

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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in English presented on 9 December 1994

Title: BORDERLANDS: THE LOSS OF A VISION IN THE NOVELS OF  
LARRY MCMURTRY

Abstract approved: \_\_\_\_\_

The novels of Larry McMurtry concern themselves with the inability of a generation displaced from its cultural heritage to create a vision that incorporates the values and traditions of the past, the conditions of the present, and a direction for the future. McMurtry's characters dwell within spiritual borders, unable to retreat to a nostalgic past and unwilling to face an uncertain future. As a result, many of the characters rely on representations of the Old West, not the actuality, to provide themselves with an identity and a vision. In his novels, McMurtry attempts to run lines of meaning between the past and the present in order to examine the nature of the frontier ethos, its death, and his characters' attempts either to revitalize the mythic West or to create a new vision for themselves.

In Horseman, Pass By, Lonnie Bannon must learn to create a vision that establishes his connection between the past and

the present, but his ability to create is inhibited by movies and song lyrics that shape his perceptions of the world. In Lonesome Dove, McMurtry examines the nature of the frontier ethos as it manifests itself in a late nineteenth-century cattle drive. Woodrow Call possesses a vision, but he is unable to pass it down to his son (a future generation). All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers reveals McMurtry's interests in a writer's attempts to recapture a vision of the past through fiction. Danny Deck's efforts to revitalize the myth fail because he wants the actuality of the past, not the representation. Texasville reveals a world that has surrendered itself to a vision of the past put forth by films, song lyrics, and television shows. McMurtry's novels suggest that people in the twentieth century are orphaned from their cultural roots, and, as a result, they turn to images of the past for a sense of an identity.

BORDERLANDS: THE LOSS OF A VISION IN  
THE NOVELS OF LARRY MCMURTRY

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A Thesis

Presented to  
the Division of English  
EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

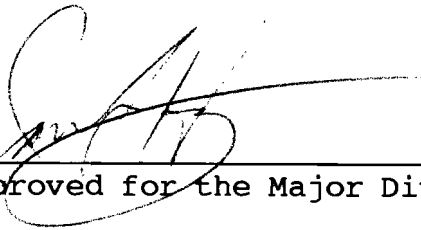
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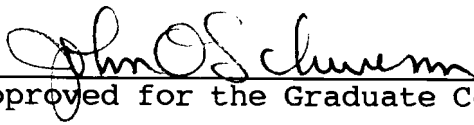
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December 1994

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Approved for the Major Division

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Approved for the Graduate Council

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. Jim Hoy and Dr. Richard Keller for their interest in my ideas about Larry McMurtry's novels and for the time and energy they spent assisting me with this project. This thesis would not have been possible without their guidance.

I would also like to thank my parents and my sister for their support and encouragement during the composition of this thesis.

Most of all, I wish to thank Trish for her patience and the prayers and support she gave to me during the last few weeks of this project. This thesis is for her.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE CRISIS: THE VISION IS LOST

". . . I watched the range change."  
--Lonnie, Horseman, Pass By

Larry McMurtry's first novel, Horseman, Pass By, dramatizes the inability of people in the twentieth century to create a life-sustaining vision to replace a nineteenth-century Western American frontier ethos. In the novel, Lonnie Bannon epitomizes a confused, directionless generation unable to choose between the code of the mythic frontiersman or that of the pragmatic oilman (Reynolds, "Oilman" 156). Thomas Landess notes that Lonnie is exposed to both his grandfather's (Homer Bannon) and step-uncle's (Hud) visions of the world, and through his observations of both codes he is expected to create a new vision that will help him survive in the world (11). Lonnie's narrative suggests he perceives Homer as the idealistic nineteenth-century frontiersman whose code encourages "industry, independence, and honor" (Lich 17). If Homer symbolizes a "romantic" past, Hud represents a contemporary generation that has rejected the traditions and values of the nineteenth century in favor of a code that upholds the "tradition of Western wildness that involves drinking, fighting, fast and reckless riding and/or driving, and, of course, seducing" (ING 24-25). Tom Pilkington adds that Hud, "out of spite and ignorance," distorts the values that Homer clings to and, as a result, Hud "is as much a man

living out of his time as is old Homer" (121).

If Homer and Hud are men living out of their time, then Lonnie seems to be a youth who is searching for a time and place in which he belongs. In the novel, Lonnie seems to occupy a transitional place between ranch and city, past and present, but he seems unsure of the direction he should take. Part of Lonnie's confusion arises from the fact that he seems to be the only one in the novel who gives much thought to his own life and the lives of others, but he does not have anyone else with whom he can talk. As a result, Lonnie is a listener: "Then he [Homer] might tell me stories of his days on the big ranches, or of cowboys like his dead foreman Jericho Green. I sat below him, flipping my knife into the soft dirt of Grandma's lilac beds, *taking in every word he said*" (italics added 4). And when Homer begins to spend less time telling his "old-timy stories," Lonnie either turns to Jesse--"I could listen all night when Jessie got to going back over his life" (20)--or relies on his own powers of observation to observe the changes taking place in the surrounding countryside: ". . . I watched the range change. I watched the whole ranch country shake off its dust and come alive" (3). All of this suggests that, as the novel's narrator, Lonnie is an artist-figure who is presented with an opportunity to resolve the conflicts between Homer's and Hud's worlds, which in turn may lead to the creation of a new code; however, his refusal to embrace either vision and his



departure from the ranch at the end of the novel imply that he does not possess the knowledge or the skills to create a new code for himself and those around him that acknowledges the values and traditions of the past, the realities of the present, and a direction for the future. Landess argues that Lonnie's experiences in the novel may be interpreted as a "contemporary" youth's rite of passage with no "stable traditions to give form or purpose to the initiation, . . . [and that Lonnie may discover] the age-old truths about life in his own time and his own way" (11). One of the ways Lonnie may follow to discover those "truths," Mark Busby argues, is through the "world of the imagination" available to him through books (185). Busby believes Lonnie's experiences with reading and the use of his imagination will enable him to "head for the cities . . . [and] [t]here he will become the writer of his own story" (186). However, it seems books, films, and songs prevent Lonnie from resolving a nostalgia for the past and the "pragmatic demands of the present" (Reynolds, "Showdown" 156), because these forms give Lonnie idealistic, "romantic" visions of a past way of life instead of encouraging him to "write his own story."

Lonnie's life, as well as those of other characters, is dominated by dreams and fantasies, and those illusions are articulated through popular culture. On the last night of Thalia's rodeo, for instance, Lonnie seems to realize the power of songs:

I felt lost from everybody, and from myself included, laying on a wagon sheet in a pastureland of cars. Only the tune of the song reached me, but the tune was enough. It fit the night and the country and the way I was feeling, and fit them better than anything I knew. What few stories the dancing people had to tell were already told in the worn-out words of songs like that one, and their kind of living, the few things they knew and lived to a fare-thee-well were in the sad high tune.

(145)

Similar to the prisoners in Plato's "The Myth of the Cave," Lonnie, Homer, and Hud live in a world of shadows or illusions that recall a past way of life. Each of the main characters possesses a lens (a way of seeing and interpreting the world) that has been shaped according to his experiences with the land and the people who inhabit that environment. Homer's frontier lens, fashioned by the sun's glare and the extremes of wind, rain, and drought, emphasizes a connection with the land that calls for honesty, hard work, and moral integrity. Homer relies on the past as a model for approaching daily events because that was when people were fair and honest in their dealings with one another (Reynolds, "Showdown" 158). Hud's lens, accustomed to the artificial light that belongs to an industrialized world, encourages materialism, viciousness, and an "every man for himself"

philosophy (Reynolds, "Showdown" 158). Hud is Thalia's version of a "movie star" who likes to be seen with flashy women and high-class cars. Even though they appear radically different, it seems that both Homer and Hud possess lenses shaped by a past way of life; however, Homer's lens is blurred with a nostalgia that "does not recall how things were but how they are remembered" (Reynolds, "Showdown" 157), and Hud's lens--a fractured product of the frontier ethos--enables him to see only the harsh existence the drought-ridden land offers. In In a Narrow Grave McMurtry asserts that both Homer's and Hud's "visions" have their roots in a frontier ethos:

Since the youngsters have never heard of the Old Man [Charles Goodnight, a nineteenth-century model for Homer Bannon] they don't know that Hud is his descendant . . . But related they are, though they knew different times, and put their powers to different uses. (19)

Tim Summerlin recognizes the presence of the nineteenth-century westerner's capacity for endurance of hardships and distrust for authority in Hud's character (50). And again, in his collection of essays about Texas, McMurtry comments, "Hud, a twentieth century Westerner, is a gunfighter who lacks both guns and opponents. The land itself is the same . . . but the social context has changed . . ." (24).

Although he is unaware of its presence throughout much

of the novel, Lonnie, too, possesses a lens that is susceptible to the influences of Homer, Hud, films, books, and songs (his dreams and fantasies also shape his lens, but these seem to be influenced by the songs he hears, the movies he watches, and the books he reads). Lonnie's situation enables him to see the good and bad characteristics of both Homer's and Hud's worlds, and, as a result, he is torn between a mythic past and a harshly realistic present (Reynolds, "Showdown" 157). If Lonnie attempts to resolve the tensions of these conflicting lenses, he may either function as a mediator between Homer and Hud in an attempt to correct the distortions--which would still leave the problem of an anachronistic frontier mythos--or else try to smash the old lens and create a new code. However, Lonnie functions strictly as a spectator of events in the novel, and he seems unable to use his imagination and reason to really "see" the situation and create a solution. Similar to the function of a Greek chorus, Lonnie comments on the actions in the novel and seems helpless to change the course of events. Lonnie's role as a "choral" character is established in the Prologue as he sits on the windmill surveying the surrounding countryside at night:

I sat above it all, in the cool breezy air that swept under the windmill blades, hearing the rig motors purr and the heavy trucks growl up the hill. Above the chattering of the ignorant Rhode Island

Reds I heard two whippoorwills, the ghostly birds I never saw, calling across the flats below the ridge. (6)

In this passage, Lonnie observes the automobiles and oil rigs that belong in Hud's world, but he also notices the creatures that inhabit Homer's natural world. With these observations, the theme is introduced of Lonnie's indecisiveness about these two worlds and his sense of helplessness in preventing the tragic destruction of Homer's herd, Homer's death at the hands of his step-son, and Hud's eventual acquisition of the ranch; all of these events seem preordained by some other power (in Greek drama this power is the Fates, but in McMurtry's novel the government assumes this role).

Lonnie's inability to engage his environment is apparent during the ride home from a cattle sale in Wichita Falls. The characters' positions in the truck's cab indicate Hud's increasing control over others, Lonnie's indecisive middle condition, and Homer's tenacious, but weakening, grip on controlling events: Hud is in the driver's seat, Lonnie is in the middle functioning as a division or boundary between the two worlds, and Homer is in the passenger seat. Like cowboys in a "B" Western movie, the three characters leave Wichita Falls and ride into the sunset; however, this motif does not signal a happy ending or a sense of resolution. Instead, the characters are tense and confused about the direction their lives are taking. Lonnie comments that he "began to feel

uncomfortable, like [he] was riding a horse along a slippery ledge when it was raining. One splash of words in the wrong place and [he] didn't know where [they would] be" (76). This is a crucial scene in the novel because the "splash of words," which is initiated by Homer, takes the characters into unfamiliar territory. This scene is the only one in the novel in which Homer reaches out to Hud. Seeking to establish some kind of bridge between their two worlds, Homer asks "What's your idea on all this, Scott? . . . What do you think we'll have to do?" (77). Homer's frontier lens emphasizes a self-reliance and a rugged individualism, but he ignores that code in order to include Hud in the events that are affecting the ranch. This is not to be taken lightly, because, as Raymond Phillips, Jr. argues, the ranch is the center of their lives and values (69).

This scene is also the only one in which all three principal characters are away from the ranch and its accompanying lands at the same time. The characters' experiences on their ride home from Wichita Falls seems to be a brief examination, by McMurtry, of the journey motif that he explores in his later novels such as Lonesome Dove, Moving On, and All My Friends are Going to be Strangers. In The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell explains that a journey usually involves a protagonist's movement away from the known world into an unknown realm (30). This journey involves physical travel, but, more important, there is an

exploration and transformation of one's inner self, "into depths where obscure resistances are overcome, and long lost, forgotten powers are revived, to be made available for the transfiguration of the world" (29). If the hero survives the journey, he is expected to return to his home with the knowledge gained through his experiences; this knowledge is the key to revitalizing the hero's land (Campbell 30). The ranch in Horseman, Pass By is the hero's land which, Phillips argues, is the source of tensions between Homer's mythic world and Hud's rootless world (69). It seems the ranch resembles a "wasteland," because the country has experienced seven years of Spring droughts (the novel opens with a slow rain that seems to revitalize the land for a brief period), and Homer's herd is infected with hoof-and-mouth disease. It seems at least one of the characters, Homer, tries to explore the nature of his lens on the ride home; this reexamination of the lens suggests that Homer may be trying to initiate a journey of the self as described by Campbell.

Before Homer reaches out to Hud, their conversation begins on familiar ground with both of them showing a dislike for government policies and officials, an attitude encouraged in both of their codes. Hud tells Homer, "When a government son of a bitch wants you to know something he'll call you, or else send a telegram" (77). In a way, they have found a link between their two lenses and view events, for a brief moment, in similar terms. Once this common ground is established,

Homer takes the initiative and plunges them into an unfamiliar context--one in which he is not the mythic cowboy, but a person who does not know the answers and is willing to look for a viable solution. However, Hud is unable to respond to Homer because he cannot forget his past with his step-dad. Hud tells Homer "Don't be a botherin' to ask me now. You done missed the time for that. You missed about fifteen years" (77). As the narrative continues, the story of Homer's and Hud's past is revealed from Hud's perspective, and the reader discovers that Hud once thought of Homer as "a regular god;" however, Homer's refusal to let Hud attend college and the subsequent permission to let him fight in the war has changed Hud's view of this god. Homer continues to reach out, but Hud's refusal to turn away from the past prevents them from looking to the future for possible solutions. During this scene, Lonnie seems to fade into the background, a passive observer of their exchange.

In his discussion of the metaphorical journey, Northrop Frye explains that the "interior journey" is hazardous because there are no familiar guides or "signposts" to lead one into the light of a new understanding of oneself and the world (223). It is this danger of becoming lost that seems to explain why Hud is unwilling to ignore his "code" (personal rules or guidelines that dictate how one acts in certain situations). When Hud faces the uncertain situation initiated by Homer, he relies on his code of thoughtless,



selfish living and converts Homer's "we" into the frontier's emphasis on "I." In response to Homer's question, Hud tells him "Now you asked me, I'll tell you what *I'd* do" (italics added 78). Hud's solution to the problem is not only dishonest, but it is one that has not been carefully thought out. Lonnie, chorus-like, notes that Hud "just always came out with the first scheme that popped into his head, however crazy-sounding it was" (78).

One interesting note is that both Homer's and Hud's codes favor action over contemplation. Clay Reynolds observes that "Homer fills each day with hard work and ends it with a grim satisfaction that there is as much or more to be done tomorrow" ("Showdown" 158). Hud may not spend his days working, but he is active, constantly on the move and as a result he is seen at the ranch only a few times during the novel. Hud's constant movement suggests an energy and vitality that emphasizes the life of the body over the life of the mind. Similar to his ability to see aspects of Homer's and Hud's worlds intermingling in the physical environment surrounding the ranch, Lonnie seems to be the only character who is able to participate in both the active and contemplative lives, but even he is unable to reconcile the two. He reads paperbacks, such as From Here to Eternity, that the local drugstore supplies, and he is willing to listen to other people's stories, while at other times he is not afraid to help his grandfather or Jesse mend fences or

round up the cattle. Lonnie's medial position enables him to experience the qualities of both worlds, but something, whether it is the country he lives in, his age, or his leanings toward the contemplative life, prevents him from blending the characteristics of the active and contemplative lives in order to replace Homer's and Hud's "action-oriented" codes. Lonnie's efforts to combine the two worlds end with someone or something wounded or dead: Lonnie's early morning ride on Stranger, his grandfather's horse, ends when he is thrown, which symbolizes, Reynolds argues, "the impossibility of capturing the past" ("Showdown" 159), and the night visit to the stock tank to gig frogs, which seems to be a symbol of extracting wisdom from some source ("You gig things you got them" [85]), results in Lonnie's expression of his frustrations with violence. In the end, Lonnie is left both with a unique perspective of the conflict between Homer and Hud, and with an inability to embrace either of their codes.

It is perspective that seems to be missing from Homer's and Hud's lenses. Even though Homer tells the government veterinarian that he does not reminisce about his past, the fact that he tells Lonnie stories "of his days on the big ranches, or of cowboys like his dead foreman Jericho Green" (4), and his quick (almost too quick) regression into the world of his memory at the end of the novel suggests that Homer lives the past. Homer is aware of the present, but it is simply a resigned acceptance of life: "There's so much

shit in the world a man's gonna get in it sooner or later, whether he's careful or not" (127). Because he concerns himself with a past way of life, Homer does not give much thought to his future. After Jesse tells Homer to leave the Hereford bull and the two longhorn steers in the brush, Homer replies, "Well, I don't know what to think yet . . . I ain't gonna try to decide till I find out for sure what's wrong with my cattle . . . Don't do no good to worry ahead" (52). Hud's awareness of the past is limited only to how he is affected by those events. Reynolds points out that Hud concerns himself only with the present ("Showdown" 158). As a result, Hud does not worry about the consequences of his actions, either to himself or to others.

Lonnie's age, 17, suggests the future lies with him. Lonnie can choose between Homer's code or Hud's code, but if he refuses either of them he must find one of his own, or somehow create a vision that will shape his life. If Homer offers Lonnie a nostalgic vision of the past and Hud offers him an amoral view of the present, it seems Lonnie should be able to take what he learns from these two worlds in order to create a code for his future. In The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction, Frank Kermode argues that humans live "in the midst of things," and, as a result, fictions or stories are created to enable people to place some kind of order over existence in an effort to understand the meanings of events in life (11). Kermode's complex

argument requires a much fuller treatment than can be accomplished here, but his idea that human beings believe they live in a time of crisis or transition and that, in order to understand their lives, they need to have a sense of a beginning, middle, and end seems to have some bearing for an understanding of McMurtry's work (7). People write stories, Kermode argues, because they can depict a life or event in terms of that tri-partite division. If Lonnie is the novel's artist figure who, at the end of the novel, leaves the ranch in order to write about his life, it is important he be aware of the limited visions Homer and Hud possess. It seems the characters' codes of behavior are their attempts to place an order over their lives. However, according to Kermode, their "fictions" are incomplete because their beginnings are not in accord with a future or, as he calls it, a "sense of an ending." Essentially, Homer and Hud offer Lonnie a vision of a beginning and a middle, but their visions do not provide a view of the end, the future, which could include hope, success, or possible defeat.

McMurtry offers the reader a microcosm of this frame. An action in Homer's past--the purchase of Mexican cattle--presents a problem for the present--the dead heifer. Homer wants to find the cause of the problem in order to find a solution (the future). The government veterinarian theorizes that Homer's problem may lie with the purchase of Mexican cattle three years before, but the action is too far in the

past to "trace this thing down, . . . if it's been that long ago I don't guess it's worth the trouble" (42). As a result, the entire herd is examined in an attempt to find the problem. In a sense, Lonnie must trace the cause of his growing restlessness and confusion back to the frontier lens (a feat McMurtry attempts with Lonesome Dove). If Lonnie can examine the root of the problem, he may have a chance of creating or finding a solution for the future. This is a theme that is repeated throughout McMurtry's novels; the past is part of the present and almost all of his characters must re-evaluate and re-interpret people and events from the past if they are going to grow and develop as human beings. However, it seems that things in the past, like Homer's purchase of the Mexican cattle, may be too remote to examine. Human vision tends to blur with nostalgia (as Homer's vision near the end of the novel reverts back to the days when he was young and active like Hud), and people and events loom larger in memory than they actually did while they walked the earth. If Lonnie can trace the evolution of the "cowboy-god" to its development in Hud's code, he may have an opportunity to realize that too much importance has been placed on the mythic west. Without any real conception of the past except what is passed on in legends and myth, people who try to carry on any kind of traditions or values from their cultural heritage are merely modeling their lives on fictions.

Lonnie discovers this tendency to revise the story of

people and events from the past during his grandfather's funeral. Lonnie tells the reader that the first preacher "told a lot that wasn't true, about Granddad and the church. He told some more that wasn't true about Granddad's being respected and loved by the people all over the state" (168). It seems that the preacher and Brother Barstow feel comfortable with the idea that they are revising Homer Bannon's life to fit the myth of this "cowboy-god." Emphasizing the idea that a fiction of Homer's life is being created for the people present in the church, Brother Barstow begins his eulogy by stating "we have gathered here in this holy place to mourn the closing of another great book of life" (170). Indeed, life seems to be a fiction that can be revised once an age or generation has passed away (however, in McMurtry's later novels one discovers that his characters learn how to revise their appearance, their basis for their identity, to live a desired lifestyle). Even Homer's appearance has been altered; "They had put paint on him, like a woman wears, red paint . . . I wished I could have buried him like he died; he was better that way" (172). Lonnie witnesses the process that creates myths and legends out of ordinary people and experiences.

In the novel, there are a couple of events that seem to be "shows" or spectacles. During Hud's rape of Halmea, Lonnie stands outside the window watching the struggle. The window seems to function as a proscenium arch for Lonnie. He

is a spectator, or a choral character, who is safely removed from the action of the scene. Lonnie knows he must do something to help Halmea, but "[he] just stood there watching" (113). When Lonnie finally does act, his efforts to distract Hud are ineffectual. As a result, Hud drags Lonnie into the artificial light of the scene and tells him "Come in where you can watch the show" (113). Many of the scenes with Hud are pervaded with artificial light; in this scene the artificial light comes from Halmea's lamp, and in the scene in which Hud shoots Homer, Lonnie notices that "Hud was looking into the pickup headlights, stretching his hands out toward them like the lights were a fire and it was winter" (159). Homer's world is associated with the natural light from the sun, while Hud's seems to require artificial light. And if the sun is a symbol for truth and reason, the artificial light surely implies a false world.

The novels, films, and songs that are alluded to in Horseman, Pass By belong to this false world, and, as a result, they inhibit Lonnie's ability to create his own vision. The danger inherent in Homer's code is that it encourages working "from the neck down." The rancher seems to be able to combine the life of the mind with the life of the body to keep the ranch running, but Homer does not teach Lonnie how to be a rancher, instead Lonnie is simply treated as a hired hand. One who lives the "life of the body," such as the cowboy or hired hand, does not try to think of

solutions to all of life's dilemmas; instead, one simply endures hardships. Because the "life of the mind" is not encouraged, the images and messages found in movies, books, and songs provide the cowboys with little bits of wisdom that seem to provide some sort of truth about living a human life. In In a Narrow Grave, McMurtry comments that "[e]ven in his golden days the cowboy lived within the emotional limits of the Western movie and the hillbilly song" (27). Lonnie, too, lives within the limits of the artificial world, because song lyrics, movie images, and other people's stories inform his perceptions of the world. In one scene, Lonnie uses a simile from an artificial construct to describe the natural world: "The pasture lay under the quietest, stillest light of day; it looked as perfect as some ranch picture on a serum calendar" (51).

In The Last Picture Show, McMurtry continues his examination of the media's growing influence. Iain Crawford labels this characteristic "Intertextuality" and argues that McMurtry's characters fashion their behavior according to what they see on the movie screen or read in "pulp" fiction" (45). This suggests that the characters no longer possess a balance between their ability to create and their reason. However, McMurtry's characters have not progressed to the extremes of a Hollywood culture--a society that relies heavily on the imagination and on fashioning the landscape according to their dreams and desires. Instead, the



characters seem to be victims of an internal inertia that prevents them from completely acting on their imaginations. Hud may be the only character in Horseman, Pass By who moves to gain possession of Homer's ranch, but his ambitions and energy are undirected and even he admits that he does not have things completely figured out (79).

Raymond Phillips, Jr. argues that "the tank, along with the windmill a literal reminder of the cattleman's efforts to reckon with the aridity of the Southwest, is the idyllic retreat in most of McMurtry's fiction" (73). The nineteenth-century frontiersman seems to have achieved a balance between the demands of reality and his vision; he was able to look at the landscape, realize that the surrounding environment must be refashioned if anyone was to live on the land, and create imaginative means to live on and with the land. The Hollywood culture dwells strictly in the life of illusion, and creates things regardless of other people or the conditions of the land. It may be that the strong, silent cowboy, the type created by pulp Westerns and perpetuated by movies, is not a good model for people trapped in an industrial age, people who need to articulate their dreams, hopes, and fantasies. Because these feelings cannot be constructively released, they are vented in erratic sexual escapades or violence, as one may see in McMurtry's later novels such as The Last Picture Show and its sequel Texasville. Hope for people may lie with their artists, but

McMurtry senses that the frontiersman's anti-intellectualism and belief that Nature is a better teacher may prove too much for an artist to overcome.

Robert Flynn seems to voice the questions that serve as a backdrop to many of McMurtry's novels:

Is no one ever the wiser? Does ignorance extend forever without challenge? Is there no one with vision beyond the immediate, beyond nostalgia for what is gone? Any futuristic, or even visionary people? (300)

At the end of Horseman, Pass By there is a sense of despair and hopelessness because there are no answers to these questions. Lonnie departs from the ranch at the end of the novel to visit his friend Hermy in Wichita Falls, but he does not have any plans for his future beyond that. As Lonnie leaves Thalia in that dark truck in which "the dash light threw shadows across his [the driver's] face," (this scene seems particularly ominous to me in light of the artificial world embraced by Hud) one senses that he will also wander aimlessly around the country like Jesse. But one fears that he may become like Marlet, the "city kid" with "eyes like black marbles" that Lonnie meets at the cattle lots in Wichita Falls, a human being forever out of place in the world without even a vision to provide hope.

Horseman, Pass By seems to be McMurtry's examination of the problems facing the twentieth-century Westerner: there

are no legitimate heirs to carry on the traditions and values of the nineteenth-century, and, as a result, people have turned to the images of that era and accepted those as their heritage. Are there any guides who can lead people through the transition between Homer's world and the world that lies somewhere in the future? The answer is not clear, but one senses that McMurtry believes these guides or artists, to be successful, should perceive the past, present, and future as continuous as the flow of a river and that they should reject others' "idealistic" images of the past in favor of their own evaluations of their heritage. Horseman, Pass By seems to be McMurtry's delineation of the crises he perceives people face living in a borderland; the novel is McMurtry's welcome to the uncertain conditions of a borderland and an invitation to explore the terrain as well as to search for a way out. At the end of Horseman Pass, By, Lonnie leaves home to look for an answer, and it is with this departure that McMurtry sends his other characters on individual and group journeys. Perhaps the journey will enable people to reconcile the active and contemplative lives and teach them how to "write their own stories." Whatever the case, it seems that McMurtry clearly wants his characters to return from their personal and communal journeys to revitalize a land that once possessed some unique quality that "illuminated our dreams."

## CHAPTER 2

### THE EXPOSITION: EXPLORING THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRONTIER ETHOS

"I have a feeling I had better decide where I'm living before I do any more remodeling or reinventing."

--Larry McMurtry, In a Narrow Grave

Lonesome Dove signals Larry McMurtry's return to the myths, legends, and codes of the nineteenth-century American West that he had seemed to spurn in his first three novels. Don Graham is one of many critics who, reacting to the novel's subject matter, notes McMurtry's 1981 "Ever a Bridegroom" article in which he admonishes Texas writers for neglecting contemporary urban themes in favor of their state's "romantic" past (312). In fact, almost all of the criticism concerning Lonesome Dove addresses McMurtry's return to the Old West because it seems to contradict not only his advice to other Texas writers but also the course of his career in the 1970s and early 1980s (incidentally, McMurtry has written three more novels set in the Old West since the appearance of Lonesome Dove in 1985: Anything for Billy, 1988; Buffalo Girls, 1990; and Streets of Laredo, 1993). Critics' statements regarding McMurtry's "return" vary considerably: Graham suggests that Lonesome Dove is a "calculated" move by McMurtry to boost his flagging career with a novel that appeals to popular tastes (312); Ernestine Sewell comments that McMurtry may have wanted to "set the record straight" in terms of previous literary treatments of

the Frontier and, in particular, the Texas Rangers (318); and Clay Reynolds argues that "Lonesome Dove . . . demonstrates McMurtry's recognition of the importance of the Western myth and its attendant codes and characters as a part of present reality. . . ." ("Back Trailing" 334). Following the pattern of these critical articles, this chapter, too, is a response to the seemingly contradictory attitudes present in McMurtry's criticism of Texas writers and his choice of subject matter for Lonesome Dove. It may also be that this chapter is a reaction to what has been written about McMurtry's novel; specifically, Don Graham's comment that McMurtry's goal in writing Lonesome Dove was to create a good "read" (317). Admittedly, the novel is by far the strongest work, both structurally and stylistically, that McMurtry has written since the "Thalia Trilogy." The novel's strength may lie in McMurtry's familiarity with the Western landscape and his interest in the creation of and departure of the "cowboy-god." However, McMurtry's story of a late nineteenth-century cattle drive is not an attempt by the author to attain popular success. The novel forms a part of McMurtry's attempt to tie the past with the present, to determine what people in the twentieth century inherited from that brief time period, an era that has captured the imaginations of many people, in which cowboys drove cattle across the plains, the Texas Rangers dispensed their brand of justice, and the land beckoned adventurous souls to explore and conquer new

territories.

In his essay "The Western Esthetic," Max Westbrook argues that the Western writer "finds it difficult to write fiction in which the meanings of the past are brought to bear on contemporary problems" (74). Westbrook explains that the nineteenth-century Western heritage of cattle drives, trapping, buffalo hunting, and cowboying have no direct influence on the political, economic, or ethical issues facing contemporary Westerners (74). As a result, the Western writer concerned with exploring contemporary life is hard pressed to explain the influence of the past on present conditions. McMurtry is one such writer who has expressed a desire, both in his fiction and in his essays, to "see life steadily and see it whole" (ING 75); this entails a search for and examination of the connections between the past and the present. In many of his novels, McMurtry uses an image from Nature, usually a river, to embody his philosophy that people need to possess a knowledge of the past as well as the present if there is to be a hope of a vital future. (Note: McMurtry also uses trees to symbolize his belief that people must see their lives as a part of the past, present, and future, but rivers are more pervasive in the novels, especially in Lonesome Dove.) McMurtry's philosophy is similar to Alfred Lord Tennyson's belief that society is an evolving community and that the values and traditions of the past flow, or are passed down, through the generations; if

the direction of this "river" changes too quickly or is interrupted, such as the case with the westward movement of cities and technology into the "garden," those institutions, rituals, and values from the past may be lost and the future, which promises yet even more change, may look uncertain and even chaotic. Richard Etulain notes that a similar theme appears in A. B. Guthrie's writings: "I accept the fact that progress leaves us no retreat. We can only insist NO UNDUE HASTE. We can only try to guide it. We can't stay it. Neither should we" (qtd. in Etulain 89). If life is, as Augustus McCrae states in Lonesome Dove, a "twisting stream," people may use rivers as a model from which they can learn how to let their lives adapt to changes in the landscape (natural or social), because that will determine not only a direction for the future but also what will be left behind on the banks and what will be carried forward. The long, sustained journey of the cattle drive is an offshoot of this metaphor because it is essentially a "river of cattle" that moves steadily over the land toward a future destination (a vision).

In his collection of essays about Texas, McMurtry comments that "the cowboy's golden age was during the last third of the nineteenth century" (ING 24), and it is during this period in which he sets his epic-length tale of three aging Texas Rangers who drive cattle to Montana for one last adventure. Reynolds notes that the exact year of the cattle

drive cannot be determined because of the inconsistencies in the characters' references to battles that occurred in the 1870s and the traffic that Call encounters on his return to Lonesome Dove, traffic that would not have been present until the late 1880s ("Back Trailing" 330). The fact that the time period is vague may be McMurtry's nudge to readers to familiarize themselves with the history of the nineteenth-century frontier in an effort to assess the year. Whatever the case, Captains Woodrow F. Call and Augustus McCrae, formerly of the Texas Rangers, own and run a dusty little cattle outfit near the Rio Grande. Since retiring from their roles as "lawmen," Call and McCrae have led suffocatingly routine lives near the border town of Lonesome Dove, rustling horses and cattle from Mexico to sell to any prospective buyers and performing endless chores around the "offices" that never seem to transform the outfit into a permanent home (the Hat Creek hands have yet to build corrals and a barn roof for their stock).

Call's and McCrae's lives are disrupted by the arrival of Jake Spoon, an old "compañero" who rode with the two Rangers during the days when hostile Indians, Mexican bandits, and outlaws roamed the plains. Apparently, Jake arrives in Lonesome Dove on the run from authorities in Fort Smith, Arkansas, because he accidentally shot and killed the town's mayor. Soon, Jake begins to kindle Call's imagination with his vision of the untamed wilderness in Montana: ". . .



there's going to be fortunes made in Montana. Why it's cattle land like you've never seen, Call. High grass and plenty of water" (68). Inspired by Jake's vision of a Garden of Eden, Call rustles cattle and horses from Mexico, hires several experienced and inexperienced hands to drive the herd north, and departs from Lonesome Dove in late spring with the hope of establishing the first cattle ranch in Montana.

In the novel, McMurtry blends characters and events from Texas history with the archetypal images of the Western movie (Graham 313). Jane Tompkins identifies those images that belong to the Western as "the gunfight, the fist fight, the chase on horseback, the figure of the mounted horseman outlined against the sky, the Saloon girl, [and] the lonely landscape itself" (5-6). The novel is filled with images that convey the traditional Western's sense of place and realism, but it is those images of the "cowboy-god" that dominate even the most breathtaking descriptions of the frontier: "Newt looked up and saw him [Call] standing at the door, his hat on and his Henry in the crook of his arm" (26). In "The Bard of Wichita Falls," Robert Adams states that Lonesome Dove follows the pattern of the "cowboy romance-adventure story" made popular by such writers as Louis L'Amour, Zane Grey, and Max Brand (309). Sewell, too, notices that McMurtry's story follows the "conventions" of the traditional Western, but adds that the author manages to present his characters as human beings rather than solely as

awe-inspiring individuals capable of great feats (318). However, the emphasis in the novel is not on "humans" but on "men" and how their codes and values dictate their behavior on the frontier (Adams 308). The novel contains some strong women, but even their strengths do not keep them from the brutality of abduction and gang rape, renegades, and the harsh landscape itself. This is an interesting depiction of females from an author known better for creating such strong, independent women as Lois and Jacy Farrow, Aurora Greenway, and Molly Taylor. However, the novel's time period may have something to do with the treatment of women. McMurtry believes the westward movement of cities is a feminine process because they "swallowed the Frontier like a small snake swallows a large frog" (ING 44). McMurtry's metaphor is sexual in nature, but it also suggests McMurtry perceives women as serpents in the garden. The arrival of women on the frontier signals the end of a man's world with its ill manners and relatively free existence away from the limitations of civilization. It seems women belong to the East, and when they move on to the frontier they bring the effects of civilization with them. The novel is set during the twilight of the masculine frontier and the advent of a feminine Metropolis, and, as a result, the characters feel they are in a time of transition,

. . . a moment between, not the plains as they had been, or as they would be, but a moment of true

emptiness, with thousands of miles of grass resting unused, occupied only by remnants--of the buffalo, the Indians, the hunters. (428)

The one strong woman in the novel is Clara Allen who seems to live in relative security from the harsh frontier. Even though she has lost her sons to the brutal Nebraska winters, Clara has not been broken by the Frontier, but seems to have been strengthened by her experiences. Sewell argues that Clara represents the "Feminine Principle" because her ranch is the first step in assimilating the frontier and the cowboy (323). Clara's ability to endure foreshadows the impending change that will take place on the frontier; Gus seems to sense this when he rejects Clara's offer to stay with her in Nebraska: "Well, you're here . . . It [the frontier] won't last long. Pretty soon it'll be nothing but schoolhouses" (699).

It is easy to assume, as Graham does, that McMurtry wanted to write a popular novel, because he is adept at handling the characters, landscape, and improbable plot twists that appear in formula Westerns. If Reynolds is correct in assuming that McMurtry is concerned with the influence of the Western myth on "present reality," the author could have written a novel with an urban setting, such as he had been doing before writing Lonesome Dove, that dealt more explicitly with characters who are haunted by the "romantic" images of the cowboy, the frontier, and the

gunfighter. However, it seems McMurtry wanted to write a novel in the idiom we have inherited from the frontier, a language that does not belong in an urban age because it does not validate the experiences of people living in an industrialized world. In her analysis of the Western genre, Jane Tompkins argues that the images, symbols, and myths of the frontier are powerful:

They carry within them compacted worlds of meaning and value, codes of conduct, standards of judgment, and habits of perception that shape our sense of the world and govern our behavior without our having the slightest awareness of it. (6)

The success of Lonesome Dove suggests people appreciate, as well as understand, a novel written in a style and a language familiar to them, both of which "carry within them compacted worlds of meaning." In the urban novels such as Moving On and Cadillac Jack, novels that are not so popular, it seems McMurtry is searching for a new idiom that speaks to and confirms the experiences of people living in a world that no longer has a geographic frontier. Lonesome Dove suggests we have inherited an idiom that worked in the nineteenth century, but it is hopelessly inadequate in dealing with the "new" relationship between men and women (as McMurtry comments in In a Narrow Grave, part of the "new" relationship between men and women stems from changes in sexual attitudes that asks that intercourse be intimate and loving,

something mutual rather than “. . . something aggressive males forced upon more or less reluctant females” [68]), and the moral, economic, and political issues facing contemporary westerners. It seems that McMurtry uses the idiom of the Old West to make a definite connection between the past and the present, and once this link is established he traces a “chain of events” back to the site of the wreck, a place that should indicate what interrupted the smooth flow or adaptation from one age to another.

In his essay “Tall in the Saddle,” Nicholas Lemann argues that, even though the cattle drives are a small part of American history, they have “animated a part of our imagination out of which flows a vital part of popular culture,” and that they have provided the material necessary for “dime fiction,” “stage shows,” and the early years of television and movies (324). Robert Flynn contends that Americans, lacking the established history of other countries, have made heroes of outlaws such as Billy the Kid, Jesse and Frank James, and John Wesley Hardin in an attempt to provide them with a background that gives them a sense of an identity, “although the ill fit tends to show how misshapen we are” (301). In a sense, Lonesome Dove is a “book of myths” that enables McMurtry to examine the wreck that occurred in the Westerner’s psyche with the introduction of what Leo Marx calls the “Machine in the Garden.” One senses in McMurtry’s work that his characters, facing radical

changes on the Frontier, are unable to adapt to the new way of life and, as a result, remain faithful to an idiom and to an image of themselves and their lives as it had been before the arrival of civilization. Lera Lich notes McMurtry's fiction gains its strength from borders "formed by collisions of divergent worlds" (50), and it seems he senses a border, or chasm, between the Old West and the New West. It is the images then that bridge the gap between life on the nineteenth-century Frontier and contemporary Western civilization, and popular culture has embraced and perpetuated these images (myths) in movies, fiction, and songs. McMurtry's comments in In a Narrow Grave reveal his recognition of the influences the images in movies, television, and other forms of popular culture have had on the Westerner:

The cowboy's gradual metamorphosis into a suburbanite is not without its element of paradox. The living conditions that make the wild, free cowboy such an attractive fantasy-figure to those already urbanized will eventually result in his being absorbed by his audience. In a sense this has already happened: nobody watches TV Westerns as avidly as cowboys. Even in his golden days the cowboy lived within the emotional limits of the Western movie and the hillbilly song. (27)

Instead of inheriting the values, traditions, and

rituals of the nineteenth-century frontier, the twentieth-century Westerner has inherited the images of that era that prove, in the end, to be illusions of historic people and events. In Buffalo Girls, McMurtry makes this process much more explicit with his examination of Buffalo Bill Cody who spent the last half of his life living an illusion of what was once his life on the frontier. Calamity Jane, one of the many frontier characters Cody hires for his show, notices the discrepancy between "history" and the Western show: "She didn't like the way things were getting so mixed now, what was real, or what had been real, mingling more and more confusingly with what was made up" (287). This ability to reinvent the past did not arise with the closing of the frontier, but it seems that it was a part of the Westerner's life to invent tall tales and to create reputations out of trivial or accidental events (Hill 398). Robert Athearn also notes that American pioneers also felt the need to reinvent themselves as they prepared to settle a new land (10). McMurtry is well aware of this tendency to revise events in the past, and usually uses images of clouds or dust to convey his characters' indeterminate sense of what is real and what is imagined. In Anything for Billy, the reader first sees Billy as he walks out of a cloud, and Jake's memory in Lonesome Dove is "kinda cloudy."

In his collection of essays about Texas, McMurtry comments that the generation born after World War II was

"committed from the first to introspection, and to a conscious search for models and methods" (52). A reading of Lonesome Dove suggests that McMurtry has developed this idea since he first wrote about it in the late 1960s. The characters in Lonesome Dove also "search for models and methods," although they are not inclined to contemplate their condition in life. Newt, Call's illegitimate son, usually looks to others for models of behavior:

The sight of Dish gave him [Newt] hope, for Dish wasn't somebody totally out of reach, like the Captain. Newt didn't imagine that he could ever be what the Captain was, but Dish seemed not that much different from himself . . . he liked to study the way Dish did things. (56)

Sewell notes that Call, too, models his behavior on "the image of himself as a Texas Ranger," even though circumstances no longer call for that role (320). The distinction McMurtry draws between the frontiersman and the contemporary Westerner may be that the frontier offered the possibility for people to reinvent themselves, but something (and McMurtry himself is never clear what this may be) fractured that opportunity, leaving people in the twentieth century without "vision." Therefore, to make up for this lack of "vision," people in the twentieth century rely heavily on images, symbols, or appearances

In accord with this emphasis on images, many of the



characters in Lonesome Dove seem to be aware of themselves as players on the stage of the frontier. Gus is the strongest voice in the novel, and it seems appropriate that he is the one character whose vocabulary contains references to dramatics. As the herd is preparing to leave Lonesome Dove, Gus tells Call, "It's your show, Call. Myself, I'm just along to see the country" (217). And before the town disappears behind them, Gus wants Call or himself to make a speech to mark the occasion, but Gus notes that "Call was not willing to indulge him in any dramatics" (220). Even the sign on which Gus carves the names of the Hat Creek Outfit (though Newt's name is curiously absent) seems to be a listing of the cast of characters. The sign lists props for the play (horses, rigs, cattle, and pigs) and what may serve as a theme for this drama: "Uva Uvam Vivendo Varia Fit" (89). Sewell translates this motto as "The cluster of grapes--many-sided, parti-colored, diverse--through living, begets one grape" (323). The Latin motto emphasizes the fact that the three Rangers, working together, embody all of the traits of the "cowboy-god" (Sewell 323).

Sewell places a Freudian paradigm over the three Rangers labeling Call the Superego, Gus the Ego, and Jake the Id (323). Indeed, looked at individually, the characters' presentations seem to border on caricature; Call is all work and seldom enjoys any recreational pursuits, Jake is the rogue who spends his time gambling, drinking, and whoring,

and Gus incorporates the characteristics of both Call's and Jake's codes because he works when the need arises but does not mind enjoying the pleasures of whiskey and women (Sewell 323).

Sewell's analysis of each of the Rangers as one part of a Freudian paradigm is extremely helpful, but I believe that the three-in-one figure of the Rangers can be developed even more to explain their relationships with the past, present, and future. Call dreams of a past way of life that placed him at center stage in his role as protector of the settlers from Mexican and Indian attacks. Reynolds notes that Call wants to live "what has already become the myth, the search for a true frontier that offers day-to-day challenges and the constant threat of violent death" ("Back Trailing" 330). Call is a product of a frontier ethos, and, even though he is reluctant to admit it, lives in the past:

It was ingrained in him, he had done it [rangering] so long, but he was aware that it wasn't in appropriate anymore . . . the fact that he had taken to thinking back annoyed him, too: he didn't want to start working over his memories like an old man. (28)

Call's inability to accept Newt as his son suggests that he is not interested in tying his actions in the past with the present. Sewell explains that Call cannot claim Newt as his son because it would mean he would have to surrender the

image of himself as a man above the drives, impulses, and failings of other human beings, to admit, in fact, that he is not a "cowboy-god" (320).

Jake, too, is a dreamer, but of a different kind than Call. The past is clouded over in Jake's memory, and he seems to prefer "dream[ing] his way through life and somehow [getting] by with it" (67). Jake possesses a vision for the future, yet he lacks Call's drive and resolve to move toward achieving that goal: "They didn't understand that he talked of pleasant things and faraway places just to create a happy prospect that they could look forward to for a while. It wasn't meant to really happen" (151). Jake needs Call and Gus to remind him of the time when he rode with the law, but without a sense of his past, Jake becomes a traveler, wandering from one town to another always in search of another whore or card game. Jake, like Call, is unable to make connections between his past and present:

Jake tried hard to think back over his years of rangering--to try and think of a debt he could call in, or a memory that might move the boys--but his brain seemed to be asleep. He could think of nothing . . . Life had slipped out of line. (574)

And it is a line that Jake crosses when he joins the Suggs, a line he should have been able to see and avoid with the knowledge gained from riding with the Rangers, but he tells Gus, "I never seen no line" (572).

Gus seems to be the only one who is capable of making the connections between the past and the present that will give his life a direction for the future. Not only is Gus aware of his own past, but that of the country as well:

"It's mostly bones we're riding over, anyway. Why, think of all the buffalo that have died on these plains. Buffalo and other critters too. And the Indians have been here forever; their bones are down there in the earth." (559)

Gus realizes that America is not, as the title of Henry Nash Smith's work states, "virgin land," but that it has a vital history of Indians roaming the plains with their own rituals, values, and customs, but an invading people has taken that away from them, much as the westward movement of cities is taking away the cowboy's way of life. Gus looks on all of this with a sense of humor as he tells Call that they may have fought for the wrong side, a statement that Call is unable to comprehend. The three Rangers, together, embody the unity one should feel with the past, present, and future, but this unity is fractured along the drive to Montana. This seems to be McMurtry's version of the "wreck" that occurred in the Westerner's psyche.

Like the characters in Virgil's Aeneid who leave Troy to found Rome, the characters in McMurtry's novel leave Lonesome Dove to create a home in Montana. One senses that the journey is a movement toward an Edenic past, before the

introduction of the "machine in the Garden," but that the journey also looks to the future because they are creating a path for future generations to follow as they travel into Montana. This journey structure suggests that people must carry the values and traditions of their past forward into a developing community, much like the characters in the Aeneid bring the statues and relics of their religion and culture to Rome. The journey symbolizes a gradual transition into a new stage; the change from one way of life to another does not happen quickly, as Tennyson warns, but over the course of most of a year. The characters must learn to leave behind certain things that will not contribute to a healthy, vital existence in their environment. In "Frontier and Region in Western Literature," Richard Etulain notes that contemporary Western writers are concerned with perpetuity on the frontier:

. . . a new environment rarely called for or accepted the wholesale continuation of old life styles. Instead there must be adjustment and change. Some traditions would and could continue, but others had to be thrown out--and totally forgotten. (91)

Nature provides a model for the characters in the novel to learn how to cross over into a new realm. As mentioned earlier, McMurtry uses an image from nature, a river, to symbolize his belief that people must have a unified vision

of the past, present, and future. The flow of the river may teach this concept, but the crossing of this body of water also teaches one to adjust and adapt to the rhythms inherent in life in order to grow and develop. There are several river crossings in the novel, and many of them seem to pose real, or at least potential, danger for the characters. One of the most memorable, as well as the earliest, river crossings in the novel involves the nest of poisonous snakes attacking Sean O'Brien and his horse. Before the crossing, McMurtry spends some time describing Sean's longing for his native land and his disenchantment with the landscape of America. The message is clear: one may not successfully cross over into a new world if one is weighted down by the emotional and cultural baggage of the old world.

There are other guides in the novel to instruct the characters how to endure. July Johnson and his step-son Joe encounter one such guide as they travel toward Texas. July and Joe's guide is an unusual character, a bug collector from Arkansas, who, when he is first seen, is stuck in the middle of a river "amusing himself by untying the parcels and pitching them into the river" (303). July and Joe pull the man out of the river, but it seems that he is the one who can offer them the most help. Sedgwick explains that he has "suffered no loss" by throwing away his baggage, because he is about to begin a new life of preaching the Gospel to Texans. Sedgwick seems to know that before he can begin his

new life, he must throw away the trappings of his old one. In accord with McMurtry's theme of an older man instructing a youthful initiate, Sedgwick offers to take Joe with him to "bring him along slow, fatten him up and teach him about the insect kingdom as [they] travel," because he doubts Joe has "had much chance to get an education" (305).

Even the new land tries to destroy one of the symbols of the old world that the herd brings with it: the Texas bull. Sewell argues that the bull symbolizes the three Rangers and their code of the frontier (321). In a battle that threatens to frighten the herd back to Texas, the bull and bear clash in a meeting between civilization and wilderness. The bull manages to hold his own in the fight, but he sustains injuries that eventually kill him. It seems that if the characters are unwilling or unable to throw away the anachronistic rituals and symbols of the past, Nature proves to be a disciplined teacher that may be able to provide models, such as the river, that shows them how to adapt to changes in the environment or obstacles that can eliminate those unhealthy vestiges of the past. However, the old ways are not so easily cast off for Call, and without the vision of Jake or the tempering influence of Gus, Call is as much living out of his time as he is living out of his place.

Perhaps this is the legacy we have inherited from the nineteenth century. Are we, like Call, committed to the myths and symbols of an era that has passed? The choice

between the active and contemplative lives is nonexistent for Call; he believes in a life of action, and it is his ability to lead men that enables him to gather an outfit and leave the wasteland of Lonesome Dove. However, without Jake's vision, Call becomes a wanderer at the end of the novel and stops only because the winter weather poses a danger to the herd. Is McMurtry suggesting that people in the twentieth century have lost the vision of Jake, the articulation of Gus, and we are left with Call's sense that effort, perseverance, and silence are the way to reach salvation? Have we inherited "a world without God, without ideas, without institutions, without what is commonly recognized as culture" (Tompkins 37)? It may be that the spirit of "westerling" has been passed down, but it has degenerated from a movement toward a vision or dream to simply unfocused, undirected movement.

Sewell's Freudian analysis is particularly apt in light of the fact that, when the Id, Ego, and Superego are not working together, the pressure built up inside one is not a focused, constructive release, rather it is an erratic, violent release that manifests itself in the firing of a gun or the beating of a scout's head against an anvil. Tompkins' comments about the cowboy's silence are revealing in terms of the heritage Call passes on to Newt:

The Western hero's silence symbolizes a massive suppression of the inner life. And my sense is



that this determined shutting down of emotions, this cutting of the self off from contact with the interior well of feeling, exacts its price in the end. Its equivalent: the force of the bullets that spew forth from the guns in little orgasms of uncontained murderousness. Its trophy: the bodies in the dust. Its victory: the silence of graves.

(66)

Maybe the twentieth century has also inherited the Westerner's belief that reality is material (Tompkins 6), but it has degenerated into the greed of bankers, lawyers, and oilmen who want "more and seem to end up with less" (HPB 145). Have we become orphans, as many of McMurtry's youthful protagonists are, from our heritage? In our effort to recapture a nostalgic past, have twentieth-century Americans become images of Western images? Do we know what is real and who we are? It may be that we have inherited an inability to let go of the past to prepare for a future, and as a result we, in the words of Matthew Arnold, are "Wandering between two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born." Maybe it will take an artist to free his fellow prisoners, or it may be that he will find that "One may write, on the frontier, but one must write about the world that is or was, not about the person one is or might imagine" (ING 52). The task is left to the Lonnie Bannon's, the Danny Deck's, the Sonny Crawford's, and the Duane Moore's.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THE CLIMAX: THE ARTIST'S SEARCH FOR A VISION

"This is what I would really like to see some western writer manage to do, to put together his past and his present. . . ."

--Wallace Stegner

Throughout the course of his career, Larry McMurtry has created a wide variety of colorful and eccentric characters that hail from diverse geographic locations, time periods, and professions; amid this gallery of characters one may find Texas Rangers, ranchers, cowboys, rodeo clowns, Las Vegas showgirls, oil tycoons, antique scouts, movie producers and directors, cartoon illustrators, actors and actresses, politicians, and even graduate students. Although the characters that appear in McMurtry's novels are quite different from one another, they all share the same sense of longing for an idealized past that seems to offer an escape from the violence, boredom, isolation, and decadence inherent in a world that changes faster than they can adapt (Reynolds, "Stock" 14). Clay Reynolds notes that McMurtry's characters rely on symbols and images of a past that never existed, yet these "myths," perpetuated by movies, fiction, and country-and-western music do not validate the experiences of characters living in an industrialized world ("Stock" 14). In a world curiously devoid of religious or spiritual guides, McMurtry's characters almost invariably return to the images of an idealized past because they are the one constant in a

society that provides few models from which people can gain some sense of an identity. Whether it is the fierce anti-intellectualism McMurtry perceives in Texas or that "life in the West [is] itself such a strenuous physical adventure that the need for psychic . . . adventure may [be] diminished" (ING 56), something in the characters' makeup prevents them from creating a life-sustaining vision to replace the romantic images of the Old West. McMurtry himself is not sure what has led to the absence of "visionaries," but he is clear about his belief that people have sacrificed an inner vision, or knowledge of the self, for a reliance on exterior "models and methods" (ING 52). Robert Flynn argues that McMurtry's characters look to movies, the oil industry, technology, and money for "salvation," but, the author asks,

Could it be that our redemption lies in our artists who continue to tell the stories and paint the pictures and sing the songs that tell us who we were, what we have become, and the way to human being? (301)

All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers reveals McMurtry's interests in a writer's attempts to transcend the limitations of place, the inheritance of an anachronistic frontier code, and the tensions between the active and contemplative lives in an effort to create a vision that incorporates the past, present, and future.

McMurtry has shied away from writers and their

lifestyles, preferring instead to look to the middle-class or suburbanites and their attempts to reconcile the active and contemplative lives in the presence of a society that encourages action over contemplation, physical prowess, and a nostalgic view of life on the frontier. McMurtry's reticence to place any hopes on an artist creating a new system of values for the West is evident in the fact that only two writers appear in McMurtry's gallery of characters: Danny Deck in All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers and Ben Sippy in Anything for Billy. There is no place for the artist in a society that craves the "reality" of the sun, the movement of a horse beneath one's body, and the harsh extremes of wind, rain, and drought that only seem possible in the wide-open spaces of the frontier. As a result, the inhabitants of this society are wary of and sometimes hostile to the artist who prefers to live the life of the mind over the life of action (ING 137). McMurtry has felt the pressures this society can place on the artist who has chosen, as McMurtry says, to "dramatize" the mythology of the Old West:

. . . how could the elders be sure that a bookish and suspiciously observant youngster like myself might not in time disgrace the line? I knew from an early age that I could never meet their standards, and since in those days theirs was the only standard I knew existed I was the more

defensive around them. Indeed, scared. (158-59)

How can an artist become, to borrow a phrase from John Steinbeck, a "leader of the people" if no one is willing to follow, let alone trust, the artist's vision? McMurtry has attempted to solve this problem by placing Danny on the border of the urbanites' and the frontiersmen's worlds. Like Lonnie in Horseman, Pass By, Danny is able to experience the characteristics of both worlds and see the possibilities that each hold for his art. Barbara Granzow argues that Danny is a "man of the land" who is capable of dealing with flash floods, shooting a squirrel out of a tree with the sun in his eyes, and invoking the names and symbols of the mythic West to assist him in physical confrontations (243-44): "I felt strange and a little dangerous. Zapata was about to come out of the mountains. Zapata's people were needing corn. . . . Boy did he [Godwin] need corn" (209). Not only is Danny a "man of the land," he is also an artist who is capable of writing about his region and its inhabitants. It is this ability, and the outside world's recognition of his talents, that dislodges him from the comfortable niche that he has created for himself in Houston (Granzow 243). Granzow notes that neither the Eastern world nor his friends and colleagues in Houston will allow him to live the life he had lived before publishing his novel, because they expect him to move on to more important themes and characters (243). Christopher Baker uses Robert E. Park's term "the marginal

man" to explain Danny's sudden loss of identity and apparent loss of direction after the acceptance of his novel (172). Danny's experiences seem to be a microcosm of what happened to people in the West when the "traditional organization of society [broke] down, as a result of contact and collision with a new invading culture" (Baker 172). Baker explains that this collision of the two worlds releases the individual from the restraints of the community to create a new life for himself and others (172-73). However, Danny clings to the "heroic" values he has learned from his upbringing in the West, "fortitude, resolution, and magnanimity," to prevent losing himself in an amoral Eastern world (Granzow 242). Those values that Danny relies on do not belong in the new world that he has been invited to join, but his reluctance to surrender them prevents him from finding a place and an identity as a writer (Granzow 242). Danny's "borderland" condition transforms him into a choral character, like Lonnie Bannon in Horseman, Pass By, sentenced to observe and comment on the people and events surrounding him but never able to completely participate: "I hadn't engaged with anyone. I was very separate. My words got across to people, but it was all verbal. . . . I was separate from everybody" (203). Danny's journey to San Francisco and his subsequent return to Texas seems to be his attempts to find a role that will enable him to remain a writer yet still enjoy the "realities" of marriage, sex, and the warmth of Emma's kitchen.

In West of Everything, Jane Tompkins asserts that "the desire to change places signals a need for self-transformation" (4). Danny's sudden departure from Houston in the middle of the night, before the dawn of a new day (life), suggests that he is in search of a new identity. Baker argues that Danny has inherited the pioneer's "wanderlust," but he lacks a specific goal or destination as he leaves the place that once gave him a sense of an identity, "Texas itself and his ancestry there" (171). Danny's journey seems destined to fail because he lacks a knowledge of a beginning and an end; Danny dwells in the middle without any idea of how to join the past and the future to his present. Even before Danny leaves Texas, he has lost his identity and also the meanings of certain traditions:

We [Jenny Salomea and Danny] went in and threw our champagne glasses in her huge fireplace, though neither of us could remember precisely what tradition that went with. (24)

and,

I don't know what's me. (41)

We fucked awhile, as Godwin would say. Or as Sally might say. Or Jenny. I don't know what I would have said. (48)

Without the past as a point of reference, Danny loses control

over the direction of his life and becomes susceptible to outside influences: "I felt as if I had suddenly become the puppet of remote but very powerful powers" (127).

The future proves to be as cut off from Danny as his past (one could assume that Danny's daughter represents, symbolically, his future, and Sally's parents' refusal to allow him to see his daughter is the decisive blow in his efforts to establish a vision). For Danny, the future promises a sense of completion, an ending, that will enable him to understand his life. Through his writing, Danny is able to achieve a conclusion, but he is unable to translate this ability into his own life:

We kept on screwing until I got sore, but somehow it didn't get us to where I wanted us to be. I just wanted us to be finished so that we were close to each other and not excited, and I couldn't make it happen. . . . I felt as though nothing in my life would ever be complete, not even for five minutes. (49)

Without the past as a point of reference, Danny is free to experiment with several new roles on the West Coast. The fog that greets Danny and Sally when they reach San Francisco parallels the fog that develops inside Danny as he isolates himself from the outside world and is alienated from Sally (a physical manifestation of this isolation is the parka that we are told Danny lives in). It is not long before the internal



fog works its way outward making Danny feel as if he no longer has any substance. This transformation occurs shortly after the news of Sally's pregnancy: "I began to feel like a ghost or a vapor, and to act like one as well. At first I didn't accept nonexistence" (95). Danny's feelings as well as his vocabulary changes once he has become a "ghost." Danny repeatedly tells us that he feels "abstract" and even the most physical and intimate of acts, sex, is described as "all too general" (116). Even Danny's ability to imagine other people's lives loses focus: "I imagined the New Americans, only I couldn't imagine what they might be doing" (126).

As a result of his encounters with the people he meets, Danny is provided with several models of how one may cultivate an identity. One such model is Leon O'Reilly, the Hollywood producer in charge of Danny's novel, who possesses a Harvard education, but in order to succeed in his line of work he has to conceal his background from others: "Nobody wants a movie producer to have a Harvard education . . . I've had to adapt" (131). His adaptation is possible because he surrounds himself with symbols of "ostentation" and "affectation," a twenty-two-pound rat, a private Jai Alai court, and a yellow Bentley are all images "to make the people in the industry feel like you're one of them" (131). The rat, however, holds a different meaning for Leon, because he has designated it as a symbol of the surrender of his

identity to what the world around him expects him to be. One senses that Leon is not truly happy "affecting affectations," but he does show some life when he takes Danny to a "vulgar" Hollywood restaurant that belongs to an earlier era. Leon explains that the restaurant is modeled after a set from one of De Mille's films; that it is, in fact, a place that reveals "life copying art," a theme that runs throughout the novel. Granzow notes that Danny is uncomfortable with "Hollywood's version of reality," and he feels that this new atmosphere is turning him into a "stranger" (251). Leon, too, is a stranger to the person his background reveals he should be, but he performs the role that is cast for him in order to survive in his world.

If Leon has surrendered his identity, Danny, ghost-like, also releases the last vestige of his past, his novel, when he accepts Leon's changes in the storyline because the novel is too simple for film (Granzow 251). Granzow asserts that Danny's acceptance of Leon's ideas, even though they "pervert every belief Danny holds dear," signals his loss of control over the version of his past (243). Granzow argues that the description of the novel suggests that the story is about Danny's region and its inhabitants (243). In the course of the meeting with Leon, Danny's story is taken away from him and changed into a version that Danny can "see, but at the same time [he does not] have any good son in [his] imagination" (136). Cut off from his past and any sense of

an identity, Danny becomes a choral character commenting on the people and events that surround him, but helpless to create a vision or story that will enable him to engage his world. Using Wallace Stegner's definition of the Western writer, Granzow argues that Danny, once he loses his identity, turns to outside sources for ideas for his second novel (243). The validation Danny received from Random House near the beginning of the novel is refuted by Leon's judgment that the story is too simple for movie audiences. As a result, Danny no longer feels that his inheritance is important enough to tell to a complex, urbanized audience:

I didn't want to tell the world about the sadness of Granny, as she sat in a flapping tent in the 1880s, listening to Grandpa count out skunk hides. I didn't want to tell it about the sadness of the Indians, as they sat watching the buffalo grunt out its last grunts. (213)

Rejecting the stories that he has inherited from his family and the region, Danny accepts Jill Peel's story about a baby bed with its "interlocking swirl of lovers and boyfriends and mistresses, ex-mistresses, wives, ex-wives" (142).

Not only does Jill provide Danny with a story for his second novel, but she also tries to teach him how to incorporate discipline and "standards" into his life as a writer (in Houston, Flap admires Danny for his discipline, but this trait disappears once he reaches San Francisco).

Jill is an illustrator (a creator of images) who has had her work praised by people in Hollywood, and has even won an Oscar for one of her projects. However, to be successful as an artist, Jill has had to sacrifice a life with her son, the man she loves, and any possibility of reaching intimacy with a man beyond talking and holding hands. Like Woodrow Call in Lonesome Dove, Jill believes that hard work and perseverance will lead to salvation. Jill's life is essentially empty (a space that Danny tries to fill), but her work ethic provides her with a code that enables her to endure, an ethic that she tries to teach Danny:

"I want you to have standards," she said. "I want you to keep them."

"But standards are empty," I said.

"So what!" she yelled. "Life isn't exactly gushing with fullness down here, either. That's no excuse for not living intelligently and having standards and eating well and working and keeping some order in your life. Emptiness is easier to bear if you have a little order in your life." (163-64)

However, Jill's "code" cannot provide the connection with emotions, intimacy, and "reality" that Danny wants. Jill tries to provide Danny with what he wants, but sex is merely a perfunctory act for her, not one of love but of a sense that she must be fair to him. Jill realizes that her relationship with Danny is not good for him ("I don't want to

repress you out of existence" [159]), and leaves San Francisco for her home in Hollywood. Danny senses that he has an opportunity with Jill to reconcile his two worlds, but her code prevents her from crossing the border into the world that Danny wants to create.

There are, of course, other models of how one may live as an artist. Danny's neighbor, Wu, is one such model. Danny and Wu are in similar situations because Danny is an exile from Texas and Wu is an exile from China who has made writing about his homeland his life's work. The novel is an extremely large work (eighteen hundred pages in length) that sits on the shelves gathering dust as Wu works on adding more chapters to his story. One senses that Wu's novel will never be published, but that does not stop him from writing about the social and economic conditions of his country. Wu is a model of the artist as a recluse who removes himself from the company of society in order to write about its problems and create a solution to the diseased condition that he perceives in human life. Even if Wu discovers the secret of his country, he lacks the skills needed to lead people out of their conditions. Wu speaks of physical borders that prevent him from returning to his country, but one senses that there are spiritual borders present also. Wu made a successful transition across his own spiritual borders to become a writer in America, but he is unable to recross that border to return home. Danny is still in the midst of crossing that

border, and Wu's condition is a foreshadowing of what may have happened to Danny if he continued to write in San Francisco.

Danny's quest for an identity promises to make him feel solid again, but all of the roles that he assumes fail to lead him through the crisis that he feels in his life. Danny does not restrict his search for an identity to artists, but to other lifestyles as well. The New Americans exhibit an unusual "hippy" lifestyle that Danny is attracted to, but when a female resident invites him to take a shower, his Westerner's modesty prevents him from feeling comfortable: "Apparently there were bourgeois shackles I still hadn't shaken off" (123). Danny can accept The New Americans and their way of life, but he cannot imagine what they might do for the rest of their lives (in a sense, he cannot imagine a future for this group).

Even when Danny turns to the images and myths of the violent West in his confrontation with Geoffrey, Godwin's lover, he says he "suddenly felt sick. I could never be good at violence" (210). Danny's "pure" vision of the Old West is shattered when he visits his Uncle Laredo at his ranch, The Hacienda of the Bitter Waters. As its name suggests, the ranch is a hard place on which to live; it is neither the ranch of Homer Bannon nor the serene ranch of Roger Wagonner in Moving On, but a place in which Uncle Laredo punches holes in the earth to seek some kind of vengeance, a lusty Mexican

(whom Uncle Laredo calls "Pierre") copulates with cars, animals, and even the land, and a place in which Nature refuses to nurture the inhabitants: "everything on the ranch seemed to be starving" (181). The ranch itself seems to be a metaphor for the question the novel asks: "Who are we, as Americans, and what have we inherited?" The ranch, built by an English architect, is a "bitter, demented parody of everything Victorian, with marble bathtubs, all half full of sand, and quarters below ground for three cooks, two valets, and a laundress" (183). Besides revealing an English Victorian heritage, a Muslim praying tower is attached to the side of the house. Immediately, Danny realizes that this is a symbol that Leon O'Reilly would want to purchase, because it seems that Leon would appreciate it for its eccentricities and its value as a symbol for people's dilemma in searching for an identity.

Danny visits his Uncle Laredo because he senses that there may be something of the mythic West remaining on his ranch. Earlier in the novel, we are told that Danny keeps a photograph of his Uncle Laredo astride his favorite horse, El Caballo, on a shelf by his bed. This is the mythic image of the horseman that Danny likes to believe conveys a real sense of the Old West. Foreshadowing the shattering of Danny's perceptions of his uncle, the picture falls off the shelf when Mr. Fitzherbert bangs his car door against the wall of Danny's apartment, fracturing the image of his uncle. Kerry

Ahearn argues that Uncle Laredo is an anachronism living in the twentieth century because he ignores the present, preferring instead to look to the past when he rode with Zapata (224). Janis Stout notes that Uncle Laredo is "cut off from the moral [and] the ranching past" (63). Even though Uncle Laredo is "a mockery of all the qualities that made Homer Bannon a hero to his grandson," he still possesses a stronger sense of identity than Danny (Ahearn 224). It is that sense of self-assurance that Danny wants to possess, but he realizes that he will not find it at Uncle Laredo's ranch: "The Hacienda of the Bitter Waters wasn't the Old West that I liked to believe in--it was the bitter end of something. I knew I would never want to visit it again" (199).

Danny may not want to visit Uncle Laredo's version of the Old West, but it seems that he does want to live, like Woodrow Call, the "pure" myth, the adventure of the frontier. As Danny leaves the ranch, he names his car "El Chevy," a modern equivalent of Uncle Laredo's horse, El Caballo, and decides to return to his home with a vision of the myth that he likes to believe in. Danny no longer wants to dramatize the mythology of the Old West, but he wants to return to his home "like Zapata--after so many years in the hills the sight of me would strike terror into my foe" (201). Danny has learned, like Leon, how to surround himself with symbols that convey a sense of an identity. Grasping on to the symbols of an idealized past, Danny believes he has a sense of the



future ("I would call it El Chevy and bury it someday beneath a cairn of rocks, preferably on the banks of the Rio Grande" [201]), and prepares himself for a destination that promises a battle.

The battle Danny must face involves his struggle to see his daughter. Danny does not know what it means to be a father, but he senses that this is a role that promises contact with what is real, and that it will force him to accept responsibilities and interact, not only with his daughter, but with others as well. However, after Danny's physical encounter with Geoffrey, Danny is unwilling, as well as unprepared, to physically confront Sally's parents in order to see his daughter. After all of his yearning for the active life and the outbursts of violence that Danny experiences throughout the novel (such as shoving Sally into the shower, shoving Geoffrey off the balcony, and hitting Razy Hutton, a professor at Rice University), Danny resorts to the only weapons that he truly knows: words. Sally's father, a Westerner who prefers to let his fists do his talking for him, hits Danny several times before Danny lashes out with a barrage of vulgarities. Shocked by this outburst of words, Sally's parents do not know how to react. Danny seems to gain strength from the words, and they have an almost magical effect on Sally's parents as they retreat from his verbal onslaught: "'Nipple nipple nipple nipple,' I said. I was chanting. I was getting louder. They looked scared.

I had them backing up" (235). Granzow argues, however, that it is only a superficial victory for Danny, because he betrays his own values by resorting to words to defend himself instead of doing "the Western thing" (255). Like a Western writer who relies on details of the land to give his art a sense of "place" and realism, Danny needs to see his daughter in order to imagine what life might be like with her: "I couldn't imagine the baby as my daughter. . . . If I could see her I might have more of an idea what to do" (236). However, he is prevented from seeing his daughter, and, as a result, the future is cut off from him. Danny realizes after his reliance on words to do battle with Sally's parents that the mythic West no longer holds the promise of a life-sustaining vision.

Ironically, in his quest to live out the myth and retain his identity as a writer, he loses both but he does inherit the stereotypical cowboy's silence (like Woodrow Call in Lonesome Dove who is unable to articulate his needs and desires or give Newt his name). Danny's inability to communicate with his friends signals that he has finally severed all ties with the outside world: "I was totally cut apart from people" (238). Lacking the possibility of words as a form of salvation, Danny leaves Houston without plans for the future or a destination. After a violent run-in with the Texas Rangers and an unsuccessful encounter with a Mexican whore ( a situation in which there are clearly

defined roles, whore and customer, but roles that Danny tries to reinvent when he asks her to return to America with him), Danny drives to Roma, Texas, the town in which the movie Zapata was filmed and in which an ex-actor lives. Along the way, Danny gives his car, El Chevy, to an old couple whom he had found walking along the road. Granzow argues that this gesture, as well as the gift of his first novel to Wu, signals Danny's conscious severing of the symbolic ties to his old life and the life of a writer (255).

What Danny finds in Roma is not the salvation he has been looking for, but Peter Paul, an ex-actor, who attempts to provide Danny with advice that will provide some comfort, but Danny says he needs a friend, not a sage. This sage, however, has only his life experiences to inform his opinions, because Danny senses, as Peter Paul looks at the manuscript of Danny's novels, that he does not think he "read much" (277). One expects a writer to be a sage, or to look within for the answers to problems, but Danny throughout the novel is like an Odysseus searching for guides to provide him with the answers he seeks. Similar to Odysseus' travels to the underworld to seek guidance from the dead, Danny, too, looks to the past listening for the voices of Old Man Goodnight or Granny Deck to tell him what to do, but the dead never appear. As Danny listens to the advice of Peter Paul, he realizes that he has failed to look within himself for the vision that is lacking in his life. He realizes actors

and their movies, as well as his novel, cannot provide reality, only the shadow of what is real. Raymond Neinstein argues that Danny's immersion in the river suggests his struggle to "court the destructive element" (295). However, Danny cannot escape the images and symbols that have contributed to his "ghost-like" condition. Danny's only connection to his past is through writing, but he discovers that it is not a satisfying connection:

I looked at my pages under the flashlight. They looked odd. Pages. Words. Black marks on paper. They didn't have eyes, or bodies. They weren't people. I didn't know why I put marks on paper. It was a dull thing to do. There must be livelier things to do. . . . The marks didn't have faces, and I had forgotten the faces that had been in my mind when I wrote them. . . . Looking at my novel by flashlight made me unhappy. (278)

Danny is slowly entering "Hollywood's version of reality" once again. The artificial light of the flashlight suggests the light of a movie projector, and Danny, increasingly, refers to images that flicker in his mind like the movement of film across a light source. Danny is no longer in the reality of the sun, such as when he shot the squirrel out of the tree. Neinstein argues that Danny "can only find literary, cinematic, and historical analogues to his situation, only a series of comparisons to other books,

films, other texts" (295).

It seems fitting that Danny disappears at the end of the novel, because throughout the story he changes into a ghost, an image of a writer searching for a vision. It also seems fitting that Danny reappears in Some Can Whistle as a retired screenwriter. In that novel, Danny is just as cut off from everyone as he is in All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers, because he talks to people's answering machines and lives in a house that is isolated from civilization. In Some Can Whistle, Danny is introduced to his daughter, Tyler Rose, who tries to save him from his lonely existence, but she is killed before she can drag him out of his ghost-like existence.

The artist as screenwriter seems to be the only solution for the writer looking for a form that can convey his message to an audience. It seems that McMurtry senses that most Americans are not only cut off from their cultural roots, but also from a literary past. If the artist does create a vision, chances are that the message will not reach a society enamored with images that flicker across a screen. It may be that there is no chance to recapture the "reality" that the frontiersman once possessed, and, in effect, people have turned to dramatizations of this reality as a substitute for living in and coping with the world. In In a Narrow Grave, McMurtry states that Texas "may be a kid brother to California," and it may be that the West prefers to surround

itself with symbols and myths of the past that result in a society that is concerned with appearances and a love for the dramatic. It seems that McMurtry senses people have surrendered their identities for dramatic "roles" that they can adopt for certain situations. McMurtry presents us with a world that is comfortable with the notion of life copying art.

## CHAPTER 4

### IRRESOLUTION: LIVING WITHIN BORDERLANDS

**“. . . everything he had believed  
was false. And he was suddenly  
in the 20th century, in the sunlight  
and violence of history, encumbered  
by knowledge. Only a hero  
would dare return with the truth.”  
--Stephen Dunn,  
“Allegory of the Cave (1990)”**

In his collection of essays about Texas, Larry McMurtry comments that a “writer’s life-work” should possess “scope, continuity, and coherence” (ING 39). Tracing the sequence of novels McMurtry has published since Horseman, Pass By, it seems he has ignored his own esthetic, choosing instead to jump around in time and space for the setting of his stories. This is the case, however, only if the novels are arranged linearly according to their dates of publication; if the novels are grouped according to their settings it appears McMurtry has adhered to his esthetic by writing about the history of the American West from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the 1980s. McMurtry’s canon achieves scope, continuity, and coherence through his examination of the ties between the past and the present; however, he could not have achieved his esthetic without Texasville, the sequel to The Last Picture Show.

McMurtry’s return to Thalia, a fictional world he inhabited during his early years as a writer, enables him to examine how his characters have resolved (or to discover if

they have resolved) their inability to create a vision to replace the nineteenth-century frontier ethos. In the "Thalia Trilogy," McMurtry establishes the challenges that a future generation must face as a result of the death of the frontier. Both Lonnie Bannon and Sonny Crawford seem to be the choral characters in their respective novels who observe and comment on the changes taking place around them but they are unable to say or do anything to prevent the loss of a past way of life, a life that seems to be embodied by Homer Bannon and Sam the Lion, both of whom die leaving the boys without a definite connection to the values, traditions, and rituals of the past. As mentioned previously in this thesis, the images and ideas found in movies and country-and-western music reside on the margins of the characters' lives in the Thalia Trilogy, making their presence felt just enough to inhibit Sonny's and Lonnie's ability to create a vision for themselves. In Texasville, however, films, songs, magazines, and television shows pervade the characters' lives making it nearly impossible to escape their influences, and, as a result, the characters possess lenses through which they interpret and order their experiences according to what they have seen or heard in movies, song lyrics, and television programs (an analogy may be useful here: in a sense the characters have been conditioned to see their world as if it is on a frame of film or part of a music lyric). For example, in Texasville Duane Moore watches as his son and



Suzie Nolan share an intimate moment on the shore of a lake. Duane views this scene through a lens that has been shaped by his world that is pervaded with television, movies, videos, and satellite dishes:

Suzie, smiling in the motorboat, played over and over again, like a few frames from a film, in waking and sleeping dreams throughout his life. . . . It was to become his image of what love was-- images from his own experience quickly blurred by comparison. (493)

In Lonesome Dove, McMurtry uses the idiom of the Western genre in an attempt to examine the nature of the symbols, images, and myths people in the twentieth century have inherited. The form and style of Texasville reveal that McMurtry has found the idiom of the traditional Western has changed slightly, reflecting the condition of his characters' lives who lack a knowledge of their cultural and literary heritage (McMurtry's characters now have their roots in the images and symbols of films, songs, and television, which may well be an artificial heritage). I realize it is premature to make judgments about a writer whose career has not ended (during the composition of this thesis McMurtry published yet another novel, Pretty Boy Floyd), but one can make some assumptions about the course of his career based on the large number of works he has published.

Like Danny Deck and Woodrow Call who return home after

their journeys, McMurtry, too, has come "home" to examine what has happened to the town and its inhabitants since he bid farewell to it in The Last Picture Show. What one discovers is that the seemingly impossible has happened: life in Thalia has worsened. The financial, moral, and emotional tensions that resonate just beneath the town's and the characters' appearances in The Last Picture Show have finally broken through to the surface in Texasville: adulterous acts are committed at intersections, friends sleep with each other's wives without trying to conceal the affair (unbelievably, Duane and his son are sleeping with the same woman), and guns are fired at dog houses, houses, and human beings. As Jan Reid points out in "The Next Picture Show," the novel's plot is fairly simple: in an effort to forget about their economic, social, and marital misfortunes, the residents of Thalia prepare to celebrate their county's centennial with week-long festivities that include a pageant that traces Hardtop County's history from the Biblical account of creation--[some] felt that just to leave out several million years left the town open to charges of superficiality" (105)--to the oil boom that the town had experienced prior to the depression.

McMurtry wastes little time in recounting the events of his characters' lives since their graduation from high school. Duane has made the transition from roughneck to oilman, making millions of dollars from his oil business.

However, an oil glut catches him with a twelve-million-dollar debt and total assets of eight hundred and fifty dollars, leaving him to drive aimlessly around the town searching for something that will take his mind off his problems. Even though the bank threatens to call his notes, Duane and his family spend their money extravagantly on such items as frontier-style dog houses, bermuda grass (which refuses to grow in the arid landscape of Thalia), automobiles (that last less than a week on the dirt roads leading to the Moore's home), and videos (Karla buys four thousand dollars worth of videos on one shopping spree). Duane lives in an extremely large house (twelve thousand square feet), isolated from the turbulent social conditions in Thalia, with his wife, Karla, and their four children and two grandchildren all of whom, we are told, have "personalities like wild dogs, but at least they're good-looking" (11).

Sonny, Thalia's mayor, has survived over the years, owning and operating a hotel, video arcade, and convenience store. Run-ins with Duane over Jacy and with Coach Popper over his wife have left Sonny with one eye and one good arm. Not only is Sonny physically damaged but he is emotionally crippled as well. Since the end of his affair with Ruth Popper, he has isolated himself from the rest of the town and, it seems, even himself. Sonny, who is still haunted by the past, occasionally slips into his memories of his high school years, and, at times, sits in the ruins of the picture

show reviewing old movies in his head. Essentially, Sonny has become the image of Sam the Lion, watching after the local children and operating a modern equivalent of the pool hall, a video arcade. However, Sonny lacks the fullness of Sam the Lion's experiences, and, as a result, he almost seems to be ghost-like in the story. In The Last Picture Show, Sonny is a choral character who observes the conditions of his town, but in Texasville his powers of observation have turned to reviewing scenes from his past. McMurtry has stated that Billy's blindness in The Last Picture Show represents the sightlessness of life in a small town, and, it seems, the same may be said of Sonny with his one eye, which suggests that neither he nor the inhabitants of Thalia possess a full vision of the past, present, and future.

One of the figures from both Sonny's and Duane's past, Jacy, returns to Thalia seeking solitude and time to heal after the death of her son in an accident on the set of one of her movies. Louise Erdrich notes that Jacy is no longer a "budding monster of self-absorption," but that she has changed into a vacant woman (339). Curiously, McMurtry does not spend much time with Jacy's character, preferring instead to follow Duane as he wanders about the town. Information about Jacy is filtered through vague rumors and gossip, but one's knowledge of this "B" movie star is as insubstantial as the rumors. Jacy's morning swims across the lake indicate, though, that she is searching for a way to heal the loss she

has suffered because water in McMurtry's novels, usually, symbolizes revitalization or a baptism into a new life (Jacy's loss seems to involve a connection with the future that she possessed with her son, but his death severed that link). Duane, on the other hand, prefers to sit on top of the water drifting without an anchor (yet another metaphor for the condition of the characters' lives). When Duane and Jacy are reunited in the novel, she appears from beneath the water's surface like a dream from his past. Although Jacy does not recognize Duane at first, he recognizes her but is a little disappointed that the reality of the situation does not match his dreams: "Though amply good-looking, she was no longer the supreme beauty of his fantasy, and he felt silly for having held it so long" (141). Appearance versus reality is a theme that runs throughout McMurtry's novel, and it seems that his characters, realizing that reality will inevitably smash their dreams, prefer the fantasy of films and romantic ideas about the past because they are seldom fractured.

Critics have not been kind to McMurtry's sequel. The lack of criticism concerning Texasville is as much a commentary about readers' reception of the novel as anything that has been written about it thus far. Those critics who have chosen to write about the novel either have limited their comments to the space allotted a book review or have briefly mentioned it in an article devoted to one of

McMurtry's other novels. The criticisms are various: Erdrich complains that McMurtry's story lacks the "leisurely, lyrical character development, description and complexity that distinguished [The Last Picture Show]" (338); Reid argues that the novel does not have much of a story and that the events in Texasville are too improbable for a reader to believe (337); and Robert Adams, in his essay about Lonesome Dove, almost sounds dejected when he notes that McMurtry, instead of following his Pulitzer-prize winner with another Western, attempts "to break new ground" with a story about contemporary Texans (309).

Their complaints are understandable. Compared to McMurtry's earlier novels, especially the Thalia Trilogy, Texasville seems to be a poorly written story because the chapters are arbitrarily divided from each other, scenes last for several chapters, descriptions of the landscape and characters are sparse, and, as Erdrich points out, the novel "often reads like a movie script, all dialogue and situation" (338). However, it may be a disservice to a reading of the novel if judgments are based solely on comparisons with McMurtry's earlier works. McMurtry's comments about his writing may prove useful in approaching Texasville:

Prose, I believe, must accord with the land. The forests of East Texas reach to Yoknapatawpha-- someone like William Humphrey can get away with the Faulknerian density. For the West, it doesn't

work. A viny, tangled prose would never do for a place so open; a place, to use Ross Calvin's phrase, where the sky determines so much. A lyricism appropriate to the Southwest needs to be as clean as a bleached bone and as well-spaced as trees on the llano. The elements still dominate here, and a spare, elemental language, with now and then a touch of elegance, will suffice. (ING 18)

McMurtry's comments reveal that he is concerned with matching his prose with his subject matter. It seems then that both Horseman, Pass By and Leaving Cheyenne require an elegiac tone, lyrical prose, and formal structure, because they are, after all, novels about the passing of a way of life that possessed a rigid code, colorful characters, and a connection with the rhythms of Nature that appeals to many people living in an industrialized world. In Moving On, McMurtry attempts to move beyond the borders of the fictional world that defines his prose, and, as a result, the structure and style of the novel reflect McMurtry's search, as well as that of his characters, for a new vision. In Lonesome Dove McMurtry relies on the tradition of the "cowboy romance-adventure story" to give it that feel of the Western (Adams 309). Many critics applauded McMurtry's return to the Old West because it seemed to give him a stronger voice and a well-written story. These characteristics may arise from the fact that McMurtry writes about a period with a definite code of

conduct, an era inhabited by characters who are confident of their actions and direction in life. The same cannot be said for the world in Texasville.

McMurtry's novel about a town's celebration of its centennial reflects a world that has lost touch with its past as well as the future. The inhabitants of this world dream their way through life grasping at anything that looks as if it might provide a center for their rootless world. As mentioned earlier, the form and style of McMurtry's novel reveals that not only has he found an idiom that reflects the condition of his characters' lives but that he has found a way for the artist to communicate to an audience unsure of its cultural and literary past. In In a Narrow Grave, McMurtry comments that he believes "the new Texas is probably going to be a sort of kid brother to California, with a kid brother's tendency to imitation" (xxi). In Texasville, the new Texas has taken root with its love for the dramatic, its reliance on appearances to reveal "truth," and people's ability to communicate with each other only through references to songs, movies, and television programs. Erdrich is correct in her observations that the novel "reads like a movie script" because the characters receive their ideas and gain a sense of an identity from movies, as well as television shows, song lyrics, and magazine articles. Karla calls Sonny, Luke, because he reminds her of a Hank Williams song with the title "Luke the Drifter." Not only does she



associate people with songs and movies, but many of her ideas derive from lyrics: "She had thirty or forty T-shirts with lines from hillbilly songs printed on them. Every time she heard a lyric which seemed to her to express an important truth, she had a T-shirt printed" (11). Not only do the characters receive their ideas from films but they also model their lives after those of movie stars. Nellie, Duane's and Karla's daughter, competes with Elizabeth Taylor in terms of the number of times both of them have been married, and the twins wear mirrored sunglasses similar to the kind worn by movie stars. At one point in the novel, Jacy tells Duane's children "[a]ll you kids could be movie stars. . . . I've never seen a better-looking bunch of kids, and I have beautiful kids myself" (164). As Lester Marlow tells his girlfriend, ". . . everything's just images, these days . . . a good PR person can show things in a positive light" (227).

The relative ease in which movies, songs, and television shows enter McMurry's characters' lives arises from the fact that there are no guides to instruct a future generation in the traditions and rituals of the past. Without these guides, McMurry's characters turn to movie stars, television shows, and songs to provide themselves with "models and methods" to help them survive in the world. D. Gene England argues that one usually needs a guide in order to discover his or her role within a culture (42). England explains that characters such as Sam the Lion and Homer

Bannon function as Wise Elders in McMurtry's fiction, and it is their responsibility to instruct the initiate in the values, traditions, and rituals of the culture (44). Erich Neumann clarifies the importance of the male's function in the rites of passage:

These fathers are the guardians of masculinity and the supervisors of all education. That is to say, their existence is not merely symbolical: as pillars of the institutions that embody the cultural canon, they preside over the upbringing of each individual and certify his coming of age. . . . Always the fathers see to it that the current values are impressed upon the young people, and that only those who have identified themselves with those values are included among the adults.

(qtd. in England)

However, what one discovers in McMurtry's fiction is that it is not easy passing on this information. In Leaving Cheyenne, the advice Gideon Fry gives to his son reveals the difficulty in expressing through words how one should live: "Fight it. Fight the hell out of it" (27). In Lonesome Dove, Call is able to pass on the symbols of his code, but he is unable to instruct Newt in the meanings behind the rifle, the watch, and the horse. As a result, Newt possesses the symbols of his past, but he is unaware of the values, traditions, and rituals that accompany them. At the end of

The Last Picture Show, Sonny returns to Ruth seeking comfort, and she feels she must pass on some of her knowledge to him, but she, too, lacks the ability to articulate the knowledge gained from her experiences:

She was on the verge of speaking to him, of saying something fine. It seemed to her that on the tip of her tongue was something it had taken her forty years to learn, something wise or beautiful that she could finally say. It would be just what Sonny needed to know about life, and she would have said it if her own relief had not been so strong.

(219-220)

Lacking the instructions of his father, Duane feels he must give advice to his son about life, but he, too, is unsure of what should be passed on:

What bothered Duane was a sense that he had never managed to give his son a clear sense of what people ought to be, of how life ought to be ordered or even of what to expect of it. He himself had proceeded into adulthood without such a sense, but his father had had no time to influence him, and his mother was too bewildered to try. (93)

The inability of the characters to express their hopes, dreams, desires, frustrations, and pains through language manifests itself through howling at the restaurant named for this phenomenon, Howlers. We are told that "[t]he howling

could be started by any patron who happened to be feeling good--or bad--enough to howl like a hound" (286). This is one of the outlets the characters have for expressing themselves, but it is clearly not enough.

If the characters lack the skills to articulate their dreams and desires, they also lack the ability to create their own ideas independent of the messages sent in to Thalia from the outside world. Erdrich notes that "[n]obody in Thalia has ideas, or even warmed-through opinions" (340). The characters seem content to borrow the ideas or concepts that can be found in song lyrics and magazine articles. Karla reads about open marriages in Cosmo and decides that this is something that she and Duane should try (Texasville 44). Bobby Lee, one of Duane's oil-field workers, derives his wit from watching Saturday Night Live. Clearly, these outside sources inhibit the characters' ability to seek their own solutions and to find their identity. In a sense, the contemplative life that is present in McMurtry's previous novels has disappeared in Texasville. Sensing the destructiveness of these outside sources, Duane drives his car over Karla's collection of Willie Nelson tapes, destroying all but a few. In what seems to be a foreshadowing of this scene, Karla exchanges her T-shirts with mottos for blank, black T-shirts, an indication that she has released even the little bit of vision that was provided in music lyrics. It may be that this is what one needs to do

to create a life-sustaining vision (in All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers, Godwin states that someone must "court the destructive element," and Karla's immersion into the world without a code suggests this).

Without a definite knowledge of the past, McMurtry's characters' development as human beings in Texasville has remained static. The irony is that even though many of the characters still possess an adolescent mentality, their bodies have continued to age. Conversations in the local Dairy Queen revolve around adolescent issues of women and sex and if they want it more than men, and plans to bomb OPEC because they seem to be responsible for the economic depression in Thalia. Also, the characters seem to possess an adolescent mentality in their experiments with sex. During Duane's sexual encounter with Suzy Nolan, she asks him to put his big toe inside her "[to] see if it feels interesting" (337).

One of the rare literary allusions that appears in both The Last Picture Show and Texasville is to Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The urn in Keats's poem seems to reflect the condition of life in Thalia. The urn contains scenes of a life filled with passion, "wild ecstasy," and fair youths and maidens who, frozen in time, will never attain a sense of completion. One senses they will always be striving after some unattainable goal of happiness or perfection. The same may be said of the frozen or static characters in

Texasville who are stuck in the transition between two worlds. In a sense, they live on a border, lacking a sense of an identity and the skills to cross over into the next stage of life. This movement into a new world promises a sense of completion or the possibility of attaining perfection. Ruth Popper seems to be able to voice the condition of the borderland the characters inhabit: "Times aren't normal or abnormal . . . Times are neutral" (152).

Like Homer Bannon who attempts to track down the cause of his herd's disease, Duane senses that an examination of the past will enable him to find the cause of his problems and that, in turn, may lead to the creation of a solution. Duane may not have a diseased herd but he does have children who exhibit reckless natures and amoral behavior. In an attempt to discover the cause of his children's behavior Duane purchases two books about genetics:

The longer he contemplated the children, the more he wondered about genes. He bought two books about genes and tried to understand how they worked, but the more he tried to apply what he read to his children the more puzzled he grew. (94)

The answer may lie in the past, but it seems that Duane looks in the wrong place.

The pageant seems to be the town's efforts to examine its past, but, like Duane, the organizers of the event look to the wrong places for a sense of their heritage. The

pageant includes skits concerning the Garden of Eden (an origin), the Boston Tea Party, and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The pageant does include a few skits relating the history of Hardtop County, however, the town's oldest citizen (the organizers' connection with their past) cannot remember Thalia's history:

Two decades of what Minerva called the little rays had obliterated all traces of the county's history from the old man's mind. . . . It was as if, mentally, he was still tuned in to a game show.

(105)

At first, the town council votes to hire an outsider to direct the pageant, an act that is similar to Danny Deck's surrender of his novel to the changes a Hollywood producer wants to make in Danny's version of his heritage. However, the director catches a cold and is unable to speak during his visit in Thalia (notice how people within the town's borders are unable to communicate), and, as a result, the town council elects one of Thalia's residents to direct the pageant. The pageant has all the makings of Hollywood's version of reality; it includes gun fights, battles of the colonials' revolution, a scantily clad Duane and Jacy, and a revision of the outcome of the fight at the Alamo. The pageant may be an attempt to recapture a knowledge of the past, but in reality it merely shows the characters' lack of knowledge about their heritage and their reliance on outside

sources for their identity; "the real walking-tall-and-looking-proud, dressing-up-in-cowboy-suits-and-aping-movie-stars-aping-cowboys thing" (Flynn 300).

As with his previous novels, McMurtry uses a group of three to examine the fragmentation that has occurred in his characters' lives. Sonny, Duane, and Jacy seem to be manifestations of the past, present, and future. Duane is immersed in his present and is unable to recall events in his past (as is suggested by his inability to remember Sam the Lion and Billy). Duane's connection with the present enables him to see the unhealthy existence many of the townspeople lead, but he is unable to look to the past for the cause of the problems or to the future for a possible solution. Because Duane is stuck in the middle, he often cannot "tell whether he [is] going forward or backward" (30). McMurtry's characters have two options once they enter their spiritual borderlands; they may either stay within this nebulous existence looking for a connection, a bridge, to aid them in crossing over into a new stage, or they may turn away from the "destructive element" and try to recapture a lost paradise. Sonny chooses the second option. Sonny's vision is oriented toward the past, and by the end of the novel he "lives" in his memories of his youth. It is Sonny who realizes the value of the past and the town's inability to portray it accurately in the pageant:

"You don't care about the past. But I care about



it. I started to think about it, and now I can't stop. I thought the centennial would really be about the past, but it isn't. It's just a gimmick to get people to come here and buy souvenirs. It doesn't have anything to do with the real past."

(452)

Sonny, however, is unable to remove himself from the past to live in the present, even going so far as to drive into the bedroom of a house that used to be Ruth Popper's garage. If Duane lives in the present and Sonny lives in the past, Jacy seems to be the one character capable of looking to the future. She is also the one character who has been able to escape the borders of Thalia to explore the world. It is her life's experiences that enable her to see that there is a future beyond the border's of the town, and it is that possibility of life in Europe that she promises to Duane's family.

However, the connections between the three are not established. Sonny refuses to look at Jacy because he "wants [her] in the golden past, and if [she] hangs around reading magazines too long and he has to contemplate the present [Jacy], it fucks up his fantasy or something" (422). Duane is unable to transcend the limitations of his present problems, and he is unwilling to plan for the future because that did not help him when he purchased his oil rigs: "Before they were even completed [the rigs], the wave of the future

knocked him right off the surfboard, along with plenty of other surfers" (31).

Because the characters are unable to make these connections, they are, like the Human Fly stuck between the second and third floors of the courthouse, unable to move forward and unsure of how to return to the point where they began. There is a solution for the characters who are in this predicament, but it seems that McMurtry believes this is not a healthy solution for his characters. It does not seem that his characters want the actuality of the Old West (or a nostalgic past) but the representation of that past that they perceive in movies, songs, and television shows. It seems that McMurtry's characters are looking for a way to intermingle fact and fiction. In Buffalo Girls, Buffalo Bill Cody is able to mix the adventures of his youth with his Wild West Show, a combination of fact and fiction. In Lonesome Dove, Woodrow Call wants to live the life of adventure again, but his image of his past borders on fiction instead of fact. In All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers, Danny Deck is able to dramatize the mythology of the Old West, but he is unable to live that life successfully because there are consequences to his actions (there are consequences to Call's actions also because he leads men away from their homes and abandons them on the untamed frontier of Montana to survive on their own). The pageant in Texasville is another form in which the residents of Thalia may assume roles and act (live)

a representation of what is considered to be fact. Sonny's attempt to intermingle with the movie he watches "on the great silver screen of the dawn" almost kills him. It is interesting to note how McMurtry handles Sonny's movement from spectator to actor to fictional character:

He was watching Rio Bravo. The great gun battle at the end would soon begin. An exchange of prisoners was about to take place. He saw Dean Martin step into the dusty wagon yard, blinking in the bright sunlight. He saw Dean Martin, he was Dean Martin. He was Dude. (538)

The sense of a beginning, middle, and end can be achieved in a work of fiction, but it does not seem possible in a world that lacks a knowledge of the past as well as a vision for the future. Sonny's vision is really no vision at all. Jacy seems to sense that conclusions, and people's desire for a sense of an ending, contributes to people's inability to adapt to changes in the landscape. It may be that the vision one needs to survive in this world is simply a knowledge of where one has been and that the future promises just as many uncertainties as life in the past once held for the people in that era:

"You males like to get things settled, don't you?" Jacy said. "You're anxious for conclusions--nice firm ones that will last forever. I keep Karla. I lose Karla. No gray areas, no uncertainty." (444)

It seems McMurtry himself has adopted Jacy's philosophy about conclusions, because he refuses to give his novel a sense of an ending that one expects from a work of fiction. At the end of the novel, nothing is resolved between Duane and Karla and one is not sure about the fates of the rest of the characters. The fact there are only 98 chapters in a novel about a town's centennial celebration suggests there is no vision to provide either the characters in the novel or McMurtry himself with a sense of an ending. It may be that the search continues for the vision that can supply chapters 99 and 100. Maybe Lonnie is still wandering around America gathering strength and knowledge to return to his home with a vision that will provide those last two chapters, but one senses that the odds against him may be too great.

It seems the characters' lack of a vision parallels McMurtry's own sense that he has returned to Thalia without a vision or a code that will enable his characters to find some meaning in their lives. McMurtry wrote Texasville after his exploration of the nineteenth-century frontier ethos in Lonesome Dove and one senses he may have felt ready to return to Thalia with the knowledge he had gained from writing about the mythic West. However, unlike the hero who returns from a journey to revitalize the land, McMurtry steps into Thalia in the middle of the 1980s seemingly as confused as his characters about the condition of life. The strong voice McMurtry has in Lonesome Dove breaks down in

Texasville, and so, too, does the novel's structure. It seems that McMurtry concedes that he is unable to "make the strands [he] worked with lay easily or neatly together" (ING 141). As a result, the novel that signals his return to Thalia also signals his inability to tie the strands of his novels together. It may be that McMurtry will not be able to bring those threads together until he finds or creates the vision that he has been searching for as a writer.

## II

Like McMurtry, I, too, may not have much talent for braiding because the strands of this thesis do not appear to lay perfectly flat. But it may be that McMurtry's novels do not lend themselves to nicely ordered conclusions. There is a progression from Horseman, Pass By, the novel in which McMurtry sets forth the dilemma his characters face, to the lack of a vision in Texasville, but it is not an orderly, clear-cut movement. As mentioned previously, Chapter 1 examines Horseman, Pass By and the nature of the conflict that the characters face as the last of the values, traditions, and rituals of the nineteenth century vanish from the twentieth-century landscape. Chapter 2 examines Lonesome Dove and McMurtry's attempts to provide the necessary exposition to understand the nature of the loss the characters face in the urban novels and also to see the connections between the past and the present (in other words,

to see what the twentieth-century westerner has inherited from the nineteenth century frontier ethos). In the third chapter, Danny Deck's attempts, in All My Friends Are Going to Be Strangers, to dramatize the mythology of the Old West parallels McMurtry's attempts to do the same in novels such as Anything for Billy, Buffalo Girls, and Streets of Laredo. However, the fiction is not enough for the westerner who craves the reality of the sun's light and the adventure of matching one's self against physical threats such as a Mexican bandit or the land itself, because it seems to be an inferior existence, living the life of the mind, in comparison with the life of action that is perceived to be part and parcel of life on the nineteenth-century frontier. It is this inability to let go of the nostalgic past that seems to contribute to the characters' conditions in Texasville. Without a vision, the characters face an uncertain future that promises even more change in their lives. The changes may promise a better life, but the characters' experiences have taught them that change is usually for the worse. Maybe this is why the characters long to escape into the movies, to see their lives as part of an ordered whole that a vision or code can provide.

After writing Texasville, McMurtry retreated to the relative safety of the Old West. It may be that he had hoped to build upon the knowledge he had gained from Lonesome Dove in order to return to Thalia one more time, this time with

Lonnie Bannon, to revitalize the ranch and the surrounding countryside. Or, it may be that McMurtry is unable to write his way out of the borderlands, and prefers instead to return to a time that he is more comfortable with as a writer. Whatever the case, it is clear that McMurtry is still exploring the nature of the world in which he lives. During the composition of this thesis, he co-authored a novel, Pretty Boy Floyd, in which he adds yet another attempt to tie the past and the present together.

In the foreword to In a Narrow Grave, McMurtry quotes a passage from Cannibals and Christians in which Norman Mailer makes a distinction between two kinds of writers. Mailer believes that the first kind of writer tries to fit separate pieces into a whole, but they never quite belong together. The second kind, Mailer continues, creates writings that "are parts of a continuing and more or less comprehensive vision of existence into which everything must fit" (qtd in ING xv). It seems that McMurtry's novels belong to this second category even though he jumps around in time and space from a late nineteenth-century cattle drive to a dinner party in Washington, D.C., in the early 1980s. Only the characters' inability in Texasville to find or create a vision to replace a nineteenth-century frontier ethos prevents McMurtry's work from fitting neatly into Mailer's second group. The literary baling wire that holds his work together is that all of his characters must learn to live with a "heart faced suddenly

with the loss of its country, its customary and legendary range" (ING 140). For McMurtry, this is what it means to live in the twentieth century, learning to live without.



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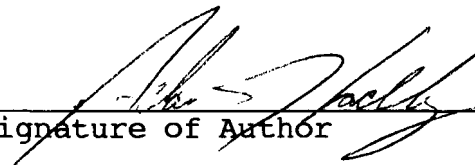
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BORDERLANDS: THE LOSS OF A VISION IN THE  
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