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The American Frontier and its Cultural Forms

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THE AMERICAN FRONTIER AND ITS CULTURAL FORMS

A thesis presented

by

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In partial fulfillment

of the requirements

of the Proudian Interdisciplinary Honors Program

University of Redlands

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INTRODUCTION

My purpose in this project is to examine an important aspect of American history and culture, the frontier. My study focuses primarily on the relation of concepts of the frontier in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to representative literary works about the frontier in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I have drawn from important historical, sociological, and cultural writings to record briefly various conceptions of the frontier and its development. I have found in examining historical records and literary formulations of the frontier experience that these writings participate in a reciprocal relationship, each adding to and nurturing the conceptions expressed by the other.

I have reduced the scope of this extremely large topic to cover the mainstream frontier movement from east to west, from the point of view of the Anglo-Saxon pioneer. I therefore take note of, but do not discuss fully, the experiences of other participants in the frontier process such as the Indians or Spanish. I treat primarily the literary expressions of culture, although I touch briefly on religion and other aspects of frontier living, and on popular and more serious artistic expressions.

Using an interdisciplinary perspective, I have drawn materials from writers who took a philosophical view of the frontier, from the daring and hardy people who pushed the frontier across the American continent, and from historians who recorded the whole experience. I then compared those records with literary formulations. I came to the conclusion, which is the thesis of my work, that the frontier experience, both in theory and actuality, had a great deal of

influence on the culture and development of America. In turn, cultural and literary expressions of the frontiering process modified or expanded our concepts of the frontier. As its name suggests, the "frontier" never stands still, it only moves. I have concentrated mainly on the relations between the concepts and literature of the frontier because they seemed to be the most pronounced and the most readily accessible to me. But many aspects of culture shared in the reciprocal relationship between the frontier and American culture. For example, the Hudson River and Rocky Mountain Schools of painters were influenced by the frontier in their choice of subject and style, while their idealization of western landscape added to the Edenic conceptions of the west. Likewise in politics, the Homestead Act was directly attributable to the garden myth, and since its statutes governed countless pioneers, it dictated the course of the frontier movement.

This paper, for lack of space, is only a distillation of three years of research on the subject. The selected bibliography gives some idea of the extent of my studies. Materials included in the discussion are those that throw light directly on the interrelationship of history and culture, particularly its literary form.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORY OF THE FRONTIER

The history of the moving frontier is the story of a concept. Writers as different from each other as Thomas Jefferson and Ole Rolvaag have brought forward various attributes of the westward movement. To define this concept, however, requires background knowledge of the nature and effects of the frontier. The frontier created personalities like Daniel Boone, the fur traders, cattlemen, miners, and Indians who figured in both history and legend. It helped shape democratic practices and influenced the development of American character and culture, especially in the areas of religion, politics, law and order, education and the arts.

The frontier has been defined either as a geographic region or as a process. Geographically speaking, any area containing not less than two or more than six inhabitants to the square mile at the edge of civilized territory is labeled a frontier. Best pictured as a migrating, westward moving area, the frontier began practically at the Atlantic seaboard during the seventeenth century. Many frontiers followed from there, including the colonial frontier, the trans-Appalachian frontier, the Lake Plains frontier, the Northwest frontier, the Gulf Plains frontier, the trans-Mississippi frontier, the Mississippi Valley frontier, the Southwest frontiers of Texas and California, the Great Basin frontier, and the Great Plains frontier.¹

While geographic descriptions and statistics are useful to consider, these fail to reflect the evolutionary nature of the frontier. Only by looking at the frontier as a process can its characteristics and effects be discussed. The pioneering process was largely the same on every frontier, although

differences due to the time and conditions of settling did arise. The pioneers who eked out a living on the arid plains in the latter part of the nineteenth century wrestled with slightly different problems from the farmers who settled in the fertile Mississippi Valley.² However, very few persons came to the frontier except to make homes for themselves and improve their fortunes. Most of them had little chance for advancement in their old homes. After the scouts, trappers, and miners blazed trails through the land farmers followed. Initially the pioneer was concerned only with building his dwelling and clearing his fields. After a time he turned to meeting social needs, build the school and church, and set up a local government. Twenty or twenty-five years later the town was completed, and the oldest children of the original settlers began moving to a newer frontier to repeat their parent's experiences.³ The word "frontier" as is used throughout this paper refers then to this standard process of pioneering.

As the westward movement gained momentum, a number of distinctive frontier "types" or prototypes, emerged, including Daniel Boone, the fur traders, the cattle barons, the miners, and the Indians. The exploits of these men were turned into legends and their personalities became part of the national myth.⁴ The most popular frontiersman of all time, Daniel Boone, oddly enough can not be fitted into any one category, or even characterized adequately. Using old Indian paths, he blazed the first trail for westward bound pioneers. The wilderness road which he beat out was nearly three hundred miles long and stretched all the way from the Appalachians to the Ohio River at Louisville. Although it took twenty years to grade the road so wagons could to through, Boone's feat was immediately glorified in ballads and tall tales. Within fifteen years it enticed over 100,000 people to go into the new territory of

western Tennessee and Kentucky.⁴ Boone himself led the first settlers to Boonesborough in 1775 and gallantly defended his outpost against the Indians during the troubled years of the Revolution. For these and other deeds, Boone was celebrated as an American empire builder.

The image of Boone the empire builder clashed with that of an entirely different hero, the fugitive from civilization who needed "elbow room" and who dreaded the encroachment of settlements on his beloved wilderness. Created by the popular mind, the fugitive persona found its way into Boone's biographies. Boone was said by one biographer to "certainly prefer a state of nature to a state of civilization, if he were obliged to be confined to one or the other." Another wrote that he was "a white Indian" and that he "would have pined and died as a nabob in the midst of civilization. He wanted a frontier, and the perils and pleasures of frontier life . . ." However, the real Daniel Boone saw himself, as a symbolic character he has functioned both as the harbinger of civilization and as a cultural primitivist.⁵

While no group of frontiersmen proved to be as fascinating as Daniel Boone, the fur traders came close. Usually the first group of people to reach a new frontier, they led the way westward virtually from the first moment Europeans landed on American soil. Always far in advance of civilization, the restless traders made little permanent impression on the wilderness. They were usually portrayed as being solitary sorts who preferred the isolation of the forest to the company of other men, and who often adopted native ways, borrowing their clothes, living habits, knowledge of the wilds, and, in many cases, taking Indian brides.⁶

About the time of Lewis and Clarke's expedition, roving trappers were already creating an international fur trade. The British controlled the

industry at first, but the Americans later became competitive by paying more money to the Indians, on whom the fur companies depended. The beaver trappers flourished in lands supposedly known only to Lewis and Clark and the Indians and beaver hats became the fashion in all the cultured cities of America and Europe. The entire fur industry helped to bring about the frontier movement, for the traders discovered many of the passes that would enable pioneers to move further westward. The fur companies contributed to the economic practices of frontier, especially the habit of relying on credit.⁶

On successive frontiers the cattlemen were as ever-present as the fur traders. Early Boston had probably the first "cattle frontier" in the Charles River Valley. But wherever there was semi-arid land the cattleman appeared and using the only available natural resource, grass, built up a vast and lucrative enterprise. He was also largely responsible for the development of the railroad, and laid the economic foundations of several western communities.⁷ The "cattle baron" or "bovine king" was a figure largely created by eastern newspapers, and one that captivated the national imagination. His life was idyllic, for in the spring, leading his "picturesque retainers, the cowboys," he rode over the range to count his hundred thousand cattle and during the fall he stayed at Chicago and New York hotels, wearing a Stetson and diamond shirt studs.⁸

Whenever conditions were favorable, traders and herdsmen were joined by miners. The mining frontier advanced in a less orderly manner than that of the traders or cattlemen. At times it advanced beyond the settlement, and at other times it lagged behind. Yet miners played a constant role in frontier development, beginning with their search for iron in Virginia and Massachusetts and ending with the scramble for gold in California. The miner was a distinct

frontier type, characterized as being grizzled, restless, greedy, and immoral.⁹

Like the miners, Indians were given a composite personality in legends: the noble savage and the bloodthirsty fiend. In general, soldiers, settlers, and writers who focused on land ownership and conflicts peopled their accounts with the latter variety; while missionaries, artists, and explorers tended to emphasize admirable Indian traits. Despite distinct tribal traditions and the unique personalities of historical persons, most Indian portrayals can be fitted into one of the two categories. The Indians' lives were also sketched simply with popular adjectives like picturesque, idyllic or primitive.¹⁰

Besides creating such legendary characters as the miners, cattlemen, fur traders, and the noble savage, the frontier process also affected democratic practices, and influenced American character and culture. Democratic theory and institutions imported from England, together with the frontier experience, accounts for America's democratic development. The contribution of the frontier is especially significant because, in the words of one historian, it tended to make democratic practices "even more democratic." Two conditions common to pioneer communities made this inevitable. One was the wide diffusion of land ownership which created an independent outlook and led those that had a real stake in the society to demand political participation. The other condition was the common social and economic level of the entire community, and the absence of any prior leadership structure. The lack of any external or national controls made self rule a necessity. The frontiersman accepted simple democratic practices as natural and inevitable. Each territory that was organized required a frame of government, and this framework reflected the frontier communities ideals. A constant process of democratization took place as the framers of constitutions adopted the most liberal features of older frames of government.¹¹

Besides contributing to an ongoing process of democracy, the frontier also accentuated the spirit of nationalism and individualism. The American attitude in world politics has historically been far more nationalistic than those of non-frontier countries. Like their pioneer ancestors Americans dislike governmental interference in their affairs. While "rugged individualism" did not originate on the frontier any more than democracy or nationalism did, each concept was deepened and sharpened by the conditions of the frontier.

The anti-intellectualism and materialism which are said to be national traits can also be traced back to frontier origins. There was little in pioneer life to attract the cultivated, the aesthetically sensitive, or the highly educated. Yet the frontiersman was an idealist as well as a materialist. His admiration for material objects stemmed not only from his appreciation for them as a symbol of advancing civilization but as the incarnation of his hopes for a better future.¹²

These same frontier traits have been perpetuated so that they form the principal distinguishing traits of the American people today. To a degree unknown among Europeans, Americans display restless energy, ingenuity, and social and physical mobility. They squander their natural resources with an abandon unknown elsewhere. In few other lands is the democratic ideal worshipped so intensely, or the principles of nationalism carried to such extremes as isolationism or international arrogance. Nor do residents of non-frontier lands possess the same faith in the future and the belief in the inevitability of progress that form part of the American creed. These are all pioneer traits, and they have become part of the national heritage.¹³

Historians have often wondered why the frontier was capable of great transformation within the United States, but did not have a similar effect in other countries with frontiers. If the pioneer movement was responsible for American democracy, nationalism, and individualism, why did the peoples of Africa, Latin America, Canada and Russia fail to develop identical characteristics? The answer is that few nations had a frontier similar to the United States where a low man to land ratio and abundant natural resources provided an unusual opportunity for the individual to better himself. Where an autocratic government of controlled population movements, where resources were limited, conditions prohibited ordinary individuals from joining the frontier movement, a frontier in the sense that Americans use the word could not be said to exist.

Comparisons with other frontier experiences bear this out. In Africa, where the few Europeans were greatly outnumbered by the relatively uncivilized natives, the need for protection transcended any impulses toward democracy or individualism. In Latin America the rugged terrain and the steaming jungles greatly restricted the amount of land available. The only areas that really attracted frontiersmen were the Brazilian plains and the Argentine pampas. In Argentina however, government-subsidized cattlemen kept small farmers out until railroads penetrated the area. Canada had an immense wilderness, but the path westward was blocked by the Laurentian Shield, a tangled mass of hills and sterile brush-covered soil that reached to the north and west of the St. Lawrence Valley. When railroads finally penetrated this barrier in the late nineteenth century, they carried pioneers directly from the East. The newcomers, who had no pioneering experience, simply adapted the eastern institutions with which they were familiar.¹⁴

The most fruitful comparisons are with Russia and Australia. In the entire world only Russia had a physical environment similar to that of the U.S. The eastward-moving Siberian frontier, the home of over seven million peasants during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was notable for its lack of guilds, powerful nobles, and authoritarian churches. While the Russian pioneers were too accustomed to rigid feudal and monarchic controls to respond as the Americans did, the frontier there did have a democratizing effect. An autocratic official, visiting the Siberian frontier in 1910 was alarmed by the enormous, rudely democratic country he saw evolving there. He feared that Czarism would soon be "throttled" by the egalitarian currents of the frontier.¹⁵

Conversely, the frontier of Australia illustrates how America might have developed had there been no westward movement. Australia's lands beyond the coastal mountains were closed off to pioneers by the aridity of the soil and by great sheep ranchers who were there first. As a result, an urban civilization and industrialized population developed relatively sooner than in America. Labor unions and labor domination were common in Australia, while unionization did not occur until after the closing of the American frontier. While it is obviously untrue that the frontier alone accounted for the unique features of American civilization, it is equally true that this civilization can also be understood as the product of the interplay between Old World heritage and New World conditions, the most significant being the frontier process.¹⁵

The effect of the frontier process on American character and culture is difficult to determine exactly, but in essence, the principal effect of the frontier environment was to weaken traditional social controls and values.

This weakening was caused by three conditions of the frontier: the pioneers attracted to frontiers were of diverse ethnic and social backgrounds, and this diversity helped to create a fluid social order; traditional social controls were weakened by isolation and the dispersion of settlement; and the absence of solidified order allowed for greater vertical mobility. The weakening of traditional socializing and cultural agencies can be seen by studying the frontier's response to religion, politics, and law and order.¹⁷

Of all the agencies utilized by man in maintaining traditional civilization on the frontiers in America, none was more effective than organized religion. The type of religion that exerted the greatest influence on the various frontiers were outgrowths of English and Scottish Protestantism. In the Southwest, of course, Spanish Catholicism gave its characteristic qualities to the people of that region. In California Spanish Jesuits and Franciscans were responsible for a paternalistic mission life, but after the Americans came Protestantism became the dominant religion. In the Mid-West French Catholics arrived first, but they too were outnumbered by Protestants. Only in Louisiana was there an appreciable number of French Catholics that left a lasting impression. In general, the early frontier societies that were most characteristic of westward expansion were prevaillingly Protestant.¹⁸

This is not to say that frontier life was plagued by denominational and doctrinal quibbles. The religious fever that raged on the frontier was characterized by a great deal of emotionalism and enthusiasm which tended to sweep away petty differences.¹⁹ Perhaps the religion of the West is best described as a "spiritual hunger." Besides an ax and a rifle and a few rude housekeeping implements, the one thing most frontiersmen took West with them was a Bible. As the West became more and more settled, churches began to

be built whenever towns and villages appeared. Few settlements in the more flourishing parts of the country lasted fifteen years without building a church.²⁰ The church played a central role in frontier life for manifold reasons. The Gospel meeting gave pioneers a chance for much needed companionship, a chance to meet their far-flung neighbors, and a release from the burdens of hard work. The Church often was a haven from loneliness and isolation. It was also an agent unifying the people of the community. This was especially true in Utah, where the Mormon Church was the center of social, civic, and judicial, as well as religious affairs.²¹

Underlying the entire frontier movement were often highly spiritual motivations. For example, Martha L. Smith, who went west with her husband in 1890 and whose recollections were published under the title Going to God's Country, recounted their travels and pioneering experience in Missouri, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Oregon. She concluded with a revealing passage:

We learned that God's Country isn't in the country. It is in the mind. As we looked back we know that all the time we was hunting for God's Country we had it. We worked hard. We was loyal. Honest. We was happy. For forty-eight years we lived together in God's Country.²²

Frontier politics, like frontier religion, was impassioned and emotional. Westerners were essentially men of action. Andrew Jackson became their symbol as well as their ideal in political matters. People admired his courage, his rugged individualism and his unpolished approach to problems. Davy Crockett, who believed that liquor and laughter would win more votes than law and logic, was another favorite. His special brand of oratory, rambunctious and bombastic, was well received and imitated. To say that frontier politicians were unruly is an understatement. A speaker of the house from Arkansas, angered by a colleague's remarks, plunged his bowie knife into the man's breast.²³ In speech

as well as in action, frontiersmen tended to be energetic. Some of their favorite words included "sockdologer," "absquatulate," "high falutin," and "spandangalous."²⁴

Partly because of the unconventional behavior of their politicians, frontiers were often portrayed as "cradles of barbarism" populated by knife fighting, whiskey swilling outcasts that had reverted to primitivism.²⁵ In actuality, the frontiers were not quite as lawless as they were reputed to be. While it is true that wickedness and debauchery existed in the camps and newly founded towns, and that lynch laws and vigilance committees often took the place of officers and courts, most of the settlements in the West were protected by a system of law and justice.²⁵

The places generally thought to be the most lawless, the mining camps, actually had a well developed, if severe, system of justice. Miner's law, in fact, established the tone for many Western policies and contributed significantly to the history of American democracy. The miners early on realized the necessity of organizing a body that would act for the "mutual protection against the lawless and for meting out justice between man and man." While trials were very quick, "efficient" to some, accused persons were given a chance to defend themselves. The regulations and decisions were enforced in daylight by a group of impartial men publicly chosen.²⁷

Besides religion and politics, the frontier influenced other aspects of culture. Culture, in the sense of science, the arts, and education, was a highly important feature of frontier development. The number of scientists and artists who pushed into the West during the frontier period was admittedly small compared with the number of farmers or miners, but they formed a significant percentage. To ignore them would be to ignore the great impact of the West in these fields.²⁸

One great aim of nineteenth century botanists and zoologists was the complete cataloguing of all the earth's plants and animals. As a vast tract of unknown land, the American West offered a considerable scientific challenge. Geologists and geographers likewise had a rare opportunity to gain new knowledge. Scientists received a great deal of support from their colleagues for their ventures in the West. In the early days of the frontier, scientists were usually sponsored by Eastern or European institutions. Such organizations as the Academy of Natural Science in Philadelphia or the Smithsonian Institution sent expeditions to the West and assembled the boxes of specimens that came from Western regions. Such well known scientists as John Charles Fremont and John Townsend were among those that studied in the West.

After the Civil War the West continued to host scientific surveys. Some of the greatest names of Western exploration did not become known until as late as the 1860's and 70's. Clarence King, Josiah Whitney, William Brewer, Ferdinand V. Hayden and many others were analyzing and documenting the features of the West during these decades. They were supported either by scientific societies of the East or by the U.S. government, particularly the United States Geological Survey.²⁹

As in science, the frontier played a major role in the development of art. The most typical activity of nineteenth century artists was the romanticizing of the West. George Catlin, who painted during the 1830's, often depicted the American Indian, which he compared to Grecian youths at the first Olympic Games. He depicted prairie fires, a buffalo hunt on snow shoes, and a self portrait of himself painting a chief while the tribe looked on, all in his original, almost garish, colors. Other artists who became fascinated with Indian themes were Alfred Miller, Seth Eastman, and John Mix Stanley.³⁰

Besides having an effect on individual artists, the West influenced the whole of American art. In the middle of the eighteenth century a school of painters led by Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran came to be known as the Rocky Mountain school because they used Western landscapes as their chief motif, just as an earlier romantic group of painters had been fascinated with the Hudson River.³¹ Panaroma was very popular with American artists of this period. James Otto Lewis started this trend when he decided that the imposing spectacle of westward expansion called for dimensions beyond those of the normal picture. He combined canvases of the upper Mississippi River and such subjects as the Falls of St. Anthony to form a canvas measuring twelve feet high and twelve-hundred years long. Another appreciator of panaroma, John Banvard, once had a three miles long painting exhibited in Boston. Besides enlarged canvases, the panoramists favored intensified palettes.³²

While the artists and scientists only accounted for a tiny percentage of those who went West, almost all pioneers shared an appreciation for the culture from which they were cut off. The pioneers' great respect for education was one manifestation of this appreciation. The little red school-house moved west with the settlers and there was great enthusiasm to build colleges in the West. By the end of the nineteenth century, for example, California had twelve colleges.³³

In the nineteenth century many Americans, everywhere, not just in the West, were beginning to substitute faith in popular education for their preoccupation with religion. The most intense periods of westward expansion coincided with the increased popularity of education, a fact that helped multiplication of schools and colleges in the West.³⁹

In the field of education, the West did not innovate so much as it selected

and emphasized. While education in general was becoming extremely popular, its nature was an undecided question for America at large. The worship of practicality and the consequent distrust of theory and classical learning had an effect all across the country. The West only accentuated what had already begun elsewhere.³⁵ Like much of America, western schools widely used McGuffey's Reader. The nationalism implicit in the Reader, coupled with the pioneers' desperate need to identify with something larger than themselves, accounted for the fact that nationalism was an ideal taught by most Western schools.³⁶

That the West needed to have many schools, and especially colleges, was argued most eloquently by Henry Ward Beecher. In an enthusiastic speech he said, "That which the West needs is not so much the educated men of the East as the Institutions by which to educate her own men. These are the suns that spread the East with harvests, and fill the hands with bounty that were held out for supply."³⁷ Western schools furnished a place for children to be educated and also housed the public library, and provided a cultural center for the literary society, choir, and other groups.³⁸

Besides educators, there was another great group of civilizing agents: women. Traditionally the most uncivilized and uncultured settlements have been those with few or no women. These "gentle yet persistent" tamers of the west included schoolteachers, loving wives, eligible daughters, hopeful old maids, missionaries, reformers, actresses, and camp followers.³⁹ To survive on the frontier, women needed to be either strong and religious, like Sarah Royce, whose recollections were published as the book A Frontier Lady, or cheerful like Martha Smith. Mrs. Royce, who had a rather stern view of life, wrote of a fellow pioneer who had had an affair with a neighbor:

"How can she endure to think of the work she has wrought into the fabric of California social life?"⁴⁰ Her fortitude served her well, though, for she survived the long journey to California and countless obstacles to raise a large family. Mrs. Smith was also a religious woman, but her Going to God's Country is suffused with a good natured humor. Even in the midst of horrible struggles she kept her cheerfulness:

It was July 1895. Crops was bad. And most all our money gone. And all those teams to feed. The corn all burned. Five hundred acres of wheat and not one grain cut. It was all too short . . . And it looked like the grass was going to dry up too. No garden. No feed for our hogs. No feed for the children. But our credit was good so we still bought goods . . . We did like pioneering very much for you would get something out of it.⁴¹

The role women played in the civilizing of the frontier has been greatly down played. Hamlin Garland, who could write so movingly about the fate of male pioneers, dismissed the life of a female settler as "Just born an' scrubbed an' suffered an' died." He pictured women as pining for the civilized society they had left behind, driven insane by loneliness, monotony, and wind, and mourning their faded beauty, broken health, and ruined complexions.⁴² Some of his portrayals were founded on truth, for certainly some women, just as some men, were unfit for the hardships of pioneering. One notable case was Miriam David Colt, who penned a bitter and despairing journal with the telling title Went to Kansas: Being a Thrilling Account of an Ill-fated Expedition to that Fairy Land and its Sad Results.

On the whole, though, the experiences of women on the frontier seem to disprove the classic saying, "It was a great place for man and dogs, but hell on horses and women." Laura Ingalls Wilder, who wrote the classic Little House series for children remembered her pioneering days fondly and found them to be adventurous and exciting. Other women pioneers voiced similar

sentiments when they were interviewed by a writer named Helena Huntington Smith. One old pioneer woman had told her about her wagon train days, "We were young. The weather was beautiful, and the grass was green. Mrs. X and I were the only women in the party, and we never touched our hands to dish water. It was the time of my life."⁴³

A sunny disposition was valuable to have, for women were expected to cook, clean, wash, carry water, help the men plow, and gather fuel. In a land of few doctors they were also expected to keep the family healthy.⁴⁴ When the West became more settled, women's clubs set out to improve it. Such groups as the Ladies' Educational Association, the Maternal Association, and the Ladies' Library Association devoted themselves to the study of English history and the forming of libraries. In addition the women would discuss and study Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott, two great favorites among pioneers.⁴⁵

Not until after 1860 did frontiersmen start to read not English classics, but literature that was distinctly American. That was when Erastus Beadle came out with his first dime novel. The first orange covered novel was followed by three hundred more tales in thirty different series.⁴⁶ The dime novels were an important source for social historians because they showed what a great many people read and dreamed about. The dime novels were an "objectified mass dream," where their individual writers abandoned their own personalities and identified themselves with the reveries of their readers. A vast and inarticulate public, dreaming of Western adventure and glory, eagerly awaited each forthcoming novel and made it a bestseller. Seth Jones, the most popular of Beadle's dime novels, sold more than 400,000 copies, and Beadle's total sales between 1860 and 1865 approached five million copies. These figures are not sensational by modern standards, but in nine-

teenth century America they were revolutionary.⁴⁷

Such large-scale production relies on regular output. The format of the novels was hardly new. Beadle patterned them after the thrillers published by Gleason and Ballou in Boston during the 1840's. What made Beadle so successful, though, was his emphasis on Western locales, a systematic devotion to the principles of big business, and the perception that New York was replacing Boston as the publishing capital of America. Beadle realized that the customer must be able to recognize the manufacturer's product by its uniform packaging. To accomplish this end he hired a sharp editor named Orville J. Victor, and devised the idea of having various series, each following its own characteristic format. But a standard label wasn't enough, Beadle reasoned, the product itself must be uniform and dependable. Victor's contribution to Beadle's success was the perfection of formulas which could be used by any number of writers, and the inspired alternation of these formulas according to the changing demands of the market. Victor has been called a mass editor, since he had an incredibly reliable intuition of the nature, degree, and direction of changes in popular tastes.⁴⁸

The systematic use of formulas severely limited the writers' creativity. However, it enabled them to write at great speed and in unbelievable quantity. Many of the writers on Victor's staff could turn out a thousand words an hour for twelve hours at a stretch. For example, Prentiss Ingraham, one of Beadle's most popular writers, produced more than six hundred novels. It should be noted that the novels seldom ran to more than thirty thousand words, but even so, producing six hundred novels, however short, was quite a feat. Fiction produced very rapidly tended to have an automatic quality to it, and the Beadle novels did not escape this. They were predictable, sub-literary, and instant hits.

Eventually, however, the industrial revolution in publishing led to more frenzied competition among the producers. Orville Victor was quoted as saying that when rival publishers entered the field the Beadle writers merely had to kill a few more Indians. It went further than that, however. Novel variations were constantly created in order to give the worn out formulas new zest. Incredible tricks of horsemanship, unusual feats of shooting, and more elaborate costumes were all introduced in an attempt to spice up stories that were essentially no different from their predecessors. Killing a few more Indians meant, in actuality, exaggerating violence and bloodshed for their own sakes, often to the point of sadism. By the 1890's the Western dime novel was characterized by conflicts between detectives and bands of robbers that had little to do with their Western settings.⁴⁹

As time went on, the Western hero deteriorated from a man in communion with nature, similar to the character of James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking, into a bandit brandishing a revolver. Eventually he was transformed into a detective, and ceased to be Western in any significant sense.⁵⁰ The Beadle heroine underwent an even more drastic transformation. Beginning life as a lady with impeccable manners, by 1880 she had become a bloodthirsty Amazon who outshone the men in acts of savagery.

These character changes revealed a progressive deterioration in the Western novel as a genre. The ideas perpetuated by the Beadle dime novel, that virtue and happiness and peace were derived from the wilderness, proved to be quite irrelevant to the society nearing the twentieth century. By 1889, when Erastus Beadle retired, the dime novels had outlived their heyday and were read mainly by a pre-adolescent audience.⁵¹

The dime novels were just one aspect of American culture that was

influenced by the frontier. Others included religion, politics, law and order, science, art and education. The important thing about the dime novels, though, was that they mirrored prevalent notions about the frontier. None of their metaphors were new and many had become distorted or trivialized through time. The original source of their vision lay in the writings of the statesmen, scholars, and literary writers who developed a comprehensive concept of the frontier.

Besides influencing American culture, the frontier helped shape democratic practices. It created personalities like Daniel Boone, the fur traders, cattlemen, miners, and noble savage who figured in both legend and history. Knowledge of these effects helps define the nature of the westward movement, for while the frontier can accurately be described as either a geographic region or a process, it is as a process that it has its most significant meaning.

CHAPTER II

CONCEPTS OF THE FRONTIER

Conceptions of the frontier evolved and developed significantly through time. In its earliest form, the concept of the frontier was a response to the American wilderness. The first settlers' experiences in wild country and the writings of men like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin then brought forward the idea that the west was a vast garden, another Eden. This idea, the most powerful of any connected with the frontier, affected the course of history. It accounted for laws like the Homestead Act, and influenced the writings of certain scholars. The most famous of these scholars, Frederick Jackson Turner, described the frontier as a formative force on American democracy and character.

Wilderness was the first name given to the American continent. European discoverers and settlers of the New World were familiar with the notion of wilderness even before they crossed the Atlantic. Some of this acquaintance was first hand, since in the late Middle Ages a considerable amount of wild country still existed in Europe. Far more important, however, was the deep resonance of wilderness as a concept in Western thought. It was understood instinctively as something alien to civilized man, a threatening environment against which civilization had waged an unceasing struggle. Europeans knew the virgin forest as a central and terrifying part of their folklore and mythology.¹ The Judeo-Christian tradition constituted another powerful influence on the attitude towards wilderness of these first colonists since wilderness in the Bible functions both as a descriptive technique and as a symbol.

The inherent immorality of wild country is expressed in the Old Testament. Paradise and the garden of Eden are regarded as the antithesis of wilderness. Later in the scriptures the disparity between wilderness and an Edenic condition is made clear in passages like the one from Joel: "The land is like a garden of Eden before them but after them a desolate wilderness" (Isaiah 51:3). Isaiah continues in a similar vein when God promises Zion that He will make her "wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord" (Joel 2:3). The story of the Garden and its loss embedded into Western thought the concept that wilderness and paradise were both physical and spiritual opposites.²

Soon after his arrival, the seventeenth century frontiersman found the New World far from being a paradise. At Jamestown the colonists abandoned the search for gold and turned, deeply disappointed, to the task of surviving in a hostile environment. When William Bradford stepped off the Mayflower into what he called a "hideous and desolate wilderness," he started a tradition of repugnance towards unsettled country. He lamented the Pilgrims' incapability of finding a vantage point "to view from this wilderness more goodly country."³

With few exceptions, other early pioneers continued to regard the wilderness with defiance and hatred, and celebrated the advance of civilization as the greatest of goals. Two reasons contributed to their bias against wilderness. It constituted a formidable threat to physical survival. Safety, comfort, and necessities like food and shelter depended on the pioneer's ability to overcome the wild environment surrounding him. For the first Americans the forest hid wild beasts, savage men, and still more horrifying creatures of the imagination. Civilized man feared the danger of succumbing to the wildness and reverting to savagery himself. The early pioneer, in short, lived too close to the wilderness to appreciate it, and the conquest of the environment was his primary concern.⁴

Wilderness not only physically threatened the pioneers but also acquired significance as a dark and sinister symbol. The first settlers shared the long Western tradition of imagining wild country as a moral wasteland, a cursed and chaotic place. Consequently, frontiersmen sensed that they battled wilderness not only for personal survival but in the name of God, country, and race. The words they chose to describe the wilderness reflected the intensity of their feelings. The same phrases were used over and over again, words like "howling," "dismal," and "terrible." In the 1650's, for example, John Eliot wrote of going into "a wilderness where nothing appeareth but hard labour (and) wants." Some years later, Cotton Mather, writing of a Puritan friend, noted that she left an "earthly paradise" in England to come to America to "encounter the sorrows of a wilderness." She died not too long after and "left that wilderness for the heavenly paradise." Clearly, the American wilderness was not regarded as a paradise by these early settlers.⁵

The Puritans who settled New England, more than any other group of settlers, understood the Christian conception of wilderness. They believed themselves to be the latest in a long line of dissenting peoples who braved the wild in order to advance God's cause. While they fled from a corrupt civilization, they never regarded the wilderness itself as their goal. Their driving impulse was to "carve a garden from the wilds, to make an island of spiritual light in the surrounding darkness."⁶

For the Puritans, the wilderness was a metaphor as well as an actuality. On the frontier, the two meanings reinforced each other. Seventeenth century writing is permeated with the idea of the wilderness as the "devil's den." The early New Englanders agreed with Michale Wigglesworth that the New World was a "waste and howling wilderness/ where none inhabited/ But hellish fiends

and brutish men/ That Devils worshipped." Cotton Mather in particular verged on hysteria when he described the Indians who were, he thought, not merely heathens but active disciples of the devil. In view of the great importance they attached to conquering the wilderness, it is not surprising that they regarded western expansion as one of their greatest achievements. It was an unending wonder and evidence of God's blessing that wild country should become fruitful and civilized.

Appreciation for the wilderness began when God became associated with wild country. Two factors contributed to this association: the Puritans themselves changed their original conception of the wilderness and the flowering of Romanticism popularized wild country. The Puritans had originally conceived of their sojourn in the wilderness as an errand, a temporary residence that would establish a New Testament community in America as an example for England. The first settlers thought they would be recalled to England to help govern it once they proved how viable their society was. When England showed no interest in the outcome of the colonies, and as succeeding generations were born, it became necessary for the Puritans to rethink their original mission.⁷ Left alone in America the Puritans came to view the wilderness not as desolate and ungodly but as the setting for God's great work, a new Israel. In his sermon "The latter Day Glory is Probably to begin in America," Jonathon Edwards noted that the great work of God was at hand and that "if we consider the circumstances of the settlement of New England, it must needs appear the most likely, of all American colonies, to be the place whence this work shall principally take its rise."⁸

In America, as in Europe, appreciation for wilderness was expressed by writers, artists, travelers, gentlemen -- people, in short, who did not face wilderness from a pioneer's perspective. William Byrd II is perhaps the earliest example of such a writer. Educated in England he began work in 1728 as Virginia's commissioner in a survey operation that was to establish the boundary between his colony and North Carolina. His History of the Dividing Line is the first extensive commentary on wilderness that reveals a feeling other than hostility. Byrd portrayed his expedition into "this great wilderness" as a delightful adventure.⁹

Although his lack of a strong religious orientation helped, Byrd enjoyed the wilderness primarily because he did not confront wild country as a pioneer but as a rich plantation owner. Nonetheless, his experience illustrated how appreciation for the wilderness was rarely pure. Contemplating a wild valley he observed it "wanted nothing but cattle grazing in the Meadow and Sheep and Goats feeding on the Hill, to make it a Compleat Rural landscape." It was not the untamed aspects of the land that pleased Byrd so much, but rather its pastoral possibilities.¹⁰

In his idealization of the pastoral Byrd was no different from the early pioneers. Since the settlers associated the wilderness with hardship and danger, a controlled, rural state of nature became the object of their affection and labor. The pastoral condition seemed closest to paradise and a life of contentment and ease.¹¹ Eden had been a garden, and what Henry Nash Smith calls the "myth of the garden" grew out of the seventeenth century discoverers and settlers' revulsion towards the wilderness. It was aided by the romantic traditions of educated and cultured travelers, and spread by the oppressed and idealistic of Europe, who, knowing little about America and ignoring reports

of appalling hardships, contemplated America through a "prism streaked with myth, and out of the refracted colors formed images of Eden."¹² The concept of the frontier as cultivated American Eden was further developed by eighteenth century writers like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson.

In his earliest writings, Franklin had pointed out the economic advantages for the British Empire of having acres of unoccupied land adjacent to the colonies. But after America won her independence, his writings focused on the redemptive qualities of the empty continent. Meditating on the idleness and extravagance of the harbor cities, he consoled himself that the hundreds of millions of acres of land "covered with forests would attract settlers who would, by their industry and frugality, save the country from economic and spiritual ruin."¹³

A city dweller, Franklin was among the first to find virtue in agricultural pursuits. "There seems to be but three ways for a nation to acquire wealth," he wrote. "The first is by war, as the Romans did, in plundering their conquered neighbors. This is robbery. The second by commerce, which is generally cheating. The third by agriculture, the only honest way wherein man receives a real increase of the seed thrown into the ground in a kind of continued miracle." Franklin repeatedly contrasted the vices of Europe and England with what he termed the "glorious public virtue" of America, and habitually he bestowed upon American farmers the ennobling title of "Cultivators of the Earth."¹⁴ Franklin's writings contain ideas that influenced later concepts of the frontier: an agrarian based society is preferable to one that depends on trade, the land to the west would be fertile enough to support farming, and Americans would move westward. In addition, his ideas were germinal to the development of that "economic romanticism" where many Americans assumed

a "God-given right to the fruits of an Edenic tree." As Franklin said, "The Divine Being seems to have manifested his Approbation . . . by the remarkable Prosperity with which He has been pleased to favour the Whole Country."¹⁵ The notion of Manifest Destiny grew out of misinterpreting this approbation.

After Franklin, the two best known expositors of agrarian philosophy were J. Hector St. John Crevecoeur and Thomas Jefferson. Like Franklin, Crevecoeur naturally assumed that American society would expand indefinitely westward. He thought that the process of westward expansion would create three divisions of society, first, a remote fringe of backwoods settlements, next, a central region of comfortable farms, and finally, to the East, a region of growing wealth and social stratification. Crevecoeur believed that both the beginning and last stages brought about undesirable conditions, but that the middle situation offered a "unique opportunity for human virtue and happiness."¹⁶

Unlike Crevecoeur, who was concerned with the social conditions that would arise, Jefferson was primarily interested in the political implications raised by the agrarian ideal. He saw the farmer as the rock on which the American republic must stand. The perceptions of Franklin and Crevecoeur that the west afforded a simple agricultural society seemed to Jefferson to guarantee that the United States would be able to maintain its republican institutions.¹⁷

In his book Notes on Virginia, Jefferson detailed what he considered to be the farmer's role: "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He had made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."¹⁸ He was obviously influenced by the literary pastoral. The American farmer or husbandman, as Jefferson

called him, was described as being a simple yet educated man, a noble democrat. While Jefferson was supposedly talking about an actual social type in an actual society, he crossed the boundary between life and art in his portrayal of the noble husbandman. At every opportunity he illustrated the contrast between simplicity and sophistication. "State a moral case," he wrote, "to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules."¹⁹ The moral inherent in his little homily was that the true American was the ploughman, whose values were derived from his association with the land, and not from artificial urban life.

While he is usually credited with being the father of agrarian philosophy, and while in Notes on Virginia and other writings he expressed his admiration for the independent farmer, Jefferson ironically never gave full credence to the pastoral ideal. In his detached moods he knew that it did not encompass all the essential truths about the American experience. He recognized that his countrymen had ambitions to get rich and rise in the world that could not be satisfied on a small, self sufficient farm. Yet over and over again in his writings he expressed a yearning for the peace and pleasures of the country in a way that bordered on being sentimental pastoralism. His political theories included many natural images such as the rural landscape, plants, organic growth, gardens, and gardening. In a letter written in 1811 he noted, "I have often thought that if heaven had given my choice of my position and calling it should have been on a rich spot of earth, well watered and near a good market for the productions of the garden. No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth, and no culture comparable to that of the garden."²⁰

One problem with summarizing Jefferson's views is that his thought tended

to be elusive and unsystematic, and does not lend itself to ordinary standards of consistency. There is no way to cancel out either his intense devotion to the rural ideal or the cool, analytical tone with which he dismissed it. Most of the polarities in Jefferson's thought had their basis in the experiences of his own life. He praised the noble husbandman's renunciation of worldly concerns, for example, but he himself held the highest political office in the land. He was drawn to a simple, rural life, and yet he cherished the fruits of an advanced civilization--architecture, music, and literature--and was devoted to the advance of science, technology and the arts. Although he preferred a rural society, Jefferson found it necessary to accomodate himself to what he called the "circumstances." For instance, the need for manufacturing in 1816 forced him, although reluctantly, to accept the factory system he despised. These accomodations do not detract, however, from the importance and vigor, albeit inconsistency, of Jefferson's ideals.

Besides laying the theoretical groundwork for the development of the frontier, Jefferson also provided the physical impetus for westward expansion. In 1803, he sent careful instructions to Robert Livingston, then Minister to France, to make a deal with Napoleon. He also sent James Monroe to assist him. Jefferson had suspected that Napoleon's Santa Domingo campaign was originally meant to be a rehearsal for a military conquest of the United States. But after the dismal failure of Santa Domingo, the emperor decided against launching any more conquests so far from France. Before Monroe had landed, Livingston had bought Louisiana for only sixteen million dollars.

Although the "advice and consent of the Senate" is necessary for a President to conclude a treaty with a foreign nation, Jefferson never even mentioned the purchase to Congress until after it was a fact, saying, "It is

the case of the guardian investing the money of his ward in purchasing an important adjacent territory and saying to him when of age, I did this for your good." Even though Jefferson's actions were unconstitutional, most of his enemies accepted it for what Alistair Cooke called "the most reliable of American reasons: it worked." Jefferson had more than doubled the territory of the United States, a one-hundred and forty per cent increase, at a price of only four cents per acre.²²

After Jefferson died, the most outspoken and well known champion of westward expansion was Congressman Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. Benton saw in westward expansion a chance to build an empire, since commerce would be likely to include not only distribution but production of goods. The empire notion was a new one, but one that persisted for many years. When the Mexican war was over, Benton's twenty year old dream of expanding into the west was realized, since the wars gained new territorial acquisitions. Ironically, it also ended his Senate career by bringing the slavery issue to a head.

The heir to Benton's ideal was William Gilpin. He took over from Benton the theory of building a succession of empires, culminating in the Republican Empire of North America. The key to building this great empire lay in the development of the Central Pacific railway. As time went on, however, Gilpin became more and more concerned with the concept of nature, rather than with the realization of the empire.²³ He recalled the older notions regarding wild country, in particular the idea of conquering the wilderness in the name of God, theorizing that "Progress is God" and that "the occupation of wild territory . . . proceeds with all the solemnity of a providential ordinance."²⁴ Gilpin believed that the physical features of nature would determine the course of human development, and this belief came to overshadow his theories

of expansion. His ideas were important, though, for the beginning of the railroad.²⁵

While Benton and Gilpin were formulating their theories about westward expansion, the early belief in the west as paradise recurred. The first frontier to be glorified in the Eden tradition by both Americans and Europeans was Kentucky. A century before the first settlers reached it, Kentucky was rumored to be an exotically rich and beautiful land. From extravagant reports of Indians and white wanderers, the region straddled by the Ohio and Cumberland rivers came to be part of the legend of earthly paradise. Kentucky was such a compelling symbol that even when the West as a whole came to be regarded as a garden by prospering settlers, Kentucky remained in people's minds as the garden of the West.²⁶

As each successive frontier was pushed forward, the myth of the garden, which had had its origins in the Puritan concept of wilderness, grew. With each surge of westward movement a new community came into being. These communities devoted themselves to agriculture, and as the farmers plowed the virgin lands and put in crops, the great Interior Valley was transformed into a garden. In people's imagination, this was the garden of the world. This image of the garden became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth century America, a "collective representative, a poetic idea . . . that defined the promise of American life." This symbol embraced a whole group of ideals that included "growth," "increase," and "fecundity."²⁷

The garden myth played an important role in the development of the Mississippi Valley. The garden tradition assumed agriculture to be the dominant force in the future society of the valley. As time went on, however, and industry replaced farming, the valley could no longer be called a garden. To the very end of the

nineteenth century, however, the image of an agricultural paradise seemed to represent in Walt Whitman's words, the "real genuine America."²⁸

An impressive illustration of the garden myth's pervasive influence can be found in the design of New York's Central Park. The park's meandering paths and tree clumps were laid out in a style that came to be known as the "jardin anglais." The assymetrical architecture and the overall picturesque effect of the park was based on a style of classicism that had been adapted to the American continent by the Hudson River School Painters. The assymetries of the roads and buildings were deliberately designed to form a romantic and naturalist setting. The studied efforts that went into turning a section of New York City into a huge garden is just one example of the myth's symbolic potency.²⁹

If the west was viewed as a vast and beautiful garden, logic demanded that an equally glorified gardener be present. The mythic gardener developed into the yeoman, a symbol that fused eighteenth century agrarian ideas with early American pioneering experiences. The yeoman became an ideal that would dominate the social thinking of the Northwest. The American yeoman had to work as hard as any laborer or European peasant, and at the same tasks. Contrary to popular belief, his economic status was not necessarily higher. But he was a totally different creature, for the yeoman was a symbol, the hero of mid-nineteenth century America, glorified in literature and in songs.

The yeoman's origins lay in Jefferson's husbandman and Franklin's cultivator of the earth. What set the yeoman apart from these early conceptions of a noble farmer, though, was that he was seen as the representative of a socially and morally superior race. By the early nineteenth century, Americans had begun to realize that their country differed in one important

aspect to Europe: wilderness and virgin land had no counterpart there. If such undefiled land was, as many Americans suspected, the medium through which God spoke most clearly, then the United States had a distinct moral advantage over Europe.³⁰ The man who lovingly tended the garden of the west was "emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched by the usual inheritances of family, an individual standing alone, self reliant and self propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his unique and inherent resources." He was, in other words, an American version of Adam.³¹

The ideal of the yeoman played a significant role in the writing of the Homestead Act of 1862. The Act came about partly in response to Western demands, and partly as a result of sectional alliances. When a similar act had been introduced in the middle 1840's, the West was enthusiastic, the Northeast uncertain but receptive, the New York-Pennsylvania region opposed, and the South divided. Not until the proposition had gained more support from the Northeast and middle states could it be passed.³²

When the Act finally came about it was seen as the "realization of the dream of an agrarian utopia in the west."³³ Any adult citizen or alien who had filed his first papers could claim 160 acres of land for a ten dollar fee. After he had "resided upon or cultivated the same for a term of five years immediately succeeding the time of filing" and paid a few other small fees, he secured final title. The law was supposed to act as a "safety valve," assuring every underpaid laborer, every crowded westerner a chance to secure a free farm.

In practice, however, the farmer benefited only slightly and the laborer not at all. This was generally true of the entire frontier movement. That the Homestead Act failed to benefit western farmers was due partly to deficiencies,

within the law, and partly to the successful efforts of speculators to circumvent the law. The writers of the act had thought that 160 acres was a generous amount of land, and indeed, it would have been anywhere except on the plains. But the Great Plains were so arid that 160 acres could barely support a single family. However, additional government land could be bought for \$1.25 an acre.³⁴ This process was known as preemption and had one major drawback. The land was sold in units, the smallest being 40 acres at a cost of fifty dollars, and this was just too expensive for most pioneers. Some pioneers secured extra land by filing a timber claim, which gave them another 40 acres in return for planting ten acres in timber producing trees. This too proved to be unrealistic, for it was next to impossible to grow trees in the prairie's hard packed, root choking soil. Since neither of these alternatives were practical, most pioneers had to be content with their 160 acres.

The provisions of the Homestead Act were intended to keep speculators from gobbling up large tracts of free land and selling them in pieces for profit. However, in the remote lands of the plains, land laws were almost impossible to enforce. Land office agents were responsible for districts so huge they could not always make first hand inspections of a settler's claim. Consequently, the laws were either skillfully loopholed or ignored. For example, there was a federal regulation which required the settler to build a house on his claim that was at least "12 by 12" and had windows. A number of land sharks managed to slip past this regulation by building cabins and rolling them from claim to claim. Another trick consisted of erecting miniature "houses" measuring exactly a foot high and a foot wide and swearing under oath that a dwelling "12 by 12" had been built on the claim.

However, land speculators were not the only reason that many pioneers could not obtain farms. Railroad monopolists controlled a great deal of land, and they sold more land at an average price of five dollars an acre than farmers obtained under the Homestead Act.³⁵

The gap between the promised agrarian utopia and the actual circumstances of the West after the Civil War disillusioned many a western farmer. Told that he was independent and self sufficient, he found himself at the mercy of the market's demand, and the railways and steamship lines that delivered his crop. The contrast between image and fact was striking, but not until the 1870's did the farmer realize he was one of the most overworked and underpaid laborers. Advertisements printed by the railroads that boldly proclaimed "The Plains are not deserts, but the opposite, and the cardinal basis of the Future empire" lured hundreds of pioneers to the plains. Upon reaching the basis of the future empire, they found the plains to be a particularly inhospitable Sahara.³⁶

Despite the failure of the Homestead Act, most writings that deal with the open continent were characterized by a great deal of optimism. From Franklin, who viewed the empty continent as capable of redeeming already existing social ills, to Gilpin with his idea of building an American empire, the prospect of unsettled land had always inspired a large amount of hope. Following in this tradition was Federick Jackson Turner, who penned the single most influential piece of writing about the west, an essay called "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." Turner was the first to state that the frontier explained America. The key to American development was to be found in the "ever retreating frontier of free land." The moving frontier, he continued, distinguished America from all other countries by

developing a jealously guarded individualism and laying the groundwork for democracy. The most controversial aspect of his hypotheses was that democracy "came out of the American forest" and gained a new strength each time it touched a new frontier.³⁷

Turner also believed that many of the characteristics associated with the American people were directly traceable to the experience of the frontier. Their mobility, their optimism, their inventiveness and willingness to accept innovation, their exploitive wastefulness, all seemed to Turner to be frontier traits. He based his theory on the experience of pioneers who as they moved further westward dreamed of a better future, experimented constantly to adapt artifacts and customs to their particular environment, and squandered seemingly inexhaustible material resources with abandon. Similarly, Turner traced the exaggerated nationalism of the United States to its roots among frontiersmen who looked to the national government for land, transportation, and protection from the Indians. He believed America's faith in democracy stemmed from the necessity of majority self rule among the pioneers, and pointed out that these characteristics persisted long after the frontier itself was no more.³⁸

Since it was first announced in 1893, the Turner thesis has been the subject of a great deal of controversy. In the later nineteenth century there were two schools of thought among historians: one which interpreted American history in terms of the slavery question, and another that attributed American institutions to earlier English ones. Turner maintained that the novel attitudes produced by the frontier were more important to American culture than either slavery or an Old World heritage.³⁹ While Turner's ideas seemed revolutionary to nineteenth century historians, they were not without precedent. Like his predecessors, Turner's frontier was the meeting place of savagery and

civilization. The myth of the garden entered into the thesis when he depicted nature as creating an agrarian utopia in the wilderness. By building on Jefferson's conception that democracy should have an agricultural base, Turner's notion of frontier democracy proved to be almost identical to Jefferson's agrarian ideal.⁴⁰

Turner pictured the frontier as a place where civilization was enacted. The process of a people transforming the elemental into the complex, and the primitive into the civilized led him to view the American frontier as the holographic image of man's total history. Although he also argued that the frontier "united heterogeneous people into a composite nationality," the real point of his essay was man's conquest of nature. He believed that while the wilderness might at first master the colonists, eventually the civilized man, as the representative of reason and progress, would overcome the difficulties posed by nature and transform the land.⁴¹

Despite the fact that Turner had a long intellectual heritage regarding the frontier, there are several flaws in his thesis. The pioneers who marched westward were not, as Turner said, attracted primarily by the promise of free land. He failed to account for the omnipresent profit seekers and speculators. They were always just ahead of the farmers in the advance westward, buying up likely town sites or appropriating the best farm lands. When the settler arrived he had a choice of paying the speculator's price or accepting an inferior site. By capitalizing on generous grants to railroads and state educational institutions who did not want to be bothered with sales to individuals, by buying bonus script from soldiers, or by securing Indian land as the reservations were contracted, the speculators managed to control most of the far west's most desirable acreage. As a result, for every pioneer who

obtained a homestead from the government, six or seven purchased farms from speculators.

Those who made these purchases were not, as Turner believed, displaced eastern workers fleeing periodic industrial depressions. Few city-dwelling laborers had the skill, inclination, or capital to escape to the frontier. Land prices of \$1.25 an acre seem ridiculously low today, but they were unreachable for factory workers earning one dollar a day. Furthermore, farm machinery, animals, and housing added about one thousand dollars to the cost of starting a farm in the 1850's. The American frontiers were largely pushed westward by younger sons from adjacent farm areas who migrated during time of prosperity.⁴²

There were other, more severe problems in the thesis. Turner was confused by the garden myth, since he lauded a simple, agricultural society while at the same time approving of the evolutionary process that necessarily led to the city. By largely thinking in an agrarian context, he tended to overlook factors associated with industrialization.⁴³ Since Turner related democracy to nature, and felt that it had no logical connection to civilization, the conclusion would be that post-frontier America had no force tending towards democracy. In later years he attempted, rather unconvincingly, to use education and science as other forces that would have democratizing effects.⁴⁴

His predicament clearly shows the history of the tradition within which he worked. From Franklin's time to the end of the frontier period, the west served as a constant reminder of the importance of agriculture to American society. The agrarian philosophy and myth that developed through the years evolved around an almost mythical conception of nature. This philosophy and myth were irrelevant to issues arising from great technological advances, and for the most part, the industrial revolution.

Turner's significance lies in his depiction of the frontier as a formative force on American democracy and character. His thesis and the myth of the garden are the most influential ideas concerning the frontier. Both conceptions used the works of men like Jefferson and Franklin and early pioneer experiences as sources. These first settlers' writings deal almost exclusively with conquering the wilderness. The evolution from early writings on wilderness to the garden myth illustrates how conceptions of the frontier developed significantly through time.

CHAPTER III

THE FRONTIER AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

Writers have wondered why the epic grandeur of the westward march in American history has failed to find an echo in American literature. Professor Leon Kellner, in his study of literature, remarks on the disparity between the "greatness of American history and the mediocrity of American literature."¹ Kellner's remark, implying that there is no relationship between the frontier movement and literature, is both misleading and inaccurate.

Trying to draw the relation of literature to a given social institution can be a complex task. For literature, to be a true "expression of society," should mirror the current social situation or depict some aspects of social reality. However, as Wellek and Warren point out, a direct transcription of experience is likely to produce literature that is commonplace, trite, or vague. They go on to say that literature is not really a reflection of the social process, but the "essence, the abridgement and summary of all history."² The question of how far literature is actually determined by or dependent upon its social setting and on social change and developments is another area that is difficult to determine. While there are many writers who deal indirectly with the influence of the frontier, these peripheral works are best left to, and deserve a separate study. Examined here are authors who typify different geographical frontiers as settings, with pioneer or settler characters. The most representative works of James Fenimore Cooper, Ole Rolvaag, Hamlin Garland, Willa Cather, and Stephen Crane are discussed below.

In general, the relationship of the frontier to literature is a two-fold one. Edwin Fussell suggests that the American West "was neither more or less interesting than any place, except in the mythology or in the swollen egos of Westerners, until by interpretation the great American writers--all of whom happened to be Eastern--made it seem so."⁴ On the other hand, it is also true that without the real and imagined experiences of pioneering nineteenth century American literature as we know it would never have come into being. Insofar as it resulted from a "series of aesthetic transformation, through which intrinsically meaningless pioneer experiences were elevated to the status of ideas and forms," American literature was profoundly influenced by the concept of the frontier.

Each writer brings his or her own individual view of where the west is and how it should be approached. For Cooper, the frontier lies practically at the Atlantic. The wildness of the countryside fascinates him most. Both Rolvaag and Garland place their characters in Dakota, but Rolvaag studies the frontier from a psychological perspective while Garland is more interested in the economic aspects of pioneering. Cather and Crane have a common setting in Nebraska, but Cather's portrayal, influenced as it is by the garden myth, differs greatly from the picture Crane draws as he contemplates the disappearance of the frontier.

The earliest and most enduring works dealing with the frontier are Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales. Often regarded as the first major American novelist, Cooper was born in New Jersey in 1789 and spent his childhood years in Cooperstown, New York. His works enjoyed immediate popularity when they first appeared, but this early approbation was later replaced by a reaction of scornful criticism. Many critics have found cause to denigrate his novels,

pointing out his stilted style, sloppy grammar, stuffed gentlemen, simpering females, and careless plots. Edgar Allan Poe, for instance, wrote in a frustrated review, "Is there any one so blind as not to see that Mr. Cooper . . . owes much . . . of his reputation as a novelist, to his early occupation of the field."⁶ Yet for all his technical deficiencies, Cooper's works retain some fascination, "something we answer to even before we have spotted it, some image of experience we know to be fundamentally our own or at least could wish that it were."⁷

Part of Cooper's popularity lies in his attempts to define and explain some of the more important issues of his day. Early in the nineteenth century, American nationalists had, after a long search, hit upon the attribute that would distinguish America from Europe. It was not nature, as most travelers tried to believe, but the wildness of its countryside that set America apart. While the Old World could boast of much beautiful scenery it had no equivalent of a wild continent.⁸ Cooper's portrayal of wilderness is unusually complex, and together with the development of the character of Leatherstocking accounts for the presence of "something we answer to" in his works.

Of the five Leatherstocking Tales, three were composed in the 1820's and two in the early 1840's. Read in the order they were written, the series begins with The Pioneers, which depicts Leatherstocking as an old man, followed by The Prairie, which contains the account of his death. The Prairie was to have been Leatherstocking's last appearance, but Cooper's next three books go back to the scout's youth, so that the last book written, The Deerslayer, gives the details of his birth and early manhood. There is a peculiar significance in the fact that Leatherstocking grows progressively younger as the series continues. D.H. Lawrence notes a relationship between the saga's

development and the Edenic conceptions surrounding America: "the Leatherstocking novels . . . go backwards from old age to golden youth. That is the true myth of America. She starts old, old, wrinkled and writhing in an old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing off of the old skin, towards a new youth."⁹

This process of constant rejuvenation is accomplished in the Leatherstocking tales by a steady exposure to nature, and in particular, wilderness. Before Cooper wilderness was typically depicted as a hated obstacle that must be overcome and destroyed. The frontiersman was inevitably a "white barbarian" who ended up on the frontier because he was rejected by the orderly, hardworking occupants of the settled areas.¹⁰ By contrast, Cooper goes to great lengths to show that the wilderness is a place of exciting adventure, a source of beauty, and a moral influence. Leatherstocking expresses many of the standard romantic conventions regarding the sublimity and holiness of nature, but the most eloquent proof of wild country's moral influence is his own character. A passage from The Deerslayer sums up Leatherstocking's relationship to the wilderness:

He loved the woods for their freshness, their sublime solitudes, and the impress that they everywhere bore of the divine hand of their creator. . . . Never did a day pass without his communing in spirit and this, too without the aid of forms or language, with the unfit source of all he saw, felt, and beheld. Thus constituted in a moral sense . . . it is not surprising that the hunter felt a pleasure looking at the scene. (The Leatherstocking Saga, p. 53).

The notion that wilderness is more stable and more closely and related to God is consistent throughout all the novels in the series. The Pioneers, for example, contains the line, "No city dweller can know how often the hand of God is seen in the wilderness." In a similar vein, The Prairie expresses

the early nineteenth century view of America's superiority over Europe. In contrast to the New World, Cooper says the Old should really be called "a worn out, and an abused, and a sacrilegious world." By moving towards nature, men may come closer to God and each other.¹¹ Paradoxically, nature itself is seen as neither good nor bad, but the source of a whole spectrum of behaviours, for present in all of Cooper's works are characters who gain nothing from their experience in the wilds and instead exploit the land.¹²

Leatherstocking says of these exploiters "They scourge the very 'arth with their axes. Such hills and hunting grounds as I have seen stripped of the gifts of the Lord, without remorse or shame." Right before he dies he notes "How much has the beauty of the wilderness been deformed in two short lifetimes" (The Leatherstocking Saga, p. 821). While the disappearance of the wilderness is an unqualified tragedy to Leatherstocking and his Indian companions, Cooper's own attitude towards its elimination is unusually complex, since he himself approved of civilization. While conquering the wilderness may be tragic, it is also necessary since civilization, the greater good, must prevail. The war between the wilderness and civilization is not a case of good versus evil to Cooper, but of two kinds of good. Civilized society on the frontier might contain many persons inferior to Leatherstocking but Cooper views this as only one stage on the road to civilization. Eventually refined gentlemen and ladies with a cultured sense of law and beauty would evolve. It is these cultured descendants that Cooper hopes would flourish, not the honorable, but crude hunters.¹³

Cooper's complicated attitude towards wilderness and civilization is manifested in the character of Leatherstocking, or Hawkeye, or Natty Bumppo, as he is variously called. In The Prairie the aged Leatherstocking is

depicted as having been "driven by the increasing and unparalleled advance of population to seek a final refuge against society in the broad and tenantless plains of the West." There are marked similarities between his personality and Daniel Boone, especially in their love for the freedom found in the forest, their delight in hunting, and their dislike for the ordinary pursuits of civilized men. Like Boone, Leatherstocking is a symbol with profound implications. He is conceived in terms of the "antithesis between nature and civilization, between freedom and law, that has governed most American interpretations of the westward movement."¹⁴ Francis Parkman delighted in what he called the "conception of this hybrid offspring of civilization and barbarism." Natty Bumppo, he continues, combines "uprightness, kindness, innate philosophy, and the truest moral perceptions" with the "wandering instincts and hatred of restraint which stamp the Indian." In an 1850 lecture Cooper said that his hero possesses "the better qualities of both conditions, without pushing either to extremes."¹⁵

Leatherstocking's dual personality is best shown when he is brought before the magistrate for assault and battery on the constable and resisting a search warrant. From the beginning of the trial, it is clear that he is unfamiliar with the workings of the court. Dressed in buckskin clothes, he needs to be told three times to remove his buckskin hat. When it comes time to enter his plea of guilty or not guilty, he delivers instead, an impassioned speech saying, " 'Tis a wicked untruth . . . Them thieves, the Iroquois, won't say it to my face that I ever thirsted after man's blood . . . Nobody can say I ever struck even a Mingo in his blanket. I believe there's some who thinks there's no God in a wilderness" (The Leatherstocking Saga, p. 725). Sentenced to one hour in the stocks, a month in jail, and a fine of one hundred dollars, the

old scout is humiliated and confused. "Where am I to get the money? Let me out into the woods and hills . . . I'll make you up the sum afore the season is over. Yes, yes--you see the reason of the thing, and the wickedness of shutting up an old man that has spent his days . . . where he could always look into the windows of heaven" (The Leatherstocking Saga, p. 725). Unfortunately, the judge is not won over by Leatherstocking's logic, and the sentence stands. His reactions to the verdict and throughout the entire court scene express both his innate goodness and his disregard for the law. He refuses to see any evidence of wrongdoing on his part, noting "there's no guilt in doing what's right, and I'd rather died on the spot than had him put foot in the hut at that moment" (The Leatherstocking Saga, p. 719).

Cooper's genuine ambivalence toward the issue of civilization and barbarism makes the character of Leatherstocking at once far-reaching and unrealized. Leatherstocking, for all his manly virtues and mastery of woodcraft, is not a true Western hero in the conventional romantic sense for at least two reasons. First, he is much too old to figure in any romance, for although Cooper tried to remove this obstacle by depicting a youthful Leatherstocking in his later books, his image generally remains that of the aged hunter. Then too, he possesses an irreversibly low social status. In order to devise a Western hero that could win the heroines and at the same time stand as a representative of civilized culture, Cooper often supplies a young protagonist who is really a gentleman disguised as a hunter. That Cooper felt it necessary to include this anemic and often tedious gentleman hero perhaps best illustrates his mixed feelings towards Leatherstocking. Hawkeye, as the man fleeing to new frontiers, necessarily cuts himself off from the law and order Cooper obviously prizes.¹⁶

While Leatherstocking is not a conventionally romantic hero, it is evident that Cooper still saw something very heroic in his character, otherwise he would not have gifted him with so many virtues. One critic, discussing the discrepancy between the heroic stature of Leatherstocking and his rather pathetic fate, notes that "when Cooper published The Pioneers he probably had no intention of writing a series of novels recounting the adventures of Natty Bumppo, or Leatherstocking and his Indian friend Chingachgook; otherwise he would hardly have painted so shabby a picture of these two old heroes, neglected and despised in a land through which they had once moved as masters."¹⁷ This writer's basic premise seems to be that the main character must be successful in order to be the protagonist, a line of thinking that discounts the existence of a tragic hero and ignores the many references to Leatherstocking and Chingachgook's dignity and worth. While in The Pioneers Natty is aged and slightly infirm, and the once mighty Chingachgook has become the converted, drunken John Mohegan, they are still more heroic than the more proper and prosperous settlers. It is possible that Cooper expresses the heroic potentialities of Leatherstocking not so much by his own nature, however commendable, but by a symbolic identification with the Western movement in such a way that the life of Natty Bumppo coincides with the settling and civilizing of the frontier. This is accomplished so that the youth of Leatherstocking is spent in the virginal forest and his old age spent mourning the despoiled wilderness. There are many examples that point to Leatherstocking's juxtaposition with the frontier process, but two, both from The Prairie, are most powerful. In the opening of this novel the great hunter has been forced to become a trapper on the plains due to westward migration.

The sun had fallen below the crest of the wave of the prairie, leaving the usual rich and glowing train on its tracks. In the center of this flood of fiery light, a human form appeared, drawn against the gilded background as distinctly and seeming as palpable as though it would come within grasp of any extended hand. The figure was Colossal; the attitude musing and melancholy. . . . (The Leatherstocking Saga, p. 771).

The hunter turned trapper must give way to the train full of settlers, and yet the figure is "colossal" and so much a part of the background that it appears etched onto it.¹⁸ Similarly, when Leatherstocking dies he "had remained nearly motionless for an hour. . . .his gaze seemed fastened on the clouds which hung around the western horizon, reflecting the bright colors and giving form and loveliness to the glorious tints of an American sunset" (The Leatherstocking Saga, p. 828). The sunset seems at first a rather simplistic image to indicate death, but it recalls the earlier occasion when Leatherstocking is static against the sun's setting light. The awe that the sight produces in the spectators suggests that it is only fitting that Leatherstocking dies looking out to the west.

After the Leatherstocking Tales, probably the most germinal literary work that deals with the frontier is Ole Rolvaag's Giants in the Earth. By the time Rolvaag joined the faculty of St. Olfa College in 1906, ten years after he first arrived in America as a twenty-year old immigrant, he was convinced that there were primarily two powerful forces that shaped American life. Immigration and the westward movement struck him as forces with epical qualities. However, he chose to make Giants in the Earth not so much an American epic as an American tragedy.¹⁹ Rolvaag's work is significant for many reasons but it is the unusual focus of the novel that gives it great power. By portraying "the cost of settlement" and the "tragedy of Americanization," Rolvaag repudiates the myth of the frontier as a paradise and second Eden.²⁰

Giants in the Earth is unique in that it presents the westward movement as a psychological rather than an economic phenomenon. Most writers before Rolvaag glorify frontiering as an especially romantic chapter in American history, detailing the outcomes of blizzards and plagues but ignoring the emotional lives of their characters.²¹ Rolvaag, though, is mostly concerned with the inner feelings of his characters and he expresses the psychological conflict inherent in life on the prairie through Per and Beret Hansa. There is a dramatic contrast between them for Beret dreads the unknowns of the prairie while Per Hansa confidently accepts them. Rolvaag quickly characterizes the two opposite personalities in a brief exchange:

"Oh, how quickly it grows dark out here!" the mother murmured. Per Hansa gave a care-free shrug of his shoulders. "Well," he said dryly, "the sooner the day's over the sooner the next day comes!" (Giants in the Earth, p. 13).

Even from this early scene it is apparent that Per Hansa is a natural pioneer while Beret is a child of the old country who will never really adapt to new ways. To Per Hansa the new land means a rebirth, to Beret it signifies a severance with old and familiar ties. She is horrified when her friends and husband decide to Americanize their names, reasoning that now "that they had discarded the names of their fathers, soon they would be discarding other sacred things." The naming of their child "Peder Victorious" delights Per Hansa but seems like a sacrilege to his wife (Giants in the Earth, p. 279).

While Per Hansa finds the challenges of pioneering invigorating and exciting, Beret misses the traditional laws and custom of her native land and develops a severe case of religious melancholy. She believes that the men on the prairie have become beasts. She is appalled by the sod but they share with the animals, and she thinks the only salvation she can find is to leave the prairie. She

hangs clothing over the windows to shut out the night, even though it is not really the darkness she fears but the light. Ironically, after Per Hansa whitewashes the interior of their sod house, she is unable to look at the bright walls, and instead stares at the floor (Giants, p. 193).

Her only refuge is her thoughts of death. The cemetery in Norway with its thick "reliable" wall and the graves of all her relatives is an especially pleasant memory. Because it is winter and the ground is frozen hard she worries that Per Hansa will be unable to bury her or find enough lumber for a casket. She empties the big immigrant chest brought over from her native land, thinking that it is the only box she could feel safe being buried in (Giants, pp. 222-3). At night she sings the pious verses her grandmother taught her as a little girl. A visiting minister finally manages to pierce through and lift Beret's gloom but she becomes intensely, even fanatically devout.

Per Hansa, after Beret's breakdown, believes it to be all his fault:

I should not have coaxed and persuaded her to come with me out here . . . She is a better soul than any I've ever met. It's only lately that I've begun to realize all she has suffered since we came out here . . . The urge within drove me on and on, and never would I stop: for I reasoned like this, that where I found happiness others must find it as well. (Giants, pp. 404-5)

Per Hansa has always imposed his own will on life and knows no other way to act, but to Beret his defiant self-sufficiency is sinister and almost blasphemous. The action that horrifies her the most is Per Hansa's removal of the stakes indicating prior claim on his neighbor's land. The fact that the stakes had been set before the claimants officially filed their intention to settle absolves Per Hansa only in a legal sense. For he has violated a law ordained by God: "Cursed be he that removeth his neighbour's landmarks. And all the people shall say Amen." But to Per Hansa the possibility of breaking up the

settlement presents a greater evil than the breaking of the law, so that after destroying the stakes he sleeps "the sleep of the righteous." Beret, though, lies awake tormented by the enormity of the sin he has committed (Giants pp. 122 and 130).

Part of Per Hansa's never-failing confidence can be traced to the jaunty personality of the Ash Lad, a Norwegian folkhero. The Ash Lad, a kind of male Cinderella familiar in Norwegian mythology, accomplishes almost impossible feats of cunning or strength to the amazement of his adversaries. Per Hansa likes to think of himself as the Ash Lad in quest of his fortune in the New World. The prairie is often referred to as a "troll," the Ash Lad's own particular enemy.²² Like the Ash Lad, Per Hansa is restless and has grand dreams. When he thinks of building his house, a real one, not one made of sod, he imagines a great estate, "the palace itself would be white, with green cornices . . . the big barn would be as red as blood, with cornices of driven snow" (Giants, p. 45).

Although Per Hansa resembles an epic hero in many ways, especially in his bravery and big heartedness, and in many of his actions, such as leading his family through the wilderness, about halfway through the book the reader senses that he is not going to triumph. A Norwegian family travelling through his settlement disturbs him greatly, for when he looks in their wagon he sees the mother, so insane with grief after burying her son that her husband has tied her wrists to the handles of their large chest. To Per Hansa she appears to be crucified, and after the family leaves the prairie seems more threatening and the clouds on the horizon resemble a huge monstrous face (Giants, p. 309). These and other incidents heighten the impression that Per Hansa will not conquer the prairie. The title of the book, from a line in Genesis, "There

were giants in the earth in those days" is often taken to refer to Per Hansa and his fellow settlers. But Rolvaag's numerous references to magic and other elements of folklore seem to indicate that the giants in the earth are the hostile powers confronting the settlers: storm, plague, drought, prairie fire, and isolation.²³ The ominous sounding chapter titles also bear this out, titles like "Facing the Great Desolation," "The Heart that Dares Not Let in the Sun," "On the Border of Utter Darkness," "The Power of Evil in High Places," and "The Great Plains Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and is Satisfied."

While many other incidents bring home the central theme, the most striking besides Beret's insanity is Per Hansa's death. When Per Hansa's best friend, Hans Olsa, becomes ill, Beret frightens the sick man with her talk of God's wrath and punishment. "It will seem strange not to meet Hans Olsa in the hereafter," she muses, "Not many from the Dakota prairie will ever stand in glory there—that I am sure of! . . . For here Earth takes us. What she cannot get easily she wrests by subtle force, and we do not even know it" (*Giants*, p. 432). Convinced that he's dying, Hans Olsa begs for someone to go bring the minister even though a blizzard has been raging and the snow is twenty feet deep in some places. Per Hansa is confused by both his friends and his wife's behavior. "Here lay Hans Olsa, driving himself out of his mind because he couldn't have a minister, when there was no better man than himself in all Christendom . . . And here was Beret insisting that he leapright into the arms of death—she who had a heart so tender that she couldn't harm a mouse." But in the end, Per Hansa gives in to Beret's nagging and sets off on the hopeless errand of bringing the minister (*Giants*, p. 443). His body is not found until the following spring:

On the west side of the stack sat a man, with his back to the mouldering hay. This was in the middle of a warm day in May, yet the man had two pairs of skis along with him. One pair lay beside him on the ground, the other was tied to his back. He had a heavy stocking cap pulled well down over his forehead, and large mittens on his hands, in each hand he clutched a staff. . . . To the boys, it looked as though the man were sitting there resting while he waited for better skiing. . . . His face was ashen and drawn. His eyes were set towards the west (Giants, p.453), (Rolvaag's Ellipsis).

This scene, the final one in the novel, has been seen as being optimistic and triumphant. The fact that even in death Per Hansa, like Leatherstocking, looked towards the west is said to present an optimistic vision of America and frontiering. However, it can be read with precisely the opposite meaning so that the tragic death of Per Hansa symbolizes a "death of hopes and dreams, the frozen corpse in the haystack with its staring dead-set eyes faces an America of frozen hopes and shattered visions of splendor, of a paradise never gained."²⁴ This interpretation appears closer to the tone of the work and seems to take into account the overwhelming irony of the lines "his eyes were set towards the west," an irony that is emphasized all the more for being the last line of the book.

In a similar manner as Rolvaag, who uses his two main characters to illustrate both the excitement and pain of pioneering, Hamlin Garland portrays the frontier in many different lights. Born in Wisconsin in 1860, and raised on a farm, he quickly became disenchanted with a farmer's life. After graduating from Cedar Valley Seminary in Iowa, he moved to Boston. There he was befriended by William Dean Howells, a distinguished author and critic who received international renown for his realistic fiction. Under Howell's influence Garland undertook to write about western farm life as he had known it, incorporating many of his own experiences. His representation of this

of this life is a marked departure from the rustic idyll it had previously and conventionally been portrayed as. His best known work, the autobiographical A Son of the Middle Border, is the story of a boyhood spent in exhausting toil and squalid living conditions.²⁵ Yet for all his disenchantment with the coarser aspects of life on a farm, Garland still retains a certain nostalgic fondness for pioneering. More so perhaps than any other author, he displays truly ambivalent feelings toward his frontier background, interspersing bitter vignettes with rosy remembrances. Despite his unique focus, Garland's main insights into the frontier can be found in his penetrating explorations of the physical hardships, the breakup of the family unit, and the economic aspects entailed in frontiering.

Garland himself was quite aware of his unusual place in literature. He recounts being surprised that his stories on pioneer life sold poorly, noting that "the fact that I, a working farmer, was presenting for the first time in fiction the actualities of western country life did not impress them as favorably as I had expected it to do. My own pleasure in being true was not shared, it would seem, by others. 'Give us charming love stories!' pleaded the editors." To which Garland replies, "No, we've had enough of lies. . . . I know that farming is entirely made up of berrying, tossing the new-mown hay and singing the 'The Old Oaken Bucket' on the porch by moonlight" (A Son of the Middle Border, p. 319). One of the few people who did appreciate Garland's fiction was his friend Howells, who wrote in a review, "Mr. Garland's books seem to me as indigenous, in the true sense, as any our country has produced. They are western American, it is true, but America is mostly western now." A few pages later he notes what he considers to be Garland's greatest virtue: "As a singularly American artist. . . he instinctively devoted himself to the

the portrayal of conditions because America itself is a novel condition."²⁶ Among the conditions that he details so accurately is the backbreaking physical labor farming involves.

A few chapters into A Son of the Middle Border it becomes obvious that Garland was never cut out to be a farmer. He finds farm work demeaning and tedious, and perhaps over-emphasizes the dirt, sweat, and flies he encounters as a boy. While his dislike for farming is personal, it gives him a natural sympathy for the hardships of pioneer life. He is saddened by the uncomfortable house his family lives in, completely without luxuries although the Garlands owned three hundred acres of land at this time (Son, p. 124). He painfully records his mother's stroke, brought on by her exhausting labors, and the early loss of youth and beauty to many of his childhood friends. Thinking of these friends he writes, "I perceived little that was poetic, little that was idyllic, and nothing that was humorous in the man, who, with hands like claws, was scratching a scanty living from the soil of a rented farm, while his wife walked her ceaseless round from tub to churn and from churn to tub. On the contrary, the life of such a family appealed to me as a almost unrelievedly tragic futility" (Son, p. 318).

The frontier not only physically taxes the pioneers but also creates emotionally devastating situations, such as the dispersion of the family. Garland's delight in his Boston life is overshadowed by his guilt at leaving his aging parents and little sister alone on their huge farm. He remembers how his mother, giving in to her husband's wanderlust, left the valley her brothers and sisters lived in to move to Minnesota when he was a boy (Son, p. 34). He becomes obsessed with bringing them back to the valley and building a little homestead for them, which he eventually does. While Mrs. Garland is quite happy to move back, Garland's father is less enthusiastic, for "to accept

this as his home meant a surrender of his faith in the Golden West, a tacit admission that all explorations of the open lands with whatsoever they had meant of opportunity, had ended in a sense of failure or a barren soil" (Son, p. 393).

Mr. Garland is not the only one for whom moving back to the old valley symbolizes defeat. Garland's uncle David, his childhood hero, spends his life moving from place to place in search of better land and better fortunes. Leaving his prosperous farm in Iowa, he farms in Dakota and Montana, but ends up poor and bitter in San Jose. All his gifts have deserted him, his extraordinary strength, his fine musical voice, and his skill at the violin, but he resists returning to Wisconsin saying, "How could I do that? How could I sneak back with empty pockets?" (Son, p. 382).

While the failure of David to ever make good hits Garland the hardest, he finds the breakup of the family to be a common occurrence. Calling it the "mournful side of American enterprise" and "pioneering madness," he describes how "sons were deserting their workworn fathers, daughters their tired mothers . . . ambitious young men and unsuccessful old men were in restless motion." Comparing their restlessness to a colony of ants, he quickly decides that his analogy is "an injustice to the ants, for ants have a reason for their apparently futile and aimless striving" (Son, pp. 341 and 372).

Besides the dispersion of the family, Garland is personally most dismayed by the economic conditions governing life on the frontier. Lovell's Progress and Poverty had a profound effect on him, and his opinions of the American land system were for the first time challenged:

Up to this moment, I had never read any book or essay in which our land system had been questioned. I had been raised in the belief that this was the best of all nations

in the best of all possible worlds, in the happiest of all ages. I believed (of course) that the wisdom of those who formulated our constitution was but little less than that of archangels, and that all contingencies of our progress in government had been provided for or anticipated in that inspired and deathless instrument (Son, p. 264-5).

The main reason for poverty and misery, as Garland perceives it, is land monopoly. On a trip to the northwest he journeys over the lands passed over in 1881 in the scramble for the government land of the further west. All the free lands were by this time gobbled up and speculators were demanding and getting huge prices. This method of pioneering appears "wasteful" and "tragic" a direct result of landlordism. Garland finds little difference between the American and European land system, noting "these plodding Swedes and Danes, these thrifty Germans, these hairy Russians had all fled from the feudalism of their native lands and were here because they had no share in the soil from which they sprung, and because in the settled communities of the eastern states, the speculative demand for land had hindered them from acquiring even a leasing right to the surface of the earth" (Son, p. 311).

While Garland is a child of the frontier, his dissatisfaction with the land system and his vague ideas of reform are indicative of a man who has been educated and lived in the East. The farmers he grew up with, the ones who remained on the border, entertain no such thoughts. Once when he receives the great honor of being "Speaker of the Day" at the County Fair and gives a radical speech regarding his theories he is conscious of "seeing on the familiar faces. . . of my bronzed and bent old neighbors a mild wonder as to what I was talking about" (Son, p. 345). Though his old neighbors are confused by Garland's speech, they are acutely aware of their heavy financial burdens. Richard Garland, farming nearly a thousand acres, tells his son "I can't get

enough to pay my taxes. Look at my clothes! I haven't had a new suit in three years." To which Garland comments, "This statement of the Border's poverty and drought was the more moving to me for the reason that the old pioneer had always been so patriotic, so confident, so sanguine of his country's future. He had come a long way from the bouyant faith of '66 and the change in him was typical of the change in the West" (Son, pp. 360-1).

Like Garland, Willa Cather was profoundly aware of the negative aspects of frontiering. For her, though, the actual experience of pioneering is an enriching one, and it is prosperity and the disappearance of frontier land that coarsens and confuses her characters. While Cather is usually regarded as a realist, and her works abound with the grubbier scenes of frontier life, she lacks Garland's bitterness and in comparison, seems almost nostalgic. This is largely because her ideas about the frontier were based almost entirely upon the two years she spent in Nebraska in the 1880's, when she was ten years old. To the end of her long life, no other subject seemed as heroic or fraught with possibilities as pioneering did. Cather's importance, however, stems neither from her realistic or romantic pictures, but from her close affinity to the intellectual traditions of her time. This affinity can be seen most closely in her novels O Pioneers! and My Antonia.

Since Cather and Frederick Jackson Turner both view the frontier movement from a poetic, romantic perspective and since Cather's rise to critical importance in American literature coincided with the years of Turner's greatest acceptance, scholars have often tried to establish a relationship between their writings. There is, however, no evidence that either ever read the other's work and any correlation between the two seems fairly casual. Much has been made of the fact that Cather describes all of Turner's basic stages of settlement.

She begins with the barren landscape in both My Antonia and O Pioneers! and details the early struggles of the new farmers. After a time the settlers begin to prosper, and enjoy the satisfaction that comes from their well ordered, fruitful farms. But any similarity between Turner's thesis and Cather's novels ends there. One of Turner's main contentions is the dramatic opposition between the frontier and civilization, but Cather does not conceive of the East and West as being polarities. Her characters move from town to city and back.²⁷

While her novels do not appear to synchronize totally with Turner's thesis, Cather's work does recall other conceptions of the frontier. What she borrows from most clearly is the myth of the garden, as illustrated through the characters of Alexandra and Antonia, and their love of the land. Both of these two women are strong, peasant types who become owners of large, fertile farms. Alexandra, especially, is very prosperous, and has the richest farm on the Divide. Much of O Pioneers! is devoted to her relationship with the land. Her life is exceptionally tranquil, and her only passion is for the land: "There were certain days in her life, outwardly uneventful, which Alexandra remembered as peculiarly happy, days when she was close to the flat fallow earth about her, and felt as it were in her own body the joyous germination of the soil (Pioneers!, pp. 203-4). Alexandra is portrayed as an artist and farming her medium for "Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and . . . it is in the soil that she expresses herself best" (Pioneers, p. 84). The land is referred to so many times that it almost becomes one of the characters. In one remarkable passage, Alexandra says that the land itself is solely responsible for her wealth, "The land did it. It had its little joke. . . all at once, it worked itself. . . It was so big, so rich, that we

suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still" (Pioneers, p. 136).

While the land is exceptionally fertile, the lives of the characters can only be called sterile. Prosperity does nothing to improve Alexandra's brother's essential coarseness or stupidity. Lou and Oscar become less and less sympathetic as their wealth increases. Their wives and children, with the exception of Lou's daughter Milly, are petty and charmless. Alexandra herself, although she has a far stronger personality than anyone else, is lonely and childless. At the end of the novel she plans to marry her old friend Carl Linstrum, saying only, "When friends marry, they are safe" (Pioneers, p. 308). Her great prosperity allows her to send her youngest brother Emil away to school and allows him to develop "a personality apart from the soil" (Pioneers, p. 213). But his greater sophistication causes the young pioneer wife, Marie Shabata, to fall in love with him and results in their destruction.

With wealth and the disappearance of the frontier, the old pioneers' virtues disappear also. It is significant that Emil, the only one who dies violently, is also the only one who can remember the early efforts to tame the land (Pioneers, p. 78). Although Alexandra struggles and succeeds in turning her farm into a garden, it is not the cultivation, so much as the wildness, of the land that is being celebrated. As Carl says, "I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years" (Pioneers, p. 118). Although she has done more to bring about the civilizing of the land than anyone else, Alexandra shares this attitude to a certain extent.

The ambivalent attitudes found in O Pioneers! suggest that Cather was

aware of the garden myth, but didn't quite understand it. In My Antonia, however, she gives it full credence. There is a hint in O Pioneers! that Alexandra and the others are involved in some great destiny beyond themselves but this is never really made clear. My Antonia, though makes it quite explicit that the pioneers are involved in turning the land not just into a garden, but into the garden of the world.²⁸

The cornfields were far apart in those times, with miles of wild grazing land between. It took a clear meditative eye like my grandfather's to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas' cornfields or Mr. Bushy's, but the world's cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities, of men (Antonia, p. 90).

One of the most problematic aspects of O Pioneers! in relation to the garden myth is Alexandra's childlessness. The sterility of the people who own the land contrasts too sharply with the fruitfulness of their farms. In My Antonia, however, Cather removes this problem by making the central character into a type of earth goddess. After her first failed romance, that ends with her giving birth to an illegitimate child, Antonia marries and has ten more children. It is of interest that Jim Burden, who relates the story, and who moves permanently to the East, never marries. Coming to visit Antonia after twenty years he is awed by her undiminished vitality, writing that "she had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up into the apples to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting. . . All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions. . . . She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early race" (Antonia, p. 229).

There is no doubt in My Antonia that what is being celebrated is the cultivation, not the wildness, of the land. On Antonia's large farm she is proudest of her orchard. Every tree had to be handplanted and water carried for them, but Antonia lives them "as if they were people" (Antonia, p. 221). This orchard is so fruitful that it produces far more apples than any of the neighbor's trees, and symbolizes the essential qualities of a garden, cultivation and fertility.

Only one other image of Cather's is as striking as that of the orchard: the plough. During an outing when they were still quite young, Jim and Antonia see a thing they never forget:

There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. . . . On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. . . . heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun (Antonia, p. 159).

There are obvious similarities to Cooper's use of the sunset in The Pioneers and The Prairie, but where the solitary figure of Leatherstocking symbolizes the passing of the frontier and his own death, the figure of the plough seems to appear conquering and triumphant. The myth of the garden's influence is indicated by the use of these two symbols of cultivation, the plough and the orchard.

The disappearance of the frontier is a significant theme not only for Willa Cather but also for Stephen Crane. While Crane is best known for his Red Badge of Courage, several of his short stories deal with the West and are regarded as being some of his best work. "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" and

"The Blue Hotel" are two of his stories that detail the impingement on the West by the East, with all its civilizing aspects and orderliness.

Like Cather, Crane drew on his own experiences as the basis for his western fiction. Unlike her, though, he spent only a few months in the West. This time, however brief, had a lasting effect on him, for he often referred to his journey in the first half of 1895 as the happiest time of his life. As a child he had devoured cowboy novels, and despite his great capacity for disillusionment, the West did not disappoint him. His main purpose in going west was to collect material for short stories, although he didn't write his westerns there. Most of them were written the next year and some of them much later.

Crane set out for the West with three desires: he wanted to see the Mississippi, watch a cowboy ride, and experience a plain's blizzard. Once while changing trains he saw a hotel painted an unforgettable shade of light blue, which later became "The Blue Hotel." In Lincoln, Nebraska he tried to break up a fist fight, an event that he transformed into a fight between the Swede and Johnnie in the same story. Apparently, though, the two men fought each other every night and the townsfolk anticipated it eagerly. It was a local custom and the local authorities resented Crane's interference. They hauled him off before the judge, who pronounced him an idiot and let him go. He later wrote that this experience was "very saddening."

Despite his unhappy brush with the law, Crane ended his journey admiring Westerners greatly. In a letter to a friend he wrote:

I have believed the Western people to be much truer than the Eastern people. . . . I fell in love with the straight

out-and-out, and sometimes hideous, often braggart Westerners because I thought them to be the truer men. . . They are serious, those fellows. When they are born they take one big gulp of wind and then they live.²⁹

His admiration for Westerners comes through even in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," a spoof on sentimental westerns being written at the time. Jack Potter is the sheriff of Yellow Sky and much of the comedy of the story arise out of his worries of how the town will react to his marriage. For he does a "heinous" thing, and doesn't consult Yellow Sky about his new wife. On the train ride home after the wedding Potter becomes more and more upset, feeling that he has "committed an extraordinary crime. . . It could only be exceeded by the burning of the new hotel. His friends could not forgive him" ("Bride," p. 90-1).

Besides Potter's overactions to his marriage, the parody in the tale is built on the anachronistic nature of the characters. The bride is homely and the groom is awkward and shy. Potter and his ancient enemy, a dangerous fellow named Scratchy Wilson, belong to another time. Crane's underlying awareness of the incongruity of the men and their changing environment expresses itself over and over again. One example is Scratchy's clothes, for his decorative maroon flannel shirt is made in New York by Jewish seamstresses and his boots have "red tops with gilded imprints of the kind beloved in winter by little sledding boys on the hillsides of New England" ("Bride," p. 97).

While Crane presents Scratchy and the sheriff sympathetically he does not take them seriously. The story consists of four sharply defined episodes connected by jarring ironies. The first section introduces Potter and his new bride, while the second informs the reader of the long standing antagonism between Potter and Scratchy. In the third section the villain enters and in

the last part the conflict is resolved, amazingly enough, when Scratchy discovers Potter is married. This alien condition greatly upsets him for Wilson "was not a student of chivalry;. . . he was a simple child of the earlier plains" ("Bride," p. 102).

The sequel to "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," "Moonlight on the Snow" continues with the same characters but focuses more on the less comic aspects of the civilizing of the West. A gambler named Tom Larpent is about to be lynched by the citizens of a town with a "reputation for bloodshed," fittingly called Warpost ("Moonlight," p. 118). But just as the hanging gets underway a stagecoach full of Easterners arrive. Now the "rough West stood in naked immorality before the eyes of the gentle East" ("Moonlight," p. 126). Surprised by the stage's arrival, the citizens waver and delay the hanging. While they debate the prospective merits of hanging him immediately or waiting until the stage leaves, Sheriff Potter and Scratchy, now the deputy, ride in and want to take Larpent back to Yellow Sky where he is charged with grand larceny. The townspeople, fearful of losing their victim, ironically argue to save him. Everything in the story, from the dandified Easterners to the detached, careless manner of Larpent, points to the commercializing of the West. Even the gallows are unnatural, for the lynching is to occur from a fixed wooden crane instead of a tree. As for Larpent, he is the most affected thing of all, calmly assuring the Easterners that "they are going to hang me, but I can give you my word that the affair is perfectly regular" ("Moonlight," p. 127).

While "Moonlight on the Snow" and "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" use an ironic but playful tone "The Blue Hotel" substitutes a dark, foreboding atmosphere. The story exposes many myths about the West, namely the widespread assumption on the part of Easterners and Europeans in the nineties that the

western states were inhabited solely by cowpokes, Indians, and bandits.

Crane uses this assumption for the Swede's immediate suspicion of everyone.³⁰

Whether the story was intended to be truly tragic, or just a mocking satire is unclear, however. The ending is ambiguous, especially the Easterner's last speech where he suggests that the gambler had little control over his fate and the Swede even less;

We are all in it! This poor gambler isn't even a noun. He is a kind of adverb. Every sin is the result of a collaboration. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede. Usually there are from a dozen to forty women involved in every murder, but in this case it seems to be only five men. . . that unfortunate gambler came merely as a culmination, the apex of human movement and gets all the punishment ("Hotel," p. 63).

As an adverb the gambler can have no meaning until he is attached to a verb. This seems to suggest that Crane wanted to show, as some critics have pointed out, that society destroys man and that in any contest between primitivism and civilization the contestant is likely to be destroyed. However, the statement "The Swede might not have been killed if everything had been square" allows for the possibility of the action turning out differently. While interpretations of the story vary, the essential depiction of a civilized man facing his most primitive instincts comes through clearly.³¹

Besides the adventures of Sheriff Potter and "The Blue Hotel" Crane deals with western themes in several other stories. In "Twelve O'Clock," a bizarre tale wherein a group of cowboys are murdered as a result of a cuckoo clock, Crane is again concerned with the confrontation between the civilized "easternized" western townspeople and the naive cowboys. "Tin Can" ends on a similar note. A western gunfighter named Cortright returns to Nevada with a top hat

he bought in Chicago. The westerners resent the hat, which to them symbolizes the sophisticated and corrupt East, and the story concludes with nearly a hundred and fifty men industriously shooting at the hat. "Galveston, Texas, 1895" is similar in many ways to "The Blue Hotel." It is notable mainly for Crane's summarization of life in Galveston: "Men move about with an extraordinary caution as if they expected to be shot as they approached each corner." Perhaps the most typical of all of Crane's western fiction is "A Man and Some Others" where a young and inexperienced stranger realizes he must kill or be killed.³²

None of these works, however, are as effective as "The Blue Hotel" or "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky." While Crane's stories range in tone from the parody found in "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," and "Moonlight on the Snow" to the bleakness of "The Blue Hotel," all of his western fiction deals in some way with the confrontation between East and West. Invariably the East is portrayed as being a false civilization imposing its loathsome orderliness on the more honest and vital West. Crane's attitude towards the East illustrates a distrust and malevolence that is similar in many ways to Leatherstocking's view of civilization.

From the short stories of Stephen Crane to the early writings of Cooper, literature has always displayed a peculiar fascination with the theme of the frontier. As each writer concentrated on the most pressing issues of his or her time, a relationship between the west and literature developed.

Cooper was influenced by the early eighteenth century's interest in wilderness. In turn, his depiction of the destruction of wild country contributes a sobering footnote to the myth and history of the frontier. Ole Rolvaag, by penetrating to the hidden, emotional lives of his characters, illustrates

the cost in health and happiness that the frontier exacts from the pioneers. Hamlin Garland refutes the notion that the frontier functions as an economic "safety valve." Willa Cather adds to the myth of the garden by employing it as a central theme in her novels. Stephen Crane's treatment of the "easternized" west takes up where all the other conceptions of the frontier leave off, with its disappearance. From this small, but representative, sample of nineteenth century works it is clear that the relation between the concepts and literature of the frontier is symbiotic.

CHAPTER IV

THE CLOSED FRONTIER

In his famous thesis Turner opened with the question "What then is the significance of the closed frontier in American history?" He himself did not answer the question and it has in fact been a relatively unexplored problem. But the closing of the frontier had major implications for Americans and continues to influence such diverse features of twentieth century life as modern literature, cultural artifacts like western and science fiction novels and movies, and foreign policy. There are two modern contradictory reactions to the closed frontier: one, the tragic view expressed mainly in twentieth century literature; the other, the hopeful view expressed in forms of popular culture.

Although Turner's essay of 1893 announced that no land remained to be designated as unsettled, he failed to fully understand the ramifications of this fact. He thought that though the frontier was closed, the old frontier spirit would remain alive. In his later writings, he praised such men as John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie who professed belief in commitments to frontierism; natural rights, free enterprise, laissez-faire, individual rights, manifest destiny, popular naturalism and social mobility. Yet the concluding statements of the thesis, where he points out that the closed frontier signals the end of an era, sound ominous. America was at a crucial stage, Turner believed, but his natural optimism kept him from realizing the more tragic implications of the closing of the frontier.¹

The recognition of these tragic implications has largely been left to modern writers and scholars, for to the general public, the word "frontier" conjures up visions of western adventure and heroic cowboys, (almost totally divorced from tragedy). The great popularity of westerns and their modern day equivalents, science fiction or fantasy is one response to the closed frontier; but compared to the seriousness of much modern literature, or the intricacies of foreign policy, it is a relatively mild and uncomplicated one.

The portrayal of the closed frontier in literature has been called the "central metaphor for American tragedy." In his book The Closed Frontier Harold Simonson notes that the open frontier is an ideal setting for youthful confidence, the assurance in epics that anything the hero undertakes will be successful. The closed frontier, conversely, is the most dramatic symbol for an American tragic vision and is expressed in the writings of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Wolfe.² The end of F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, for example, makes it clear that Gatsby can only be understood in relation to the "last and greatest of all human dreams," the original European enthrallment with the "fresh, green breast of the new world." Jay Gatsby, like the other characters, is a westerner who goes to the East in order to make his fortune. After Gatsby's death, the narrator Nick decides to move back west saying, "Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadapted to Eastern life." This shared deficiency is perhaps the realization that the contemplation of the fresh, green continent made mankind "face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder" (The Great Gatsby, p. 182).

A major theme running through William Faulkner's tales of Yoknapatawpha

County is the sacrificial or expelled hero and the redemption through union with nature. In "The Bear" he sums up the state of both his protagonist Ike McCaslin and America: "Dispossessed of Eden. Dispossessed of Canaan." Ike relinquishes his claim to his inheritance, arguing that the original Indian inhabitants had no right to sell or deed the land in the first place and that all subsequent sales or deeds are invalid (Go Down Moses, p. 180). Although he views his inheritance as tainted by its bloody and exploitative history, he sees the wilderness itself as an ennobling place, teaching bravery, courage, and endurance.

In a similar vein, Hemingway wrote, "the earth gets tired of being exploited . . . A country was made to be as we found it. Our people went to America because that was the place to go then. It had been a good country and we had made a bloody mess of it and I would go now, somewhere else as we always had the right to go somewhere else. Let others go to America who did not know it was too late."⁴ In From Death to Morning Thomas Wolfe notes how the true history of America runs

back through poverty, and hardship, through solitude and loneliness and death and unspeakable courage into the wilderness. For it is the wilderness that is the mother of that nation. . . .⁵

Two other modern writers who deal with the presence of a closed frontier in American society are Saul Bellow and Ralph Ellison. The title character of Bellow's Henderson the Rain King is a rich, educated, unhappy man who is tormented by a voice within him crying, "I want. I want." Unable to satisfy this voice in America, he journeys to Africa. In the primitive environment of Africa he hopes to "find things which were old, which he saw when he was still innocent and longed forever since--and without which he could not make it" (Henderson the Rain King, p. 102). Henderson is an example of a man who

desperately needs to have a frontier and journeys until he finds one. Ellison's The Invisible Man gives another example of a man without a frontier in the sense of unlimited possibilities and potential. Ellison's black hero has been deliberately cut off from frontiers by the society that systematically curtails his potentialities. Living in a hole in Harlem he nevertheless manages to find a frontier of his own, the still uncharted realms of the mind and human relationships.

Perhaps the saddest description of the closing of the frontier is to be found in a conversation from John Steinbeck's The Long Valley. An elderly man who once led a trek of pioneers across the plains to the west tells his grandson, who dreams of doing similar deeds: "No place to go, Jody, Every place is taken. But that's not the worst--no, not the worst. Westering had died out of the people. Westering isn't a hunger any more. It's all done."⁶ Despite its presence in many literary works, Simonson concludes that, just as in 1890, many people would rather not recognize the existence of a closed frontier with "its national or personal consequences."⁷ But these consequences manifest themselves in such things as a longing for pastoralism and an attachment to the stereotypical action and characters of westerns.

The longing for a pastoral utopia has been used to define the meaning of America ever since its discovery, and to this day retains some hold on the national imagination. There are various kinds of pastoralism, though, the popular or sentimental as opposed to a more complex and imaginative type. The latter kind of pastoralism is evident in the works of men like Jefferson and Franklin and played a major role in the settling of the continent. The first kind, which persists today, is difficult to define because it is "an expression less of thought than of feeling." It is evident in the widespread

desire to flee the cities, in the power of the farm bloc in Congress, and in the ardent devotion of many Americans to camping, hunting, fishing, picnicking, and gardening. This longing for rural happiness dominates the lower plan of the collective America fantasy life, and expresses itself in the overwhelming popularity of westerns and Norman Rockwell prints. Perhaps the most convincing testimony to the continued appeal of western settings is the fact that marketing experts have determined that advertisements employing western locals and props will induce Americans to buy more of everything, but especially more jeans, beer, cigarettes, and new Toyotas.⁸

Besides appearing in commercials, western themes and motifs have figured in hundred of popular Western novels, stories, and movies. The plots of some of these westerns may seem ludicrous and their characters flat, but this underdevelopment is not merely a result of poor writing. Wallace Stegner explains the lack of development in the typical western story this way: "Its characters are not individuals but archetypes or perhaps more than any other work, develops the image of the American cowboy as a self-reliant individual with a well developed sense of honor and chivalry. Zane Grey, whose bestselling novels have made him the all time champion of western writing, has also contributed to the development of this image. Lassiter, the hero of Riders of the Purple Sage, who rescues his love from Mormon perfidy, is described as "black-leather-garbed, gentlevoiced, sad-faced man who was a hater and killer of Mormons" (Riders, pp. 15-16). Gifted with excellent powers of description and characterization he has produced a "memorable gallery of the much-loved Western figures, (which are) sometimes downright archetypal." An example of what Frank Hammond Tucker calls a "principal Jungian archetype" is the character of Ruby, the dance hall girl who "represented youth, health, beauty,

terribly linked with evil, wisdom, and a corrupt and irresistible power, possessing a base and mysterious affinity for men."¹¹

After The Virginian, the most influential piece of cowboy lore is the television show Bonanza. At one time Bonanza was the most popular show in the world, appearing in over sixty countries, "not because it was good history or drama, but because it was good mythology." Marshall McLuhan has noted that the essential theme of westerns is "Let's make a town," and to television viewers who live in a complicated and alienating world, this is an exceptionally heart-warming prospect. That westerns appeal to some deep-seated emotion would seem to be clear from the fact that several television shows continue to tell basically the same stories over and over again for years while garnering high ratings; besides, Bonanza, The Rifleman, The Big Valley, Gunsmoke and Little House on the Prairie are other such examples. As McLuhan says, "We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future. Suburbia lives imaginatively in Bonanzaland."¹²

In recent years, though, there seems to be a desire to update Bonanzaland into something more compatible with the twentieth century. One example of this modernization can be found in the movie Urban Cowboy which depicts a townful of oil workers who fancy themselves cowboys. While Urban Cowboy is certainly a striking example, it is also a fairly isolated one. A much more widespread attempt at updating cowboy mythology can be seen in the tendency of science fiction to borrow devices and themes from westerns.

Most western literature can be fitted into one of several fundamental situations and six of these can easily be transposed into science fiction plots. For example, the "Union Pacific Story" which deals with transportation and communication problems and growth matches the science fiction plots about

space ships, space warps, and matter transmitters. The "journey story" finds many echoes in long journeys or migrations through space. The "ranch story" has an equivalent in the tales of would be farmers, miners, and other entrepreneurs on distant planets. The western "empire builder" is closely related to those heroes who acquire wealth and power on other worlds, and the familiar "Custer's last stand" resembles those valiant defenses against extraterrestrial nuisances. The "outlaw" story is less common in science fiction than in westerns, but only the "revenge" story fails to find a common equivalent in science fiction literature. While there are many examples of the similarity between western and science fiction plots, one of the most marked is Ray Bradbury's The Martian Chronicles. In this work, which tells of the colonization of Mars by humans, analogies are drawn between the American Indians and the native Martians. Like the Indians, the natives endure plagues and the culturally shattering effects of invaders.¹³

The remythologizing of western material has also been carried over into film, and the popularity of this strategy can be attested to by the fact that several of the highest grossing movies of the last few years have been of this type. Westerns have always depended on a clear demarcation between good and evil and there is no chance of confusing the hero and the villains. In both Star Wars and Superman II this distinction is carried over. You can't miss the bad guys because they wear black. In fact, Superman has been compared to a modern Shane, clean, strong, and violent.¹⁴ George Lucas filled Star Wars and The Empire Strikes Back with western conventions, giving them a slight twist, turning the six gun into a laser blaster and the faithful Indian companion into an alien. The young innocent from the sticks is of course the hero, and the beautiful girl, who from Cooper's time has had to be of superior

or noble breeding, is a princess. True to the form of the old westerns she is the only female in sight. However, by falling in love with the older, hardened Han Solo instead of the untouched Luke Skywalker, the princess violates a tradition that has remained relatively unbroken since Leatherstocking watched his gentlemanly sidekicks win all the heroines.

The borrowing of devices by science fiction from the old westerns is nothing new, although it seems to be more in evidence recently. The original pilot of TV's Star Trek, for instance, was described by its creator as being "Wagon Train in space" to NBC officials.¹⁵ Because the similarities between the two forms are so remarkable, there has been a tendency to combine them in the same movie or television show, as in Billy the Kid Meets Dracula and Phantom Empire. In the first movie Billy's fiancée is the count's niece, but his problems are nothing compared to Gene Autry's in Empire. A subterranean kingdom is ensconced below his ranch, and exotic scenes of the underworld alternate with clips of cowboys singing cowpoke songs.¹⁶ Both Star Trek and the short lived series Battlestar Galactica featured episodes where the characters face deadly shootouts with the locals.

While movies and television shows are often useful indicators of a particular culture's preoccupations, most people would agree that it would be stretching the point to concur with the Swedish critic who wrote that Gary Cooper's High Noon is "the most honest explanation of American foreign policy since the hero always does what he has to do."¹⁹ Yet, in a very real sense, frontier myths have shaped the United States' foreign policy. The most powerful conceptions of the frontier are those that portray it as a garden and a new Eden. In time these myths came to be applied to America in general rather than just to the frontier borders. Carried to their inevitable extension they

came to represent Americans in one of two ways: an innocent people in an evil world that needed saving, or conversely, an innocent people in a fundamentally innocent world where virtuous foreign people needed to be saved from their wicked rulers. Either way, there could be no doubt that America, the garden of the world, had a duty to save the rest of it by messianic intervention. This policy of internationalism and intervention that characterizes much of America's twentieth century foreign policy is perhaps most clearly illustrated by Theodore Roosevelt's and Woodrow Wilson's terms.¹⁸

Although its roots can be traced back to Jefferson's remark that the "moral force of America's example" should spread throughout the world, intervention as a policy was launched in 1898 by President McKinley. Whatever other motives might have existed at this time, it is extremely unlikely that the American people would have been so enthusiastic about going to Cuba and the Philippines if they had not been persuaded that the native people needed to be saved from their wicked Spanish overlords. Later, as the question of annexing the Philippines was agonized over, both sides interpreted the issue as a moral problem involving Edenic conceptions and both sides argued with a similar rhetoric. Arguing for annexation, for instance, was Senator Beveridge, who said, "We will not renounce our part in the mission of our race, trustee, under God, of the civilization of the world. . . God. . . has marked us as His chosen people henceforth to lead in the regeneration of the world." William Jennings Bryan, on the other hand, held that America was "hastening the coming of universal brotherhood" and "giving light and inspiration to those who sit in darkness," but "only by its silent example." Then too, there was the view held by Henry Cabot Lodge and others that America was duty bound to prevent the Philippines, in their present weakened state, from falling

into the wicked hands of powerful nations like Germany or Japan.

Having taken the Philippines by force, American statesmen began at once to consider how best to withdraw. America, at this time was "dedicated to the moral reformation of the world, but unwilling to assume the responsibility and consequences of moral commitment unless these were clearly joined to a national self-interest which yet scruple hesitated to acknowledge." From 1900 to World War I, then, the United States tried to develop and adhere to a policy of messianic intervention without guilt by assuming the role of the great, neutral arbiter of the world's disputes. President Theodore Roosevelt helped negotiate a peaceful settlement of the Russo-Japanese War, presided over the arbitration at Algecuras, was instrumental in calling the second Hague peace conference, and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906. William Howard Taft, his successor, made efforts to continue arbitration agreements, although in a more general manner, and both Roosevelt and Taft tried to exert a beneficial influence in Latin America.²⁰

Throughout World War I and the peace negotiations that followed, the United States played the grievously wronged, innocent, neutral nation. President Wilson in 1914 thus noted a parallel between himself and James Madison facing the beginning of the War of 1812: both were peace-loving Princetonians who felt called upon to defend the cause of neutral rights. Both men, too, made their entrance into war based not upon the nation's self interest but upon abstract conceptions of honor and justice. Wilson sincerely believed and widely announced the opinion that the United States was best equipped to forge a just and lasting peace because the U.S. was the only nation at war whose motives were "disinterested." He thought that only the example of "disinterested

initiative" could bring nations to discard their petty rivalries and embrace a new order.²¹

The source of Wilson's world vision lay in the old myth of the garden and its implications for American destiny. As early as 1894 he linked this destiny with the job "at once material and ideal, of subduing a wilderness and covering all the wide stretches of a vast continent with a single free and stable policy." To Wilson, the United States still possessed a quality of Edenic newness. The assimilation of foreign immigrants created "constant and repeated rebirth." During his administration as President, both of Princeton and the United States he introduced reforms that were essentially conceived within a Jeffersonian "ideological framework of democracy against aristocracy." Even in his language, Wilson borrowed heavily from the myths of Eden and the garden. The ideal society, he thought, was like a rosebush or tree, and a paradisaical state could be restored in America: "And now we are going into this garden and weed it. . . We are going in there to see to it that the fertilization of intelligence, of invention, of origination. . ." ²²

He projected this Edenic image on the rest of the world. World War I was seen as the outcome of an international plot of a few sovereign lords, but out of which a new world order would come. This new order would unite the moral forces of the world against the forces of selfish ambition.²³ In the aftermath of Wilson's fate at Versailles, America returned to its prewar role of the great disinterested nation and neutral arbiter of the world's problems. During the twenties and thirties measures such as disarmament agreements, pacts that respected the Open Door principles and the territorial integrity of China, the "good neighbor" policy in Latin America, the world court at the Hague, the doctrine of nonrecognition, and the neutrality acts of 1935 and 1937 were

all set up.

After Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt was the American president most greatly influenced by the Edenic and garden traditions. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms were not unlike Wilson's Fourteen points, and assured Americans and all mankind that his was not a "vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation."²⁴ While the disenchantment with Yalta and Roosevelt and the later development of the Cold War colored the way many Americans feel about international relations, the policy of messianic intervention persists to this day and is expressed in varying degrees in such events as President Carter's Human Rights Proposal and the Camp David talks.

While many of America's foremost scholars and writers see the frontier myth as dying, there seems to be a great unwillingness to submit to the idea. By changing the definition of frontier, a word that originally signified a national or geographic border, to mean a "threshold," or a "border line of innovation," the old myths have been kept vital. For example, the book Frontiers of Civil Liberties by N. Dorson with a preface by Robert Kennedy, deals with the fight to expand and defend personal liberties. President John F. Kennedy made the phrase "New Frontier" a rallying cry for his administration and eight years later Richard Nixon included an invitation to frontier adventures in his first inaugural address: "Let us go to new worlds together, not as new worlds to be conquered but as new adventures to be shared."²⁵

Increasingly, references are made to the "new frontiers" and "frontiers of science." Both Alaskan and undersea exploration are discussed in terms of frontiers, and researchers in medicine and psychology are often called

"pioneers" in their fields. James Kilpatrick, a syndicated columnist, pondering the hazards of population control, surgical genetic alterations, and artificial mood control, concluded by asking "Are there frontiers that ought never to be crossed?" Thomas Thompson's book on heart surgery, Hearts, was subtitled Along the Cardiac Frontier. The space program has long been linked with frontiering, starting with the first United States planetary probe. Named Pioneer, it was sent to the outer reaches of the solar system, passing through the asteroid belt beyond Mars, approaching within 100,000 miles of Jupiter, and heading out further still to orbit Uranus and beyond. Quite naturally Time referred to this project as a "culmination of the process by which man had "steadily pushed back the frontiers of space."²⁶ There is also a recent interest in "psychological frontiers" as the many self-improvement and self-awareness books on the market attest to.

The association of these new developments with pioneer experiences, along with the continued appeal of western material in the popular media and science fiction, and the hold the garden and Edenic myths exert on political thinking seems to contradict the claim of modern literature that the frontier is permanently, tragically closed. The view a particular person brings to bear on the problem seems to depend largely on his innate optimism or pessimism. One fact that is clear, however, is that the frontier has traditionally been used to explain America, and is still a useful concept to consider when discussing American culture and literature.

CONCLUSION

The frontier has had a great effect on American culture. The frontier's connection to cultural institutions was fluid, so that more than one cultural area was often affected by the same frontier conception. The myth of the garden alone played a major part in the writings of a historian (Turner), a novelist (Cather), and a group of lawmakers (the farmers of the Homestead Act). In many ways Archibald MacLeish was correct when he said, "The West is a state of mind," for the various portrayals of the frontier seem almost to form a separate reality from the actuality. The yeoman ideal, for instance, though obviously a distortion of the actual circumstances of the farmer, had great influence. Even today romanticized depictions of western life are constantly being displayed in movies and on television.

As Turner stated, the frontier is geographically closed. However, Americans have managed to transform the frontier into new intellectual and imaginative forms, or in more recent times, to frontiers beyond the earth. Turner's thesis still is true in many ways, for Americans exhibit a need to have a frontier, to have something that is not yet explored or attained. This desire for a frontier illustrates perhaps more than anything else that the frontier, although closed, continues to significantly influence American culture and literature.

FOOTNOTES

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