

WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE'S THEORY OF THE WEST

by

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William Allen White's fiction presents a puzzling mixture of unfamiliar images to students of Middle Western literature.¹ Although his pieces often open in standard form with a description of bucolic countryside, pioneers migrating, and towns appearing magically on the open prairie, he does not consider the magnificent sweep of prairie landscape, or the struggle to come to terms with the exigencies of prairie weather, or the dehumanizing desolation of physical and cultural isolation. True, these struggles occurred a generation before White began to write, but many twentieth century Middle Western writers, particularly those who write about the high plains and prairie which is White's setting too, have focused on those early years in their explorations of the character of the region. Not only does the reader notice White's evident indifference to these standard Middle Western settings and conflicts, but the reader is apt to be puzzled by what is there: a curious mixture of tone, at once sentimental, moralizing, and realistic; a confusing array of western, eastern, Biblical, classical and fanciful images and allusions; confusing story lines and crowds of characters--kindly shopkeepers, philosophical country doctors, local moralizers, bombastic politicians and women who are either good or bad but seldom a realistic mixture of both.

It is hard to determine who the main character--(the hero, White would say)--is and just where the story is headed, although by the tale's end, the moral is usually crystal clear. Perhaps it is for these reasons that White's fiction has been generally ignored by critics and readers alike since his death. Yet in a wider context, as editor, essayist and political observer, White's reputation as representative Midwesterner persists.

To understand the relationship between White's fiction and his economic theory, it is necessary to know something of his biography. White's own life illustrated his assertions, expressed in his writing about the Middle West: he was a member of the middle class, he lived in a small town, his family's social life was centered in school and church. White grew up in the frontier town of El Dorado, Kansas. After his father's death when William was fourteen, he moved to Emporia and Lawrence with his mother, attending college and working for local newspapers. He began his journalism career in earnest with the Kansas City Star. In 1895 he bought the Emporia Gazette, and from then until his death in 1944 he was "The Sage of Emporia." An 1896 anti-Populist editorial "What's the Matter With Kansas?" caught the eye of the Republicans who distributed it during the Bryan-McKinley

campaign, and with a national forum soon established, White went about the business of making his "private sentiment public opinion."² Politicians and Presidents read what he wrote and admitted him into their circles of friends. This audience influenced White's style, his plots, and his economic theory, which is reflected in his fiction.

In 1939, near the end of his life and twenty-one years after his last work of fiction, White wrote The Changing West: An Economic Theory About Our Golden Age.³ It was a summary of ideas and opinions that he had held for years. An examination of this work--particularly how the West has changed--explains some of the anomalies in White's fiction. The work traces the settlers' attempt to realize the democratic ideal in the face of conflicting capitalistic reality. According to White's theory, in the beginning cheap land in the opening and expanding West made possible economic equality and freedom. Since everyone had land that rapidly became valuable, everyone had wealth, but no one had more wealth than another. The West became middle class and therefore democratic. The people who enjoyed the fruits of their hard work were optimistic, altruistic, kindly, literate and politically civilized. White's recurring symbols for this optimistic view are the church and the school. These two institutions provide the source of ethical and practical guidance that the people need. Men of good will had the freedom to establish a way of life in which school and church aided men in their struggle to overcome the baser elements in themselves and society so that life was bearable for the decent, kindly man. And all of this was the product of that one unique phenomenon: free land and the rising value of that land.

This part of White's theory explains the bucolic picture of life in early prairie towns that he portrays, however briefly, in the opening pages of his two novels and in some of his short stories. Although towns might be settled in times of struggle or be beset with natural disasters, the people's overriding goal was to establish and maintain order, and it is this orderly civilizing process, rather than the farmer's struggle with the land, that interests White. In The Changing West White tries to explain the unique character of these pioneers: "The whole compassionate social program that rose in the states that were hewed out of the Western Empire was implied in the mercy-loving democracy of these 'Gospel hymns, that often lifted the roof of the little red schoolhouse and every Sunday waked the echoes around the little white church. The lesson of that mercy song was the dignity of the human spirit. . .

Work, for the night is coming,
 Work through the morning hours;
 Work, while the dew is sparkling,
 Work 'mid springing flowers.

Here the children, closing their eyes in musical ecstasy and opening their spirits to propaganda, learned diligence. They learned that the idler was to be scorned" (pp. 32-33).

This simplistic view of early pioneer life is evident in the opening chapters of A Certain Rich Man and In the Heart of a Fool, and in White's Autobiography. Where White sets the historical scene for the main story that takes place in more complicated contemporary time, he focuses not on the struggle to establish a home in the harsh wilderness, but on the idyllic boyhood of his heroes and himself--innocent, sturdy middle-class Yankee Protestant lads.

In an early short story, "The Homecoming of Colonel Hucks," this idyll is his theme.⁴ He sketches the arrival in Kansas of William Hucks and his wife, "young, strong, hearty people," who "conquered the wilderness," but as they grow old, they remember their old Ohio home. "The Kansas grass seemed short, and barren of beauty to them, beside the picture of the luxury of Ohio's fields. For them the Kansas streams did not ripple and dimple so merrily in the sun as the Ohio brooks, that romped through dewy pastures, in their memories," (p. 150). When their children have grown and married, and they have accumulated some savings, Mrs. Hucks arranges a trip back to Ohio:

The day which Colonel and Mrs. William Hucks set apart for starting upon their journey was one of those perfect Kansas days in early October. The rain had washed the summer's dust from the air, clearing it, and stenciling the lights and shades very sharply. The woods along the little stream, which flowed through the farm, had not been greener at any time during the season. The second crop of grass on the hillside almost shined in vividness. The yellow of the stubble in the grain fields was all but a glittering golden. The sky was a deep, glorious blue, and the big, downy clouds which lumbered lazily here and there in the depths of it, appeared near and palpable, (p. 152).

Ohio, of course, does not measure up to their memories and the reality of Kansas.

When the two Kansas people were alone that night, the Colonel asked:

"Don't it seem kind of dwarfed here--to what you expected it would be? Seems to me like it's all shriveled, and worn out, and old. Everything's got dust on it The hills I've thought of as young mountains don't seem to be so big as our bluff back--back home."

Kansas was "home" to them now. For thirty years the struggling couple on the prairie had kept the phrase "back home" sacred to Ohio. Each felt a thrill at the household blasphemy, and both were glad that the Colonel had said "back home," and that it meant Kansas (pp. 159-160).

This sentimental tale provides a rare fictional account of White's admiration for the land and the people of Kansas and by implication all of the Middle West.

White's seeming indifference to common Middle Western themes is not based upon rejection of the pioneer reality that he observed as a child. Rather, he views the early, hard years as prelude to the even more complicated present. In White's view, the character of the West was not the result of "selective migration," the Romantic theory that stated that the pioneers were especially heroic and adventurous. Nor was it due to the deprivations and hardships that the pioneers faced, which molded the character of weak men into heroic and strong men. And in White's estimation, it was not the hardy German or Scandinavian immigrants, but the sturdy Yankee Protestants who settled the western lands. White's theory about this early period of settlement, set forth in The Changing West, is based on rising land prices and augmented by traditional middle class values, and his fiction reflects this theory. His two novels, A Certain Rich Man and In the Heart of a Fool focus on middle class men who rise and fall because of economics and their own weaknesses, and not because of hard work or the exigencies of nature. To readers accustomed to the conflicts and struggles with the land, and the hardships and heroics in other Middle Western literature, White's characters seem curiously unheroic and out of place until they are matched against his theory.

Of course, White was too astute to believe that this Golden Age of middle class democracy ever existed in a pure and perfect state. He knew that change was inevitable, and he believed it came soon after the land was settled. The grabbers and gougers were quickly attracted by the West's easy wealth, and they were not affected by the Golden Rule. The democratic ideal, like innocent childhood, cannot long be sustained outside the protective confines of church and schoolhouse. The boys must grow up and face the sins of greed, poverty, and pride in their fellow townspeople and sometimes in themselves. As White explains:

But let us not forget that in the United States we have an acquisitive civilization. Democratic capitalism merely furnishes a battlefield for the two warring instincts of man, his altruistic yearnings and his acquisitive instincts. And in the hundred and fifty years during which the West was settled, the influence of the church wrestled daily with the vast opportunities which the pioneer era offered to make money, to accumulate wealth by sharp practice and often by vicious devices. When they grew up, those little children who sang the pious homilies in the schools and churches had a hard time keeping up with the scoundrels or joining the brigands who were out for loot. These social vandals, like the camp followers of a great army, plundered and robbed

and poisoned the advancing columns of democracy as they marched across the continent (pp. 39-40).

White recognized that although free land was available to everyone, while some would acquire more than their share, not all would succeed in acquiring land or enough capital to enter the middle class, and the Progressive reformer in him chafed at that. In his novel In the Heart of a Fool his hero is Grant Adams, son of a poor but honest philosophical printer, a boy gifted with intelligence and an idealism that prevents him from using dishonest devices to gain wealth or power. Instead, he becomes a union activist. He will not marry Laura Nesbitt because he has fathered a child, Kenyon, by Margaret Müller, a fact known only to his parents and Doc Nesbitt, Laura's father. Laura marries Thomas Van Dorn, an Eastern lawyer, whose moral laxity Laura's father and Grant both recognize. But the townspeople, awed by Van Dorn's Eastern caste in spite of their own democratic frontier society, are influenced more by Van Dorn's apparent power, made evident by his material prosperity and the judgeship that Doc Nesbitt acquires for him in a futile effort to make him morally responsible, than they are by the honest morality of Grant. In this novel, as in his later essay, White makes it clear that the early settlers did establish a loosely-cast democratic society for a time until the greed of some--in this case in the Eastern lawyer and his local cohorts--forced townspeople to begin to make choices, and decide whether to be on the side of morality, honesty and poverty, or power and prosperity. Chapter seven, for example, is titled, "In Which We See How Life Translates Itself into the Materialism Around It," and it opens:

Coal and oil and gas and lead and zinc
 When they came rushing out of the earth there at Harvey, man groveled before them, and sold his immortal soul to these And the curious thing about this orgy of materialism, was that Harvey and all the thousands of Harveys great and small that filled America in those decades believed with all their hearts--and they were essentially kind hearts--that quick, easy and exorbitant profits, really made the equality of opportunity which every one desired. They thought in terms of democracy--which is at bottom a spiritual estate--and they acted like gross materialists. So they fooled the world, while they deceived themselves (p. 69).

White's other novel, A Certain Rich Man, focuses this struggle on one man, John Barclay. From his boyhood home, Sycamore Ridge, Barclay develops and rules an economic empire. To do this, he betrays and uses his friends and yet Barclay's early moralistic training is so much a part of him that, like the townspeople described in the last passage, he does not recognize his own evil when his father's friend General Ward, an old pioneer idealist, confronts him with it. "John, why are you so crass, so gross a materialist? You have money--why

don't you stop getting it and do something with it worth while?' 'Because, General, I'm not making money--that's only an incident of my day's work. I'm organizing the grain industry of this country as it is organized in no other country on this planet'" (p. 69). It is not money that Barclay is after, but power and a warped sense of good deeds. Barclay regards his success as a sign of his moral worth: he is improving the economic well being of Sycamore Ridge and the nation: he is streamlining marketing technology, all for the "larger good" as he often says.

Barclay is perhaps White's most interesting character. He reflects the middle class's rising expectations: their belief that material prosperity would bring about a better society that all could participate in. Barclay becomes one of those who exploits these expectations for his own ends even as he believes he is helping to achieve them. Finally, events in Sycamore Ridge make Barclay realize the enormity of his presumption. His wife dies in an epidemic that results from contaminated water in the city water plant that Barclay has an interest in. For economic reasons he has ignored the danger. Barclay reaches a conclusion that White says in The Changing West many Middle Westerners had discovered: materialism and morality are not easily combined. According to White's theory, the final complication that destroyed the possible realization of the early democratic ideal is the fact that the open land was gone by 1890. By then, the farmers had become solidly middle-class, and they expected the land to continue to support their rising standard of living. However, the end of free land meant the end of economic equality. No longer could a poor man claim land and work to increase its value. The pioneer who had the land and had been supported in these first hard years by the church's hymns and the Golden Rule fought with his urge to make money by *sharp practices and devices*. Moreover, the farmer soon found that he had to sell his goods to industrial arbiters and no matter how prosperous he became, supplies always cost more than his products sold for. Prices no longer allowed him to live as he was accustomed to living. The material wealth that the first settlers had craved resulted in lower material comforts for the second generation, and the loss of that freedom of movement and the voice in their own local affairs that the pioneers of the "golden age" had enjoyed for a brief time. As White explains it, "the middle class lived for a generation or two upon the bounty of a virgin land They were openhanded, neighborly, kind, munificent in the beneficences, even tolerant of rapacious scoundrels; and in many cases, these west-owners were regal in their institutional grant to rascals because the people, living on the rising prices of land, could well afford to be generous. . . . For them, this West was in truth the Kingdom of Heaven, and they loved it. They cherished their West in affection for a century and a half. But today they are baffled, bewildered, and heartsick at the inequities of this wide world--inequities which now threaten and challenge their life. I mean those deep economic and social wrongs which mock their philosophy, and which assail their democratic claims" (pp. 108-110).

Still, White is optimistic. The struggle between the good and the greedy may never be resolved, but it will continue, and the good will never be wholly defeated. White summarizes these conflicts in this way:

It seems to me the democratic process works something like this: In every human heart are two conflicting forces, the altruistic urge and the egoistic instinct, the centripetal and the centrifugal impulses, the yearning to give and the desire to get. . . . The final compromise in every life between these two inner stresses shapes the curve of a man's personality. In the settlement of the West we had a fairly good working model of the play of those forces which, acting upon one another achieved the democratic end. In the end an approximately just social control bound the aggrandizers into some fair semblance of a just and equitable relation to organized society. That struggle was the democratic process (pp. 115-118).

This conflict between these two urges, stifled by changes in the economic balance of power, is particularly evident in White's two novels. The struggle between the spiritual and the material is almost too obvious in *In The Heart of a Fool*. Civil War veterans--pioneer idealists--found the prairie town of Harvey and enjoy a democratic community for about a generation. But the town begins to fill with smelters and factories and coal miners--material prosperity controlled by an elite. Some of that elite are those original pioneers, who abandoned the early egalitarian ideal, attracted by the promises of riches and power. Thomas Van Dorn represents the most corrosive forces of materialism, although in the early stages of his decline, he half-heartedly attempts to allow the better part of his nature to control his impulses. It is in this stage that he marries Laura Nesbitt, but as he gains and uses power, he becomes more and more degenerate. He abandons Laura for Margaret Müller Fenn. They build a grand but empty house, an obvious symbol of their lives. The "desire to get" controls his life. At every point where compromise is possible, he consciously chooses materialism. In Thomas Van Dorn, it might seem, White has created an image of the new man, and it is not good. And yet, just as the reader fears that Van Dorn and his kind will prevail, the townspeople are rooted out of their passivity by a tragedy--the violent death of Grant Adams--and at the end of the novel, balance has been restored.

It is the third generation, the children of Grant Adams and Laura Nesbitt Van Dorn, who portray White's final resolution of frontier conflict. Kenyon Adams and Lila Van Dorn are steady, sturdy young people and of course they fall in love. A mixing of bloods, both good and bad, Yankee and immigrant, in an established town where the ideal and the material are both in evidence but the evil forces are under some control of law and public opinion has provided a more stable environment

for these children. The first generation was too intent upon monetary goals--making money for themselves or establishing a firm economic footing for the town--to develop personal relationships. The second generation was trying to exploit or control the sudden material prosperity that settlement accomplished. In Kenyon and Lila, the good will prevail not out of innocence but from knowledge of both the spiritual ideal and the material reality.

The story of John Barclay is even more interesting in light of White's quote about these conflicting urges. In A Certain Rich Man, White internalizes this conflict in Barclay. Barclay's father was an idealist, killed in the Kansas-Missouri border war. His mother stayed alone on the frontier. His father's friend, General Ward, warns John, "your mother's sacrifice must find its justification in you. . . if you do not live a consecrated life, John, your mother's life has failed . . . consecrated to some practical service, to an ideal . . . not money service but personal service" (p. 67). Although Barclay never consciously rejects the old man's advice, as Thomas Van Dorn rejects Doc Nesbitt's warnings, Barclay does subvert the ideal for immediate material rewards. A simple device for grain railroad cars is the basis of a fortune that soon allows Barclay to dictate economic policy to most of the townspeople and even to the state's politicians. Sentiment--the ideal--is abandoned: "we can't afford to have sentiment interfere with business" (p. 121), Barclay says, as he rationalizes his own dishonesty, "for the larger good" (p. 138). He manipulates his friends, saying to one who objects to his methods, "this is no game of London Bridge" (p. 147). As in In The Heart of a Fool, it takes multiple tragedies to make John Barclay realize how far he has strayed from his parents' ideal. Finally he summarizes his dealings:

"There was some good in it--a lot of good when you come to think of it--but a fearful lot of bad! Well . . . I've kept the good and chucked the bad . . . I took what balance I had left--every cent of it, went over the books for thirty years, and made what restitution I could . . . and then I got out, I closed up the City Office, and moved the whole concern to St. Paul, and turned it over to the real owners--the millers and elevator men . . . I wonder if it will work . . . There's big money in it . . . But I'm tired of it . . . The great hulk of a thing has ground the soul out of me. So I ducked . . . I never did any real good with money. I'm going to see what a man can do to help his fellows with his bare hands" (pp. 420-421).

That was where White ended his theory and his fiction: the democratic ideal of the pioneer prairie was gone forever. The rascals tried to take over and they failed but the farmer and villager were still at the mercy of big business. All that a decent man can do is keep the good and chuck the bad, and get out if he finds himself in league with the evil doers.

What then is the student of Middle Western literature to make of William Allen White? White's fiction originates in his theory of the conflict between democratic ideal and capitalistic reality rather than in his desire to portray man's epic struggle with the land. Indeed, his own life, his journalistic point of view, his intended audience, and the popular fiction of the early twentieth century that he evidently meant to emulate created a milieu that blocked "traditional" Middle Western themes in White's writings. Does this polemical point of view remove his works from consideration as part of the literary Middle West? The conflict forms the basis for the plot in most of his works, and therefore weakens the stories in that they must conform to the theory rather than to a "realistic" chain of events. Thomas Van Dorn must be slowly but inevitably destroyed. Grant Adams and John Barclay's wife must be martyred as life's natural tragedies must underline the message that the democratic good will prevail in spite of the power of capitalistic wealth. At the same time, however, knowledge, if not appreciation, of White's economic theory makes some of the contradictions in his novels and short stories much less puzzling. His emphasis on contemporary conflicts, on small town politics and contradictory economic philosophies are consistent with White's own point of view--nurtured in the Middle West--even if these themes are not reflected in "traditional" Middle Western literature.

If we recognize the limitations of White's polemical and complex style, we can make room for his fiction as a viable and valuable addition to the region. For years, his fiction has been virtually ignored by students of Middle Western literature. It is time that we accepted his fiction, recognizing its weaknesses, but also its origins in White's impassioned loyalty to the region and--finally--his unique and therefore valuable contributions to the Middle Western fictional point of view.

NOTES

¹White's fiction includes: The Real Issue (Chicago: Way and Williams, 1896); The Court of Boyville (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1899); Strategems and Spoils (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1901); In Our Town (New York: McClure, Phillips, 1906), A Certain Rich Man (New York: Macmillan Co., 1909); God's Puppets (New York: Macmillan Co., 1916); In the Heart of a Fool (New York: Macmillan, 1918).

²The Autobiography of William Allen White (New York: Macmillan, 1946), p. 163.

³(New York: Macmillan).

⁴The Real Issue (Chicago: Way and Williams, 1896).