

Westering and Woman:

A Thematic Study of Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*
and Fisher's *Mountain Man*

by Joseph M. Flora

The fact of the West, the fact of the frontier, has been the distinctive shaping factor in the American experience. And, as we all know, our literature from the first has wrestled with the American male's conflict about the compatibility of the female with the promise of the frontier, or at least her compatibility with the frontier as symbol of male fulfillment. James Fenimore Cooper in giving us Natty Bumppo gave us the archetypal frontiersman, attracted to but frightened, eventually, from woman. The theme has persisted. Huckleberry Finn wants to light out to the territory because Aunt Sally is about to civilize him. The freedom that Huck found on the raft is anathema to the likes of Aunt Sally, a Widow Douglas, or a Miss Watson. In our own century Faulkner has comically and seriously treated the role of woman on the frontier in *Go Down, Moses*. In "Was" Uncle Buck and Uncle Buddy want to retrieve Tomey's Turl to prevent Miss Sophonsiba's encroaching on their land. And those two go for months without ever seeing a white woman. They convey Natty Bumppo's dilemma nicely. Uncle Buddy is absolutely determined that no female will ever ruin the place or catch him. Uncle Buck intellectualizes the same position, but because he wears the red tie we know that he wants Miss Sophonsiba, or some female, to catch him eventually. And Faulkner makes it clear that roan-toothed Miss Sophonsiba is a very clever hunter. In the ante-bellum years she helps domesticate the male dominated Yoknapatawpha frontier. In "Delta Autumn," near the end of the novel, Ike McCaslin, Buck and Sophonsiba's son, is still having trouble coping with the female, in the decaying Eden in which he has lived his long life. And surely Faulkner convinces us that through miscegenation old Carothers McCaslin brought a curse on the Mississippi land in a context that was essentially frontier. Old Carothers operated on the premise that on his frontier land new codes of conduct towards women, black though they be, were in order. *Go Down, Moses* is Western as well as Southern.

But my point here is to remind us of the pervasive problem. I wish to emphasize the continuing dilemma by focusing on two more recent novels by unmistakably Western novelists, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and Vardis Fisher's *Mountain Man*. These two novels invite comparison on many counts. They were published in a short span, Kesey's in 1962 and Fisher's in 1965. Kesey's novel was a first novel, Fisher's the last of many novels. Kesey's work was a young man's novel. Fisher was the "dean" of Western novelists. Kesey's novel was immediately taken up by the young and was widely read and re-read on college campuses. Here was a book that exposed the establishment for what it was. Fisher's novel did not become widely known to the same young readers, but in its paperback editions *Mountain Man* in the past ten years has probably rivalled Fisher's *Children of God* as his most familiar title. In both *Cuckoo's Nest* and *Mountain Man* we respond to other than the realistic tale. The realism of both books has been questioned. Both books, in fact, have been charged with sentimentality. Both books deal with myth, particularly Western myth.

Furthermore, both novels were made into popular motion pictures in the 1970's, motion pictures with critical as well as popular approval. Symbolic of the success of *Cuckoo's Nest* is its dominance in the 1976 Academy Awards. *Jeremiah Johnson* (the title of the adaptation of Fisher's novel) did not win an Oscar for 1972, but it was in 1976 one of the recent film successes chosen for special Sunday Night movies on television. Among film critics Pauline Kael did not like *Jeremiah Johnson*,¹ but American audiences were more in tune with Jonathan Yardley, who reviewed the movie in the *Greensboro* (N.C.) *Daily News* on February 5, 1973. Yardley wrote: "In every regard 'Jeremiah Johnson' is an exemplary movie The photography is lovely without being arty, fully conveying the beauty and danger of the mountains. Sydney Pollack's direction is firm and unobtrusive. The secondary performances are all excellent. But this is Redford's movie. He is, indeed, becoming one of those rare actors who dominate each film they make. . . . Now, in 'Jeremiah Johnson' he has created a character who is wholly realized and believable, a complex man whose depth is at once surprising and persuasive. It is one of the memorable performances of recent years, and one that must be seen."

Both movies and both books are one in glorifying the spirit of the free man. Kesey's novel may be taken as the ultimate horror the mountain man might have imagined as he saw the settlers coming into the Western territories. *Jeremiah Johnson* with hardly an indoor



Two mountain men set beaver traps.

scene is one of the great outdoor films we have had. Movie, like book, conveyed the love for a magnificent land. The Kesey movie, like the book, takes place almost totally indoors. Its Jeremiah Johnsons and Sam Minards have been emasculated, or rendered impotent, and hardly think of the outside. Chief Bromden looks out of the window from time to time and sometimes has reveries about a great land—to remind us of what has been lost. There is one “escape” to the sea for the inmates of the asylum when they experience something of the freedom of the mountain man. But the name of the boat, *The Lark*, makes clear just what the escape is. It is only a lark. After that McMurphy is reduced to bringing Candy Starr and her friend *in* to the asylum. It is noticeably easier to get the girls in than to get the men out.

But even as Candy and Sandy seem to be on McMurphy's side, they underscore one of the major dimensions of Kesey's novel—the basically negative effect of the female on the male drive towards freedom and fulfillment. In fact, the novel is as vehement as “Hansel and Gretel” in portraying the female in an unflattering light. Kesey shows us only two kinds of women: the maternal emasculator and the whore—both fascinated with the same feature of the male anatomy.

I have mentioned “Hansel and Gretel” because when we as adults read this story to our children we can sense it as a harmless manifestation of the child's hostilities toward the mother, with whom he spends most of his time and who frequently tells him “no.” In the fairy tale we change mother to stepmother, for it has always been justifiable to feel resentful towards a stepmother. She is the one who *makes* father treat the children so badly. Of course, he doesn't want to, and we recognize that he's perfectly helpless before her. Undoubtedly she is the real witch! At story's end we will wish her dead, and the children will get to live with father without any mother figure. The old witch with the gingerbread house is only a replay with variation, but a bit more fun since Gretel gets to push her into the oven. (It seems that witches wish to devour little boys more than they do little girls.) Then it is only a matter of time before brother and sister can live together, with father, in primal innocence. It's a great story—particularly for Gretel.

Kesey's novel does not allow the total wish-fulfillment of the old fairy tale. The Chief escapes, and in the book the Nurse's power is broken—but McMurphy is dead. Still, what movie-goer will forget the scene when McMurphy breaks the Nurse's neck? A lot of wish fulfillment there! But book and movie are for an older audience than is “Hansel and Gretel,” and we cannot push our witch into an oven.

The movie gives even less triumph than the novel, for Big Nurse goes on, her power hardly checked.

The nurse is traditionally the mother of mercy. We might be reminded of the war front in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. There, too, we find mainly nurses and whores. In a sense (a good sense) Catherine Barclay combines both roles. Particularly when we compare her with Kesey's Big Nurse we can sense the injustice of much of the prejudice against Hemingway's treatment of women. Surely Catherine is a growing, sensitive person—an important tutor for Frederic Henry—the most important tutor in the book. As the novel ends, Frederic seems to have only intimations of what she tried to teach him, but the reader is supposed to see more. Kesey's world has darkened all that Catherine represents; it vehemently cries out that Huck Finn did well to strive to escape Aunt Sally and her kind.

Kesey's very title underscores the maternal threat. Note that word *nest*. Hasn't the Western hero always felt a shudder at the notion of the sweet little nest, out there in the West? Kesey's novel brings home the ultimate nightmare: Big Mama is Big Nurse—her big breasts give no comfort. She wants nothing more and nothing less than to keep her little boys forever in her efficiently managed nest. She is so powerful that her boys "choose" to be where they are—a fact that McMurphy, the modern mountain man, finds totally shocking.

Big Nurse has a name: Nurse Ratched. For the more sophisticated, there is the play on the *ratchet* wheel—but there is also the little boy's naughty "rat shit." Calling the nurse by that name gives him a false sense of power. He *knows* what she is, even if he can't do anything about her. The name conveys the novel's truth about the Mother of Mercy.

Let us quickly survey some of the other indictments of "female" in the novel. We should start with Chief Bromden's mother since, after McMurphy, the Chief is the most important male in the novel. He is institutionalized because his white mother "did in" his Papa, insuring the victory of the Combine, the great white real estate interests. The Chief is Kesey's narrator, and he consistently presents the mental hospital as the creation of women. The visitors who come to the wards—teachers or whatever—are women. Public Relations only seems to be a man, and his public is female: "Oh, when I think back on the old days, on the filth, the bad food, even, yes the brutality, oh, I realize, ladies, that we have come a long way in our campaign."² Harding, the most intellectual patient in the ward, is under Nurse Ratched's care because of his inability to relate to women; the Chief

reports that Harding complains that his wife is "the sexiest woman in the world" who "can't get enough of him nights" (p. 23). He is terrified. And poor Billy Bibbitt! His mother is a declared ally of the Nurse, dedicated to keeping Billy just that: *Billy*. Sexual initiation, McMurphy feels, might launch this lad of thirty into manhood. Billy stops stuttering only once, in the climactic scene of the novel after McMurphy has procured his sexual initiation with Candy Starr. But Nurse Ratched can undo it all in a moment as she utters the most frightening word in the ward: "What worries me, Billy . . . is how your poor mother is going to take this" (p. 264). Mother, as Hansel and Gretel knew, never did want us to have any fun.

It is significant that McMurphy, though thirty-five, has never married. In cowboy legends, he should not be married. This cowboy has gone a bit beyond: he has found only one redeemable feature in women, and to obtain that he has not found it necessary to marry. The whole tenor of McMurphy's life view is illustrated by his youthful initiation into sex, which had taken place when he was about ten and the girl less. Yet she "drug" him to bed. McMurphy had wondered if they ought to announce their "engagement," his own instinct being that the sexual event should symbolize something important: "But his little whore—at the most eight or nine—reached down and got her dress off the floor and said it was mine, said 'You can hang this up someplace, I'll go home in my drawers, announce it that way—they'll get the idea'" (pp. 217-18). So much for McMurphy's idealism. With such limited views toward women McMurphy could never defeat a force as formidable as Big Nurse.

While Fisher's *Mountain Man* shares with Kesey's novel anguish over the invading hordes of the "civilized" and the loss of freedom to the individual man, it could hardly be more different in its portrayal of women. Western writers have not always viewed women with the vitriolic distrust we find in Kesey. We will do well to keep in mind the subtitle of Fisher's book: "A Novel of Male and Female in the Early American West." In fact, the title *Mountain Man* is not the one Fisher wanted for his novel, but is a compromise he worked out with his publisher. Fisher's original title was *Male and Female*, and it is useful for coming to terms with the kind of book *Mountain Man* is, for the novel is a departure in many respects from the traditional Fisher approach. We recognize the matter and the style as his surely, but many readers were so accustomed to thinking of Fisher as the hard-boiled realist or naturalist that they were puzzled by his last novel. It is as if the great debunker of the romantic novel had at last bared his own romantic soul, as if the great proponent of the

rational would give the emotional its full due. Incredibly, in Fisher's novel, we find a mountain man breaking forth into noble song as he makes his way through perilous terrain. Had Fisher written a novel or an opera?

Fisher knew what he was about, and probably the risks he was taking. He did think of his work as a symphony to the West that he loved. Furthermore, he used the imagery of the Biblical story of creation in a sustained way, joining the ranks of other American writers who had seen the American story as paralleling the account in Genesis. And he emphasized the female as much as the male, which is one reason the title *Mountain Man* is not quite adequate and why we have the subtitle. "Male and Female created he them," we read in Genesis. Fisher's intention of balancing Male and Female, while focusing on the story of Sam Minard, is seen in his division of the novel into three sections: Lotus, Kate, Sam.

In fact, only these three characters receive much attention. Unlike Kesey, Fisher was not much interested in many characterizations, though we meet many mountain men. We remember their stories rather than their characters. Fisher keeps the focus on Lotus, Kate, and Sam through frequent use of indirect discourse and by treating the other mountain men in a catalogue manner. The script writers of *Jeremiah Johnson* had to invent their supporting characters, for while the catalogue technique might work in a novel, a movie does not have the leisure wherewith to stress the sense Fisher builds of the mountain men as a group.

In fact, we come to realize that not even the major characters are to be taken finally as individuals. Fisher's original title is valuable for emphasizing the representativeness, the mythic dimension of his major characters. Sam is *the* mountain man, representative in something like Emerson's sense. He is not the average, but embodies the finest qualities of his kind: he sums them up. Fisher has purposely made him bigger than life. He is named Samson John Minard. The Samson is another Biblical reference that keys us into the heroic dimensions of Fisher's character. Sam is six foot four, and he towers over the other mountain men physically as well as intellectually, artistically, and every other way. He is both strong and gentle. He is a man of great faith--and as Fisher's original title makes clear--he is Adam in the brief moment when Eden was to be found in the American West. He is living life as his Creator intended life to be lived. No other character in Fisher has so keen a sense of a Creator.

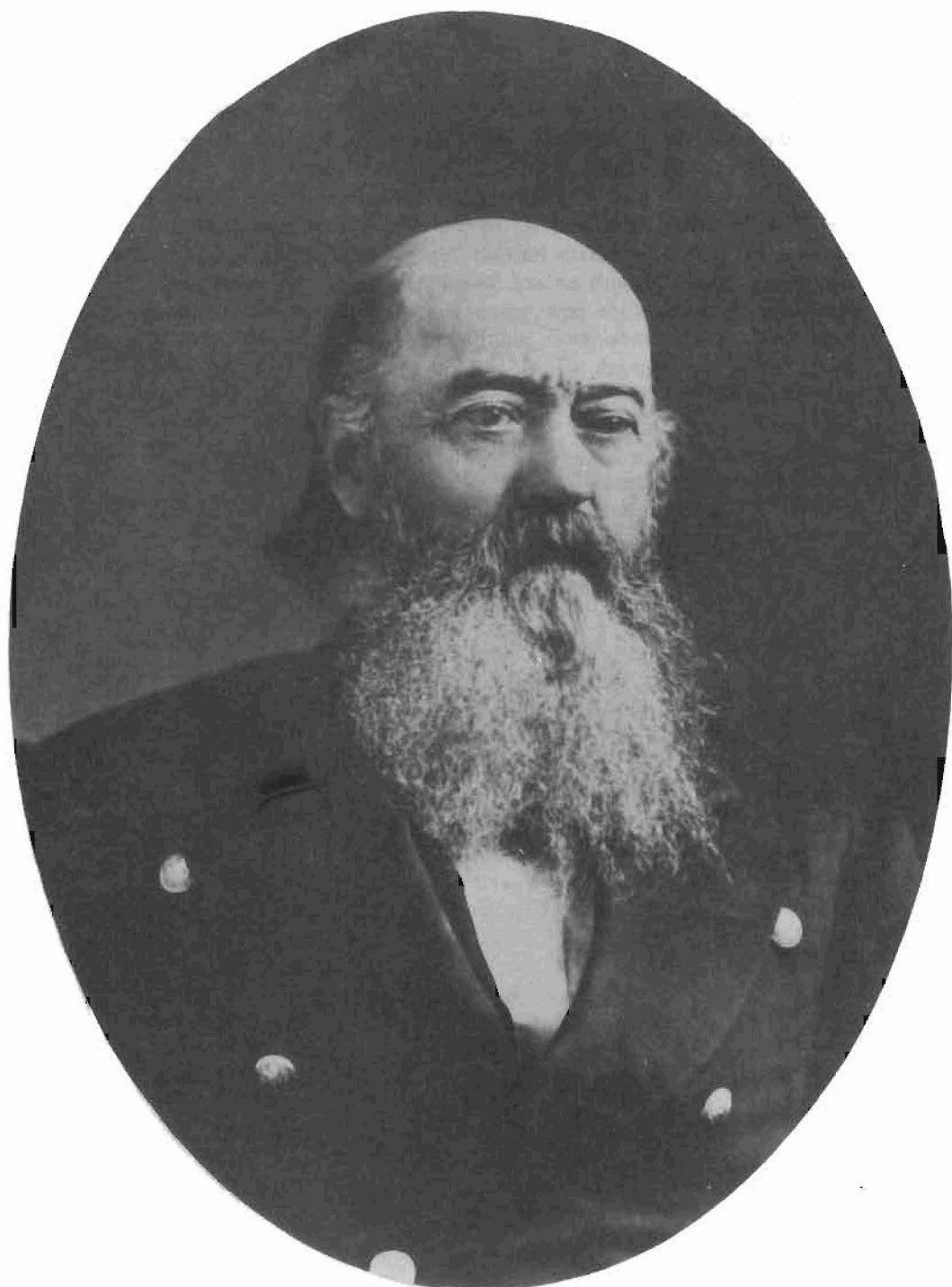
But at age twenty-seven, after eight years as a mountain man, Sam Minard feels that something is missing from his life. He is an

Adam whose Eden is not yet complete—so he seeks the lovely Indian girl he saw first a year ago. We are reminded of Genesis 2:18: “And the Lord God said, It is not good that a man should be alone, I will make him an help meet for him.” The maiden has been much on Sam’s mind. Fisher begins with Sam’s journeying to find his bride—she is no accidental thing as she is in *Jeremiah Johnson*. The movie is closer to the Western stereotype in making Johnson reluctant to take a wife. Fisher lets us know that many mountain men did fear alliance with a woman. Windy Bill warns Sam:

“I tell ye, Sam, if she be female, no matter if redskin, blackskin, or white-skin, she will torment the life outta ye fer foofarraw. Day and night she will. I know mountain men as has tried them all, even the Diggers, even the Snakes, even the niggers; and I been tole the nigger she is as sweet as Hank Cady’s honey. But I swear by the ole hoss that carried me safe twenty mile with fifty blackfeet runnin’ outta their skins to lift my hair that wolf is wolf and female is female, and this ole coon can’t stand no more. . . . A woman’s breast it’s the hardest rock the Almighty made on this ole earth, and I can see no sign on it. I could track even a piece of thistledown but I never could see no tracks in a woman’s heart.”

But Fisher shares instances with us of mountain men who lived happily with their Indian wives, and Sam’s marriage proves to be that ingredient that makes his cup run to overflowing.

For his Indian maiden, Lotus, is beautiful and all that Eve could ever be. The Edenic quality of Sam’s relationship with his new bride is suggested in several ways. Sam must teach Lotus many things, importantly the English language. So he names and points out to her, allowing Fisher to poetize repeatedly on the magnificence of the natural world they live in. Fisher’s Adam and Eve discover each other’s bodies and the delights thereof in a similarly pastoral manner. Eve responds to her man’s gentleness. “And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.” Repeatedly in the Lotus section we sense the quality of the shared experiences of Adam and Eve. He is older, not superior. And he looks for children as the natural fulfillment of their love. After Lotus becomes pregnant, Sam is eager to accept responsibility for the child as he has for the wife. Lotus does not threaten Sam’s manhood, but she allows him to express aspects of it hitherto subdued. Fisher tells us: “In the vacuum where for seven years he had known only eating and killing and dodging his enemies he now enthroned her and she began to fill him; and his emotions enfolded her as she enfolded him, until on awaking she would be the first thing he would think of, and the last thing before falling asleep” (p. 69). All of this, of course, worlds away from McMurphy’s experi-



Joe Meek, mountain man.

ence. We know, however, that brevity is part of the essence of any Edens we have ever read about. Thus, it happens that Sam loses Lotus, but he will never forget the bliss of that married fulfillment.

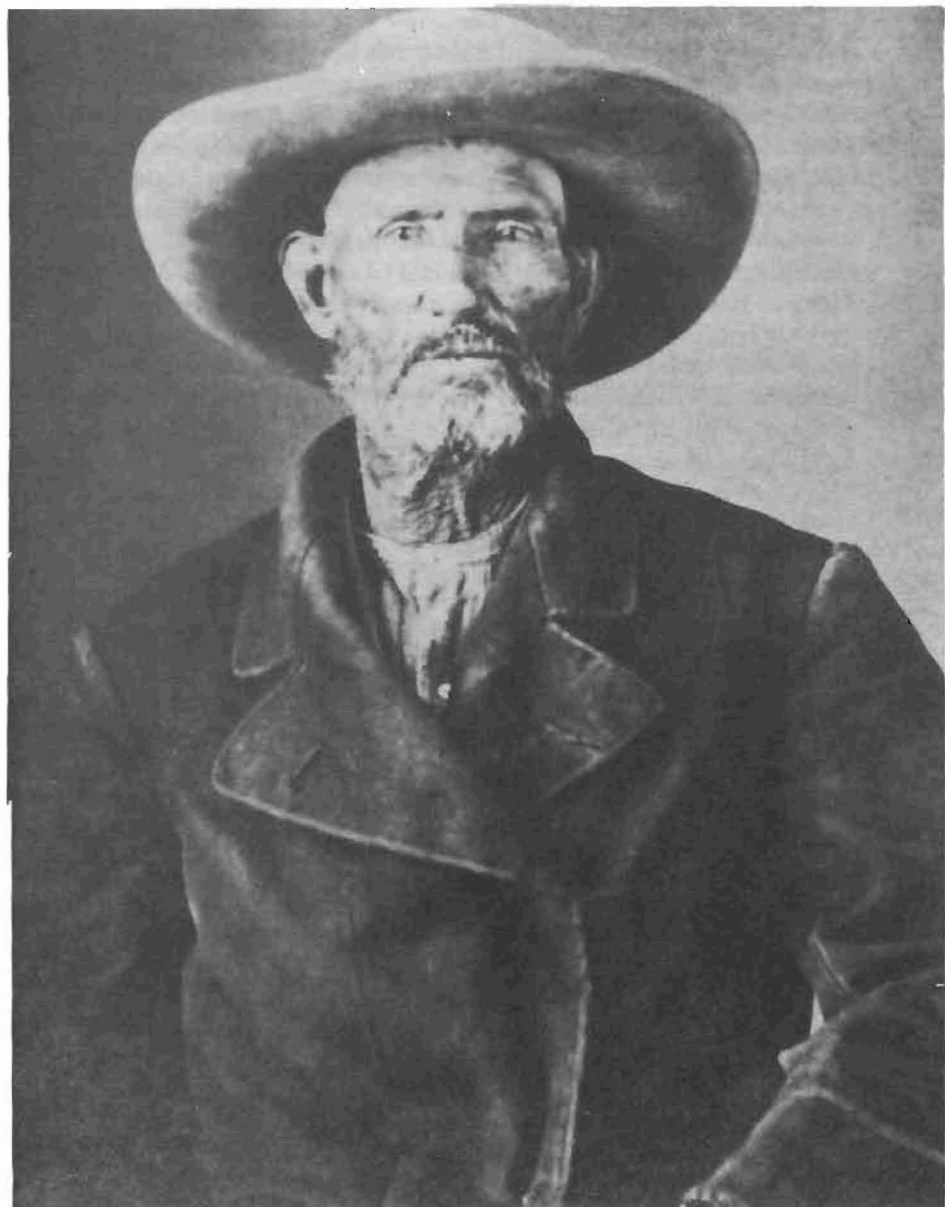
While the given of *Mountain Man* is Sam's decision to marry, the opening dramatic scene of the novel has to do with another woman, Kate Bowden. Sam happens upon the Bowden wagon just after Kate has killed with an axe four Blackfeet who have murdered her three children. Kate becomes a legend to all of the mountain men, but she becomes most significant of all to Sam, who has marvelled at her strength in crisis and at the mother love that keeps her the guardian of the graves Sam helps her make and consecrate. To the rational view she is mad, but in the spirit of Fisher's novel, Kate is transported into a sacred world. As Sam is the representative mountain man and Lotus the representative young maiden, Kate becomes the highest representative of motherhood. Thus, it is that Sam, bent on vengeance after his loss of Lotus, turns more and more to Kate. It is his vision of Kate, the representative mother, that enables him to give up his path of vengeance, to attain to a higher degree of manhood.

In the Lotus section, Sam is the teacher. In the second and third sections of the novel, Kate is the needed balm and inspiration that teaches Sam. Fisher's novel celebrates both sexual love and mother love. Father love is made possible only because of the female qualities, and even though Sam loses his biological child, Fisher gives strong emphasis to the deepening concept of fatherhood in Sam. Significantly, exactly in the middle of *Mountain Man*, Sam kills a young Indian. Chapter 15 ends with Sam looking down "a full five minutes" at the brave youth. He does not take the scalp and cut off the ear, as he has been doing, but gives the youth as noble a grave as he can. This is the first check to what Fisher presents as male aggressions—Kate also killed, but in the instinctive moment, not programatically as Sam is doing. Sam's zeal for killing lessens, and midnovel he is on his way back to Kate. Later in the novel, after his escape from the Blackfeet, he again returns to the mother—for healing, for comfort, for insight. Part II ends with Sam's resting his head on the lap of Kate, who has been the inspiration that has saved his life and his soul.

In the final section of the novel there is yet the rendezvous of the mountain men and their collective vengeance for the insult put on Sam, but it is clear that Sam sees things differently from the other mountain men because of his experience with Kate. Sam's fatherhood needs time to grow, and it does in the final movement—which progresses from recovery and vengeance to forgiveness and peace. The

importance of the mother to the process is emphasized at the end of the novel through Kate's death. Sam is shocked and humbled by the Indians' response to Kate's death: they buried Kate by her children and placed a monument of stones over her. Sensing the beauty of Kate's devotion that crosses racial and cultural lines, Sam decides it is time to make peace with the Indians.

Jim Bridger in the 1860's.



Positive accounts of women in the novel are not dependent upon Kate and Lotus. Sam has good memories of his own mother and sister. He has not gone to the wilderness, as did many mountain men, because he had turned his back on the idea of home and family. Sam's past has nourished his experience in the great West. He has been singularly blessed. His own father is also a positive memory. Sam's background facilitates the growth of his concept of fatherhood.

Fisher is supportive of the female and the concept of family in other ways. The novel finds mother love strong in the Indian culture, and Sam can read it everywhere in the world of nature.

Thus, while Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is filled with frightening female images, not every Western writer has found the female so threatening—certainly not Vardis Fisher, whom Alfred Kazin described as our last authentic novelist of the frontier.⁴ There is undoubted force in Kesey's novel, but his vision is like that of "Hansel and Gretel"—distorted, incomplete, and—in its treatment of women—amoral if not immoral. Fisher's conception and treatment of women is, by contrast, moral, responsible, and (to use a key Fisher concept) adult.⁵ And it should be noted that while *Mountain Man* is Fisher's most poetic tribute to wifely and motherly love that novel is not unique in Fisher's canon. From his first novel, *Toilers of the Hills*, onward, Vardis Fisher has turned a sensitive eye to the problems and contributions of women. If American novelists have pondered most often about the American Adam, Vardis Fisher has sought to understand and to portray the American Eve as well.

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NOTES

1. See *The New Yorker*, December 30, 1972, pp. 50-51.

2. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 14. Hereafter references to the novel will be given in parentheses and will refer to this edition.

3. *Mountain Man* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1965), p. 51. Hereafter references to the novel will be given in parentheses and will refer to this edition.

4. Alfred Kazin, "Our Last Authentic Frontier Novelist," *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, August 27, 1939, p. 3.

5. It is true that the archetypal dimensions of *Mountain Man* have disturbing implications concerning the role of woman in America. The American Eve as wife is destroyed, and the American Eve as mother is cut off from her family. Fisher's novel leaves open the possibility that Sam may remarry, but it is far from a certainty. The Eden of the American West emerges as much more congenial to Adam than to his helpmate. Nevertheless, Fisher is unequivocal about the necessity of the female virtues for the West.