

# Images of the Midwest: Cornfields in Poetry, Fiction, and Film

by  
Nancy H. Pogel

**A**lthough a few scholars might disagree about its exact origins, in the minds of most Americans maize or corn is a native American product. Through the years it has become a part of our collective national awareness and identity, meaningful as myth and symbol in our history, in our written literature, and more recently in our motion pictures. Abundance; a benign community of strong individuals who work the land; a well-ordered, predictable world that turns with the seasons—these are the cornfield's agrarian promise. The associations that orderly rows of corn have for us come not merely from early national mythology but from years of national and regional experience and from a much older inheritance: from ancient religious rituals in which corn was a primitive symbol of sexual energy and through which men contracted with corn gods and goddesses for a fertile year and a happy life.

As Americans moved beyond the Appalachians and settled the Mid-American frontier, corn became synonymous with the Midwest—the cornbelt, 350,000 square miles, less than 1% of the world's total land; yet it produces over 80% of the country's corn, over 40% of the world's, enough to make the Midwestern cornfields emblems of national health and prosperity.

Although these fields of corn are primarily a Midwestern contribution to the mythology of the American dream, some of the earliest popular references to corn in American literature came from New England, where in 1793 Joel Barlow wrote "Hasty Pudding." In the nineteenth and especially in the twentieth century, however, the references to corn and cornfields in American literature can more easily be found in the settings of such Midwestern writers as Carl Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson, and Willa Cather. The contemporary Midwestern poems of Robert Bly, Dave Etter and others also have

cornlands very much in evidence. More recently, too, contemporary American films have gained by utilizing Midwestern cornfields and the associations these have for an American audience in their settings. Some examples worth considering here are the cornfields in Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* and in the now-classic Midwestern crop-dusting sequence from Alfred Hitchcock's well-known thriller *North By Northwest*.

The pattern of references to corn in early American literature is clearly unqualifiably optimistic, while, not unexpectedly, in those references in the later twentieth century—following two wars, industrialization on a large scale, and the rapid urbanization which accompanied those phenomena—the corn imagery is handled with greater restraint, qualification, and ambivalence. These recent examples of Midwestern corn imagery most closely approach the modern Southern writers' use of traditional agrarian symbolism. The strong, upright cornstalks, originally signs of individuality, natural order, fruition, abundance and life, are to some later Midwestern writers emblems of a fruitful time gone by. Those writers may view that time as recoverable, so that the agrarian past becomes a positive alternative, a source of inspiration and strength for the present; but for other writers, corn seems only to serve as a reminder of an irrecoverable past—or worse yet, a promise never kept. Rather than alluding to continuity and new beginnings, the cornfields of later literature and of films seem to be used to suggest an end to the very fertility, natural order, and national optimism which the traditional corn images once evoked.

In Joel Barlow's poem "Hasty Pudding," one of the earliest of America's popular poets celebrated the new nation in a mock-heroic form with repeated references to corn and cornfields.

I sing the sweets I know, the charms I feel,  
My morning incense, and my evening meal,  
The sweets of Hasty-Pudding. . . !

In the mock heroic tradition, Barlow looks to the lowly corn pudding for reminders of his origins, his strong father and the vigorous Americans who work the land:

Thy constellation rul'd my natal morn,  
And all my bones were made of Indian corn.

With a hymn to national growth and the harvest that toil and care will bring, Barlow traces corn production from seed and forecasts fruition in the Fall. Within the ripened cornfield there is room, too,

for happy sexuality and human fertility, for love and good-humored sex-play: "When the pledg'd roasting-ears invite the maid,/To meet her swain beneath the new-form'd shade." In Barlow's vision of America's future, there is no end to the abundance, and the Autumn harvest does not mean death but cornhusking parties, warm homes, and the start of a new crop; there is a well-earned reward and the promise of continuity.

This robust early corn poem is an appropriate beginning to any study of corn imagery in American art, for in its nationalism, its vigor, its glorification of the promise and fertility of the land, the poem epitomizes an early American optimism which should serve as a touchstone against which later references to corn and cornfields may be measured.

Barlow's sentiments, refined by the development of an idiom more natural to America and the Midwest, are still echoed by Carl Sandburg over a century later. In Sandburg's early twentieth-century Midwestern poetry, the corn stands for what Archibald MacLeish calls the poet's belief in "the future of the human race; a credulity about the destiny of man."<sup>2</sup>

I speak of new cities and new people.  
I tell you the past is a bucket of ashes.  
I tell you yesterday is a wind gone down,  
    a sun dropped in the west.

I tell you there is nothing in the world  
    only an ocean of tomorrows,  
    a sky of tomorrows.

I am a brother of the cornhuskers who say  
    at sundown:  
        Tomorrow is a day.'

In the title poem from the section called "Haze" in *Smoke and Steel*, Sandburg rejoices in the promise of sexual union and fruition:

I don't care who you are, man:  
I know a woman is looking for you  
and her soul is a corn-tassel kissing  
a south-west wind.

Using corn images, Sandburg also writes about the natural cycle and continuity of life in "Brown Gold" and in "Corn Prattlings." There the poet sees the corn laughing as it reaches harvest time because of its secret wealth at the end of a long job, because of the strength of its roots against the winds and because it participates in the magic movement of a benign natural order.

In the post-World War I years, Midwestern poets and writers looked out across the cornfields of their native region for confirmation of their best hopes. For Sandburg those cornfields were almost entirely comforting and inspiring, but for some other writers, although the corn still represented the values they believed in, the setting was marred by the industry in the garden, by the smoke that interfered with the sunshine. The cornfields were outside cities that appeared to have forgotten what cornfields meant. Writers like Sherwood Anderson reached into their regional backgrounds and for the oldest significance of the corn and fields to find emblems that would kindle new spirit, but the optimism was sometimes anxiously coupled with misgivings in years when factories and skyscrapers were new signs of energy rising on the plains where cornstalks formerly stood.

In his memoirs, especially in the section "Childhood and Young Manhood," Sherwood Anderson described what the cornfields signified to him.

What a field for the poets of America, the corn fields. . . .

And now it is time for the cutting of the corn. The tall corn stalks are set up in shocks. They are not fighting armies. They stand in rows ready to feed the nation of men.

The men come to husk out the corn. You see the piles of yellow gold on the brown earth. Here is something to make the heart glad. The cornfields, the cornfields.

In "The Cornfields" from *Mid-American Chants* Anderson sees himself as an intermediary between the fields and the people, as a vessel to be infused with the vitality of the long rows of corn which remain those ancient symbols of fertility and the emblems of American promise.

. . . All of the people of my time were bound  
with chains. They had forgotten  
the long fields and the standing  
corn. They had forgotten the  
west winds.

I will renew in my people the worship of  
gods. I will set up for a king  
before them. A king shall arise  
before my people. The sacred vessel  
shall be filled with the sweet oil  
of the corn.

Love for a woman is also associated with the feeling the poet gets when he is at one with the old things, when he understands or feels the inspiration of the Midwestern fields. "With her I have adventured into a new love . . . I am come up into the wind like a ship. Her thin hand is laid hold of me. The land where the corn nods has become my land."

Anderson's faith in the power of the corn as opposed to the city and its poets becomes strident in "Song to New Song":

I see new beauties in the standing corn,  
And dream of singers yet to come,  
When you and your rude kind, choked by the  
fury of your furnaces,  
Have fallen dead upon this coal heap there.

Corn imagery also appears frequently in the work of other Midwestern writers who wrote out of the agrarian tradition. Willa Cather's writing always shows careful balance between the romance of the land and its realities. In "Neighbor Rosicky" the good Czech farmer compares London and New York to his Midwestern farm planted in corn, and although it is the hard times and the shelling of the corn, the years when the crops don't come up or the corn is roasted in the sun before it reaches maturity that help to kill old Rosicky, he would never give up the land again to return to the tailor shop or the furniture factories. His has been a complete life on his Midwestern cornlands. Despite the demands of farm life, it is the city which comes in for greatest criticism.

To the south, where an agrarian life style yielded tragic disappointment for the region following the Civil War and industrialization, the modern literary response to agrarian symbolism was much more extreme and negative than in the Midwest. Among modern Southern writers there is a nostalgic longing for the land and its traditional values and an often bitter hatred for the modern forces which destroyed the land and its tradition. In extreme examples of this inclination in Southern regional writing, corn becomes an inverted symbol, an emblem of infertility played against a desert where the old god of plenty is a grotesque, insane cartoon, a Popeye in Faulkner's *Sanctuary* who in his modern impotence violently rapes women in a hay mow with the aid of an oversized corn cob. In such a cornfield scene there is no love, no healthy sexual meeting that looks forward to harvest and continuity, no harmony within the community. There is only bloody violence, perverted sex, and a dying land. The

rows of corn turn into brown stubble to become T. S. Eliot's wasteland, the valley of ashes tended by hollow men.

In samples of contemporary Midwestern poetry—poetry about the Midwest or poetry by Midwesterners—the trends in the use of corn imagery in Southern regional writings are also evident, but they are muted somewhat, perhaps because the Midwestern modern experience has not been as bitter nor has the contrast been as marked between industrialism and the agrarian tradition. What is still present in some contemporary Midwestern poetry is a personal affinity for the region and for the cornfields, but there is little evidence of a long-range optimism, a sense of fertility, or a sense of national purpose associated with corn. Whether the response is more or less angry, however, many of the writers use corn imagery in poetry which conveys a strong sense that the kinds of options suggested by the older images and symbolism are now either invalid or significantly limited.

Contemporary Midwestern poetry is a stark, condensed poetry which itself resembles the plains on which an occasional cornfield, a memorable image, appears. The very form of such poetry suggests a reduction in possibilities. Among this poetry there are a few poems which see the cornfields as traditional symbols of regional strength and spirit, though seldom as national spirit. Even in works like Paul Engle's Iowa poems, where the cornfields still suggest continuity, the images are harsher than in the older Sandburg or Cather stories or even the Anderson poems. In "Ancestral Iowa" Engel recalls the will and strength of his Iowa ancestors, "Women who helped break earth and harvest corn," and he asks, "What have I left of their great human will?" While the question is contemporary, the answer may imply more assurance, however forced, than many of the Midwestern poets today would be able to muster: "The field of fact to plow, the corn to grind,/ My hand to learn old lightness in new skill."

Although Robert Bly's poetry suggests an acceptance that appears to be beyond despair, many of Bly's poems are about the ends of seasons and harvested cornfields rather than growing corn. His collection *Silence in the Snowfields*, where corn images appear often, includes primarily Fall and Winter poems, and *The Light Around the Body* is a collection of poems about death. The poet recalls stillness, in cornfield settings during caught moments and there is often Eastern detachment rather than the robust affirmation of life which the corn suggested in Cather, Sandburg, or Anderson. In "Approaching Winter," Bly fashions a pensive mood in which we are asked to see the corn as part of a scene at the end of what might have been a great time.

## I

September, Clouds. The first day for wearing  
jackets.  
The corn is wandering in dark corridors,  
Near the well and the whisper of tombs.

## II

I sit alone surrounded by dry corn,  
Near the second growth of the pigweeds,  
And hear the corn leaves scrape their feet  
on the wind . . . .'

The mood is similar in "Fall," where "the bones of the corn rustle" to evoke a sense of stillness and loneliness from the Midwestern landscape.<sup>8</sup> The same kind of economical setting and feeling of restraint occurs in Bly's "Three Kinds of Pleasures" where again the harvested cornfields are a recognizable part of an end to something as the sun sets in the winter.

The darkness drifts down like snow on the  
picked cornfields  
In Wisconsin: and on these black trees  
Scattered, one by one,  
Through the winter fields—  
We see stiff weeds and brownish stubble,  
And white snow left now only in the  
wheeltracks of the combine.'

In "The Fire of Despair/Has Been Our Savior," another poem about the end of the year, Bly's last stanza uses corn imagery to describe a modern state of confusion.

A dry cornleaf in a field; where has  
the road gone?  
All trace lost, like a ship sinking,  
Where what is left and what goes down,  
both bring despair.  
Not finding the road, we are slowly  
pulled down.<sup>10</sup>

The Midwestern poetry of Dave Etter treats the corn images with greater irony. In "The Hometown Hero Comes Home," Etter describes the scene in flat tones. The Midwestern landscape which formerly offered inspiration and hope to the poet has become no alternative; the cornfields are merely another battlefield, another

world ruined by the experience of violence and war which lies just behind the returning hero.

The train, two Illinois counties late,  
slips through jungles of corn and hot leaves,  
and blazing helmets of huge barns . . .

It's too humid: no one will meet me.  
And there are no brass bands in Dubuque."

There is violence in the cornfields that once provided a pastoral refuge in Etter's "Words for a Friend Who Was Accidentally Shot While Hunting Pheasants in Northern Iowa." Again it is death and an end rather than a new beginning which the poet writes about here.

Close weather wets the bricks on Hill Street.  
Only one porch light fights the fog.

The midnight train to Mason City  
is washed in rivers of the moon.

In the windy cave of a cornfield  
Your blood has dried on the bones of husks.

I have every right to love you.

While contemporary Midwestern poetry offers a number of examples of the trend toward a nostalgic or ironic treatment of corn and cornfields, some of the best examples of the movement that has occurred over the years appears not only in the verbal imagery of poets, but in the visual imagery of serious contemporary filmmakers who use Midwestern settings and cornfield scenes in particular as symbolic or suggestive backgrounds in major American films. Working with the associations which Americans have traditionally made with corn and cornfields, contemporary moviemakers have used the corn and cornfields visually, dramatically and thematically to underline their intentions. Although the filmmakers are not always Midwesterners, for the most part the images of corn are in Midwestern settings. Rather than being positively affirmative in their use of the cornfields, the filmmakers tend to recall the affirmation and to use it as a reminder of what has been lost. In Alfred Hitchcock's thriller, *North By Northwest* the famous crop-dusting sequence includes a prominent and important example of a cornfield which warrants further analysis.

Roger Thornhill in *North By Northwest* is a sophisticated Madison Avenue advertising executive in New York; he is abrupt



and rude, he has a tendency to drink too much, and he is much too complacent and self-satisfied about his world. Thornhill is thus a likely target for Hitchcock, who loves to pull the rug out from under the self-satisfied man on the street and the complacent audience which does not find it difficult to identify with such a man. Within half an hour after the film has begun, the man in the button-down shirt finds himself mistaken for a non-existent agent named George Kaplan; he is hunted by the spies who believe that Kaplan has something on them on one hand, and he is hunted by the police on the other for a murder he did not commit. A beautiful woman gives him help and arranges a meeting outside of Chicago between him and the mysterious Kaplan. Unbeknownst to Thornhill, Miss Eve Kendall, the kind lady, is in the employ of the villains, and the meeting is an attempt to lure Thornhill to his death during the famous crop-dusting scene.

Following Eve's instructions, Thornhill takes a bus which drops him off at the side of an empty road twenty miles outside of the Chicago city limits. In an extremely long, high-angle helicopter shot, we see Thornhill as the bus leaves, as a mere speck on a dry and dusty Midwestern landscape. What crops there are, are in the far distance with the exception of a cornfield. This cornfield is not golden or green but a field of dusty shocks, still standing upright in the small field, but ready to be plowed under. Thornhill's vulnerability and his aloneness as well as the emptiness of the Illinois landscape are accentuated in a series of subjective shots which show Thornhill's view of solitary plains and country roads which proceed without apparent end in all directions. Rather than warm Midwestern hospitality, Thornhill finds barren, hostile lands, unfriendly people, and cars that kick dust on his Brooks Brothers' suit.

Suspense builds as cars pass but no Kaplan arrives. There is a false arrival when an unfriendly Midwestern native is dropped off by a car because he is going to take the next bus. As the stranger gets on the bus, he observes to Thornhill that the crop-dusting plane far in the distance seems to be dusting crops where there are none. Within minutes the plane is chasing Thornhill across the empty fields in an attempt to kill him. Thornhill tries to stop cars for help, but the Midwest is not unlike New York City, where even Thornhill's mother would not come to his aid. The plane buzzes Thornhill and the audience feels his sense of fear and alienation in a traditionally hospitable setting where now there is nowhere to hide or seek sanctuary. Finally Thornhill thinks he sees refuge in the small field of corn. He runs for what seems like an interminable length of time to reach the field, and crouching amid the furrows and stalks, Thornhill breathes a sigh of relief that he has found shelter from the machine. Thornhill, however,

is in the last remnant of Leo Marx's garden, and it is not long before the promise of the cornfield refuge proves to be merely false security, just more of the same empty Midwestern landscape that holds out no hope for our hero's renewal and salvation through place. The plane dusts the small field with a heavy gas or insecticide; Thornhill grasps the corn stalks as though they were prison bars, and coughing and sputtering, he is forced again to run into the open plains. After another close call with the enemy he stops a gasoline truck by standing in front of it, making it halt suddenly and causing the plane to crash into it. Only then do the Midwestern farm people, the old cornhuskers, stop their old Fords to view the violent deaths of the plane's occupants as the truck bursts into flame.

The traditional cornfield where life is renewed becomes a potential death chamber for Thornhill, and the green and golden cornfields where ripening corn once provided a symbolic backdrop for sexual fruition are cornfields where Roger Thornhill is sent to be killed by a love who betrays him. Although our hero's mettle has been tested, and eventually we are given hope that all will right itself, Hitchcock has made a point about our traditionally sacred places. The cornfields are no longer positive signs of fertility wherein a man can renew his manhood by finding inspiration or answers, wherein the city man can find new vitality. Rather the landscape is inhospitable, not better than the city. It has a barren wasteland look. Evil, according to Hitchcock, is everywhere, even in the most unlikely places, even among our oldest gods, in our most sacred myths, even in our Midwestern corn. Thornhill must experience the lessons at such American shrines and overcome the obstacles before he makes a personal and social commitment and achieves a new sense of control and identity, this time based on a deepened, more realistic awareness of good and evil and the dangers of intellectual and emotional complacency. What refuges Thornhill finds tend to be existential; they are to be found within himself or together with a few other people. Place or region, a return to the land, secure positions in the business world—all are no assurance of security and selfhood.

The film's best effects in the cornfield scene depend in part upon the inversion of the traditional Midwestern farmlands image and more particularly, the inversion of the cornfield symbol with all its mythical associations. It is at this level that Hitchcock is such a master, where he taps an image which has cultural and mythical dimensions that help to carry his hero beyond plot and into basic conflicts and serious thematic concerns to which every American audience cannot help but respond.

A similar, but more tragic version of the use of Midwestern cornfield settings in a demythifying manner occurs in Arthur Penn's 1960's award-winning feature, *Bonnie and Clyde*. Penn used the cornfields as setting for one of the tenderest and most moving moments between Bonnie and Clyde. The sequence occurs not long before the two, having finally consummated their love, are riddled with bullets in the famous bloody ambush-assassination scene that is the film's slow-motion finale.

The cornfield sequence follows the kidnapping of the undertaker, Eugene, and his girlfriend, Thelma. The fear or premonition of death is apparently what causes Bonnie to leave Clyde and the gang one morning soon after and run away. Clyde goes looking for her and is anxious and frightened by his loneliness when he cannot find her. Finally he sees her ahead running in a cornfield, and in a frantic cross-cutting scene chases her down the furrows of ripened corn ready for harvesting before he catches up with her. Bonnie tells Clyde against the background of the cornfield shown in medium and close shots that she wants desperately to go home to see her mother and her family despite the dangers, and Clyde agrees after she promises never to leave without telling him again. His tenderness for her, her childlike need for family, and her return to Clyde, their embrace, all emphasize the innocent quality which Penn attaches to his outlaw, outcast heroes from the first coke which Clyde drinks until the end of the film when Bonnie, dressed in bridal white buys a delicate china doll, and Clyde in all simple good faith stops to help C. W. Moss's father fix a flat tire, thus walking into a violent ambush and the inevitable death.

That innocence is most appropriate within the cornfield setting, and the tender holding and touching which develops sympathy for the lovers evokes the traditional responses to cornfields as images of sexual fertility and simpler agrarian values in a world where they are otherwise hard to find. There is irony too, of course, in the fact that such a moment in such a setting must occur between two who are outside the prescribed boundaries of American society.

Penn's camera work emphasizes both the traditional associations with corn and the ironical implications when his camera moves very slowly from a close shot of the two clinging to one another against the corn stalks to longer and longer shots from higher and higher angles. At the highest angle, which the camera holds so long that the T.V. version cut this important portion of the film, Bonnie and Clyde are finally small figures surrounded by a frame filled with corn. The effect is to underline their separateness and aloneness and their vulnerability as well as their moment of oneness with the ancient field, to force the viewers to retain the photograph of the two held in the

fields of corn as the stuff that romantic legends are made of, to evoke all the traditional positive associations of Midwestern cornfields. That moment of hope and possibility and return to innocence only takes on its full meaning when soon after, Bonnie and Clyde die in a barrage of bullets. The potential of the corn would see its end in the inevitable bloody ambush at the hands of American overkill, and the hypocrisy of the small-town farmer who arranges a deal with the "laws" for favors and money would emphasize the distance between the early ideal huskers of corn and the later ones.

Throughout Penn's film there is a nostalgic longing for an irrecoverable innocence, a humane love, a sense of human community which a modern and violent and intolerant nation may have forgotten. If the message out of context and by the 1970's seems to be an oversimplification, a cliché, the visual effects are not. The cornfield sequence in conjunction with the violent end of the criminals and lovers destroys old myths and creates newer ones. It is a suitable reflection of the distance that the American cornfields have come as significant emblems since Carl Sandburg first wrote:

Have you heard my threshing crews yelling  
in the chaff of a strawpile  
and the running wheat of the wagonboards,  
my cornhuskers, my harvest hands hauling  
crops, singing dreams of women, worlds,  
horizons?

Michigan State University

#### NOTES

1. Joel Barlow. *Works II* (Gainesville, Florida: Scholars Facsimiles and Reprints, 1970) p. 88. (All subsequent references to "Hasty Pudding" are to this edition.)
2. Archibald MacLeish, introduction to *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969) p. xx.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 85. (All subsequent references to Sandburg's poetry are to this edition.)
4. Sherwood Anderson, *Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs*, ed. Ray Lewis White (Chapel Hill: University of No. Carolina Press, 1942) pp. 48-50.
5. Sherwood Anderson, *Mid-American Chants* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918) p. 12. (All subsequent references to Anderson's poetry are to this edition and will be cited in the text.)
6. John T. Frederick ed., *Out of the Midwest* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1944) p. 352.
7. Robert Bly, *Silence in the Snowy Fields* (Middleton, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1962) p. 19.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
10. Bly, *The Light Around the Body* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) p. 48-49.
11. Lucien Stryk, ed., *Hearland* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1957) p. 59.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 60.