

SACRED CIRCLE IMAGERY AND THE UNITY OF LITTLE BIG MAN

by

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Thomas Berger's Little Big Man has been the subject of some discriminating appraisals, but the structure of the novel remains a matter of debate, and its unity has not been thoroughly explored.¹ Even the novel's genre seems to be in dispute for some readers. Leslie Fiedler perhaps echoes a widespread misconception of the novel when he voices doubt about Jack Crabb's reliability as a narrator, describing the book in terms more appropriate for a discussion of John Barth's fiction or of Berger's own later parody of the detective novel, Who Is Teddy Villanova? (1978).² Delbert Wylder and Fred Fetlow both present convincing arguments for the reliability of Crabb, but Wylder still insists on describing the book as a "Barthian novel," while at the same time defining several differences in Little Big Man from the "Barthian novel."³ Most careful readers agree that Little Big Man is modeled on the traditional picaresque novel, yet contains moments of high seriousness that transcend satire. Wylder, in fact, finds the tragedy of Old Lodge Skins akin to that of Oedipus.⁴ But the unity of the novel and its integrity as more than a series of serio-comic incidents seems to require further demonstration.

Perhaps the best way to perceive the novel's unity and art is to view it as a study of initiation: its central theme is Crabb's moral and spiritual growth through initiations and exploits that enlarge his concept of self and identity. Central to this theme of initiation is Berger's use of the "sacred circle" imagery from Indian mythology as one of the novel's unifying metaphors.⁵

Viewed thus, the novel falls easily into two major divisions, each culminating in an epiphany scene employing Cheyenne sacred circle imagery, moments of transcendent illumination when Crabb feels that he is at the "center of the world." The first of these scenes follows Crabb's sexual exploits as a Cheyenne husband in Black Kettle's village on the Washita, and it seems to be a symbolic confirmation of his manhood. It provides an appropriate climax to the first half of the book, which is thematically concerned with Crabb's growth from childhood to manhood, his many passages back and forth from the Cheyenne world to the white world, and his attempt to define a place for himself in one society or the other.

Just as the first epiphany scene comes as a result of sexual performance, the second is an initiation into a cosmic vision of life and death, and enables Crabb to come to terms with tragedy and death following the Custer massacre on the Little Big Horn. This scene occurs on the mountain peak in the Big Horns at the end of the novel, when Old Lodge Skins is singing his death song and preparing to die, but it also provides

a reconciling and healing conclusion to Crabb's own symbolic death and rebirth at the battle of Little Big Horn and after his miraculous rescue by Younger Bear. The scene is also a fitting imaginative conclusion to the second half of the novel, which, beginning with Custer's massacre of Black Kettle's village and concluding with Custer's own defeat, is concerned with the themes of tragedy, death, and Jack Crabb's own ambivalent relationship with Custer. In this half of the novel, Crabb vacillates from being an avenger of the Cheyenne to being an admirer of Custer, and finally an ironic observer at Custer's death. In this latter half of the novel, too, Crabb is the ironic observer of white frontier society, surviving by cleverness and confidence-man trickery, being initiated into the professional gunman's world by Wild Bill Hickok, and learning something of the mystery of spiritual "elected" kinship from his experience with "my niece Amelia."

It is true that Little Big Man adopts an apparently picaresque form and that Crabb is a trickster hero, but a careful reading demonstrates that the novel is a sophisticated example of the picaresque novel, closer to the tradition of Huckleberry Finn and The Adventures of Augie March than to such loose and episodic works as The Unfortunate Traveller and Moll Flanders.⁶

A compassionate humanist as well as a rogue, Crabb is constantly an explorer of experience, an American Adam setting out with renewed hopes and a certain measure of innocence, and learning through new initiations.⁷ Beginning apart from family and history, Crabb is thrown on his own at an early age, and becomes a self-created man. Constantly crossing and re-crossing the frontier between Indian and white, Crabb is always ready to assume a new role, even at the end of the novel when he plays the part of spiritual son to Old Lodge Skins at the latter's death ritual. It sometimes seems as though Crabb wants to live many lives and to undergo the entire experience of the frontier himself. It is this lust for experience as an end in itself that shows Crabb's kinship with such heroes of American literary tradition as Huckleberry Finn, the Hemingway heroes, and Bellow's Augie March.⁸

In the first half of the novel, Crabb is first a boy, then a youth, and finally a young man, undergoing a series of initiations as he leaves white society and sojourns among the Cheyennes three different times. After his first period as a Cheyenne, he leaves when on the verge of complete immersion in the Indian consciousness; the second visit is brief, and constitutes a rejection of the Cheyennes; but the third period with the Indians finds Crabb marrying a Cheyenne woman and accepting totally, without reservation, the Indian vision of life, only to have his world destroyed by Custer. Each return to the Cheyenne world is an occasion of renewal, much like Huck Finn's returns to the Mississippi in Twain's novel, clearly one of Berger's precursors. Crabb's periods in the white world also represent initiations and changing points of view. The first return to the white world begins with an initiation into "civilization," which Crabb ultimately rejects in favor of frontier life. In his

second return to the white world, Crabb is caught up in the frontier myth of progress and hopes to be a business success; but after the failure of his business and the loss of his family, Crabb goes through a period of despair that ends when he is rescued by his sister Caroline and decides to return to the Cheyenne. In his successive crossings of the boundaries between red and white, Crabb's views of the Indian and white worlds undergo a series of modifications and revisions.

When Crabb is first taken into the world of the Cheyennes, after Old Lodge Skins and his band had massacred Crabb's father and the other men of the wagon train, Crabb makes the transition easily enough. As a mischievous boy of ten, he had already learned to distrust the point of view of his father, the religious fanatic and chiliastic seeker after the millenium. In fact, Crabb recognizes that his father is what the white world considers insane, and Crabb's own shrewd realism seems first of all to be a reaction against his father.

As a boy growing into adolescence, Crabb accepts the Indian world and his new family readily enough. Life with the Cheyennes seems a boyhood adventure. Crabb learns the Indian concept of "good" and "bad medicine," the Indian belief in the inner life of everything in nature, and the Indian obsession with circles symbolizing the continuity of natural life. But at this point Crabb's attitude is much like that of a boy learning a new code for a secret society.

Crabb is jolted out of his complacent attitudes by the "Fight with the Long Knives," as the Cheyenne call their first encounter with the cavalry. Before the fight, Crabb seems to be on the point of committing himself irrevocably to the Indian way of life. For the first time, he will be fighting against his own race, and he feels some reservations, as well as suspecting that some of the Cheyennes are also suspicious of his loyalty. Yet when the war chant begins, Crabb finds his identity being immersed in the warrior group:

I forgot about myself, being just a part of the mystical circle in which the Cheyenne believed they were continuously joined, which is the round of the earth and the sun, and life and death too, for the disjunction between them is a matter of appearance and not the true substance, so that every Cheyenne who has ever lived and those now living make one people
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Although the sacred circle image has been introduced before, this is the first time that Crabb experiences its power existentially. But the vision here is tribal and communal, not personal, as in Crabb's later experiences, and the spell is broken when the cavalry charge takes the Cheyenne by surprise causing them to flee. Relieved from irrevocable choice about his identity, Crabb makes his first adult moral decision by deciding to cross over into the white world and make himself known to the soldiers. This action marks the end of Crabb's boyhood.

As a youth, Crabb re-enters the white world, only to find himself treated like a child in the Missouri town where the Pendrakes live. His life with the Pendrakes represents his major initiation into the settled world of "civilization," as opposed to the life of red or white on the frontier. Like his predecessor, Huck Finn, who vowed to "light out for the territory" at the end of Twain's novel, Crabb finds civilization stultifying and hypocritical. Crabb can tolerate the Reverend Pendrake's gluttony and gloomy Puritanism, so long as he is infatuated with Mrs. Pendrake. But discovering her to be an adulteress, he feels betrayed and his jealousy is aroused. Although he never quite forgets the power of his Oedipal adoration for Mrs. Pendrake, her adulteries make civilization unbearable; Crabb chooses to return to the frontier, carrying out what remained only a threat for Huck Finn.

In his new life on the frontier, Crabb is initiated into a man's role as a freighter. Crabb confesses that he is now caught up in the white mythology of progress and the taming of the West:

Speaking for the person I had turned into, what with being a partner in business and making enough money to buy me bright clothes and take a turr. with the Spanish girls in Santa Fe, I thought it swell that white enterprise was re-claiming the Indian wastes. You take the sorriest cabin, it was a triumph over the empty wilderness.

That was what I thought at that time, anyway.¹⁰

This attitude shapes Crabb's opinion when he visits the Cheyenne for a second time: he sees them through the eyes of the ordinary white adult as stereotyped Indians, and is more mindful of their shortcomings than their virtues. Old Lodge Skins' band is "poor and seedy," and Indian life has many disagreeable features in contrast to the white world: the camp for instance has a peculiar stench. Having acquired a commonplace sense of white superiority, Crabb feels a total rejection of the Cheyennes, believing a return to them impossible.

After this display of white chauvinism, Crabb falls victim to personal ambition, one of the major features of white frontier life. He goes into business and marries and gains a son, hoping to establish himself in white society. Ambition proves, ironically, to be destructive. His business fails through the chicanery of his partners, and Crabb loses his new family when the stagecoach carrying them is attacked. Through the failure of his hopes, Crabb falls into despair and sinks lower than he would have as a Cheyenne, virtually losing his manhood and becoming a drunk and a barroom clown.

Crabb does not have his manhood fully restored until he returns to the Cheyennes. At first, Crabb's rescue of Sunshine and his assumption of responsibility for her brings him back to the Indian world. But Crabb regards his marriage to Sunshine as a convenience, and sees himself merely as another white man living among a tribe of savages. However,

Berger prepares Crabb for a dramatic reversal when suddenly confronted with the situation of Olga as the wife of his old enemy Younger Bear, and his son adopting Indian ways as though born to them. Their complete acceptance of Indian life makes Crabb's mission to rescue them seem pointless and quixotic. Crabb's first reaction is bitterness tinged with white racism:

As I lay on my buffalo robe and looked at the swell of Sunshine's pregnant belly, all I could think of was how Olga might at this very moment be carrying the seed of that savage in her. She was forever soiled. I could leave my lodge at any time, go back to civilization, take a bath, and be white again. Not her. The Cheyenne was inside her. Indians sure made me sick. I could hardly breathe for the smell inside my own house, where them sloppy women I supported stirred up the muck we was going to eat for supper.¹¹

It is only when he ceases to wallow in self-pity and begins to feel compassion for his Indian wife and her sisters that he regains his ideal self-image. This regeneration and initiation into the Indian cosmic vision begins when Crabb abandons his white sexual inhibitions to assume the role of an Indian husband with Sunshine's sisters. On this evening, Crabb performs an extraordinary sexual exploit, making love to the three sisters in succession, with the approval of the pregnant Sunshine. Thus Crabb abandons his white self and immerses himself once more in the Indian cultural world view. His reward afterward is his epiphany when he imagines himself at the center of the universe: he is in a mystical mood when the outer world corresponds to his inner sense of unity.

No, all seemed right to me at that moment. It was one of the few times I felt: this is the way things are and should be. I had medicine then, that's the only word for it. I knew where the center of the world was. A remarkable feeling, in which time turns in a circle, and he who stands at the core has power over everything that takes the form of line and angle and square. Like Old Lodge Skins drawing in them antelope within the little circle of his band.¹²

Crabb has thus apprehended the mystic vision that sustains Cheyenne culture, and his attitude toward the white world, the culture based on "line and angle and square," is never again as admiring as when Crabb had been caught up in the white myth of progress. Crabb's vision provides support for him and is re-affirmed in a new context at the end of the novel. Although torn away from his acceptance of Indian life by the Washita massacre, Crabb's displacement makes him merely an ironic observer of white frontier society in the second half of the novel.

The second half of Little Big Man begins with Custer's massacre of Black Kettle's village on the Washita, and comes to a climax with the

defeat of Custer's Seventh Cavalry on the Little Big Horn. The major themes of this division are Crabb's involvement in the tragedies both of Custer and of the Plains Indians, and Crabb's own need to come to terms with death and tragedy. Custer's tragedy is a tragedy of hubris and retribution, with the treacherous attack on Black Kettle at the Washita seeming to find its inevitable punishment in Custer's defeat and death eight years later in the battle of the Greasy Grass. By contrast the tragedy of the Plains Indian is not an individual one, but the tragedy of a people in conflict with history and an opposing (and militarily stronger) culture.

Crabb is involved in both tragedies as Ishmael-like observer and as participant, for he barely escapes death at the Washita, and he fights valiantly at the Little Big Horn before undergoing a symbolic death and resurrection. Between the major events of the Washita and the Little Big Horn battles, Crabb is involved in a struggle to clarify his ambivalent relationship to Custer.

There are two sub-plots in the second half which appear to be episodic digressions from the main theme of Crabb's obsession with Custer; but both contribute to thematic coherence and unity. These sub-plots, themselves intertwined, are the sections dealing with Wild Bill Hickok and "my niece Amelia." The Hickok section provides an initiation for Crabb into Hickok's profession of weapons and violence, and culminates in a test of courage for Crabb; while the Amelia section is an initiation into the world of social distinctions and manners, and develops into a revelation of Crabb's theory of "elected" relatives. Both sub-plots are appropriate for the theme of the second half of Little Big Man, Crabb's initiation into and transcendence of, the experience of tragedy and death.

Crabb's relationship with Hickok is similar to his relationship with Custer. Both Hickok and Custer are heroic but flawed figures, obsessed with creating their own myths. Each is tragically isolated from humanity by his obsession with his self-image, and each is fated to a violent death. A sense of tragic irony underlies the comedy of the Hickok interlude.

Similarly, the Amelia episode, though even more comic on the surface, carries serious overtones of Crabb's longing for kinship and paternity, and for some human contribution to endure beyond his death. Crabb had twice attempted to raise families and thus establish permanent human relationships and an immortality of sorts, only to be frustrated by the uncertainties of frontier life. By believing Amelia's absurd claim to be his niece, Crabb gives himself another chance at paternity, since he becomes a surrogate father to the girl. Crabb's attraction to Amelia is more than sentimental, for the girl reminds Crabb of himself, since she has the same smallness of stature and quick wits.

In playing Pygmalion to Amelia, Crabb not only enjoys the confidence man's delight in deceiving the upper class, but he manages to

share vicariously the pleasures of respectability. But the experience produces deeper insight when Amelia, after her engagement, reveals to Crabb that she is not in fact his niece. Crabb remarks that "you can go along in life for years without facing essential matters of this type," but facing the truth brings him to his theory of "elected" relatives.¹³

. . . the kind of life I had lived, I had earned a right to say who was or wasn't my kin. . . .

"Amelia," I says, "you don't have to have blood-ties to get a family feeling about a person. I am connected in natural brotherhood to a man who is so low as to drop snakes heads in the whiskey he sells, and I do not give a damn for him if you will pardon the expression. Most of the people I have really cared about in this world, I have elected to the position. I have a belief that a man's real relatives are scattered throughout the universe, and seldom if ever belong to his immediate kin."¹⁴

Just as the Hickok relationship reinforces and parallels Crabb's involvement in the Custer tragedy, so Crabb's adoption of Amelia as a symbolic relative foreshadows and parallels Crabb's final acceptance of Old Lodge Skins as his spiritual father at the novel's end. Both subplots are therefore related subtly to the dominant theme of Crabb's confrontation of death and tragedy in the second half of the novel, and his transcendence of it through his acceptance of the Cheyenne vision in the final scene.

Crabb's ambivalent involvement with Custer dominates the second half of Little Big Man. This complex relationship begins with Custer's massacre of Black Kettle's village on the Washita, an action that drives Crabb from his life as a white Indian just when he had become deeply immersed in it and discovered the "center of the world." Through Custer, Crabb is initiated into the tragedy of heroic individualism and into the tragedy of the Indians as a people. At first, Crabb's response to Custer is the desire to assassinate him, in simple revenge for Custer's slaughter of the Cheyennes. But Crabb's humanity, his inability to kill a man who placed a basic human trust in him, keeps him from striking when he has a chance. Later Crabb tries to convince himself that he will kill Custer when they are on equal social footing, in a duel between gentlemen. But eventually, Crabb admits to himself that killing Custer was merely a childish fantasy. Yet Crabb remains fascinated by the complexities of Custer's character and Custer's status representing a heroic ideal in white culture.

In the climactic trek to the Little Big Horn, Custer is described as a man in the grip of his personal obsession. Aristocratic in manner and in pride of family, Custer strives to live up to his idealized self-image. Through Crabb's reluctant admiration, Berger stresses the

genuinely admirable qualities of Custer: his courage, his flamboyant style, his unyielding pursuit of his own destiny in spite of detractors and opponents. As Crabb concedes, not even President Grant has been able to stop Custer in his quest for glory. In short, Berger presents Custer through Crabb's eyes, as a kind of classic tragic hero, blinded by hubris and his own ambition (a far different portrayal from the vain-glorious fool of the film version of Little Big Man).¹⁵ Even the nickname given to Custer by the Indians, "Son of the Morning Star," has tragic overtones because of its association with Lucifer.

Emphasizing Custer's willful blindness, his refusal to accept reality, Berger has Crabb report several instances of Custer's preoccupation in the grip of his heroic obsession. On one occasion, Custer fails to hear an insulting remark from Crabb. At another time, Custer cannot see the gigantic Indian encampment underneath the dust clouds below, even though the Crow scouts can make it out. Custer will not listen to warnings, and rejects scouting reports that do not coincide with his beliefs. Generally self-absorbed, Custer even breaks out into a cheer at an inappropriate time. During the battle, Custer seems to go into a kind of tragic madness for a time.

Nevertheless, Crabb, Custer's severest critic, acknowledges that Custer's basic identity is somehow indestructible. At Custer's death Crabb concedes that Custer possessed greatness, a quality necessary to a tragic hero:

I had finally accepted the fact that he was great
--and he sure was, don't let anybody ever tell you dif-
ferent, and if you don't agree, then maybe something is
queer about your definition of greatness. . . .¹⁶

Although Custer goes temporarily insane in the battle, he returns to lucidity at the end, thereby enjoying a moment of recognition of his fate, as in the manner of many classic tragic heroes.

Tragic irony is also contributed by Crabb's role of court jester to Custer: Crabb's nebulous position as a teamster allows him the opportunity to be near Custer, and he is frequently given license to speak the truth because Custer will treat it as a joke. Thus Crabb's relation to Custer is a little like the Fool's relation to Lear. Nevertheless, Crabb's own ambivalent relationship to Custer is not resolved until Crabb grudgingly acknowledges Custer's heroic and tragic qualities as well as his faults. Appropriately, Crabb, like Melville's Ishmael, is spared Custer's fate. Like Ishmael, who undergoes a symbolic death and resurrection at the end of Moby-Dick, Crabb undergoes a symbolic death and resurrection at the end of the battle, resuming life to undergo a final symbolic initiation into the Cheyenne vision of the world as a sacred circle.

The final section of the novel shows how Crabb's resurrection releases him from the nightmare of the battle and Custer's tragedy and

culminates in his recovery of the numinous Cheyenne cosmic vision, which allows him to transcend death and tragedy. Crabb's memory of the trauma of the battle is exorcised partly by the ritual visit that he and Old Lodge Skins pay to the battlefield. Under the shamanist influence of Old Lodge Skins, Crabb once more becomes immersed in Indian life, and prepares for the final healing experience, when he accompanies Old Lodge Skins on the latter's death journey.

In this last scene of the novel, Crabb plays the symbolic role of Old Lodge Skins' son, and the action shows that Crabb has accepted Old Lodge Skins as his spiritual father--or "elected" father figure. Accompanying the chief to a high peak in the Big Horns, Crabb listens as Old Lodge Skins sings his death song and observes the circle of the sky. Old Lodge Skins' death is of course symbolic of the passing of the Plains Indian; but the experience has personal meaning for Crabb. For the second time in the novel, Crabb undergoes a visionary experience:

Looking at the great universal circle, my dizziness grew still. I wasn't wobbling no more. I was there, in movement, yet at the center of the world, where all is self-explanatory merely because it is. Being at the Greasy Grass or not, and on whichever side, and having survived or perished, never made no difference.¹⁷

In this moment, Custer's tragedy, the deaths of whites and Indians, and Crabb's own suffering are all swallowed up in an experience of mystic wholeness when Crabb seems to be at one with nature and its cycle of life and death. This is a purely pagan numinous experience, and one based on an acceptance of life in its entirety. It should be understood that Crabb's vision does not involve any Christian consolation of a life after death.¹⁸

This mythic scene ends with Old Lodge Skins giving Crabb, his symbolic son, a blessing: "Take care of my son here, . . . and see that he does not go crazy." The coherence and accuracy of Crabb's narration, as well as its aesthetic qualities, are sufficient testimony that the chief's prayer was fulfilled.¹⁹

Little Big Man is structured around Jack Crabb's initiations and in particular two central initiation experiences. The first of these is Crabb's sense of being at the center of the world at Black Kettle's camp. The second is his experience of wholeness and unity at the end of the novel, which enables him to transcend the tragedy of Little Big Horn. A careful attention to Berger's initiation themes and sacred circle imagery demonstrates that Little Big Man is a more subtle and unified work of art than many have noted. The central focus of the novel is Jack Crabb, an American Adam whose quest for experience always brings him back to the transcendent vision of the world of man and nature, the shaping spirit of Cheyenne culture, which Crabb is able to apprehend and possess in his personal quest for meaning.

NOTES

¹L. L. Lee, "American, Western, Picaresque: Thomas Berger's Little Big Man," The South Dakota Review IV (Summer 1966), pp. 35-42, discusses the genre of the novel for the first time. William T. Pilkington, "Aspects of the Western Comic Novel," Western American Literature I (Fall 1966), pp. 215-217, relates the novel to the tall tale tradition. Delbert Wylder, "Little Big Man as Literature," Western American Literature III (Winter 1969), pp. 273-284, makes a case for the novel's literary value. Jay Gurian, "Style in the Literary Desert," Western American Literature III (Winter 1969), pp. 285-296, also assesses the novel favorably. Gurian's essay is later reprinted in his Western American Writing: Tradition and Promise (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, 1975). Brian Dippie, in "Jack Crabb and the Sole Survivors of Custer's Last Stand," Western American Literature (Fall 1969), pp. 189-202, discusses Crabb in relationship to other novels about the Little Big Horn. Dippie's essay, however, while informative, makes the curious statement that Jack Crabb is a "super hero" p. 201. There is some disagreement about Crabb and the novel's genre among these authors.

Finally, a recent essay by Michael Cleary, "Finding the Center of the Earth: Satire, History, and Myth in Little Big Man," which appeared in Western American Literature XV, 3 (Fall 1980), contains some insights that parallel my view of the novel. Cleary's article, however, did not much influence my interpretation which had essentially taken shape in an earlier and longer version of this paper, delivered at the Midwest Conference of the American Culture Association at Bowling Green State University, at Bowling Green, Ohio, in November 1979.

²Leslie Fiedler, The Return of the Vanishing American (New York: Stein and Day, 1968; paperback reprint, 1969), pp. 160-163, discusses the novel provocatively, but for Fiedler, all is undercut by irony and burlesque.

³Wylder, p. 282, argues that Snell, the "intermediary" narrator increases rather than decreases the "believability" of Crabb's story. Feltow also argues that it is Snell more than Crabb's story that is being satirized in the prologue and epilogue, and through Snell, the arrogance of today's society p. 62.

⁴Wylder's treatment of Old Lodge Skins as a tragic hero modeled on Oedipus is suggestive, particularly when Wylder compared Old Lodge Skins to Oedipus in Oedipus at Colonus. But it requires some special pleading to make Old Lodge Skins the victim of a personal tragedy like Oedipus's. Wylder also has trouble reconciling the august tragedy he sees in Old Lodge Skins with the Barthesian novel he wants to make of Little Big Man.

⁵Sacred circle imagery is found in the mythology of many Western Indians, as many studies indicate. Two recent articles in American Quarterly discuss the presence of this metaphor in Indian art: Franchot Ballinger, in "The Responsible Center: Pueblo and Navaho Ritual Songs,"

American Quarterly XXX (Spring 1978), pp. 90-107; and Stuart Levine, "Sacred Circles: Native American Art and American Culture," American Quarterly XXX (Spring 1978), pp. 108-123.

⁶Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in The Nature of Narrative observe that picaresque "has had strong affinities with the autobiographical, eye-witness form of narrative from its beginnings to Huckleberry Finn and Catcher in the Rye." (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966; paperback reprint, 1968), p. 251.

⁷The classic study of the Adamic hero in nineteenth century American literature is R. W. B. Lewis, The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

⁸One might add Cooper's Leatherstocking to this group. These heroes all seek experience for its own sake. For a discussion of the phenomenon, see Philip Rahv's essay, "The Cult of Experience in American Writing," reprinted in Philip Rahv, Image and Idea (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1957), pp. 7-26.

⁹Little Big Man (New York: The Dial Press, 1964; paperback reprint, New York: Fawcett Press), p. 113. Subsequent references are to this version.

This is not the first mention of the sacred circle image; Berger introduces the idea in describing the teepee and in describing Old Lodge Skins' shamanistic action against the buffalo.

¹⁰Little Big Man, p. 170.

¹¹Little Big Man, pp. 246-247.

¹²Little Big Man, p. 253. The symbolism of sacred circles and the numinous feeling associated with being at the center of the world is known in other religious traditions beside the American Indians. In fact, it is a very widely used symbolism. See, for instance, Mircea Eliade, Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism (translated by Philip Mairet (New York: Bneed and Ward, 1959), pp. 27-36, for a discussion of this symbolism in other religions. The sacred circle is what C. G. Jung would call a "mandala" image. For a discussion of this, see Jung Singer, Boundaries of the Soul: The Practice of Jung's Psychiatry (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1973; original publication, 1972), pp. 385-387.

¹³Little Big Man, p. 343.

¹⁴Little Big Man, p. 344.

¹⁵John W. Turner, "Little Big Man: The Novel and the Film: A Study of Narrative Structure" in Literature/Film Quarterly V (Spring 1977), pp. 154-163, explores the differences between the film and the novel. Turner points out that comedy in the film undercuts the ending, which is quite serious in the novel.

¹⁶Little Big Man, p. 421.

¹⁷Little Big Man, p. 443.

¹⁸The Cheyenne vision does include a belief in life after death, but neither Crabb nor any of the other characters takes it very seriously. What is more important, and emphasized frequently, in the Cheyenne religious vision, is the essential identity of human beings and nature in one great unity. Crabb makes this point when he adds "we had all been men, up there on the mountain, there was no separations" (Little Big Man, p. 443).

¹⁹Fiedler in The Return of the Vanishing American, p. 163, argues that "Crabb cannot hold onto his vision," but in fact, Crabb's narrative is supposed to be taking place at the end of his life, and he is thus triumphantly reaffirming it as the climax of his tale (and of existence). Berger provides an irony in that Crabb is in the psychiatric ward of the state hospital for the aged. But the irony is largely directed at the modern age. There is also the suggestion that Crabb has adroitly worked himself into the psychiatric ward in order to find a secure place in his old age.