

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Margaret Jo Cummings for the Master of Arts

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Title: THE DESERT, THE DEVIL, AND MATURATION

IN THE SOUTHWESTERN FICTION OF PAUL HORGAN

Abstract approved: *Richard M. Kelly*

This paper explores chronologically the development of Paul Horgan's sense of place within his southwestern fiction and shows how the desert setting embodies the themes of good and evil which in turn develop maturity in the characters as they gain knowledge and responsibility.

In the southwestern novels and short stories Horgan develops a setting in which nature has great beauty and great harshness. His desert and mountain settings are not only attractive because of their beauty but are also dangerous because his characters must struggle to survive there. As the characters in the fiction come into conflict with nature they are forced to understand their own potential for either good or evil. The vast expanses of the West with its rugged mountains, its hot arid desert, and its violent weather detaches man from the softening influences of civilization and forces him to confront both

the land and himself. In the confrontation he either survives or is destroyed and because of it he undergoes a process of maturation. The process is not just a loss of innocence in youthful characters but is a growth which occurs in men of all ages. The setting in Horgan's fiction also serves as symbol. His dust storms and thunderstorms come to represent the storms of human passions; his trees and adobe houses become symbolic of the continuum of life and the peace men find; his poisonous snakes symbolize the evil inherent in men. Over a period of forty years Horgan has used setting to reinforce his themes of man's conflict with nature and himself and maturation. In his early novels and short stories the themes are less closely linked with the setting than in his later work. The novels A Lamp on the Plains, Far From Cibola, and A Distant Trumpet all embody excellent examples of the blending of setting and theme. One short story, "The Devil in the Desert," reaches a high point in story telling and symbolism as well as vivid evocation of place. His latest novels Whitewater and The Thin Mountain Air are not so satisfactory for the first evokes no sense of place and the latter lacks realistic characters to develop within the setting. Horgan's work is so widely varied that it is difficult to evaluate, but his southwestern fiction is both symbolically satisfying and universally applicable.

THE DESERT, THE DEVIL, AND MATURATION  
IN THE SOUTHWESTERN FICTION  
OF PAUL HORGAN

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by  
Margaret Jo Cummings  
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## Preface

The Pulitzer Prize winning history Great River was my first contact with the writing of Paul Horgan. The story of the Rio Grande and the peoples who live there makes fascinating reading for anyone who loves the Southwest. Since Horgan was the college librarian at the New Mexico Military Institute when my husband was a student there, the personal contact was also interesting. The lack of critical material in spite of tremendous output and financial success was a problem that emerged during the study of his work. The fact that few people were familiar with Horgan was also intriguing. In the southwestern regional fiction some common themes became apparent. The potential for good or evil and the struggle for maturity which are found in his work are not just regional but are universal. Horgan has been especially successful in presenting the difficulties of life in the desert and mountains of the Southwest and in his writing he creates an awareness of the place for the reader. In his work place becomes both setting and symbol.

I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to the following people: my husband Ralph, who didn't complain when he had many reasons to do so; Dr. Richard Keller who directed the thesis and who increased my interest in western literature

as he made many helpful suggestions; Dr. Jeremy Wild who as second reader gave so generously his time and knowledge of style; Dr. Charles Walton who encouraged me to work for this goal; and my sister, Kate Fink, who has been a constant support.

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Paul Horgan has achieved both financial success and public acclaim as an author of history, biography, and fiction. He won the Harper Prize Novel award in 1933 for The Fault of Angels, the Bancroft and Pulitzer Prizes in history in 1955 for Great River, and a second Pulitzer Prize, in biography, in 1975 for Lamy of Santa Fe: His Life and Times. He has published at least thirty-nine separate works, has contributed to dozens of periodicals, has written an opera libretto, has done a television series, authored a volume of poetry, and, ironically, written a work which has millions of distributed copies, "You Don't Think . . ." a pamphlet on venereal disease for the War Department. But in spite of nearly fifty years of publication, little critical material has been written about Horgan's work, few people recognize his name, and those who know the name know little of the man's life or work.

Horgan was born in Buffalo, New York in 1903 and moved with his family to Albuquerque, New Mexico when he was twelve years old. He attended the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell and the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, after which he returned to New Mexico as a librarian for the Institute with the agreement that he would have each morning free to write. He stayed there until 1942 when he

went to active duty with the Army. After World War II, he received the Guggenheim Fellowship which enabled him to complete research for the book which won him his first Pulitzer Prize. Since then he has moved between New Mexico and the East in the world of music, art, and letters while publishing in a wide variety of genres.

Because he has written so many things and in so many genres, he poses a problem for critics and students. Most writers discover one part of the world of letters that suits their particular gifts and skill, and they then pursue that single genre. William Faulkner wrote poetry, but he abandoned the craft for that of the fiction writer. Horgan, however, has another view of the professional writer as he says in Approaches to Writing, his book about the theory of authorship:

It is now considered clever to say that "the man of letters" is no more. What we have are journeyman specialists in the various separate forms of literature. Many are gifted at single purpose; but how much more gifted they would be if they wrote in many genres, and evoked the several sensibilities necessary to do so, so that each would benefit all.<sup>1</sup>

Horgan has practiced the art of being a man of letters with the result that it is difficult to deal with his artistry.

The task, however, is not impossible, for within that wide area of reading, a central consideration becomes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Horgan, Approaches to Writing, p. 73.



apparent. The most pervasive common denominator of his writing is his sense of place. This is not accidental but is part of his philosophy as a writer:

How important for the novelist is a highly developed sense of place, and how rarely is it richly realized. When well done, it compels the reader to supply details in his imagination which are not actually described by the writer.<sup>2</sup>

James Kraft, in "No Quarter Given: An Essay on Paul Horgan" comments:

It was, in the end, the New Mexico landscape that took the harshness of life in the Southwest, the exoticism of its cultures, and his own loneliness, and through its grandeur and clarity of light slowly created in Horgan a sense of place, an eye for detail, and a love of land which has never left him. Any reader of his work is struck by his descriptive powers, which Horgan feels the southwestern landscape awakened in him. He has the eye of a man who has observed carefully, the eye of a landscape artist--and indeed he has remained a fine watercolor painter and an amateur student of art history.<sup>3</sup>

Horgan's sense of place is central to everything he writes and is evident in almost all of his southwestern writing. With the exception of Whitewater, his fictional southwestern settings evoke from the reader an understanding of the place and its beauty and violence. This sense of place or setting is used in two ways in his fiction; the characters are revealed in conflict with the place, and the place is symbolic

<sup>2</sup> Horgan, Approaches, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> James Kraft, "No Quarter Given: An Essay on Paul Horgan," p. 17.

of the actions of the characters.

The characters in Horgan's fiction must confront the hardships of a land that is nearly barren, a climate that is violent, and distances that are almost unconquerable. Against these natural conflicts man is a puny figure who struggles to survive, and who, in that struggle, must come to an understanding of the potential for good and evil within himself. In a place where civilization intervenes and protects men from this knowledge it is possible to escape the confrontation with this central truth, but in Horgan's Southwest, this sense of good and evil is inescapable.

The desert setting also becomes symbolic of the men who live there. The most obvious symbols in Horgan's writing are the rattlesnake and scorpion for evil, the violence of storms for men's passions, the cottonwoods for the renewal of the life cycle, and the grandeur and beauty of the scenery for the potential goodness in man. These symbolic uses of the setting are surely intentional for Horgan is a conscious artist who says of the use of symbolism in writing:

With one part of his mind, many a writer works against setting forth any symbolism; while at the same time with another he holds the hope and intention to write so truly of anything that it can assume a universality which will be seen by others as symbolic, quite possibly in current terms undefined by, or unknown to, the writer himself.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Horgan, Approaches to Writing, p. 51.

The symbols are repeated and are in his works for the reader to interpret.

The characters in Horgan's fiction are made aware of the coexistence of good and evil in men because their equivalents, beauty and violence, coexist in the southwestern setting. It is from their awareness of the possibilities for good or evil that the characters attain maturity. The understanding of humanity grows out of an understanding of the land.

Within the scope of the southwestern fiction of Paul Horgan it is the purpose of this paper to explore chronologically the development of Horgan's sense of place, and to show how the desert landscape embodies the themes of good and evil, which in turn give rise to the theme of man's maturation as a creature of knowledge and responsibility. A span of forty-two years is involved, for the earliest publication set in the Southwest was "Tribute," a 1935 short story, and the latest was The Thin Mountain Air, a 1977 novel.

Horgan has explained the method by which he attempts to create his fiction:

In my fiction I hope to enclose in a precisely appropriate and thus beautiful form a story which rises from the interaction of characters brought alive through empathy for human life, in settings which are evocative in atmosphere, set forth in

language interesting for its own sake as well as for its suitability to the subject matter.<sup>5</sup>

"Tribute," which appeared in Scribner's, shows some of the skill Horgan would later refine with its development of a sense of place. His setting evokes the atmosphere of the small southwestern town of Hermosa, New Mexico in the description of the Court House with its unchanging painted clock:

Hermosa was a small town, but right opposite the tavern was the County Court House, a sandy gaunt building with a wooden cupola on whose windy four faces a clock had been painted four times in 1897. The painted hour was five minutes after two. Time arrested in that small town was a memorial to the death of Toby Gardenhire who had died by gunfire at hands of cattle thieves at that hour on a Saturday afternoon in 1897, when Hermosa consisted of hardly one street.<sup>6</sup>

Into the tavern which is opposite the Court House comes a man, a killer and bank robber, who is wanted by the police. Although the people in the tavern recognize the man, they are afraid to do anything about it and go about the business of serving food to him. They are awed by their closeness to a man whose picture is in the newspapers and whose name is on the radio.

Although "Tribute" lacks plot and has almost no character development, the description of Hermosa in this early

<sup>5</sup> Horgan, Approaches to Writing, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Horgan, "Tribute," in The Peachstone, p. 296.

piece of fiction shows a true western town with the country at the end of the street. The sense of place in the story is achieved by the combination of description of the people and the land:

. . . when the evening settled over the immense veils of color that made the land there--roads taking the eye far down the terraces of the plains; the blue hover above the river behind the town with dying willows and the white salt hollows; the level horizon blurred with light except the place where the mountains began, rising light on sky and taking light into their depths all day in change. Slow things lived temperately there still, cows roving, old Mexicans paced by their burros, the fat sheriff who limped majestically and was beloved by his townsmen.<sup>7</sup>

That town of Hermosa provides a real, believable setting for the ironic sketch which shows the admiration of the people for a lawbreaker. No violence occurs in "Tribute." The wanted man is not caught, and the characters take no action. The meal is served and the wanted man leaves town. After he is gone he is the topic of much speculation.

The skill in describing place that was apparent in "Tribute" is also seen in No Quarter Given, Horgan's first novel with a southwestern setting. Character and plot neither emerge from the sense of place nor are they limited to the particular setting, for the tubercular musician of this story could have worked out his problems with his wife, his mistress, and his duty to art just as easily in a

<sup>7</sup> Horgan, "Tribute," p. 297.

mountain sanitorium in the East. Still it is possible to find glimpses of Horgan's developing sense of place in the book. The places described, the customs noted, and some of the native New Mexicans are early examples of what will later become the author's greatest strength.

Edmund Abbey, a composer and the protagonist of the book, has come to Santa Fe, New Mexico to recuperate from tuberculosis accompanied by his extremely wealthy and social wife, Georgia. Georgia, however, soon leaves to find livelier companions and more sophisticated entertainment, and Abbey, as his condition improves, finds companionship and love with Maggie Michaelis, a successful New York actress. Georgia's son David--Abbey's stepson--also comes to Santa Fe, and the three become a close knit unit sharing a common love for the people and land of the Southwest. Horgan's meticulous attention to detail is exemplified in a description of the mountains near Santa Fe:

There was a road that led along the ridges of the foothills, from which they could both look up at the shaggy mountain forests and down to the little green valleys, where orchards turned their trees in bloom, and irrigation ditches went silver through the brown fields. Farther beyond, they could see the tremendous boyage of the clouds reflected in shadow on the flat tawny land.<sup>8</sup>

One of the devices that Horgan uses in the development of the sense of place is a house to typify the region. The

<sup>8</sup> Paul Horgan, No Quarter Given, p. 148.

peaceful setting with trees to stand for the continuation of life and the house made from the very earth itself emphasizes the peace and permanence of life in the desert. Only as men live successfully in this setting do they too achieve something peaceful and permanent. Mrs. Mannering, a wealthy old woman who is a friend to Maggie and Abbey, describes one of her houses near Albuquerque:

. . . I love best the one at Albuquerque, out in the country along the Rio Grande, where there are willows and cottonwoods, so ancient and tremendous. It is a very old house, and a vice-regal Mexican family used to live in it for generations. . . . The walls are five feet thick, and have been plastered and painted so many times. You can see the shallow depressions and filmy shadows left by hands that patted the plaster and dipped the paint. The floors are dark oak planks; and between the cracks here and there you can smell the earth, right below. Two hundred yards away the river goes by. You can look across and see the town and the mesa and then the mountains. . . . It is a lovely place to stay. I always feel part of my life belongs there, in that house of earthen walls and generations of people who in silent and powerful ways have left the marks of their lives there.<sup>9</sup>

The house is both setting and symbol, and Maggie and Abbey eventually go to live--and he dies--in that house.

Horgan begins to explore the implications of the place and its role in bringing men to maturity as his protagonist, Edmund Abbey, thinks about the lives and the dignity of the Indians:

<sup>9</sup> Horgan, No Quarter Given, p. 156.

Edmund thought the Indians were all adult, in spite of their being considered and treated as children by their white custodians. As a race, they grew and lived among natural forces; they bore a grand dignity toward all the facts of existence, for which they had explanations that drew good sense from natural or supernatural tradition. To have a life whose conditions met both individual and communal needs, this was an adult achievement; . . .<sup>10</sup>

Horgan's description of the annual corn dance of the Domingo Indians, however, emphasizes the separation of his characters from the land, but in spite of this weakness, the city of Santa Fe, as he paints it, draws the reader to it:

They were driving past the Plaza, in the old streets that led out of town; and out to the mesa where the dusty grasses grew, and gray-violet shadows lined the roadside. Behind them lay the mountains, before them the smally rising and falling drift of the desert hills. They were traveling toward the golden clouds that seemed not to have moved along the horizon, but to have been built higher into white towers lighted and shadowed with the brilliance of the day.<sup>11</sup>

During the corn dance Abbey has a hemorrhage and the party attempts to return to Santa Fe, but they are stranded by a flash flood in an arroyo. This is an early example of Horgan's depiction of nature as a great force which man must overcome:

. . . the color changed on the surface of the water that ran in the red mud river bed. Half an hour before, the high flood wall and waves of the drained rain water had come plunging down from the

<sup>10</sup> Horgan, No Quarter Given, p. 217.

<sup>11</sup> Horgan, No Quarter Given, p. 217.



foothills like rank upon rank of red wild horses maned in ruffled foam the color of washed stones. The white wooden bridge was scattered in the earth-red waves . . . they must wait and watch the violence of the stream, . . .<sup>12</sup>

Abbey and his wife agree to divorce so that each can remarry, and she takes David away with her. David leaves Santa Fe with regret, just as he leaves his youth behind. Abbey tells him, "It isn't much fun to see the beliefs of youth disappear, as they always do."<sup>13</sup>

Horgan uses the scene of the peaceful hacienda to suggest the peace that Abbey has found by coming to terms with his artistic commitment, his maturation. Abbey has decided to complete his symphony even though the activity endangers his life, and this is the peace that he finds:

The heat was exhausting during the day, but it gave the sweet exhaustion of drowsiness. At night the immense cottonwoods murmured over the great house, and indicating a breeze that whispered like the river which lay a few fields to the west, they twinkled their leaves in the starlight, making a sound at peace with silence.<sup>14</sup>

Horgan is accurate in his understanding of the importance of the weather in the Southwest, for he titles a chapter in his book by that name. He describes the violence of the weather and its effect on men:

<sup>12</sup> Horgan, No Quarter Given, p. 238.

<sup>13</sup> Horgan, No Quarter Given, p. 485.

<sup>14</sup> Horgan, No Quarter Given, p. 494.

The sand storms seemed to reach a new fury of incidence in March. They rose off the mesa in tawny veils leveled and flown by the wind, and they came bleak and universal down across the town, casting a saffron light upon everything; sometimes letting the sun show through, an electric pale blue light in the sky, throwing down a light like a reflection off steel, cold and unearthly. Yet there was a certain desert beauty about that kind of weather . . .<sup>15</sup>

During the sand storm, Abbey dies of tuberculosis; he has completed his finest symphonic composition. The final section deals with the trip home to New York by Maggie and David with the body of Edmund Abbey. The return to New York for the funeral, the reception of her dead son by the mother of Abbey, the admiration of David and Maggie for the composer, and the acclaim of the musical world are all reminiscent of "The Sculptor's Funeral" by Willa Cather. While the composer's funeral may be similar to that of Cather's sculptor, this novel ends with the triumphant reception of a new symphony by Abbey and is valedictory rather than gloomy as is Cather's story.

Within this first novel of the Southwest, Horgan's development of the sense of place is already apparent; he vividly describes the land and people and gives the reader a feeling for the history of the place. The conflict of good and evil in man is not clearly defined, but the idea of maturation through a kind of choice, such as that made by

<sup>15</sup> Horgan, No Quarter Given, p. 552.

the musician, is a factor. His characters are not yet delineated by the land, but the descriptive power in this book is found in his later work.

One of the chapters in No Quarter Given concerns an emergency operation performed under primitive conditions, and a short story published soon after the book uses similar situations. "The Surgeon and the Nun" suffers from a trite plot involving potentially violent and completely ignorant Mexican laborers and a doctor who performs an emergency appendectomy under nearly impossible conditions while using excessively violent language. The patient, of course, recovers to complete the happy ending. In spite of the fact that it sounds like a pulp western, it is possible to discern Horgan's concept of man's place in the universe.

The surgeon must perform the appendectomy in spite of the unbearable heat and dust because the distances are too great to allow the patient to be taken elsewhere. If he does not operate the patient will certainly die; if he does operate, the patient may die and the surgeon will be killed by the Mexican laborers. He has no obligation to the man, yet he risks his life to help him. The setting forces the decisions.

The desert locale is not lengthily described to achieve the sense of place; instead, the heat of the sun with its violence is manipulated until it dominates the story. Fifteen times in the story Horgan uses the intense heat to

create an antagonist to the man, and to suggest violence and evil.<sup>16</sup> He says, "Above, a blue sky like hot metal. The heat swam on the ground" (p. 260); "The heat, the shimmering land, . . ." (p. 260); "We stopped and the cars creaked in the heat" (p. 260); ". . . on that plain where the heat went up from the fried ground in sheets; . . ." (p. 264); "Beyond him we had glimpses of the slow dancing silvery heat on the scratchy earth, . . ." (p. 271).

The reader is impelled to suffer with the characters in the absolute aridity of the place, the terrifying force of the sun, and the violence of the desert. The desert, in "The Surgeon and the Nun," forces the confrontation of the surgeon with a choice to good or to avoid involvement. Only in this place and under these circumstances would the choice be necessary.

To conclude the story, Horgan cools the desert as the good in the surgeon triumphs over evil. The patient shows signs of recovery and the surgeon says, "I began to think the day was cooler" (p. 277); and later "We reached Eddy in the evening and it was like a garden after the endless plains and their sear life. We found green trees and artesian water and cool fields of alfalfa" (p. 279).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Horgan, "The Surgeon and the Nun," in The Peachstone. Page references follow.

"The Hacienda," another short story, achieves a much finer delineation of character than "Tribute" or "The Surgeon and the Nun." Don Elizario, its main character, is a native of New Mexico and is of Mexican descent. He has been a wealthy and powerful rancher, but as civilization has encroached upon the desert, so too has it destroyed Don Elizario, for he has come down to the position of living in a room above the Elks club and being an object of fun among the Anglos who see him. He lives in the past, and in that memory his hacienda still stands, just as he believes himself still an important man. He is a ruin of the formerly strong and attractive man; frequently drunken, he achieves a kind of dignity in his identification with the house, for it too has been destroyed by the forces of time and nature. To make clear the character of Don Elizario, Horgan first shows the hacienda as it was:

By the Rio Grande the great house stood, a fortress and a palace, built of adobe and cornered with shade in some part of its rambling pattern all day. It was a house risen out of the earth and forever subject to the things that qualified earthly portion . . . rain wearing off the face of walls, the river rising and mingling valley with field in the spring floods, the hardening fire of the sun that dried all things in time to dust. . . . It was a hive, that hacienda. Life sprang in every form from the chocolate-colored river and its marshes, where in the pale filters of sunset crimson, tall herons stood, and the suck and seep of enriching river water was audible.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Paul Horgan, "The Hacienda," in The Peachstone, p. 367.

Horgan's power in bringing to life the land and the hacienda allows the reader to understand Don Elizario as he once was. The construction of the adobe house is described, the willows along the river which gives them life are shown, and most important, the tree in the patio develops the idea of the life cycle. Don Elizario says, "When I was ten years old, when it was 1860, I planted a tree in the patio of my father's house."<sup>18</sup> As Horgan tells the story, ruin has come to the hacienda--the river, in flood, destroyed it--and Don Elizario lives on money sent from New York by his son because he has sold his land and lost his money.

A man tells Don Elizario, ". . . there's not much left of your hacienda these days. Somebody pointed it out to me the other day on the way to Santa Fe. All I could see was a heap of adobe. And some trees."<sup>19</sup>

Don Elizario and the hacienda repeat nature's cycle of dust to dust. The house is slowly being worn away by the passage of time and the erosion of wind and water, two potent forces of the desert, and Don Elizario, too, is worn with age and the conflicts of a harsh land. While the setting of this short story is regional, its implications are universal, for Horgan seems to be telling his reader

<sup>18</sup> Horgan, "The Hacienda," p. 373.

<sup>19</sup> Horgan, "The Hacienda," p. 372.

that the tree of life is still standing. New life comes from the very forces which destroy life.

Main Line West, a novel, was published in the same year as "The Hacienda." The unifying device in the book is the Santa Fe Railroad's main line to California, along which are its setting and action. D. W. Brogan says in the introduction to Mountain Standard Time, in which the novel was anthologized, "As is indicated in the title of one of the novels reprinted here, Main Line West, the human condition is developed in a society that is perhaps too mobile for its own good."<sup>20</sup> The human condition is the focus of the novel: the struggle to live in a harsh environment, man's inhumanity to his fellow man, and the impermanence of man contrasted to the land. These themes are developed in settings which become real because of Horgan's ability to paint pictures with words.

The novel moves from the plains of Kansas to California, back to Colorado, New Mexico, and ends in Arizona. With the scene in Kansas, Horgan begins his story:

It is in Kansas, where the colors of the land become toylike as the darkness grows. Faded red barns become rich plum color; the trees bunched in land hollows at the flowing together of hills show candy green as the sky blackens; the wheat bends its whispering surf against the fences; over the flat country the telegraph wires run beside the

<sup>20</sup> D. W. Brogan, Introduction, in Mountain Standard Time, by Paul Horgan, p. vii.

railroad, and a far freight train travels like a child's toy, . . .

It is what the people have--imagination and consequent restlessness. The symbols of it (in the early 1900's when this story begins with little cloud) are the white wooden church where emotion can bind everybody together, and the tracks that run from coast to coast, with life, mysteriously hinting of splendid places elsewhere, from which the train has come, and exciting places yonder, to which the train is going, pausing here only to change engines and breathe a spell, then running on secure through the heavy storm which has gathered out of the sky, and with a boom of wind has struck on the wide Kansas lands and finally driven kernels of rain on roof and window. The rain comes like an assuagement on the lonesome earth.<sup>21</sup>

Horgan's initial statement about the land and people is a fine example of his developed sense of place, in this case, Kansas. The toylike freight train is contrasted to the vast prairies of the state, and the wheat bends in waves which resemble the even greater ocean. As he writes of the open spaces and the vivid skies, Horgan has caught the size and color of an area frequently accused of being colorless.

He has also caught the character of the people who live in Kansas when he uses the white church as a symbol for the unity of the people. The church is an important social bond in the small rural towns. Later he reiterates the description in the memory of Irma, the woman who is a major character in the book. As her child is being born, she remembers,

<sup>21</sup> Paul Horgan, Main Line West, in Mountain Standard Time, p. 7.



". . . Kansas, where she came from and to which she was always going to return, the farm, the white church, the red sand blowing and the hot summer moons riding dusty in the sky."<sup>22</sup>

Irma's husband deserts her and dies in World War I, but she earns a living as an evangelist. When Irma dies, it is on the train, and her teen-age son is left to bury his mother at the first stop in a small town cemetery:

Somewhat before eight o'clock they all went in a small procession to the cemetery two miles out on the desert from Driscoll. . . .

The day was already blinding yellow, and the hot sands stretching away in all directions were dappled here and there with greasewood brush. They drove on a highway for a mile and a half and then turned off on a lane with deep sandy ruts, and came beyond a little freckled hill to the cemetery gate, which was made of hunks of petrified wood cemented together, and topped by a scrolled arch of wrought iron with a design of grapes and leaves in vine. They drove in. The earlier graves were leveled by the wind. There were crosses and stones, whitened by the sun.<sup>23</sup>

Horgan's Arizona cemetery becomes a real place as well as a statement about the bleak life of the woman being buried there, for without the place and its harsh realism, the reader would not understand the bitterness of her end.

With Irma's funeral in Arizona, this novel ends. Her son again boards the train to his unknown future. "The

<sup>22</sup> Horgan, Main Line West, p. 53.

<sup>23</sup> Horgan, Main Line West, p. 194.

wheels," says Horgan, ". . . tore no roots from under him."<sup>24</sup>

A Lamp on the Plains is the first novel in which Horgan achieves a complete integration of character and theme with his dominant sense of place. James M. Day says, "A Lamp on the Plains, . . . may one day be judged his best novel."<sup>25</sup> The book picks up the story of Danny Milford, the orphaned teen-ager of Main Line West, and traces his growth and maturation in rural New Mexico. Danny is a withdrawn and bitter boy at the beginning of the book; he has reason to fear and mistrust people, for he has seen his mother die as a result of mob violence and has experienced a lack of sympathy and understanding from those who were near him at the time of her death.

Horgan creates a living small town when he describes Vrain, New Mexico. The village lives by the tempo of the trains that come and go and by the seasons of the harsh land that surrounds it:

Late summer was hot over the country of the plains. When evening approached, the sky turned to porcelain colors, pale blue and opalescent pinks, in the great sail of the dome which was white and then dark as distance. The change from the heat of the plains day, when a whole life-scheme of obscure animals and insects contributed their dusty singing on the air, to the night which

<sup>24</sup> Horgan, Main Line West, p. 199.

<sup>25</sup> James M. Day, Paul Horgan, p. 18.

went quieter but little cooler, seemed to coincide with the thought of the evening train in people's minds.<sup>26</sup>

Danny arrives on the evening train and in the early parts of the novel he comes in contact with three persons who influence his life. Newt Jimson, a mechanic given to profanity and drunken sprees, befriends him and gives him reason to begin to trust human beings again; Rev. Hopeman, the minister, tries to improve his life by giving him a place to live; and Professor W. W. Burlington, an educated charlatan, awakens in Dan a thirst for knowledge and a loyalty to those who have helped him.

After the Professor, called W. W., leaves town to escape the law, Wade McGraw takes Dan to his ranch and treats him as part of his family, two boys older than Dan and a girl Dan's age. In McGraw Horgan has created a character both mature and admirable for Dan to emulate. The long winter in Vrain is over and spring is coming to the land just as Dan's time to grow and mature is coming:

As the afternoon latened, the air drew into chill, and the falling sun let less heat, though its light turned warm in color, a thing like nourishing blood. In this earliest likeness of spring, under its sparse snow, with its cows and brown hills and scent and snow melting green life into the roots and washed sky and cold mud sweet and crisp with the evening's ice, the country was

<sup>26</sup> Paul Horgan, A Lamp on the Plains, p. 10.

given glow on its sunwise places by the setting light.<sup>27</sup>

Just as the ice melts from the land, so too the ice melts from Dan's heart and he reaches out to other human beings.

Dan Milford learns about good and evil as he learns the necessities of the harsh land. Branding is cruel but it is necessary for the identification of cattle. The unnecessary cruelty of one of the ranch hands, when he deliberately mutilates the calves, makes clear the evil that exists in man:

Neville was kneeling with his long thin legs spraddled, and he was curved over the calf. On his face was an idiot grin without humor in it. The sickening iron in his hands touched, touched, touched a little each time in a different place, and the calf shivered at the burn; then the brand was at last given full. . . .

Neville had his hat off, and the same face that had flinched back pleasurably at the cook of hurt flesh now wore an inviting smile, a patient snake-like letting of the fangs, some evil ingrati-  
tion.<sup>28</sup>

The snake image for evil is a frequent device used by Horgan in this and other works. Wade McGraw, the rancher, refuses to allow any unnecessary pain to be inflicted on the animals and fires the ranch hand. He and Neville are presented as contrasting examples of good and evil men.

<sup>27</sup> Horgan, A Lamp on the Plains, p. 174.

<sup>28</sup> Horgan, A Lamp on the Plains, p. 210.

McGraw does not protect Dan from reality, though, when the boy must face the fact that his dog has been killing sheep. In some other setting the dog could be penned or tied, but in the West there is no escaping the necessity of destroying a sheep killer, and Dan accepts the responsibility when he shoots and buries his friend, and, "The relentless truth and the duty it set him seemed to enclose him like the dust-sifted hills. . . ."29

The setting of summer drought and the storm that breaks it are used to accompany Dan's first sexual encounter. The well developed sense of place lets the reader understand the violence of the storm. Setting also symbolizes the action as Dan and the rancher's daughter Kitty have ridden to a favorite picnic spot which the young people call Africa. In the story this place serves as a reminder of Eden before the fall. The implication is clear, for the young people are innocent and the place has great beauty. The heat and desert are described to give a sense of foreboding:

Nothing shone in the country of the heat that summer but the heat itself, ghosting above the hills and flashing in the distance. The earth and its growths were covered with dust and the parched colors of dead things. The sand would rise and blow on the wind; other times the dust would simply hang in the heavens, drifting slowly down upon the house and the men and the animals and the ground. . . .

29 Horgan, A Lamp on the Plains, p. 220.

It was said that even the rattlesnakes thought it was too hot, and stayed in shadow as much as they could.<sup>30</sup>

Horgan's description of the snakes as they are driven from the small arroyo during the thunderstorm is vividly evocative of evil:

From the dusty dark abodes where they like to lie together the rain had washed them out. In the confluent hills there were many rocky and weedy nests where the snakes lived; there ran the collected water of the storm and to make rivers, rivulets gathered and joined their strength.<sup>31</sup>

The young people escape the snakes, but in their relief are caught in their first sexual awareness of each other.

Horgan's description of the land and the animals which live there is linked to the young people's encounter. The implication of man as a part of the cycle of life in nature is made clear when he says, "Of that wild life, subject to tempest and response, they became part, for a while."<sup>32</sup> The spiny grasses, the ant den, and the sleepy rattlesnakes are part of the place. The whole cycle of life becomes apparent; good and evil are in man and to become mature he must accept this central truth. The evidence of this is clear in Horgan's later statement:

<sup>30</sup> Horgan, A Lamp on the Plains, p. 220.

<sup>31</sup> Horgan, A Lamp on the Plains, p. 236.

<sup>32</sup> Horgan, A Lamp on the Plains, p. 257.

Their eyes were closed, both inwardly and outwardly. Later they would open and see many things clearly and find burdens to take up obediently as the results of this very hour in the hot silent, magic land, Africa.<sup>33</sup>

But more than sexual awareness is involved in maturity, and in the novel Dan achieves maturity when he goes to military school with the rancher's two sons. The younger boy, Steve, hazes Dan far beyond the accepted customs of the prep school. Steve wins a fist fight between Dan and him but is killed in a polo accident caused by his own anger from the fight. Dan, then, must accept his own part in the death of his foster brother. In the end he makes the growth necessary and goes on to the world of knowledge found in books. Horgan tells of his growth in a paragraph which links the people of the plains to that growth:

It was late and quiet and he was alone with his book; he had stepped through its opened doors; the stature to reach them was built of the flesh and bone and spirit of others; his dead mother Irma, and her strong spirit like a river; Dubya-Dubya with the vagrant charms of the mind as his wares; . . . Kitten alive as all womankind, dead Stephen as the cost of strife, Hank the governor of passion out of respect for the good and proper; and Newt, like a spirit of the plains.<sup>34</sup>

The book is about maturity. It details the growth of a boy into a man who can live in the harsh and difficult land of the Southwest and who can also live with himself. James

<sup>33</sup> Horgan, A Lamp on the Plains, p. 257.

<sup>34</sup> Horgan, A Lamp on the Plains, p. 372.

Day says:

The loss of innocence is a negative approach to this manifestly affirmative novel. The novel is one of growth toward maturity, rather than growth away from youth. . . . Both the later novels, A Distant Trumpet and Give Me Possession, are novels of human experience and its effect on a man's personal growth, but neither is a novel of youth.<sup>35</sup>

The legendary cities of gold which the Spanish explorer Coronado was seeking are in the title of Horgan's next novel, Far From Cibola. As the title implies, the land is not an easy place for human beings to survive. This is a highly effective short novel in which Horgan's sense of place supports his larger concerns with evil and the maturation of a human being into a person capable of loving and giving in spite of weaknesses. The southwestern setting is still there, more vividly projected than before, but it does not dominate this book.

Far From Cibola concerns itself with a small New Mexico city caught in the grip of the national depression of 1933.<sup>36</sup> A tight unity is achieved in the novel by using a time span of only one day in the life of the characters. These characters are as varied as the occupations in the small city; however, their lives are overlapped and intertwined in their

<sup>35</sup> Day, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Horgan, Far From Cibola in Mountain Standard Time, p. 277. Horgan identifies the city as Roswell.



common problem--the spectre of hunger that is so close to everyone in that particular year.

The time span unity of a single day may have been intended to follow the Aristotelian unity of time and at the same time suggest a similarity between the book and a Greek play. The characters in the book are victims of tragedy, and in commenting on his general view of tragedy Horgan says:

. . . in the face of evidence for the tragic view of life, my underflowing persuasion has always been to transcend the tragic by simple recognition of its existence.<sup>37</sup>

Horgan also said that he felt Far From Cibola was one of the two of his own novels which he liked best because it, ". . . perhaps satisfies best among my works that concern which for me is the most interesting of the artist's problems--the solution of form."<sup>38</sup>

The opening chapter of the book sketches the desert and mountain setting and details the killing of a rattlesnake. From the folk-lore of the Southwest comes the title "Until Sundown," for the people there say a snake doesn't really die until the sun goes down. The snake operates in a frame device to appear again at the end of the book; it

<sup>37</sup> Paul Horgan, "The Novel--A Symposium," in The Literature of the American West, ed. J. Golden Taylor, p. 43.

<sup>38</sup> Horgan, "The Novel--A Symposium," p. 43.

also serves as a reminder of the beauty and death found together in the setting.

The harshness and beauty of the land are used by Horgan to explore similar qualities that exist together in men, qualities for both good and evil. A hobo dies of exposure to the cold because he has been denied help, but the cafe owner who refuses to feed the hobo is not capable of firing the waitress he cannot afford to employ. A promising young athlete is killed accidentally by a shot fired in warning over the heads of a mob of people demanding relief money. Far From Cibola tells the story of a nation in a time of great stress, its characters are universal not merely regional, and its total impact is that of all the pain and conflict of the 1930's; this universality is strengthened by the sense of place. At the end of the day the dust storm which is typical of the Southwest is described:

Now thicker, the sand rose high enough in the sky to obscure the sun, and the light turned yellow, softening everything, and bringing a sharp drop in temperature. Off the plain below the mountain, the wind rose and carried sand, pulling it in a great veil across miles of ground, so that the town could not see the mountain, and the spring morning disappeared with its freshness under the choking afternoon, that swept its new atmosphere across the whole valley, obscuring everything.<sup>39</sup>

This is a realism of place that illustrates Horgan's care for detail, a detail which is a necessary part of the novel,

<sup>39</sup> Horgan, Far From Cibola, p. 250.

for the hobo dies in the sudden cold which sweeps in with the sandstorm. The final phrase of the book says, ". . . he had died on the night the frost had cracked down on the valley."<sup>40</sup> The cafe owner who has been instrumental in the death of the hobo and the parents of the dead young athlete are examples of men who struggle to survive in the harsh land. They achieve dignity when they do not allow the land to destroy them.

Two young brothers who make a hunting trip to save their family from cold and starvation are the protagonists of the short story "To the Mountains." The boys learn the evils inherent in their world when they fight a wolf, survive a snowstorm, and kill a mountain lion. The younger brother selfishly takes the only rifle they have in a private foray to prove he can hunt as well as his older brother. But the older boy nearly dies as a result of an attack by a wolf when he has no weapon to defend himself. Both boys realize that in the mountains there is no place for the selfishness which has nearly cost one boy his life. The mountains dominate the landscape in the place Horgan pictures, just as they dominate the people who live there. This awareness of nature and the puniness of man is a part of the sense of place that is developed:

<sup>40</sup> Horgan, Far From Cibola, p. 276.

The mountains were miles away from the house of the family, and sometimes they were altogether hidden by the weather: cloud or rain or wind alive with dust. At other times the mountains were momentuously close, as if moved in golden light by the hand of God, and every canyon, every wind course and water hollow in the rock, stood clear to the eyes of the wondering brothers. Hardly a day in their lives failed to be somehow influenced by the mountains off there to the east. . . . The boys would one day own the earth and know woman; and perhaps, as some men did, know something of the mystery of the mountains at the world's rim.<sup>41</sup>

In their hunting trip to the mountains the boys learn a great deal and are pronounced men when they return from their adventure.

Horgan's short story, "The Peachstone" utilizes the tumbleweed, bane of ranchers and useless but tenacious survivor in a land of insufficient rainfall, to depict the barren cruelty of the land. These Russian thistles are the death pyre of a small girl in the story; however, Horgan does not detail the death scene, rather he compels the reader to supply that in imagination. The rancher has put off burning the weeds and the child dies as she plays near them when a spark from the chimney lights the dry mass. His own neglect and the tumbleweeds loom enormous in the mind of the young father as he takes his small daughter to her grave in the cemetery at the closest town, Weed. He thinks:

<sup>41</sup> Paul Horgan, "To the Mountains," in The Peachstone, p. 5.

Burn? It burned like a house afire. It had oil in it, somehow, and the thing to do was to get it in shape for use as a fuel. Imagine all the tumbleweed that blew around the state of New Mexico in the fall and sometimes all winter. In the winter the weeds were black and brittle. They cracked when they blew against fence posts, and if one lodged there, then another caught at its thorny lace; and next time it blew, and the sand came trailing, and the tumbleweeds rolled, they'd pile up at the same fence and built out, locked together against the wires. . . . Many times he'd planned to get out back there and clear them away, just e-e-ease them off away from the fence posts, so's not to catch the wood up, and then set a match to the whole thing, and in five minutes have it all cleared off.<sup>42</sup>

But of course the rancher did not clear the weeds away in time, and the environment does not allow for mistakes.

Jodey and Cleotha Powers arrive at Weed with the small coffin covered by a cross stitched yellow flannel coverlet, and again Horgan evokes the truth of all small western towns in his description of the cemetery on the hill, for these arid places are sometimes devastated by flash floods, and cemeteries are situated at high spots never reached by flood waters. Jodey and Cleotha are united in their understanding of the tragedy that has overtaken them.

Though the trip to town is grief dominated, the tone of the story is not hopeless or bitter; rather, it reflects Horgan's belief in the quality of Godliness that allows human beings to rise above the evils that are a part of

<sup>42</sup> Paul Horgan, "The Peachstone," in The Peachstone, p. 347.

human existence. Men may transcend the tragedy of the human condition and the cruel reality of natural forces and show that in maturity is the sum of everything Godly.

The peachstone of the title is a symbol to the young mother--who is burying her beloved baby daughter--of hope for new life and beauty. It is a hope which rises above the land and its harshness. The land does not make allowances for the fallibility of man, however, for the child's death makes this clear. Jodey must accept his responsibility and in that acceptance go on to a maturity which lets him forgive himself.

The Godly quality in man is nowhere more apparent in Horgan's fiction than in Dr. Peter Rush of The Common Heart. This man's love and understanding of the beautiful and harsh land are equalled by his compassion and understanding of the human beings he works and lives with. Dr. Rush has achieved his status partly because of his desire to give his mother some of the things she longed for, but, as he remembers:

. . . she died first. He never again lost a sense of compassion for the private dreams, the inner dignities of people; anyone at all; and this was her legacy to his adult life.<sup>43</sup>

Dr. Rush, however, is human and therefore subject to the conflict of good and evil within himself, and this is

<sup>43</sup> Paul Horgan, The Common Heart, in Mountain Standard Time, p. 285.

the basis for the novel. Rush falls in love with a woman patient who is an author. With her he is able to talk about his love of the history of New Mexico while with his wife, Noonie, communication is impossible. Noonie has withdrawn from reality after nearly dying when their son was born twelve years earlier. Dr. Rush is torn between his desire to have a normal home and marriage and his duty and love for the woman he married.

The understanding Rush brings to the land and to people is evident in the opening paragraphs of the book:

One winter day, in the nineteen-twenties, the physician Peter Rush was driving carefully through a cold sandstorm that was blowing off the mountains, across the mesa, and down upon the town of Albuquerque. He could hardly see. . . . the sand whined through the cracks on the bitter wind and stung him in the eyes. . . . All his life he had known such days; . . . It was common enough for patients under his care to have "setbacks" on such an afternoon. They said they felt depressed, and that they could hardly catch their breaths. When they looked out the window, all they saw was that steel-blue light, and far off on the mesa, that sandy veil being dragged by the wind.<sup>44</sup>

Dr. Rush is a thoughtful, reflective man and because of this he cannot break his marriage without being aware of his own capacity to injure. He tells Molly, the woman he loves, "I don't believe grownups have a right to demand happiness. But I think children ought to have it."<sup>45</sup> Horgan's concern

<sup>44</sup> Horgan, The Common Heart, p. 283.

<sup>45</sup> Horgan, The Common Heart, p. 469.

with the different expectations for children and adults is obvious here. In this book Dr. Rush must decide whether to be a mature adult and do without happiness, if necessary, or to be a child, taking happiness at the cost of hurting others.

Horgan's characters are still subject to the conflicts of good and evil within themselves. Dr. Rush and Molly visit an ancient pueblo near Albuquerque, and in this place of ruins they are overwhelmed by the sense of what the desert has done to the people who lived there. The heat, the brilliant light, and a shrieking bird make them aware of their own mortality and they, for the first time, embrace:

Overhead, flying back from the far end of the cliff, the bird returned. His piercing cry echoed again, and they blinded themselves to it, shutting their eyes and hungering and easing through their kisses, which said no, no, to the dry daves of death above them in the cliff wall.<sup>46</sup>

Noonie's sense of guilt for failing her husband finally pushes her to the point of suicide, and she takes an overdose of sedative. Rush, who has decided to divorce her and leave the area, returns in time to save her life, but with saving that life he knows that he cannot take his own happiness with Molly. As timeless as the desert itself is the duty which dictates his decision:

Romance would have dictated neater solutions, grander fulfillments of the moment; but given how

<sup>46</sup> Horgan, The Common Heart, p. 474.



things were, what prevailed was the formal outline of "morality," which was an unfashionable term, but which carried a timeless authority.<sup>47</sup>

Horgan's character is realistic, not romantic, for he lives in a land that demands mature realism from its inhabitants or destroys them. Rush has learned his lessons from the land.

Noonie recovers her grip on reality and life, and in the symbolic thunderstorm the doctor and his wife are reunited:

Then came the torrent, and the wind. The house was trundled by the storm. There came sky after sky of lightning, and whole avenues of the thunder's bombards. And in a trice everything was drenched. Everything drank and was slaked. . . . Now that delivery was come, save us, save us from the deluge!--this whisper of racial memory coursed in the hurried blood. But to be grasped all natural forces had to come into scale with human beings, with a single one.<sup>48</sup>

It is interesting to note that the passions and storm that symbolizes them belong to Peter Rush. He knows the land, understands its harshness, and makes the decisions. Noonie and Molly are only involved as foils for the Doctor.

In Horgan's work women are not generally a part of the place, the desert, or in any real life. Molly comments to Peter early in their relationship that the West is masculine:

<sup>47</sup> Horgan, The Common Heart, p. 487.

<sup>48</sup> Horgan, The Common Heart, p. 590.

The country is so great and the jobs that keep us alive on it are so close to the first simplicities that it takes men to do them, all of them. It is Adam's own land.<sup>49</sup>

The Common Heart is a complex novel with many intertwining plots. The unifying device that holds the work together is the central theme of a man's knowledge of the land and of the good and evil possibilities within himself as revealed by that land.

The years of World War II were not productive of fiction for Horgan. He even donated the plates for his previously published books to be melted down for the metal they contained, which may partially explain, since the books are out of print, why he is not so well known as his productivity and success would imply. James Kraft says:

He wrote nothing during the war but one story, "Old Army," and did not publish another book until 1952, . . .

Horgan spent over three years in the Army, in Washington, as chief of the Army Information Branch of the Information and Education Division of the War Department.<sup>50</sup>

After the war ended Horgan was involved in research and writing of the Pulitzer Prize winning history, Great River, which he began before the war. Not until 1950 did he again publish a work of fiction.

<sup>49</sup> Horgan, The Common Heart, p. 346.

<sup>50</sup> Kraft, p. 22.

"The Devil in the Desert" appeared first in The Saturday Evening Post and this short story contains much of the technique and theme most admired in his fiction. This completely western story has universal application to man and his struggle for goodness. Good and evil are in conflict in this tale of death and life in the desert. Horgan has again used the rattlesnake to symbolize evil and again man, in understanding the temptation to evil, achieves maturity and an almost Godly nature.

Father Louis who has served his desert parish most of his life is once more traveling on horseback to visit his widely scattered parishioners. He knows, and his immediate superior knows, that he is probably too old to make these journeys but:

He always undertook them with a sense not only of duty but of escape. Nowhere else did he feel so close to God as alone in the hard brush country riding to bring comfort, news and the sacraments to some family in a jacal hidden by solitude open to the hot sky.<sup>51</sup>

The closeness to God which Father Louis feels is a part of the idea that in the desert a man is stripped of superficiality and must come to terms with himself as well as his God.

"The Devil in the Desert" contains some of Horgan's best description of the arid region near the Rio Grande, and in this story it is no longer possible to separate descrip-

<sup>51</sup> Paul Horgan, "The Devil in the Desert," in The Peachstone, p. 408.

tion from plot and theme. The elements of plot, character, setting, and theme are blended into a unified artistic work. This unity lets the reader understand the age and physical infirmity of the priest as the place is described:

The natural limits of his endurance was determined by water. His private map had an X for the end of each stage of travel--a settlement, a farm, a creek, a spring, a water hole (and pray it was not dry).<sup>52</sup>

Father Louis has followed the same circuit of calls for so many years that he knows each part of the desert. He pauses to bathe in a pool of water which eases the sting of the cactus spines he has encountered. When he arrives at the Guerra ranch he hears confession, says mass and baptizes a baby. Then he goes to bless the grave of the old grandmother who has died since his last visit. The small scene at the gravesite exemplifies the skill Horgan shows in handling the southwestern setting:

Guerra brought some water in an earthen vessel, not much, but enough. Father Louis took the jug and held it in both hands for a moment, and gazed into it. They were all reminded of how precious water was on the earth, how it determined by its presence the very presence of life. Then he blessed it, and they all knew what this meant in terms of their daily struggle.<sup>53</sup>

The water he blesses is the water of life both actually and symbolically.

<sup>52</sup> Horgan, "The Devil in the Desert," p. 412.

<sup>53</sup> Horgan, "The Devil in the Desert," p. 419.

Once more the old priest resumes his journey, and Horgan brings the sounds of the desert to the reader with vivid realism:

As he rode on, the singing in the air became louder. It sounded like the voice of the desert heat. He shook his head, resentful of natural conditions that hid behind mystery. And then suddenly he knew, and scornfully he rebuked himself for taking so long about it.

He was riding into a swarm of cicadas, and now he could see the first ones, clinging to the mesquite as they raised their shrieking song of the heat. The farther he rode the louder they became. He bent his head under their stinging assault upon his hearing. There were thousands and millions of them. Blindly they fulfilled their natures in their collective scream of response to the sun and the desert. The very atmosphere seemed to be in flames, and the sound of the stridulating insects added to the illusion.

Father Louis had touched the desert often enough. He had smelled it. He had tasted it in every state. But never before in so real a sense had he heard it.

He was suddenly exhausted.<sup>54</sup>

The sound of the cicadas foreshadows the death of the old priest. People who live in rattlesnake country know that it is easy to mistake the rattle of the insect for the warning of the snake, and this is the way Father Louis misses the warning of the rattler which kills him. He has heard the cicadas and does not recognize the buzz of the serpent until it is too late. He has met the Devil in the desert.

<sup>54</sup> Horgan, "The Devil in the Desert," p. 424.

Alone in a copse of mesquite, he has lain down to rest and the snake crawls into the shade of the sleeping old man to strike him when he awakens. After the snake bites him, the old priest imagines a conversation with the Devil, as personified in the snake. In that talk, the struggle between good and evil is symbolized, and good is triumphant for the priest tells the snake:

I can't assume any form, for example, as you can. I always remain what I am, a man, an old man, a dirty old man when water is scarce or I am busy, an old man full of pride and sin and vanity and all the rest of it; but nobody is ever in doubt about what I mean, or about what I think life means, and with all my mistakes in style and good form, the garden I scratch keeps growing.<sup>55</sup>

Setting and theme are completely unified in this story which may be Horgan's best, for he has vividly created the place and the people who live there. The setting is the plot, for the priest's bones are not discovered for eight years. Then his friend Guerra comes across them by chance. He knows, since Father Louis had freed his horse and the horse returned to the ranch, how the old man died. Guerra tells the Bishop, "Where I found him was just like the place where it would happen."<sup>56</sup> Then he pantomimes the sinuous movement of the snake. James Kraft has called this, ". . .

<sup>55</sup> Horgan, "The Devil in the Desert," p. 431.

<sup>56</sup> Horgan, "The Devil in the Desert," p. 537.

one of his finest stories, . . ."57

Horgan has said that he does not believe he is a regionalist; he has written about other places than the Southwest. He comments, however, about the West in the same interview:

If there is a single pervasive theme in writing about west, perhaps, with all its variations, it could be identified as the theme of man, alone, against the grand immensity of nature--the nature of the land reflected in his own soul.<sup>58</sup>

His idea of man alone against nature, as reflected in his soul and the maturity that a man achieves when he meets this challenge is the major theme of A Distant Trumpet. This is the novel which many people connect most closely with Horgan. It is a western story of the Army, of duty, of Indians, and of the desert Southwest. James Kraft says of the book:

This was Horgan's one attempt to write a historical novel that used the setting and the usual ingredients of the Western--in this case the United States Army and the Indians. Horgan said he wanted "to deal with these things as if nobody had ever heard of them before. It was my belief that if I wrote a rich enough book, and a true one, it would survive as a worthwhile novel whose 'westernness' was not necessarily the determining thing about it." He succeeded with this objective and the novel has been extremely popular. A measure of its success was its sale to Hollywood

<sup>57</sup> Kraft, p. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Horgan, "The Novel--A Symposium," p. 41.

and the production of a movie reduced the story to all the conventions Horgan so artfully avoided.<sup>59</sup>

A Distant Trumpet is the story of a young man's growth from a raw young lieutenant to a seasoned cavalry officer in the desert Southwest. Matthew Hazard, the protagonist of the novel, is stationed at a small fort in Apache Indian territory after his graduation from West Point. During the time that he spends in the West he experiences the barrenness of the land and the extremes of climate as well as the conflict with the Indians. In this harsh setting men are forced to achieve some sort of maturity or perish.

In an early encounter with Indians Horgan details the scene where Indians have killed an Army deserter and his girl friend, the post laundress:

Further specifications of unspeakable treatment suffered by the two corpses would be reserved for the official report to the commanding officer of Fort Delivery, Matthew decided. He was pale. His lips were white, and felt stretched.<sup>60</sup>

This is Matt Hazard's first encounter with Indians and he is strong enough to keep his head and do what is required of him. He learns in "The school of the desert, . . ."<sup>61</sup> One of his men is unable to pass the test of that hard school,

<sup>59</sup> Kraft, p. 29.

<sup>60</sup> Paul Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 132.

<sup>61</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 134.



and he deserts rather than pursue the Apaches with the rest of his patrol. The young lieutenant, his scout, and his men follow the deserter through a dust storm even though they are short of rations. The storm is vividly pictured:

By eight o'clock the full storm was upon them. The sky was filled from rim to rim with flying heavy dust. The wind was strong. It drove the dust into the skins of the troopers, stinging. It choked their nostrils and mouths. They made mud about their eyes with tears stung forth by the hot wind and the driving dust. . . . The sun was like a disk of pale blue metal. The dust closed over it soon again.<sup>62</sup>

The deserter Cranshaw is captured and returned for court-martial. Both men, Hazard and Cranshaw, have faced a part of the hard western setting and both have been afraid, but Cranshaw is destroyed by the land and his fear while Hazard survives and even learns something about commanding men. He accepts his own responsibility for not recognizing the trooper's weakness. When the time of punishment comes for Cranshaw, Horgan again uses the setting to emphasize the theme of the weakness of one man and the strength of the other. The deserter is branded with a D and sent away under escort; the desert sun is as hot as the branding iron used to punish the soldier:

It was a day of still heat and white sky. Thin high cloud filtered the sun's light until it made no shadows anywhere. Light poured wide and changeless from above upon all things. Color paled . .

<sup>62</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 157.

. . The air was so hot and so dry that men inhaling it felt their tongues go rough under the roofs of their mouths.<sup>63</sup>

This experience is another example of the occurrences taking Matt Hazard on his road to become a mature human being.

Another episode tells how Matt is seduced by the wife of a fellow officer even though he is engaged to a girl who lives in the East. The seduction is foreshadowed and symbolized by an incident involving a scorpion:

Matthew scrambled down the bank and came up to the dog, which was dancing about in clamorous fury. Matthew tried to pull him away from a little heap of fallen clods, and as he did so, he saw a large white scorpion with its shelled tail quivering over its back. It was like some miniature survival from a prehistoric sea. It might have been more imagined than real, but Matthew thought he smelled an odd, musty, yet acid essence in the air, released by the defensive insect.<sup>64</sup>

Horgan implies a link between the primal nature of the desert and the sexual impulse in man. Nothing in his writing shows approval of sexuality outside of marriage; instead he shows a great deal of respect for the conventions of the Christian religion. In commenting on the themes in western writing Horgan says:

In east it is society in its complexity which offers opposition to the individual. In west it is the raw wilderness, with a sparse society reflecting rawness, which offers opposition. In

<sup>63</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 235.

<sup>64</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 176.

west a man triumphs over or succumbs to primal nature . . .<sup>65</sup>

Horgan has used the setting of West and its difficulties to illuminate the struggle a man makes within himself. Matt Hazard triumphs over his own primal nature and breaks off the affair. It is a measure of Hazard's growth that he does not tell his young wife, Laura, anything of his encounter with the woman. Horgan's protagonist accepts his own sinfulness and lives and grows from the knowledge.

Matt Hazard matures further and learns more of the desert and of men in a scouting expedition against the Chiricahua Apaches. He and Joe Dummy the Indian scout are pursued by the Indians across the desert, and the desert in Horgan's description becomes a sort of hostile army camp:

It was like being in a revetment. Whatever man built, nature had somewhere built it first. Behind them rose the sheer bluff; ahead of them as they turned to see where they had come from lay, moon-silvered, a stand of tall grass and then the desert.<sup>66</sup>

The scout is wounded by an arrow and Matt is forced to deal with a problem which grows out of the setting:

Yes, Matthew knew. The arrow was poisoned. The Chiricahuas made baskets of spring willow canes. Into these they put captive rattlesnakes which they teased with arrows thrust through the

<sup>65</sup> Horgan, "The Novel--A Symposium," p. 41.

<sup>66</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 380.

woven willows, until the snakes struck again and again at the iron points, leaving on them the crystalline venom that when dry gave no odor but, when wet, as with man's blood, smelled to make the tongue come up in the throat. Such an arrow smelled of death. Joe Dummy, as Matthew knew him, and more properly White Horn, as he knew himself in all his knowledge and dignity, was now preparing to die.<sup>67</sup>

Joe expects Hazard to leave him, but the white man stays to fight the poison by cauterizing the wound. The cauterization saves Joe, and they drive off the Indian attackers by firing the dry prairie grass.

After the fire the harshness of life and death in this land is reemphasized as Horgan tells of how the fleeing Indians have left the old people of their tribe who would have slowed them in their flight to Mexico. The old people and their dogs are tied to mesquite and have been left to die of exposure. Hazard and Joe release the elderly Indians to survive if they can as they follow the tribe.

Hazard and Joe return to the fort in time for the birth of Matt and Laura's first child. Even this event is detailed in terms of the desert. The difficulty of life in the West is specifically compared to the difficulty of life everywhere.

She must hate the desert, where her child was now struggling to open life. How could he carpet it with green lawns and visit it with cooling rains and sweeten it with kindly creatures? It was hard

<sup>67</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 381.

and gritty and gave off hot winds that blinded the eye and the soul, and in most of its creatures lived peril. Why did young people getting married pretend that life was beautiful and safe and always would be? Someone should tell them that it was not so.<sup>68</sup>

Matt Hazard in this scene is coming to the mature perception of the fictive world of Paul Horgan: he realizes the world is not made up of good, but that all men are in a harsh and difficult world where evil exists around them. He applies the truths of the desert to all of life.

Life is not always fair, Horgan says, and good and brave men are destroyed along with evil and cowardly men. In one section of the novel he illustrates this theme. The Cavalry unit on patrol is in an area known many years before by General Quait who accompanies them. It is here he has lost a man whose disappearance was never explained. As they ride they see:

A particularly high, thin and powerful column of whirling pale sand was moving in the distance straight ahead of them. It seemed to approach them, dancing mightily as its tip touched, and leaped and touched the earth.<sup>69</sup>

Because of the peculiarity of the blowing sand a natural phenomenon, a pit of soft yellow soil, is revealed and the end of the general's story is told:

<sup>68</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 388.

<sup>69</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 520.

At a sharp incline, a slope of earth reached out from the pit wall toward the center of the deep dusty floor. Leaning on it was a figure of a man, face downward, with his head resting on his raised left forearm. His right arm was curved under his belly. In the dim lantern light he was dusted thickly with the golden earth of his open grave. . . . He was a mummy, preserved by the dryness of the desert air and the driftings of the yellow earth about him.<sup>70</sup>

The trooper had died after being trapped in the open pit of soft soil; the desert preserved his body for those who found him.

This long and complex novel ends in Washington, but the climax of the book shows the character development and maturation that occurred in the West. Hazard and Joe are sent to Mexico to obtain the surrender of the Apache chief. Horgan describes their struggle to travel over mountains and across the desert to accomplish this mission in passages which show the harsh grandeur of the area and the struggle with the elements. When they return, "General Quait, and the other soldiers who knew Matthew Hazard, saw in him, as he returned from Mexico, a man tried and transformed."<sup>71</sup> Joe and Matt are forever bound by their desert experiences and because of this Hazard refuses the Congressional Medal of Honor when the Army fails to honor its promise of a place for Joe and instead sends him to a reservation in Florida.

<sup>70</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 523.

<sup>71</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 597.

After the medal has been refused, the General says, "I wonder whether Matthew ever had a chance to educate himself for a day of sorrow. I hope so. I do hope so."<sup>72</sup>

Horgan's character, Hazard, is developed in the Southwest, he is in conflict with the elements of the region, he survives the conflict, and in the final words of the general is the universal application, that all human beings must educate themselves for that day of sorrow which comes to all. Only in that kind of maturity can man find his salvation. Hazard is Pilgrim, every man, who progresses through a series of encounters with a variety of evils and difficulties to a Celestial City of maturity. His slough of despond is the desert and his giant despair is disillusionment in an Army he trusted, and he matures because of his contact with the forces of the desert.

If A Distant Trumpet is a novel directed by its sense of place, Whitewater is not. Although the setting for this novel is south central Texas, it contains none of the sense of the desert. It is, instead, a book about a manmade lake and people whose lives are seen as if mirrored in water. The narrator, a mature college teacher, looks back on his youth from the perspective of long absence and sees that youth mirrored in time. The river, the water tower, the

<sup>72</sup> Horgan, A Distant Trumpet, p. 629.

accidental death of a friend caused by the youthful protagonist, as well as the adult narrator, are similar to the events and people in A Separate Peace by John Knowles.

Horgan's skill in creating a sense of place is missing from this book. James Kraft says, in commenting on the book:

His 1970 novel, Whitewater, a massive success for Horgan financially, was a disappointing novel for many readers. He almost seemed to have lost touch with the Southwest that he again used as the setting.<sup>73</sup>

In Whitewater Horgan has suggested other ideas, other themes, and other methods of creating a novel, and he has not used setting to delineate character or to bring about maturation. If anything, this novel emphasizes the importance of setting in the other works of Paul Horgan.

The sense of place with its evocation of the Southwest reappears as a dominant element in the 1977 novel The Thin Mountain Air. This is the third in a series of Richard novels which began with Things as They Are and Everything to Live For. The first books were set in Dorchester, New York, a city Horgan created, but the third book moves the characters to Albuquerque, New Mexico where the Southwest influences the development of Richard.

Richard, a college student, goes to New Mexico with his parents when his father, the lieutenant governor of New

<sup>73</sup> Kraft, "No Quarter Given," p. 30.



York, contracts tuberculosis. In the dry thin mountain air they hope for his recovery, and Richard embarks on a series of encounters which bring him to maturity. The social life of the town revolves around:

. . . railroading, ranching, and sputum. Richard meets a different breed of folk--including a bizarre assortment of tuberculars, who are every bit as testy and sardonic as Maugham ever said they were.<sup>74</sup>

Richard develops symptoms which indicate he may share his father's weakness and he is sent to work on the ranch of Don Elizario Wenzel to get him outdoors and to strengthen him.

The Albuquerque setting is described in the style which has gained acclaim for Horgan:

Ten miles away, in a grand arched profile, lay the Sandia Mountains, pale rocky brown by day, with blue clefts and inky cloud shadows over their many faces. To their south, another range, the Manzanos, dwindled away in fading blue ridges. At evening, the mountains were washed by a deep rose glow, and at night, during the full moons, they abided in a sort of silvery dark wall against the pale moonlit sky. . . .

. . . the oldest houses were still made of the dried earthen bricks--adobes--which the Pueblo Indians and the Spanish-Mexican settlers both used for building. The streets were unpaved in Old Town.<sup>75</sup>

Don Elizario Wenzel, an elderly widower who has recently married a beautiful young woman, Concha, belongs to that

<sup>74</sup> Richard Boeth, "Love Knots," p. 100.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Horgan, The Thin Mountain Air, p. 92.

segment of southwestern society older than the Anglos, for he is of Mexican descent. He talks to Richard of the land and the people, "All I knew was the land, from my papa. He told me once, The land will either kill you or you will make it serve you. I have made it mine."<sup>76</sup> The statement illuminates Horgan's theme that in the harsh western setting, evil and good are found in both nature and men who live there. As a man comes into the setting and is in conflict with it, he will either mature or will be destroyed.

Richard learns to accept the necessary cruelty of the sheep dipping and learns also of the unnecessary cruelty of the amoral ranch hand Buz; Buz enjoys trying to drown a sheep in the evil smelling creosote dip. The sheep dipping scene foreshadows the death of Don Elizario at the hands of Buz, for Buz covets Concha and drowns Don Elizario in the vat of dip.

By the time that Richard has helped to pull the body of Don Elizario from the dipping vat and has driven from the mud marooned ranch to town, he begins to comprehend that evil is common to all men, "Though he was in custody for the worst of crimes, I was even so pulled by a sense of our common humanity and its general sorrows."<sup>77</sup> Because of his

<sup>76</sup> Horgan, The Thin Mountain Air, p. 192.

<sup>77</sup> Horgan, The Thin Mountain Air, p. 238.

experiences at the ranch he comes back to Albuquerque not only restored to strength and health but also mature enough to face his father's death:

It seems to me now that I came home readier to deal with pain than before. I came home from a land which gave space to my vision, and loss to my youthful conviction that virtue controlled all. Now I knew that virtue had to be salvaged as best it could out of every human situation.<sup>78</sup>

He sees the disparity between the artificial society of the town and its expatriot residents and the land:

What arc could ever connect the world of these people with the life of the earth and its labor, the blind needs of the animal creation, the sorrow of evil and savage death which I had come home from?<sup>79</sup>

Richard has matured sufficiently to allow him to understand his father's affair with another woman even though his father obviously loved Richard's mother at the same time. He is able to look, without judgement, at the drives that brought about the affair. This open understanding of good and evil in men is made possible by his close contact with the desert.

The Thin Mountain Air contains many scenes found in Horgan's earlier work.<sup>80</sup> The tubercular doctor, the sheep

<sup>78</sup> Horgan, The Thin Mountain Air, p. 243.

<sup>79</sup> Horgan, The Thin Mountain Air, p. 253.

<sup>80</sup> In No Quarter Given the tubercular doctor is described in almost exactly the same terms as the doctor in The

dipping, the death of the tubercular man, and Don Elizario are all found in other works. While those earlier works take the setting and use it to amplify the theme and characterizations, The Thin Mountain Air is too conscious of the themes and their importance. It is almost as if Horgan has chosen the major ideas of his earlier works and used them together for effect. Because of this self-conscious use of theme and method, the book is not so satisfactory as the earlier works which it incorporates.

Man's choice of either good or evil is a theme of many of Horgan's stories. As his characters interact with the setting and with other characters they must make a conscious choice between the good and evil possibilities within themselves. This does not imply that his characters are all virtuous; instead, Horgan reveals men as fallible creatures who make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. The desert-mountain settings make the choice appear clearer because there are none of the trappings of civilization to interfere with the confrontation.

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Thin Mountain Air, ". . . tall, skeletally thin, with a long forward jaw, an exhausted smile, . . ." and "Tall, stooped, skeletally thin, he had a skull-like face which constantly wore its fierce bony smile." The ranch hand who enjoys the pain he inflicts on the calves during the branding in A Lamp on the Plains is much like the hand who enjoys the pain of the sheep dipping in The Thin Mountain Air.

When Horgan departs from this theme of good and evil in conflict, he has less success. Whitewater with its adolescent characters and their breach of the moral codes lacks the sense of conscious choices being made. In comparison the adolescents of A Lamp on the Plains are much better developed characters because they consciously choose for good or evil and are either destroyed or survive because of that choice.

Horgan's narratives frequently use a passage that describes the place and its violence followed by another passage that describes man and his violence. Through the symbolic and real setting the reader understands the characters. As his characters come in contact with the land they begin to understand their own capacity for violence, or for good, and through that comprehension the process of maturation occurs. This theme is not limited to adolescents; rather, it happens all through men's lives. Matt Hazard of A Distant Trumpet is an adult in years, and he matures further because of his desert and mountain experiences. Father Louis of "The Devil in the Desert" is an old man near death, but he too is a part of the process of maturation because he learns in his debate with the snake that the choice between good and evil is made continuously all through a man's life. He finds that he must still make the right choice even though he is near to death.

It is important to note that Horgan's stories are not didactic in tone, nor are they romantic. The realism of the settings and the people who live there is too great for the author to slip into these weaknesses. Horgan is not judgmental in his presentation of the capacity in man for good or evil; instead, he views it as a part of all of humanity, a universal problem. He seems to imply that men must become aware of their failings, forgive themselves, and go on.

Horgan's use of setting is dual; it is not only important as an antagonist to his characters but also serves as a symbolic statement of the theme of man and his choice between good and evil. The realistic description takes on added importance as it represents broader concepts of man's inhumanity to man and animals. Horgan's southwestern setting is a moral setting which teaches his characters about themselves. The important elements of setting--the grandiose desert and mountains, the enduring trees, the violent storms, the venomous snakes--become symbols. Only when Horgan becomes overly conscious of the significance of the setting, as in The Thin Mountain Air, do these symbols detract from the writer's art.

The most satisfying of his stories contain these common elements of man in conflict with nature, the conflict of good and evil, and the maturation of character. When Horgan departs from the ideas his fiction is less than satisfactory.

The span of Paul Horgan's western fiction dates from 1935, when No Quarter Given was published, to 1977, the publication date of The Thin Mountain Air. From over forty years of his writing the central position of his sense of place emerges as the most important single element, for his characters are shown in relationship to that place. Just as the desert areas were important in the author's life, so they are important in his fiction. In Approaches to Writing Horgan says, "Like Antaeus, the artist must touch earth to gain strength. Each artist must define 'earth' for himself. It will be the image of his hidden needs" (p. 151). Horgan found in New Mexico the earth most essential to his needs.

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