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BERET HOLM: STUDY OF A HOMESTEADING HEROINE

By

Anne V. Anderson

B.A., Montana State University, 1954

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

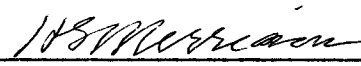
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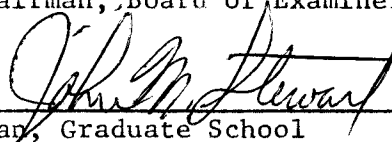
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1968

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## INTRODUCTION

By adapting the historical romance of Sir Walter Scott to American materials,\* James Fenimore Cooper established in American letters the pattern of light and dark females. Color-coded to be identified with the triumph of virtue and the defeat of evil, the divided females are part of Scott's stereotyped version of the historical novel, considered by critics to be the "'male' counterpart to the Richardsonian ladies' novel."<sup>1</sup> In Scott's novels, the two females are subordinated to a plot which stresses an historical past described in a travel-poster setting against which the heroes and heroines flee from a variety of external dangers. As a result, suspense depends upon action rather than upon amorous involvement.

Action, important to Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*, centers about the adventures of the hero, Natty Bumppo, who takes refuge in an idyllic wilderness away from encroaching civilization, represented more by females than by judges or English officers and gentlemen who live in settlements or in frontier forts. But Natty seldom encounters

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\*I have based my discussion of light and dark heroines and of the historical novel upon Love and Death in the American Novel, written by Leslie Fiedler.

<sup>1</sup>Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1966), p. 163.

either representative of civilization, for he exists in a wilderness where his companionship is masculine rather than feminine.

Adapted from Scott's fair Rowenas and dusky Rebeccas, the occasional females who flutter through Natty's wilderness are of two types. "Passionate brunette" or "sinless blonde" (Fiedler), they establish convenient class lines. The dark heroine is déclassé because of her past, which is tainted by implied indiscretions or by an inferior heritage of mixed blood. The virginal and virtuous Anglo-American fair heroine represents upperclass designation because of her refined sensibilities. Both heroines may admire or may fall in love with Natty, but neither may marry him, for the convention-challenging dark heroine is beneath any possible consideration of marriage to the nature-ennobled hero, who, because he speaks a dialect rather than perfect English, is unsuitable as a husband for the genteel heroine. As a result, whenever circumstances of fate cause the heroines to be placed in the wilderness, Natty's relationship to them is that of a protector who guides them to the nearest fort or settlement where secondary romantic heroes of appropriate rank may marry them.

Consequently, light and dark heroines become, essentially, protected, passive females who undergo a series of adventures while Natty assists them to flee from the wilderness. The dark heroine either survives to be married at the end of the story or she dies. Her marriage conveniently removes her from any further consideration of Natty as a husband. Because of her superior sensibilities, her aristocratic demeanor, and her contrast to the dark heroine, the light

heroine consistently survives and marries in a ritual ending which establishes her as the chosen one to continue and to sustain American empire. Natty Bumppo, as her worthy protector and resourceful escort, elevates her to a pedestalled place of honor beyond any implication of sexual desire or of credible human involvement as a mother or as a wife. Her sexlessness derives not only from her severance from the passionate dark heroine but also from the unmarried state in which she is invariably encountered.

Not intended to represent more than token love interest, Cooper's light and dark heroines, ultimately, are stereotypes subordinated to the masculine wilderness. As Cooper's real subject all along, the wilderness is significant not only for its idyllic pastoral qualities but also for its being the setting through which the westward course of empire moves in a series of frontiers. In a setting inseparable from the daring endeavors of the hero, the only function of females is to underscore the resourcefulness and the courage of the hero whose westward flight on the frontier symbolizes Manifest Destiny. The fair, genteel heroine, who marries and who remains in the East, is the prototype for endings which promise both success and happiness as the proper reward of those chosen for social and moral concepts which, by implication, sustain and approve the westering of Natty Bumppo. As a symbol of imperial success and approval, the genteel heroine, through her admiration of Natty, in effect, endorses his superiority and moral virtue, environmentally bestowed upon him as a result of his harmonious relationship with

the wilderness. As the bulwark of American civilization, she supports Natty Bumppo who is the westward impulse of American empire.

Hence, Cooper's adaptation of Sir Walter Scott's historical romances establishes in American fiction the formulae of frontier, flight, and light and dark females, as characteristics of the Leatherstocking Tales which critics regard as the first Westerns.\* Regarded as the "improbable founder of the national expression,"<sup>2</sup> Cooper significantly influenced American writers, whose works establish a literature of landscape which avoids, in continuation of a masculinized tradition of the novel, any attempt to deal with romantic love. Deprived of romantic love, subordinated to landscape, and encountered as unmarried females, the heroines of the Cooperian concept of the novel are incapable of change of character, possess no credible emotions, and exist outside meaningful human involvement as mothers or as wives. Like fair and dark paper dolls, they serve only

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\*Whenever I use the term Western during the course of this study, I refer to the evolution of the Western story from Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales in which a concept of a frontier West, based not upon reality but upon a romanticized image of a preferred, imagined West, is preserved in a nostalgic past. Inseparable from positive values of good triumphant over evil, the imagined West is the idyllic setting for heroic rather than for human experiences. Consequently, Westerns emphasize surfaces of history, hinterland, and heroism to the virtual exclusion of human experience of importance, value, or depth.

<sup>2</sup>Edwin Fussell, Frontier: American Literature and the American West (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 68.



as feminine silhouettes against a variety of American landscape, which are faithfully reproduced to create what little realism may be recognized in Westerns.

In the nineteenth century, the western setting established by Cooper was proliferated in the multitudinous and popular dime novels\* which emphasized the Cooperian tradition of masculine action and derring-do accomplished in a variety of rugged settings to the near exclusion of any female interest. Dark females of the dime novels, who appeared in 1880 wearing masculine garb, tend to become an indistinguishable series of Calamity Janes whose lack of propriety and whose tough self-reliance render them scarcely distinguishable from the Deadwood Dicks. Despite her masculine appearance, however, the trousered dark heroine remains a passionate creature who loves well if not wisely a hero who, unlike Natty Bumppo, may respond to her but who leaves her when he encounters the fair lady to whom he is predestined to give his heart.

When Owen Wister wrote The Virginian, he changed the archetypal Natty Bumppo-Deadwood Dick into a cowboy hero who is permitted a casual encounter with a lady of easy virtue but who reserves his admiration and love for Molly Stark Wood, the genteel heroine who is defined in terms of American empire rather than of her feminine attributes. A direct literary descendent of Cooper's fair heroine, she traces her

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\*Chapter IX, pp. 99-125, "The Western Hero in the Dime Novel", and Chapter X, pp. 126-135, "Dime Novel Heroine" are invaluable discussions of the development of the Western story which Henry Nash Smith describes in the course of his study Virgin Land (New York: Vintage Books, 1957).

family beginnings to the American Revolution, for she is the namesake of Molly Pitcher, her famous ancestress. Genteel for generations, the women of her family have scorned suitors whose crude, insensitive manners seem to derive directly from their livelihoods as industrial tycoons whose factories mar the New England landscape. Rather, the family has been perpetuated by a series of marriages made with poor but deserving suitors untainted by industrial liaison.

Molly Stark Wood, as a worthy member of an impoverished but proud family, accepts a position as a schoolteacher in Wyoming, a decision which allows her to leave the New England scene of industrial revolution and to follow the westward course of empire to a setting of unsullied nature. Departing from an urban landscape and from traditions of established social and cultural practice, she journeys to a rural landscape where she is admired as a bearer of culture, imperially dispensed for the good of her youthful charges. As befits a lady of her heritage, she requires the respect and distant admiration of the many cowboys who populate the western setting. When Trampas, the villain of the piece, casts innuendoes upon her honor, the Virginian, whose heritage and whose nearness to nature provide him with the credentials of class which allow him to woo her, becomes her protector. During the period of her courtship, she does not fill a hope chest, but she learns to appreciate the beauties of nature which only the Virginian can reveal to her. After she has been sufficiently educated to an appreciation of pastoral beauty, she is a suitable wife for the Virginian. Their marriage is consummated after the Virginian kills Trampas, who represents evil

in an otherwise unblemished landscape. The happy ending, unlike that of Cooper's novels, joins the hero and heroine whose fulfillment is one not of love but of empire building.

In the novel Ann Carmeny by Hoffman Birney, the genteel heroine of the same name revealingly expresses the imperial role that females have played in Westerns since Cooper originated them. As she and her husband stand together on a hillside, where they are to build their status-symbolic home, and look across the wide valley before them, her emotions are stirred not by his nearness but by the vastness as well as the possibilities of the "big land." She is benignly inclined toward farmers, miners, lumbermen, stockraisers, and freighters. Only the Plummers, like Trampas, "could not be permitted to survive" in a land suitable by her definition for exploiters but not for "destroyers" differentiated by their threat to the moral order which both she and her husband represent as first citizens of Virginia City, Montana. Her view of the land, which concludes the novel, ends on a passionate note of possession, not of husband but of the land which is "her land, hers and the children who would come after her."<sup>3</sup>

Even though she is supposed to represent the role of wife and of future mother, she seems more masculine than feminine, as she defines Manifest Destiny not in terms of home-making but of exploitive

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<sup>3</sup>Hoffman Birney, Ann Carmeny (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1941), pp. 422-423.

land-taking. Her insensibility toward all but those who are chosen by her definition to secure empire is a disquieting lack of tolerance, attributable to her stereotyped subordination as a genteel heroine to a literature of landscape and masculine derring-do. As a wife and as a mother-to-be, she is grotesque rather than feminine in either relationship, for she does not represent womanly warmth or care within the frame of credible human involvement. Rather, she represents the fate of all genteel heroines who cannot escape becoming abstract, arbitrary, sexless creatures, confined as they are to formulated concepts of empire.

The multitude of novels which feature the genteel heroine reveals that her arrested development as a woman remains essentially undisturbed not only by authors of stereotyped fiction but also by those few authors whose attempts to make art of Western materials continue to maintain a tradition centered about heroes rather than one concerned with credible heroines. For example, in his novel The Ox-Bow Incident, Walter Van Tilburg Clark essentially employs Ann Carmeny's expression of chosen and unchosen which he inverts into a study of the evil and murder possible to a community which judges and hangs innocent men. His dramatic portrayal of tragic error, resulting from a righteous concept of good and evil, is accomplished almost entirely through masculine protagonists. The only women in the novel have minor, stereotyped roles: Rose, a dark heroine of easy virtue, is only fleetingly present in the events of the novel; Ma Grier, an aged Calamity Jane

is indistinguishable in dress and in savagery from the men around her. In another of Clark's novels, The Track of the Cat, the mother and the fiancée are also unsatisfactory females, the former a Bible-reading gorgon of scarcely repressed violence and the latter, a "frail" whose passion is implied but is not portrayed. All of Clark's women in these two novels symbolize females more dead than alive.

Because of the difficulty in discovering a heroine believably involved in human experience in a Western story, it is interesting to study the trilogy\* which Norwegian-American novelist Ole Edvard Rølvaag wrote to depict the homesteading experiences of Norwegian immigrants in South Dakota from the early 1870's until the mid 1890's. These experiences are framed in the familiar themes of flight and of frontier encountered when Rølvaag,\*\* a teen-aged fisherlad in Norway, read Cooper's novels as part of the widely varied reading which alleviated his monotonous life at sea. Young, restless, discontented with his life as a fisherman, Rølvaag experienced a westward flight to

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\*In 1923 Rølvaag began to write the first of the three novels which comprise his portrayal of Norwegian-American immigrants as homesteaders in South Dakota. I de Dage (In Those Days) was published in 1924 in Norwegian, as were all of his novels. Combined with Riket grundlaegges (The Kingdom Is Founded), published in 1925, the two novels were translated into English and were published in 1927 under the English title Giants In The Earth. Peder Victorious was published in 1928, and Their Fathers' God, in 1931, the year of Rølvaag's death.

\*\*I have referred to the following sources for biographical material concerning the life of O. E. Rølvaag: Cyclopedia of World Authors, ed. Frank N. Magill, Dayton Kohler (New York: Harper and Brothers), pp. 916-917; and to Charles Boewe, "Rølvaag's America: An Immigrant Novelist's Views," The Western Humanities Review, XI (Winter, 1957), pp. 3-12.

the America romantically evoked by Cooper. In 1896, at twenty years of age, Rölvaag received a ticket to America which was sent to him by an uncle in South Dakota on whose farm he spent three years. As discontented with farming as he had been with fishing, Rölvaag turned to education as the answer to his need of purpose and of fulfillment for his life. A brilliant student, he graduated with honors from St. Olaf College, where he then became a professor of classical, Biblical, and Norwegian studies. As an immigrant who became an American citizen in 1908, Rölvaag was in a particularly advantageous position to compare European and American cultural concepts as well as to evoke the meaning of frontier and of flight as a result of his experience and observation in an agricultural region settled by homesteaders like his father-in-law only a few years before Rölvaag was born in 1876.

To contrast the pervasive, popular, romantic myth of the idyllic frontiers of literature with the reality of life on a frontier, he avoided the masculine tradition of the novel imitated by Cooper in favor of the European tradition which, from the inception of the novel, had emphasized heroines inseparable from a consideration of love. Portrayed both psychologically and historically, his heroine Beret Holmis encountered as a wife and mother of lower middle class social station. Her experience in marriage and in family life is treated, for the most part, from her imperfect point of view, detailed impersonally and objectively by an author whose intent is to create realism rather than sentimental romance. Unlike the passive, predestined,

and often perfect heroines of the traditional Western, Beret tries unsuccessfully to escape the consequences of her choices and actions which direct the way of her life. She is not on the frontier because she is a chosen instrument of imperial destiny but because she chose in Norway to give herself to Per Hansa, a decision which inextricably binds her life to his in a chain of events and interactions, the most significant of which is his decision to leave Norway and to emigrate to America. Love, then, is the motive power of her life. Her acceptance or rejection of its obligations and responsibilities and experiences comprises the main theme of her life in the trilogy. Any consideration of Beret as a heroine must include a study of her relationship in love to her husband and to her children; how she affects them and they affect her; how love fulfills her as well as defeats her, and how both passion and love are essential to her realization of her role as a wife and mother.

Second, she is a farmer's wife, not a genteel, upperclass heroine who observes but who does not encounter the land. Beret's experience with the land reveals the human cost of homesteaders on land, politically and philosophically regarded as an agrarian utopia in a concept which ignored the geographical realities of land-taking past the ninety-eighth meridian, the invisible barrier between forest lands of adequate rainfall and the semi-arid expanse of the Great Plains. But Beret is not aware of the fallacies of a stream of belief about the land upon which they settle. Her unawareness serves not only to underscore the inexperience of homesteaders accustomed to farm practices developed in areas of adequate moisture but also to

emphasize that she is an ordinary woman of realistically limited comprehension of anything beyond the everyday life which involves her. At first, she rejects the life in a strange land. Later, after the death of Per Hansa, she accepts the responsibility for continuing their domesticating of the land and becomes a first-rate farmer. As a result, her relationship to the land not only portrays the initial failure to adjust to unfamiliar conditions but also demonstrates the success which occurs after innovative adjustments to conditions of a semi-arid land are made.

Third, as a Norwegian immigrant, Beret represents continuity with a European cultural tradition which she fails to preserve not only from neglect but also from the obliterating effect of a process of Americanization upon a past heritage. Unlike Molly Stark Wood or Ann Carmeny who represent and perpetuate an Anglo-American heritage, she is not a conscious bearer of culture. Rather, she does not comprehend her failure to establish a living tradition for her children, tending, instead, to blame entirely the schools and the progressive minister of her church for the growing lack of communication between her and her children, represented by their preference for the English language and for the ways of the new country.

The remainder of this study will be devoted to Beret's relationship to love, to the agrarian frontier, and to a cultural heritage. In order to relate more effectively the three categories to the events of the trilogy, it may be helpful to sketch briefly the



plot of the three novels. In Giants In the Earth, poverty-stricken Per Hansa, Beret, and their three children arrive as part of a small group of Norwegian friends who take adjacent claims and who begin the arduous process of domesticating the virgin land. Per Hansa's reaction to the land is one of "boyish" enthusiasm as he labors to fulfill his dream of economic and material success, symbolized for him by a white house with green cornices and a "royal mansion" of a barn in which to keep all the livestock which he intends to own. In contrast, Beret reacts fearfully and resentfully toward a treeless land which is entirely different from the forest land of Norway and of Minnesota to which she is accustomed and which she recalls with increasing nostalgia. Per Hansa's incredible feats of innovative adjustment to solve the problems of his poverty and of exacting prairie conditions require him often to be gone from the homestead, a fact which increases Beret's loneliness and melancholy. Their first Christmas on the prairie is significant for the birth of their fourth child, Peder Victorious, whose presence restores Beret, for a while, to her role of care and concern for others. However, unable to adjust to her life on the prairie, Beret goes mad. She does not recover until a minister, having found his way to the little community, appeals to her sense of motherhood to draw her out of her self-centered madness. Although she has recovered her sanity, she is still unable to adjust to the reality of herself in relation to Per Hansa, her children, and the land. She escapes into a consuming concern for her religion which leads her to bring about the last crisis of the novel. Having

convinced their dearest friend Hans Olsa of his need for a minister as he lies dying of pneumonia, she urges Per Hansa to perform one more incredible deed by going a great distance in a blizzard after the minister. Her illusion of the necessity of obtaining a minister for a man who has no need for one is equalled by Per Hansa's illusion of himself as a superhuman. Several escapes from death have convinced him of his invincibility. The novel, which has been as much a study of illusion as of reality, ends with Per Hansa found dead in late spring upon the prairie.

The story of Peder Victorious takes precedence in the second novel which bears his name. His development from a lad of nine years of age to young manhood provides the central motif of the novel, which is a study of the fragmentation of his cultural heritage. As a Norwegian youth, he encounters forces of Americanization in school and in church which cause him to rebel against his mother's stubborn insistence that Norwegian be spoken in their home. When the novel ends, he is going to marry Susie Doheny, an Irish girl of Catholic faith. Throughout the novel, to underscore the conflict between youth and age, rebellion and tradition, past and present, Beret's story becomes secondary, symbolizing her waning effect upon her children. Her presence in the second novel, in contrast to her extremes of behavior portrayed in the first novel, is quiet and calm, symbolizing her reconciliation to the death of Per Hansa as well as her acceptance of the responsibility for their children and for the success of their homesteading venture.

In the third novel, Beret's theme is very much in the background. As a quiet, elderly woman, she has relinquished the management of the farm to Peder and his wife Susie. She unobtrusively continues her round of care of her immaculate house and of the animals on the farm. Her quietness is especially noticeable in contrast to Susie and Peder's conflict regarding Their Fathers' God, ironic title for a novel which shows the stupid and tragic errors perpetuated by a fragmented heritage which has no past from which to learn. Peder, who has grown up without a father, is a free-thinker who prefers a political rather than a religious paternalism. Susie, whose mother died of tuberculosis, is sustained by her mother church. When they become the parents of a son, Beret, desirous that he be a Lutheran, secretly has him baptized. Susie, equally desirous that he be baptized as a Catholic, arranges still another secret baptism. As a result, the child, whom all of them call Petie, signifies the tragic differences which his prejudiced parents perpetuate with increasing bitterness in their quarrels. The little boy whose Lutheran name is Peder Emmanuel and whose Catholic name is Patrick St. Olaf is, in effect, a child of a broken home, where the very real love which once existed between his parents has foundered on pride and prejudice. Before the end of the novel when Susie takes Petie and leaves Peder, Beret dies, leaving the material legacy of the farm to her children to end a trilogy where a success story is possible but a "happy-ever-after" ending is tragically, if realistically, impossible. Once Beret is dead, the human relevance, which she represents and

which she at great cost has come to realize exists as a result of loving relationships between husband and wife and between parents and children, ceases to exist.

## CHAPTER I: THE LADY

The qualities of the Cooperian light and dark heroines are blended in Beret. Tremulous and tearful, reserved and gentle, she is a fair-haired heroine whose inner state is that of the passionate dark heroine. Married to Per Hansa and the mother of their children, she has experienced the full cycle of love which begins before the events of the trilogy with her seduction in Norway. Although she has been seduced, she is not a ruined woman rejected by her lover, scorned by her friends, or doomed to die as are the fallen women of sentimental-romantic fiction. In contrast, though she has been seduced, she is loved and cherished within the frame of marriage to her seducer, Per Hansa, by whom she bears an illegitimate child and for whom she later relinquishes her homeland and her family. Before she and Per Hansa leave Norway, they are married in a hasty ceremony which changes nothing in their relationship to one another. As a heroine, Beret is unusual in that she is unconcerned about the sanction of marriage until it is necessary for the name of her child.

As an imperfect but non-rejected heroine, Beret breaks the stereotyped convention which requires heroines whose hair color determines their roles. Her outward appearance of dignified reserve belies not only her sensual nature but also her consistent tendency

to react emotionally to the events of her life. Although she is involved in the care of her family, she is a selfish, possessive woman whose need for affection is so great that she fears and resents anything that may alter or affect her closeness as a wife to Per Hansa.

Consequently, her reaction to the land-taking is one of deep resentment, for Per Hansa is required to give almost his entire attention to the land. Feeling neglected, she jealously regards the land as the rival for the affections of her husband. Self-centered, she fails to understand that Per Hansa, with no alternative to survival on his homestead, dares not spare himself in his efforts to succeed. She does understand, however, that he is happiest when confronting a challenge testing his power to bend a desirable woman or a new experience to his will. As the "Beret-girl" whom he has won, she feels that she has become subordinated to his new mistress, the land.

That Beret suspects his devotion to a new love is indicated by her frequent weeping. When first introduced at the beginning of Giants In The Earth, she is not a cheerful wife. Instead, she is melancholy and depressed. Her weeping, by inference, causes her husband to stride farther ahead of the wagon which she is driving than is absolutely necessary. Her children, not able to comprehend her tears and made uneasy by them, prefer to be in the company of their father. Although it is true that Per Hansa is lost on the trackless prairie and that the possibility of a terrible death awaits them when their supplies are gone, Beret, who suspects that Per Hansa has gone astray, weeps

not so much because of their being lost as for herself. Pregnant with their fourth child, she has been reluctant to leave Minnesota and has attempted to use her pregnancy to force Per Hansa to stay where wind and water sounds reminded her of the forests and lakes of Norway. But Per Hansa, who well understands that passion rather than reason can persuade Beret, has won her consent to migrate once more.

After the family has settled down for the night, Per Hansa, who has pretended sleep, slips away in a last desperate attempt to find his way to his friends who await him at the site of their future home. By excellent fortune, he successfully establishes his location on the prairie. Restored to a happy frame of mind, Per Hansa returns to the dark huddle of his family to discover Beret distraught and in tears. Wild with fear that he is lost and that they are forsaken, she has been unable to be calm or resourceful in his absence. Only by loving her can he calm her and drive away her wild imaginings.

When Per Hansa and his family arrive the next day at the place of their new home, they are joyfully greeted by their friends. Everyone is happy except Beret. As she descends from the wagon to be solicitously cared for by her friends, Sörine and Kjersti, she silently surveys the site of all their new beginnings and feels that "here something was about to go wrong," a feeling in direct contrast to the optimism of everyone else. She nearly gives way to her tears, but, ashamed to cry before her friends, she stiffens her reserved appearance. Only once that day does she rejoice. Surveying the

isolated expanse of prairie which surrounds them, Per Hansa instinctively shivers. Beret, sensing his momentary awareness of their isolation, regards him tenderly, feeling that he must understand how impossible it will be for any of them to live in a land where there is "nothing to hide behind."

Although her recoiling from the land reflects the reaction often felt by real women confronting the vastness of the Great Plains, it reveals Beret as a weak woman who needs to have Per Hansa near her in order to protect her from anything unfamiliar. Until their arrival in South Dakota, their rootless life has not altered Per Hansa's intensely passionate and protective care of her. But her fear of being alone and being forced to be independent is underscored by the enormous distances of the prairie, which lie not only between them and preferred Minnesota but also between them and the nearest settlements. Dismayed by the distances and by the implication of challenge and of change, she has even more need to possess and to confine Per Hansa to assure her sense of security that he loves her better than the land, the proof of which, she feels, will be his agreement to return to Minnesota before autumn.

The day after their arrival on their land, Per Hansa goes to Sioux Falls to register his claim. While he is gone, Beret demonstrates that she, too, appreciates the power of passion to persuade a man of strong will. She establishes a temporary tent home, but she devotes special attention to the arrangement of a bedroom in the wagon for herself and Per Hansa. When he returns, she greets him tenderly.



During the first days, she cheerfully supports his efforts, pleasing him with a special gift of melon seeds which she has saved. She helps him plant a crop of potatoes, takes her turn with the plow, and, in the evenings, assists with the laying of sod blocks used to build their new home. To celebrate their day's work and accomplishment, she adds festive dabs of rare butter to their plain fare of porridge. In the mornings, she wakens before Per Hansa in order to hold him to her before he insists upon leaving their bed to begin another day's challenging work. The carefully prepared bedroom, the solicitous assistance, and the sustained tenderness are not intended to encourage him to make prodigious efforts but to turn him from the land toward her to such an extent that he will acquiesce to her dream of returning to Minnesota or to Norway. During days of her loving, if calculated care for him, peace and harmony prevail in the family and the work goes efficiently and well as an excellent start is made in the effort of land-taking. Those days are noted for sunniness and not for tears.

Beret's wiles reveal how stubbornly determined she is to have her way. Both she and Per Hansa rely upon sensual pleasure as the means of persuasion. Their strategy, as old as Adam and Eve, is a favorite theme of that stream of realistic folk literature which traditionally deals with the intimate, everyday aspects of domestic intrigue. Employed by Beret and Per Hansa, the tender tactics not only establish commonplace reality but also underscore the tension of wills which lie just beneath their harmony. But Per Hansa is not defeated in the contest of will with Beret. His enthusiasm for

homesteading continues unabated. By late summer, Beret realizes that she has no hope of fleeing from the frontier. She reacts by letting the house go, by neglecting herself and the children, and by succumbing again to her ready flow of tears. Her tear-swollen face and her unkempt appearance become a matter of habit. Homesick, fearful of the distances represented by the prairie outside their home, she weeps because she feels sorry for herself, a form of self-indulgence and weakness which Nanny Alderson, a pioneer woman of Montana, described as "the lowest state to which a woman's mind can fall."<sup>1</sup>

Frustrated in the hope of flight from a land which, to her, is not a place of promise but of exile, and unable to rejoice that she will be the first to bring new life into their little community, she desires death as the only escape possible for her. Hopeful that she will die during child birth, she cries out for Per Hansa, who is summoned immediately by Beret's two friends who fear for her life and for that of the child. Revealing how torn she is between life and death, she first pleads wildly with him to love her. Her request, completely unrelated to the reality of her circumstances, astounds Per Hansa. He becomes even more concerned the next moment when, in a more considered manner, she matter-of-factly informs him that she is going to die and that she wishes to be buried in the huge immigrants' chest which must suffice as a coffin in a treeless land.

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<sup>1</sup>Nannie Tiffany Alderson, "Frontier Home-Maker," Montana Margins: A State Anthology, ed. Joseph Kinsey Howard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), p. 216.

Per Hansa, dismayed by her unreasonable request and by his husbandly helplessness during the process of birth, is especially horrified by her obviously prior consideration of the desirability of death which he resents as the only barrier to all of life's possibilities.

But she does not die, for life proves to be stronger than her wish for death. Per Hansa, whose self-sufficiency and proud independence prevents his acknowledging humility or gratitude, is overcome by grateful relief that Beret and his new son are alive. The child, who has come cauled into life, seems to be a supremely healthy symbol of life, of hope, and of the vanquishing of death. Born on Christmas Day, he represents a life force, symbolized in the name Victorious which Per Hansa bestows upon him during a baptism ceremony conducted by Peder's godfather, Hans Olsa, and witnessed by his two godmothers who assisted at his birth. For a while the intimate needs of her infant son arrest Beret's withdrawal. Eventually, however, as he comes to require less care, she again lapses into her cheerless ways.

Desultorily attending to her duties, she continues in her melancholy state until one year after their arrival on the land. During that summer the small community experiences the awesome spectacle of a horde of locusts descending upon the fields in which they have labored. Per Hansa, who is not a superstitious man, cannot believe his neighbors' pious assertion that the locusts are a form of retribution sent as a result of vaguely defined sins. Observing only that his precious grain is being devoured, he knows that his survival

depends upon marketing and using his crop. Almost instinctively, he shoots his gun at the locust-layered heavens, an act which, astonishingly, not only drives the insects from his fields but also demonstrates to Beret to what blasphemous lengths he will go to defend his beloved land. Convinced of the extent of his feeling for the land and of the futility of her ever persuading him to leave, she goes insane.

Beret's madness, her "lowest state", is synonymous with a rejection of her womanhood and of life itself. Having always followed the dictates of her heart, Beret has derived joy from being a woman fulfilled by sensual pleasure and by giving birth to and caring for her children. Physical satisfaction and the delight of experiencing to the full her role in life is symbolized by her remembrance of a golden summertime of her initiation into life as a result of seduction and by golden summer days of happiness when, in spite of her intrigue, she and Per Hansa shared the joy of creating a new home. She begins to turn the remembered light and joy of these experiences into a dark rationalization of them as sinful and shameful.

Symbolic of her decline into madness is her closing out of light. When she does go outside the sod hut, she imagines that the clouds are huge faces looming over her. She prefers to remain indoors where she sits staring at the dark earthen floor. When Per Hansa is away, she covers the window to close out the "eyes" watching her. She is annoyed by Per Hansa's discovery that another settler in a

distant community has lightened the interior of her sod hut by whitewashing the walls. To Per Hansa, whose realm is outdoors and whose dream is of a white house, the whitewashing of the interior makes less noticeable the gap between an earthen home and the one of his dreams. To Beret, the task of cleanliness is increased by the white walls, but worse, their brightness, which doesn't match her state of mind, is offensive rather than comforting or pleasant.

As she becomes preoccupied with herself to the exclusion of others, she fails to acknowledge light or to be aware of the needs of others. To maintain the self-absorbed darkness of her inner state, she rationalizes that fate and not choice is responsible for her feeling exiled in a strange land. Because her uneventful and commonplace life holds no other noteworthy event, she gradually convinces herself that her presence in the land is her punishment for the desire which she and Per Hansa have shared. Consequently, she denies the only reality and security of her relationship to her husband and to her children, inverting her affection for them into cold rejection. The familiar wife and mother becomes a dread stranger in her home.

Feeling that she is being punished because of her womanly fulfillment in sensual pleasure and in the bearing of children, she regards her desire as sinful and as the root of all evil. She begins to reject Per Hansa's frank invitations to bed by trembling not with desire but with revulsion. Baffled and disturbed by her consistent refusal of his amorous advances, he rationalizes, in turn, that she is a delicate child who needs his protection and solicitous care until she adjusts to the land which he cherishes.

Inhibited as she is in the rigid preservation of her chastity as part of the black and white, good and evil morality which she has fashioned from the repression of her passion, Beret comes to believe that she is surrounded by a series of rings. The horizon, largest circle of all, is a barrier to her escape from the land. Closer by are magic rings across which she cannot step. Finally, the walls of her home and the chair where she so frequently and passively sits represent her completely passive inability to recognize that her inner state determines her view of everything about her and that the complex world of darkness which she alone has created is in itself a complicated form of escape. For it, concern with sin and guilt becomes a form of grim satisfaction and penance is a hair shirt of chastity. That she is, in effect, beyond any participation in life as a result of her denying its flux and change is evidenced by her sitting motionless and staring unseeing at the dark earthen floor.

As a result of her withdrawal, friends seldom come to call, Per Hansa has adopted a paternal attitude toward her, and the children, fearful of their mother who is a stranger, are wary of her. In short, she has achieved the isolation which walls out any intrusion of responsibility or obligation. Only Peder is a bother, reminding her that life can exist on the prairie in spite of her determination to see nothing but failure there. Cheerful and demanding, the toddling child does not leave her alone. His healthy presence, but especially his name, becomes for her as much a reason for her punishment as Per Hansa's Faustian gesture of driving away grasshoppers by shooting into the face of heaven itself. In the depths

of her madness, she feels that her dark landscape of sin and guilt is destroyed by the innocence and promise of her child whose name enrages her. Convincing herself that he should be taken from a world of darkness and error, she betrays the basic relationship of mother and child, essential to human continuity, by attempting to harm Peder, who is too young to fear her or to shun her. Per Hansa and the two older sons take turns watching her in order to protect Peder. In her lowest state, Beret is a fair-haired heroine whose self-righteous definition of a landscape which reflects her concept of good and evil results from her denial of womanhood and of care. She has become a monster of morality, terrible in a mother who can justify violence to eliminate intolerable innocence, represented by her own child.

Two years later, the first minister arrives in the little community. Having been raised on the frontier, he understands the hardships as well as the struggle for life in the isolated outposts of empire. Administering to the needs of people, he fits his religion to the lives of his parishioners. Because Per Hansa's sod house is the largest dwelling, the minister requests that church services be held there. Per Hansa, who has never respected those who preach humility, has been reduced by the strain of Beret's madness to begin to wonder if he is in any way responsible for her malady or if he should even remain responsible for her actions. Having told the minister of Beret's violent behavior toward Peder,

Per Hansa indicates that he intends to send her away in order to spare the family further concern.

Having advised Per Hansa not to isolate Beret further by sending her away or by allowing Sörine and Hans Olsa to adopt Peder, the minister does all in his power to rouse Beret from her state of insensibility toward life. First, he praises the name of "Victorious", which he interprets to mean that Peder is to become a minister in service to a loving God. To counteract Beret's fascination with evil, he prays as if he were speaking to a kind, cherished friend always near and forgiving, in contrast to Beret's belief in an arbitrary, remote God. Further, he uses the coffin-chest as an altar during a church service which forces Beret to see her home not as a place of filth and of uncleanness but of holy sanctity. Finally, to break her ringed imprisonment, he assures her that she is free of the bonds of Satan.

Attempting to win her from a negative absorption with evil to a recognition of the good she can accomplish by becoming aware of others and caring for them, the minister succeeds in causing Beret to begin to doubt her repressive beliefs. The process of restoring her identity as a wife and as a mother is completed by Per Hansa's affirmation of his belief in Beret. This occurs when Beret overhears Hans Olsa's request that he and Sörine be allowed to have Peder as their own child. Seizing a knife, Beret becomes murderously inclined to harm Peder. But she hears Per Hansa gently reply that the mother



and child are not to be separated. The joyful relief which she feels as a result of his stated belief in her as a woman causes her to relax completely. She falls into a deep sleep, very much like death, from which she wakens, symbolically reborn into life.

When Beret wakens, she imagines for a moment that she hears the sound of church bells. Symbolic in Norwegian folk literature of the power of Christian faith to disperse the forces of darkness, their sound also represents Beret's awakening acceptance of the harmonious relationships possible when she accepts responsibility for those who need her care. Significantly, her first act to re-establish her presence in a house which seems neglected and poorly kept, is to prepare food for Peder as well as to delight him by playing with him and caressing him. Then she goes outside the sod hut to look for Per Hansa whom she scarcely recognizes, for he seems unusually aged and haggard. Not understanding why he should appear so weary, she solicitously urges him to leave his work and to rest inside while she prepares a bowl of hot milk for him. Consequently, Per Hansa is the first to realize that Beret, almost miraculously, has been restored to her family, although he is unaware of how important his expression of faith has been to her recovery. Where silence and separation once were an impenetrable barrier between her and Per Hansa and the children, her spontaneous, natural renewal of care and of communication evidence her strong, social feelings, essential to her role in sustaining the human continuity represented by her family.

In contrast to the serene, secure atmosphere established by her acceptance of her womanly role of care, her madness has represented a narrow, repressed isolated world of guilt, sin, and punishment, unrelieved by a concept of love. Indeed, Beret's passion has been equated with rejection rather than acceptance since she surrendered herself to Per Hansa in youthful rebellion against her family in Norway. Both she and Per Hansa have used passion to cloak their immaturity as well as their inclination to anti-social behavior. Their frequent liaisons have been an escape from the reality of family and of community, sustained by their reliance upon one another for approval. "Boyish" Per Hansa and his "Beret-girl" are compatible, primarily, because both are rebels outside society who are reluctant, as their belated marriage indicates, to accept enduring, serious responsibility as a part of participating in and sustaining society. Even the arrival of children has not caused either Per Hansa or Beret to place the needs of their children before their own need for gratification.

For Per Hansa, gratification means an endless succession of new experiences. His flight to an American frontier is his escape from conventional confinement as a married man in a Norwegian community. In contrast to his search for endless possibilities against which to test his prowess and resourcefulness, Beret, whose features are "child-like", confines herself to Per Hansa to maintain her sense of security, inseparable from sensual gratification. She is jealous of friends, particularly Hans Olsa and Sörine, whose close relationship to Per Hansa causes her to be aloof toward them, a defensive posture

which conceals her resentment of them. Although she attends to the physical needs of her children, she is occupied, for the most part, in rejecting anyone or anything which might affect her relationship to Per Hansa. Fearful of change and of new experiences, she contradicts her role as a woman entangled with the process of life and of change itself. Thus, Per Hansa's flight to a frontier which is ultimately the death of him and Beret's escape into madness, when she is a female divided into a destructive black and white morality, serve to illustrate the tragic denial of life, romantically concealed in the Cooperian emphasis upon youth sustained by flight from society and from care.

That the pattern of escape is difficult to overcome comprises the remainder of the novel Giants In The Earth. Although Beret recovers her sanity and resumes care for her family, she still is unable to understand her role as the source of physical, spiritual, and emotional nourishment of her family. She no longer hides behind madness and withdrawal. Instead, she hides behind her religion, which allows still another escape conforming to her belief that destiny, not choice, is responsible for the events of life. Channeling any urge toward passion into fervent prayers for forgiveness of her sins, she holds daily devotions in a ritual observance of preparing for salvation after death. In fact, her stubborn insistence that ritual be rigidly adhered to is the cause of Hans Olsa's concern that he must be confessed by a minister. A simple, good man who requires

no minister, he becomes deeply troubled and fearful of his impending death.

As a result of Beret's insistence and of Hans Olsa's pleading, Per Hansa, who scorns ministers and the traditions which they represent, decides to flirt once more with death to accomplish yet another deed about which the community will talk for years. Thus, their last clash of wills comes about as a result of Per Hansa's determination to excel as the best man in the community and Beret's determination to be the most pious woman. Their inability to know and to accept their limitations and imperfections in an intimate relationship of tolerant love and mutual assistance is evidenced by their relationship of immaturity sustained in an atmosphere of embattled wills and challenge. As Per Hansa straps on his skis in the snow-drifted yard, he hopes that Beret will surrender first by inviting him to come inside for a cup of coffee. Not trusting herself to keep her resolve that he go after the minister if she confronts him personally, Beret sends Peder into the yard to announce that coffee is ready. The second-hand message rankles Per Hansa to whom the word "ready" is a challenge to discover if he is ready to go or if he will stay at home. He skis into the late afternoon gloom, unable to hear Beret's belated calling him in to coffee. Their immature contest of wills ends tragically in Per Hansa's death.

Only after Per Hansa's death in the blizzard does Beret realize with the help of the minister that her retreat into madness

and then into religious concerns compounded by Per Hansa's testing of limits of endurance and his preoccupation with the land prevented their achieving a relationship which she knows could have been heaven on earth instead of a little hell of hurt and irremediable cost. Her belated recognition of what could have been the reality of their relationship had they not remained selfishly immature underscores the fact that her marriage has not had a happily ever-after ending, denied to those too young to understand its significance. Instead, her marriage has represented a failure of love.

As the survivor of their marriage, she is confronted with the responsibility for the children and for the farm which are very real consequences of her union with Per Hansa. Terribly uncertain whether or not she can carry on alone, she contemplates once more escape from responsibility. She determines to sell the farm and to return with the children to Norway. But Sörine, her best friend and the widow of Hans Olsa, suggests that the children, uprooted from the environment familiar to them, would be as much strangers in Norway as she and Beret are in America. In addition, the minister reminds Beret that she must assume the task of completing Per Hansa's dream, for she alone has the choice of leaving the farm or continuing the work already begun and in process of fulfillment. He also urges her to overcome the conflict within herself by looking for good in others. When she accepts the responsibility for the farm and for the children and relinquishes her escapist tendencies, she becomes a strong, capable woman in spite of herself. By following the minister's advice of looking for good, she becomes less self-centered and self-righteous.

Although she has lost Per Hansa, she comes to appreciate her children. She discovers how capable the two older boys are in helping with work on the farm and how protective they are of her. Especially grateful for their care of her, she realizes that she did not provide them with consistent care and love when they needed her. Although she has failed to establish a close relationship with her two older sons, she determines to devote special care to Peder, and to And-Ongen, her daughter, whose unfailing cheerfulness and companionship keep loneliness at bay. Possessive, stiffly acknowledging the early marriages and the early babies which seem to characterize her sons' provincial lives, Beret's lack of charitable acceptance of their need to live their own lives results not only from her age and outmoded role of mother but also from her reaction to her lost chance to love her children and to establish a basis for understanding and communicating with them in spite of separation.

In the last novel, Their Fathers' God, she maintains an habitual round of farm chores and care for her home where Susie and Peder live their off-and-on-again marriage. Inconsiderate and hurtful of one another, Peder and Susie pay token tribute to her, but they are unable to extend to her the love and the understanding which would cause her old age to be the honored fulfillment of life itself. Although she is a grandmother, she scarcely sees her grandson and she cannot establish any close relationship to him. Her random life

concludes in her death, the final reality as well as the ultimate separation from life's experiences from which she has attempted to escape during so much of her life.

## CHAPTER II: THE LAND

The South Dakota frontier, to which Beret and Per Hansa immigrate in the 1870's, is a region opened as a result of the Homestead Act passed in 1862.\* As one more political manifestation of the Jeffersonian dream of an agrarian society, it was, from the beginning, a failure. By the 1860's the Industrial Revolution, not agrarian accomplishment, was the mainstay of American economy and progress.

Outmoded by industrial progress, the Homestead Act failed to acknowledge the geographical reality of land west of the ninety-eighth meridian, the invisible barrier dividing forest lands of adequate rainfall from the region of the Great Plains, characterized by aridity or semi-aridity. Early Spanish explorers, who approached the Plains from the southwest, defined the region as a desert as did American explorers like Zebulon Pike.

In the 1870's, John Wesley Powell reported that 160-acre units of land would not support homesteaders in the new region. He recommended units of 2560 acres or more<sup>1</sup> as well as innovative social,

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\*I have based my discussion of the Homestead Act upon Henry Nash Smith's study of the agrarian myth in his book The Virgin Land, pp. 190-245.

<sup>1</sup>Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 228.



legal, and cultural adjustments to a land of drought, distance, and little water. But his recommendations were irrelevant to the persistent stream of belief in the land as a fertile landscape which needed only the plow to turn it into a productive garden. By the 1890's the discrepancy between the dream and the reality of an agrarian utopia past the ninety-eighth meridian had become the basis of Populist protest.

Thus Per Hansa takes land under a Homesteading Act which is a political illusion opposed not only to American industrial progress and urban growth but also to the geographical realities of the region in which he homesteads. As a Norwegian fisherman, he is, fortunately, entirely ignorant of forest-land agrarian methods, which is a situation to his advantage, since he intends to use his ingenuity to adapt to the conditions imposed by the arid lands of the Great Plains. A man of no means, he welcomes the opportunity, as did many European immigrants of the period, to materially better himself by taking free land. His restlessness on the Great Plains becomes an advantageous impulse of the mobility essential to discover markets for his produce, to learn about the land, and to adapt to the land, as the requisites of his survival and of his success. Because he is restless, innovative, and imaginative, he succeeds from the beginning by discovering sources of scarce timber and meat, by seeking out markets for his variety of produce, and by establishing diversification of his income which allows him to increase his original land holdings. A fortunate combination of imagination, mobility, and luck allow him to succeed.

In contrast, Beret views the land not as an idealized setting for favored builders of empire but as a dreary infinity. Never, she feels, can the land be settled, for distance precludes the familiar things and concepts which she honors nostalgically as she never did before she came to South Dakota. For example, once, when Per Hansa is gone, Tonseten sends her some "bear" meat. The rarity of meat in their subsistence diet of porridge and of potatoes creates tremendous anticipation which turns to disgust when Ole reveals that the delicacy before them is badger meat. Beret, who always expects the worst of the new environment, calmly throws away the meat. The incident verifies her feeling that they live in a land fit only for savages where people are reduced to eating trolls' food. Whenever she sees an infrequent caravan of new settlers, rather than welcoming the sight of them, she wishes she could stop them from going further, to what, she is sure is doom for all who take land on the Great Plains.

Because the land has never been turned by a plow, the effort to break ground for fields is arduous and backbreaking. Poverty-stricken, Per Hansa owns no implements to make easier the task of turning the heavy sod. In addition, he has no extra supplies to allow his family any margin of survival during their first year on the land. Therefore, the day after his return from filing his claim, he borrows a plow from Hans Olsa, the wealthiest man among them, and begins at once to make a field in which to plant potatoes, a quick crop which will help to feed his family and which he can sell readily or can barter for things which he cannot grow or create.

Beret's contribution of the melon seeds, on the other hand, indicates her unrealistic appraisal of a land where water is precious and where entirely new methods of agriculture as well as crops must be developed. Melons, common enough in Minnesota, represent a delicacy for prairie diets and command great bartering power, but they are perishable in contrast to Per Hansa's staple crop of potatoes.

Per Hansa, dream-impelled by the promise of his economic achievement and enchanted by the belief in himself as a peer of his very own realm, is prevented by his illusion, which parallels the Jeffersonian agrarian myth, from experiencing any disquieting thoughts of the drudgery and toil of his land-breaking. Beret, who has no dream but that of leaving the land, appreciates the irony of Per Hansa's fondly calling her a "princess" and refusing to think of her as a "common clod." But the implied princess in her is belied as she works like a European peasant to stretch their basic fare of porridge, to plow the stubborn sod, to plant potatoes down long furrows in a land of no shade from the sun, and to assist Per Hansa to lay the heavy sod blocks of their dwelling. Even their home, when completed, is a simple, utilitarian dwelling patterned after those of peasants in Europe.

Conserving precious time and energy, Per Hansa decides that it is inefficient to build two sod shelters, one for his family and one for the animals. Instead, he decides to combine them, partitioning the living quarters from the barn. At first, Beret

is repelled by the idea of living next to the animals, but she grows to welcome their nearness and their animal warmth as well as the convenience of tending them when Per Hansa is gone.

But attempting to maintain order and cleanliness in a sod house necessitates constant, frustrating effort. Whether in the field or at home, Beret cannot escape earth, which does not ennoble but demeans and confines those who live near it. The interior of the hut is lighted by one window which admits but little air. Because of the press of her many duties, Beret, unlike Per Hansa, cannot escape the constant reality of her earthen home by getting away from the monotony of view and of daily duties. For Beret, empire is measured in the stuffy confines of a primitive dwelling and by the exhaustion and backache at day's end.

Beret is aware, too, as Per Hansa is not, that empire has a price tag. When they first arrive, Per Hansa discovers an Indian grave at the top of the low hill on his claim. He chooses not to tell Beret, for fear he will agitate her fears still further. When Beret discovers the grave, she is not frightened by it but, instead, considers it as a lonely representation of loss, rendered more pathetic for being unmarked in contrast to the accustomed burial practices in Norway.

Later that year, a lone Norwegian family stops at the home of Per Hansa. The husband is distraught nearly to the breaking point, the children are fearful and neglected, and the mother is mad and must be tied to a chest in the wagon. Travelling alone as did Per

Hansa only a year before, the man has lost his way. Unable to find his way back to a settlement in order to obtain medical assistance for one of his children who has become suddenly ill, he has been helpless to prevent his child's death and has been forced to leave the child's body in a shallow, unmarked grave. Instinctively, Beret understands the mother, grief-maddened and unable to reconcile her loss to the impersonal prairie. Unlike Per Hansa, she knows how tragically their own lives might have ended when Per Hansa lost his way.

During their first summer on the land, a small ragged band of Indians cross Per Hansa's claim. Marked by the Indian grave and by a well-worn trail, the claim is his because the Indians have been dispossessed of their territory and of their rights. Because the members of the little community know of Indians only from romantic tales or from tales of Indian attacks, all presented from the point of view of Manifest Destiny, they are certain that they are doomed to be slaughtered without provocation by savages. However, as the little band draws near, Per Hansa recognizes that the Indians look too domesticated and too poverty-stricken to be a threat. Curious, he goes to their encampment, only to discover among the ragged party one whose dignity is not impaired by the intense pain which he suffers from a badly infected arm. Remembering a fisherman's remedy for infection, Per Hansa, who treats the entire episode as an adventure, officiously sends for Beret, whose fears and tears have again gotten the best of her. It requires great courage in her to come alone with clean cloths and water to assist Per Hansa to care for the fellow's arm.

During their stay of two days, the Indians, significantly, show no inclination to associate with the settlers. When they depart, never again to return, the Indian, whom Per Hansa assisted, repays his debt of gratitude, not by coming personally to thank Per Hansa but by royally sending an Indian lad to bestow a gift of a horse, the traditional gift of a chief. Promptly named Indie, the horse is as valuable to Per Hansa's need to travel great distances as rapidly as possible as to the Indians, who could not have survived on the Plains without horses.

The cost most personal to Beret is Per Hansa's death. It is ironic that he should be the one to die, whose joy of life and whose strength has allowed him to overcome obstacles of distance and weather. The fact of his death leaves Beret, who once desired death and who thinks that she is weak not only because she is a woman but also because of her lack of confidence in herself, to continue all of her work in addition to assuming responsibility for a farm.

That she proves to be capable and strong despite her original reluctance to assume responsibility, rests primarily upon three factors. First, she establishes the habit of discussing each evening with the two oldest sons the best means of accomplishing the tasks and improvements on the farm. As a result, they try new methods and seek more efficient means of accomplishing the work. In addition, Beret is an excellent manager. She wastes nothing but doesn't materially deny her children either, as she saves the money required for each improvement. As a result, the farm during the time of her

management is never compromised by debt. Third, Beret, appreciating from her own experience that machinery is the difference between ceaseless, demeaning toil and leisure and dignity, makes full use of all the technological means available and suitable to make the farm efficient. Her attitude toward the "machine in the garden"\* contrasts to a prevalent theme in American fiction in which the machine, unwelcome intruder upon a pastoral landscape, interrupts the peace and harmony of a green land where productivity is natural and not assisted. But Beret, whose farm is peaceful and productive as a result of technology, possesses as symbols of her success the first windmill and the first dairy in the community.

The barn symbolizes the crowning achievement of Beret's management as well as the culmination of Per Hansa's dream. Ole, one evening, discovers in a newspaper a drawing of a barn much like the one which Per Hansa described to his sons. Their imaginative father wanted a barn with a ridgepole which would have a track and carrier to simplify the hauling of hay to and from the loft. Beret clips the picture from the paper, saves money, and to be sure that the barn is the very best, travels to Brookings to see one like it, built by a successful Norwegian farmer. Convinced of its merit and its fine appearance, she makes plans to have it built. When completed, the barn is indeed the "royal mansion" which Per Hansa desired for

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\*The Machine In The Garden is the title of a study written by Leo Marx (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967). In it he traces a tradition of pastoral fable through American writings in order to demonstrate the persistent, if paradoxical, emphasis upon simple, idealized landscapes, synonymous with a withdrawal from society, in contrast to the disruptive effect upon such tranquil landscapes whenever technological reality or complexity is introduced.

his livestock. Representing the result of Per Hansa's vision and of Beret's accomplishment as the "ablest farmer in the town of Spring Creek,"<sup>2</sup> the barn stands as the symbol of success possible when farming practices are adapted to the conditions of the Plains.

When she relinquishes the farm to Peder, she continues to care for the livestock and to do the chores, but she makes no more major decisions. For the first time a mortgage is placed on the farm, after Peder buys cattle while market prices are low during a time of sustained drought. Beret uneasily objects, blaming conflict between Peder and Susie for his decision to compromise the economic independence which she has maintained. She fails to understand that Peder, regardless of his conflict with Susie, resembles Per Hansa in his scorn for old methods of doing things.

Before Beret dies, she makes her will in the presence of Store-Hans and of Peder, the only two children who remain near her. Her main concern is that they all agree as to how the legacy of the farm is to be managed in order to prevent any conflict. After she completes the legal arrangements, she lies for a moment in "deep thought. . . "This farm has cost much more than money can ever pay . . . I like to see it remain in Per Hansa's family.'"<sup>3</sup> Her musing remark

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<sup>2</sup>O. E. Rølvaag, Peder Victorious (New York and London, 1929), p. 174.

<sup>3</sup>O. E. Rølvaag, Their Fathers' God (Harper and Bros., Publishers, New York, 1931), p. 253.



reveals that she realistically associates the material accomplishment and legacy of the farm with the cost. Ironically, she dies as a success in the very role for which she was least prepared. Reconciled to the land, which she resented at the beginning, she has overcome her initial failure to see an impersonal landscape, neutral in itself until transformed by the dreams and the accomplishments of those who homesteaded there and who survived to become successful. The brief span of her independent administration of the farm has been conducted in a setting of pastoral peace and productivity, significantly dependent upon the technology that is part of the society remote from her agrarian region. During the time of her management of the farm, she has achieved through practical, productive results the agrarian dream which motivated Per Hansa to accomplish his incredible, initial efforts of land-taking. She does not live to see Peder's manipulation of the dream for political purposes.

### CHAPTER III: THE LEGACY

The fair-haired heroine, who goes West from New England or Virginia, is unmarried and is intensely conscious of herself as a maidenly bearer of culture which has a past no older than that of the American Revolution. In contrast, Beret, a fair-haired immigrant, is encountered initially ten years after her marriage to Per Hansa. Throughout the trilogy, she is unaware of herself as part of a European cultural tradition and is ignorant of the cultural concepts of the new land which she considers unendurable and unsuitable for humans. Her unawareness of cultural tradition or continuity underscores her inability to see herself as part of the historical reality of either Europe or of America and reveals her lifelong confinement to provincial regions, where isolation preserves fixed beliefs which contradict contemporary reality. Because of the stagnation of her environment, she consistently resists change and resents cultural "hidden forces", imagined or real, which seem to threaten her security, based upon as little change as possible. She represents a tragic and futile attempt to stop time and historical reality.

By a stubborn exercise of free will, she and Per Hansa escape the monotony of Norwegian provincial life by rebelling against its conventions. The golden summer sun, which pervades Beret's memories

of her affair with Per Hansa, indicates her sentimental-romantic tendency to transform a careless liaison into a predestined, romantic adventure in which she is a princess and Per Hansa is a dashing, irresistible hero who happens to win her considerably short of marriage. In imitation of the hero and the heroine of popular romance, she and Per Hansa hold center stage, absorbed in one another and in self to the extent that family, friends, community, time, and history are vague shadows without significance.

Their passionate adventure is returned to reality and to time when Ole is born. Confronted with life in all its helplessness and dependence, they become uneasily aware of the need of conventional observance to protect his name. They marry, thus becoming another couple in a village where more than one child has come earlier than intended. As parents, rather than carefree lovers, they are a part of the commonplace human condition from which they sought to escape. Their illusion of freedom is bruised by an environment in which they cannot really escape from the reality of their love affair.

Regarded as unstable and shiftless in the village, Per Hansa determines several years later to follow his fortune to America. Unlike unmarried heroes of adventure tales, Per Hansa takes with him his wife and three children to a land discovered by Europeans, who romantically imagined it to be a pastoral paradise of new beginnings for a perfect society. The romantic concept of America as a utopia of natural happiness and perfection reflected a tradition of pastoral

idealism, recurrent in European literature since Virgil. The pastoral concept became especially popular in eighteenth century Europe as a Rousseauistic wish-image of life, seemingly attainable by emulating the life of the country in preference to that of the city. Because the Rousseauistic concept and American settlement coincided to a large extent, the pastoral ideal became Europe's popular definition of the lure of the new land. Later, the pastoral ideal became an influential concept in the thinking of Thomas Jefferson who dreamed that farmers would establish the economic, social, and cultural basis of the new republic.

The Homestead Act of 1862, under which Per Hansa and Beret take land, was a political continuation of agrarian democracy in which the noble yeoman-farmer was the backbone of the republic. Yet, by the 1870's, the mythic figure of the nature-ennobled farmer was irrelevant to the industrial progress of the nation. The idea of a credulous, country bumpkin, easily gulled by city slickers, began to flavor countless jokes which depended for humorous effect upon a derogatory view of rural isolation. Less humorously, the contradiction of rural belief to urban and industrial realities, by the 1870's, was beginning to gather momentum for the divergence in the 1890's of economic and social realities from agricultural interests, evidenced in Populist protest, a major depression, and an exposition which featured technological marvels rather than plows. Consequently, in the 1890's, Peder Victorious gains his political success as a result of the eruptive

unrest of Populist revolt in the region where Per Hansa came to homestead.

But Per Hansa, ostensibly fleeing "pot-bellied kings," chooses America as the land free of all past in which the prevailing concepts are youth, hopefulness, independence, freedom, and separation from Europe. It is the country to match his view of himself as a solitary individual who needs no past and who faces his future with only his own innovative, imaginative abilities. In America, his illusion of freedom can be maintained only when he is away from settlements where institutions and concepts remind of Europe. A Norwegian Natty Bumppo, he, of necessity, finds the frontier the most congenial environment in which to preserve the concept of himself as an heroic, adventurous individual. Independent, confident of his abilities, unwilling to admit any reality which may disturb his illusion of freedom and of optimistic success, he is introduced in the trilogy with his back set stubbornly against the east, his eyes fixed on the west of the "Rock-ock-ocky Mountains" which he intends to see someday. The fact that he is lost when the trilogy opens indicates his desire to be separated from his friends whom he has persuaded not to wait for him while he repairs his rickety wagon. He needs isolation to enjoy selfish gratification of himself as the only hero of his great adventure, a "boyish" thrill which isn't darkened by the threat of death or harmed as long as he ignores Beret's weeping. His preference for isolation is ironic, for, as a married man, he is part of the most basic unit of society, defined and perpetuated by its interdependence.

Consequently, his numerous excursions away from the dreariness of his home comprise his escape valve to maintain an illusion of independence.

In relation to the land, he considers himself as a noble yeoman-farmer, the "peer" of his agrarian "realm." Ironically, his belief is an outmoded pastoral belief of his European past which he thinks no longer affects him. As a provincial product of Norwegian culture, Per Hansa is a European participant in an American agrarian myth, irrelevant to the facts and the effects of the Industrial Revolution. Already outstripped by the events of history, in which he is an unwilling and largely unaware participant, he follows the setting sun, which, as it turns out, is both promise and death for him.

In contrast to Per Hansa who symbolizes the denial of past, Beret, as a wife and mother, represents the impossibility of freedom from a past. As the protected and cherished only child of a commonplace couple whose livelihood depends upon a fishing boat and a farm, she leaves her home not as a bride but as a mistress. Although she has freely chosen to give herself to Per Hansa, she thinks that Destiny is responsible for her being cast into his arms, a significant passive mode of thought which reveals her romantic tendency to refuse reality as well as the consequences of her choice. That freedom and care are inseparable companions is a fact impressed upon her by Ole's birth. His presence in itself is an unescapable tie to the past.

After she and Per Hansa are married, they work hard to build a simple home, adequate for them and two more children. To all appearances, they have decided to live out their lives in the

Norwegian village where her parents and friends represent a stable, unchanging way of life. Secure in the routine of life as a mother and wife among familiar friends and family, Beret desires nothing more than to be the center of Per Hansa's life.

Beret realizes that she alone cannot satisfy Per Hansa, when she learns that Per Hansa has convinced Hans Olsa, his best friend and trusted fishing companion, to sell his family farm in order to emigrate to America. Resentful of Per Hansa's affection for Hans Olsa, Beret has always been aloof from him and from Sörine, his wife. When Per Hansa asks her if she wishes to wait and to come after him, she chooses to go, leaving everything "like a pair of worn-out shoes."<sup>1</sup>

In America, Beret, fearful of the strange and the unknown, is more perceptive than Per Hansa to see a country of contrasts. Unlike the fabled land of unlimited riches, Beret realizes, as a result of their own experience, that there is "enough of poverty and grinding toil."<sup>2</sup> As she observes how heedless Per Hansa and countless others are of security and economic stability, she is troubled by the thought that the "west-fever" is "the thousand-year old hunger of the poor after human happiness. . . ."<sup>3</sup> As they continue their random way west, she becomes more reluctant to increase the growing distance between her and the familiar, comfortable ways of her life in Norway. The greater the distance the more she transforms the ordinariness of

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<sup>1</sup>O. E. Rölvaag, Giants In The Earth, p. 219.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 220.

her Norwegian life into a nostalgically rendered past of selected memories and beliefs which tend to harden into the certainty that her presence in America is exile for her sin of filial disobedience and her flaunting of convention.

As their nomadic life exposes them to strange people and regions, she looks only for things to remind her of her Norwegian home. Isolated by a language barrier, she has little or no comprehension of the westering of which they are a part. Only water sounds on an occasional ferry soothe away the cursing and the jostling of people jammed together with livestock and possessions to cross one of several waterways on their way west. In Minnesota, the trees and the water remind her of home, and she wishes to linger there. But she has no choice but to follow Per Hansa. A frontier Faust who must probe to the very limits all the possibilities which lie in the West, he requires a land on which he may place his own stamp of identity.

Imagination and mobility are the factors which prevent Per Hansa from being overwhelmed by the monotony of existence in an isolated area where hard work at a peasant's level is the reality in contrast to the leisurely, patrician existence envisioned by Jefferson. Beret, however, cannot overlook the monotonous expanse of prairie which stretches from horizon to horizon. Nor can she relieve the monotony of her daily round of duties, accomplished in spite of dirt and incessant fatigue. Unimaginative, resentful of the land and



of their friends, whose cheerful adapting to the land makes her the only outsider in their communal endeavor to create a new life, Beret increasingly prefers to look east, the direction of a remembered past which becomes infinitely preferable to the dreary present in which she lives.

That her nostalgic past does not exist meaningfully is demonstrated in her fondness for an immigrants' chest nearly two hundred years old from which the carved date is nearly obliterated after years of hard use. It is a useful relic, but it has no life or identity of its own, nor is it an object which assists her children to comprehend their heritage. First, she fills the chest with their few possessions in futile preparation for a return to Norway; later, she empties it in the dark hope that it will suffice as her coffin in the wilderness. Beret's preoccupation with the chest symbolizes her inability to go beyond established, narrow confines by which she measures her heritage as well as avoids participation in the flow of events around her. She never indicates awareness of Norwegian attempts to establish a national language and a cultural identity, inseparable from a past of revived saga tradition as well as collected folk treasures, fairytales, ballads, music, and art. Although cultural enthusiasm was the most significant and pervasive aspect of Norwegian life at the time and although several outstanding Norwegian artists were representing Norway's name abroad, she never indicates that she knows anything of the efforts of Ibsen, for example, to relate the past to contemporary social problems and change. Instead, she reveals her provincial isolation in her unimaginative, fearful rejection of anything which she does not understand.

She seems not to have gone beyond the confines of the village until she and Per Hansa emigrate to America. As they journey westward, she sees predominantly rural areas. Finally, the land which they take is identified as a frontier because of its isolation and remoteness from settlement. Consequently, isolation is the prevailing factor of their environment.

The physical isolation of their homestead serves to underscore the growing distance between Per Hansa and Beret, as they fail, increasingly, to communicate with each other. Beret, withdrawing from reality, prefers silence. Concerned almost entirely with the land, Per Hansa, relying upon physical conquest, is too exhausted to talk about his work in the fields, a subject which Beret cannot tolerate. In addition, communication, for him, is useful primarily only for its emotional and persuasive force. As his own myth-maker, he transforms ruthless or selfish motives into heroic deeds.

Tolerating no interference with his dream of successful conquering of the land, he requires his friends and his family to provide material as well as psychological support to sustain his belief in himself as a superior man. For instance, when he discovers Irish boundary stakes upon the claims of his friends, he does not call a community meeting or travel to Sioux Falls to determine prior claim or rights. Rather, he pulls out the stakes, burns them, and conceals his action until the moment until he can use his neighbors' ignorance and good will to advantage against the Irish. Intimidated by a show of force, the Irish settle west of the Norwegian claims. Flushed with the victorious resolution of his clever manipulation of

expediency and of his friends' good faith, Per Hansa creates a tale of heroic, selfless action taken to protect the community's interest. Regarded as a hero, he is enraged when Beret piously remarks that those who pull landmarks are pariahs in Christian countries. For days after, they refuse to speak to one another, indicating their hardening refusal to examine the pattern of their manners and responses to events in their lives. Discarding all the rules and literally beginning again, Per Hansa uses his dream as the basis for right and wrong. Beret makes the rigid, narrow religion, in which she was raised, the irrefutable basis of behavior. Consequently, they tend to become more estranged from one another, their conversation dwindling not only because they lack the leisure or the topical variety for discussion but also because Per Hansa's excursions and Beret's withdrawal increase their growing inability to communicate. Per Hansa becomes entirely concerned with the future. Beret becomes absorbed with the past.

Together, they create a cultural vacuum in the present, represented by their children, who continue to grow physically in time. As children, unaware of any contrast to their environment, they, in turn, measure their identity by the isolation in which they live. They are left to shift for themselves, for the most part, for Per Hansa is frequently gone. Beret, withdrawn and severe, desultorily looks after their physical needs, but she does not provide any cultural climate in their home. She concerns herself, instead, with relics and rituals which have meaning only for her as links to a sentimentalized past.

Self-absorbed in the past, she creates simultaneous separation from her children and from her parents, both representative of a living tradition. Lethargic, she fails to write letters to her parents, excusing her filial obligation by feeling that her parents cannot comprehend the surfaces of her new life. Significantly, she completely overlooks the fact that her parents are unconcerned with the topography of the strange land. Indicative of the real as well as the psychological distance between her and her Norwegian home, she receives months later a letter which notifies her of her mother's death. To stress again her relation to a dead past, she is portrayed in madness imagining that her mother comes often to visit with her.

Thus Per Hansa and the children listen to Beret's insane babblings with her imagined mother about topics which are terrifyingly remote and unrelated to anything which the children know from their life in a sod hut on the prairie. It is small wonder that they are attracted to their cheerful, optimistic father, whose adventures provide delightful relief from the senseless babblings of their maddened mother. In addition, he is part of the life which they know and understand. Their mother, the only outsider, is unrelated to all that they can comprehend. Their own home offers little cultural interest even when Per Hansa is at home and has time to spend with them or when Beret rouses from her lethargy to demand that they read from the Norwegian Bible. Because they know hard work and toil in service to the land, they are, as children, too exhausted after a day's work to do more than fall into bed. Even when they visit

Sorine or Kjersti, they encounter a level of cultural attainment and insight which does not vary appreciably from the one in their own home. The two women, in their kindness, are substitute mothers to the children, but they and their husbands are classless, common folk of no particular distinction or education. They, no more than Per Hansa or Beret, are able to create a cultural climate. Their immediate concern is survival itself.

Only once do the older children encounter some aspects of their Norwegian heritage. After the birth of Peder Victorious, the members of the community establish a school to while away the remaining months of the winter's isolation and inactivity. Although there are no books or school supplies, each take turns relating Norwegian legends and singing songs which have nearly been forgotten. But the school is short-lived. With the arrival of spring, the children and the adults return again to their labor in the fields. That summer Beret goes mad, not to recover for two years. In the meantime, grasshoppers and drought conditions cause the struggle for survival to become even more hazardous and exhausting.

As a result, Ole and Store-Hans, the two older boys, spend their formative years in an environment of fragmented memories of early childhood in Norway, a blur of rootless impressions of America, and nothing beyond unrelieved toil in an isolated region, where infrequent wagon trains or their father's marvelous tales relieve the drudgery of their lives. Vicariously sharing their father's adventures, they cannot separate the myth from the reality. Wary of their mother

whose violent moods are unpredictable and terrible, they feel that they must protect her as well as their small brother whom she tries, on occasion, to harm. Although both parents are strangers in a very great sense, Per Hansa, despite frequent absence, is more real to them than their self-absorbed mother. When she does seem more rational, she sternly, not lovingly, demands that they read from the Bible. Once, unaware of her presence, they speak coarsely and boastfully of one of their father's deeds. They are astonished and terrified when their mother, without a word, appears and begins to beat them. Blaming the land for their behaving like "savages," she fails to comprehend that she and Per Hansa are responsible for shaping manners and concepts of behavior.

After recovery of her sanity, she further estranges her children by holding daily devotions and by preaching to them about salvation, an abstraction which irritates them, for it has no relevance to their young lives. In addition, Beret tends to pray more and more for Per Hansa, causing him to seek relief from her supplications for his salvation in work outside the house. Tragically, of course, her insistence that rigid ritual be observed for the sake of Hans Olsa's salvation is the cause of the events which end with Per Hansa's death.

Not until the minister assists Beret to overcome her discontent and insecurity by encouraging her to look for good in others does she begin to comprehend the narrowness of her rigid beliefs. Ironically, however, as she struggles toward a realization of tolerance, she is

unable to communicate her discovery of the simple, common goals shared by individuals beneath the complicated surfaces of conflict and division. Once isolated by madness, she continues to be isolated from others because she cannot articulate her expression of a way of life, gained at great personal cost, which centers on her simple belated appreciation of everyday relationships with others. In fact, the community, grown beyond the original founders, in many ways, is as rigid in its collective morality as Beret was in her madness. For example, a young girl, who may or may not have been seduced and have borne an illegitimate child, is ordered to make public confession before the congregation. When the girl faints, Beret is the only one to step forward to assist her. Unable to continue her confession, the girl is taken from the room, where the congregation erupts into a prolonged argument about the failure or the merit of exorcising evil by making an example of the girl. The debate results not in any comprehension of wrong within their moral concepts but in the division of the church into two congregations, one a little more righteous than the other but neither of them merciful. The girl commits suicide and is soon forgotten.

As a result of her growing tolerance of different points of view, Beret becomes aware that the community no longer possesses the closeness and the kindness of the founding group. Fragmented and divided along racial and religious lines, the community of Spring Creek is a monotonous and dreary place, remote from contact with interests or concepts which do not relate to the agrarian interests of the area. Divided largely into Norwegian Protestants and Irish

Catholics, Republicans and Democrats, the chief diversions of the town are the religious and political gatherings held in the schoolhouse where the children are Americanized in a levelling process which separates them from their parents who are "foreigners." Later, a proliferation of church spires and an assortment of parochial schools indicate even more fragmentation and separation within the community.

After Per Hansa's death, Beret gives in to her children's pleadings to be allowed to attend school. However, she demands that they speak Norwegian at home and read a Norwegian Bible. Restricted by Beret's daily ritualistic reading and speaking, the children, rebel, for they cannot relate their language to contemporary Norwegian cultural development or significance. In school, they are equally imposed upon, for their teachers emphasize that only English is to be spoken as they study a romanticized America of wars of separation and division, mythic heroes like Washington and Lincoln, and heroic pioneers who never died or went mad. They memorize and repeat what they are taught and learn that at least one teacher becomes manic and hysterical when doubt is expressed about the reality of a very good little boy who chopped down a cherry tree. In church, they memorize church ritual, but they learn not to question what kind of boots Jesus wore to keep his feet dry when he walked on water. Ritual, rote, and conformity, unrelated to the reality of their lives and veneered with romantic, glowing emphasis upon the success and happiness possible to them in a perfect temporal kingdom as well as the spiritual one represented by the one true church



confines them to a narrow, righteous view of their world, in which the emphasis is upon chosen and unchosen. In the latter category, sinners and immigrants seem singled out for special condemnation as strangers and outsiders who mar an otherwise perfect picture. They learn that the safety of church and of nation lies in sameness, not in individual differences or in honoring traditions which differ from the Anglo-American one taught in the schools or from the narrow faith furthered by the church. As a result, the children learn an intolerance which is tragically sustained by surface prejudices and conflicts. Ashamed or scornful of foreign parents, who are also inexcusably old in a country which cherishes youth, the children fail to understand or to know the achievements of their own parents, whose westering has been the definitive impulse of American empire and has been an accomplishment inseparable from costs as well as mistakes from which they could benefit.

As a result of being unable to go beyond a one generation experience and of being fated to repeat the mistakes of his parents, Peder, as well as his brothers and his sister, grows into adulthood in a farming community which contains the only values which they understand. Like their father, they believe that the farmer is the most deserving citizen, although they are bewildered by the economic disaster which their agricultural region suffers during periods of drought or depression, crises which increasingly leave them with no alternative to mortgages and increased economic vulnerability. Unprepared by education or environmental influence for any other

livelihood, their only future is in farming. Ole, restless like his father, homesteads in Montana where And-Ongen goes to join him and his family for an extended visit. Store-Hans goes into debt to purchase a mortgaged farm near the original homestead. Peder assumes responsibility for the farm which is not as interesting to him as Populist protest and political manipulation of agrarian interests. As each grows into manhood, he, like Per Hansa and Beret in Norway, entertains romantic fantasies, derived from education and from the desire to escape the monotony of rural life. Each repeats the pattern of sentimental-romantic courtship which turns into hurried marriage, early children, and a swift return to the everyday realities of farm work.

Thus Per Hansa dies before he can see the result of his preference for an isolated environment in which to preserve his illusion of freedom and of independence. Beret, however, survives to observe, bewildered, that her children grow away from her. To them, she is not a mother as much as she is a foreigner, who is old-fashioned and just plain old. Isolated, she is unable to comprehend that her children are products of a rootless, provincial environment which is not tied to any past related to either European or American human experience. Objects, things, dates, and standardized viewpoints result in their inability to see beneath the surfaces of their lives. Consequently, the only meaningful legacy which Beret can leave to them is a material one which represents success but not happiness.

Not until a few days before her death does Beret even begin to comprehend that she and Per Hansa have been contemporary

participants in a westward movement which merges European and American historical reality. During the week between Christmas and New Year's, in a season celebrating beginnings, Beret invites the Doheneys, the Norwegian members of the original community, and several other friends to have dinner with her. After the group has gathered in the front room, Reverend Kaldahl, a minister whom Beret especially respects, talks about Norwegian accomplishments as a race of pioneers who founded Iceland, the world's oldest republic. Turning to a consideration of Norwegians in America, he discusses the need for their maintaining cultural integrity, richness, and nuance in the face of the encroaching shallowness represented by the process of Americanization. As his example, he chooses not Norwegians but Jews, whom he praises for their enduring individuality and integrity of cultural identity and contributions wherever they have lived.

Look at the Jews, for example: Take away the contributions they have made to the world's civilization and you'd have a tremendous gap that time would never be able to fill. Did they make their contribution by selling their birthright and turning into Germans, Russians, and Poles? Or did they achieve greatly because they stubbornly refused to be de-jewed? See what they have done in America! Are they as citizens inferior to us? Do they love this country less? Are they trying to establish a nation of their own? Empty nonsense! . . . One thing I can see clearly. If this process of leveling down, of making everybody alike by blotting out all racial traits, is allowed to continue, America is doomed to become the most impoverished land spiritually on the face of the earth. . . .<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>O. E. Rölvaag, Their Fathers' God, pp. 209-210.

At the conclusion of Reverend Kaldahl's discussion, Peder is shaken by a concept of historical progress and identity which he has never encountered in his home or in his education. Beret weeps silently, relieved at last to relate her life to the large events of human progress. She comprehends, finally, that she, as a woman, though imperfect and uncertain about the random events of her life, has contributed through her children and through the individual pattern of her life to the unending flow of human possibilities.

## CONCLUSION

Beret Holm, an individualized rather than a stereotyped heroine, permits an interpretation of the West in terms of human experience and predicament, in contrast to the standardized, heroic experience associated with literature of the American West since the time of James Fenimore Cooper. Her feminine, subjective existence is impersonally and objectively portrayed as the central concern of a Western story in contrast to a genre limited to surface representations of masculine resourcefulness, landscape, and heroines of secondary interest. As the central character in Rolvaag's trilogy, Beret is significant because she is a woman and because she is an unwilling participant in the last phase of the westward movement in America. An unimaginative, weak, commonplace woman, her life, from her arrival as a homesteader's wife until her death some twenty years later, is one of everyday routine in a rural-provincial setting of realistically rendered monotony, suffering, and hard work rather than heroism. Because her story is of predominant interest, landscape is subordinated to her, representing a psychological reflection of her terror of space, of change, and of reality; and, later, signifying her accomplishment as an outstanding farmer.

The trilogy is centered, then, about the subjective life of an unsentimentally portrayed heroine, whose pursuit of happiness is

paradoxical in that she thinks of herself in a sentimental-romantic manner. Of no particular class or distinction, she is simple and provincial and is given to romantic tendencies to flee the drabness of life around her. In the manner of romantic heroines, she hopes that happiness and love will come to her. Suspended, as it were, in her gray, unchanging existence, she escapes into amorous involvement with Per Hansa. A passive female, who believes that destiny or fate has cast her into the arms of her lover, she wants to be his pedestalled princess, worshipped, loved, and protected to the exclusion of all else in life. Sustaining, thus, her illusion, Per Hansa, likewise, devotes his energies to maintaining an illusion of himself as a dauntless, heroic figure of a man who needs Beret's adulation.

Neither associates happiness with marriage or the sharing of responsibilities of caring for children. Immature and self-centered, each seeks happiness associated with a sense of personal security and well-being. Per Hansa identifies happiness with new experiences which allow him to feel successful and superior. Beret seeks happiness in the intimate security of sensual pleasure. In their discontented attempts to find and to keep happiness, Per Hansa never discovers and Beret barely comprehends that the only happiness possible for them occurs when they adjust to the reality of their lives, evidenced by the idyllic interlude when they combined their efforts to establish a home, adapted to the conditions of their homesteading claim. For

the most part, they are tragically immature, stubborn individuals in flight from themselves. Unable to help each other to insight, necessary to maturity and to growth, their vulnerability to tragic error and consequence is increased by their failure to confront reality.

Thus, as realistic counterparts of the romantic heroine and the heroic hero, their flight to a frontier as well as their passionate involvement and appended marriage reveal them as individuals entangled in circumstances and interactions which they create but which they cannot acknowledge. Their relationship in marriage, the most basic and intimate one of society, is as imperfect and flawed as they are. Because Per Hansa dies prematurely, Beret never knows whether or not happiness might have been possible for them. Wanting to believe so, she remembers their marriage as sentimentally as she does her seduction and her Norwegian home. Nostalgically, she keeps Per Hansa's picture draped with black crepe in the bedroom where she keeps the immigrants' chest as well as all other things representative of an idealized past safe from the change and the insecurity of contemporary events.

Consequently, Beret is an ambivalent heroine, whose habits of feeling are consciously or unconsciously patterned after those of sentimental-romantic heroines. Acting out a sentimental role, she is not able to see herself as others do. Thus, her tear-swollen face and her bedraggled appearance comprise a realistic picture of a woebegone woman who is not charmingly disordered or endearing when she sobs. Likewise, her withdrawal strongly reminds one of a

sentimental-romantic heroine whose pale features and vague responses identify her as a lovelorn lady. But Beret is not an enchanting creature, as her forlorn withdrawal, her sighs, and her tears become part of a depressed state which deepens into madness. As a revelation of the morality of romantic heroines, her madness is a self-inflicted, fierce self-punishment which derives from her repression of desire. By stifling and by transforming desire into a sense of shame and of sin, Beret devises a narrow, complicated concept of black and white morality. Her virtue and chastity depend upon repression and suspicion of anything or any one not easily bent into her frame of evil and retribution. After recovery from her madness, she becomes a paragon of piety, contributing to missions, memorizing the entire New Testament, and regularly observing all the rituals of her church.

Thus, the rather pathetic characteristic of Beret is that she spends her life maintaining the appearance of a sentimental-romantic genteel heroine, despite her realistic experiences and suffering in a life span sufficiently long and varied to allow her to participate in life in depth. But she is never able to appreciate the rich and infinite possibilities available daily to her as a woman who could have responded vitally, rather than passively, to her Norwegian environment, to Per Hansa, to her children, and to her American environment. Significantly, she fails in her human relationships as a wife and mother, because she is incapable of the change and adjustment necessary to fulfill those roles. She is successful



materially, however, in developing the homestead into a prosperous farm which she leaves to her children as the tangible result of Per Hansa's dream. Success, not happiness, is possible to her. She represents, finally, the futility of arrested youth, hiding behind appearances or postures of rebellion in stubborn, tragic attempts to oppose life which goes on, as she discovers, when her children are grown and gone.

In addition to revealing the tragic inadequacies of imitating a sentimental heroine, she demonstrates in her relationship to the land that the American setting of virgin wilderness is not an environment of peace, harmony, and virtue. Beret hates the land at first. Sullenly, she sees it in all its unrelieved monotony and impersonality, as she wishes only to escape from a region which is not protective or romantic. In a setting which emphasizes reality and adjustment, Beret recognizes her subordination to earth as a peasant rather than as the princess she would prefer to be.

After she adjusts to the land and becomes one of the more prosperous farmers of the region, she is one of the successful citizens of a community which, in narrow morality and hardened beliefs, resembles Beret in her madness. Defensive and intolerant, the members of the community represent, in a profusion of church spires and parochial schools, the complex divisions caused by prejudice and ignorance. In ironic contrast to Jefferson's pastoral mode of belief that the rural areas would be the noblest environments to create and to sustain American culture, the little town of Spring Creek is a place of geographical as well as cultural drought.

Despite years of wishful thinking about her return to Norway, Beret never attempts to make any excursions beyond the familiar limits of her farm. Only once does she travel as far as Brookings, in order to ascertain the merits of a barn. She reads nothing besides Norwegian newspapers and her Bible and she displays no interest in the development of Norway or of America. Her life is confined to the certain and the familiar.

As a result, Beret is represented within the frame of an ordinary, random life, composed of failure as well as accomplishment. Her unawareness of herself, her uncertainty about the events of her life, and her inability to determine the consequences of her actions reflect human reality. Her imperfections and failings, the errors which she makes and their consequences create suspense in the trilogy as well as provide an individualized impression of life observed over a period of nearly twenty-five years. Encountered after ten years of married life and observed until her death shortly before the conclusion of the trilogy, she is a heroine in a story propelled by human choice and consequence, resulting in endless possibilities but precluding a stereotyped ending of guaranteed happiness and success. Inseparable from a concern for human values, Beret enriches Western literature, too frequently exploited for standardized response rather than explored for human worth and experience.

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