

# Setting and Theme in Wright Morris's *Ceremony in Lone Tree*

by Jack Hafer

**O**f the large group of novels which have as their primary setting the Great Plains of America, Wright Morris's *Ceremony in Lone Tree* is surely one of the most important. It begins with the simple, physical facts of life on the Plains: emptiness, dryness, flatness, and windiness. These simple facts are presented in haunting fashion and are symbolically extended to produce a picture of the world which Morris insists we inhabit.

Come to the window. The one at the rear of the Lone Tree Hotel. The view is to the west. There is no obstruction but the sky. Although there is no one outside to look in, the yellow blind is drawn low at the window, and between it and the pane a fly is trapped. He has stopped buzzing. Only the crawling shadow can be seen.

Following these opening lines is the familiar comparison of Plains and sea, the eternal sea of grass.

Waves of plain seem to roll up, then break like a surf. Is it a flaw in the eye, or in the window, that transforms a dry place into a wet one? Above it towers a sky, like the sky at sea, a wind blows like the wind at sea, and like the sea it has no shade; there is no place to hide. One thing it is that the sea is not: it is dry, not wet (p. 3).

This is Wright Morris's field of vision, the navel of the world, the sacred center of the universe. This is the central symbolic background of the Plains novel, and it is in *Ceremony in Lone Tree* that most of the themes of the Plains novel come together to produce what Leslie Fiedler has called Morris's "native horror-story."

There is, first, the theme of pioneering. The ceremony of the title is a celebration of Tom Scanlon's ninetieth birthday, and it is this which brings the assorted characters together. Scanlon, though no pioneer himself, is the son of a pioneer, Timothy Scanlon, who filled his son's head with stories about the trek west, and it is at least

partially, though perhaps unconsciously, to honor Scanlon's dreams and memories of the West that the characters gather. Tom Scanlon lives in the past remembering things that took place before he was born. He was born in a prairie schooner which sits at the rear of the stable, and which is used by the characters for the long ride into town after the death of Scanlon at the close of the novel. The things Scanlon remembers and sees are from the pioneer past, but they are also "the scenic props of his own mind" (p. 4).

This relic of the late nineteenth century who, when the century turned, refused to turn with it, sees much where there is little to see. The pioneering venture, which was to turn the Plains into the Promised Land, all too often left only the dream and not the reality. Lone Tree, a bustling community at the time when William Jennings Bryan was there pleading for free silver, is now only a shell sitting "on the plain as if delivered on a flatcar—as though it were a movie set thrown up during the night" (p. 6). For the most part, even the dream was shattered, but Scanlon lives on in the pioneer past seeing through his porthole to the west buffalo, wolves, and geese where "other men squinted and saw nothing but the waves of heat" (p. 5).

The theme of pioneering has another exemplar in the novel, however. Nineteen year-old Calvin McKee, who hobbles around in cowmen's boots with spurs and looks like Gary Cooper, is ill at ease in the city and has a bad stutter. Women, especially, make him nervous, and his sexy young cousin Etoile makes him so nervous that he half rapes her. The psychic pressure that results from Calvin's muddled feelings about Etoile and himself is released in a classic American way. He heads west. In Utah he meets another throwback to the old West, the German prospector Fischer, who allows him to tag along and shows him how to pan for gold. This idyll ends abruptly when the old-timer and the neophyte gold seeker spot what appears to be a Martian festooned with gadgets. The sight of this modern day prospector for uranium saddens Fischer and Calvin as well: "Calvin felt the mean was cheating. Where were his burros, his tin pans and his pick? What sort of mining was it to go around with this machine in your hand" (p. 99)? Disillusioned, Calvin heads east with two ounces of gold dust in a Bull Durham sack to talk to old Scanlon who is the one man, Calvin thinks, who might be able to understand what he is looking for. But Scanlon, if he understands anything at all, does so in a half-senile, half-mystical sense, and Calvin leaves for home only to be picked up by the police as a murder suspect.

Pioneering the West is linked closely to another important theme of the novel. The normally placid, middle-American lifeway of people

like the McKees is interrupted by shocking intrusions of violence. Raw violence grows out of the landscape and hovers over it like a summer storm, breaking loose and then subsiding only to be followed by larger and darker thunderheads. The violence in the novel ranges from a small boy with a cap pistol shouting Bang! Bang! to the threat of nuclear annihilation. Between these extremes lies an example of what Larry McMurtry has called, in slightly different context, the symbolic frontiersman. This is the man who once would have killed his own meat and forked his own broncs but who has been forced into an urban wilderness which he does not comprehend and which exacerbates his feelings of frustration and isolation. The result is the soaring homicide rate of a city like Houston, where, if we are to believe McMurtry, a significant percentage of the male population still packs guns.<sup>2</sup>

Morris, rather typically, presents a number of these modern day frontiersmen in *Ceremony*. Least dangerous to other humans is Bud Momeyer, a son-in-law of Scanlon. Bud is a mailman in Lincoln, an easygoing, bland, humorously eccentric person who has developed a grotesque fondness for shooting cats with bow and arrow. Bud is a kind man, the savior of hundreds of kittens in his lifetime, but a man who also has the instincts of a hunter and who knows that kittens and cats are two very different propositions. His first cat tumbles easily to the ground. "Not a sound. Not a whimper. Nor was it in any way messy. Bud did not feel bad. He did not feel much of anything" (p. 115). And consider an earlier comment on Bud: "One of the big days of the year for Bud was the Labor Day week end, when he waited to see if there were more dead on the highways than the year before" (p. 71). Although Bud would not think of it in these terms, if, indeed, he thinks about it at all, we can see that he, like the other Plainsmen in the novel, is a hollow man. He must somehow assert his own existence by denying existence to cats. In this way he is much like the two "big" killers in the book, Lee Roy Momeyer and Charlie Munger.

Lee Roy, who has come from Calloway to stay with the Momeyers in Lincoln, is short of stature and not too bright. His talent lies in fiddling with cars, and he himself drives a strange looking but powerful hot rod. Two things are at work on Lee Roy: the proximity of his sexually tantalizing cousin, Etoile, who usually ignores him, and his general feeling of inferiority caused by his shortness. His frustrations make him an easy prey for the stupid taunts of three local high school boys who embarrass him (and his car) in front of most of the student body, including Etoile. Lee Roy cuts them down, killing two, with the only weapon he has—his hot rod. "'Lost control of it, eh?' one of them police said, but Lee Roy shook his head, No, he hadn't lost control. He had been in control for once in his life. 'F--k the bastards,' he had said,

and that was just what he had done" (p. 127). The sexual nature of his crime is obvious, and though we cannot approve, Lee Roy's action is understandable.

More horrifying because the motivation is more obscure, is Charlie Munger's rampage through the Nebraska landscape during which he murders ten people. Why did he do it? Because, as McKee recalls it, he wanted to be somebody. The problem is one of being. The Plainsman must, in the midst of an empty landscape and a feeling of personal emptiness, convince himself that he is there and that he somehow counts for something. For the simple and the disturbed, violence is the easy answer. Not only is it easy, there is plenty of precedent for it in the "Wild West" of both fact and myth. In the lonely places, often the encounter with strangers was apt to be hostile or had the potential for erupting into violence.

The present-day Plains in this novel are not only a field on which violent activities are carried out, but a generator of violence as well. Though *Ceremony in Lone Tree* is in a way a hilarious book, it is hard to think of another important American novel with quite so much violent action in it. Bud Momeyer, the cat-killer, is shot at by one of the people on his mail route who mistakes him for Charlie Munger, the mad-dog killer. McKee reads in the paper of two girls who had hitched a ride with a farmer from Humbolt "then put a gun to his head and told him to hit for Texas" (p. 53). Calvin McKee carries a loaded rifle about with him in the front seat of his car, but surprisingly shoots no one, though he is arrested as a suspect in the Munger killings. Little Gordon, grandson of McKee and Lois, is constantly firing his cap pistol, shouting in choric fashion, "Bang! Bang! You're dead." This, along with many other reasons, leads the normally icy Lois McKee to fire old Scanlon's revolver, thus releasing some of the tensions that have built up at the ceremony. Hearing the shot, Scanlon dies, bringing the number of human deaths in the novel to fourteen. And, as Jonathan Baumbach has pointed out, in *The Landscape of Nightmare*, the atmosphere of the entire novel is one of incomprehensible waiting for the big nuclear storm to hit. "I swear to God it's the bomb or something, everybody's crazy!" (p. 116) Maxine says after the radio announcement that Charlie Munger has been captured "out in the sandhills."

The bomb, though, is an effect rather than a cause. It is simply a more efficient mechanical device for committing violence, and although the threat of nuclear annihilation does live over Morris's Nebraska, "the force behind the reason, the reason for the reason" can be found, if at all, in the brooding strangeness of the landscape. The ultimate mystery of being and the violent snuffing out of being can be

illustrated by an event which finds its way into three of Morris's novels. More than any other, I think, this description of the death of Emil Bickel puts us into the eldritch world of the Great Plains. First, from *The World in the Attic*:

Tom Scanlon was the only man in town who knew that the place to look for Emil Bickel was not in Omaha, or Kansas City, but over the telephone wires. There he swung, like a sack of grain, his arms dangling like the sleeves of a scarecrow, and every last button gone from his vest. Popped, so my father said, by the force of it. A good man, with an honest wife, three sturdy kids. There was a freight parked on the siding and some men said that Emil Bickel, a man with everything to live for, had stepped out from behind it, died that way. . . . Emil Bickel had been dressed for church, and the watch in his pocket, the crystal unbroken, had stopped at exactly eleven-seventeen. The night mail, rolling down the grade, had been ninety seconds late.<sup>4</sup>

Seven years later, in *The Field of Vision*, Morris returns to this event, seen now from the point of view of Lois, Tom Scanlon's daughter. She is thinking of her father's room in the Lone Tree Hotel, "the one on the west, looking down the stretch of track toward Ogallala and the crossing where the downgrade freights hit so many buggies and teams. In such an empty country, how was it possible? Where there had been so few teams, so few trains, why did they meet so often at that crossing, in plain daylight, where nothing blocked the view? It made her doubt her own life. Doubt that she knew what she knew."

What she knows is that full grown men sometimes did walk right down the track instead of on the cinders off to the side. Lois's mother had once said that she would have walked down the tracks herself, if she had stayed. Emil Bickel, with everything to live for, chose to stay, and die.

There had been Emil Bickel, a bearded man with a lovely wife, and everything to live for, swinging from the telephone wires, the buttons gone from his vest. Popped, her father had said, by the force of it. He had been dressed for church, all of his bills were paid, and the gold watch in his pocket, the crystal unbroken, had stopped at exactly eleven-seventeen. The fast eastbound mail train, rolling down the grade had been two minutes late. (p. 557)

There is, in both these descriptions, a quality similar to that in E. A. Robinson's "Richard Cory" in which the man who has "everything" inexplicably goes home one night and puts a bullet through his head. As in that poem, the event here is viewed from the outside, first through Scanlon, then through Lois. Lois and her mother, more sensitive to the vast emptiness surrounding them,

understand this event more clearly perhaps than Scanlon, the man who sees many things "out there" through his porthole to the West. For the third time, in *Ceremony in Lone Tree*, this event is pictured for us.

One day as the dust settled he saw a team of mares, the traces dragging, cantering down the bank where the train had just passed. On the wires above the tracks, dangling like a scarecrow, he saw the body of Emil Bickel, in whose vest pocket the key-wound watch had stopped. At 7:34, proving the train that hit him had been right on time (p. 8).

This obsessive image of a body dangling from the wires, smashed into oblivion by a railroad locomotive, meaninglessly, is more terrible by far than the vague threat of a mushroom cloud on the horizon. Yet, characteristically, it is stated in a wry manner that can provoke, if not a belly laugh, at least a twitching at the corners of the mouth. Events on the lonely Plains assume more than normal importance and are milked for any possible meaning or emotion. Violent events, whether assertions of selfhood, as in the case of Lee Roy, or mysterious workings of fate, as may be the case with Emil Bickel, provide a form of continuity between present and past; more importantly, they are the very texture of life on the Plains, in modern as well as in pioneer times.

Finally, it is possible to view *Ceremony in Lone Tree* as a religious work. Let us look at Morris's National Book Award Address where Morris mentions what he calls "holy provinces." "Huck Finn out on his raft, escaping from Aunt Sally, Hemingway in his trout-haunted Big Two-Hearted River, Faulkner in his moss-strewn baroque wilderness, and in the dark, dark fields of the republic the immortal remains of Jay Gatsby. These are holy provinces, and within them lies what we come to recognize as the author's field of vision."

Fragments of such a province, he says, are found in his book *The Field of Vision*. He then speaks of his next work as being "a homecoming, a return to that center, that navel of experience from which the author has never departed, and now uses as a magnet to order the iron filings of his separate lives. In the province of his works that great good and empty place will be known as Lone Tree (pp. 74-75)." It is obvious, for what it is worth, that for Morris the area of his birth, Central City (formerly Lone Tree), has indeed been central for him and has assumed mythic importance in his works.

*Ceremony in Lone Tree* is, as the title says, about a ceremony. The various members of the Scanlon clan plus some extras gather at the ghost town of Lone Tree to celebrate Tom Scanlon's ninetieth birthday. Though it is a disordered and rather profane ceremony, still the participants are aware that tribute is due to a man of Scanlon's

years, a man who listened to Bryan and watched the century turn. Ironically, however, Scanlon dies, thus turning the birthday celebration into a funeral procession consisting only of the covered wagon in which Scanlon was born.

The occasion is a ceremony, in another sense, too, for it provides the culmination of the courtship of Calvin and Etoile who leave at the novel's close to be married. For Gordon Boyd, who has returned from Mexico, it is a homecoming. Not far from Lone Tree is the sandpit where as a boy he tried to walk on water while McKee watched, disbelieving. For the man called Jennings, son of Will Brady (protagonist of *The Works of Love*) it is a return to the home place as well. For most of the characters, in fact, the reunion in the Lone Tree Hotel has a significance over and above anything they feel for the fossilized Scanlon.

In addition to the ceremonial quality of the novel brought about by the gradual convergence of the characters on Lone Tree and their resulting movements, there are other more specific respects in which *Ceremony in Lone Tree* is a religious chronicle. The town itself, now dead, was founded because of the lone cottonwood tree, now dead also. In the vast open spaces of the Plains, trees were a rare and welcome sight, a reminder of the land the settlers had left, and also a sign of water. The tree around which a community might spring up can be regarded as a sign, on the level of actuality as a sign of water, perhaps.

As people settle and grow attached to the land, this sign assumes mythic or religious significance. The belief of various cultures in all parts of the world that they are at the center of the world, "the navel of the earth," is often paralleled by a belief in an *axis mundi* around which the world lies. This idea of the "cosmic pillar" is expressed through different images such as a ladder, mountain, vine, or tree.<sup>7</sup> A sign, such as a tree in treeless land, assumed powerful importance for both physical and spiritual reasons. Morris's lone tree, growing along the Platte River and marking a watering and resting place, had the added significance of lying almost exactly on the ninety-eighth meridian of longitude, an abstraction which serves to delineate two different climatic and physiographic regions. And, for Morris, who has obviously read Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains*, this line serves as a convenient boundary marking off East from West.

But we must remember that in the novel the tree is dead. If the characters in Morris's Plains novels inhabit the navel of the world, then there is something wrong with that world. An analogous case, mentioned by Mircea Eliade, concerns the Australian tribe, the Achilpa, who, in their tribal movements, carry their *axis mundi* with them. It is a sacred wooden pole which, when erected, transforms the

surrounding area into a sacred space, "their world." But if the pole should be broken, chaos results. It is like the end of the world.<sup>8</sup> And what we see quite clearly in *Ceremony* is the end of a world. With Scanlon's passing, a way of life is over. The Old West, even if it existed only in Scanlon's second-hand memories is now gone. The man who knew Buffalo Bill is dead.

He has been dead for a long time, though, like his town. His death in the novel is only the cessation of his bodily functions, for his mind has dwelt in the nineteenth century all of his life. The town of Lone Tree and especially the Lone Tree Hotel are symbols of the death of a dream. The founding of a town, bringing civilization to a wilderness, order out of chaos, makes a difference in space. The settled land becomes a holy place because man has begun anew there. A new life comes into existence at what then becomes necessarily the center of the world. But for the sons and grandsons of the pioneers the world's center has shifted, and the peculiar feeling of reverence that Scanlon has for the empty town that lies like a movie set in the midst of an empty plain is lost. The action is elsewhere—Lincoln, Omaha, Chicago, and all the smart young men and women leave the farms and small towns for the cities. There is nothing wrong with this; it is simply that as this major demographic change has occurred, people have their roots in different places now, namely the cities. Part of the melancholy that accompanies the passing of Scanlon is due to the fact that his roots were deep in the plain. Now that he is gone, what is left of the mythic significance of Lone Tree is gone too. The Town is now truly dead.

Some of the characters recognize the passing of something more than an old man living in a ghost town. Calvin, especially, as I have mentioned, is the spiritual heir of Scanlon and can lament the changing of the old ways. Of the other characters (with one exception) Jennings, the "son" of Will Brady comes closest to understanding the characteristics of Scanlon and his town.

Jennings has the West in his blood, as one of his critics said, and he earns a living by writing western adventure stories. He too is a loner, a solitary, who needs time to try to understand "that he was the son of a man who thought he was Santa Claus" (p. 130). As a writer, Jennings shares the writer's gift and his predicament according to Morris: that is, he is both in and out of this world.<sup>9</sup> It is as a man who is out of this world that he falls into the tradition of the holy man in the Plains novel. He is one of those characters, of whom Natty Bumppo is the prototype, who understands his relationship with the land or else at least realizes that he does have a relevant connection with it and is trying to understand the connection.

Of the other characters, only Boyd and Scanlon can be considered holy men. Scanlon, who peers out over the sea of grass year after year and who sees many things where other men see nothing, is obviously a visionary, a man who is out of this world. "He is more like a piece of nature than a man." (p. 69) thinks Lois. But Scanlon in this novel is too far out of this world. He can no longer communicate anything to anyone. If he was once a person who was both seer and sayer, that is, one who could make his visions at least partially intelligible to others, in *Ceremony* this latter function is impossible for him. Still, it is Scanlon, who has spent his life looking westward from his window in the Lone Tree Hotel, who understands the scene more than anyone else.

Gordon Boyd, friend of McKee, writer, and walker on water, is the most perceptive character in the novel. A man who has left the home place but who has not gotten over it, he returns to Lone Tree for the reunion without quite knowing why.

Lone Tree? When Boyd read the name he laughed out loud. Was there a more desolate, more inhuman outpost in the world? Treeless and bleak, home of the Dust Bowl and that eccentric old fool Scanlon, boarded up in his delapidated hotel, it made him grateful Acapulco was so far away. And then a week or so later he searched half the day for the letter to see if he still might get to Lone Tree in time (p. 28).

Boyd is a man who can both see and communicate, but no one is interested in what he has to say. His early attempt to walk on water at the sandpit east of Polk proved abortive. Even if it had been successful, Walter McKee was the only witness and a singularly inappropriate one, for lack of understanding is McKee's major characteristic. Boyd has failed as a dramatist and failed as a hum, but he succeeds in being what David Madden calls an audacious amateur.<sup>10</sup> He stands out from his background because he has to, just as people had to build false fronts to stores and towering grain elevators—to convince themselves, in the midst of emptiness, that they are there. It is a question of being.

Like Scanlon and Will Brady, Boyd is incomplete as a holy man. If he is a prophet, he is a Jeremiah deriding bitterly the land and people of Nebraska, yet carrying the navel of the world around with him under his belt buckle. He is a local boy, but unlike McKee or Bud, he has spent his life trying to understand what it means to be a local boy. Jennings, musing on the mystery of his father, wonders:

What led a boy, born and raised in this soddy, to roll down the plain like a pebble to where men were paid to be Santa Claus? And another, a few years

later, to leave at home his well-thumbed Bible [Lee Roy Momeyer]; and another to take up his gun like Billy the kid [Charlie Munger]? In some way left to Jennings to discover, these lives seemed to be related, not merely to each other but to the man on the platform of the caboose [Will Brady]. Local boys. Local boys who made-- or unmade -- good (p. 137).

The landscape operates on all of them, and in its unreality or ambiguity, its barrenness, and in the isolation and violence it seems to engender in man, the Plains landscape is indeed a symbolic one. Henry Nash Smith, speaking of the changes in the American western novel, has said:

The scene has shifted from the deep fertile forests east of the Mississippi to the barren plains. The landscape within which the Western hero operates has become, in Averill's words, a "dreary waste." It throws the hero back in upon himself and accentuates his terrible and sublime isolation. He is an anarchic and self-contained atom . . . alone in a hostile, or at best, neutral universe."

Local boys, walkers on water or mass murderers, all have the flat, dry, windy Plains behind them. As Morris is fond of saying, "The emptiness of the plain generates illusions that require little moisture, and grow better, like tall stories, where the mind is dry. The tall corn may flower or hurn in the wind, but the plain is a metaphysical landscape. . . ." (p. 5). It is the attempt to understand the metaphysics of this landscape that differentiates characters. McKee does nothing, Charlie Munger kills, and Boyd and Scanlon, in different ways, try to "see," in a place where there is little to see, what their world is all about.

Finally, however, the view presented through these characters and their actions seems to be that "holiness" is on the wane, that man is losing his connection with the home place, the land. Clyde and Edna live in a modern, air-conditioned home but spend most of the time roaming the country in a trailer. Daughter, a young divorcee, whom Boyd picks up in Las Vegas, mutters "Sweet Jesus" at everything, not as a curse, not as a prayer, but as a gap-filler, a next-to-meaningless speech gesture. As the height of irony, she wears contact lenses so she can see better; yet she would be lost if confronted with a statement like this one by Henry David Thoreau: "Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our checks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact! Who are we? Where are we?*"

These are the questions *Ceremony in Lone Tree* asks and answers. We are contemporary Americans and we are lost on a barren, windy plain which in Morris's fiction is our world. Once, perhaps, we knew

where we were going. But no longer. Among the many deaths in the novel, three are most important: the death of the lone cottonwood tree, the death of the town founded around the tree and named after it, and the death of Scanlon. Man's drive to begin a new and better place, a New World, has died here. Of the first bloodletting at Wounded Knee, John Neihardt in *Black Elk Speaks*, transcribes this lament which Scanlon, could he speak, might echo: "A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream. And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth,—you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead."<sup>11</sup>

Richmond, Virginia

#### NOTES

1. Wright Morris, *Ceremony in Lone Tree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), p. 3.

2. Larry McMurtry, *In a Narrow Grave: Essays on Texas* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 120; pp. 126-128.

3. Jonathan Baumbach, "Wake Before Bomb: *Ceremony in Lone Tree* by Wright Morris," in *The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 1965), pp. 152-169.

4. Wright Morris, *The World in the Attic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1949), p. 45.

5. Wright Morris, *The Field of Vision in Wright Morris: A Reader* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 557.

6. Wright Morris, "National Book Award Address," March 12, 1957, *Critique* 4, No. 3 (1962), 74.

7. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. by Willard P. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1959), p. 37.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

9. Morris, "National Book Award Address," p. 72.

10. David Madden, *Wright Morris* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1964), p. 140.

11. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1950), p. 97.

12. Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, ed. Dudley C. Lunt (New Haven: College and University Press, 1950), p. 278.

13. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 276.