WILLA CATHER'S CODE HERO: TOM OUTLAND AS SHANE

by

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One reason, I believe, for our continuing fascination with Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* is that its two interrelated stories, Tom Outland's and Professor St. Peter's, encompass the split identity which is characteristic of western American literature. In this remarkable novel, Cather combines elements of both the formulaic and the so-called "serious" western, and in doing so she reveals that both genres contribute meaningfully to her sense of contemporary American life.

Books One and Three, the first and last sections of *The Professor's House*, are, of course, ample evidence of the novel's difficult and provocative nature, treating, as they do, the life of an alienated intellectual of late middle age who comes to accept at last a place in the house of the social family, where fortitude must take the place of joy. But in the Professor's house are many mansions and in one of these is lived Tom Outland's life, as revealed in Book II, the middle section of the novel, entitled "Tom Outland's Story." Briefly told, Tom's life is more stereotypically heroic than even Hollywood would dare to venture: A young cowboy makes a stunning archaeological discovery, then turns to college where he is a brilliant student, and then to science where he invents a gadget which revolutionizes the aircraft industry, then to the war, where he rushes off to die nobly, leaving his friend to marry Tom's girl and the young couple to then enjoy the riches accruing to them from Tom's marvelous invention. Who would, in bald summary, believe it?

To compare *The Professor's House* with a classic formula western like Jack Schaefer's *Shane* is not only to demonstrate the unabashedly heroic nature of Tom's story but is also to reveal more clearly aspects of power and limitation in both stereotypical and non-stereotypical western American literature.

*Shane* is more than merely formulaic, to be sure, but it meets the requirements of the "Western" on all counts; indeed, it seems to define the prototype unerringly. It is set on the frontier in that moment when it is passing into civilization; indeed, *Shane* takes place in 1889, just one year before the U.S. Census Bureau officially proclaimed the end of the frontier. The story presents the apostles of civilization in conflict with those of the older, freer, but nonetheless dying West. A heroic stranger, virtually nameless, appears, and must choose between the older order whose skills he shares but whose denial of the historical process he cannot espouse. He sides with the representatives of civilization and defeats their tormentors in a violent confrontation. Although he eschews violence and turns to it only
regretfully, he proves himself a master of it. Having preserved the community and insured its appropriate future, he turns from its accolades and withdraws alone, as he had come. There are, as John Cawelti claims, many variations possible within the Western formula, but surely the Shane story is not far from the center by which such variations are recognized.

To begin by comparing the structures of the two novels, it is worth noting that both heroes' stories are framed within the perception of an admiring observer. Professor St. Peter, as Cather's third-person central consciousness, shapes our awareness of Tom Outland less directly than Bob Starrett, Schaefer's first-person narrator, controls our conception of Shane, but the technique is similar in both works. A compelling central figure exists as a kind of dream-hero in the worshipping consciousness of an observer. Both Shane and Tom Outland are exponents of heroic action in contrast to their more reflective admirers, but it is significant that Cather's framing figure is an intellectual, a habitual questioner and prober of meanings, one whose own life, thoughts, and emotions are thoroughly depicted in counterpoint to Tom Outland's decisive story, and are finally more important than Tom's story. Schaefer's narrator is, on the other hand, a child during the book's actual events, and as a storyteller he seems but a simple townsman whose later life, only briefly glimpsed, has not moved physically beyond the town of his youth, nor mentally beyond his fascination with the legendary Shane. The use of the child-observer in Shane is not only a measure of its simplicity but also perhaps its most unique feature, a technique by which the formula story is given new freshness and distinction.

Both novels, then, pass out of the frontier age and into a post-frontier America, but Schaefer suggests a post-frontier which is the unthreatened and secure fruition of pioneer hopes. In a short coda, Bob Starrett, now an adult, recalls Shane's parting words to him to grow strong and straight. He suggests at this point the growth of the town and community since his childhood, and we may read into these patterns of order and fruition a vindication of Shane's sacrifice. Shane has become a legend in the town. The narrator, finally, discounts the scraps of information he has heard through the years as to Shane's real identity, preferring his own fable-like conception: "He was the man who rode into our little valley out of the heart of the great glowing West and when his work was done rode back whence he had come and he was Shane."2

Cather's new America, on the other hand, is deeply troubled. Tom is indeed Cather's heroic modern Westerner, a new pioneer who carries on into the scientific and industrial present the frontier promise of her older generation heroes and heroines like Alexandra Bergson of O Pioneers!, Antonia Shimerda of My Antonia, and Captain Forrester of A Lost Lady. He, too, like Shane, has passed into legendary status in the minds of his admirers. But Tom's portrait, the center
of a triptych, cannot be seen apart from the somber panels which enclose it. In The Professor's House and Shane, both reflectors, Professor St. Peter and Bob Starrett, cling to their lost cowboys' cherished memories, indeed seem to live vicariously through their heroes, but Cather's Professor is wrenched at last out of his bondage to myth and forced to take up his place in a threatening contemporary world. The effect of Cather's structure is truism: that of Schaefer's is confirmation.

Both Tom and Shane exude a sense of quietude and serenity, often letting their admirers and their actions, rather than their words, speak for them. Taciturnity is, of course, a standard attribute of the Western hero, and Shane carries out the requirement unremarkably. Tom is, again, a more complex case. He tells us his story, but with a kind of economy that strips away all pretentiousness and false emotion. Reading Tom's diary after his death, the Professor reflects that this plain account was almost beautiful, because of the stupidities it avoided and the things it did not say. If words had cost money, Tom couldn't have used them more sparingly. The adjectives were purely descriptive, relating to form and colour, and were used to present the objects under consideration, not the young explorer's emotions. Yet through this austerity one felt the kindling imagination, the ardour and excitement of the boy, like the vibration in a voice when the speaker strives to conceal his emotion by using only conventional phrases.

The accent, so apt for Tom's style, also describes and predicts remarkably the style of an as yet almost unknown young writer, Ernest Hemingway, who would also employ the moral stance and the manner of the Western code hero in his fictional figures.

As for the stories themselves of Cather and Schaefer, it is curious how closely Tom Outland's story, cut free from the thickets of moral ambiguity which surround it in the story of the Professor, is similar to that of Shane. In both cases, the protagonist closely resembles the tragic hero of myth and romance: A figure of compelling power emerges from mysterious origins. (Outland's name, suggesting outlander or foreigner, marks his uniqueness as surely as the virtually anonymous but romantic "Shane"). Accepted by the social body the hero nevertheless holds himself somewhat apart from it, for the role he must perform on its behalf requires sacrifices beyond its capacity to share or understand. In the face of threats to the society, he rises above its fears and uncertainties and acts decisively to preserve those values by which it may honorably endure, but at the cost of his
own life. Still, he is not killed so much as he chooses death for himself. His purity and purposefulness are too intense for this world. And so he remains a bright memory in the minds of his survivors.

The purity of both heroes extends to their sexuality. Shane does not marry, does not prosper in the warm afterglow of earned affection as does, say, Owen Wister's Virginian. Shane acts at the end to break off the growing romantic attachment between Marion Starrett and himself. Riding away at the end of the novel, Shane tells the boy, speaking of his mother and father, "There's only one thing more I can do for them now" (p. 113). Shane's doomed moving-on, his withdrawal from the community and from the possibility of a sexual attachment is present, with a vengeance, in Cather's novel, wherein Tom Outland goes undoubtedly virginal to his death. Like all of Cather's truest heroes, Tom must not spill his heroic potency. Not only is illicit sex always punished in Cather, as critic Blanche Gelfant points out, but Cather seems to find in all sex a threat to true selfhood and a diversion from the greater creative achievements of the individual will. Although their motives may differ, both Cather and Schaefer share the western writer's characteristic avoidance of sexual considerations.

Written large, the entrapment of sexuality is the obligation of the individual to the social order. The Professor, suffocating under the weight of such obligations to his wife, his daughters and their husbands, to his university as it slides toward mediocrity, to his role as renowned scholar, finds release beckoning in the clean and decisive death of Tom Outland. Tom, the older man thinks, "had escaped all that" (p. 261). Cather here intimates, I think, a new and fascinating complexity once again beyond the scope of the formula Western. For all of Tom's clear-eyed heroism, his rush to the front is an escape, and calls into question whether a larger share of heroism may not be called for in what is required of the Professor: staying put and facing somehow the crisis of his personal life. It is this sort of heroism that the Professor struggles toward so that by the book's conclusion, he thinks, however uncertainly, that "he could face with fortitude the future" (p. 283).

Tom is fortunate, in Catherian terms, in being able to achieve alone, both as the cowboy explorer and later as the lonely scientist. As a "pure" researcher he is carefully distinguished from Louie Marsellus, who puts Tom's invention into commercial production. This leaves Tom in the enviable position of having benefited society abstractly, in terms which do not sully his individual striving. Thus, Tom's honor is maintained until death; self-contained and invulnerable to the forces of moral decay he goes his own way in the laboratory as he had in the cowboy West, a kind of "last gentleman," as are all of our true western heroes. Finally, when war comes, Tom goes off to fight and leaves the girl for someone else to marry, a code hero to
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In both Shane and The Professor's House, then we are pre-
icted with the conflict between the individual and society. In both
works, an outsider touches a family and a society without ever quite
becoming part of them, but he nonetheless influences them profoundly.
Schaefer's conception of marriage, family, and community is wholly
supportive. We notice how important questions in Shane are inevi-
tably conveyed upward through individual and family discussion to
community debate and back to the family and individual level again.
Civilization clearly succeeds the departure of the hero in Shane.
In The Professor's House, where marital, family and communal re-
relationships are suffering from a kind of moral dry-rot, we are not at
all sure whether civilization can recover itself. Once more, Cather's
view is complex, aberrant, questioning, while Schaefer's is clear and
affirmative.

Clear and affirmative also describes Schaefer's treatment of
violence, a subject upon which the formula Western has been seen
to make an important contribution as a cultural expression. The
several fist fights and two shoot-outs in Shane are unanswered by
anything of such immediacy in Cather's novel. In the Western, vio-
ence serves to assert the individual's ability to set a threatened
world aright. Acting out of a heightened moral awareness, the code
hero moves unwaveringly toward his violent confrontation, his de-
structiveness sanctioned by its alliance with the clear needs of the
society. The code Western, of course, ignores much of the real
historical violence of the frontier, the casual, amoral beatings and
killings by those drawn to the frontier by the absence of restraints
upon their behavior, the violence inflicted upon the land itself, the
destruction of the buffalo, the rangeland and forest, and above all
the decimation of the Indians. In Shane, the boy in his play shoots
make-believe Indians to Shane's benign acquiescence. In The Pro-
fessor's House, Cather's cliff-dwellers are "good Indians, " that is,
artists and craftsmen, but having conversely declined as warriors
they are the victims, at last, of more aggressive tribes. Cather's
treatment is more complex, but still merely a brief and undramatized
historical summary. Direct depictions of Indian life and realistic
treatments of the violence practices by whites against Indians have
had to await the so-called "anti-Westerns" of recent years. But
within its narrow range, the formula Western does offer a signifi-
cant and powerful treatment of violence, of might making right, in
American life.

Cather's violence is muted, intimated, offstage. When she
attempts a direct presentation, as she does with the World War I
battle scenes at the conclusion of *One of Ours*, she is quite unconvincing. Yet her view of the Great War as a kind of holy crusade—Our Boys against the Hun Invaders—has something of the formulaic fervor about it, and indicates her acceptance of violence as an instrument of national policy. And Tom's vague invention which improves aircraft engines undoubtedly enhances the deadliness of aerial warfare. Once again, Cather projects the older western myth of retribution through individual violence into contemporary terms: the cowboy enters the laboratory and becomes a scientist, one promised agent of salvation succeeding another. But, instead, the new Westerner helps to usher in a modern era of anxiety and war.

Another important contrast between Cather's novel and Schaefer's is in their respective treatments of landscape. The inter-relationships between man and landscape, the idea that nature itself is a source of primal power—these are, of course, crucial elements in western American literature. Cather makes extensive use of the immensities of western space, the beautiful vistas of Tom's Blue Mesa and the Professor's Lake Michigan, the older man's primitivistic return to "earth and woods and water" (p. 265) and the young man's reverence for the fabulous stone city, which graces the natural beauty of the rimrock country with a crown of human significance. For it is not mere landscape that Cather celebrates in her novels, but intimations of human achievement which invest those natural settings with a kind of religious or artistic dimension. Cather thus extends our sense of nature in the western novel by allowing its grandeur to be shared with human creativity. Each enhances the other, and when Tom discovers the cliff city he responds to both in the proper tones of sublimity and awe. There is nothing to match this intensity of relationship between man and nature in the novel *Shane*. True, Shane's identification with the mountains is thematically established in the novel, but the linkage is thin and perfunctory. I attribute this lesser sense of landscape in *Shane* to Schaefer's not having experienced the West first-hand and over a long period of time, as had Cather. The evocation of setting in Schaefer's later novel, *Monte Walsh*, written after the author had moved to the Southwest and spent some years there, is much more sure and convincing. One recalls, in this context, Cather's fictional Professor, whose historical researches on the Spanish explorers in the Southwest lacked authenticity until he himself had experienced the region first-hand. While *Shane*, then, lacks the powerful sense of place of *The Professor's House*, both works ask us to regard the actions of their heroes from the perspective of ethical openness which the Western setting embodies.

The Midwest and Southwest of *The Professor's House* were Willa Cather's blood's country. She knew the American West as only one who had been formed by its influences could know it. Jack Schaefer, on the other hand, wrote four western books, including *Shane*, before ever getting closer to it than Ohio, a demonstration
that the creation of the formula Western does not depend on the kind of regional bone-wisdom which marks the best non-formulaic western literature. In fairness to Schaefer, however, it should be noted that he is a careful student of the West, and that, while his depiction of western landscape is much less intense than Cather's, his historical awareness, his knowledge of farm and ranch life, of occupations, horses, equipment, clothing, food, and the like is deep and convincing, as is his command of colloquial western language.

But what distinguishes Shane as a classic example of the Western is its strong and simple depictions of character, and its action fashioned along boldly-drawn and decisive lines. There is, indeed, something to be learned by applying the techniques of close reading to a novel like Shane, but the results thus achieved are likely to be quite limited when compared to the wealth of insights which attend a close reading of a work like The Professor's House. It is more rewarding, I believe, to regard Shane in such terms as Kenneth Burke sets forth in his treatment of literature as symbolic action, as a kind of equipment for living. What Shane does, in Burke's terms, is to arouse within us a more or less timeless and contemporaneous appetite, and then to gratify that appetite. The appetite might be defined, with Shane, as order, security, validation of the family and the right relationship between adult and child, on the personal level, and on the wider national and historical level the sanctioning of the doctrines of heroic individualism and nation-building which are commonly associated with the American frontier heritage. One of the important contributions of western American literature is its stubborn insistence upon the legitimacy of those values associated with what Wallace Stegner describes as "strenuousness, pragmatism, meiiorism, optimism and the stiff upper lip." Any western writer, Stegner goes on to say, may ultimately be grateful to his western upbringing for convincing him, beyond all chance of conversion, that man, even Modern Man, has some dignity if he will assume it, and that most lives are worth living even when they are lives of quiet desperation. The point is to do the best one can in the circumstances, not the worst. From the western writer's square, naive point of view, the trouble with Modern Man, as he reads about him in fiction, is that Modern Man has quit.
That such expressions of order, optimism, and heroic individualism as are found in *Shane* may have more or less universal appeal is demonstrated by the influence and popularity of such works in many diverse countries and cultures. *Shane*, both as book and film, is capable of expressing to wide and varied audiences the affirmation of order over anarchy and the necessity for heroic individualism and courage at times when nothing else will answer. To this universal appeal, one must add the convincing arguments of recent theorists of the popular Western like John Cawelti and Will Wright that the Westerns of any period in America satisfy a need to reconcile the *particular* tensions of that period by projecting them into a historical fiction invested with symbolic resemblance to the contemporary society. Seen from this perspective, *Shane* expressed a resolution of the tensions of post-World War II American society which sensed its recent victory as a clear triumph of righteousness over evil and yet which viewed the obligations of world leadership and the problems of the post-War future with genuine trepidation. *Shane*, as Burke would say, sized up the situation and gave its audience an appropriate attitude to take toward it. By the story's sanctification of its historical moment—another period of crucial transition and emergence into powerful nationhood—contemporary American fears were allayed and the country's right to exercise global power was confirmed.

*The Professor's House*, on the other hand, answers another and equally insistent and universal human propensity for ambiguity and uncertainty, as it also spoke to the anxiety of its own age and, by extension, our own. As a cultural statement, *The Professor's House* articulated the post-war disillusionment of the 1920's—and what has come to be the malaise of modernism—as *Shane* was to project the sense of triumphant virtue for Americans in the late 1940's and early 1950's. While Professor St. Peter affirms, at last, the necessity for going forward into the future, he does so with the most profound doubts and misgivings. Cather's novel, then, explores much more and affirms much less of individual and collective American life than *Shane*. With a keen sense of our need for moral directness, she nevertheless sheaths Tom Outland's *Shane*-like portrait of critical simplicity and purity within a context of deep personal and social disorder. Thus, she affirms the myth of the code hero while at the same time she questions it searchingly. Both functions may be appropriate to memorable literature, and both are surely representative of the essential Willa Cather and her *West*. 
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2Jack Schaefer, Shane (New York: Bantam, 1978), p. 113. (Shane was originally published in 1949). Further references will be included in the text.

3Willa Cather, The Professor's House (New York: Random House Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 262-63. (The novel was originally published in 1925.) Further references will be included in the text.

4Although Shane is alive at the end of the novel, he is badly wounded, shot in the stomach, and cannot in either the realistic or mythic sense, be expected to survive. I am instructed in my conception of the hero here by Rosette C. Lamont's "From Hero to Anti Hero," Studies in the Literary Imagination, 9 (1976), 1-22.


7See Warshow, pp. 151-54.

8Warshow (p. 139) points out this influence of landscape upon morality in the Western.

9A helpful critical and biographical overview of Jack Schaefer and his work is Gerald Haslam's Jack Schaefer (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Press, 1975).

10For a fuller argument in favor of applying the methods of close reading to the popular Western, see Don D. Walker's "Notes Toward a Literary Criticism of the Western," Journal of Popular Culture, 7 (Winter, 1973), 720-741.


15 See Cawelti and Wright, n. 1.