

WILLA CATHER'S CODE HERO: TOM OUTLAND AS SHANE

by

Glen A. Love
University of Oregon

One reason, I believe, for our continuing fascination with Willa Cather's The Professor's House is that its two interrelated stories, Tom Outland's and Professor St. Peter's, encompass the split identity which is characteristic of western American literature. In this remarkable novel, Cather combines elements of both the formulaic and the so-called "serious" western, and in doing so she reveals that both genres contribute meaningfully to her sense of contemporary American life.

Books One and Three, the first and last sections of The Professor's House, are, of course, ample evidence of the novel's difficult and provocative nature, treating, as they do, the life of an alienated intellectual of late middle age who comes to accept at last a place in the house of the social family, where fortitude must take the place of joy. But in the Professor's house are many mansions and in one of these is lived Tom Outland's life, as revealed in Book II, the middle section of the novel, entitled "Tom Outland's Story." Briefly told, Tom's life is more stereotypically heroic than even Hollywood would dare to venture: A young cowboy makes a stunning archaeological discovery, then turns to college where he is a brilliant student, and then to science where he invents a gadget which revolutionizes the aircraft industry, then to the war, where he rushes off to die nobly, leaving his friend to marry Tom's girl and the young couple to then enjoy the riches accruing to them from Tom's marvelous invention. Who would, in bald summary, believe it?

To compare The Professor's House with a classic formula western like Jack Schaefer's Shane is not only to demonstrate the unabashedly heroic nature of Tom's story but is also to reveal more clearly aspects of power and limitation in both stereotypical and non-stereotypical western American literature.

Shane is more than merely formulaic, to be sure, but it meets the requirements of the "Western" on all counts; indeed, it seems to define the prototype unerringly. It is set on the frontier in that moment when it is passing into civilization; indeed, Shane takes place in 1889, just one year before the U.S. Census Bureau officially proclaimed the end of the frontier. The story presents the apostles of civilization in conflict with those of the older, freer, but nonetheless dying West. A heroic stranger, virtually nameless, appears, and must choose between the older order whose skills he shares but whose denial of the historical process he cannot espouse. He sides with the representatives of civilization and defeats their tormentors in a violent confrontation. Although he eschews violence and turns to it only

regretfully, he proves himself a master of it. Having preserved the community and insured its appropriate future, he turns from its accolades and withdraws alone, as he had come. There are, as John Cawelti claims, many variations possible within the Western formula, but surely the Shane story is not far from the center by which such variations are recognized.¹

To begin by comparing the structures of the two novels, it is worth noting that both heroes' stories are framed within the perception of an admiring observer. Professor St. Peter, as Cather's third-person central consciousness, shapes our awareness of Tom Outland less directly than Bob Starrett, Schaefer's first-person narrator, controls our conception of Shane, but the technique is similar in both works. A compelling central figure exists as a kind of dream-hero in the worshiping consciousness of an observer. Both Shane and Tom Outland are exponents of heroic action in contrast to their more reflective admirers, but it is significant that Cather's framing figure is an intellectual, a habitual questioner and prober of meanings, one whose own life, thoughts, and emotions are thoroughly depicted in counterpoint to Tom Outland's decisive story, and are finally more important than Tom's story. Schaefer's narrator is, on the other hand, a child during the book's actual events, and as a storyteller he seems but a simple townsman whose later life, only briefly glimpsed, has not moved physically beyond the town of his youth, nor mentally beyond his fascination with the legendary Shane. The use of the child-observer in Shane is not only a measure of its simplicity but also perhaps its most unique feature, a technique by which the formula story is given new freshness and distinction.

Both novels, then, pass out of the frontier age and into a post-frontier America, but Schaefer suggests a post-frontier which is the unthreatened and secure fruition of pioneer hopes. In a short coda, Bob Starrett, now an adult, recalls Shane's parting words to him to grow strong and straight. He suggests at this point the growth of the town and community since his childhood, and we may read into these patterns of order and fruition a vindication of Shane's sacrifice. Shane has become a legend in the town. The narrator, finally, dis-counts the scraps of information he has heard through the years as to Shane's real identity, preferring his own fable-like conception: "He was the man who rode into our little valley out of the heart of the great glowing West and when his work was done rode back whence he had come and he was Shane."²

Cather's new America, on the other hand, is deeply troubled. Tom is indeed Cather's heroic modern Westerner, a new pioneer who carries on into the scientific and industrial present the frontier promise of her older generation heroes and heroines like Alexandra Bergson of O Pioneers!, Antonia Shimerda of My Antonia, and Captain Forrester of A Lost Lady. He, too, like Shane, has passed into legendary status in the minds of his admirers. But Tom's portrait, the center

of a triptych, cannot be seen apart from the somber panels which enclose it. In *The Professor's House* and *Shane*, both reflectors, Professor St. Peter and Bob Starrett, cling to their lost cowboys' cherished memories, indeed seem to live vicariously through their heroes, but Cather's Professor is wrenched at last out of his bondage to myth and forced to take up his place in a threatening contemporary world. The effect of Cather's structure is irony; that of Schaefer's is confirmation.

Both Tom and Shane exude a sense of quietude and serenity, often letting their admirers and their actions, rather than their words, speak for them. Taciturnity is, of course, a standard attribute of the western hero, and Shane carries out the requirement unremarkably. Tom is, again, a more complex case. He tells us his story, but with a kind of economy that strips away all pretentiousness and false emotion. Reading Tom's diary after his death, the Professor reflects that

this plain account was almost beautiful, because of the stupidities it avoided and the things it did not say. If words had cost money, Tom couldn't have used them more sparingly. The adjectives were purely descriptive, relating to form and colour, and were used to present the objects under consideration, not the young explorer's emotions. Yet through this austerity one felt the kindling imagination, the ardour and excitement of the boy, like the vibration in a voice when the speaker strives to conceal his emotion by using only conventional phrases.³

The accent, so apt for Tom's style, also describes and predicts remarkably the style of an as yet almost unknown young writer, Ernest Hemingway, who would also employ the moral stance and the manner of the western code hero in his fictional figures.

As for the stories themselves of Cather and Schaefer, it is curious how closely Tom Outland's story, cut free from the thickets of moral ambiguity which surround it in the story of the Professor, is similar to that of *Shane*. In both cases, the protagonist closely resembles the tragic hero of myth and romance: A figure of compelling power emerges from mysterious origins. (Outland's name, suggesting outlander or foreigner, marks his uniqueness as surely as the virtually anonymous but romantic "Shane".) Accepted by the social body the hero nevertheless holds himself somewhat apart from it, for the role he must perform on its behalf requires sacrifices beyond its capacity to share or understand. In the face of threats to the society, he rises above its fears and uncertainties and acts decisively to preserve those values by which it may honorably endure, but at the cost of his

own life. Still, he is not killed so much as he chooses death for himself.⁴ His purity and purposefulness are too intense for this world. And so he remains a bright memory in the minds of his survivors.

The purity of both heroes extends to their sexuality. Shane does not marry, does not prosper in the warm afterglow of earned affection as does, say, Owen Wister's Virginian. Shane acts at the end to break off the growing romantic attachment between Marion Starrett and himself. Riding away at the end of the novel, Shane tells the boy, speaking of his mother and father, "There's only one thing more I can do for them now" (p. 113). Shane's doomed moving-on, his withdrawal from the community and from the possibility of a sexual attachment is present, with a vengeance, in Cather's novel, wherein Tom Outland goes undoubtedly virginal to his death. Like all of Cather's truest heroes, Tom must not spill his heroic potency. Not only is illicit sex always punished in Cather, as critic Blanche Gelfant points out,⁵ but Cather seems to find in all sex a threat to true selfhood and a diversion from the greater creative achievements of the individual will. Although their motives may differ, both Cather and Schaefer share the western writer's characteristic avoidance of sexual considerations.

Written large, the entrapment of sexuality is the obligation of the individual to the social order. The Professor, suffocating under the weight of such obligations to his wife, his daughters and their husbands, to his university as it slides toward mediocrity, to his role as renowned scholar, finds release beckoning in the clean and decisive death of Tom Outland. Tom, the older man thinks, "had escaped all that" (p. 261). Cather here intimates, I think, a new and fascinating complexity once again beyond the scope of the formula Western. For all of Tom's clear-eyed heroism, his rush to the front is an escape, and calls into question whether a larger share of heroism may not be called for in what is required of the Professor; staying put and facing somehow the crisis of his personal life. It is this sort of heroism that the Professor struggles toward so that by the book's conclusion, he thinks, however uncertainly, that "he could face with fortitude the future" (p. 283).

Tom is fortunate, in Catherian terms, in being able to achieve alone, both as the cowboy explorer and later as the lonely scientist. As a "pure" researcher he is carefully distinguished from Louie Marsellus, who puts Tom's invention into commercial production. This leaves Tom in the enviable position of having benefited society abstractly, in terms which do not sully his individual striving. Thus, Tom's honor is maintained until death; self-contained and invulnerable to the forces of moral decay he goes his own way in the laboratory as he had in the cowboy West, a kind of "last gentleman," as are all of our true western heroes.⁶ Finally, when war comes, Tom goes off to fight and leaves the girl for someone else to marry, a code hero to

the end. The Professor's reflection upon Tom might serve for all our western heroes of fiction and film: "Fellows like Outland don't carry much luggage, yet one of the things you know them by is their sumptuous generosity--and when they are gone, all you can say of them is that they departed leaving princely gifts" (p. 121).

In both Shane and The Professor's House, then we are presented with the conflict between the individual and society. In both works, an outsider touches a family and a society without ever quite becoming part of them, but he nonetheless influences them profoundly. Schaefer's conception of marriage, family, and community is wholly supportive. We notice how important questions in Shane are inevitably conveyed upward through individual and family discussion to community debate and back to the family and individual level again. Civilization clearly succeeds the departure of the hero in Shane. In The Professor's House, where marital, family and communal relationships are suffering from a kind of moral dry-rot, we are not at all sure whether civilization can recover itself. Once more, Cather's view is complex, aberrant, questioning, while Schaefer's is clear and affirmative.

Clear and affirmative also describes Schaefer's treatment of violence, a subject upon which the formula Western has been seen to make an important contribution as a cultural expression.⁷ The several fist fights and two shoot-outs in Shane are unanswered by anything of such immediacy in Cather's novel. In the Western, violence serves to assert the individual's ability to set a threatened world aright. Acting out of a heightened moral awareness, the code hero moves unwaveringly toward his violent confrontation, his destructiveness sanctioned by its alliance with the clear needs of the society. The code Western, of course, ignores much of the real historical violence of the frontier, the casual, amoral beatings and killings by those drawn to the frontier by the absence of restraints upon their behavior, the violence inflicted upon the land itself, the destruction of the buffalo, the rangeland and forest, and above all the decimation of the Indians. In Shane, the boy in his play shoots make-believe Indians to Shane's benign acquiescence. In The Professor's House, Cather's cliff-dwellers are "good Indians," that is, artists and craftsmen, but having conversely declined as warriors they are the victims, at last, of more aggressive tribes. Cather's treatment is more complex, but still merely a brief and undramatized historical summary. Direct depictions of Indian life and realistic treatments of the violence practices by whites against Indians have had to await the so-called "anti-Westerns" of recent years. But within its narrow range, the formula Western does offer a significant and powerful treatment of violence, of might making right, in American life.

Cather's violence is muted, intimated, offstage. When she attempts a direct presentation, as she does with the World War I

battle scenes at the conclusion of One of Ours, she is quite unconvincing. Yet her view of the Great War as a kind of holy crusade--Our Boys against the Hun Invaders--has something of the formulaic fervor about it, and indicates her acceptance of violence as an instrument of national policy. And Tom's vague invention which improves aircraft engines undoubtedly enhances the deadliness of aerial warfare. Once again, Cather projects the older western myth of retribution through individual violence into contemporary terms; the cowboy enters the laboratory and becomes a scientist, one promised agent of salvation succeeding another. But, instead, the new Westerner helps to usher in a modern era of anxiety and war.

Another important contrast between Cather's novel and Schaefer's is in their respective treatments of landscape. The interrelationships between man and landscape, the idea that nature itself is a source of primal power--these are, of course, crucial elements in western American literature. Cather makes extensive use of the immensities of western space, the beautiful vistas of Tom's Blue Mesa and the Professor's Lake Michigan, the older man's primitivistic return to "earth and woods and water" (p. 265) and the young man's reverence for the fabulous stone city, which graces the natural beauty of the rimrock country with a crown of human significance. For it is not mere landscape that Cather celebrates in her novels, but intimations of human achievement which invest those natural settings with a kind of religious or artistic dimension. Cather thus extends our sense of nature in the western novel by allowing its grandeur to be shared with human creativity. Each enhances the other, and when Tom discovers the cliff city he responds to both in the proper tones of sublimity and awe. There is nothing to match this intensity of relationship between man and nature in the novel Shane. True, Shane's identification with the mountains is thematically established in the novel, but the linkage is thin and perfunctory. I attribute this lesser sense of landscape in Shane to Schaefer's not having experienced the West first-hand and over a long period of time, as had Cather. The evocation of setting in Schaefer's later novel, Monte Walsh, written after the author had moved to the Southwest and spent some years there, is much more sure and convincing. One recalls, in this context, Cather's fictional Professor, whose historical researches on the Spanish explorers in the Southwest lacked authenticity until he himself had experienced the region first-hand. While Shane, then, lacks the powerful sense of place of The Professor's House, both works ask us to regard the actions of their heroes from the perspective of ethical openness which the Western setting embodies.⁸

The Midwest and Southwest of The Professor's House were Willa Cather's blood's country. She knew the American West as only one who had been formed by its influences could know it. Jack Schaefer, on the other hand, wrote four western books, including Shane, before ever getting closer to it than Ohio, a demonstration

that the creation of the formula Western does not depend on the kind of regional bone-wisdom which marks the best non-formulaic western literature.⁹ In fairness to Schaefer, however, it should be noted that he is a careful student of the West, and that, while his depiction of western landscape is much less intense than Cather's, his historical awareness, his knowledge of farm and ranch life, of occupations, horses, equipment, clothing, food, and the like is deep and convincing, as is his command of colloquial western language.

But what distinguishes Shane as a classic example of the Western is its strong and simple depictions of character, and its action fashioned along boldly-drawn and decisive lines. There is, indeed, something to be learned by applying the techniques of close reading to a novel like Shane, but the results thus achieved are likely to be quite limited when compared to the wealth of insights which attend a close reading of a work like The Professor's House.¹⁰ It is more rewarding, I believe, to regard Shane in such terms as Kenneth Burke sets forth in his treatment of literature as symbolic action, as a kind of equipment for living.¹¹ What Shane does, in Burke's terms, is to arouse within us a more or less timeless and contemporaneous appetite, and then to gratify that appetite. The appetite might be defined, with Shane, as order, security, validation of the family and the right relationship between adult and child, on the personal level, and on the wider national and historical level the sanctioning of the doctrines of heroic individualism and nation-building which are commonly associated with the American frontier heritage.¹² One of the important contributions of western American literature is its stubborn insistence upon the legitimacy of those values associated with what Wallace Stegner describes as "strenuousness, pragmatism, melliorism, optimism and the stiff upper lip." "Any western writer," Stegner goes on to say,

may ultimately be grateful to his western up-bringing for convincing him, beyond all chance of conversion, that man, even Modern Man, has some dignity if he will assume it, and that most lives are worth living even when they are lives of quiet desperation. The point is to do the best one can in the circumstances, not the worst. From the western writer's square, naïve point of view, the trouble with Modern Man, as he reads about him in fiction, is that Modern Man has quit.¹³

The cheap and automatic optimism of much of American culture at its most superficial should not preclude the possibility of a serious affirmation of life. And, conversely, as Robert Warshaw reminds us, the widespread presence of meretricious optimism ought not drive us, by reflex, to assume that pessimism or despair is an auto-

matic guarantee of seriousness.¹⁴

That such expressions of order, optimism, and heroic individualism as are found in Shane may have more or less universal appeal is demonstrated by the influence and popularity of such works in many diverse countries and cultures. Shane, both as book and film, is capable of expressing to wide and varied audiences the affirmation of order over anarchy and the necessity for heroic individualism and courage at times when nothing else will answer. To this universal appeal, one must add the convincing arguments of recent theorists of the popular Western like John Cawelti and Will Wright that the Westerns of any period in America satisfy a need to reconcile the particular tensions of that period by projecting them into a historical fiction invested with symbolic resemblance to the contemporary society.¹⁵ Seen from this perspective, Shane expressed a resolution of the tensions of post-World War II American society which sensed its recent victory as a clear triumph of righteousness over evil and yet which viewed the obligations of world leadership and the problems of the post-War future with genuine trepidation. Shane, as Burke would say, sized up the situation and gave its audience an appropriate attitude to take toward it. By the story's sanctification of its historical moment--another w period of crucial transition and emergence into powerful nationhood--contemporary American fears were allayed and the country's right to exercise global power was confirmed.

The Professor's House, on the other hand, answers another and equally insistent and universal human propensity for ambiguity and uncertainty, as it also spoke to the anxiety of its own age and, by extension, our own. As a cultural statement, The Professor's House articulated the post-war disillusionment of the 1920's--and what has come to be the malaise of modernism--as Shane was to project the sense of triumphant virtue for Americans in the late 1940's and early 1950's. While Professor St. Peter affirms, at last, the necessity for going forward into the future, he does so with the most profound doubts and misgivings.

Cather's novel, then, explores much more and affirms much less of individual and collective American life than Shane. With a keen sense of our need for moral directness, she nevertheless sheathes Tom Outland's Shane-like portrait of critical simplicity and purity within a context of deep personal and social disorder. Thus, she affirms the myth of the code hero while at the same time she questions it searchingly. Both functions may be appropriate to memorable literature, and both are surely representative of the essential Willa Cather and her West.

NOTES

¹See John Cawelti, The Six-Gun Mystique (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1970), and Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976). Critics who directly acknowledge the centrality of Shane to the western formula include Wallace Stegner, in The Sound of Mountain Water (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 191, and Will Wright, Six-Guns and Society (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 40-59.

²Jack Schaefer, Shane (New York: Bantam, 1978), p. 119. (Shane was originally published in 1949). Further references will be included in the text.

³Willa Cather, The Professor's House (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 262-63. (The novel was originally published in 1925.) Further references will be included in the text.

⁴Although Shane is alive at the end of the novel, he is badly wounded, shot in the stomach, and cannot, in either the realistic or mythic sense, be expected to survive. I am instructed in my conception of the hero here by Rosette C. Lamont's "From Hero to Anti Hero," Studies in the Literary Imagination, 9 (1976), 1-22.

⁵Gelfant, "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in My Antonia," American Literature, 43 (March, 1971), 61-82.

⁶The phrase is Robert Warshow's. See his "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," The Immediate Experience (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1962), p. 141.

⁷See Warshow, pp. 151-54.

⁸Warshow (p. 139) points out this influence of landscape upon morality in the Western.

⁹A helpful critical and biographical overview of Jack Schaefer and his work is Gerald Haslam's Jack Schaefer (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Press, 1975).

¹⁰For a fuller argument in favor of applying the methods of close reading to the popular Western, see Don D. Walker's "Notes Toward a Literary Criticism of the Western," Journal of Popular Culture, 7 (Winter, 1973), 728-741.

¹¹Burke, "Literature as Equipment for Living," The Philosophy of Literary Form (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), pp. 293-304.

¹²On the theme of nation-building in Schaefer, see Fred
Erisman "Growing Up With the American West: Fiction of Jack
Schaefer," Journal of Popular Culture, 7 (Winter, 1973), 710-16.

¹³Stegner, The Sound of Mountain Water, p. 184.

¹⁴Warshow, "The Movie Camera and the American," op. cit.,
p. 181.

¹⁵See Cawelti and Wright, n. 1.