natty, of course, does not meet the strict requirements of this definition since he has a foot in both worlds, yet his closeness to and regard for nature brings him closer to purity and innocence than his European counterparts. His reverence for nature stands in stark contrast to the wasteful ethos of the colonists and settlers who understand only exploitation. Throughout the novels, his practices and commentaries on fishing and hunting reveal his attitude toward the wilderness. Slotkin, analyzing the mythic function of bodies of water in the tales, sees Natty's conservationist leanings as most pronounced in *The Pioneers*:

The exploitation and depletion of the lake by the Templeton settlers dramatizes the role they play in destroying the sources of the natural, Indian life of the woods. Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, by contrast, know how to appreciate and utilize the dark, fecund life-force in the lake. They fish it in the appropriate manner... (*Regeneration* 494).

Furthermore, and perhaps more to the point, Cooper creates the sense that Natty's closeness to nature makes him a veritable part of it. Following a skirmish with Huron Indians in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Natty and his Indian companions, Chingachgook and Uncas, move through the deep woods of upstate New York "with instinctive readiness," and then "disappeared in succession, seeming to vanish against the dark face of a perpendicular rock" (46). In a later novel, *The Prairie*, Leatherstocking is, as Slotkin puts it, "alternately hidden and revealed by the landscape, materializing mysteriously as if out of the sun itself before the dazzled eyes of the half-dreaming [settlers]" (*Regeneration* 494-495).

An Alternative View of Wilderness

Slotkin's analysis of *The Pioneers* reminds us of the Transcendentalist concept of the "oversoul" or "universal spirit," the belief that God, humankind, and nature are all part of the same life-force. To achieve one's godhood, however, humans must live close to nature, and they must demonstrate a profound respect for it. In *Nature*, Emerson famously says, "The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me. I am part or particle of God" (996). He later claims that rediscovering nature will "emancipate us" and bring us closer to God (and our true selves) (1010). One can argue, then, that the most

positive view of wilderness materialized in the early to mid-nineteenth century in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson argues that “[a] man is a god in ruins,” but he has lost sight of his higher standing due to the industrialization and urbanization of society, as well as his stubborn reliance on reason.⁸ If man wishes to discover his true nature, “let him look at the stars” (994).

Thoreau, of course, took Emerson’s words to heart and moved to the woods near Concord, Massachusetts for a one-year period where he practiced the transcendentalist values of self-reliance, nonconformity, and, more to the current point, communion with nature. In *Walden*, Thoreau describes the building of his house shortly after his arrival. His pronounced work-ethic and self-reliance remind us of John Smith’s words, while also echoing Natty Bumppo’s attitudes on nature and conservation. Working almost entirely alone on his new home, Thoreau “went on for some days cutting and hewing timber, and also studs and rafters, all with [his] narrow axe,” all the while making sure to catalog nature: “the lark and pewee and other birds,” as well as “a striped snake” (1740). He later obtains many of the raw materials for his new home by purchasing and dismantling “the shanty of James Collins” (1740-1741). Slotkin claims that Thoreau shares much in common with frontier heroes such as Leatherstocking and Daniel Boone, especially thematically, for, like them, Thoreau enters “a wilderness of the material world and of the soul; nonetheless, Thoreau’s “wilderness . . . is second growth, really a back lot of civilization, in which Indians and larger predators are no longer even memories but

⁸ The transcendentalist movement, like the rest of the romantic movement, stressed intuition over reason. In many ways, the romantic era was a direct response to (and a refutation of) the Age of Reason. Nature was the vehicle by which romantic authors and poets achieved intuition, or evidence of the “sublime.”

myths” (*Regeneration* 537). Slotkin’s words here are important to note since, by *Walden*’s publication in 1854, the American frontier was drawing near to its 1893 “closing”; the unspoiled wilderness viewed and written about by Columbus, Raleigh, and Smith was now a thing of the distant past.

Realism and Naturalism

Interestingly, authors in the second half of the nineteenth century took different approaches to the frontier/wilderness, approaches prompted at least in part by unrelenting westward expansion. Though Mark Twain wrote *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the 1880s, he set the novel in 1845, a year when the Mississippi River region contained the right amount of “wilderness” to accomplish his purposes. By the time of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*’s publication in 1885, following on the heels of the Industrial Revolution and during the extensive urbanization of the Eastern Seaboard, Twain and other authors had begun to portray the city/town as a place of corruption, and the wilderness as a place of freedom and redemption (i.e. the inverse of the Puritan approach). It is to the river and the wild that Huck and Jim flee to escape the corruption and abuse of St. Petersburg, Missouri, a place where slavery is legal and where the legal authorities are powerless to stop Pap from abusing Huck. Twain exposes the well-intentioned citizens of town—such as Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas—as hypocritical; they take Huck in, but they only wish to “sivilize” him, even though they are committing the act of slave-ownership all the while. This negative portrayal of town/positive portrayal of the wild continues during the journey down the river. On the river Huck and Jim feel free and happy, until the King and the Duke come along at least.

One may view these characters as extensions of civilization's corrupting influence, but it may be better to see how Twain leans on them to comment on society. In the various towns where the King and the Duke perform their cons and scams, the reader sees an unsavory human spectrum, from gullibility to cruelty. Even apart from them, Huck sees society's corrupting influence whenever he leaves the river behind. During the Grangerford episode, Huck witnesses the cruelty of slavery, and the hypocrisy and savagery of the southern aristocracy. The reader recalls that the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons engage in a bloody gun battle soon after praying in church together. Late in the novel, after Huck's final departure from the river and the wild, he once again falls under the corrupting influence of Tom Sawyer. Though Huck has come far in his treatment of Jim, Tom causes him to revert back to the ways of St. Petersburg and to treat Jim cruelly and as an object, as the butt of a cruel joke. By novel's end, Huck senses this setback—on some level at least—and he declares that he will depart for the West. For Huck, the Mississippi River just is not wild enough to escape the corrupting influence of society: "But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before" (265). Lawlor, speaking of nineteenth-century writings in general, says that [t]he transience of the 'West' and its susceptibility to easternization are recognized in westernist texts, but as long as there is more wilderness ahead, the full implication of these processes can be deferred and evaded. Thus, Western explorer-heroes often see for themselves that the regenerative effects of the frontier world are or will soon be compromised by the very processes of Euro-American settlement. (18)

Even the naive, uneducated Huck appears to recognize that the frontier will provide relief from civilized society for only so long. The negative forces of society (as highlighted in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) —flawed or dubious education, hypocrisy, racism, violence, abuse, etc.—have already reached the eastern boundary of the frontier and will soon begin encroaching further westward. The “dream,” Slotkin writes, “may dissolve as soon as we attempt to realize it” (*Gunfighter* 311). Through Huck, we can detect the beginnings of “[t]he hero’s nostalgia for a wilderness uncontaminated by European hands or eyes” (Lawlor 18). For this reason, he feels anxious to get to “the Territory ahead of the rest” (265). Jane Tompkins, in *West of Everything*, says that the West “seems to offer escape from the conditions of life in modern industrial society: from a mechanized existence, economic dead ends, social entanglements, unhappy personal relations, political injustice” (4). Huck, after failing to treat Jim humanely in the novel’s final episode, feels “a powerful need for self-transformation” (Tompkins 4). He will seek to fulfill this need in the West.

The rise of literary naturalism around 1890 offers a slightly different literary view of the frontier/wilderness. The naturalists saw the wild as a setting where they could demonstrate Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” principle and show how nature’s deterministic forces could shape characters for the worse or better. Geographically, writers and historians were looking further and further west. Much of the east was now urban, and one could only find the wilderness in pockets. In “The Blue Hotel” Crane does not go as far west as possible; his story is instead set in a small Nebraska town. Settlers, gold prospectors, trappers, and cowboys having presumably long since passed this town, the residents view the Swede with amusement when he enters and expresses the belief

that he is in the middle of a wild, dangerous place. Scully, his son, and the cowboy cannot understand why the Swede continues to act suspiciously and aggressively in the peaceful confines of the blue hotel. Unfortunately, they do not know that the Swede has been conditioned to act/react in this manner. Physically, he is a large, hulking man, a man equipped for violence. He has also been conditioned by years of reading cheap dime novels to fear the worst when he comes west. Tompkins argues that the western genre has conditioned both men and women to expect pain and, to some extent, to seek it (14). As a result, the Swede “said that some of these Western communities were very dangerous; and after his statement he straightened his legs under the table, tilted his head, and laughed again, loudly” (420). Later, on his way to join the men for a game of cards, the Swede “strode towards the men nervously, as if he expected to be assaulted” (421). One wonders why the Swede traveled west in the first place if he expected trouble. The answer seems to lie in Tompkins’ argument that the West is attractive *because* it is rugged and dangerous. Though the Swede is a large man, he appears reticent and timid at first. One suspects that he has come west to prove his manhood, and soon the environment helps him change from shy and passive to dangerous and menacing. He does “prove” himself in the hotel, but the indifferent forces of the West prove to be his undoing in the end. The blue hotel is not exactly the wilderness, though it is located near the presumed “badlands” of the west.

For true wilderness, one turns to the Yukon Territory. The frontier of the contiguous United States had all but disappeared by 1900, so Jack London looked as far west as possible after the turn of the century. London’s naturalism is of a harsher variety than Crane’s (at least the setting is). In London’s short story “To Build a Fire,” he does

not even name his doomed protagonist. The man has no real identity in the harsh, indifferent wilderness of the north. He is just one of many who have traveled there unprepared and unequipped for what they will face. The protagonist is unprepared in more than one way: he was born and raised in the friendly confines of the continental United States, and his background in wilderness survival is limited. He also appears to be mentally unprepared for the Yukon; the old timer has warned him about traveling in these conditions. Thus, when his feet become wet, he unwisely builds a fire under a tree. Falling snow from the branches above soon extinguishes the fire, and the man freezes to death. However, his dog survives. Like Buck in *The Call of the Wild*, heredity has equipped him to live in the harsh conditions, and the environment has acted upon his physical traits to make him even stronger, more durable, and intelligent. Early in the journey, the dog realizes that the man lacks the necessary instincts to survive:

This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of one hundred and seven degrees below freezing point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge. And it knew that it was not good to walk abroad in such fearful cold. (264-265)

The cold, indifferent landscape of the north does not judge; it punishes and rewards equally, basing its “decisions” on deterministic forces only. The dog is prepared for this environment, so he survives; the man is not, so he perishes. This neutrality or indifference on the part of the wilderness contrasts sharply with earlier nineteenth-century views.

Literature in a Post-Turnerian America

This chapter's discussion of literary naturalism and the late nineteenth century brings us to Jackson's 1893 pronouncement. It is not surprising that the historical closing of the frontier also affected its status in literature. Indeed, for the next few decades, especially in the literary and academic realm, the frontier/wilderness was partially overshadowed by other concerns; the formalist, experimental nature of modernism and the disillusionment resulting from World War I took center stage from approximately 1900-1939. Still, we recall that Willa Cather's career blossomed during this period. *O Pioneers!* appeared in 1913, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was published in 1927. And, though they were not writing about the West per se, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner certainly feature wilderness at times, Hemingway in "Big Two-Hearted River" (Parts I and II) and Faulkner in *Go Down, Moses*. We must also recall that, though the West receded somewhat from the literary landscape in the early twentieth century, the Western itself began to achieve prominence during this time. Owen Wister's *The Virginian* appeared in 1902, Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* in 1912. From our twenty-first century perspective, we know that the frontier/wilderness remained an important part of literature and the arts throughout the twentieth century, and even to the present day. In fact, in subsequent chapters, I will argue that the frontier became *the* vehicle by which many important twentieth-century authors attempt to craft a new literary aesthetic. This new "Western" paradoxically borrows from traditional frontier and cowboy tropes while also questioning and even subverting the very myths upon which Westerns were founded.

CHAPTER III

THE URBAN COWBOY ON THE MODERNIST FRONTIER

Introduction

In 1972 scholars Donald A. Yates and George Grella joined mystery fiction writer Francis M. Nevins at a panel discussion hosted by *Armchair Detective* to reflect on the golden age of American detective fiction (the 1920s and 1930s) and its antecedents. Distinguishing between classic detective stories and their competition (also known as the “hardboiled tradition”), the panelists agreed that the former owed much to nineteenth-century British fiction, whereas the latter appeared to be a uniquely American phenomenon (241-243). Paul Skenazy clarifies and historicizes this distinction in his 1982 study “The New Wild West: The Urban Mysteries of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.” He observes that the classic, genteel stories,

written mostly in England, generally share an extremely isolated English countryside location, a small cast of characters, a central murder which disrupts the carefree atmosphere, and a detective who solves the crime and returns society to its everyday path...

At the same time, a rowdy, bastardized, lower-class version of the detective and mystery story began to appear in the 1920s in America, reflecting the slangy realities of a different set of readers, people more

accustomed to city slums and the gangster world of Prohibition than to fashionable estates and country weekends. (7)

Like Skenazy, the 1972 panelists noted the succession, British to American, nineteenth century to twentieth. They cited "the Sherlock Holmes novels of Conan Doyle" and "the detective novels of Dickens and Wilkie Collins" as influential in the emergence of the *classic* detective novel in the United States (240). The works of American S.S. Van Dine, for example, follow many of the patterns established by these British authors (241). However, the panelists looked elsewhere to trace the origins of *pulp* detective fiction. Yates argued that we may also trace the origins of pulp mystery fiction "to the very roots of the American literary experience," stating that American pulp fiction takes the shape of "frontier tales" (243). Nevins and Grella later traced the foundations of the pulp tradition back to Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Herman Melville, demonstrating how these early American writers influenced the dime novels of the late nineteenth century, which, in turn, influenced the hard-boiled works of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler in the twentieth (245). It seems noteworthy that the panelists did not spend much time on Edgar Allan Poe since his "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" usually springs to the forefront of any conversation about American detective fiction. Other scholars, as Pamela Bedore notes, have labeled Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," and "The Purloined Letter" as "the first fully formed detective stories" (223). She herself spends as much time on Poe as on the dime novels, arguing that both equally figure in the etiology of twentieth-century detective fiction.

One of the more interesting details from that 1972 panel discussion is the “commonplace” to which Nevins makes passing reference: “that the hard-boiled private eye is something like an urban cowboy.” This point merits further scrutiny; indeed, I take it as the seed corn of the argument I mean to develop: that Raymond Chandler’s hero Philip Marlowe *does* possess many of the traits of the mythical cowboy and that Chandler’s Los Angeles setting functions as a sort of twentieth-century frontier or “Wild West” town; as will be seen, however, Chandler co-opts these Western tropes to highlight a West in its death throes. The frontier has become an urban wasteland where Frederick Jackson Turner’s fears have proved prophetic. Before proceeding to Chandler’s work, though, I will attempt to explore how the dime novels of the nineteenth century evolved from cowboy/western tales into the precursor of the American detective story. Further, I will discuss how Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust*, published in 1939 (the same year as Chandler’s first novel, *The Big Sleep*), presents Los Angeles as the terminus of the American frontier, the place where Manifest Destiny concludes, and the locale where the American Dream comes to die.

Natty Bumppo to Deadwood Dick

The evolution from frontier tale to detective novel appears to involve at least a few discernible steps. This approach may seem reductive at first, but it also helps lay the groundwork for the primary discussion. The early frontier tale, usually printed in “cheap” or “dime” novel form, represents the foundational step. In its resourceful protagonist, the frontier setting, and the conflict of hero versus the “savage” Indians, this genre owes much to James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*. According to J. Randolph Cox,

“[t]he original dime novels were tales of early America, of the frontier and the West. They were often imitations of James Fenimore Cooper's stories The quantity and popularity of frontier and western stories was such that the genre seemed to represent all dime novels. For some readers a dime novel was by definition a western.” The earliest texts usually follow the formula established by Fenimore Cooper in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, a series of five novels published between 1827 and 1841. These novels feature frontier settings and take place during the Revolutionary period. The cheap or dime novel followed *The Leatherstocking Tales* in the mid-nineteenth century (Bedore 224). The setting in these texts remains the natural one established by Fenimore Cooper: the plains, the woods, the desert, etc. The few man-made structures consist of solitary cabins or small settlements. The conflict remains true to the Fenimore Cooper formula as well; if the protagonist is not fighting to survive in the unforgiving natural environment, he is likely battling the Indians. The popular 1860 dime novel *Seth Jones, or, The Captives of the Frontier*, written by Edward S. Ellis, features an archetypal frontier setting and archetypal frontier characters, and its debt to Fenimore Cooper appears unmistakable. The opening paragraph reads,

The clear ring of an ax was echoing through the arches of a forest, three-quarters of a century ago, and an athletic man was swinging the instrument, burying its glittering blade deep in the heart of the mighty kings of the wood. (5)

Ellis goes on to describe the woodsman, Alfred Haverland, as “a splendid specimen” with a “swelling, ponderous chest,” wearing “strong moccasins” and a “raccoon-skin cap” (5). This Daniel Boone figure is not even the protagonist of the novel; that honor belongs to

the titular Seth Jones. Seth Jones serves as the archetypal frontiersman in many ways, from his background as a member of Ethan Allen's "Green Mountain Boys" to his prowess in hunting game and tracking Indians. Seth Jones "can foller any red-skin as far as he can go" (29). Slotkin says that "[f]rom the 1840s through the Reconstruction period, most cheap frontier stories followed the formula of Cooper's historical romances, using Indian warfare and captivities . . . and a colonial or Revolutionary War setting to provide a 'historical' context for the action of the plot. The cast nearly always included a Hawkeye-type hunter..." (127). Most strikingly, at the end of the novel, we learn that Seth Jones is an alias for Eugene Morton, a wealthy aristocrat from back east. The backwoods "yokel" was just a disguise, the real man is "tall, dignified, graceful," and his speech is erudite (116). Much like Fenimore Cooper, Ellis has created a hero that operates comfortably in two worlds; he is at home in the western world of rugged individualism, danger, and savagery, but he also represents the eastern world of money, class, and leisure. In this way, Seth Jones appears to be a hero for *all* of America. Most importantly for our purposes, Seth Jones prefigures Philip Marlowe in the way he is able to operate as both a "lowly" primitive *and* as a member of the gentry. Skenazy notes how "the detective story is an urban version of the Western, its hero a street-wise cowboy. Both genres trace their roots back to the rough-and-ready American male" (10). Skenazy then cites Natty Bumppo as an archetypal example of this rough-and-ready American male (10). Skenazy's analysis is important because it highlights a connection that, at first glance, appears hazy or even weak. However, we must remember that early frontier heroes such as Natty Bumppo and Seth Jones serve as *character* antecedents. The *plots* and *settings* of early frontier works/dime novels do not necessarily anticipate later

detective stories. It is in the later dime novels that we can see traces of the plots and themes that will re-emerge in the hard-boiled tradition.

The “outlaw” dime novel emerged in the post-Civil War period and constitutes another important shift as we move toward the American detective novel. The famous dime novel outlaws Deadwood Dick and Jesse James mark an important departure from the Fenimore Cooper formula. Whereas Fenimore Cooper’s hero, Natty Bumppo, embodies the democratic values of early American history, Deadwood Dick and Jesse James resist the hyper-capitalistic values of late-nineteenth-century America. Richard Slotkin, in *Gunfighter Nation*, discusses how these outlaws battle the corrupt practices of industry and other moneyed interests on behalf of the working class; thus, the heroes of dime novels became, in a sense, “social bandits” (128). Interestingly, these outlaw-heroes also play the role of something akin to a detective in many of these texts, especially the later ones. Deadwood Dick, for example, plays a typical frontier outlaw in his early appearances; however, in later dime novels, he re-emerges as *The Frontier Detective* and *The Detective Road Agent* (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 146). Slotkin posits that Deadwood Dick becomes a “hybrid hero that combines elements of the detective and the social bandit” (*Gunfighter Nation* 146). The development of this hybrid hero appears to have laid the groundwork for Raymond Chandler and his hero, Philip Marlowe. The final step along this evolutionary process from frontier tale to detective novel is an obvious one: the dime detective novel. The influence this genre had on future “hard-boiled” writers such as Raymond Chandler requires little elaboration. Still, the dime detective novel represents an important link, and, more importantly, it is in this genre that we see how the urban “frontier” replaces the natural one as the primary setting.

In many texts, the natural frontier setting of a work such as *Seth Jones* eventually gives way to the “Wild West” frontier town, especially in the post-Reconstruction period. For example, in Edward L. Wheeler’s *Deadwood Dick: The Prince of the Road, or, The Black Rider of the Black Hills* (1877) the action shifts to Deadwood, South Dakota early in the second chapter. Wheeler’s description of setting contrasts sharply with the opening pages of *Seth Jones*:

Deadwood! the scene of the most astonishing bustle and activity, this year (1877). The place where men are literally made rich and poor in one day and night. Prior to 1877 the Black Hills have been for a greater part undeveloped, but now, what a change! In Deadwood districts every foot of available ground has been "claimed" and staked out; the population has increased from fifteen to more than twenty-five hundred souls.

The streets are swarming with constantly arriving new-comers; the stores and saloons are literally crammed at all hours; dance-houses and can-can dens exist; hundreds of eager, expectant, and hopeful miners are working in the mines, and the harvest reaped by them is not at all discouraging.

Thus, roughly between the years 1860 and 1877, notions of the West have shifted from what might be called the frontier pastoral of Fenimore Cooper to the busier, more-populated “Wild West” locale that we often associate with cowboys, outlaws, and duels at high noon. The over-population and urbanization that Alfred Haverland (of *Seth Jones*) attempted to escape has arrived in the West.

It is also important to note that, though the plot of the typical dime novel remains located in the West, much of the action now takes place in and around the forces of industry and mechanization: mining operations, and the railroad. In *Deadwood Dick: Prince of the Road*, we learn that Deadwood has boomed in population and size because “[t]he quartz formation in these neighborhoods is something extraordinary, and from late reports, under vigorous and earnest development are [sic] yielding beyond the most sanguine expectation.” In the later *Deadwood Dick Branded, or, Red Rover at Powder Pocket* (1896) the tale begins aboard a train. As the engineer stops to avoid an obstruction on the tracks, he gives a “sharp blast of the whistle” and applies the noisy “air brakes.” In the earlier *Seth Jones*, the environment is so untouched by mechanization that Haverland’s mere swinging of an ax echoes through the pristine woods. Now, however, a noisy locomotive barrels through the landscape, signaling the end of one era and the beginning of another. Thus, the primary setting of the frontier novel has begun to transform into something approaching the urban.

These *Deadwood Dick* texts represent another important stage in the evolution from frontier literature to detective fiction. The hero of these stories is often an outlaw rather than the Natty Bumppo or Seth Jones type. We have seen that Seth Jones moves comfortably among both the “primitive” and the “civilized”; *Deadwood Dick* clearly does not. His description alone tells us that this is a man who operates outside of or apart from societal norms:

His form was clothed in a tight-fitting habit of buck-skin, which was colored a jetty black, and presented a striking contrast to anything one sees as a garment in the wild far West. And this was not all, either. A broad

black hat was slouched down over his eyes; he wore a thick black veil over the upper portion of his face, through the eye-holes of which there gleamed a pair of orbs of piercing intensity, and his hands, large and knotted, were hidden in a pair of kid gloves of a light color.

The "Black Rider" he might have been justly termed, for his thoroughbred steed was as black as coal, but we have not seen fit to call him such—his name is Deadwood Dick, and let that suffice for the present. (Wheeler *Deadwood Dick: The Prince of the Road*)

In short, Deadwood Dick is the archetypal “bad man.” Still, the outlaw appearance should not in any way belie Deadwood Dick’s hero status. He and many other outlaws of the dime novel era are in fact heroes; only they are heroes of the working class, the underprivileged, and the downtrodden. Slotkin comments on the changes that took place in dime novels of the late nineteenth century, as the United States entered the era of the ruthless robber baron:

After 1875 . . . many of the most popular new dime-novel series abandoned Indian-war settings in favor of conflicts between ‘outlaws’ and ‘detectives,’ and the struggle between classes. The hero of these postwar dime novels is no longer the protector or vindicator of the ‘genteel’ values of order and respectability, as Hawkeye [Natty Bumppo] and his dime-novel successors had been. In fact, some of the most popular of these heroes are criminals drawn to banditry by a mixture of social justice and an innate propensity or ‘gift’ for antisocial behavior. (*Gunfighter Nation* 127)

Slotkin adds that this new dime novel hero “stands in actual opposition to the moral values embodied in the Cooperian mythology,” especially the values that had been co-opted by politicians in the post-Civil War period (*Gunfighter Nation* 127). These outlaws resort to crime not because they are innately bad, but because they are responding to some injustice or corruption committed by “moneyed interests” (*Gunfighter Nation* 127). As a result, the conflict between the white man and Indians recedes to the periphery as these outlaw-detectives fight greedy opportunists. These shifts make sense, Susan Ray argues, when one considers that these more evolved dime novels “originated when trusts and monopolies controlled not only significant portions of the American industrial economy but also the lives of many of those working in its factories, mines, railroads and lumberyards” (27). Ray cites a passage from Wheeler’s *Deadwood Dick on Deck* to highlight the primary conflict in these fictions. A shady banker from back east wishes to buy the protagonist’s mine interests. The mine owner, Sandy, replies,

No, I will not sell out...[I] am giving a gang of honest industrious men of families employment at paying wages. No doubt there are capitalists who would like to step down . . . and grasp the tyrant’s reins in their hands; but they’ll be mightily disappointed when they find that very few poor men are so poor but what they can stand firm for their rights. (qtd. in Ray 27)

We see here, in stark terms, that a shift from frontiersman vs. nature/Indians to frontiersman vs. corrupt capitalist has taken place. Wheeler’s diction portrays the Westerners as hard-working and honest and Easterners as greedy, power-hungry, and eager to mulct their supposed inferiors.

Though not to be confused with the regular constabulary (or, most emphatically, with the Pinkertons), the outlaw is often thrust into the role of detective in these texts as he attempts to root out corruption. The transition from the frontier tale to the detective novel also occurred for more practical reasons, however. First, many of the most sensational crimes of the mid-nineteenth century happened in or near metropolitan locations. The depictions of these crimes, according to Slotkin, surprisingly retained many elements of the frontier romance. Only, in the metropolitan frontier, “the ‘urban savage’ replaces the Noble Red Man,” and “Hawkeye is transformed from a saintly ‘man who knows Indians’ to a figure whose consciousness is ‘darkened’ by knowledge of criminality” (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 139).

The Pinkertons to Dashiell Hammett

Ironically, the prominence of the Pinkerton Detective Agency between 1858 and 1898 appears to form another important bridge between early frontier tales and the detective novel. Nemesis of outlaws (heroic or otherwise), the Pinkertons would co-opt the romantic lawbreaker as righter of wrongs. Allen Pinkerton and his detectives often traveled west in search of outlaws (especially train robbers). Most famously, the Adams Express Company hired the Pinkertons to find and apprehend Jesse James (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 139-140). In the 1870s Pinkerton published *The Detectives and the Expressmen*, *The Mollie Maguires and the Detectives*, and *Strikers, Communists, Tramps, and Detectives* (the latter two deal with labor violence). Slotkin calls these texts the “pattern-setter” for the modern detective novel, and he says that they “implicitly link the

detective hero to the hero of the frontier romance” (*Gunfighter Nation* 140-141). Slotkin adds,

Detective stories published by Allen Pinkerton and his son continued to appear for the next twenty years. Their influence on the dime novel was profound, and their treatment of the detective’s character, mission, and milieu became the basis of the so-called ‘hard-boiled’ detective story—the characteristic form of the genre after 1920. Dashiell Hammett, the most important figure in early hard-boiled fiction, was a former Pinkerton detective, and his first series of stories featured an operative for the ‘Continental’ detective agency—a thin disguise for Pinkerton’s. (*Gunfighter Nation* 142-143)

Thus, we see how the pattern or structure of the modern American detective novel began to take shape as early as the 1870s. The influence of the Pinkerton texts seems clear, especially when one considers, as Slotkin suggests, the early work experiences of Dashiell Hammett. We should also recall that “[t]he term] ‘private eye’ . . . comes from the logo of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency: a large, open eye over the words ‘we never sleep.’ Pinkerton was the largest and most famous American detective agency by the 1920s; its logo came to stand for the whole profession” (Skenazy 11). What does not seem clear, however, is how the frontier setting of nineteenth-century texts evolved into the urban one of Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

To trace this shift from the natural frontier to the metropolis, Slotkin examines two late-stage dime novel series: the *New York Detective Library* and the *Log Cabin Library*, both published in the 1890s. The former series features a fictional Jesse James

detective/outlaw and an Irish detective named “Old King Brady.” The latter series presents the James Gang as their heroes (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 146-147). In both series, frontier settings alternate with eastern (usually New York) settings. Slotkin says that the settings appear separate or exclusive in the early volumes of these series. Each has a distinctive “mythic landscape,” he says (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 147). As each series progresses, though, the frontier and urban settings begin to blur, especially “as figures from one setting begin literally to infiltrate the other” (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 147). Slotkin later cites stories in which Old King Brady travels west to hunt Jesse James but discovers that James’ crimes were in response to capitalist greed/corruption.

Similarly, in other novels, Jesse and Frank James travel east, where they “become embroiled in social struggles against capitalists greater than they have known” (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation* 149). Slotkin’s analysis of setting is a crucial piece in exploring the hard-boiled novel’s debt to frontier literature. None of this is to suggest, however, that Hammett and Chandler consciously tried to recreate frontier heroes, conflicts, settings, etc. in their novels; rather, the evolution from early frontier tale to detective novel appears to have taken place more naturally and organically. Over the course of almost a century, these shifts almost certainly occurred due to the changing demands of readership. Obviously, many important historical and societal changes transpired in the United States from the time of Fenimore Cooper to the early-twentieth century. And perhaps most important of all was the “closing” of the frontier in 1893. Just as Americans had to search elsewhere for the energy and motivation after 1893 (according to Turner), writers also had to look for new frontiers, places where heroes of twentieth-century romance could fight injustice and corruption.

The City of Angels as Modernist Frontier

Establishing the ties between frontier literature and American detective fiction is not such a difficult endeavor. Establishing twentieth-century Hollywood/Los Angeles as a modernist “frontier” setting may seem like a reach, however. To do so, we must first remember that Los Angeles represented the terminus of westward expansion; it was quite literally and obviously the furthest point west. Manifest Destiny ended in Los Angeles and other California cities. We must also recall that Turner declared the frontier closed in 1893; it seems almost fated that Hollywood began its rapid growth in that very decade. K. Edington notes that “the establishment of the [movie] industry in Hollywood coincided with the closing of the historical frontier” (63-64) Just as the cowboy, rancher, trapper, and Indian began to disappear from many parts of the West, their Hollywood representations began to appear on the big screen. Film historian Mark Shiel, in *Hollywood Cinema and the Real Los Angeles*, discusses how the landscape of early Hollywood reflected its ties to the West/frontier: “Hollywood’s past as an untamed wilderness was plainly in view . . . The early film industry’s special emphasis on westerns echoed the historical layering of Hollywood’s landscape” (44-45). Shiel notes that the Edison company produced, in 1897, the first motion picture filmed in Los Angeles (26). This 1897 filming is notable in that it occurred just four years after the publication of Turner’s thesis. In 1907, the first Los Angeles studio emerged, and the first Hollywood studio began operation in 1911 (Shiel 26, 32-33, 36). Most notably, the Bison Company opened in 1909 and produced Westerns exclusively, featuring what *The Los Angeles Times* called “rough-riding cowboys” and “Indians” (qtd. In Shiel 36). Clearly,

even though the physical frontier had “closed”—or at least become seriously diminished—by the end of the nineteenth century, it was still very much a part of the American imagination. Its myths and archetypes became a mainstay of popular culture, art, literature, etc. and remain so to this day, albeit in various states of revision. We should also note that Hollywood, according to many scholars and historians, replaced the frontier (or became a different manifestation of it) as the primary symbol of the American Dream. It seems no accident that both symbols reside(d) in the West. “Between the 1880s and 1930s,” observes David Fine,

Los Angeles was the best-advertised city in America. It was hyped by real estate speculators, railroad promoters, and city boosters as the New World Garden, the new El Dorado, the place of the fresh start and unlimited opportunity. Hundreds of thousands came, and by the end of the thirties the population swelled to almost 1.5 million people, twice as many as lived in San Francisco. (198)

Fine goes on to say that “what brought people and sustained the myth of paradise regained was climate and its association with health” (198). Interestingly, Fine’s analysis includes much of the same language that we typically rely on to discuss early-American writings and frontier literature. In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner worried that the American ethos would suffer—or even crumble—without the dynamism, the striving, and the strength of spirit that westward expansion sustained. Prior to the closing of the frontier, the American Dream was, in large part, located in the West. Now, after the closing, the Dream remained there. John Springer argues that Hollywood joined the frontier as part “of our national mythology” (439). Springer says that, like the West,

Hollywood became a conflicted symbol, both "the promised land" and "the wasteland," a place that could be "either the fulfillment or the betrayal of the American dream" (439). Several modernist texts deal with this question, most notably F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* and Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*. Though the focus of this chapter is the discussion of hard-boiled detective fiction as twentieth-century "Western," it is helpful to look outside genre fiction and toward its more literary counterpart to see how Hollywood/Los Angeles became the definitive western setting in modern times. But in *The Day of the Locust*, set in the City of Angels, "the American dream has spun out of control, and images of apocalyptic vision suggest that the moral disarray of Hollywood anticipates the decline and fall of American society" (Edington 67).

The opening paragraph of West's short novel disorients the reader in terms of both location and time. The protagonist, Tod Hackett, hears "a great din on the road outside his office. The groan of leather mingled with the jangle of iron and over all beat the tattoo of a thousand hooves" (59). Indeed, the reader might assume for a moment that a cattle drive is taking place in the nineteenth-century West. West dispels this notion in the next paragraph as he catalogs the chaos and artificiality of a Hollywood studio lot. The earlier impression is merely an echo of the mythic West. Here, the American Dream is something quite different from what it was in the previous century. In Hollywood, the frontier and the American Dream have become anachronisms, just more waste thrown away on the "dream dump" at the back of the studio lot (132).

Many of the characters in *The Day of the Locust* have left their homes back East to pursue their dreams in the dream dump. Tod received his education at the "Yale School of Fine Arts," and Homer Simpson "came from a little town near Des Moines,

Iowa” (80). Faye Greener and her father, Harry, have wandered the country because of his vaudeville show, but they seem to hail from the northeast also (Harry’s early shows took place in towns such as Brooklyn and Mystic, Connecticut). This east-west movement, of course, mimics the westward migration of the previous century when millions travelled west in search of the Dream. The experiences of the later transplants prove to be quite different, however. In fact, West notes that many transplants “had come to California to die” (60). This statement contrasts starkly with stereotypes of the nineteenth-century West, a time when men and women lived under the stars and had to fight and struggle for sustenance and survival, or so the stories go. The dynamism that characterized the nineteenth-century American ethos (according to Turner) is nowhere to be found in West’s twentieth-century Los Angeles. The author depicts these transplanted Easterners as almost zombie-like: “they loitered on the corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed” (60). One must ask why these people came to California in the first place. K. Edington offers a likely answer: the movies. She writes, “These are . . . retirees, fortune seekers, dreamers whose visions have been inflamed by the sensationalism of the Hollywood films they grew up viewing. But reality fails to meet the false expectations these average Americans have of the promised land” (66). The men and women in *The Day of the Locust*, like those in the nineteenth-century, have travelled west in search of their dreams. Yet the artificiality, corruption, and degradation of Hollywood have dashed their hopes. They have, quite literally, run out of land and options. There is nowhere else to turn. Turner’s worst fears have metastasized in Los Angeles.

West does include two characters who appear to be “native” to the region: the cowboy Earle Shoop and the Mexican Miguel, or simply “Mig.” West seems to include these characters to experiment with widely-held stereotypes and notions of the old West. Specifically, these characters indicate that these myths are false and/or no longer exist. Earle certainly looks the part of the heroic cowboy. He is “over six feet tall. The big Stetson hat he wore added five inches more to his height and the heels of his boots still another three” (108). Faye becomes temporarily enamored by Earle’s cowboy persona and rugged good looks. Despite his stature, appearance, and cowboy drawl, though, Earle proves to be an empty vessel. For starters, two of Earle’s cowboy associates, Calvin and Hink, imply that Earle knows nothing about being an actual cowboy. They sarcastically suggest that maybe Earle’s “piebald vest” will get him a job as a “road agent” (110). Then, they imply that Earle has never actually worked around cattle or on a ranch. The dwarf Abe Kusich makes fun of Earle’s “prop boots,” and says that he looks like a “fugitive from the Western Costume Company” (150). Earle is clearly attempting to play a part. Nonetheless, Faye remains oblivious for the time being. All she sees—at least initially—is the cowboy of her dreams. Earle, in Faye’s hyper-romantic imagination, is much like the Tarzan poster on her bedroom wall, a Hollywood creation that bears little resemblance to reality. Earle also fails to demonstrate the chivalry and courage of the stereotypical cowboy. He has no job, no car, no horse, and, most noticeably, no money. When Faye objects to Tod’s treating them to dinner once again, Earle leads them to “a ramshackle hut patched with tin signs that had been stolen from the highway and a stove without legs or bottom set on some rocks. Near the hut was a row of chicken coops” (113). For dinner, Earle “treats” them to a meal of birds that he has poached in a

makeshift trap. As Faye and Tod watch, “Earle caught the birds one at a time and pulled their heads off before dropping them into his sacks” (115). The reader does not witness Faye’s reaction to Earle’s pitiful attempt at dinner, but one may safely assume that she decides to move on to other diversions.

Earle does not fight like a real cowboy either. When he becomes jealous of Mig’s highly-sexualized dance with Faye, Earle hits him from behind with a stick. The public challenge, the duel at high-noon, the “romance” of the Western are nowhere to be found. In no way, shape, or form do Earle’s actions live up to romantic notions of what a cowboy should be. Earle fails so miserably at being a cowboy that the reader begins to question cowboy myths in general.

Faye’s disenchantment with Earle may be one reason she turns to Mig so quickly when they return from retrieving the poached birds. If Earle appears at first to be the stereotypical cowboy, Mig seems to be his bandit counterpart. We may safely classify the Mexican bandit or outlaw as a Western hero or at least a recurring Western “type” in its own right. One imagines a member of Pancho Villa’s band as West describes Mig’s “large Armenian eyes and pouting black lips. His head was a mass of tight, ordered curls. He wore a long-haired sweater, called a ‘gorilla’ in and around Los Angeles, with nothing under it. His soiled duck trousers were held up by a red bandanna handkerchief. On his feet were a pair of tattered tennis sneakers” (113). Initially, one assumes that Mig is the heir to the outlaw tradition mentioned earlier. He lives outside the corruption and degradation of the city in this last pocket of California wilderness. He is untainted by the societal factors that torment Tod, Faye, and Homer. Perhaps Mig is a latter-day “noble savage,” poaching and stealing as he attempts to live naturally and “clean.” His later

actions prove otherwise, though. Shortly after meeting, Faye and Mig begin dancing with each other, and “Tod could sense her growing excitement” (115). Having failed to find romance and adventure with Earle, Faye is immediately drawn to the primitive masculinity of Mig. Here, finally, is someone like the Tarzan on her wall. Their steps are flawless as they dance and look deeply into each other’s eyes. The dance seems almost choreographed. But Mig fails to live up to her Hollywood image of a bandit. In fact, Faye’s dream of meeting a romantic hero soon becomes a nightmare due to her association with Mig and Earle. Later in the story, attending a small party at Homer Simpson’s house (a party that includes an ugly cock-fighting episode), Faye and Mig take up their dance once again. The dance seems much different this time due to Faye’s drunkenness and Mig’s naked sexual aggression. Presently, she dances with Earle, and Tod watches them “stumbling all over the room, bumping into the walls and furniture” (163). Tod leaves, so the reader does not witness the end of the party. Homer fills in the blanks the next day, though. West reveals retrospectively that Homer walked in on Mig having sex with Faye the previous night/early morning. Though we cannot know with any certainty whether Mig raped her, we must remember that Faye was drunk, and both Mig and Earle were both acting aggressively toward her during the party. Regardless, we learn that the morning ended on a violent note as Mig and Earle fought savagely over Faye, the two men “tearing at each other” (170) like the roosters that fought in Homer’s garage. Following the party, Faye’s dreams of romance and adventure have been left in shambles, just like Homer’s house with its broken tables and chairs. Initially, both Earle and Mig seem to fit the bill of the Western heroes, but, by the novella’s end, they prove

to be anything but heroic. The facades that they present prove to be as artificial as those lining the streets of the city in which they reside.

Although *The Day of the Locust* clearly does not belong to the detective genre (nor is it a frontier tale or a “Western,” strictly speaking), it reveals how the frontier could be problematized during the modernist period. In *The Day of the Locust*, we hear parodic echoes of the nineteenth-century Western, and, more importantly, we see Frederick Jackson Turner’s worst fears realized. The Dream that once inexorably drew Americans westward has turned into a nightmare; now, “they . . . come to California to die” (60). Simply put, there are no more lands to conquer and no more peoples to subjugate, so these California transplants fall into a state of ennui. Fittingly, the end of the novella features an apocalyptic dream vision in which the citizens of Los Angeles erupt into violence and perversion. West implies not simply that the American Dream is dead, but that it was always merely an illusion.

Besides establishing ties to the frontier, *The Day of the Locust* is also useful in demonstrating how Los Angeles has become the twentieth-century’s “frontier” setting. That said, it is the antithesis of the traditional Western setting in many ways: it is urban, it is dark, it possesses a seedy underbelly of crime and corruption, and, to reiterate, it is the place where the Dream proves false. Still, though it is the polar opposite of this setting in many ways, Los Angeles is the clear inheritor of the tradition. Once the frontier “closed,” Hollywood/Los Angeles arose quickly, replacing the West as the meretricious symbol of the American Dream.

The Hard-Boiled Detective Novel as Modernist Western

It is no accident that Chandler's protagonist Philip Marlowe has a number of traits in common with the heroes of the mythic Western. Chandler's secondary characters may also have roots in Western literature. It comes as no surprise, then, that Chandler's setting, twentieth-century Los Angeles, is still very much a frontier town. As with Nathanael West, however, Los Angeles is a city where frontier myths are upended and ultimately dismantled. For the purposes of this discussion, I will rely chiefly on Chandler's first three novels: *The Big Sleep*, *Farewell, My Lovely*, and *The High Window*. To establish context for these fictions, I will also consider some literary and popular texts, including Owen Wister's *The Virginian* and Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage* and *Last of the Duanes*.

Marlowe's code perhaps forms the clearest connection to frontier/Western literature. By "code" I mean the self-imposed rules that govern Marlowe's personal and professional behavior. That Marlowe operates according to a set of rules does not seem a great stretch, especially when one remembers that Chandler's contemporary, the much admired Ernest Hemingway, created in many of his fictions, a "code hero" (the term is Phillip Young's) who operates under a similar set of self-imposed rules (Romero in *The Sun Also Rises*, for example). In fact, one may argue that a code-hero is a natural extension of modernist fiction. The modernist writer, no longer able or willing to trust in the old beliefs, attempts to construct something new to replace them, i.e. the code. As a result, Hemingway depicts characters who achieve (or don't achieve) a "grace" that enables them to function "under pressure." In a post-World War I world where faith in God and other meta-narratives are no longer possible, a code allows the protagonist to

carry on even in the face of impending doom. The always wounded Hemingway hero cannot control the “big things”—defining matters such as faith, death, corruption, corrupt institutions—so he often avoids thinking and busies himself by ordering minutiae. One recalls how Nick Adams almost neurotically erects his campsite in “Big Two-Hearted River: Part I” as he struggles to move past his PTSD. Occasionally, the Hemingway hero encounters and learns from the Hemingway code hero, who has more effectively mastered living with contingency (Plath 123-129).

Interestingly, James Plath discusses how the Western genre, especially Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, may have directly inspired Hemingway. Hemingway likely read *The Virginian* as a young man, and Hemingway and Wister corresponded by letter from 1928 to 1936. Hemingway also possessed a nine-volume set of Wister’s works (including *The Virginian*) in his Key West home (Plath 122). Plath posits that this connection likely influenced Hemingway’s creation of the “code” and its hero:

The code [of the West], which sets him [the hero] and a select group of others apart from everyone else, lies at the center of every Western novel and film, shaping and defining the genre. But I’m suggesting that it may also have shaped and defined the code by which Hemingway’s heroes aspire to live . . . for the Western hero and the Hemingway ‘code’ hero bear a striking resemblance to one another. Both privilege experiential over book knowledge, action over talk, and precision and skill over sloppiness or mediocrity. Both value stoicism and self-control, and both respect coolness under fire and confronting death bravely. (123)

Plath's argument is pertinent for two reasons: It demonstrates that the myths and archetypes of the West still held sway well into the twentieth century. And it shows that Chandler's contemporary, Hemingway, may have looked—whether consciously or unconsciously—to the frontier for his imaginative framework.

Thus, Marlowe's code, like that of Hemingway's heroes, belongs at once to literary modernism, to the Western romance novel of the nineteenth century, and to the cowboy cinema analyzed by Jane Tompkins. The classic Western film, she observes, features scenes designed to display cowboy toughness:

[A]ll the qualities required of the protagonist are qualities required to complete 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. At the most literal level, then, the experience the scene reproduces for its readers is that of work rather than leisure, of effort rather than rest or relaxation. Whatever it may be an escape from for its audience, this scene is not an escape from the psychological demands of work. (12)

Chandler's Marlowe possesses many, if not all, of the traits adduced by Tompkins and Plath. In fact, his character's unrelenting adherence to the code of the West almost makes him appear one-dimensional or flat at times. After all, he appears to have few relationships outside of work, especially in the early novels; furthermore, he engages in zero nonprofessional activities or interests. It is true that, like the cowboys of yore, Marlowe is often tempted to "settle down" with a beautiful woman, but he consistently

thwarts her advances. Marlowe seems to fear that the code he has so carefully constructed may crumble if he allows himself to care for someone. Marlowe, then, is the hard-boiled detective at almost all times, just as a cowboy is always a cowboy.

The Cowboy Code: Work and Duty

Marlowe's pronounced work ethic provides the strongest bridge between hard-boiled fiction and Western literature. His willingness to work hard and his efforts to hone his craft connect him to his cowboy predecessors. In early twentieth-century Westerns such as *The Virginian* or the Zane Grey's novels, work is literally always there, occurring in the background, even when it is not the central subject or theme. For a resident of the West—whether cowboy, lawman, outlaw, farmer, or cattleman—occupation is his defining characteristic. Or, to put it another way, work tends to become intertwined in all facets of a character's life. In many cases, it becomes difficult to distinguish between the man and the job.

In *The Virginian*, the title character often leaves the ranch for long periods to drive cattle or horses. Even though he is actively pursuing romance with the teacher Molly Wood, “[a]ll spring he had ridden trail, worked at ditches during the summer, and now he had just finished with the beef roundup” (77-78). At this point, the Virginian has not received any promises of marriage from Molly, yet he departs for months—whole seasons even—to do his job. For a cowboy, the job always comes first. In the opening pages of the novel, we see the Virginian's expertise with horses. The narrator has just arrived in Wyoming, and he sees a group of men trying to rope a wild horse. One man, later identified as The Virginian, watches the proceedings patiently, until he finally

decides to intervene. He moves “smooth and easy” (2), and he casually ropes the pony in mere moments. A fellow passenger on the train remarks, “That man knows his business” (2). Later, preparing to escort the narrator to the Sunk Creek Ranch, the Virginian engages in practical jokes and horseplay with other cowboys; however, when the time to depart draws near, “[t]he Virginian’s responsibility now returned; duty drove the Judge’s trustworthy man to take care of me again” (36). As the two men drive out of Medicine Bow, the beautiful landlady of the eating-house watches the Virginian from a window, but he takes no notice because “[h]is eyes seemed to be upon the horses, and he drove with the same mastering ease that had roped the wild pony yesterday” (36). Here, the Virginian’s absolute focus becomes clear. When he is on the job, other matters—even romantic ones—recede to the periphery. The narrator later notes the ease with which the Virginian sleeps, but, if necessary, he is able to “sit all night watching his responsibility, ready to spring on it and fasten his teeth in it” (151). The narrator’s diction here perfectly captures just how important work is in the cowboy ethos.

In Grey’s *The Last of the Duanes*, a novel of warring outlaws in the Rio Grande Valley, the hero’s work ethic is not always emphasized. Along the Rio Grande, though, we see “Mexicans working in the fields and horsemen going to and fro” (45). Throughout the novel, profession (i.e., one’s work) and identity appear to be inextricably linked. Even if Grey does not make the subject of work explicit, we should not overlook its presence. Being a cowboy, or frontier gunman, one understands, is hard work. We see this idea even more vividly through the novel’s title character, Buck Duane, who makes a point of honing his craft as a gunfighter, especially the quick-draw: “He stood still in his tracks; he paced the room; he sat down, lay down, put himself in awkward positions; and from

every position he practiced throwing his gun” (56). Duane has not become the best gunfighter by accident; before his first kill, he had practiced drawing the family Colt .45 so many times that he “could draw it with inconceivable rapidity, and at twenty feet he could split a card pointing edgewise toward him” (17). Duane not only takes great pride in his abilities, his life quite literally depends on being adept at his job.

In Grey’s earlier *Riders of the Purple Sage*, Jim Lassiter proves to be skilled on the range *and* in a gunfight. When Jane Withersteen’s cattle begins to stampede, Lassiter, without hesitation, rides among them, attempting to turn them around. As Jane watches “[s]pellbound,” Lassiter singlehandedly reroutes the herd back toward the ranch (91). The skillful horseman “relentlessly crowded the leaders [the lead steers], sheering them to the left, turning them little by little,” and soon “[t]he white herd had come to a stop” (90-91). Jane thinks of Lassiter’s act as a “feat,” and she waits to thank him “with full and grateful heart” (90-91). We should remember that this episode occurs early in the novel, when Lassiter barely knows Jane. Nevertheless, he springs into action and places himself at great risk by riding into the thick of the herd. Due to his training as a cowboy, his instincts and expertise take over, and he saves the day. It is also important to note that Lassiter does not come west in search of work; he is there to look for his sister. Rescuing Jane’s cattle does nothing to help in this endeavour. Yet, once duty calls, Lassiter mounts his horse and rides into danger, ignoring his personal interests for the sake of others.

Chandler’s novels, like cowboy fiction, also “make work their subject” (Tompkins 12). Marlowe’s great pride in his occupation becomes evident in the first paragraph of *The Big Sleep*:

I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display

handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars. (3)

Marlowe may come across as cocky and defensive in this paragraph, at least at first glance. Yet, once the reader becomes better acquainted with him, it becomes apparent that he does not dress well (and conduct himself with professional pride) out of any sense of inferiority in the face of wealth and social distinction. If anything, Marlowe comes across as a peculiar mix of self-effacing and confident in the novels. For example, when he arrives at the Sternwood residence early in *The Big Sleep*, he declines to give the beautiful Carmen Sternwood his actual name, introducing himself as “Doghouse Reilly” (5). This moniker bears no clear allusive antecedent; instead, it seems to be Marlowe’s way of saying that his actual identity is not very important. Perhaps more importantly, this response keeps his client’s beautiful daughter at arm’s length (for the moment anyway). In Marlowe’s world, the job comes before flirtation, however beautiful the woman. Furthermore, during his conversation with General Sternwood, Marlowe neglects to reveal any substantial details about his personal life. He quickly and vaguely tells Sternwood that he is a 33-year-old bachelor and that he used to work as an investigator for the Los Angeles district attorney; however, he soon steers the conversation back to Sternwood and the case. Marlowe spends the rest of the conversation trying to obtain details about the case because that is what matters most to him. Throughout the novels, Marlowe consistently elevates professional obligations before self.

Marlowe again shows just how much work means to him during an encounter with Sternwood's other daughter, Vivian. Shortly after rescuing Vivian from one of Eddie Mars' hired guns, Marlowe and Vivian begin to kiss in his car. Marlowe's description of the kiss (along with his earlier comments about Vivian's beauty) demonstrates that he physically, and possibly emotionally, desires her: "I kissed her tightly and quickly. Then a long slow clinging kiss. Her lips opened under mine. Her body began to shake in my arms" (129). Soon, they agree to return to Marlowe's apartment. Nevertheless, before Marlowe starts the car, his mind abruptly returns to the job. He asks Vivian, "What has Eddie Mars got on you?" (130). This question quickly changes the sexually-charged mood in the car, and Vivian's "body stiffened" (130). Marlowe does not regret his line of questioning. He pushes forward, observing acerbically, that General Sternwood "didn't hire me to sleep with you" (130). A short time later, he declares, "Get it through your lovely head. I work at it. I don't play at it" (130). The affectionate, romantic Marlowe is gone in an instant. He remembers the job and his duty to General Sternwood, and he drives Vivian home despite her eagerness to take the relationship to the next level. Marlowe admits that he "liked kissing" Vivian (131), but he never again arranges to be alone with her, except at novel's end when he exposes Carmen as Rusty Regan's murderer. For Marlowe, the job always comes before possible romance.

An incident in *Farewell, My Lovely* further highlights Marlowe's belief in putting business before pleasure. Shortly after being hit from behind (while working on behalf of Lindsay Marriott), he meets Anne Riordan, a woman with a "very nice face" (260). Marlowe "liked the cool quiet of her voice" as well as "her nerve" (259). Nevertheless,

Marlowe declines when Anne invites him to her house for a drink. Marlowe's professional code prevents him from pursuing romantic possibilities while a case remains unsolved. Instead, he tells Anne that he wants "to be by myself for a while" (261). Despite his attraction toward Anne, Marlowe is clearly in no mood for possible romance after experiencing a professional failure. Instead, he leaves Anne to report the murder of Marriott (i.e. the man he was hired to protect) to the local police and endures several hours of questioning.

In his interactions with the ravishing Mrs. Grayle (a.k.a. Velma Valento), the reader sees Marlowe's devotion to work most clearly. Marlowe's attraction for Mrs. Grayle becomes obvious during their first encounter at her mansion. She and Marlowe flirt so intensely and so obviously that Anne leaves the house in disgust. When they are alone, Mrs. Grayle plies Marlowe with drinks until he loosens up and forgets that he is there for work. Still, even through his growing desire and his Scotch-fueled haze, Marlowe tries to keep her at bay, saying, "[l]et's focus . . . Let's get what's left of our minds—or mine—on the problem" (307). Then, Marlowe really gets down to business, asking, "How much are you going to pay me?" (307). Thus, we see that Marlowe strives to stay on task even when he is tempted by lust and what seems to be his achilles heel: alcohol. Nevertheless, Marlowe goes on to violate the code during this episode, an error in judgment which he will deeply regret. Marlowe gets another opportunity to be alone with Mrs. Grayle near the close of the novel. He phones her and invites her to his apartment. Mrs. Grayle quickly accepts the invitation and says flirtatiously, "Don't act so hard to get. You have a lovely build, mister" (425). At first glance, the reader assumes that Marlowe will again fall prey to the beautiful Mrs. Grayle, even though the case

remains murky and unsolved. However, it soon becomes apparent that he has lured Mrs. Grayle to his apartment as part of a final, bold effort to solve the case. As Marlowe planned, murder-suspect and ex-convict Moose Malloy arrives at Marlowe's apartment before Mrs. Grayle. The reader then realizes that Malloy is responding to a note that Marlowe sent him through the gangster Laird Burnette. Curiously, Marlowe tells Malloy, "If she [Mrs. Grayle] comes, I'll get rid of her. I'd rather talk to you" (427). This ambiguous statement soon becomes clear: Malloy is there as part of an elaborate set-up. Marlowe has not invited Mrs. Grayle because he physically desires her; he has invited her to expose her for her crimes and to reveal her true identity. In the end, despite his earlier mistake, Marlowe demonstrates his devotion to work even in the face of great temptation, temptation in the form of both lust and money. He does not hesitate to bring Mrs. Grayle's past to light if that is what solving the case takes.

Fittingly, once the case is solved and Mrs. Grayle/Velma Valento is on the run, Marlowe appears to let his guard down with Anne Riordan. Just before the novel's end, Marlowe visits her at her house in Bay City. Marlowe finally seems at ease with Anne as they discuss the case. His diction is less "hard-boiled" when he says, "Let's go riding along the water" (438). Anne insists on receiving a detailed summary of the case, so Marlowe fills her in, moving through the case quickly (in a few paragraphs). When he is finished, Anne declares that she would "like to be kissed" (439). Chandler ends the section there, refusing to reveal whether or not Marlowe finally pursues romance. Nevertheless, the abrupt ending, the blank space where the reader can supply meaning, implies that Marlowe's actions will be different this time around. He has successfully completed his task, so now he can turn his attention to other matters. We should also

remember that Marlowe declined to accompany Anne to her house earlier in the novel; he obviously has no such qualms this time around. Still, on some level we suspect that this warm, relaxed Marlowe is just a mirage. We suspect that, like his cowboy forebears, he will ultimately resist settling down with Anne so he can set out to conquer a new frontier, or, in his case, set out to solve a new case. Indeed, Marlowe remains a bachelor when Chandler's next novel, *The High Window*, opens.

The Marriott episode also amplifies Marlowe's tendency toward self-denigration, a tendency that becomes more pronounced whenever he makes a professional mistake. After regaining consciousness, Marlowe calls himself a "dimwit" (251). And just before saying goodbye to Anne, he gives her his card and says, "Some day you may need a strong back . . . But don't call me if it's brain work" (262). The next day in his office, Marlowe thinks, "She [Anne] was going to be disappointed in me" (272). Marlowe, at other junctures self-assured and calm, becomes self-critical after the Marriott episode. He takes his profession very seriously, and he becomes determined to correct his mistake. On the night of Marriott's murder, Detective Randall of the Los Angeles Police Department (West Los Angeles Station) orders Marlowe to stay away from the Marriott case (which includes a jewelry heist, an extortion attempt, and now a murder). Randall says, "This is a murder and a police job and we wouldn't want your help, even if it was good" (267). The next day, Randall reinforces his order during a phone conversation. Marlowe responds by yawning into the phone, confirming for the reader that a police order will not sway him from completing the task he began the night before. Marlowe went against his professional instincts by accepting the Marriott job at the last minute. Now, a man is dead, and the criminals have made away with both the jewels and eight thousand dollars.

To be clear, Marriott's death does not motivate Marlowe to work the case until it is solved. That is, he does not actually mourn the loss of Marriott, a man Marlowe considers shady, lazy, and effete. No, it is pride in his work that drives Marlowe. Work is an essential part of his personal code. One may argue that Marlowe would have little reason to live without it. This pride is severely damaged after the Marriott episode; thus, he does everything in his power to correct it.

Marlowe's attitudes toward work become more evident when one investigates his views and attitudes toward others in his profession. Marlowe appears to judge other policemen/detectives based on their work ethic and professionalism above all other factors. In *Farewell, My Lovely*, Marlowe demonstrates a grudging respect for Lieutenant Randall even though Randall threatens to arrest him on several occasions. For instance, shortly after Marlowe escapes from a criminal hideout (disguised as a sanitarium) in Bay City, Randall shows up at his apartment and forces his way inside. Randall threatens Marlowe with arrest when he enters the apartment, but he soon softens and steers the conversation toward various investigative leads. It quickly becomes evident that Randall has been hard at work on the case, and, more impressively to Marlowe, he has developed some plausible theories. Despite Randall's earlier aggressive behavior, Marlowe says that he "was beginning to like him. He had a lot behind his vest besides his shirt" (363). As Randall discusses his thoughts on the case, Marlowe realizes that Randall is intelligent, capable, and hard-working. In short, Marlowe recognizes a kindred spirit in Randall; he is a man who abides by the work code. From this point forward, Marlowe's diction becomes increasingly positive when he mentions Randall. Marlowe's later description of Randall sounds a lot like the way others describe him (Marlowe): "Randall leaned back in

his chair, looking just the same as ever, just as cool, just as smooth, just as ready to be nasty or nice as the occasion required” (375). Like Marlowe, Randall is a skilled professional who can operate among the wealthy *and* the criminal element of Los Angeles. The corrupting forces of money will not prove to be a temptation for this man. The job always comes first and foremost in the ethos of Marlowe and Randall.

Another Los Angeles police detective named Nulty provides a counterpoint to Randall. When Marlowe first meets Nulty, he quickly recognizes a burn-out. The always professionally-dressed Marlowe notices the policeman’s “frayed” clothes and unhealthy appearance (212). Marlowe determines that Nulty “didn’t look like a man who could deal with Moose Malloy” (212). Nulty’s inaction annoys Marlowe more than his appearance, however. Malloy’s crime is still fresh, but Nulty fails to budge from behind his desk. Instead, he asks the private eye to conduct the initial investigation. Marlowe again shows that money holds little sway over him as he agrees to do Nulty’s legwork free of charge. Marlowe reveals that he “hadn’t had any business in a month. Even a no-charge job was a change” (215). The lure of work proves to be too difficult to resist even if he will be covering his own expenses. Here, as in other junctures, we see that it is love of work that motivates Marlowe rather than any desire of monetary gain.

Lieutenant Nulty faces no such temptation, though. When Marlowe later visits him, the case remains unsolved, but Nulty remains behind his desk, “picking his teeth, sitting in one chair with his feet on the other” (296). Marlowe mentally notes other signs of Nulty’s laziness and slovenliness before announcing his arrival. Nulty informs Marlowe that he has given up on apprehending Malloy. Marlowe responds by hinting that he has a lead. Nulty urges Marlowe to remember him if the hunch leads to an arrest: “I

need a break, pal.” Marlowe sardonically replies, “A man who works as hard as you deserves one” (297). Despite Marlowe’s lack of respect for the lethargic Nulty, however, the private investigator pursues the lead and eventually cracks the case. For most of *Farewell, My Lovely*, Marlowe works for the Los Angeles Police Department on a pro bono basis, but he does so quite willingly, even eagerly.

Randall shares Marlowe’s negative view of Nulty. He later tells Marlowe that he knew the case was a “flop” when he saw Nulty’s name attached to it (365). Randall goes on to tell Marlowe about some railroad cars that have had their wheels removed and turned into cabins for vacationers. Randall icily adds, “Nulty is the kind of guy who would make a swell brakeman on one of those box cars” (365). In other words, Nulty is useless as a police detective. Marlowe and Randall form a bond in *Farewell, My Lovely* based on their similar attitudes toward work. They recognize that Nulty is not abiding by the code—at least at this late point in his career—therefore, they bypass him in conducting their respective investigations. He has become, in a sense, someone from another world. Nulty is no longer a true detective, if he ever was.

Marlowe meets another kindred spirit in *The High Window*. Shortly after the murder of another private eye, George Anson Phillips, a Los Angeles police detective named Jesse Breeze questions Marlowe, who has discovered the body and was the last one to see the victim alive. Breeze tells Marlowe that “[y]ou and me . . . are going to get along” (516). The reader soon realizes that the two men likely *will* get along since Breeze conducts his investigations in a similar fashion to the way Randall does his. Breeze says, “It’s the way I work. Everything in the clear. Everything sensible. Everything quiet” (516). Marlowe immediately recognizes Breeze’s strong sense of professionalism, and he

begins to cooperate with the investigation as much as possible. Marlowe's loyalty will always remain with his client, but he does his best not to obstruct Breeze's work. As a way of parting, Breeze barks, "Why don't you go on home and let a man work?" (519). The usually-obstinate Marlowe rises and departs cooperatively. The reader, who recalls their previous interactions, knows that Marlowe rarely goes quietly during an active investigation, but, in Breeze, he recognizes another detective who abides by the code. Marlowe will not forget his duty, but he respects Breeze and allows the man to do his job.

The Cowboy Code: Ethics

In addition to their pronounced sense of duty, the cowboys of yore also abided by the maxim "fair pay for an honest day's work." We might classify this belief as another major aspect of the cowboy work code. In *The Virginian*, for example, the title-character and the eastern narrator organize a hunt the year after the latter's first visit to Wyoming. The Virginian "positively declined to accept" any money, "asserting that he had not worked enough to earn his board" (63). His refusal is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the Virginian has just lost his job at the Sunk Creek Ranch and is undoubtedly in need of money. Second, in earlier chapters we have seen that the Virginian must direct the narrator in all matters relating to hunting and the outdoors. During previous hunts, the Virginian is "obliged to hasten and save" the narrator "from sudden death or from ridicule, which is worse. Yet never once did he lose his patience" (51). Accompanying the narrator on a hunt is quite literally *work* for the Virginian. Yet, he states that he will not accept payment for his services. Apparently, in the cowboy ethos, taking someone on

an outdoors adventure does not qualify as work. The unemployed Virginian abides by the code, even when circumstances might tempt him to do otherwise.

The Virginian's strong adherence to the work code leads him to deal harshly with those who do not follow it. The Virginian's relationship with his best friend Steve provides the starkest example. Near the beginning of the novel, the narrator witnesses the closeness between the two men; they engage in horseplay, practical jokes, and whiskey, and, even when Steve insults the strong, tough Virginian, "no offense had been taken" (11). We soon learn that the tight bond between the two men has been forged on the job, driving horses and cattle for the Sunk Creek Ranch. Later, when some kind of impropriety takes place at the ranch, the Virginian quietly departs, declining to spend "many words upon his own troubles" (63) even though he is innocent of any wrongdoing. Steve, on the other hand, appears to be directly involved in the unnamed crime. The Virginian, however, declines to comment: "Concerning Steve he would say no more . . . it was plain that for some cause this friendship had ceased" (63). Earlier, Steve's joking insults had no impact on the Virginian, but now, after some sort of work violation, the Virginian has ended the friendship and left the ranch. At first, it seems that this episode will mark the end of Steve's presence in the novel. However, we later learn that the Virginian has a long memory, especially when it comes to a violation of the work code. Several chapters later, the narrator stumbles upon the Virginian and a posse of men as they prepare to hang Steve and another man for horse and cattle rustling. This rustling was the heretofore unnamed crime that caused the end of the friendship between the Virginian and Steve. And, more importantly, this crime was committed against the owner

of the Sunk Creek Ranch, Steve's employer at the time. The narrator cannot believe that Steve is about to be executed:

It was Steve! Steve of Medicine Bow! The pleasant Steve of my first evening in the West. Some change of beard had delayed my instant recognition of his face. Here he sat sentenced to die. A shock, chill and painful, deprived me of speech. (281)

The narrator struggles to understand how the Virginian will kill this man with whom he once shared such a close bond. This decision is not an easy one for the Virginian as "he was under a constraint very different from the ease of the others [the other members of the posse]" (282). This "constraint" is obviously the brotherly love he still holds for his former friend. Yet, when the time comes to carry out the hangings, the Virginian resolutely and simply says, "I reckon if every one's ready we'll start" (287). He then goes through with the executions even though he is visibly affected by the proceedings. A short time after the hangings, he has to drink whiskey to steady himself. The Virginian later tells the narrator that he has "never had it to do" before, but he "would do it all over again this morning" (290). He grieves over the loss of his friend and the fact that he has played the part of executioner, but he does not regret his actions. The Virginian has placed duty—duty to the cowboy code, duty to employer, and duty to self—above his personal feelings, including his love for his former best friend Steve. Steve, on the other hand, forfeited his life by violating the code. In the ethos, a man's life has no value once his honor is gone.

Philip Marlowe inherits this trait from his cowboy antecedents. First, he consistently refuses to accept the exorbitant payments offered by his wealthy clients, as

long as they are honest and fair with him. Marlowe will accept only what he deems fair. In *The High Window*, he adheres to his standard fee of twenty-five dollars a day even after Mrs. Murdock tells him that “[m]oney . . . is not really important. A woman in my position is always overcharged and gets to expect it” (452). She goes on to hint that she is willing to part with more money as long as Marlowe can keep her family out of legal trouble. Nevertheless, Marlowe declines to respond to this invitation, his silence signaling that the standard fee will suffice. Throughout the remainder of the novel, though he learns several incriminating facts about the Murdock family, he declines to press her for more money. Marlowe does finally take five hundred dollars from Mrs. Murdock, but only to pay for Merle’s medical expenses following her nervous breakdown. Merle is Mrs. Murdock’s timid, neurotic secretary whom Mrs. Murdock has abused and brainwashed over many years. Marlowe eventually discovers that Mrs. Murdock, not Merle, killed Horace Bright (Mrs. Murdock’s first husband) by pushing him out of a window. Once he makes this discovery, Marlowe appears to view Mrs. Murdock as existing outside the code, something alien, something contemptible. He no longer feels obligated to treat her fairly and honestly, so he takes from her without permission. Still, he takes the money only to help the victimized Merle, not for personal gain. Mrs. Murdock might be a murderer, but the code nevertheless forbids Marlowe from benefitting from this information.

In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe asks the wealthy General Sternwood for his standard rate of twenty-five dollars, though that novel is set some years before *The High Window*. Marlowe’s daily rate appears to be as consistent as his allegiance to the code. More strikingly on this occasion, Marlowe refuses to accept payment for his services until he

completes actual work. Sternwood directs his butler to pay Marlowe, but Marlowe answers, “No money now, thanks” (14). The trappings of wealth—the mansion, a butler, “chairs with rounded red plush seats” (4), etc.—surround Marlowe during this scene, but he will not abandon his beliefs about fair work and pay. Later, after Marlowe finds Carmen Sternwood drugged and nude at Arthur Geiger’s house, he drives her home to the Sternwood mansion and summons the butler. Out of respect for the elderly General Sternwood, Marlowe makes sure that Carmen is cared for and delivered to her room without Sternwood’s knowledge. And during his conversation with the butler, he still neglects to bring up the subject of payment. In fact, he says, “I’m not here. You’re just seeing things” (35). The normally-cold butler smiles then, seeming to recognize Marlowe’s honesty and chivalry. At this point in the novel, Marlowe has already uncovered Geiger’s blackmail scheme and saved his client’s daughter from disgrace, yet payment seems to be far from his mind.

Chandler brings Marlowe’s attitudes toward money into sharp focus when Vivian Sternwood visits Marlowe’s office early in the novel. Though his clients are the wealthy of Los Angeles and the surrounding region, Marlowe’s office is noticeably plain:

We [Marlowe and Vivian] went into the rest of my suite, which contained a rust-red carpet, not very young, five green filing cases, three of them full of California climate, an advertising calendar showing the Quints rolling around on a sky-blue floor, in pink dresses, with seal-brown hair and sharp black eyes as large as mammoth prunes. There were three near-walnut chairs, the usual desk with the usual blotter, pen set, ashtray and telephone, and the usual squeaky swivel chair behind it. (48)

The generic ordinariness of the office furnishings clashes with Chandler's earlier descriptions of Sternwood's mansion and Geiger's trendy house in the Hollywood hills. Vivian, rich and wasteful with her money, immediately takes note of the office's meager furnishings and décor. "You don't put on much of a front," she says (48). Marlowe tells her that making money as a private eye is difficult if one is "honest" (48). Vivian asks him if he is honest, and he responds, "Painfully" (49). Marlowe seems all too aware that his honesty prevents him from obtaining the wealth and luxury enjoyed by his clients. Nevertheless, as the novels progress, we see that Marlowe attempts to adhere to the code in all circumstances. Marlowe cherishes honor far more than any chance at an easier life. Marlowe's belief in this part of the code remains constant throughout the novels. In Chandler's last novel, *Playback* (not counting the posthumously published *Poodle Springs* which was completed by Robert B. Parker), Betty Mayfield, the story's damsel in distress, attempts to push a large stack of traveler's checks at Marlowe. All she wants in return is protection from the unknown men who are pursuing her. Betty asks, "How far would you go for five grand, Marlowe?" (52). Marlowe responds, "[t]hat would buy me full time for several months. That is, if I happened to be for sale" (53). Here, Marlowe quite definitively tells Betty that he does not want her money. First, he is currently under retainer with another client. Second and more importantly, Marlowe desires to help and protect Betty because it is his duty, not because he desires monetary gain. It seems that pay would somehow taint Marlowe's chivalric actions. In this chapter, the intoxicated Betty comes to believe (mistakenly) that she has murdered one of her pursuers, a violent blackmailer named Larry Mitchell. She forces the five thousand dollars in checks on Marlowe to help her cover up the crime. Marlowe thinks, "The big money meant nothing

to me” (57). Later, after Betty falls asleep, Marlowe slips the folder of checks back in her purse. Marlowe does eventually accept five hundred dollars from Betty once he is no longer working for his first client. However, Marlowe returns the money after he and Betty have sex. Marlowe’s code forbids him from mixing business with pleasure. He tells Betty, “You know very well that I couldn’t take money from you” (153). Once he consummates the relationship with Betty, his sense of ethics, professionalism, and chivalry will not allow him to keep the money. The gesture astonishes Betty; she has obviously not witnessed this behavior in other men. She says, “I think you’re crazy. I think you’re the craziest man I ever met” (154). Marlowe’s adherence to his self-imposed code sets him apart from other men. In a world where people elevate money, materialism, and self above anything else, Marlowe becomes almost an anachronism. In a sense, he becomes the last of the cowboys, staying true to his code of ethics, even in an urban wasteland of corruption and decadence.

Outside the Code: Corruption on the Urban Frontier

To bring Marlowe’s unusual honor into focus, Chandler often features policemen and other figures who operate outside the code. They feature much like the character Steve in *The Virginian*. That is, they are benefiting monetarily and professionally by being dishonest, and, in doing so, they draw the scorn of Marlowe and other code adherents. In *Farewell, My Lovely*, as Marlowe and Randall meet to discuss the case, Marlowe asks Randall about Bay City, the town where he was kidnapped and drugged by two policemen. Randall’s face becomes “red and uncomfortable” at the mention of the place (367). Randall, like Marlowe, abides by the code, so Bay City is anathema to him; it is a

place he would rather not discuss. And, since Bay City is connected administratively to the Los Angeles Police Department, Randall seems to feel soiled by association. Randall grudgingly reveals to Marlowe that the gangster Laird Brunette “put up thirty grand to elect a mayor,” but he then clams up (367). Marlowe tries to find out more, but Randall becomes quiet and “looked down at his clean, shiny fingernails” thereby ending the conversation (367). This subject obviously troubles Randall. He cannot abide corruption, but, as a lowly lieutenant, he is helpless to do anything about it. Marlowe, on the other hand, *can* take action. He is a private eye, so investigating Bay City will not harm his career, though it may put him in danger.

Marlowe soon pays a visit to the Bay City Police Department to locate the policemen who assaulted him. There, he meets with Chief John Wax, a man whose appearance immediately reminds us of Randall’s earlier words:

He had small, hungry, heavy-lidded eyes, as restless as fleas. He wore a suit of fawn-colored flannel, a coffee-colored shirt and tie, a diamond ring, a diamond-studded lodge pin in his lapel, and the required three stiff points of handkerchief coming up a little more than the required three inches from his outside breast pocket. (381)

Marlowe does not note Wax’s clothing and jewelry merely to showcase his powers of observation. The Chief is obviously receiving pay outside and above the typical policeman’s salary. Later, Marlowe observes that the man can barely lean over his desk “on account of his stomach being in the way” (383). Not only is the man benefitting from the town’s corruption, he has also become indolent and fat from sitting behind his desk and gazing out the window at the ocean view while he drinks expensive scotch and eats

cardamom seeds to disguise his breath. In short, Wax is the exact opposite of Marlowe and professional, competent city detectives like Randall and Breeze.

Wax initially dismisses Marlowe's inquiries, saying "The door is there" (383). Yet, when Marlowe reveals that he is now working for the wealthy Mrs. Lewin Grayle, Wax's "face changed so completely that it was if another man sat in his chair" (384). Wax then offers Marlowe a glass of scotch and becomes extremely cooperative. Wax refused to assist Marlowe in locating the two policemen at first; now, however, he summons one of the men to his office to question him about the incident. This quick change highlights how money—rather than any sense of justice or fairness—motivates a corrupt official like Wax. Only the backing of a wealthy client allows Marlowe to meet with one of his attackers.

Marlowe later decides to follow a lead that will entail boarding Laird Brunette's casino ship. Near the Bay City docks, he meets a man named Red Norgaard, a former Bay City policeman. Red serves as the foil to crooked cops like John Wax. Red owns a boat, so Marlowe hires him to take him out to Brunette's ship. Red tells Marlowe, "I was on the cops once. They broke me" (404). As Red's boat moves closer and closer to Brunette's casino boat, Marlowe realizes that Red was once an honest cop, one of the last police officers to resist the corruption that has become so pervasive in the department. Red followed the code, but the forces of corruption and bureaucracy eventually forced him out. In the ever-expanding wasteland of the Los Angeles "frontier," policemen such as John Wax and gangsters like Laird Brunette flourish while honest, hard-working men like Philip Marlowe and Lieutenant Randall struggle just to get along. Or, worse, honest cops like Red Norgaard find themselves black-balled and out of work. Now, Red tries to

make a living by drifting along the shore, searching for gamblers who need a ride out to one of the ships.

Once the men arrive at the ship, Red further reinforces Marlowe's initial impression of him. When Marlowe offers Red more money due to the danger posed by Brunette's henchmen, the ex-cop responds in true cowboy fashion: "You don't owe me nothing more, pardner." The men have agreed on a payment, and Red refuses to alter the agreement, even if it would benefit him to do so. Furthermore, the men have quickly forged a bond during the boat ride. Each appears to recognize a kindred spirit in the fight against corruption and crime. At the close of the novel, Marlowe reveals that he has helped Red get his job back as a Bay City policeman. He will now be working for someone other than Chief Wax, who has been fired. Even though Marlowe barely knows Red Norgaard, he does know that he is one of the "good guys," and he takes steps to assist him.

The Hero as "Bad Man"

We have seen that the heroes of Westerns and hard-boiled fiction operate according to a code of values. These values center on work, duty, ethics, and a pronounced chivalry. These heroes also rigorously and relentlessly pursue justice, even if they must regularly place themselves in great danger. This pursuit of justice is the most important aspect of the cowboy code. In fact, Western and detective heroes are often willing to deviate from other aspects of the code to achieve justice. These heroes will employ trickery, lie, steal, and even kill to get their man. In this way, they hearken back to Natty Bumppo, a frontier hero who was able to operate in the savage world of the wilderness *and* in the eastern

world of civility. More to the point, these twentieth-century heroes appear to owe much to Deadwood Dick of the previous century's dime novels. Deadwood Dick quite literally began as an outlaw before transforming into a cowboy-detective in later works.

Deadwood Dick's shady beginnings allow him to "get his hands dirty" as he pursues justice.

Jim Lassiter, the hero of *Riders of the Purple Sage*, appears to be a direct descendent of Deadwood Dick. When Lassiter first appears, the Mormon men note that "[h]e wears black leather" (15). Lassiter is dressed as the archetypal outlaw figure, and the "two black-butted guns" hanging "low down" complete his "gunman" image (16). When the Mormons hail him, Lassiter responds "with a curt nod. The wide brim of a sombrero cast a dark shade over his face. For a moment he closely regarded Tull and his comrades, and then, halting in his slow walk, he seemed to relax" (16). Everything about Lassiter, at least at first, screams mystery and danger. Not only does he appear the part of an outlaw, we might say that Lassiter also serves as the archetypal anti-hero in this novel. However, after this initial appearance, he demonstrates a marked sense of selflessness, honor and chivalry, especially in his dealings with Jane Withersteen. He places himself in danger by rescuing her cattle, and he accedes to her wishes that he not resort to violence in his dealings with Tull and the other Mormons, even though they are responsible for his sister's fate. In a sense, the outlaw/gunman Lassiter recedes to the periphery following Grey's first description of him. Instead, we see an honorable, respectful, almost peaceful Lassiter in his place.

It is only when Bishop Dyer kidnaps Fay Larkin that the outlaw returns. When Jane looks at him, she sees that a transformation has occurred:

Looking at him—he was so terrible of aspect—she could not comprehend his words. Who was this man with the face gray as death, with eyes that would have made her shriek had she the strength, with the strange, ruthlessly bitter lips? Where had vanished the gentle Lassiter? What was this presence in the hall, about him, about her—this cold, invisible presence? (301-302)

The handsome man that has treated Jane with such kindness has disappeared. In his place stands someone resembling a villain, someone willing to kill. Earlier, Jane made Lassiter swear that he would not pursue vengeance for his sister against Dyer, Tull, et al. Jane reminds Lassiter of his promise, but he replies, “Jane, now it’s justice” (302). In this context, Lassiter is able to dispense with other aspects of the code so that he can pursue and enact justice on Fay’s kidnappers. Lassiter allows his other, more-dangerous persona to return but only to save Fay and to punish the Mormons. Lassiter’s transformation is so striking and complete that it causes Jane to faint. When she awakens, Judkins tells her what happened after Lassiter confronted Bishop Dyer. Judkins says that Lassiter looked like “death” as he sent nine rounds into Dyer’s “bowels” (308, 310). As Dyer kneeled and held his hands over the multiple gunshot wounds, Lassiter said to him, “I reckon you’d better call quick on that God who reveals hisself to you on earth, because he won’t be visitin’ the place you’re goin’ to!” (310). This violence and cruelty contrast starkly with the Lassiter of earlier parts of the novel, particularly his interactions with Jane. Now, though, he is pursuing justice, so he allows himself to become the bad man. Like Deadwood Dick in the dime novels, he is willing to become an outlaw to “get his man.”

Philip Marlowe is also willing to get his hands dirty in his pursuit of justice. Despite his adherence to the code, Marlowe is able to operate in both the world of civility and in the underworld of crime. Now, the line between good and evil or right and wrong is not as clear-cut in Chandler's novels as it is in popular Westerns. Morality on the urban frontier of Los Angeles is much more nebulous and relative than it is in a Western like *Riders of the Purple Sage*. George Grella, in the 1972 panel discussion, says that the world of the hard-boiled detective novel is one "where there is no innocence and there is no guilt; everyone is more or less guilty." Nevertheless, in his effort to make order out of the disorder, Marlowe pursues justice the only way he knows how: by protecting and serving his client, even if doing so means working against the police, behaving dishonestly, and resorting to violence. Marlowe is perfectly willing to operate on the same plane as the criminal element in order to get the job done.

For instance, in *The Big Sleep* Marlowe tampers with evidence and fails to report murders on multiple occasions to protect Carmen Sternwood from scandal and possible arrest. He shields her because he feels duty and honor-bound to her father, General Sternwood. Paradoxically, Marlowe violates ethical boundaries in order to protect his client's honor. Early in the novel, Marlowe arrives at Arthur Geiger's house just as Geiger is shot and killed. Geiger is a pornographer and a blackmailer, and he has lured Carmen to his house for a photo shoot. Marlowe hears gunshots as he approaches the house, so he rushes inside where he finds a drugged Carmen and a dead Geiger. Instead of calling the police, Marlowe inspects Geiger's camera, then breaks into a "locked steel box in the deep drawer" of Geiger's desk as he looks for photographs of Carmen (33). After failing to locate the photographs (or photographic negatives), Marlowe takes "her

[Carmen] out to the car” and drives her home even though she is at least a witness to Geiger’s murder and possibly a suspect herself (33). Though he is attempting to protect General Sternwood by tampering with evidence and not reporting the murder, Marlowe *does* commit a crime at Geiger’s house. Early in this novel, the first of the Philip Marlowe series, we see that he is willing to ignore the law as he seeks his personal version of justice.

Marlowe’s willingness to operate in a legal gray area becomes more pronounced in *The High Window*. Near the end of the novel, Leslie Murdock confesses to Marlowe that he killed the blackmailer Louis Vannier. When Murdock finishes his tale, he asks, “What about the police?” (646). After shrugging his shoulders, Marlowe responds, “I don’t know about the police . . . They and I are not very good friends, on account of they think I am holding out on them. And God knows they are right” (646). Marlowe later adds, “I’m not going to turn you in. I’ve been working for your mother and whatever right to my silence that gives her, she can have” (647). Here, we see again that Marlowe’s allegiance to his client trumps his adherence to the law. In this case, he circumvents the law to protect the son of Elizabeth Bright Murdock, a client whom he detests. Moreover, though he does not come right out and say it, Marlowe seems to view Vannier’s death as a case of justice being served, not legal justice per se but the type for which Marlowe’s code calls. Vannier’s blackmailing scheme has played a large part in the hellish existence that Merle Davis has lived since the death of Murdock’s first husband years before. Thus, Murdock’s murder of Vannier is a kind of “frontier justice,” and Marlowe says nothing to the police.

We have viewed examples of Marlowe covering up evidence or failing to report crimes. There are also instances, albeit rare, of Marlowe himself enacting frontier justice. Most obviously, he shoots and kills Eddie Mars' hired gun Canino in *The Big Sleep*. Canino is responsible for the attempted robbery of Vivian Sternwood, the murder of Harry Jones, and the attempted murder of Marlowe. Near the end of the novel, Canino and his partner Art Huck detain Marlowe and knock him out. When Marlowe awakens, he is alone with Eddie Mars' wife Mona Mars, a beautiful woman Marlowe refers to as "Silver-Wig." Mona frees Marlowe before Canino can return and finish him off. Marlowe flees the hideout but only to retrieve a gun from his car. Then, Marlowe says that he "started back. The world was small, shut in, black. A private world for Canino and me" (171). In short, Marlowe returns to the hideout to kill Canino even though he could easily make a clean escape. Marlowe apparently cannot abide the fact that Canino planned to kill him in cold blood. After Marlowe returns, he lures Canino outside and kills him. Chandler's description of the incident reminds us of Lassiter's shooting of Bishop Dyer in *Riders of the Purple Sage*:

[H]is gun was still up and I couldn't wait any longer. Not long enough to be a gentleman of the old school. I shot him four times, the Colt straining against my ribs. The gun jumped out of his hand as if it had been kicked. He reached both his hands for his stomach. I could hear them smack hard against his body. He fell like that, straight forward, holding himself together with his broad hands. He fell face down in the wet gravel. And after that there wasn't a sound from him. (Chandler 173)

Also notably, just before sending the four shots into Canino, Marlowe thinks, “I didn’t want him with an empty gun” (173). In other words, Marlowe hopes Canino’s gun is loaded so that he can claim self-defense when the police arrive. At that moment, we realize that Marlowe plans to kill Canino no matter what, even if the man is unarmed or offers to surrender. Just as importantly, we know that Marlowe plans to mislead the investigators regarding the nature of the crime. From a legal perspective, the shooting qualifies as premeditated murder; however, according to Marlowe’s personal code, Canino deserves to die. The police seem to understand what Marlowe has done. The day after the shooting, Captain Gregory tells Marlowe, “Shooting this Canino was all right I guess, but I don’t figure the homicide boys pinned any medals on you” (174). Gregory’s statement is slightly ambiguous. Does he mean that Marlowe should have let the homicide detectives do their job in investigating Canino for the murder of Harry Jones? Or does he mean that the detectives will have to investigate Marlowe for the shooting even though, in the end, he will be able to claim self-defense? The answer remains unclear. One way or the other, however, Gregory does recognize that Marlowe has now entered an ethical gray area. Marlowe, in essence, has become a criminal. This episode from *The Big Sleep* serves as the most direct example of Marlowe’s willingness to operate outside the bounds of formal legality. Nevertheless, his actions near the close of *Farewell, My Lovely* demonstrate that Marlowe is willing to act deviously, even immorally, to achieve his notions of justice.

Near the end of *Farewell*, Marlowe orchestrates a meeting between the escaped convict Moose Malloy and the former nightclub dancer Velma Valento (aka Mrs. Grayle). During the course of his investigation, Marlowe has deduced that Mrs. Grayle is

in fact Velma Valento and that she is the former lover of Malloy. Marlowe undoubtedly recognizes how dangerous such a meeting is since Malloy has spent the duration of the novel committing various acts of violence as he relentlessly searches for Valento. In fact, Marlowe's early description of Malloy's appearance and clothes alerts us that he is some kind of modern-day "gunslinger." Marlowe calls Malloy "a big man but not more than six feet five inches tall and not wider than a beer truck" (201). Chandler's litotes emphasizes Malloy's tremendous size and strength. But his bulk is not the only trait that makes him a formidable foe. He also carries his arms "loose at his sides" in gunslinger fashion as he enters the "double-swinging doors" of a black nightclub in search of Velma (201-202). When he enters the club, "[t]he chanting at the crap table stopped dead . . . Heads turned slowly" (204). For a moment, Chandler displaces the reader in time and space. Malloy seems to be an outlaw entering a Wild West saloon in the 1800s rather than an African-American bar in 1930s Los Angeles. After the bouncer tells him that whites are not allowed in the bar, Malloy throws him "clear across the room," then says, "Some guys . . . has got wrong ideas about when to get tough" (206). Further emphasizing his dangerous outlaw persona, Malloy enters the back room and shoots the bar owner. It is important to note that Marlowe is a witness to this early episode. So, later in the novel, Marlowe understands perfectly that he is putting Velma in harm's way by luring her and Malloy to his apartment. After all, when Malloy learns that she is now married to Lewin Grayle and/or that she has had other lovers, he may hurt or kill her. Perhaps to Marlowe's surprise, though, the still-lovestruck Malloy "stopped dead and dropped the gun to his side" when he sees her (434). Then, Velma "shot him [Malloy] five times in the stomach," killing the outlaw (434). As an aside, we might say that the

femme fatale of the hardboiled detective story has “gotten the drop” on the anachronistic gunslinger. More importantly, we must note that Marlowe’s scheme has resulted in another death. Marlowe may not have pulled the trigger this time, but his actions directly lead to the death of Malloy. In *Farewell*, Marlowe continues to operate in a moral and ethical gray area in order to achieve his idea of justice.

On the twentieth-century urban frontier, words like justice, law, morality, good, evil, etc. have begun to lose their meanings. As a modern or even modernist cowboy, Marlowe believes that justice cannot always be served by fully cooperating with the police or legal authorities. Experience with the “system” has evidently caused Marlowe to become disillusioned with and distrustful of the higher authorities. Marlowe began his career as an investigator for the Los Angeles District Attorney, so we may infer that his disillusionment began to take root then. Fighting crime/solving mysteries thus becomes an existential endeavour for Marlowe; he must go his own way, and, at times, he must create his own version of justice. In the world of Marlowe, justice or “right” appears to entail protecting one’s client at all costs. Furthermore, and perhaps more strikingly, Marlowe views crimes that lead to the death or incarceration of a “bad guy” as a type of frontier justice, so he does little or nothing to prevent them. Nor does he attempt to hold the perpetrators of these crimes legally culpable. And, at times, Marlowe is willing to pull the trigger himself.

The End of Frontier

We have seen that Philip Marlowe becomes something of an “urban cowboy” in the Raymond Chandler novels. His rugged individualism, his adherence to a code of

behavior, his respect for other professionals (and his disdain for laziness and sloppiness), and his willingness to go his own way in order to achieve justice serve as clear links between Marlowe and the cowboys of traditional Westerns. These parallels go far in showing how Westerns remained influential even after the “closing” of the frontier. Still, this discussion has only briefly touched on the most obvious, and possibly the most important, aspect of frontier literature: setting. After all, if Marlowe fills the role of cowboy, if he possesses ties all the way back to early American heroes such as Natty Bumppo, then he must ostensibly operate on some sort of urban, modern frontier. This assumption is true to some extent. However, in addition to the obvious physical differences between the nineteenth-century frontier and the twentieth-century one—open space versus confined spaces, solitude versus crowds, nature versus steel and glass, horses versus cars, etc.—these respective frontiers feature a fundamental symbolic difference as well: in traditional Westerns, dime novels, and frontier literature, the West operates as *the* symbol of the American Dream, something positive, something hopeful, something worth fighting for; in hardboiled fiction, on the other hand, the West becomes the place, as in *The Day of the Locust*, where the American Dream is in its death throes. By foregrounding these Western character types and tropes in an urban, “hardboiled” environment, Chandler pessimistically reinforces the notion that, in the twentieth-century, an escape from industrialism and mechanization is all but impossible. There is, figuratively but also quite literally, no more West. Joseph C. Porter observes,

the dream of the Golden West seems outmoded, albeit in a sad and nostalgic way, when compared to the twentieth-century West. The fleeting memory of the Old West intrudes only briefly, reminding Marlowe of its

existence. When it intrudes it is in the guise of the constable or a retired Wells Fargo guard, but the backdrop is always the twentieth-century West, either the tourist trap of Puma Point or ‘an old hotel that had once been exclusive and was now steering a shaky course between receivership and a bad name at headquarters.’ The decline of the hotel parallels that of the dream of the Golden West. (423).

Writers such as Chandler may construct an urban cowboy—complete with codes governing behavior, speech, etc.—but this character must still operate in a steel, concrete and glass “frontier,” a place where crime, corruption, and over-population dominate, and the natural environment has receded into mere pockets. Marlowe passes one of these wilderness pockets during *Farewell, My Lovely*:

The smell of sage drifted up from a canyon and made me think of a dead man and a moonless sky. Straggly stucco houses were molded flat to the side of the hill, like bas-reliefs. Then there were no more houses, just the still dark foothills with an early star or two above them, and the concrete ribbon of road and a sheer drop on one side into a tangle of scrub oak and manzanita where sometimes you can hear the call of the quails if you stop and keep still and wait. On the other side of the road was a raw clay bank at the edge of which a few unbeatable wild flowers hung on like naughty children that won't go to bed. (319)

This description of nature is quite rare in the Marlowe series, but, for a moment at least, Chandler allows the frontier to “flicker,” to remind us that this place was untamed land mere decades before. According to the old myths, this place was one where rugged men

like Marlowe faced danger and hardship as they attempted to carve out the American Dream in the wilderness. In this way, Marlowe is much like the wild flowers that stubbornly “hung on.” The frontier has all but disappeared; thus men like Marlowe are becoming outmoded as well.

Or, to put it another way, these echoes of the frontier/Western form a sort of exclamation point on the Turnerian thesis. Twentieth-century writers like Louis L’Amour who return to the nineteenth-century West to fulfill “a need to get out of that apartment and into fresh air, sunlight, blue sky, and open space” (Tompkins 4) may succeed in writing escapist literature, but writers like Chandler (and Nathanael West), by including certain cowboy myths, succeed in calling these same myths into question. In this ever-increasing urban environment, the old myths no longer provide the answers to the question: what does it mean to be American?

CHAPTER IV

THE WESTERN IN THE ATOMIC AGE

Cormac McCarthy

Now one of America's most well-known authors, Cormac McCarthy remained shadowed in obscurity throughout the first three decades of his writing career. His first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, was published in 1965 to little fanfare, although several critics gave it positive reviews. Granville Hicks praised McCarthy for describing the Tennessee landscape "with precision, eloquence, and affection" (qtd. in Frye 19). Three more "Tennessee" novels followed, but the reviews became mixed, sometimes even contentious. The critical debate during these years largely centered on McCarthy's stylistic and thematic similarities to William Faulkner. Some critics praised McCarthy for the literary kinship; others, such as Patrick Cruttwell, called McCarthy a "lesser" writer (qtd. in Frye 31). *Suttree*, published in 1979, seemed further to cement McCarthy's indebtedness to Faulkner, nor did it sell much better than its predecessors.

McCarthy made both a physical and a literary move to the west in the late 1970s. Following his second divorce in 1976, he moved to El Paso, Texas (Frye 3). While there, he began working "on a new novel rooted in the troubling history of westward expansion" (Frye 66). Published in 1985, *Blood Meridian* (subtitled *The Evening Redness in the West*) did little to change the author's literary fortunes. Despite the dramatic change in setting, reviews continued to be mixed. Frye notes how many major

publications ignored the novel altogether (70). As McCarthy's first foray into western literature, however, *Blood Meridian* paved the way for his next novel, *All the Pretty Horses* (1992). The geographic shift also allowed McCarthy to step outside of Faulkner's shadow.

All the Pretty Horses became a bestseller and won the National Book Award, among other honors. Frye attributes the novel's success to "a softening of perspective, with a deeper, more moderate tone and a clearer sense of hope and possibility, even as it charts the destruction of the old social order and confronts the inexorable forces of the postnuclear world" (97). The 1980s and early 1990s had now seen the publication of *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, and Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*. The frontier had returned to American literature.

Of these fictions, I would argue that *All the Pretty Horses* serves as the sturdiest bridge between the "old" and the "new," between western novels of the late 1800s and the postmodern. Indeed, *All the Pretty Horses* is, to some extent, both of those things. The novel surely contains all the elements of the former: cowboys, gunfights, rugged individualism, and even a pronounced tie between the cowboy way of life and national identity. Yet one must remember that the opening pages occur in 1949, only four years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and well into the era of telephones, radios, and airplanes. The television is on the verge of becoming a mainstay as well. The United States has entered the Atomic Age. For better or worse, American life has undergone a radical transformation.

The Western in the Atomic Age

McCarthy artfully juxtaposes the old and the new in the opening pages of *All the Pretty Horses*. The protagonist, John Grady Cole, after paying his respects to his recently-deceased grandfather “walked out on the prairie and stood holding his hat like some supplicant to the darkness over them all and he stood there for a long time” (3). The mention of “prairie” and the choice of the word “supplicant” immediately transport the reader to an earlier time and place. However, McCarthy is quick to disrupt any sense of the pastoral:

As he turned to go he heard the train. He stopped and waited for it. He could feel it under his feet. It came boring out of the east like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance and the long light of the headlamp running through the tangled mesquite brakes and creating out of the night the endless fenceline down the dead straight right of way and sucking it back again wire and post mile on mile into the darkness... (3-4).

This scene provides a jarring contrast with the opening paragraphs, solemn, subdued passages that feature the young cowboy standing over the body of his rancher grandfather. With the violent cacophony of the train’s passing, McCarthy signals that the cowboy way of life subsists in the industrial shadow. Modernity, “ribald” and loud, is here; the train’s lights reveal that fences now mark property lines. The reader recalls the Cole Porter song “Don’t Fence Me In” as the train’s lights reveal the borders of modern life.

McCarthy provides a similar example at the end of the novel as an older, experienced, and disillusioned John Grady Cole wanders west in search of the “old.” He feels that the “modern” or the “new” has ruined Texas for him. He tells Rawlins that Texas “aint my country” (303). Thus, much like Huck Finn, the disillusioned John Grady gets on his horse and heads west, in search of a place that preserves some semblance of the cowboy way of life. He failed to find this way of life in Mexico, but he pushes onward nevertheless. Crossing the Pecos, as he has crossed and re-crossed the Rio Grande, he enters New Mexico. The imagery in the novel’s last paragraph indicates that John Grady’s quest will end in failure:

The bloodred dust blew down out of the sun. He touched the horse with his heels and rode on. He rode with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west across the evening land and the small desert birds flew chittering among the dry bracken and horse and rider and horse passed on and their long shadows passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into the darkening land, the world to come.
(306)

These closing images suggest that John Grady will not find a cowboy paradise in the lands west of Texas. He enters a land that is speeding toward the future, not some idyllic past. It is “the world to come,” not the world that was. And McCarthy’s diction further implies that utter destruction waits at the end of this future. The bright, red sunlight and the blowing dust are reminiscent of an atomic or nuclear bomb. After “coppering” John Grady’s face, the sun sets and the land is soon cast into darkness. Indeed, upon entering New Mexico, John Grady has entered the territory where many nuclear weapon tests

were conducted during and after World War II. Frye discusses how the “red of the sky may simply be the sunset, but it may work figuratively as the most stunning symbol of the cold war—the atmospheric burn of the atomic test” (113).

The other volumes of *The Border Trilogy* reinforce the apocalyptic imagery of this final paragraph. In the closing paragraphs of *The Crossing*, the protagonist, Billy Parham, has departed Arizona and reentered New Mexico. As he shelters in an abandoned adobe hut, a bright light suddenly wakes him. Only this light is one that “[draws] away along the edges of the world” (740). The light, even though it is noon, continues to recede and then leaves the day in darkness:

[H]e looked again at the road which lay as before yet more dark and darkening still where it ran on to the east and where there was no sun and no dawn and when he looked again toward the north the light was drawing away faster and that noon in which he'd woke was now become an alien dusk and now an alien dark and the birds that flew had lighted and all had hushed once again in the bracken by the road. (740)

Here, McCarthy draws a distinction between the “sun” and the “light”; they are separate things; furthermore, once the light disappears, he refers to the darkness as “alien.”

Something unnatural and sinister has occurred, something that causes the birds to behave erratically and something that causes Billy to sit in the middle of the road and weep.

McCarthy calls further attention to the unnatural light when, in the closing sentence of the novel, he says the “godmade sun did rise, once again, for all and without distinction” (741). Only a manmade light could have caused the earlier light; only a manmade object

could have cast the land into an “alien” darkness. Billy has witnessed, Andersen argues, a “false dawn . . . an atomic test blast” (118).

Cities of the Plain, the third installment of *The Border Trilogy*, bolsters the argument that John Grady has crossed into some post-nuclear, apocalyptic landscape at the conclusion of *All the Pretty Horses*. The title refers to Genesis 19, the chapter featuring the obliteration of Sodom and Gomorrah. The third novel, set a few years after *All the Pretty Horses*, brings together John Grady and Billy Parham on a New Mexico ranch that has been recently purchased by the army. Frye, noting the tensions between city and country, “the modern and the premodern,” and ranching and industry, characterizes “the stage upon which the drama unfolds” as “the cold war and the nuclear age” (137, 139). “In this era of technological hubris,” Andersen observes, “the ranches of the old West are an anachronism and have fallen on hard times. The open rangelands have been fenced” (151).

Critical Debate

The symbols and imagery of apocalypse both warn readers that the novels of *The Border Trilogy* are not traditional westerns and that they belong to the postmodern. That being said, several scholars have attempted to classify *All the Pretty Horses* as a traditional western, or, more specifically, as an elegy for a lost/passing way of life. Frye, while acknowledging that *All the Pretty Horses* “confronts the inexorable forces of the postnuclear world,” goes on to label it “a modern western replete with the conventions of nostalgic romance” (97, 100). Edwin T. Arnold, in “The Mosaic of McCarthy’s Fiction,” admits “moments of brutality” in *All the Pretty Horses* but says the novel is “elegiac”

(46). Susan Kollin, in “Genre and the Geographies of Violence: Cormac McCarthy and the Contemporary Western,” contrasts the earlier *Blood Meridian* with *All the Pretty Horses*, calling the former “anti-Western” while arguing that the latter “lacks the transgressive elements that marked his [McCarthy’s] earlier work” (561). Kollin admits that McCarthy attempts to critique myths about the West in *All the Pretty Horses*, but these myths ultimately trap him, resulting in yet another western. Kollin feels that novels such as *All the Pretty Horses* “are often unable to escape the very thing they seek to dismantle but instead are drawn into an intimacy and affiliation that destabilizes the critical effort” (561). To Kollin, McCarthy fails to subvert myths about cowboys, the frontier, etc. because he has been “drawn in,” and his protagonist has an “obsession” and a “compulsion to act out the mythos of the West” (574, 586).

Nevertheless, other critics have detected signs of the “transgressive” in *All the Pretty Horses*. In “Pledged in Blood: Truth and Redemption,” Sara L. Spurgeon begins by cataloging several myths about cowboys and the frontier, calling these myths “America’s most cherished . . . The mythic West and the frontiers of legend are familiar icons on the American cultural landscape” (79). However, Spurgeon argues, McCarthy draws on these national myths—“rugged individualism, “the cowboy code of conduct,” etc.—only to show them as “untenable” and as “fantasy” (80-81). In a sense, Spurgeon’s approach is the inverse of Kollin’s: McCarthy presents all of the iconic myths and archetypes, but he does so only to dismantle them in postmodern fashion.

Mark Eaton concurs in his article “Dis(re)membered Bodies: Cormac McCarthy’s Border Fiction,” arguing that *The Border Trilogy* and *Blood Meridian* are “anti-Westerns” (156). Furthermore, Eaton is careful to place McCarthy’s fiction outside or

beyond traditional interpretations of American literary history. He says that *The Border Trilogy* and *Blood Meridian* are “attentive to the diverse cultural, historical, and literary discourses of the Southwest borderlands” (156). Both novels, Eaton concludes, exist outside of “the outmoded paradigm that posited a self-contained American literary history from [the] Puritans to the present” and that McCarthy’s southwestern works belong to “the emergent field of ‘postnationalist’ American studies” (176, 156).

Thesis

My study will build on the arguments of Spurgeon and Eaton. I will limit my analysis to *All the Pretty Horses*, although similar threads run through *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*. *All the Pretty Horses* reflects the western genre in that it features many of the settings, tropes, and myths of traditional frontier literature, yet McCarthy undermines these aspects, showing them to be no more than relics of the past, relics that mean nothing when viewed in the “false dawn” of an atomic blast. John Grady, romantic to the core, puts all of his hopes and dreams into these traditions, but, in the end, he gazes out at the apocalyptic landscape of the postnuclear world. John Grady’s search for “country” and the cowboy way of life proves to be a futile endeavour.

Setting: False Paradise

The setting of *All the Pretty Horses* serves as the most obvious link to frontier literature. The novel opens on a ranch in Texas, of which early descriptions transport the reader to an earlier time. Jane Tompkins states that “the opening shot of a Western is a land defined by absence: of trees, of greenery, of houses, of the signs of civilization, above all,

absence of water and shade” (71). The opening scene of *All the Pretty Horses* does not quite meet Tompkins’ requirement as it takes place inside. However, within a few paragraphs, John Grady steps outside, onto a land that is “[d]ark and cold [without] wind and a thin gray reef beginning along the eastern rim of the world” (3). The land is so empty, so devoid of signs of civilization, that it appears almost otherworldly, a moonscape. Strikingly, it is here that the aforementioned train hurtles past, demolishing the absolute emptiness. McCarthy, in the opening sentence, mentions “[t]he candleflame and the image of the candleflame” as John Grady pays his respects to his dead grandfather (3). The ranch house appears to lack electricity and sits upon a flat land where calves “bawled” in the distance (3). Perhaps the candleflame and its image show that the “old” feel of the opening pages is nothing more than a reflection, a flicker of something that has passed, a bygone era. McCarthy reinforces this idea when John Grady looks down at the source of the light: a “guttered candlestub” (3). The source of the light, like the time period, has passed. Any sense of the premodern is vestigial at best.

The grandfather also serves as a distinct link between the old and the new. Like the guttered candlestub, the grandfather’s body is “caved and drawn”; moreover, John Grady says, “You never combed your hair that way in your life” (3). In other words, the grandfather’s dead body is a poor representation of his actual life. There is both a falseness and an emptiness to the body. The grandfather’s life spanned the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. This interval, of course, runs from the height of westward expansion through the modernization of America. We learn that the grandfather was born in the ranch house, and now he was “the first man to die in it” (6). The grandfather’s life provides a bridge between the present and the epoch of

“telegram[s]” and cattle crossings, when men “were drowned, shot, kicked by horses” (7). This time span also provides the first indication that the novel is set in the twentieth century, rather than the nineteenth. McCarthy forces the careful reader—a reader that has already been displaced in terms of time—to add 77 years to the grandfather’s birth year: 1872. In this way, the reader discerns that the present is 1949, a full half-century after the “closing” of the frontier, several decades after the rise of modern modes of transportation and communication, and most importantly, four years into the atomic age.

John Grady senses modernization and mechanization encroaching upon his way of life. Soon after his grandfather’s death, he and his best friend, Lacey Rawlins, concoct a plan to travel south to Mexico in hopes of finding a job on a ranch. More specifically, they plan to seek a type of “cowboy paradise” in Mexico, an unspoiled land of plenty, a place that they (especially John Grady) feel is their birthright, the frontier “Eden” that they have heard about in the old myths and stories. As they travel south through Texas, man-made obstacles constantly impede their journey. Frye comments on the “strange blend of old and new: highways and cattle ranches, cafes and campfires, oil derricks and ancient traces cut by the Comanche” (101). When they encounter yet another fence, Lacey remarks, “How the hell do they expect a man to ride a horse in this country?” John Grady replies, “They don’t” (31). His answer is short and succinct, but it demonstrates John Grady’s disillusionment with Texas. He understands that modernization—roads, telephone lines, towns—have rendered the cowboy way of life nearly impossible. Later, they stop and look at a map that Lacey obtained at a roadside cafe. South of the Rio Grande, the map is “white,” a blank space onto which the boys can project all of their hopes and dreams, a place where they can return to the old (35). A few signs along the

journey indicate that they might be mistaken. They encounter a “Mexican” prior to crossing the border and ask him if he “know[s] that country down there?” (34). The Mexican answers, “I never been to Mexico in my life,” his response hinting that he thinks the boys are fools for traveling south (34). After crossing the border, the boys—now accompanied by the young delinquent Jimmy Blevins—arrive at their first Mexican village, a village of “[h]alf a dozen low houses with walls of mud brick slumping into ruin” (50). McCarthy later calls them nothing more than “mud huts” (52). Lacey remarks, “There aint no electricity here” and “I doubt there’s ever been a car in here,” and the reader senses that he is already having second thoughts about coming south. No electricity and no cars sound good in theory, but the stark poverty unsettles him. Shortly after leaving the village, the boys pass “cattle dead from an old drought” (53). John Grady, perhaps having his own doubts, asks Lacey, “How does this country suit you?” (53).

The boys continue south, passing more poor villages and “ragged caravans of migrant traders headed toward the northern border” (67). These “ragged caravans” traveling “north” suggest that the boys are heading in the wrong direction. Mexico has proven to be the antithesis of unspoiled paradise during the boys’ early days in the country. The lands outside of the first villages also fail to impress them:

Days to come they rode through the mountains and they crossed at a barren windgap and sat the horses among the rocks and looked out over the country to the south where the last shadows were running over the land before the wind and the sun to the west lay blood red among the shelving

clouds and the distant cordilleras ranged down the terminals of the sky to
fade from pale to pale of blue and then to nothing at all. (60).

McCarthy's diction, words such as "barren," "pale," and "nothing," hint that this land is no land of plenty, no cowboy Garden of Eden. Lacey gazes out at the vast emptiness and skeptically asks, "Where do you think that paradise is at?" (61). The more optimistic John Grady responds, "You cant tell what's in a country like that till you're down there in it" (61).

Still, John Grady, in search of "lakes and runnin water and grass to the stirrups," quietly begins to doubt their decision to travel south. His frequent queries of Lacey appear to indicate his own growing anxiety. It is also important to recall that the boys are traveling south in search of a *myth*. In 1949, popular narratives surrounding the frontier, the West, and cowboys have already become entrenched in the past. In short, the boys are searching for a phantom. McCarthy clearly foreshadows the futility of chasing this myth during the boys' journey south. The land is dry and dead and ugly, the few farms contain no livestock; and the impoverished citizenry consistently view the boys with suspicion. Not only does McCarthy hint that the foray is a fool's errand, but, as the boys put more and more territory between them and the border, the reader begins to wonder if danger lies in the next village, or just over the next mountain.

Nevertheless, the boys push on, and, even though they have not found their cowboy paradise just yet, the poor, barren landscape of northern Mexico does function as an important western trope. Tompkins writes,

It [the landscape] is 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. This code of asceticism founds our experience of Western stories. The landscape challenges the body to endure hardship—that is its fundamental message at the physical level. (71).

Therefore, at first glance at least, the boys' journey through the barren dryness and poverty seems fitting, a necessary rite of passage before they gain entry to the "Big Rock Candy Mountains" (56). A Western would not be complete without the hero(s)' being tested first. The genre practically dictates that John Grady and Lacey must travel through the badlands before they reach their paradise. As the hardship and danger grow, the reader begins to believe that they will somehow be rewarded for their suffering and hard work. If they just keep riding, keep pushing on, their quest will end in something better; at the end of their journey, they will surely find the way of life that is their birthright. Thus far, Mexico has failed the eye-test. Soon, it begins to unsettle the boys in other ways. John Grady and Lacey, eager to play the role of desperadoes back in Texas, now begin to encounter real danger in Mexico. Here is a land of different values, a land of extreme class divisions, and a land where a man feels comfortable asking "John Grady if he wished to sell the boy [Jimmy Blevins]" (77). The Mexican, trying to buy Blevins as a slave (indeed, a sex slave perhaps), "did not look evil" (78); in fact, he and his men have just shared their scant provisions with the boys. Yet, in this land, slavery appears to be a fact of life. We recall that Lacey, prior to crossing the border, told John Grady that he felt "ill at ease" (37). Perhaps his earlier premonition foreshadows that the boys will find

anything but a paradise south of the border. We now begin to suspect that this dream-quest may soon turn into a nightmare. The land has disappointed thus far; now the cultural practices of its people cause the boys great alarm. In this land, a man may casually ask if another human is up for sale.

The cowboy swagger that John Grady and Lacey feigned back in Texas disappears quickly when they encounter real danger. Blevins spies his horse stabled in a Mexican village, and he decides to steal it back—though the horse was likely stolen property to begin with. Lacey, in particular, shows marked fear during the incident. “This is by God it, aint it?” he asks, then adds, “You know what these sons of bitches’ll do to us?” (85). Here, the reader recalls Lacey’s “cowboy” diction prior to crossing the border. He called John Grady “son” and tells him to “pay attention to your old dad now” as they ate breakfast (33-34). He was also the one who lied to the Mexican that “[w]e’re runnin from the law” as he tried to play the archetypal outlaw figure (34). In Mexico, however, Lacey’s facade quickly crumbles. John Grady, conversely, remains stoical, yet his demeanour undergoes a subtle but noticeable transformation as well. At the cafe or at the various campsites on the journey south, he was quick to joke with Lacey, but, following the encounter with the wax merchants and later the horse theft episode, his responses become clipped, strings of “[y]eah” or “[n]o” or “[w]ho knows” (93-94). Unlike Lacey, John Grady does not show his fear, but he does seem to recognize the gravity of the situation. He also seems to sense that Mexico is not the cowboy paradise he so desperately seeks. On a practical and more immediate level, John Grady’s decision to help Blevins has placed the boys in danger. Instead of a cowboy paradise, the boys have found nothing but ugliness and violence so far.

Soon, however, the boys' fears and concerns are alleviated, albeit temporarily. Blevins leads his pursuers in the opposite direction, allowing John Grady and Lacey to continue their journey south. McCarthy's description of landscape shifts dramatically as the boys enter "the deepening cool of the mountains" (95). One recalls Zane Grey's famous western *Riders of the Purple Sage* when John Grady and Lacey, now without Blevins, pass "grasslands [that] lay in a deep violet haze" (95). This positive imagery provides a stark contrast with the ugliness of the earlier mud huts and with the dry, barren landscape of the northernmost reaches of Mexico. John Grady's optimism, courage, and steadfastness have finally been awarded, at least at first glance. In an archetypal sense, the boys have successfully traveled through the "badlands" to reach a land of plenty. Mary Lawlor writes,

Western Iconography had never adhered to a single format or a single ideology, although the dominant mode for representing the American West by Europeans and Euro-Americans since at least the middle of the eighteenth century had largely been, to put it simply, romantic. The frontier was typically construed as a border zone that harbored mystery and danger, but that ultimately opened onto a plentiful, inviting space where the desires of common citizens, if they were diligent and brave, might be richly fulfilled. The wide, figuratively horizontal plane featured in such prospects gave material form to the ideals of democratic possibility central to U.S. national culture from the beginnings. (2)

The reader recognizes that John Grady and Lacey's journey has followed a popular, easily-recognizable pattern. The boys have crossed the border into a strange land, a land

where they have faced danger and hardship. Now, after successfully navigating the badlands, a beautiful Eden opens before them. It is reasonable then to assume that the story will continue along preordained lines. In this place, John Grady's dreams "might be richly fulfilled."

The wildlife is remarkably abundant here; the boys see "flights of waterfowl" and plenty of cattle as they ride (95). They have arrived at a ranch called The Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción, a name suggestive of purity and innocence. This name also implies that the ranch is beyond the reaches of the modern. Indeed, "[i]n the lakes and in the streams were species of fish not known elsewhere on earth and birds and lizards and other forms of life as well all long relict here for the desert stretched away on every side" (99). The beauty and abundance of the place recall Columbus's first impressions of the New World. Just as Columbus cataloged the animals, the plants, the fruit, etc. in his letters to Ferdinand and Isabella, McCarthy lists the plenty that lies before the boys. John Grady and Lacey have stumbled upon a vast oasis, a Mexican Garden of Eden.

Somewhat remarkably, the boys are hired as ranch hands on the day they arrive, reinforcing the notion that they have reached their destination. As the boys lie in bed after being hired, Lacey says, "I believe these are some pretty good old boys," referring to the other ranch hands, then adds, "This is how it was with the old waddies, aint it?" (98). Perhaps all too conveniently, the boys have stumbled upon exactly what they were looking for. John Grady says that he would like to stay for "a hundred years" (98). The ranch becomes even more paradisiacal for these young cowboys when they are allowed the opportunity to break 16 wild horses after being on the job for only three days. At this

point in the novel, events seem to be proceeding too neatly, too positively for John Grady and Lacey. The careful reader remembers that Blevins is still out there somewhere and that consequences lurk just around the corner.

Nevertheless, the boys do successfully break the horses as twenty “women, children, young girls, and men” watch them (107). The owner of the ranch, Don Héctor, learns of John Grady’s skills with the horses and invites him to the house for coffee and a meeting. In mere days John Grady receives a promotion to work in the hacendado’s stable and periodically to lead search parties into the mountains to obtain more wild horses. And, again in mere days, John Grady begins to fall in love with Don Héctor’s daughter. One begins to marvel as John Grady achieves his version of the American Dream in a neat, swift package—the land, the horses, the beautiful daughter, and, most importantly, respect, the respect no longer afforded to cowboys in 1940s American. However, due to John Grady’s sins—he lies about his connection to the outlaw Jimmy Blevins, and he carries on a clandestine sexual relationship with the daughter—, Don Héctor soon casts him out of this Mexican Garden of Eden. Following his betrayal of the hacendado, John Grady rides with Lacey in the mountains, searching for more wild horses that he can take to Don Héctor for breeding purposes. There, in the once idyllic landscape, the boys sit by the fire as three greyhounds approach: “[The dogs] trotted into the light one behind the other and circled the fire, pale and skeletal shapes with the hide stretched taut over their ribs and their eyes red in the firelight” (152). The dogs’ appearance startles the boys, and, for the first time, they, especially John Grady, appear to realize they do not belong here. This paradise is a false one, or at least one that is beyond their grasp. The boys will not succeed in re-establishing old myths in this land. John

Grady, scared of the demon-like dogs but also worried about his status with Don Héctor, “stood and looked out into the darkness” (152). He seems to sense that Don Héctor will soon cast him from this Eden, and, like Adam, the rest of his days will be filled with suffering. The boys soon return to the ranch where they are shunned by the other cowboys. That night, Mexican police/soldiers rouse them from their sleep and arrest them due to their connection to the outlaw Blevins.

On the outskirts of the hacendado’s lands, as the soldiers lead them to their fate, they pass the beauty that they mistakenly believed they had a claim to: “The country they traversed was advanced in season and the acacia was in bloom and there had been rain in the mountains and the grass along the selvedge of the draws was green and blowsy in the long twilight where they rode” (155). In a short time, they return to Encantada, the ugly village where Blevins stole his horse back. They soon learn that Blevins returned to the village and murdered at least one man just so he could also steal back his revolver. During John Grady’s first night in jail, he painfully dreams of Don Héctor’s ranch, or perhaps an idealized version of it:

[H]e dreamt of horses in a field on a high plain where the spring rains had brought up the grass and the wildflowers out of the ground and the flowers ran all blue and yellow as far as the eye could see and in the dream he was among the horses running and in the dream he himself could run with the horses and they coursed the young mares and fillies over the plain where their rich bay and their chestnut colors shone in the sun and the young colts ran with their dams and trampled down the flowers in a haze of pollen that hung in the sun like powdered gold . . . and they ran in that

resonance which is the world itself and which cannot be spoken but only praised. (163-164)

Here is the place for which John Grady longs, a place he thought he had found upon approaching The Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción. Now, the majority of his remaining time in Mexico will be spent in dank, dark cells arrived at by passing “mud pens” and waterways polluted by “oil” and “runoff” (176). In the villages they pass through, children play in “dead mud yard[s],” and the road is a “hot and guttered track” (177). And, in their time in jail and later prison, John Grady discovers that being a citizen of the United States means nothing on this side of the border.

The promise of a “cowboy paradise” proves to be a false one. John Grady Cole and Lacey Rawlins travel south in search of the cowboy way of life, a life they believe to be their birthright. Along their journey they encounter deprivation, ugliness, and danger, yet, even during this sequence, McCarthy creates the impression that the boys are experiencing a cowboy rite of passage, perhaps even a purgatory before they reach their Garden of Eden. Finally, the boys do indeed arrive at their destination, a sort of “Big Rock Candy Mountain” called The Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción. Its beauty and purity create the impression, especially for John Grady, that he has reached the place where he will spend the rest of his days. At the ranch he begins to live the American Dream, only on the opposite side of the border. Not only has he reached his dream destination, he soon obtains his dream job and his dream girl. He likely even believes that he will one day become the son-in-law of Don Héctor and inherit his lands. However, in the end, this land and its abundance disappear. McCarthy has reinforced the notion of the cowboy paradise only to dismantle it in the end. The

promise of Eden, the promises of beauty and abundance and limitless opportunities once drew the Puritans to the New World. Then, in subsequent years, these promises led pioneers and cowboys further and further west and helped create the idea of Manifest Destiny. And, now that their land and way of life are giving way to the forces of modernism, these same promises lure John Grady and Lacey south of the border. There, they watch these myths crumble, and both return home in defeat, disillusioned, displaced, and deracinated.

Nationalism/American Exceptionalism

McCarthy's undermining of western myths and tropes does not stop there. He also introduces the themes of patriotism and American exceptionalism early in the novel, only to undermine them again once John Grady is located on the other side of the border. In Part I, the tie between the cowboy way of life and patriotism or military valor is firmly established; this tie is one that reaches back to the previous century, back to the Indian Wars that spanned most of the nineteenth century. We learn that John Grady's recently deceased "grandfather was the oldest of eight boys and the only son to live past the age of twenty-five. They were drowned, shot, kicked by horses. They perished in fires. They seemed to fear only dying in bed. The last two were killed in Puerto Rico in eighteen ninety-eight..." (7). Thus, of the seven dead Grady sons, five presumably died while working as cowboys or perhaps while battling Indians, while the remaining two were casualties of the Spanish-American War. It is striking that McCarthy does not distinguish here between the hardships of frontier life and the dangers of war. To a cowboy, perhaps,

there is no real difference. Whether fighting for survival on the range or serving in the military in faraway lands, a cowboy is a cowboy. Loyalty and courage are essential. The bonds of patriotism and military service may be one reason—or perhaps *the* reason—John Grady’s grandfather remained loyal to his son-in-law, even after his daughter divorced him. Shortly after the funeral, John Grady tells his father that “[h]e always thought you all would get back together” (13). Apparently, the grandfather was the one who also remained loyal and hopeful while the elder Cole was a prisoner of war during World War II:

He never give up, the boy [John Grady] said. He was the one told me not to. He said let’s not have a funeral till we got somethin to bury, if it aint nothin but his dogtags. They were fixin to give your clothes away. (13)

Even though blood does not link the men, some kind of cowboy/patriotic code does. The grandfather refuses, as it were, to leave one of his own behind. On the other hand, the father has not spoken to the mother since 1942, presumably the year he left for the war. We can infer that the mother moved on quickly during the subsequent years, gaining an interest in acting and perhaps engaging in other relationships. Regardless, she was not waiting faithfully when Cole returned home. The war apparently allowed her to find herself, to explore options that were not previously afforded to her.

The father presents an interesting link between cowboys and martial valor. He was a prisoner of war during the Bataan Death March, a survivor of unspeakable cruelty and torture, and a witness to death on a mass scale. While riding on horseback through the Texas countryside, he now sees “the country with . . . sunken eyes as if the world out there had been altered or made suspect by what he’d seen of it elsewhere” (23). His

anguish is not just mental. The war has left him physically ill as well, underweight, prone to coughing fits, and dying. His sickness appears to reside in the lungs because John Grady worries about his chronic smoking habit. Perhaps the smoking compounds the chronic pneumonia he contracted in the Japanese POW camp. Yet the father remains defiant, lighting his cigarettes with “his Third Infantry Zippo lighter” (8). Sadly, the father has survived the war only to face a steady, painful decline. More to the point, he has returned to Texas to find a way of life that is slowly disappearing. He has lost a wife who “dont want to live out there” (i.e. west Texas) and who seems to gravitate toward the modern, the urban. And, due to the divorce, he is no longer allowed to live and work on the Grady ranch, a ranch that will soon be sold since the grandfather is dead. Thus, the father, “thin and frail, lost in his clothes,” slowly dies, just as his way of life is slowly dying (23). In his final scene, the father compares cowboys to the nearly-extinct Comanche people: “We dont know what’s goin to show up here come daylight. We dont even know what color they’ll be” (26). White European settlers once caused the demise of the Comanche; the father predicts that some future invader will do the same to the cowboys (and presumably to Americans in general). It is no great stretch then to cast John Grady’s father as a symbol of the cowboy way of life. Both have reached mortality’s frontier at the same time. It is the war that ultimately kills the father, just as the war ushered in the Atomic Age, the age of burgeoning technology and blinding progress that signaled the end of the cowboys. John Grady realizes that his way of life is coming to a close in Texas, so he sets out to find it elsewhere. While doing so, he and his partner, Lacey Rawlins, carry the mistaken notion that their heritage, their *Americanness* will carry weight south of the border. In 1949, the American West, populated,

industrialized, and mechanized, no longer provides the boys with a chance to escape and explore, and, as they stand on the verge of adulthood, the West's status as the symbol of the American Dream has all but faded. Thus, just like earlier pioneers, settlers, and cowboys, they shortsightedly turn their attention to the closest blank space on the map: Mexico. There, they attempt to enact their personal version of Manifest Destiny.

The boys plan to seek their lost way of life in Mexico, yet they carry with them the same patriotic code that the grandfather shared with his son-in-law. The boys are willing to leave America behind in a physical sense in order to pursue their hopes and dreams, but they refuse to give up their almost spiritual notion of being American. The patriotic code is strong among cowboys, and John Grady and Lacey will desperately hold on to this code even while living in another country. Their strict adherence to the code first becomes obvious just before reaching Mexico. During their journey south, the boys realize they are being followed. They eventually stop and confront their pursuer, Jimmy Blevins. They have every reason to part ways with Blevins: he rides a stolen horse; he carries a stolen gun; he is too young; he lies about his name and other matters, etc. And they do in fact go their separate way initially; Rawlins tells him, "You aint ridin with us...[y]ou'll get us thowed in the jailhouse" (42). Blevins does not reply, but he apparently continues to follow them because he shows up again the next day, right before the boys cross the Rio Grande. Again, the boys have no reason to allow Blevins to ride with them, and many reasons not to. In fact, Lacey correctly predicts that associating with Blevins will doom their Mexican enterprise: "I got a uneasy feelin about that little son of a bitch" (44). Blevins, however, holds an ace-in-the hole, and he plays it, telling the boys that they should let him ride along "[c]ause I'm an American" (46). Lacey had led the

argument against Blevins prior to this statement, but now he “turned away and shook his head” (46). Blevins has evoked the code, and the boys seem reluctant to discuss his right to ride with them further, for now at least. Blevins’ nationality affords him the right to travel and to make camp with the boys. Once in Mexico, Blevins gives the boys every reason to turn their backs on him—his sloppy drunkenness, his irrational fear of lightning, and his careless aggressiveness when trying to steal his horse back—yet John Grady tells Lacey he “cant” leave Blevins behind (81). John Grady just cannot abandon a fellow American, even if he attracts danger at every turn. This decision to remain loyal to Blevins comes back to haunt the boys, of course. They are later expelled from the ranch, arrested by Mexican soldiers, and imprisoned in Saltillo, where they almost die. Their allegiance to the code proves to be unwise in this case.

For now, though, circumstances lead the boys in different directions. Blevins flees, taking danger with him, so the boys continue south. We have already looked at The Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción and how it serves as a false paradise. The manner in which McCarthy describes the ranch and its lands in the opening paragraphs of Part II echoes Columbus’s first descriptions of the New World:

This said island of Juana is exceedingly fertile, as indeed are all the others; it is surrounded with many bays, spacious, very secure, and surpassing any that I have ever seen; numerous large and healthful rivers intersect it, and it also contains many very lofty mountains. All these islands are very beautiful, and distinguished by a diversity of scenery; they are filled with a great variety of trees of immense height, and which I believe to retain their foliage in all seasons; for when I saw them they were as verdant and

luxuriant as they usually are in Spain in the month of May,—some of them were blossoming, some bearing fruit, and all flourishing in the greatest perfection, according to their respective stages of growth, and the nature and quality of each: yet the islands are not so thickly wooded as to be impassable. The nightingale and various birds were singing in countless numbers, and that in November, the month in which I arrived there. There are besides in the same island of Juana seven or eight kinds of palm trees, which, like all the other trees, herbs, and fruits, considerably surpass ours in height and beauty. The pines also are very handsome, and there are very extensive fields and meadows, a variety of birds, different kinds of honey, and many sorts of metals, but no iron.

This language proved crucial in establishing the sense that America was a place of boundless resources. Columbus and other early-American writers painted the New World as a place of abundance, a place of limitless opportunities, and a place where life will continue to improve for subsequent generations. The lure of this myth is what led so many to push further and further west in the 1800s. In a similar fashion, it now leads John Grady and Lacey to leave home and travel south. Here, the boys find a land much like what Columbus described. The Hacienda de Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción is everything a cowboy could ever desire. In the end though, the ranch proves to be a false paradise, a place where the boys can never be fully accepted, a place with values and societal strictures of which the boys are unaware. Nevertheless, like Columbus centuries before, the boys seem to assume that their hard work will allow them access to the land's natural resources and the ranch's career opportunities. John Grady specifically appears to

believe that the ranch and its lands are available to him due to his American notions of democratic possibility.

On their first evening at the ranch, after eating dinner with the other “vaqueros,” John Grady and Lacey appear to be content. John Grady assumes that he is welcome to stay for a long period of time, perhaps permanently. In fact, he tells Lacey that he would like to stay at the ranch for “a hundred years” (98). His attitude echoes that of the early explorers, Puritans, and colonists who remained without regard for the land or its native peoples. Nevertheless, as newcomers, the boys also appear humble, outwardly at least, and, during the first two days, they quietly fall in line with the other cowboys, driving and branding cattle and performing other basic ranching chores. This humility does not last long. When the boys spy a group of wild horses in a holding pen, John Grady begins to consider breaking them, taming the horses with just a little assistance from Lacey. Furthermore, he would like to break the 16 horses in four days or fewer. Four days appears an arbitrary number, but John Grady is eager to make his mark on the ranch. Breaking the horses in four days will gain him fame and stature even though he is a newcomer. John Grady’s ambition provides a stark contrast with the boys’ behavior upon first arriving at the ranch. Then, they were just happy to be one of the “good old boys” or “the old waddies,” working on the ranch like the other vaqueros (98). Now, just a few days later, John Grady devises a plan that will elevate him above the other cowboys; breaking 16 wild horses will hopefully demonstrate his prowess and gain the attention of the hacendado (and his daughter). It is perhaps no accident that John Grady makes this plan just after seeing Don Héctor for the first time. Now, he becomes unwilling to settle for being a mere worker; his American notions allow him to believe that might one day

become the heir-apparent. Prior to his grandfather's death, John Grady was promised that the family ranch would one day be his, but, due to his mother's decision, he will not receive his "birthright." We can safely speculate that John Grady wants—whether consciously or unconsciously—to obtain in Mexico what was taken from him back in Texas.

Furthermore, McCarthy reinforces a cowboy myth during this episode (only to later subvert it). Jane Tompkins writes that the West presents an "opportunity for conquest" and fulfills "a powerful need for self-transformation" (4). For the time being at least, John Grady believes that they have found their West, a new West where they can live out their hopes and dreams. It is only natural that the archetypal American cowboy would set out to conquer the land (i.e the ranch) and to right the past wrongs of his life. Regardless, the careful reader remembers that the boys are in Mexico, a land with its own societal strictures, its own customs, its own myths. The "all-american cowboy" will soon learn that this land is not his to conquer (*Cities of the Plain* 745).

As for Lacey, he reveals his true feelings toward the skills of the vaqueros after hearing John Grady's plan. Lacey says that the wild horses have the advantage of not having a "Mexican to try and break them" (101). Lacey goes on to criticize other Mexican horsemanship and ranching methods as well. Obviously, both boys have carried the idea of American exceptionalism across the border. Their ethnocentrism should come as no surprise. They are operating within the framework of a Western, and a Western carries with it certain ideas about nationality and race:

For the setting by its hardness and austerity seems to have selected its heroes from among strong men in the prime of life, people who have a

certain build, complexion, facial type, carriage, gesture, and demeanor; who dress a certain way, carry certain accoutrements, have few or no social ties, are expert at certain skills (riding, tracking, roping, fistfighting, shooting) and terrible at others (dancing, talking to ladies). And because the people who exhibit these traits in Westerns are invariably white, male, and Anglo-Saxon, the Western naturalizes a certain racial, gender, and ethnic type as hero. There is no need to *say* that men are superior to women, Anglos to Mexicans, white men to black; the scene has already said it. (Tompkins 73)

Here, it is appropriate to pause and look closely at Tompkins' criteria. The boys look and behave like archetypal cowboys, and they possess, in varying degrees, all of the skills Tompkins has cataloged. And, like other Western heroes, John Grady and Lacey reinforce certain ideas about race and nationality. Their outclassing of the Mexican cowboys is no real surprise when one remembers that this novel, on the surface, operates at the level of traditional Western. However, it is also appropriate to pause and remember that McCarthy draws on myths and archetypes of traditional Westerns so that he can later dismantle them. In this way, his novel is anything but traditional.

John Grady's horse-breaking plan does seem to work at first. As the boys break the horses, "[t]he entire complement of vaqueros" watches them; later, "something like a hundred people gathered" to watch John Grady ride the last few horses (107, 109). The boys, especially John Grady, have become quasi-celebrities on the ranch and in the surrounding community. When the horse-breaking episode ends, John Grady and Lacey join the other vaqueros for dinner, and "they got their plates and helped themselves at the

stove and got their coffee and came to the table and swung a leg over and sat down” (112). The humility and deference that they showed when they arrived at the ranch have disappeared, replaced by cowboy swagger and bravado. The boys have made their mark, one-upping the native cowboys and gaining an elevated position and reputation.

The manager of the ranch no longer assigns the boys normal tasks; now, they journey to the mountains in search of “wild horses in the upland forests” (112). In other words, due to their pronounced skill and prowess, they receive a special assignment mere days after their arrival. One suspects that their Mexican fellows, having presumably lived and worked on the ranch for years, would cherish this assignment, would like the opportunity to drive the horses “over the high mesas” and to camp “at night on the high headlands” (112, 113). Nevertheless, the Americans receive the assignment instead. Insofar as McCarthy co-opts Western myths and archetypes, John Grady’s fast rise is really not that surprising; in fact, it is pre-ordained to a large extent:

The ethical system the Western proposes, which vindicates conflict, violence, and vengeance, and the social and political hierarchy it creates, putting adult white males on top with everyone else in descending order beneath—this code and this hierarchy never appear to reflect the interests or beliefs of any particular group, or of human beings at all, but seem to have been dictated primordially by nature itself. (Tompkins 73)

While John Grady’s early success on the ranch is not won through violence, his rise does seem too fast and too convenient, almost a given or something preordained. John Grady will live his dream, will become a legendary cowboy, will get the land, and will get the girl because he is an *American*. Tompkins puts this dynamic in racial terms, but in the

framework of *All the Pretty Horses*, nationality appears to be just as important as race. Indeed, nationality and the naiveté of adolescence have conspired to give the boys a false sense of confidence during their time on the ranch. For the time being, they remain blind to the forces that may be working against them in this foreign land.

Soon, John Grady's growing reputation causes him to surpass Lacey in stature as well. Shortly after the boys return from the mountains, the hacendado offers John Grady a job in his personal stables. John Grady claims to be reluctant to leave Lacey behind, but when Lacey returns from working in the pens, he saw that "John Grady's tick was rolled up at the head of his bunk and his gear was gone" (119). John Grady has embarked on a path to power, leaving Lacey behind to clean pens and eat dinner with the regular cowboys. This path to power includes working directly for the hacendado and courting (or seducing) his daughter. Once John Grady begins a romantic relationship with Alejandra, it seems apparent that this young American will one day reclaim what he lost back in Texas. During John Grady's first days and weeks on the ranch, McCarthy brings the myth of American exceptionalism into sharp focus.

However, he begins to dismantle this myth when John Grady first meets with Don Héctor. In terms of class and wealth, Don Héctor ranks far above John Grady. He owns the ranch and its vast lands; he breeds cattle and horses; he employs what seems to be hundreds of employees; he even owns a plane. And those are just the material things. He also speaks/reads Spanish, English, and French fluently, and he appears to be highly-educated and well-traveled as well. One recalls the boys' assumptions about nationality and race when McCarthy describes Don Héctor as "a spare man with broad shoulders and graying hair and he was tall in the manner of norteños and light of skin" (115). The

reader infers that John Grady's journey through Mexico has not prepared him for Don Héctor's European features. The hacendado's speech also sets him apart from John Grady; Don Héctor consistently uses precise diction and syntax while John Grady often slips into the vernacular of West Texas. The following is an excerpt from their conversation about horses:

Don Héctor: "The horse was foaled at Monterey Farm in Paris Kentucky.

The stallion I have bought is a half brother out of the same mare."

John Grady: "Yessir. Where's he at?"

Don Héctor: "He is enroute."

John Grady: "He's where?"

Don Héctor: "Enroute. From Mexico." (117)

Upon realizing that John Grady does not understand the word "enroute," [t]he hacendado smiled" (117). This exchange reveals a lot about the two men (if we can classify the sixteen-year-old John Grady as a man). Don Héctor presents himself as cultivated and worldly while John Grady comes across as slightly backwards and uneducated. We may attribute some of this difference to their age gap, but we should also remember that, when Don Héctor was John Grady's age, he was likely being educated at a private school like many of his other family members. It is obvious that he has received some kind of classic education, unlike John Grady who has quit school at age 16. The point here is not to argue that Don Héctor's wealth, education, etc. make him superior to John Grady; instead, we should understand that John Grady has traveled to Mexico with certain expectations and assumptions about its people. John Grady perhaps believes that his nationality will allow him to advance rapidly in this new culture. He unconsciously

assumes that his Americanness and his race will allow him to surpass the dozens or even hundreds of other cowboys on the ranch to a point where he is able to marry into the family and to become the heir-apparent. To an extent, John Grady is correct: he is able to gain a quick promotion. In this land, though, it is one thing to be a stable boy; it is quite another thing to become the son-in-law of Don Héctor Rocha. In the end, John Grady's assumptions prove to be foolish ones. Yes, Don Héctor does allow the boys to be arrested when he finds out about their connection to Jimmy Blevins, yet he only does so when he learns that John Grady is engaged in a clandestine romance with his daughter. In this place and in this culture, being an American gets one only so far.

The Mexican guards soon show John Grady and Lacey that American values carry little weight in this land. As they journey back toward Encantada, the guards say "nothing at all" to the Americans (155). For dinner, the guards serve them "some kind of pale and fibrous tuber," then make them sleep "with their hands chained" (156). This harsh treatment does not appear to be out of the ordinary; instead, we see that the boys are treated just like any other prisoner. Their Americanness no longer sets them apart. In the dark Encantada jail, the boys are no different from the old Mexican man with whom they share a cell.

McCarthy further highlights their *un*-exceptionalism through the events leading up to Blevins' execution. The boys, now reunited with Blevins, are being transported toward a prison in Saltillo when the truck suddenly stops beside some abandoned buildings. Then, the captain and the charro walk Blevins out beyond "a grove of ebony trees" to execute him (178). Lacey says to John Grady, "They caint just walk him out there and shoot him" (180). Lacey's reaction is interesting for two reasons: first, he

despises Blevins and blames him for the boys' troubles (more on this point later); second, and more to the current point, he assumes that the laws and codes of the United States still apply in Mexico. In the United States, a vigilante execution of this type would be taboo, at least one sanctioned by the legal authorities. Furthermore, Blevins has not been given a fair trial for his crimes. Nevertheless, here the Mexican authorities are perfectly willing to enact their version of justice since they "have no death [penalty] . . . for the criminals. Other arrangements must be made" (182). Following Blevins' death, the captain informs the boys that *he* shot Blevins since "the charro had suffered from a failure of nerve out there" (182). As the boys listen, the captain explains how the Mexican code of *machismo* demanded Blevins' death. Even though the charro failed to protect "the honor of his family," the captain refuses to "go out to do some thing and then . . . go back" (184). In other words, once certain events were set in motion, Blevins had to die, or the captain would look weak or cowardly. Back on Don Héctor's ranch, the boys—especially John Grady—believed in the myth of American exceptionalism. The land, the horses, even the people were his birthright, or so he thought. However, now, following Blevins' grim death, John Grady learns that his nationality means nothing on this side of the border. His time on the ranch was merely a flicker or echo of the frontier myth, a false cowboy paradise. Here, different codes dictate behavior, and, when the boys enter the Saltillo prison, they will be forced to fight for their lives. The fact that they are Americans will not save them from the misery of a Mexican prison. Before the captain departs, he tells the boys, "You dont know nothing" (182). In the corrupt world of the Mexican legal system, "Papers is lost. People cannot be found" (183). The boys will have

to decipher the complexities of new codes in order to survive and perhaps gain their freedom. They can no longer rely on the old myths.

Even as their notions of American exceptionalism are being dismantled in Mexico, the boys still continue to adhere to their code of patriotism and loyalty. After their arrests, Lacey is obviously angry with John Grady for his actions, especially his secret romance with Alejandra. John Grady says, “I’m the same man you crossed that river with. How I was is how I am and all I know to do is stick . . . I wouldn’t quit you I don’t care what you done” (158). Lacey then assures John Grady that he “never quit” him (158). It may be worthwhile to examine John Grady’s sentiments here. We recall that he accepted a promotion and left Lacey behind to work with the regular vaqueros. We also recall that John Grady’s interactions with Lacey became very limited once he began a relationship with Alejandra. In fact, Lacey recedes to the periphery of the novel for much of Part II. The cynical reader may infer that John Grady displays loyalty only when it is convenient for him. Nevertheless, the boys do re-establish their allegiance to each other at the outset of Part III, an allegiance that is primarily based on friendship but seems to be tied to their nationality as well.

As we have seen, the inclusion of Blevins actually reinforces the notion that the boys possess an abiding sense of patriotism and loyalty. John Grady allowed Blevins to ride south with them simply because of his nationality. Now, following the arrests, even Lacey begins to display a nationalistic attitude toward Blevins. Lacey continues to despise Blevins on a personal level, but, as the boys face increasing hardship and violence, he becomes protective of him. During their time in the Encantada jail, Lacey concernedly tells John Grady that “Blevins is sick” (172). Then, when John Grady tells

Lacey that the Mexicans plan to execute Blevins, Lacey begins to cry and says, “Just goddamn it all to hell” (172). During Blevins’ execution, Lacey reacts angrily and emotionally because of the brutality and illegality of the situation. Later, after he and John Grady finally make it out of the Saltillo prison, he says, “I keep thinkin about old Blevins” (216). Lacey’s inclusion of the word “old” seems especially noteworthy. The word implies that Lacey and Blevins shared a close bond, even a friendship. As Lacey remembers Blevins, “[h]is eyes were wet and he looked old and sad” (216). This display of emotion almost rings false. After all, Lacey strongly resented Blevin’s presence from the outset, arguing to John Grady that the boy was dangerous and dishonest. Additionally, Lacey correctly predicted that Blevins would lead them into harm’s way in Mexico. Lacey and Blevins were never close on a personal level, so their common nationality appears to be the only reason for Lacey’s emotional attachment to Blevins’ memory. John Grady and Lacey remain true to the cowboy code of patriotism and loyalty in Mexico, even when it leads them into danger and imprisonment. It is during their incarceration in Saltillo that their nationalistic impulses finally begin to fade.

In the early days of their imprisonment, the boys stick together, fighting “back to back” in the prison yard against the Mexican and Indian prisoners (185). The other prisoners have apparently targeted the boys because of their nationality and/or race. In this way, ironically, the boys’ nationality does set them apart. Almost sadly, John Grady and Lacey show brief glimpses of the old cowboy bravado during and after the fights. Lacey makes light of the fights by saying John Grady’s bruises make him look like a “raccoon” (185). In response, “John Grady grinned crookedly” (185). Then, still trying to play the cowboy, John Grady picks out the biggest prisoner, and walks over to him to

“bust him in the mouth” (186). Though the boys fight bravely and remain loyal to each other, they are soon reminded once again that their American virtues carry no weight in this place. At the idyllic ranch, it was easy for the old myths to hold sway over the boys, at least initially. Here, McCarthy presents the brutality and ugliness in stark terms. The boys can attempt to hold on to their old selves, their old behavior, their old ideas, etc., but prison life allows no veneer. And here, McCarthy strongly reinforces the fact that the boys’ Americanness will not set them apart or save them. In fact, it has apparently made them a target.

After the boys prove their mettle in the prison yard, a unique prisoner known as the “papazote” (father) requests a meeting with them. Emilio Pérez appears to rank as the top prisoner in Saltillo: he resides in his own cabin in the middle of the prison yard; he has a personal bodyguard; and the prison guards apparently leave him to his own devices. Most importantly, Pérez possesses the power to effect the boys’ release *if* they pay him a substantial bribe. At the meeting, Perez warns them that “[l]ife here is not so good for the Americans. They dont like it so much” (190). Shortly after the meeting, a prisoner stabs Rawlins, so he is taken to the prison infirmary, leaving John Grady to fend for himself. Soon, John Grady meets with Pérez again, and the papazote once again asks for money. He also reminds John Grady that his American notions do not hold sway here. Pérez tells John Grady that “the mind of the anglo is closed in this rare way . . . It is not that he is stupid. It is that his picture of the world is incomplete. In this rare way. He looks only where he wishes to see” (194-195). Pérez seems to suggest that John Grady’s mind remains too stubbornly fixed on American ideas and values. The reader witnesses this failure on the ranch, but McCarthy brings it into sharp focus during the prison episode.

Furthermore, the Saltillo prison is yet another world inside the outer world of Mexico, distancing John Grady even further from the familiar, the comfortable, and the American. John Grady will die if he does not recognize this truth, the papazote appears to say. In order to survive in this world, John Grady must essentially become a new person. The ethical and even *mythical* framework upon which John Grady was reared will not save him in Saltillo and may even lead to his demise. Rawlins' stabbing has already demonstrated that the other prisoners do not plan on stopping at mere prison yard scuffles.

John Grady *does* adapt. The last vestiges of "the all-American cowboy" fall away as, alone now, he prepares to battle for his life (*Cities of the Plain* 745). Using the money that Blevins slipped him just before his execution, John Grady buys "[a] switchblade with the handles missing, made in Mexico, the brass showing through the plating on the bolsters" (201). Once full of optimism and idealism, John Grady decides that he will become like the other men in Saltillo. In short, he will kill if necessary. The knife is noteworthy because of its ugliness, and, more importantly, the fact that it is not an American weapon. In no way, shape, or form does the knife resemble the archetypal weapon of the American cowboy: the six-shooter. Its user does not wield it on the street at high noon; instead, this device is designed to be used stealthily, in the shadows. Soon, John Grady encounters his would-be assassin in the prison cafeteria. During the fight, McCarthy once again emphasizes the foreignness of this place and its peoples. He highlights John Grady's naive assumptions about Mexico as the young man looks into the "dark eyes" of the prisoner trying to murder him (203). John Grady sees "[a] whole malign history burning cold and remote and black" in the other man's eyes (203).

McCarthy's mention of "history" reminds us of John Grady's shortcomings in the novel. As someone still hovering between childhood and adulthood, he was perhaps incapable of comprehending that he was entering a land of unique people, a people with codes, customs, and a unique history. On an almost allegorical level, John Grady reminds us of the settlers and cowboys who pushed west during Manifest Destiny, men and women more concerned with projecting their own hopes and dreams on the blank slate of the West than they were with recognizing the welfare and customs of the native peoples. And, like those nineteenth-century Americans, John Grady's pursuit of the Dream quickly fades as he faces the brutal choice of kill or be killed. John Grady's killing of the assassin further distances him from his idealistic notions. The actual killing proves to be as ugly as the weapon itself. Bleeding profusely and on the verge of being defeated, John Grady "brought his knife up from the floor and sank it into the cuchillero's heart. He sank it into his heart and snapped the handle sideways and broke the blade off in him" (204). While granting the fact that John Grady's life is in danger, we must also note the emphatic manner in which he kills the cuchillero (or "knifeman"). John Grady of course wants to kill his would-be murderer, but he also enacts vengeance on the man who has permanently destroyed his innocence. It would be a digression for us to focus too much on John Grady's loss of innocence; however, we should remember that his belief in uniquely American myths is inextricably linked to his youthful naiveté. Not surprisingly, John Grady's personality undergoes a significant transformation following the knife fight. His nationalistic ideas of American exceptionalism almost completely recede from the novel.

In *ATPH*, then, McCarthy subverts several frontier myths. At first glance, one myth that appears “hands-off” is the cowboy code of loyalty. John Grady and Lacey’s notions of loyalty and patriotism remain steadfast for much of the novel, even as John Grady’s decisions directly lead to Lacey’s imprisonment and stabbing. After the prison episode, on the other hand, the boys’ relationship undergoes a significant change. This change is directly related to (or a result of) John Grady’s transformation while incarcerated. Shortly after being released, the boys again attempt to declare their loyalty to each other. These declarations echo the declarations they made while jailed in Encantada. Yet, somehow, their words ring hollow this time around. For example, Rawlins tells John Grady that he “could of run off” from the hospital where he was recovering from his wounds, implying that he passed on the opportunity so he could remain near John Grady (213). This pronouncement comes out of nowhere and sounds almost forced. Lacey obviously wants John Grady to know that he is still loyal to him. His words also hint at feelings of guilt, however. Lacey apparently considered leaving and returning to Texas while John Grady fought for his life in Saltillo. Not surprisingly, then, Lacey then declines to accompany John Grady back to Don Héctor’s ranch to retrieve Alejandra and the horses. After John Grady says that he is going back, “Rawlins shook his head and looked away” (215). Rawlins’ reaction points to feelings of both disapproval and guilt. In short, he is torn. Regardless, John Grady has already dismissed any thoughts of Lacey joining him. He says, “I aint askin you to go with me” (215). On one hand, we might interpret John Grady’s words generously. To an extent, he is being a loyal friend by protecting Lacey from any further danger and by sending him home where he belongs. Still, we should again recall the important change that John Grady underwent

in prison. We have seen that John Grady shed his American “self” during his time in prison. This transformation seems to have a subtle but significant impact on his friendship with Lacey. In other words, this transformation now sets John Grady apart. He obviously experienced important psychological changes in prison, changes that allowed him to kill another man. He wears outward signs of these changes as well: rugged scars across his face and belly. In a way, John Grady has become indistinguishable from the Mexicans around him. McCarthy terms John Grady “some newfound evangelical” to emphasize the radical metamorphosis he has undergone (220). During much of Parts I-III, the native Mexicans appeared to treat John Grady with wariness; he was an outsider, or “the other.” Now, however, he rides toward Don Héctor’s ranch with “five farmworkers who . . . spoke to him with great circumspection and courtesy” (221). Soon, John Grady stops in a town where “[n]o one passed without speaking. He walked along past fields where men and women were hoeing the earth and those at work by the roadside would stop and nod to him and say how good the day was and he agreed with all they said” (223). Later, when John Grady is unable to climb aboard a truck because of his wounds, the workers “rose instantly and pulled him aboard” (223). Clearly, a significant shift has occurred. The native population no longer views John Grady with suspicion, and it no longer holds him at arm’s length. In prison, John Grady’s Americanness fell away, and he is now nearly indistinguishable from those around him.

But, to return to the point at hand, we notice that, even after the prison episode, Lacey remains attached to his nationalistic roots. While in the hospital, he was given a blood transfusion, so he worries about the “Mexican blood in” him (214). After jokingly telling Lacey that he is now “a halfbreed,” John Grady then dismissively adds, “Hell, it

[the blood transfusion] dont mean nothin” (214). John Grady literally means that blood does not determine race, but, on a deeper level, his words indicate that he has moved beyond his earlier nationalistic impulses. In Mexico—especially in Saltillo—John Grady has learned that being an American means very little on this side of the border. It certainly does not guarantee fulfillment of the Dream. And, as John Grady becomes a man without a country, a subtle divide forms between the friends. Through this divide, McCarthy demonstrates that even this aspect of the myth has its limits. The cowboy code of loyalty and patriotism, a code that the boys’ ancestors have seemingly adhered to for several generations, begins to crumble following the prison episode. At the end of Part III, John Grady accompanies Lacey to the bus that will take him back to America. John Grady assumes that Lacey will “take a seat at the window” so they can wave goodbye to each other, but Lacey sits “on the other side,” clearly emphasizing the growing emotional distance between the boys (220). To Lacey, John Grady has become “the other,” so he boards the bus and returns to the United States without a prolonged goodbye.

Later, when John Grady finally returns to Texas to return Lacey’s horse, the boys share an awkward conversation. This conversation demonstrates that the divide in their relationship has now become a gulf. On a basic level, they no longer share the same personal bond, and, on a thematic level, they no longer share the same nationalistic values. Lacey is now content to live and work in San Angelo, presumably for the rest of his life. He tells John Grady that “[t]his is still good country,” to which John Grady replies, “But it aint my country” (303). Mystified and possibly frustrated, Lacey asks, “Where is your country?” (303). The disillusioned John Grady responds, “I dont know . . . I dont know where it is. I dont know what happens to country” (303). This exchange

highlights a few key ideas. First, despite the danger and hardship he experienced in Mexico, Lacey remains a static character. He may be a little older and a little wiser, but he is nearly identical to the young man who left for Mexico earlier in the novel. And, above all, he holds true to his nationalistic ideas about America. Furthermore, the conversation shows that the friendship between the boys has come to an end. We recall that Lacey frequently called John Grady affectionate words such as “cousin” during the early parts of the novel (61). Even now, when John Grady first shows up, Lacey says, “Bud is that you?” (302). However, when John Grady prepares to depart again and calls Lacey “old pardner,” Lacey neutrally says, “All right. I’ll see you” (303). Lacey seems to know that the friendship is over, and, possibly, he suspects that he will never see John Grady again. Most importantly, the exchange shows that John Grady’s experiences have changed him dramatically. He clearly no longer believes in the ideas he once cherished. He journeyed to Mexico (ironically) to pursue his version of the American Dream and all that the Dream entails, but he found the Dream to be a myth, something as fictional as the oil painting in his grandfather’s house, a painting of horses that had “been copied out of a book” (16). Thus, John Grady’s grand ideas about America and loyalty and land have perished in Mexico. He appears to turn away from these nationalistic ideas and to turn toward the everyday acts of kindness that he encounters both in Mexico and back in the United States. Throughout Part IV, McCarthy emphasizes ordinary gestures of goodwill and courtesy, such as the Mexicans hauling John Grady aboard the truck or Pastor Blevins’ wife feeding him dinner. In a sense, John Grady himself stands on the verge of entering the “mythical,” so he attempts to hold on to tangible things, the *real* world. At novel’s end, a remnant of Indians stop and watch John Grady “[s]olely because he would

vanish” (305). This ending, of course, foreshadows John Grady’s death in *Cities of the Plain*, and it implies that the era of the “all american cowboy” has come to an end.

In Search of a Helpmate

Although we often think of the Western genre as male-dominated and intended for a “predominantly male audience,” women are an important presence in many texts (Oehlschlaeger 360). In the foundational *Riders of the Purple Sage*, for instance, Jane Withersteen serves as the novel’s protagonist (or co-protagonist), and the point of view is limited to her. Furthermore, several myths and stereotypes formed around frontier women during the nineteenth century. Beverly J. Stoeltje lists the categories of the “symbolic frontier woman” as “the refined lady,” “the helpmate,” and “the bad woman” (27). She concludes her essay by arguing that the helpmate or “comrade woman” rises above the others because she is capable of “bringing civilization to the frontier” and because she “enabled her man to be a success” (41). Fritz H. Oehlschlaeger agrees that women serve as a civilizing influence in frontier literature/Westerns, but these “forces of civilization” may carry negative connotations for male readers since they “threaten the primitive world” (360). Rula Quawas builds on this discussion by arguing that Alexandra Bergson, of Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* “bridges the gap between gender and heroism” (240). In other words, Bergson transcends Stoeltje’s categories and becomes more like a traditional frontier hero(ine), especially in the way that she maintains faith “in the potential of the wilderness” (Quawas 241). *ATPH*’s female characters—John Grady’s mother, Mary Catherine, Abuela, Luisa, Alejandra, and the Dueña Alfonsa—have remained on the periphery of our discussion thus far. And, for the most part, these characters reside in the

margins of the novel, usually appearing for only a few paragraphs at a time. These characters neither reflect traditional frontier archetypes, nor do they follow in Alexandra Bergson's footsteps as frontier heroines. However, *ATPH's* women play a crucial role in dismantling or at least revising many of the myths in which John Grady has been raised to believe, primarily highlighting two key ideas: the cowboy way of life is rapidly drawing to an end, and the traditions of Mexico are quite different from those in the United States (or, alternatively, these traditions are closed to Americans).

With the passing of the Grady patriarch early in *ATPH* goes also the possibility of John Grady's living the traditional cowboy life (at least in Texas). Due to the lack of a male heir, the ranch passes to John Grady's divorced mother who wants no part of running a ranch and who plans to sell the ranch as soon as possible. In a last-ditch effort to save the ranch, John Grady consults the family lawyer, but the lawyer tells him that he has no legal recourse. As a result, John Grady's mother becomes the obstacle standing between him and the life he desires, the life he has been raised to lead, the life that previous generations of Texans have lived. One might argue that she serves as the catalyst for all later events since she is the reason John Grady leaves for Mexico. At the outset of Part I, then, McCarthy emphasizes the subtle but important role of women in *ATPH*.

Specifically, John Grady's mother represents the shifting gender roles that are radically changing the West. These shifting gender roles appear to walk hand-in-hand with the forces of modernization and industrialism that are also relentlessly pushing West. At first glance, John Grady's mother seems to be a minor character, one that appears only briefly near the start of the novel. And, at the level of plot, she is. Yet her

effect on John Grady (and his later decisions) cannot be underestimated. Her resistance to traditional gender roles does not start with the selling of the ranch. A conversation between John Grady and his father reveals that she did not stay faithful while he was serving in the war—even though she did not know whether he was alive or dead. His father says that her behavior during his absence caused something of a local scandal. John Grady's father says, "He [the grandfather] used to get in fights over her. Even as a old man. Anybody said anything about her. If he heard about it. It wasn't even dignified" (13). John Grady's father later tells him that his mother tried to leave him once before the war, moving to San Diego for almost three years when John Grady was an infant. We may safely assume, then, that John Grady has spent much of his childhood longing for the nurturing that previous Grady children experienced. It is no stretch to assume that John Grady is the first child in the Grady line to have a "modern" mother. In other words, John Grady's mother is the first Grady woman to put her own desires before motherhood. In search of understanding after he learns that his mother will sell the ranch, John Grady travels to San Antonio to watch her perform in a play. He hopes "that there would be something in the story itself to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming but there was not" (22). Failing to gain knowledge or satisfaction from the play, John Grady waits in the lobby of his mother's hotel the next morning. There, he learns that she did not register under her married name. He also sees her leave "on the arm of a man" (22). Obviously, John Grady's mother is living an unconventional life for a woman of the mid-twentieth century. Her choices certainly set her apart (presumably) from the other women of West Texas. In some ways, she can be read as the embodiment of the industrialism and progress that are leading to the disappearance of the cowboy way of life. We might say

that John Grady's mother is like the noisy train that mars the serenity of the opening scene of the novel (discussed in the "Setting" section of this chapter). Now that industrialism and progressive values have arrived, living the cowboy way of life becomes all but an anachronism. Without a doubt, the mother's actions and attitudes are confusing to John Grady. John Blair observes,

His world has tilted off-kilter. For him, the most salient evidence of its instability is his mother and the fact that she will not yield in her desire to free herself from the same consistency John Grady values. She will sell the ranch now that the grandfather is dead, and even her son's clear sense of desperation will not make her hesitate in her resolve. She is the force of progress, of the American imperative to change. (302)

Blair goes on to say that, on some level at least, John Grady understands what motivates his mother. The force that moves her is similar to the restlessness that causes him to depart for Mexico, Blair argues (303). This argument fails to take John Grady's visit to San Antonio into account, and, more importantly, it does not recall his dismissive attitude toward his mother upon his return at the end of the novel. Still, Blair correctly identifies both John Grady's confusion and the progressive forces that motivate his mother.

John Grady's former girlfriend Mary Catherine also plays a brief but important part in Part I. For starters, their breakup adds to his growing frustration with women and with life in Texas. More importantly, their conversation just prior to John Grady's departure for Mexico tells a lot about the role of women in the novel. Mary Catherine initiates and leads the conversation, telling John Grady that she hopes they can still be friends. John Grady, still angry about the breakup, remains taciturn and noncommittal. Still, his silence

may also stem from the strangeness of Mary Catherine's proposal. It is no stretch to assume that John Grady's relationships with women have been limited to the familial or the romantic, and his family members have likely modeled this pattern as well. Mary Catherine then claims that her boyfriend will not become jealous if they talk as friends. John Grady responds, "That's good. That's a good trait to have. Save him a lot of aggravation" (29). He says these words to Mary Catherine, but one wonders whether they are also aimed at his mother. Dianne C. Luce believes that John Grady's negative feelings toward his mother and Mary Catherine lead to his later "rebellion" in Mexico: When he runs away from home, he is motivated partly by his resentment that his girlfriend Mary Catherine has "quit" him for an older boy who has a car. He seems to accept Rawlins' cynical judgment that Mary Catherine's motives are superficial and materialistic—perhaps all the more readily because of his anger at the choices his mother has made in taking lovers, divorcing his father, and selling the ranch. He accepts neither woman's right to make choices that deny his wishes. (158)

Luce's primary concern is showing John Grady's growth from immaturity to maturity or from innocence to experience, but her comments do highlight John Grady's growing frustration and confusion regarding women. Before they part, Mary Catherine extends her hand, and John Grady "didn't know what she was doing" because "[h]e'd never shaken hands with a woman before" (29). Like being friends with a girl, physical contact that is not familial or romantic in nature is foreign to him. As John Grady departs, he sees Mary Catherine's reflection in the windows across the street. Bewildered by the changes taking place all around him, John Grady "touched the brim of his hat" and "stepped out of the glass forever" (29-30). This act echoes the old cowboys, and, on some

level, even takes the reader back to the chivalric behavior of medieval knights. More importantly, the gesture reinforces the notion that the John Grady “type” is rapidly becoming extinct. His behavior during the conversation with Mary Catherine is awkward and outdated, and, when his reflection disappears from the glass, one remembers that the cowboys had all but disappeared by 1949. John Grady now leaves Texas behind and heads for Mexico, not only to search for his “cowboy paradise” but also to find relationships with women that make sense to him.

Though John Grady’s primary motivation in going to Mexico is the hope of finding the life that now eludes him in Texas, the women in his world also figure. But why Mexico? Its proximity to Texas is the obvious answer. However, two other female characters may play a factor in John Grady’s idealization of Mexico, a place untouched by progress, a place where women maintain and even cherish tradition. Some evidence indicates that the Mexican “help” has acted more maternally toward John Grady than his own mother has. Abeula (“grandmother”) is a Mexican woman who has worked for the Grady family for 50 years, acting as cook, caretaker, and nanny. John Grady demonstrates far more emotion toward Abuela than he does toward his mother. Near the end of the novel, after John Grady returns from Mexico, Rawlins asks him if he has been to see his mother; John Grady stoically replies, “No” (302). His response is simple, but it is remarkable when one considers that he has not seen his mother in many months, an interval that saw John Grady run away from home, fall in love with Alejandra, and spend time in a Mexican prison. John Grady’s response is even more striking when contrasted with his reaction to Abuela’s death a short time later. Not only is he seen crying for the

first time, but his thoughts also reveal much about shifting gender relations and the loss of tradition:

He stood hat in hand over the unmarked earth. This woman who had worked for his family fifty years. She had cared for his mother as a baby and she had worked for his family long before his mother was born and she had known and cared for the wild Grady boys who were his mother's uncles...[he] turned his wet face to the wind and for a moment he held out his hands as if to steady himself or as if to bless the ground there or perhaps as if to slow the world that was rushing away and seemed to care nothing for the old or the young... (305)

Abuela has evidently transferred her maternal responsibilities to her daughter, Luisa, who is presumably about the same age as John Grady's mother. Along with her duties, Abuela has also passed to Luisa her sense of tradition and familial obligation. When Luisa learns that the ranch will be sold, she "couldn't talk about it without crying so they didn't talk about it" (18). This Mexican woman has no economic ties to the ranch, but she shows great emotion over the loss of it. Her reaction is quite different from that of John Grady's mother, who sneers dismissively when John Grady tells her he wants to keep and manage the ranch. More striking is Luisa's affectionate attitude toward John Grady. Early in the novel, she greets him with "Buenos días, guapo," and then "she touched the back of his head with her hand" (4). In contrast, John Grady's mother spots him sitting in his grandfather's office and says, "What are you doing?" in lieu of greeting (11). Indeed, John Grady's father tells him that "Luisa looked after you" during their aforementioned conversation about John Grady's mother running away to San Diego (25). In short, John

Grady has good reason to believe that his relationships with women will improve in Mexico. Abuela and Luisa have acted as mothers to him, raising him and acting affectionately toward him during the physical and emotional absence of his biological mother. They also have modeled the female behaviors that John Grady has been taught to expect as a Texas boy in the first half of the 20th century. To borrow Stoeltje's term, we might say that Abuela and Luisa both embody the "helpmate" archetype of the traditional Western/frontier novel. Thus, with the cowboy way of life disappearing before his eyes and his mother behaving inexplicably, John Grady departs for Mexico.

Perhaps not surprisingly then, John Grady falls in love with the first pretty girl he sees in Mexico. Alejandra is the embodiment of everything John Grady loves: she is beautiful, she has been raised to be a lady, and she rides expertly. More importantly, she lives on a ranch that John Grady finds Eden-like. He tells Rawlins that he would like to stay there "[a]bout a hundred years" (98). In mere days John Grady is spending his days breaking horses and his nights in the arms of Alejandra. Initially, it is difficult to classify the rebellious Alejandra as a carrier of traditional feminine values. In fact, she almost seems like a younger version of John Grady's mother. For starters, her relationship with John Grady is secret and forbidden. Their relationship is "[s]weeter for the larceny of time and flesh, sweeter for the betrayal" (145). On their first night together, Alejandra hints that she is attracted to John Grady—or at least more attracted to him—simply because her aunt has forbidden the relationship. Alejandra says, "I wont be treated in such a manner" as she lies in John Grady's arms (143). Much evidence also indicates that the girl is modern by Mexican standards. On a micro level, she rides like a man (rather than side-saddle), and she does not hesitate to ride a wild stallion: "she swung up onto the

stallion's back and looked down at him [John Grady] and then booted the horse forward and went loping out up the track along the edge of the lake and was lost to view" (134).

More broadly, Alejandra attends an elite private school, she speaks English, and she travels widely. Furthermore, she spends half of her time in Mexico City with her mother.

Perhaps these rebellious, modern tendencies are normal for a teenage girl, or perhaps Alejandra is straining against the sexist social barriers of Mexican society. Regardless, her rebellious spirit appears to have its limits; she declines to run away with John Grady after his release from prison. When they meet in Zacatecas, John Grady pleads with Alejandra to marry him. Instead of answering with a simple yes or no, she leads him to an area known as Plazuela de Guadalarita, the place where her grandfather was killed during the Mexican Revolution. With this action, Alejandra signals to John Grady that family and tradition are more important than romantic love. Her family has a history, and even the young, rebellious Alejandra is able to recognize this history. John Grady is white and an American, and she cannot be his wife if her family does not approve of him. The reader also recalls that Alejandra pledged to end the relationship in order to obtain John Grady's release from prison. Alejandra proves to be a character who will sacrifice neither familial bonds nor her word. She tells John Grady, "I cannot do what you ask...I love you. But I cannot" (256). John Grady, deeply affected by the loss of tradition in Texas, is now heartbroken by the preservation of tradition in Mexico. Though they appear similar at first, in the end Alejandra proves to be quite different from John Grady's mother. Ironically, then, Alejandra may eventually fall into the helpmate category, but she will not be John Grady's helpmate.

Alejandra's great-aunt, the Dueña Alfonsa, is the ultimate guardian of tradition in the novel. We are told that "her life at the hacienda invested it with oldworld ties and with antiquity and tradition" (135). She dresses plainly, and "She spoke with an english accent" (136). Though she is amicable toward John Grady, she is firmly against his relationship with Alejandra. In fact, her actions directly lead to both the initial and final separations of John Grady and Alejandra. One should not, however, assume that Dueña Alfonsa is simply an older woman who has become "set in her ways." Nor is she simply a bitter antagonist who is bound and determined to ruin the happiness of young people. A lifetime of experience and pain has led to her traditionalist perspective and her disapproval of John Grady and Alejandra's relationship. Frye writes, "She [Dueña Alfonsa] is not merely a traditional aristocrat protecting her niece from the suit of a poor foreigner. The past that she has told him of suggests sympathies quite the contrary" (108). The "past" to which Frye refers is a rebellious one. As a young woman, Dueña Alfonsa acted against her father's wishes, becoming heavily involved in Mexico's revolutionary activities. She tells John Grady that she was a "freethinker" when she was younger (234). In return, her father treated her like an "exile" until his death in a country where a woman has her reputation and little else (242). "There is no forgiveness. For women," Dueña Alfonsa says earlier about the Mexican attitude toward women, specifically those women who break with convention (140). In Alejandra, Dueña Alfonsa recognizes a kindred spirit, a fellow freethinker who will revolt in the face of authority and convention. Thus, Dueña Alfonsa does not view Alejandra's actions unkindly, but experience prompts her to steer the girl in a different direction (i.e. away from John Grady). She says to John Grady,

You see that I cannot help but be sympathetic to Alejandra. Even at her worst. But I wont have her unhappy. I wont have her spoken ill of. Or gossiped about. I know what that is. She thinks that she can toss her head and miss everything...But I have seen the consequences in the real world and they can be very grave indeed. They can be consequences of a gravity not excluding bloodshed. (139)

These words constitute a veiled threat, one that is later carried out when Alejandra's father has John Grady arrested. More importantly, they show Dueña Alfonsa's logic in taking a stand against the relationship. A lifetime of pain has transformed her from romantic/idealist into realist; she knows that Alejandra cannot be happy in a relationship with John Grady. A Mexican woman, particularly one of the upper class, can only operate within the confines of tradition and convention. By the end of Alejandra's relationship with John Grady, it becomes apparent that Dueña Alfonsa's ideas are taking root in the young girl. The aforementioned visit to the site of her grandfather's death serves as evidence that Alejandra's rebellion is coming to an end. Like her great-aunt, she will now become a guardian of tradition (albeit grudgingly).

One sees that *ATPH's* women play key roles in dismantling the cowboy mythos to which John Grady adheres. First, the American women, especially John Grady's mother, represent the progressive forces that have brought the cowboy way of life to an end in Texas. His mother's selling of the ranch and her other decisions are clear factors in John Grady's decision to leave for Mexico. On the other hand, John Grady views Abuela and Luisa with great affection and respect. Their nurturing, maternal behavior may lead John Grady to believe that he will find similar "helpmates" in Mexico. In Mexico, John Grady

begins a romance with the rebellious Alejandra who eventually declines to turn her back on her family and culture to continue the relationship. Her aunt, the Dueña Alfonsa, is the guardian of tradition in the novel. Her conversations with John Grady reveal that, though the values he seeks may be present in some form in Mexico, they are closed to him. John Grady learns that the Mexican aristocracy rigorously protects its way of life. Ironically, then, John Grady does find his helpmate in Mexico, but the Dueña Alfonsa judges him unworthy due to his nationality and class. The young cowboy's idealistic expectations are once again disappointed in Mexico.

CHAPTER V
THE POSTMODERNIST WESTERN

Critical Framework

One can no longer assume the truth of old myths (or current ones); instead, one must interrogate them carefully, poking and prodding, searching for biased perspectives and unfounded assumptions. This questioning of narratives is one of the hallmarks of postmodernism. Jean-Francois Lyotard proclaimed that the characteristic trait of postmodernism is “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). The purpose of the present study is to demonstrate how postmodernist authors have cast doubt on the vestigial metanarrative of the American West. In this chapter, I will consider the emergence of the “postmodernist Western” (alternately called the Revisionist Western).

However, before attempting to explore this sub-genre, it is important to establish a practical heuristic by which to operate. Obviously, our analysis must go further than merely stating that “the purpose of the postmodernist Western is to question the prevailing myths of the West/frontier.” Any attempt at establishing a postmodernist poetics must begin with Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987). McHale begins his formulation by contrasting the key aspects of postmodernism with those of the literary epoch that preceded it: modernism. He says that “[p]ostmodernism follows *from* modernism, in some sense, more than it follows *after* modernism” (5). McHale argues

that we can understand postmodernism only by studying how it differs from and reacts to modernism. Thus, postmodernism is not just the chronological successor to modernism. McHale views the primary difference between the two creative epochs as a difference in *dominants*. A dominant, according to McHale, is a “conceptual tool” by which we might trace the “literary-historical change” that occurred during the twentieth century (7). Simply put, McHale attempts to discern the dominant feature of both modernism and postmodernism.

“[T]he dominant of modernist fiction,” he says, “is *epistemological*” (9). The modernist writer primarily concerns him/herself with questions of knowing. Just as in a detective novel, the characters of a modernist novel “sift through the evidence of witnesses of different degrees of reliability in order to reconstruct and solve a ‘crime’” as they attempt to understand the world around them (McHale 9). As these characters embark on this epistemological journey, however, the modernist writer makes it evident that this world is ultimately unknowable. A modernist writer plays with time and perspective to foreground the problem of knowing; shifting points of view and a non-linear plot are centerpieces of the modernist novel. The reader, of course, must also grapple with the same issues as the characters as s/he attempts to reconstruct the story based on conflicting perspectives and evidence.

McHale identifies the dominant of postmodernist fiction as *ontological* (10). Whereas modernist fiction concerns itself with knowing, postmodernist fiction centers on questions of being. The postmodernist writer attempts to identify the world, its characteristics, and its interactions and overlappings with other worlds. Though epistemological concerns remain in the postmodernist novel, they recede or disappear as

the author foregrounds the ontological dominant (McHale 10-11). Put more simply, the postmodernist writer creates new worlds and examines the meeting places or overlappings of these worlds.

Linda Hutcheon attempted to establish her own postmodernist poetics shortly after McHale (1988). In her influential monograph *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, and Fiction*, Hutcheon explores how postmodernist novels resist the “consolatory” structures of modernism—structures such as art and myth—as they express Lyotard’s questioning of grand narratives (6). Modernist writers recognize the futility of the old beliefs, but they attempt to stave off chaos with their structuralizing myths; postmodernists, on the other hand, embrace this chaos, even reflexively foregrounding it. Put another way, postmodernist writers interrogate the artistic tendency to “repair” the world. Hutcheon writes, “[A]ll repairs are human constructs...[a]ll repairs are comforting and illusory” (8). Thus, postmodernist writers challenge art and humanism by blurring traditional literary genres such as fiction and nonfiction or the novel and the epic poem; they also ignore the distinction between “high” and “low” art (Hutcheon 9-10, 20). Parody and pastiche proliferate. Many of these writers also subvert traditional genres by parodying the very genre in which they operate. Whereas some modernist writers look to the mythic past with a sense of nostalgia, postmodernists are apt to expose the “ironic discontinuity” between the old and the new (Hutcheon 12).

Most importantly, Hutcheon discusses the renewed importance of historical study during the post-World War II era. After the New Criticism, which seldom attempted to historicize the text, the postmodernists possess “a new desire to think historically, and to think historically these days is to think critically and contextually” (88). Thus, “[t]he

postmodern,” Hutcheon says, “effects two simultaneous moves. It reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge” (89). Postmodernist writers of both history and fiction do not shy away from context; however, they are careful to scrutinize the ideological biases that inform the gathering of knowledge as well as the writing process itself. The postmodernist writer, as a result, is denied the traditional foundations which inform representation. Hutcheon says that any foundational ground is “subsequently subverted” in a postmodernist text (92). These ideas, according to Hutcheon, have led to the rise of historiographic metafiction, a blurring or overlapping of literature and historiography. These texts self-reflexively parody themselves as artistic endeavors while also forming intertextual “bridges” to other literary and historical texts. By including historical figures and events, postmodernist writers ironically suggest that history shares many of the same concerns as fiction. There is no one “true” or “accurate” version of history. Instead, multiple versions of history exist, and they are subject to the same problems of narration and representation as fiction. Therefore, Hutcheon is careful to note that the postmodernist historiographical project “is not recuperation or nostalgia or revivalism” (93). The postmodernist writer, instead, sets out to make us question heretofore accepted historical narratives, while also reflexively acknowledging that s/he must paradoxically engage in the same narrative-writing process. Still, we must remember that this *questioning* is not the same as *destroying*. Hutcheon says that “to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it” (126).

Steven Connor interestingly notes that postmodernism “is concerned almost exclusively with the nature of its own presentness” (10). At first glance, his remark would

seem to run counter to much of Hutcheon's historical concerns. Connor does not ignore the importance of history, however. He instead argues that modern technology has caused a blurring of the border between past and present:

[O]ne definition of postmodernism might be: that condition in which for the first time, and as a result of technologies that allow large-scale storage, access, and reproduction of records of the past, the past appears to be included in the present, or at the present's disposal, and in which the ratio between past and present has therefore changed. (10)

Many postmodernist writers, then, turn to history as they explore how the past is paradoxically present. The postmodernist view of time can best be understood by contrasting it with the modernist one. In a stylistic or "technical" way, the modernists made time their primary concern. In novels such as Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, or even F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, modernist writers *show* time in experimental, sometimes jarring, ways. The reader is forced to re-order the fragmented events of the story in order to understand it properly. Here, we remember McHale's declaration that the modernist text has the "logic . . . of a detective story" (9). Connor says that modernists "worked on time" as they sought to break from literary tradition (63). Postmodernists, on the other hand, rather than experimenting with narrative chronology, make time/history their subject. These observations are generalizations, of course, but they do assist us in defining this elusive, often contradictory, thing we call the postmodernist text. At the risk of being reductive, we conclude that postmodernist writers share more historical concerns than their modernist predecessors. Furthermore, postmodernist historical concerns go far beyond

simply depicting bygone events and eras. The postmodernist writer is careful to demonstrate how widely-accepted historical narratives are based on ideological biases, how accurate representation in writing was (and is) a difficult, ultimately futile endeavour, and how time continues to shrink as technology makes the last century feel like yesterday.

Return of the Western

In chapter III, I explored how Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* interrogates and even dismantles many of the myths that constitute what might be called the western imaginary. Published in 1992, this first volume of *The Border Trilogy* appeared toward the tail-end of postmodernism (if one accepts the notion that we have moved on to a new artistic paradigm in the twenty-first century). As a postmodernist text, *All the Pretty Horses* casts a questioning glance at the grand narrative of the West. McCarthy's diction and syntax—archaic, elevated, Biblical—also lend the novel a postmodernist quality as the words on the page disorient the reader in time and place. McCarthy even includes untranslated Spanish. Is this story really set in 1949, or does it concern some earlier epoch? Is this a story of the American West, or is it one of revolutionary Mexico? The answer to both questions is, in a postmodern sense, *both*. Still, when one applies the poetics of McHale and Hutcheon to the text, *All the Pretty Horses* appears to evade the postmodernist label at times. For starters, it does not possess the ontological instability of other postmodernist texts. McCarthy's third-person narrator is also noticeably withdrawn in the text. This narrator adopts a journalistic or Hemingway-esque objectivity throughout much of the novel. The narrator never reflexively comments on the events of the story or

draws attention to him/herself. Moreover, there do not appear to be clear intertextual links with other, earlier texts. The reader may draw loose parallels between the plot and earlier Westerns or between John Grady and earlier cowboys, but this link exists at the level of genre only. And, though *All the Pretty Horses* may call the historical record into question, it does look back on the mythic West with a sense of nostalgia, nostalgia over the rapidly disappearing cowboy way of life. John Grady Cole may have his faults, but he is courageous, tough, and individualistic, i.e. the archetypal cowboy. Ideology aside, the reader feels a sense of loss and sadness toward the end of *All the Pretty Horses* when John Grady realizes that his “country” and way of life are gone forever. Thus, we should understand that McCarthy’s fiction simultaneously resides in different literary worlds. *All the Pretty Horses* is epic romance, gritty realism, experimental modernism, and questioning postmodernism . . . all at the same time. Above all, we might classify the novel as an elegy, a lamentation for the lost land and the lost way of life.

Irony, parody, and play are not foregrounded here, and their absence or attenuation further separates *All the Pretty Horses* from other postmodernist texts. The question arises whether a Western exists that features those traits outlined by McHale, Hutcheon, Connor, and others. Does an unmistakably postmodernist Western exist? Interestingly, if one browses the titles of “literary” or “canonical” novels from the end of World War II to the end of the century,—i.e. the general time frame of postmodernism—the relative lack of frontier or Western novels is striking. In addition to McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* and *The Border Trilogy*, Larry McMurtry’s *Lonesome Dove* (1985) seems to be an obvious exception. John Williams’ *Butcher’s Crossing* (1960) is a lesser-known frontier novel that was written during the postmodern period. However, like *All*

the Pretty Horses, these novels do not evince a postmodernist poetics to any noteworthy extent. We must remember that a novel is not *postmodernist* just because it was written during the era of *postmodernity*. The number of literary Westerns—never great owing to the ghettoization of genre fiction—seems to decline further under the aegis of postmodernism; furthermore, the few novels that did appear did not necessarily reflect the prevailing literary currents of the time. It seems that the artistic frontier began to disappear in the late twentieth century, just as the physical one disappeared in the late nineteenth century.

The Revisionist Western

If we put aside literature for a moment and turn our attention toward film, however, we remember that a Western known as the “Revisionist Western” emerged in the last few decades of the twentieth century. Media studies scholar David Lusted discusses this genre in his monograph *The Western*: “Revisionist Westerns find less to celebrate and more to condemn in American History, which makes them inclined to deal more circumspectly with the history of the Western imaginary” (233). First, in the Revisionist Western, the hero or heroes come under intense scrutiny. In the 1971 film *Doc*, notes Lusted, Wyatt Earp becomes the calculating villain while the Clanton gang is portrayed sympathetically, according to Lusted (233). Furthermore, the Revisionist Western is inclined to open up the genre to a plurality of perspectives and voices. The “outlaw” becomes the hero; the Indian takes center stage as the protagonist; African-American characters begin to appear on screen. Thematically, the Revisionist Western expands far beyond “good guys versus bad guys” or “the white man versus the other.” In a film like *Dances With Wolves*, for

instance, environmentalism becomes a focal point as whites appear hell-bent on the exploitation and destruction of the West's resources, while the Sioux attempt to treat the land with respect and care (Lusted 233-242).

A sort of Revisionist Western did appear in literature during this time period as well, but to a limited degree. The aforementioned *Blood Meridian* is the most prominent example. Its brutality and nihilism are almost unprecedented in the Western canon. In an ironic sense, the novel's pessimistic outlook on humanity has a sort of equalizing effect. Like many of the revisionist films discussed by Lusted, *Blood Meridian* does not privilege the white man above other races. However, the novel's attempts at equality take on a dark, grim tone. There are no heroes; McCarthy portrays whites, Mexicans, Indians alike as bloodthirsty and depraved. It is safe to classify *Blood Meridian* as revisionist and postmodernist. McCarthy's language is complex: his diction is sometimes archaic and usually polysyllabic; his syntax strives toward an almost Faulknerian aesthetic. Yet, even in Faulkner's works, we can work with the puzzle pieces until we arrive at a sort of clarity. In *Blood Meridian*, though, working the puzzle only creates more possibilities (or cancels out others). For example, we carefully analyze the protagonist, known as the Kid, to determine his motivations and to observe his development, only to watch in frustration as the Kid disappears from the plot for the middle third of the novel. The moral ambiguity of the characters' actions also reflects a postmodernist interpretation of the novel. Without a discernible ethical framework, the novel deconstructs into a primitive abyss where there is no meaning. McCarthy allows Judge Holden to rape and kill with impunity. Ending with the Judge's violation and murder of the Kid in a dirty, stinking outhouse, the novel ultimately rejects most attempts at formalist interpretation. Any

interpretation, that is, beyond a brutal questioning and dismantling of the Myth of the American West.

Robert Coover

Robert Coover became one of the better-known postmodernist fiction writers in the waning decades of the twentieth century. McHale discusses how Coover's early novels evince the epistemological dominant of modernist novels, yet, during the Vietnam-War era, his fiction takes a noticeable turn toward ontological concerns. Coover's 1977 novel *The Public Burning* stands out as an example of historiographical metafiction. Coover, McHale says,

grafts historical characters onto a fantastic world, a mismatching of norms dramatized by Richard Nixon's sodomization (!) by the mythological Uncle Sam..Here characters of different and incompatible ontological statuses . . . have been gathered together in an impossible, heterotopian locus which is also, according to Coover, 'the ritual center of the Western World.' (21)

Here, McHale refers to Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, or a "linking together of things that are inappropriate" (qtd. In McHale 44). McHale argues that it may be better to call a heterotopia a "zone" rather than a world. And, this zone or space, "is less constructed than *deconstructed* by the text, or rather constructed and deconstructed at the same time" (McHale 45).

Ghost Town

Coover's 1998 novel *Ghost Town* differs from *The Public Burning* in that it does not feature any historical personages. It does, however, feature several recognizable narratives. According to Brian Evenson, "*Ghost Town*, Coover's rewriting of the myths of the old West . . . is a short but lively novel in which dream and reality commingle inextricably. It draws from the stock situations and characters of books and movies about the Old West, exploding the genre of the Western from within" (9). Evenson later discusses how the novel is similar in content and style to Cormac McCarthy's Westerns, "[b]ut whereas McCarthy's work often breaks into metaphysical speculation, Coover's moves toward critique, parody, and comedy" (238). Whereas McCarthy's tone toward the old West might be deemed nostalgic at times, *Ghost Town* represents Coover's "assault on the myths of the old West" (Evenson 238). While the novel may not include the obvious characteristics of Coover's other historiographical metafiction, he does clearly set out to confront the grand narrative of the West. Specifically, Coover probes Manifest Destiny, heroism, gender and racial norms, and the act of story-telling itself. In *Ghost Town* Coover creates a postmodernist "playground" of heterotopian elements, intertextuality, worlds under erasure, and pastiche. And, as Coover deconstructs this Western zone, the reader is forced to question the reliability of traditional histories and narratives of the West.

Ghost Town: A "Heterotopia" of Disparate Elements

In *Ghost Town*, Coover creates a heterotopian zone of disparate characters, settings and plot-lines. This impossible "piling up" of details, contradictions, and sudden meanderings

reveal that this story about many things is really a story about *nothing*. This statement is not meant to denigrate Coover's work. The reader quickly understands that Coover's novel is a postmodernist project. The novel's ambiguity prompts the reader to look beyond the text and toward the Myth of the West. For instance, on the opening pages, the reader realizes that Coover's hero evades true characterization. He has no name, and "[h]e is leathery and sunburnt and old as the hills. Yet just a kid" (3). The kid, as he is called, may not be a kid at all (or maybe he is?). Coover declines to give a clear answer. Nor does he fill in the blanks later in the novel. In fact, even when Coover retrospectively explores the kid's background, he muddies the water even more:

How did he [the kid] come to such a place? Perhaps he lost his way, or was sent by the army, or was chased by lawmen, or went in purposeful search of some secret treasure of his own self-knowledge, or perhaps he was captured and dragged to this alien land, stripped, bound, spread-eagled on the desert floor to be tortured and killed, only to be rescued at the last moment by the great chief's only daughter... (21).

The list of Western tropes continues, but Coover has made his point. By presenting multiple possible backgrounds, Coover destabilizes the narrative, and he hints that a formalist interpretation of this text will be all but impossible. Furthermore, the kid's ambiguous beginnings allow Coover to begin his interrogation of the history of the American West. He lends the kid these hazy, indeterminate backgrounds to draw attention to Western heroes in general. Americans tend to define the mythic Western "hero" in different, often contradictory ways. For some, courageous, stoic lawmen like Wyatt Earp represent the Western ideal. For others, the outlaws—Billy the Kid, Jesse

James, et al—embody the nonconformist, individualistic spirit of the West. And still others gravitate toward mythic figures like Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, and Jeremiah Johnson, men who turned their backs on civilization to venture into the wilderness, relying on their skills and intuition to survive. In a sense, then, identifying the hero of the West is a difficult task. There are too many interpretations, too many opinions, and too many possibilities. We assume that the Myth of the West is stable, easily definable, but it instead proves to be as dynamic today as it was a century ago.

Ghost Town's settings further emphasize the instability of the Western myth. Early in the novel, Coover experiments with setting as the kid crosses the desert toward the town. The kid perceives that the plain is “there and not there, like a monumental void, dreadful and ordinary all at once. As if the ground the horse treads, for all its extension, might be paper thin and stretched over nothing. He doesn't expect to come to the end of the world out here, but he doesn't expect not to” (4-5). Here, Coover creates a sense of ambiguity, a sense of ambiguity that will persist and even intensify during the course of the narrative. He refuses to allow the reader the comfort of straightforward story-lines and forms, but, at the same time, he prods the reader to become an active participant in his experiment. More subtly, Coover self-reflexively points to *Ghost Town* as a work of fiction. Indeed, this world is “paper thin and stretched over nothing.” By drawing attention to the fictionality of the text, Coover begins to lay a foundation for his probing of traditional Western narratives.

The ambiguity and self-reflexiveness of the text increase when the kid attempts to reach the town. He notices that “[t]he town's still out there, sitting on the edge like a gateway to the hidden part of the sky. Sometimes it disappears behind a slight rise, then

reappears when that rise is reached, often as not even further away to the naked eye, his naked eye, than when last seen, like a receding mirage, which it likely is” (5). At this early point, the reader might still rationalize the novel’s peculiarities. The town’s shiftings and disappearances are surely due to the haze and topographical varieties of the desert, the reader assumes. However, the kid soon notices “another town on the opposite horizon, a kind of mirror image of the one he’s headed toward, as if he were coming from the same place he was going [T]he town behind him closes upon him even as the one in front recedes” (6). Eventually, the rear town overtakes the kid, and he finds himself in the middle of a dusty street. The town surreally continues its forward movement, soon leaving the kid “alone again on the desert” (6). Once again, Coover announces the instability of the text through his depiction of setting. As the novel progresses, *Ghost Town* will become increasingly erratic, “flickering” as settings/worlds show themselves, only to disappear again in a flash, leaving the kid to wander the landscape in a futile search for something real, something tangible.

Coover retrospectively lists the other landscapes that the kid has braved during his Western exploits. He has crossed “mountains . . . crags and chasms, raging rivers in deep gorges, and dense forests . . . He’s known snakebites, mountain lion and wolfpack attacks, blizzards and thunderstorms” (4). The reader soon discerns the absurdity of this catalog. By “piling up” these details about the kid’s background and the myriad settings that he has faced, Coover is accomplishing two related aims: first, he is presenting the kid as *the* Western archetype; the kid has endured *all* of the trials and travails that other Western heroes have endured in traditional fictional and historical narratives. Put another way, the experiences of the heroes of the West have been concentrated in this one

character. Second, and more important, by creating these impossible, exaggerated lists, Coover deconstructs this Western hero and causes us to doubt the veracity of the text. Coover's lists quickly push the novel into absurdist territory; no man can experience—let alone survive—so much. In turn, the heroism of Davy Crockett, for instance, begins to drift away from historical fact and into the realm of myth.

The ambiguity and absurdity of the novel do not end with the kid's name and the settings he encounters. The plot of the novel also appears to be a condensing of many Western narratives into one. Coover begins several storylines, but he declines to clarify which story represents the primary plot and which ones represent mere subplots. For example, an early episode recounts the kid's cold-blooded killing of a character known only as "floppy hat." Even though the kid feels confused and lethargic, he is able "to raise his rifle barrel and shoot the man in the floppy hat. The impact explodes into the man's chest and his hat flies off and his mouth lets go the cigarillo and he pitches backward onto the desert floor" (11). Here, it is interesting to note that, even when Coover describes specific events, his intentionally-evasive diction creates uncertainty. The careful reader questions whether the kid has shot floppy hat *in* his hat, rather than his chest. Or perhaps the opposite is true. Regardless, we understand that both cannot be true. Coover has once again inserted contradictory details to cast doubt on the text. More to the point, this tense, violent episode appears to carry importance, at least at first glance. The reader assumes that the death of someone must carry some form of consequence, even if only frontier or vigilante justice on the part of floppy hat's gang, a group of men who witnessed the killing. This assumption becomes certainty when the kid looks at floppy hat's body and realizes that he was "[n]ot a bandit" (10). In fact, a "sheriff's badge"

adorns his chest (10). Furthermore, the remaining gang members inform the kid that floppy hat was blind and unarmed. Nonetheless, the kid's lethargy prevents him from feeling alarmed or guilty. He briefly considers killing the rest of the men, but he instead rides away "without a backward glance" (10).

Though the shooting took place out in the desert, the kid quickly, almost magically, finds himself in a town, even though floppy hat had told him earlier that there was "[n]uthin over thar" (8). The kid walks up the town's main street at "high noon" as "a saloon sign creaks desultorily" (11). The conditions are ripe for a duel. Someone from floppy hat's gang will surely step from behind a building and challenge the kid. Yet the shooting's relevance soon begins to fade. No challenger appears, and the kid does not appear to give the episode another thought; he is more concerned with exploring the abandoned saloon, then looking for his now-missing horse. Finally, "four of five horsemen come riding in at a slow canter," and the reader assumes that floppy hat's gang has followed the kid into town (13). The reckoning for floppy hat's death has finally arrived, the reader assumes. Interestingly, Coover's diction continues to be imprecise as he neglects to name the number of men who ride into town. Coover makes us wonder if this gang is in fact floppy hat's gang. Even though the men ominously "pull up at the saloon in dead silence" and "dismount into their own shadows," they are soon inside "clapping shoulders, shooting craps, drinking, laughing, brawling" (14). The celebratory mood of the men seems to indicate that they represent a different gang, but, once again, we cannot know for sure. No matter, no one from the gang confronts the kid; in fact, they do not appear to recognize him. The anticipated duel fails to transpire. The shooting of

floppy hat soon assumes the form of a random, meaningless event, just one more episode disconnected from the novel's many others.

After a few more inexplicable events as well as a dream/flashback sequence, the kid finds himself in an upstairs room of the saloon with a prostitute. He is somehow dressed in new clothes and boots. He rejects the prostitute's proposition, then leaves the room. The gang meets him at the top of the stairs, slaps him, and pushes him back. The kid steels himself for the inevitable showdown, but he is again disappointed. The kid is about to "draw on them" when the men pick him up and "parade him down the wooden stairs to the packed-out saloon" (27). The kid's confusion grows as the men toast him and "roar with sour laughter and whistle and hoot and toss down the whiskey" (28). He has become their hero, their champion. The kid soon realizes that "[t]here's a badge . . . pinned on his fringed short: a bent-tipped star pierced by a bullet hole and black with blood" (33). Coover clearly indicates that this badge is the same one worn by floppy hat prior to his death. Is he also suggesting that the kid and floppy hat are the same person? Is he suggesting that the *kid* is actually the one who was gunned down in the desert? We cannot know for sure. Coover has established a surrealist dreamscape where anything is possible. Nevertheless, we do know that the kid, the archetypal outlaw, the mythical badman, has become the lawman. In essence, Billy the Kid has magically transformed into Wyatt Earp. This episode creates further ontological instability, and the text begins to "flicker" for a moment. Still, the reader assumes that the kid's change in personas will bring order to this lawless town, and, as a result, bring order to this lawless text.

The narrative's instability continues, however. Later, the kid, still the sheriff at this point, finds himself in the desert, attempting to stop his deputies as they engage in

cattle-rustling. The gang of rustlers decides to kill the sheriff/kid after he disperses the herd with gunfire, so they tie him up and attempt to figure out a way to hang him in the treeless desert. But one deputy, described as a “one-eared mestizo with [an] eyepatch,” comes to the sheriff’s aid and kills another rustler in a knife fight (62). The mestizo, though, has received mortal wounds in the fight, including a slashed throat. Somehow, he still retrieves a bottle of whiskey and hands it to the sheriff/kid just before dying. When the kid awakens, he is alone under “the blazing midday desert sun” (65). The entire gang/ex-posse has departed. The bodies of the men who killed each other in the knife fight do not seem to be nearby. Yet the kid spies “a few bleached bones” near him (65). It is unclear if these are human or cattle bones, but the reader understands that they have been lying in the desert for a long time, presumably many years. The only sign of the gang is a note which tells the kid to come join them. Unfortunately, the kid is bitten by a rattlesnake, and soon he can feel “his whole body begin to puff up and turn feverish” (66). The kid assumes that he will die in the desert, “but then he spies the town over on the horizon, shimmering in the heat . . . Sometimes the town is out there, sometimes it isn’t” (66). The town’s appearance/disappearance possibly stems from the kid’s feverish condition (i.e. he is hallucinating), yet the reader recalls that the town has done this before, flickering in and out of the kid’s imagination, its instability calling attention to the instability of the text itself.

Despite his wound, the kid soon inexplicably becomes part of a wagon train. He forgets the snakebite as the settlers “are attacked by a band of screaming wild Indians on horseback” (67). An arrow pierces the kid’s thigh in the same spot as the snakebite. These wounds are one in the same, of course, as Coover continues to cast doubt on the

reality of the kid's experiences and especially on his perception of these experiences. Nevertheless, a beautiful schoolmarm is there to tend to his wound. Coover's imagery becomes highly-sexualized here as the schoolmarm "strips off one of her black stockings and ligatures his naked thigh with it" (68). As she attempts to suck the poison out of the wound, the kid "can see the tight bun of her hair bobbing between his thighs" (69). It then becomes unclear whether the schoolmarm is treating the kid's wound or if the encounter has actually culminated in sex. The encounter becomes even more ambiguous when the kid awakens again to find himself back in town, lying in the saloon chanteuse's room. According to the chanteuse, *she* found him in the desert and treated his wound. The kid begins to worry that he had sex with the chanteuse/prostitute, not with the virginal schoolmarm. Furthermore, the chanteuse claims that the kid asked her to marry him.

The narrative's instability has long since become its defining feature. We can no longer arrive at a definitive reading of the text as the plot meanders wildly through this hallucinatory dreamscape. One moment the kid is forcibly taken to a stag party prior to his wedding with Belle (the chanteuse); the next moment he is back in the desert attempting to rescue the bound schoolmarm from an oncoming train. One after another, the stock plot devices of the Western appear on the page—violent poker games, horse thievery, train and bank robberies, jailbreaks, etc.—only to fade into irrelevance as the kid moves on to something else. As the flickering between desert and town continues, the kid eventually transforms from lawman back into badman. Ironically, the kid is sentenced to die near the end of the novel, not for being "a killer, hoss thief, cattle rustler, trainrobber, 'n card cheat," but for jilting Belle (138).

These illogical jumps in plot and setting and this impossible “piling up” of details direct our attention to the fictionality of the novel, of course. Coover’s *Ghost Town* draws from the vast reservoir of Western plots, characters, and devices. The novel is a gunfight at high noon, a confrontation with cattle rustlers in the desert, a rescue of the virginal damsel in distress, and the enactment of frontier justice, *all at the same time*. For settings, Coover includes the desert, the dusty street, the gold mine, the railroad, the stable, and the jailhouse. This list might continue yet further, but the point is clear. A novel that attempts to be about everything is ultimately about nothing. In the end, Coover’s massive catalog forces us to question our preconceived notions of the Western. What *is* a Western? Is it a story of frontier justice, or is it a story of man’s confrontation with the rugged wilderness? And, perhaps more importantly, what *is* a Western hero? Is he a lawman or marshall, someone law-abiding and morally upright? Or is he the archetypal badman, a gunslinger with questionable ethics? Is he good with a gun, good with women, and/or good with horses? All of the above? One might frame these questions any number of ways, but by beginning to probe the Western story, the reader begins to question the Myth of the West. One cannot properly address the Myth of the West without addressing the question of the missing “other.” Traditional Westerns have typically subordinated non-whites and women to lesser roles and/or to the periphery. A postmodernist reading of the West must account for the story of the American Indians; it must address the Chinese immigrants who worked on the Transcontinental Railroad; it must look to the African-Americans who settled in the West after the Civil War; and it must treat the female heroines who helped carve out a new civilization. Coover’s exhaustive catalog of

everything “Western” paradoxically prompts us to look for the “missing.”

Ghost Town: Intertextuality

As a result, one begins to look at other Western narratives with a critical eye. Coover intentionally foregrounds the impossibility of accurate representation in his novel in order to direct our attention to other texts. On the first page, Coover refers to his protagonist simply as “a kid” or “the kid,” a vague appellation that tells us very little about him. On one hand, this title serves as a subtle intertextual bridge to other Western narratives: we recall the historic/mythic story of the outlaw Billy the Kid as well as the more recent *Blood Meridian*, a novel that features a protagonist also known as “The Kid.”

At the level of genre and plot, one possible antecedent is Dorothy M. Johnson’s 1950 short story “A Man Called Horse.” This story was popular and influential throughout the 1950s and 1960s, influencing the plot of a *Wagon Train* episode in 1958, then being adapted as a motion picture in 1970. The story’s influence continued into the 1980s as it was anthologized in the ubiquitous junior high/middle school textbook *The Elements of Literature*. Critics have praised Johnson for avoiding popular stereotypes of cowboys and Indians and for rigorously researching the behavior and customs of Indians (*The Great Western Stories* 215). Though we cannot take for granted an intertextual relationship between *Ghost Town* and Johnson’s story, one section of *Ghost Town* bears a striking resemblance to the earlier story. As Coover probes the kid’s murky background, we learn that he, like Johnson’s protagonist “Horse,” may have been the captive of an

Indian tribe (alluded to in the above quote). We also learn that the kid and Horse endured a similar catalog of abuses. Coover writes of the kid's captivity,

Life with the tribe, which follows as a river follows its bed, is, though always harmonious in this idyllic wilderness, not always painless. To initiate him into their exemplary ways, his new brothers play face-kicking, fire-throwing, and dodge-the-arrow games with him, rub him with skunk oil and hang him upside down in the sun without water and food for a week, cage him with rattlers, pierce his scrotum with sharpened hawk quills, chop off one of his fingers, and send him out to wrestle buck naked with a seven-foot black bear. They display their own scars and mutilations to show he isn't being picked on, it's all just for fun, part of their guileless way of life. (21-22)

Like Coover's other catalogs, this one soon surpasses parody and devolves into absurdity. However, a close inspection of the more-serious "A Man Called Horse" reveals that Horse's experience—though more subdued—is actually fairly close to the kid's ordeal. He begins to behave like a "horse" because he believes that the Indians respect a horse more than they do a white captive. They will not deign to abuse and kill a horse, but Horse has seen and experienced what they will do to humans.

The kid and Horse miraculously survive their respective horrors; each goes on to become a member of the tribe, and each marries a beautiful Indian woman. In time, each man learns to appreciate the natural, even noble ways of the tribe. The kid's appreciation of Indian life is even more remarkable since he is forced to take a crying white baby and "swing the squalling thing by its feet against a tree and bash its little brains out" (22).

This shocking detail does not appear to be a condemnation of Indian practices. Indeed, Coover implies that this entire episode may not have happened in the first place. It represents one more *possibility* in the kid's dubious background. Moreover, Coover's absurdism draws our attention to the premise of Johnson's text (and the resulting television and film adaptations). Though possessing a realist aesthetic and a more-serious tone, her fictional account of Horse's captivity and Indian culture is no less sensational than Coover's novel. Many of Johnson's contemporaries may have believed that "[t]o read her stories is to know: This is the way life was life in frontier settlement and in Indian village," but Coover prompts us to question this assumption (*The Great Western Stories* 215). Coover's obvious parody forces us to recall the fictionality of Johnson's narrative, and it forces us to recall that she attempted to depict Indian practices from a white, Anglo-Saxon perspective. Her perspective is further skewed by her attempt to depict Indian life a century after the fact. In short, this popular, ostensibly inclusive text may carry a serious tone, but its storyline deserves as much careful scrutiny as *Ghost Town's* intentional absurdism.

McHale would classify the relationship between these two texts as a postmodernist phenomenon known as an "intertextual zone" or "intertextual space" (56). This space is created when "we recognize the relations among two or more texts, or between specific texts and larger categories such as genre, school, period" (57). Even if we cannot definitively establish that "A Man Called Horse" influenced Coover's writing of the captivity section of *Ghost Town*, the stories do share obvious parallels, and both undoubtedly reflect the Western genre. If one accepts that authors may create intertextual zones at the level of genre—not solely at the levels of plot and character—this section of

Ghost Town also harkens back to the very foundations of frontier/wilderness literature: the captivity narrative. For example, Mary Rowlandson's 1682 *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration* [sic] recounts Rowlandson's capture and subsequent hardships at the hands of Indians during King Philip's War. Parts of her captivity narrative read much like those of Horse and the kid. Rowlandson, however, experienced the additional horror of losing her daughter shortly after their capture. Rowlandson survived her ordeal and was reunited with the remainder of her family. Once free, she wrote *A Narrative*, "one of the most widely read books in late-seventeenth-century America (Gunn 216). In fact, it seems no exaggeration to consider Rowlandson's text, along with William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, as the most foundational frontier/wilderness narratives of the pre-Revolutionary War period. By inserting the captivity section in *Ghost Town* and thus creating an intertextual zone based on genre, Coover appears to interrogate one of the nation's earliest wilderness myths, a myth that serves as a direct ancestor of the Western itself. *A Narrative* was the seventeenth-century equivalent of a "bestseller," but we must remember that it is nonfiction. As a result, scholars and teachers usually treat it as a "historical" text. And, of course, it is. Yet we must remember that *A Narrative* was written from a singular point of view.

Rowlandson's account represents the Puritan perspective of her captivity (and King Philip's War in general). We may assume that Rowlandson's outlook on her experience was naturally skewed due to the death of her daughter and the other hardships that she was forced to endure. Just as in "A Man Called Horse," the voices of the Indians remain silent. In fact, erasure of the Indian perspective in the era of King Philip's War has

continued—relatively speaking—to this day as Rowlandson’s account continues to command critical attention.

Endings and Beginnings

For all intents and purposes, Coover announces the death of the Western genre as *Ghost Town* draws to a close. The genre has become stale and relies too heavily on the same characters, the same settings, and the same tropes, these closing pages appear to declare. The kid has been arrested for jilting Belle, and he faces the gallows. Mysteriously, just before his scheduled execution, a sudden storm sweeps through the town. When the storm passes, the kid’s “cell door is agape” (140). The kid cautiously retrieves his gun and prepares to face his adversaries. The long-awaited gunfight has finally arrived, the reader assumes. It is noon, and “[t]he moment for it has come” (142). The kid feels a “taut necessity” as he ventures out of the jailhouse onto the “wide dusty street” (142-143). He bravely runs from building to building, looking for his foes, but he sees “[n]othing. Same as before. A deathly stillness” (144). He then enters the Claims Office, “but the place is empty, thickly coated with layers of ancient grime” (144). The kid later finds the saloon in similar condition:

Nothing but a dark cobwebbed and dusty murk in there. Busted furniture strewn about, broken lamps and bottles, the old grand piano fallen face forward as if to bite the floor with its sad scatter of chipped teeth, someone’s yellow suspenders trailing from a tipped brass spittoon like spilled chicken guts. (146)

At times in the novel, the town has appeared to be full of activity, full of life. Now, we learn that it has been abandoned for years, maybe even decades. The town's condition casts further doubt on the kid's experiences. The events of the novel evidently never happened; they were part of some surrealist dreamscape. Also notable is the absence of people. Belle, the cattle-rustlers/deputies, et al were never there. Or, if they existed, it was long ago. Perhaps most importantly, the kid never existed, or, alternatively, he is a cowboy ghost, haunting this lost, forgotten territory in search of something real. The long-anticipated duel will never take place, and, soon, "the town is leaving [the kid] and taking the day with it. The claims office, the jailhouse ruins, and steepled church are already some distance off, their long shadows darkening the desert" (146-147). The rest of the town follows, leaving the kid in a black void with "nothing to be seen except the black sky riddled with star holes overhead" (147). In *Ghost Town*, Coover inserts an exhaustive number of stock Western devices, but, in the end, these devices prove to be as old and dusty as the town. Coover seems to argue that the genre has reached its end. If writers hope to revive the Western, they must present something new, something fresh. Furthermore, the archetypal cowboy and his way of life have come and gone. Just as Cormac McCarthy famously announces at the end of *All the Pretty Horses*, the cowboy life belongs to a bygone era. The kid and his type died long ago. Thus Coover's experimental Western forces the reader to recognize the Myth of the American West in general. The ontological instability of his text prompts one to scrutinize the contradictory nature of the Myth. The reader discerns that the frontier novel/the Western mean different things to different people. In the end, there is no one over-arching myth. And some of these myths have not been given their proper due.

New West

Contemporary authors Percival Everett and Cormac McCarthy share similar backgrounds in that both men were born and raised in the South but later moved to the West (Mitchell and Vander IX). More notably, both authors have redirected much of their literary focus from the South to the West. McCarthy and Everett explore and question many Western myths in their works. However, it is at this point that their similarities appear to end. McCarthy's Westerns are oriented toward the past. With a certain sense of nostalgia, McCarthy echoes Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 pronouncement: America's frontier is no more. Everett, on the other hand, following in the wake of the deconstructed Western, attempts to create a new paradigm.

A prolific author of 19 novels, three short-story collections, and three collections of poetry, Everett has placed many of his works in the American West (usually Wyoming but sometimes New Mexico). Everett, an African-American, creates black protagonists who do not often think of themselves in terms of race. Put another way, race is not the totalizing force of their lives. They are men, living in the West, who love, laugh, and hurt; they share in the human experience.

Everett's heroes perhaps reflect the outlook of their creator. Throughout his prolific career, Everett has expressed frustration with those critics who declare that nonwhite writers should write only about race. Matthew Dischinger discusses how Everett often declines to meet this expectation:

Everett's fiction often exists in the liminal spaces between meeting expectations and rejecting them outright: it centralizes the expectations of

readers and critics yet again only to disturb and deconstruct them. One effect of his work, then, is that we are left to ponder what our expectations have foreclosed. If black writers must write about their nonwhiteness, then whiteness, in this formulation, becomes an invisible, unmarked category for both the critic and the writer. (416)

Everett, however, is still adept at exploring racial themes when they present themselves. In many of his works, race becomes *a* theme, but it is not necessarily *the* theme. Race becomes an important aspect of Everett's overarching concern: *relationship*. He often strives to demonstrate how relationship is the most important human endeavour. His protagonists attempt to create healthy romantic, familial, racial, and environmental relationships. Furthermore, Everett is skilled at presenting the voices of many types of characters, characters of different races, genders, and sexualities. Again, though, even as these categories remain important factors, they often recede to the background as Everett sets out to depict the *human* experience.

Everett's 1994 *God's Country* shares a parodic kinship with Coover's 1998 *Ghost Town*. At first glance, the first-person narrator, Curt Marder, will fulfill the role of cowboy-hero in the story, especially when "Indians" burn his house down and kidnap his wife. However, Marder soon disappoints these expectations when he proves to be cowardly, dishonest, and ignorant. When Marder enlists a black tracker named Bubba to assist in the search, the reader begins to realize that Bubba is the real hero of the story. And he possesses many of the traits of the archetypal cowboy: he is brave and protective of those in danger; he is quiet and stoical; he understands the land; and he is loyal and honest. Like *Ghost Town*, this novel veers into absurdity as it begins to expose the fault

lines of traditional Western narratives. Nevertheless, not only does *God's Country* cause the reader to question his/her views on heroism, the novel also explores racial and gender issues. These areas have been placed under erasure in most traditional western narratives.

It is not until later works such as the novel *Wounded* (2005) and the short-story collection *Half an Inch of Water* (2015) that Everett offers a solution or alternative to what he has deconstructed in *God's Country*. Interestingly, in these works Everett's concerns appear to move from postmodernist to something more akin to modernist. The old beliefs have been torn down, so Everett attempts to build something new in their stead. In *Wounded* and *Half an Inch of Water* Everett features protagonists who, on one hand, echo their cowboy predecessors in their stoicism and rugged individualism. These characters, however, present new attitudes toward race, gender, and the environment, and, most uniquely, they begin to move away from cowboy individualism and toward something more akin to collectivism. In a contemporary West that holds new dangers, the hero must embrace those around him/her in order to survive. In this way, Everett has begun to create a Myth of the *Modern West*.

Cowboy Stoicism and Individualism

At first glance, Everett's protagonists appear to fit the mold of the archetypal cowboy hero. Indeed, in *Wounded* and a selection of short stories from *Half an Inch of Water*, the protagonists demonstrate a marked stoicism and a rugged individualism, much like the cowboys of yore. Everett's "cowboys" are stoical, and their diction and syntax are simple almost to the point of cliché. These traits, of course, connect them to their cowboy forebears. The protagonist of *Wounded*, John Hunt, shares a first name with mythic

“cowboy” John Wayne. His first and last names are masculine, rugged, and monosyllabic. John’s dialogue, like his name, is similarly spare and economical. He is a man of action, so he does not have time for extra verbiage. In *Wounded* his tight, simple diction is evident from the outset. John travels to town and stops at the feed store where he learns from the store owner that a local boy was murdered. The shopkeeper Myra says, “You know, people are just animals anymore.” John’s response is direct: “No, they’re people. That’s the problem” (13). John’s words here establish a pattern of straightforward dialogue; for much of the novel, his diction and syntax remain Hemingway-esque even when the reader begins to sense that he is troubled and anxious. His dialogue also becomes somewhat clichéd at times, especially in the first half of the story. During an early encounter with his future girlfriend, Morgan, John says, “Thank you ma’am” in response to a compliment (28). The only thing missing is a tip of his hat. John’s cowboy dialogue becomes even more pronounced when he converses with other men. In an early exchange with rancher Duncan Camp, John’s dialogue and syntax are noticeably simple, though he evidently considers Duncan a friend. To Duncan’s comments and questions, John’s responses remain along the lines of “I’m okay. You?”; “That’s pretty fine.”; and “A few minutes ago.” Early in the novel, John’s spare language indicates that he is stoical and reserved. At times, his attitude almost comes across as coldness.

When Wallace Castlebury, a young man who works for John, is arrested for murder, Wallace asks to speak to John. As the sheriff escorts John to Wallace’s jail cell, John says, “I won’t be long” (17). It is obvious that John resents this intrusion; he is eager to leave town to return to the solitude of his ranch. During their conversation, Wallace tells John that he did not commit the crime. John’s response is terse: “I’m not your

lawyer, son” (17). Later, just before John leaves, Wallace says that he is scared. John’s only response is to nod before he departs the holding area. From the outset, Everett paints John as a rugged individual, forming an important bridge between this modern cowboy and the protagonists of authors such as Owen Wister and Zane Grey. He doggedly guards the quietude of his life. This link becomes much less pronounced later, when John must let go of his individualism in favor of something more collectivist in nature.

Shortly after his first visit to the jail, John reluctantly returns. He informs Wallace that he called the prisoner’s brother to tell him about the arrest. Wallace uses the opportunity to reason somewhat convincingly that he would not have killed the victim: “Mister Hunt, I liked him. I really liked him. You know what I mean? Why would I have killed him?” (33). Here, Wallace indicates that he and the murder victim were involved romantically; therefore, he would not have harmed him. To this news, John says, “I’m sorry, Wallace. I just came to tell you about your brother,” then leaves without further response (33). John’s attitude remains brusque and dismissive. Clearly, he does not want to get involved in this situation. He will leave it to the legal system to sort things out. John later stoically thinks, “I frankly didn’t believe that Wallace was innocent . . . I simply did not care” (34). Here, the reader may flinch a little at John’s lack of sympathy and may also recall that John’s Uncle Gus was once unjustly imprisoned for many years. However, at this point in the novel, John still retains the persona of the archetypal cowboy; he remains aloof because he believes that the authorities will take care of the situation. John does not believe it is his problem. Becoming involved in this situation would threaten the quiet life that he has carefully constructed.

Everett's short stories contain protagonists who speak and think much like John. The protagonist of "Little Faith" is a veterinarian named Sam who assists local law enforcement in searching for a missing Indian girl. Like John's, his diction and syntax are often spare, and he sometimes speaks in cowboy clichés. Early in the story, Sam says to his wife Sophie, "Come here, Missy" as he reaches to embrace her (5). She responds, "You know I love when you talk cowboy," hinting that this dialogue is a pose (6). Yet, though he may not always talk in the stereotypical fashion of cowboys, Sam's dialogue remains reserved throughout the story. Even after he miraculously survives two snake bites, "Sam nodded but said nothing" (27).

In another story from *Half an Inch of Water*, "A High Lake," Everett deviates significantly from the Western formula by featuring an elderly female as protagonist, Norma. This story recounts Norma's mystical near-death experience while on a horseback ride high in the Wyoming mountains. Norma's rugged individualism is obvious early in the story. Though her husband is dead, Norma "lived alone" (43). Her house is located in a remote part of Wyoming, far from any neighbors. She refuses to move closer to town, and she only grudgingly allows a nurse to visit her each day to conduct wellness checks. When a friend named Pat visits her, "Norma didn't *much* [my italics] mind," but it is obvious that she is relieved when the neighbor departs (46). More notably, despite "her brittle bones, her osteoporosis," she "rode every morning" (43). Everett soon reveals that Norma possesses a sort of nostalgia for the mythic cowboy. The thought of being injured or dying during a ride does not bother her; in fact, "[d]ying in the saddle was a romantic way to go" (43). The reader senses that Norma hopes to die in this manner, rather than in her house or, worse, in a nursing home. Norma does not feel

lonely on the ranch, and, though she retains a fondness for her husband, she treasures her life as a solitary cowgirl: “For nearly eight years she had been alone with her horse and her thoughts. She liked that they were her thoughts. They came like a glacier, moving slowly, and like any glacier they were a tsunami of ice, surging, unstoppable” (44).

Though Norma’s character may deviate from the Western formula in terms of gender, she clearly embraces the solitude of life on a ranch. Her outlook connects her to the cowboys of old, men who carefully guarded their privacy and emotions and men who refused to be “fenced in.”

The themes of stoicism and individualism continue throughout *Half an Inch of Water*. Jake Sweeney, in “Wrong Lead,” bears a close resemblance to John Hunt of *Wounded*. He lives alone in Wyoming, he has lost his wife (to divorce), and he trains horses. The solitary life does not appear to bother him at all. When Jake thinks about his wife’s leaving him for another man, he does not feel “devastated...[h]e was, in fact, in a way, quite relieved” (78). Now, at dinner, Jake “sat alone at his table,” where he eats whatever he pleases (78). Jake feels unease when others attempt to intrude on his solitude. When a female client asks him to meet her, Jake thinks that it is “strange” (85). During the meeting, he tells her that he is “uncomfortable” with her questions (86). Jake, of course, shares much in common with the other protagonists of *Half an Inch of Water*. Sam, Norma, and Jake are slow to speak, and all three value the solitary life of the cowboy. Just as in the earlier *Wounded*, Everett forms links between his contemporary Westerns and those of the late 1800s and early 1900s. At first glance, these modern-day cowboys appear to possess some of the important traits of the archetypal cowboy. And they undoubtedly do, but these similarities begin to break down as the stories progress.

The reader begins to discern the dynamic nature of his heroes and heroines. Yes, in some fundamental ways, they hearken back to the protagonists of Westerns/frontier literature, but they also begin to experience important changes as Everett constructs a new Myth of the West.

Making It New

Everett's project is not to deconstruct the Myth of the West, at least not in *Wounded* and *Half an Inch of Water*. He seemingly understands that scholars and authors like Robert Coover have already completed this undertaking during the postmodern period. Indeed, Everett himself dismantles and subverts the grand narrative of the West in his parody *God's Country*. In his post-*God's Country* Westerns, however, Everett instead attempts to fill the void that has been left, to construct a myth that is worthy of the land he so obviously treasures. In a sense, then, Everett's twenty-first century Westerns are more modernist than postmodernist. To construct this new mythos, Everett begins to steer his characters away from cowboy individualism and toward something more collectivist. Everett seems to argue that humans must band together to achieve peace and to survive the unique dangers of the new century.

John Hunt of *Wounded* soon learns that he must allow others into his life if he is to find peace and contentment. In the wake of his wife's death, John has evidently raised emotional "walls," only engaging in brief conversations with others. He does converse with Uncle Gus at times, but the reader infers that the men live a relatively quiet life together on the ranch. Early in the novel, it is clear that John is attracted to Morgan, a single woman from a neighboring ranch. Nevertheless, he strongly implies that he would

turn down “a woman who made a pass at” him during a conversation with her (29). She nevertheless persists in pursuing John, and they become lovers. He later tells her, “You’re good for me” (89). Later, when he is injured while trying to treat a horse, John allows Morgan to tend to his wounds. The heretofore fiercely-independent John realizes that he has changed significantly:

I was about to tell her I was all right, to take the horse back and not worry about me, but I was proud that I made a good decision for once, a selfless and right decision, a smart one. I let my friend take care of me. I let her look at the damage, wash me and bandage me and it was good. I let her take care of me and it was right. (101)

Near the beginning of the novel, he attempts to push Morgan away (emotionally), but here the reader begins to understand that John is a dynamic character. Though he is like the cowboys of old in speech and attitude, his actions have begun to look like something else. He has begun to move past an outdated individualism and stoicism. This change soon becomes both more pronounced and more important.

David, a young man from Chicago and the son of John’s roommate from his college days, visits John early in the novel. David and his boyfriend Robert have traveled to Wyoming to protest the murder of a local gay man. David soon leaves Wyoming but not before experiencing an ugly argument with some homophobic locals. Months later, David returns to Wyoming after breaking up with Robert. He wants to “take some time off” to work on John’s ranch (114). David works there for a few weeks without incident, but he is surprised when his father, Howard, and Howard’s much-younger girlfriend visit

the ranch. Howard has never accepted David's homosexuality, but the fact that Howard has left David's mother has increased the tension between father and son.

Howard and David soon begin to argue, an argument that is worsened by their imbibing of whiskey. In the middle of the night, John discovers that David has left and walked off into a blizzard. In sharp contrast with his inaction and coldness toward Wallace Castlebury months before, John leaps into action, saddling a horse and riding out to search for David. When John does find David—four miles from the house—he is blue with hypothermia. Realizing that David will not survive the journey back to the house, John takes David to a nearby cave and uses his body heat to warm David. The delirious David attempts to kiss John, and John realizes that he “couldn't pull away; I was trying to save his life” (149). David survives the ordeal thanks to John's actions. The episode further demonstrates that John's outlook has changed significantly. The man once so reluctant to become involved when Wallace Castlebury was accused of murder, now risks his life to save David, who is not a member of his family and whom John has known for a matter of weeks.

It is at this juncture that the thematic quality of the novel's title begins to come into focus. All of the primary characters are “wounded” in some manner. John is wounded due to the death of his wife, Gus because he has unjustly spent 11 years in prison, Morgan because of the loss of her mother, and David because of the way his father has treated him. These characters must rely on each other if they hope to heal from their wounds. John's tough individualism will heal neither himself nor the people he loves. John must be willing to sacrifice for the greater good, and he must allow others to sacrifice for him. Thus, John, Morgan, Gus, and David form a collectivist arrangement, a

surrogate family, as the forces of intolerance begin to organize against them at the end of the novel.

John's surrogate family witnesses cruelty and violence throughout their short time together. John, a horse trainer and lover of animals, stumbles upon an ugly scene shortly after Wallace is arrested. John is out training a horse when he discovers the charred body of a dead coyote. An unknown person tossed gasoline into the coyote's den and ignited it with a match. Much to his surprise, John then finds two burned but still living coyote puppies. One of these puppies soon dies, but John attempts to save the other one. Though John eventually has to amputate one of the puppy's legs, it recovers. More importantly, the reader notes how John and Uncle Gus—and to a lesser extent Morgan and David—take turns tending to the puppy. This episode highlights the cooperative nature of the group's relationship, and is merely the first example of the novel's primary characters banding together in the face of ugliness and pain.

Furthermore, this incident demonstrates John's regard for the environment. His love and respect for nature does not necessarily mark a new Western paradigm. Nineteenth-century writers such as Emerson and Thoreau remarked at length on the sublimity of nature, and one of the earliest frontier heroes in American literature, James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, is often cited by scholars for his conservationist practices. Still, as the idea of Manifest Destiny began to hold sway in the nineteenth century, the land often became only something to be settled, cleared, and exploited. This notion, of course, took root in the popular imagination, and the peaceful tranquility of Natty Bumppo's world soon gave way to gold mines, railroads, and boom towns. In a sense, through John's respect for the environment and its inhabitants, Everett returns the

reader to the West of Cooper's time, before rampant industrialization and the razing of the land. In Everett's works, the environment becomes an important part of his characters' emerging collectivism. Everett not only endorses cooperative relationships between people, he places equal importance on healthy relationships between them and nature. Before John begins to build relational bridges, he already possesses a deep appreciation for the land:

It was dramatic land, dry, remote, wild. It was why I loved the West. I had no affection necessarily for the history of the people and certainly none for the mythic West, the West that never existed. It was the land for me. And maybe what the land did to some who lived on it. (45)

David's boyfriend Robert appears to view the area with suspicion and skepticism when he arrives in Wyoming. He asks John, "So, why are you here?" (51). John responds, "Did you notice the landscape when you drove in . . . This is a beautiful place . . . I love horses" (51). Thus, before John begins to lower his emotional barriers with other people, he already appears to have a relationship with the environment. Later, John, Gus, Morgan, and David help care for the coyote puppy, work around the ranch, and take horseback rides into the Wyoming mountains. The reader begins to understand that a regard for nature and its inhabitants is an important part of the novel's communal vision.

The most striking demonstration of community and compassion comes at the novel's end, however. David is abducted by the same men who committed the murder for which Wallace Castlebury was arrested. Acting on a tip, John and Gus venture to a place called Mouse Canyon to search for David. The men understand that they are risking their lives since David's abductors have already committed at least one murder. John and Gus

bravely approach the abductors' cabin, and, after a confrontation with the three men, Gus shoots and kills one of them. But David has been severely beaten. John drives him to the hospital where, presently, he dies.

Gus stays behind at the cabin, presumably to execute the other men. Gus, who has already done a stint in prison, decides to enact frontier justice on David's murderers. The close of the novel, then, deviates wildly from its earlier direction. The new Western paradigm begins to break down as old tropes return: gunplay and revenge. As the old West briefly flickers, Everett's description of the landscape shifts. The earlier beauty disappears, replaced by a "narrow rugged canyon" that "was dry enough that no one cared to go there" (198). Nearby, "[t]here was a small creek that managed to flow year round, but supported few fish" (198). Most notably, on the story's last page, a Native American named Elvis tells John, "This is the frontier, cowboy . . . Everyplace is the frontier" (207). In response, John "nodded and stepped away" (207). John appears to understand that creating a new West will take some time. The death of David and Gus's violent response have allowed echoes of the old West to return, but John chooses to step away from Elvis's words, implying that he will continue to work on his relationship with Morgan, continue to respect the environment, and continue to embrace community wherever he can find it. The mythic frontier to which Elvis refers is no place for John.

Everett hints at a new paradigm in his short stories as well. Jake, of "The Wrong Lead," treasures the solitude of his ranch. He does not even regret the loss of his wife to another man. A married woman named Sarah disrupts Jake's cowboy quietude when she expresses feelings for Jake and announces that she is going to leave her husband. Jake rejects her advances, and he refuses to become involved in her marital issues. He will not

allow the relationship to move beyond the professional: Jake is the trainer; Sarah is the client. Jake says to her, “I don’t know you, Sarah. We’re not close friends. All I wanted was for your horse to cross the creek” (87). Sarah’s success in riding her horse across the creek has given her a newfound confidence. This new outlook prompts her to leave her husband and to view Jake as a potential romantic partner. When Sarah’s husband Clark visits the ranch to ask about Jake’s involvement with Sarah, Jake becomes involved despite his earlier misgivings. Jake saddles a horse and tells Clark to ride it “to see if this helps you understand” (92). Jake wants no part of this situation, but he temporarily surrenders his solitude to help Clark repair his marriage. Jake believes that Clark will better comprehend his wife’s changes if he too learns to ride horses. The end of the story is somewhat ambiguous, but Clark and Sarah are reunited on Jake’s ranch. It seems quite possible that their newfound love of horseback riding will be an activity that will bring them closer together. It also seems possible that Jake’s willingness to let others trespass on his independence may make him more open to trying another relationship.

In “A High Lake,” Norma begins to show more regard for others after she becomes lost in the wilderness. She worries that “[t]he sheriff had the helicopter up now. Neighbors were no doubt on horseback searching for her. Braden [the nurse] was pacing the yard” (54). Before this episode, Norma does not really acknowledge the feelings of others, insisting on being left alone so that she can ride her horse each morning. Furthermore, Norma appears to become scared after becoming lost. She perhaps has come to realize that solitude has its limits as she cries out for her deceased husband and daughter.

When her neighbor, Dan Hilton, finds her, Norma expresses concern that she has “gotten a lot of people worried” (55). Once back at her house, she apologizes to her friends and the law enforcement officers who were searching for her. Demonstrating that she still treasures her solitude, Norma does insist that she be allowed to stay by herself once the paramedic clears her. However, she does allow Braden to cook her some bacon and eggs before he leaves. More importantly, as the story closes, Norma realizes that “[s]he would not ride again” (58). Norma, like John of *Wounded* and Jake of “Wrong Lead,” changes significantly during the story. She understands the limits of individualism and begins to demonstrate a newfound sense of community after her rescue. To be sure, Norma will never fully surrender her cowgirl solitude, but she does begin to show regard for others.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The Final Frontier

The frontier of space (i.e. “the final frontier”) seems a likely candidate for inclusion in the current study. Indeed, the twentieth century saw the production of a plethora of science fiction in both fiction and film. Like other postmodernists, science fiction writers are most concerned with projecting new worlds, while often simultaneously using these new worlds to comment on traditional historical narratives. It is true that most written science fiction has been relegated to the genre fiction category; however, Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) is an obvious exception. In the vignettes of *The Martian Chronicles*, we see an almost haunting reenactment of the westward expansion of the nineteenth century, yet this time the pioneers are obviously travelling from the Earth to Mars. Once they reach their new home, the settlers must grapple with how to treat this new land and its native inhabitants. More recently, Mary Doria Russell’s *The Sparrow* (1996) reimagines an even earlier historical narrative: that of a Catholic priest travelling to an alien civilization to win converts. Only, in Russell’s novel, the priest journeys to another planet in the twenty-first century.

In the last decade, scholars have begun scrutinizing the frontier of space in literature. Most notably, Carl Abbott, in *Frontiers Past and Future: Science Fiction and the American West* (2006), explores the parallels between western fiction and science

fiction. According to Abbott, many science fiction writers have drawn on and recrafted traditional frontier narratives as they imagine humanity's future forays into space. Science fiction such as *The Martian Chronicles*, Abbott observes, casts doubt on humanity's ability to learn from its mistakes in settling the American West; at the same time, this fiction prompts the reader to reconsider the Myth of the American West. Similarly, William H. Katerberg's *Future West: Utopia and Apocalypse in Frontier Science Fiction* (2008), looks at how frontier literature—and its resulting myths—have shaped science fiction, especially works that feature a dystopian and/or post-apocalyptic setting. Katerberg's thesis parallels Abbott's in the way he argues that these works begin to reshape the reader's understanding of traditional historical narratives. Abbott and Katerberg's studies are thorough and enlightening, and I would have little new to add to their analysis.

Other Considerations

Cormac McCarthy is included in this study, but I have chosen to omit his more-recent *No Country for Old Men* (2005) and *The Road* (2006). The latter of these represents McCarthy's pivot away from the American West as the father son and son travel toward the east coast after some unnamed apocalyptic event. Their cardinal direction is interesting to note in that it marks a departure from the traditional frontier/settler story. Perhaps their west-east movement among the ruins is McCarthy's way of saying that the American Dream is no more. Besides this detail and a few other exceptions, though, a study of *The Road* contributes little to my current purposes. *No Country*, on the other hand, continues many of the themes found in *All the Pretty Horses*. Indeed, the reader

recalls John Grady's bewilderment at the end of *ATPH* when he wonders what happened to "country." Now, in 1980s Texas, the protagonists of *No Country*—Llewelyn Moss and Ed Tom Bell—traverse a grim landscape where drug cartels slaughter each other with impunity and where a hired assassin kills his victims with an instrument normally reserved for cattle. In *No Country* McCarthy presents a stark answer to John Grady's questions. *This* is what happens to country in the postmodern era. Still, though set in the 1980, *No Country* first appeared in 2005 (the same year as Percival Everett's *Wounded*). McCarthy may further expose the flaws of traditional Western narratives, but it offers little in the way of something "new." Indeed, rather than presenting any sort of answers, the novel devolves into violent nihilism. It is true that *Wounded* also concludes on a violent note, but Everett does strive to present a fresh alternative, something that may replace the ugly underbelly of the old West.

The frontier has reasserted itself in a couple of other twenty-first century novels, both of which may be labeled "post-apocalyptic." In Peter Heller's *The Dog Stars* (2012), set primarily on an abandoned airstrip in Colorado, a man named Hig must learn to survive after a disease has wiped out most of the United States' population. Hig once lived an upper-middle class lifestyle in Denver with a wife whom he dearly loved. Now, these things have been ripped away, and the distraught Hig must overcome his sadness if he hopes to make it through each day. Surviving on this new frontier takes hard work and a steely resolve. Over time, Hig experiences a sort of emotional and physical renewal as his urban, modern self slowly falls away and a new frontier hero takes his place. The earlier *World Made by Hand* (2008), by James Howard Kunstler, operates in a similar vein, although this novel's apocalyptic catastrophe appears to be environmental rather

than disease. Whatever the case, Kunstler's characters are left without electricity, running water, modern modes of transportation, and basic medical supplies. In and around their small upstate-New York village called Union Grove, these people must learn to raise food, perform medical procedures, and defend themselves without the technological benefits that we have grown accustomed to. As the novel progresses, the village and its inhabitants return to earlier practices in order to survive. In some ways, by novel's end, Union Grove strongly resembles the setting of a James Fenimore Cooper romance. Both *The Dog Stars* and *World Made by Hand* recast traditional frontier stories in a future time, and they cast a questioning glance at some widely-accepted myths; however, they do not offer anything radically different from what the reader has seen before. The protagonists of these novels predictably become healthier, more content, and even more heroic once the technological trappings of modern life have completely disappeared. In fact, one might argue that these novels offer a Turnerian argument for a "return to frontier." In similar ways, Heller and Kunstler almost seem nostalgic for life as it once was, a life lived close to nature. I do not make this statement as a criticism; rather, I wish to argue that these post-apocalyptic "frontier" works do not exemplify the same reimagining as the primary texts of this study.

Final Thoughts

Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis announced the end of the geographical frontier, yet the imaginative frontier continued to flourish for the next century. In fact, this setting served as the medium by which many modernist and postmodernist writers experimented with and deconstructed many widely accepted myths. Admittedly, the literary frontier did

temporarily recede during the modernist period as authors and poets became more concerned with the disillusionment that resulted after World War I. Nevertheless, Willa Cather continued to produce at a prolific rate during these decades. Furthermore, the wilderness continued to be an important consideration in some of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner's works. The shrinking pockets of wilderness featured in Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" and Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* are located in areas that would have been "frontier" only a century earlier. At the level of genre fiction, the imaginative frontier became even more important in the twentieth-century. The foundational Westerns *The Virginian* and *Riders of the Purple Sage* both appeared within two decades of Turner's thesis, and cowboys dominated Hollywood for the first half century of its existence.

As the modernist period reached its conclusion in the pre-World War II years, authors such as Nathanael West and Raymond Chandler drew on the frontier to experiment with myth. In *The Day of the Locust*, West features the sad relics of the Western to foreground the futility and entropy of life in present-day Los Angeles. "Cowboys" and other Western simulacra continue to exist but only as reminders that American life has become artificial, stale, and degenerate. The Hollywood Dream appears to be a pathetic substitution for the American Dream, according to West. Raymond Chandler also experiments with Western myths in order to create his hero, Philip Marlowe. In Marlowe, Chandler created an urban cowboy; this cowboy might trace his roots back to the protagonists of *The Virginian* or *Riders of the Purple Sage* or even further back to Deadwood Dick or Natty Bumppo. In novels such as *The Big Sleep* and *Farewell, My Lovely*, Chandler portrays Marlowe as a twentieth-century cowboy

who rigidly abides by a personal code. This code looks very similar to the one practiced by the cowboys of yore. However, in the urban landscape in which Marlowe lives and works, the reader can see that the frontier has all but disappeared. In Los Angeles, the terminus of the American frontier, the natural landscape that once characterized the West now only exists in small pockets. In the same way, “cowboys” like Marlowe appear to be a dying breed amidst the urbanization, corruption, and vice that characterize modern life.

The disappearing cowboy briefly reappears 50 years later in Cormac McCarthy’s *All the Pretty Horses*. In this more-“traditional” Western, John Grady Cole embraces the cowboy way of life, but his experiences in Mexico prompt the reader to take a closer look at traditional myths (such as Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism). Likewise, the reader notes that *All the Pretty Horses* is set after World War II. In the Atomic Age, John Grady is already an anachronism. Thus, by novel’s end, he travels the landscape in search of something that no longer exists. *All the Pretty Horses* is the first volume of *The Border Trilogy*, and, by the time the series ends with *Cities of the Plain*, McCarthy has definitively argued that the cowboy way of life has reached its conclusion.

For a more postmodernist Western, I next turn to Robert Coover’s *Ghost Town*. This parodic novel contains none of the nostalgia the reader might find in *All the Pretty Horses*. Coover’s protagonist, known only as “the kid,” travels across a surrealist landscape that includes all of the familiar Western plot devices and tropes: gunfights, train robberies, cattle rustling, poker games, et al. The kid absurdly experiences this entire catalog, causing the reader to view traditional narratives with more scrutiny. Coover likewise provides subtle intertextual links to other cowboy tales. In light of *Ghost Town*’s catalogs and intertextual bridges, the kid becomes the avatar of all cowboys, and

his experiences “pile up” to demonstrate that the Western genre has become outmoded and exhausted. Thus, the mythic West appears to have reached its own terminus, just as the physical West did in 1893.

As the twentieth century gave way to the twenty first, however, the prolific writer Percival Everett stepped in to fill the void. In works such as *Wounded* and *Half an Inch of Water*, Everett creates a new Western paradigm, a paradigm that looks at the mythic West with suspicion while also creating something new. Everett’s aim of “making it new” thus turns the Western away from Coover’s deconstructionist project and toward something more modernist. In this “new Western,” Everett’s heroes learn to move past the individualism that was once guarded so carefully by the cowboys and settlers. Instead, they begin to form collectivist partnerships that embrace relationship, respect for the environment, and diversity.

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