# "THE LIVING AND THE DEAD LAND": THE GREAT PLAINS ENVIRONMENT AND THE LITERATURE OF DEPRESSION AMERICA

by
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As dust storms and economic blight spread over portions of the Great Plains during the 1930s, writers and poets of depression America limned this decade that helped shape national consciousness. These texts interacted with images of a sterile, barren landscape, which transported literature beyond a frontier land where unlimited opportunity abounded. During the Great Depression, the representations of environmental crisis became a point of departure for new kinds of tales about national destiny. For Depression-era authors, the displaced American served as a symbol for those who struggled against adversity, a symbol that derived meaning from the environmental context of dust, drought, and depression.

Before the 1930s, literature about the Great Plains offered an idealized frontier vision of a fertile, virgin land, a myth that reinforced the conventional American dreams of the late nineteenth-century. However, during the actual climatic extremes, hard times, and ecological disasters of the decade, the environment once again became a nightmarish incarnation of the Great American Desert metaphor so popular in the early nineteenth-century.[1] Using the adversarial relationship between nature and humans, these texts set an epic conflict upon this geographical stage in order to identify the overwhelming forces at work, not simply in the margins of space and time but at the core of a nation.[2] Ultimately, these narratives molded an image of Americans and their values in crisis, people and ideas lost in a modern setting of environmental decay and erosion.

In 1935, poet Archibald MacLeish offered an extended essay in *Fortune* magazine on "the living and the dead land." He described the scene of "dead quarter sections with the hardpan clean as weathered lime and the four-room flimsy ranch houses two feet deep in sand. . . ." The grasslands of North America were dead, according to MacLeish, offering a place of human and environmental devastation with "stock tanks brimming full but not with water, trees dead and a raven's nest of fence wire in the branches–these the dust did."[3] MacLeish's lyrical details, evoking the specter of a Great Plains desert unable to support life, echoed his sense of despair about the destiny of American

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civilization. If the land and people suffered across the region, then the assumptions of frontier progress required re-examination.

The poet looked to history for precedents of such massive environmental decline. "The city of Antioch was a rich and dissolute city in the days of Paul," MacLeish wrote with the authority of Scripture, but "today Antioch is a miserable Syrian town of 30,000 and the archeologists who excavate its ancient stones may shovel through some eighteen feet of mountain-washed detritus." Dust, whether in the North American grassland or an ancient civilization, produced the same disaster, because "deserts look like deserts." MacLeish discovered "no philosophic difference between the fate of Antioch in Syria and the possible fate of Garden City in Kansas," since mankind, the "greatest of all abraders of the earth's hide," has "learned, over the intervening years, to destroy his planet with an amazingly increased dispatch."[4] During a modern age, MacLeish opined, Americans inherited a responsibility not simply for eradicating deserts but also for avoiding them.

MacLeish expounded upon this theme in a pictorial poem entitled, *Land of the Free*, published in book form in 1938. When the frontier beckoned Americans ever westward, there "was always the grass ahead of us on and on Father to father's son." However, now "that the grass is back of us: Back of the furrows: Back of the dry-bone winters and the dust: Back of the stock tanks full but not with water: Back of the snakeweed greasewood ripgut thistle," free land and the opportunity it represented disappeared from the horizon. While MacLeish wrote from the vantage of his farm near Conway, Massachusetts, that "the land's going out from us" just like "the dry wind in the wheat," the nation was left to "wonder if the liberty was the land," and if the grass had been "grazed beyond horizons." The Great Plains environment taught a lesson to a free people who refused to accept limits, he concluded, while the "dust chokes in our throats and we get wondering."[5] For MacLeish and many other artistic critics, the dust storms and drought illustrated the transformation of the great American dream into a nightmare.

Other poets of the 1930s lamented the cruel climatic conditions, and their efforts, in effect, confirmed the national image of the region as a desert wasteland. Consider, for example, poetry bearing titles such as "Black Blizzard" and "In Time of Drought." Consider also descriptions of "a dirty faced world," "the long and listless plains," and the "grey, discouraged endlessness" of the landscape. Phrases such as "the bone-bare field" often evoked warnings about a "drought of heart," or comparisons to "Hell" suggested that the drought-stricken people suffered for their own failings. Poetry during the 1930s, like agriculture, sustained in words an unusually protracted drought and a sense of despair.[6]

As early as 1932, such requiems for the homesteader reflected an enduring tradition of Great Plains poetry. In that year, Hazel Barrington Selby wrote "Dirge for a Pioneer" in *The Frontier*. The poem explained:

> If these plains shall ever bloom,
> Recking [sic] not their pain or doom

Pioneers as he must leave them
Bones and flesh and will unbeaten,
Stubborn land to save and sweeten . . .
Dust is death and death is dust:
Let the dusty earth receive him.[7]

Such poetics offered the sterile land as a challenge to the pioneer, even though ultimately nature seemed to triumph over human will.

By the middle of the 1930s, with a heightened sense of the destruction, the regional poets cultivated the desert myth. For example, Julia Lott penned a poem entitled, "Drought Survivors," which appeared in *Kansas Magazine* in 1936. She wrote:

The creek bed, white with quicksand in the sun,
Companions fields from which no wheat was binned . . .
But yucca spikes are blooming, one by one.
Oh for the racing shadow of a cloud
To resurrect again this stricken plain!
Hot winds are scorching through a land unplowed,
Awaiting still the healing of the rain.[8]

Although poets such as Lott feared the consequences of environmental devastation, these texts promised that the desert remained only a temporary obstacle.

Likewise, "The Dust Storm" by I. R. Sherwin exposed a desiccated scene:

I see the dust storm speed across
The barren soil.
High driven clouds their streamers toss,
Torn by the wind in swift recoil,
Casting their shadows far and near
Over the fields so brown and sere,
In wild turmoil.[9]

Even dust storms in Kansas prompted poets to imagine a kind of beauty out of the extreme arid conditions.

In 1937, Kenneth Porter in "Dust Cloud Over Kansas" expressed a similar lament about the human destruction of nature. As the grass disappeared, more and more desert loomed in the wake:

A chaotic chimaera, they trampled and horn one another
As they rush through the land, over watered fields
planted to wheat
Or alfalfa; the towns and their people are lost in the
smother
and choke of parched panting breath, shedding hair,
flinty feet.
Behind is a desert; plantation and street
are swept by brown fire which no breaking can stay . . . .[10]

According to Porter, human disregard for nature, rather than merely seasonal encounters with punishing weather, caused man's discouragement and despair.

Nevertheless, the poets of the Great Plains captured the trials of an inhospitable environment in ways that uncovered strength and courage hidden by the dust. "A Prayer For West Texas," a popular poem by Martha Nell Lang, appeared in *The Land Today and Tomorrow*. In the text, she explained that a struggle against nature, especially the "wind's fury" and "stinging dust," remained as significant for contemporary residents as it had been during pioneer days. The poem called for "walls of courage to withstand the rolling sand clouds–sand that threatens to fog in–to smother stubborn flames of hope. . . ."[11] In "The Plains," Mae Francies Hall, a resident of the Texas panhandle imbued with a spirit of optimism, described "a barren plain" that "with faith and toil . . . will come into its own again."[12] With a stubborn faith, these poets insisted that the climate, economic cycles, and isolation could not deter Americans from their sacred duty to subdue the land.

In contrast to the poetry of the 1930s, only a few selections of short fiction found significance in the environmental conditions on the Great Plains. For example, Morrow Mayo's "Man With a Tractor," which appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1938, ficitionalized the typical day of a Panhandle farmer named Sank, who converted portions of his fields into the grass that had "prevented the Sudan from blowing Egypt off the map." In *Farm Journal*, Frank S. Mead recounted a conversation of three men on a train, who discussed "the deserted farms out West." Katherine Kilmer Miller in *Kansas Magazine* offered an imagined account of a funeral as a metaphor for a dying land, where the "smothering dust" of the prairies left behind an "oppressive, palpable gloom." More often, however, this short literary form concentrated upon the myth of success, and the desperation of the Great Plains hardly represented an appropriate scene for displaying such convenient, comforting fictions.[13]

Eric Thane, however, used desert scenes of the Great Plains in a 1937 short tale of familial failure entitled "Dark Retreat," which appeared in *Frontier and Midland*. He wrote about a family escaping from a wrecked homestead in the "lousy dust bowl of hell," as their vehicle passed "dust duned across the road" and "intermittent waves over a tumbleweed-choked fence of which only the post tops were now visible." The field beyond revealed "a grey, grey waste, twisting, writhing in tortured folds under the scourge of the wind." "It's terrible!" explained the grandson of the old homesteader of the story. "The Great American Desert, grandpop! Dust Bowl is right!" Left with nothing but failure, the younger generation recognized that an era of homesteading had ended in dust, and Americans were faced with "reaping the whirlwind" from a desiccated land. Instead of young men moving westward–a long-enduring tradition in American fiction–Thane's "Dark Retreat" represented a counter-movement, with a pioneer generation defeated by a desert forced to return to the East.[14]

In 1935, with the convergence of economic and natural calamities across the Great Plains in mind, writer Sherwood Anderson offered a modern version of the nineteenth-century travel genre in his book, *Puzzled America*. The picaresque account of his encounters with people in South Dakota described the anxieties felt by ordinary

Americans during the Great Depression. Anderson assessed in detail the fatal environment: "It is true I had been seeing the sand-and-dust drifts, against the fences, trees killed by the drought, great patches of the trees' bark dropped off. . . ." With the arrival of the drought, "the trees are all killed–man's eternal struggle and so often tragic war with nature–his struggle to command and control–ont on the plains it is all there, to be seen, in the raw."[15] In Anderson's text, the harsh conditions that puzzled Americans signified an epic battle of humans against the elements.

Yet the battle was not fought by individuals alone; Anderson also observed nature's assault against the strength of entire communities. "I walked around the country church," wrote Anderson, and there found that the "long dry year just passed had done its work well." The searing temperatures "had curled up the boards covering the sides of the building so that you could look through and see the daylight streaming in from the opposite side." The writer imagined the "worship, in the midst of the drought," of a "sun-burned people, men and women," who arrived "from distant farmhouses, past their own fields, where the corn is shriveled away to nothingness, the fields their own hands have plowed, planted, and tended only to see the crops all burn away to a dry ash of dust." With "the very boards of the church cracking and curling under the dry heat, the paint on the boards frying in the hot winds, perhaps a breeze blowing, and the dust of the fields sifting in through the cracks," the long-suffering people as they prayed for a rain swallowed the dust in their mouths. "Now it may all blow away," explained a country newspaperman to Anderson. "They have got this notion of dry farming in their heads. It's dry all right."[16]

Dying communities also appeared in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. This 1939 novel electrified the nation with its tale of a tenant-farm family, the Joads, driven from their homes in the Great Plains to search for the promised land in California. Relying on stark contrasts between the people and the land, Steinbeck's main theme of collective resistance obtained the fullest development in the far Western "factories in the field." Steinbeck, a resident of California's Salinas Valley, sought to expose the conditions evident in these migrant camps, but the Depression and "dust bowl," the dispossession, and the sense of helplessness merged with natural disaster as the novel's metaphor for the victimization of poor Americans. In fact, the tale of sharecroppers and tenant farmers reflected more accurately the economic structure of the American South rather than the Great Plains. Although Steinbeck exaggerated the extent of the decade's severe weather by locating blowing sand along the corn and cotton fields of eastern Oklahoma, his artistic license presupposed characters alienated from their homes not in a pastoral garden but in a wasteland. Therefore, the book accentuated an Old Testament setting with a struggle against nature–the droughts and the floods.[17]

The powerful story of human dignity and spirit under the most severe conditions began, then, with scenes of deserts across the nation's farmlands. The opening scene of the novel revealed that the surface of the earth became "crusted, a thin hard crust, and as the sky became pale, so the earth became pale, pink in the red country and white in the gray country." When the dust blew, the "dawn came, but no day," for in "the morning the dust hung like fog," and the "sun was as red as ripe new blood." Families

such as the Joads encountered days when "the dust sifted down from the sky, and the next day it sifted down" until an "even blanket covered the earth." Everything turned to dust, according to Steinbeck's linkage between humanity and nature, leaving the land worthless and a people impoverished.[18]

With the Great Plains environment serving as a backdrop for the human tragedy, the novel's central characters offered the only signs of life in these scenes. Into this virtual desert, Tom Joad, paroled from a McAlester, Oklahoma, prison, "turned about and faced the dusty side road that cut off at right angles through the fields." When Joad took a few steps, "the flour-like dust spurted up" in front of his new yellow shoes, even as the yellowness disappeared "under the gray dust." Jim Casey, the ex-preacher who returned from the "wilderness" with the seeds of a spiritual union planted in his mind, in the past offered baptism for human salvation, when he "used to get an irrigation ditch so full of repented sinners half of 'em like to drownded." In this barren time and place, however, the irrigation ditch–a powerful symbol of human power over aridity–no longer satisfied the preacher, who then became a new Christ in the sense that he sought to baptize a people with a fire for social action.[19]

Joad and Casey searched for their first disciples, the displaced families of sharecroppers and tenant farmers who moved westward. As they walked "toward the horizon," the "dust road stretched out ahead of them, waving up and down," while "the smell of burned dust was in the air, and the air was dry, so that mucus in the nose dried to a crust, and the eyes watered to keep the eyeballs from drying out." According to the environment invented by Steinbeck, an evil economic system with its tractors and machines caused such a plague, when the "land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses." The novel contrasted the deserted Plains with the visions of oranges and grapes in California, and so the virtuous Joads began the exodus from a wilderness, across the deserts, and into their last best hope in the far West.[20]

Frederick Manfred, while working as a reporter for the *Minneapolis Journal*, wrote his first draft of the novel *The Golden Bowl* in 1937. Manfred traveled, lived, and worked among the dispossessed people and the drought-stricken land about which he wrote. During 1939, he rewrote the tale as a play for the local Federal Theater Project, and the story of adversity and depression in South Dakota appeared in book form in 1944. The novel's setting represented one of erosion and decay, with barns and silos and the land itself "deserted," while a "gray dust films everything, even the moving things." Rotting bodies of dead animals laid facing empty water tanks, while skeletons of farms remained in "a dusty slumber." According to Manfred, "dust beat on the grain and killed it. Dust beat on the animals and choked them. Dust battered the barns and the houses." Throughout a series of difficult years, the "wind drove and the sun burned, drying and cracking and breaking the land."[21] Within this surreal place, only extraordinary characters survived.

Whatever the accuracy of such claims, Manfred's novel emphasized the spirit of the human attempt to achieve identity and to resist fate when faced with punishing drought and violent dust storms. The Thors, a valiant family who held stubbornly to the

dying earth, refused to abandon their home.[22] Of course, Manfred evokes the name of the mythic Norse god of thunder to denote the family's courage. The wandering protagonist of the novel, Maury Grant, who rejected farming and nature, in one early scene proclaims:

> I don't know what's wrong with you, but I know fer sure that I ain't workin' in a desert. I got my guts and lungs full of it once down in Oklahoma, and I've had enough. I'm gettin' outa here quicker'n a jackrabbit with its tail on fire. Goin' where things stay green.[23]

In contrast to the young Maury's rootless view of life, the Thor family demonstrated a profound sense of place, one of love for a land despite its sterility.

Maury, who desired to be "free as the wind," left the land of death to chase the illusion of wealth in the gold mines of the Black Hills. Nevertheless, the odyssey ultimately led him back to the Thor home and to the virtuous Kirsten–the family's young daughter. The novel's concluding chapter unfolded with a descriptive return to the desert scene, with "the great earth dying" while "the drouth wrinkles the skin of the old creature." Sand dunes "rise and billow," according to Manfred, and drifts "move slowly in the lee of the boulders and the posts and the stones, back and forth, beside and above the buildings and the machines and the graves of men. And then a desert drifts where once a home had been tucked away in a valley." Despite the foreboding image of the landscape, the Thor family remained in the gray environment and continued to hope for a return of rain.[24]

In the novel's climax, Maury assumed the lead in the Thor family's struggle against the "parched land" and pledged a newfound devotion to the land and to the pregnant Kirsten. Maury rose at dawn in order to confront an enshrouding dust storm at its height, to wrestle with nature, to protect the desperate homestead. Manfred set the scene: "Dust charged the mountains, fell upon the gutted prairies, droned across Colorado and Nebraska, tumbling, twisting, rutting, spilling, over the knolls and buttes, stirring the silt of the Dakotas." With the powerful forces of nature against him, Maury believed that "it wasn't a wind they were wrestling with, but a malevolent being, and one of such unmatchable size that, if it wanted to, it could kill them all." After he "bound up his wounds against the dust," Maury surveyed a landscape where "everywhere were new dustdrifts, new dunes, rising, falling, billowing." The lonesome, restless traveler, nevertheless, embraced the redemption of the moment and followed his destiny to transform the desert into a golden bowl, or a kind of Valhalla.[25]

Lawrence Svobida, doubting that the Great Plains as a desert offered any redeeming qualities, described his experience as a western Kansas farmer in a published autobiography, *An Empire of Dust*. "From my experience I have written a true, inside story of the plight of the average farmer in the Dust Bowl," wrote Svobida, where "an area extending over the greater part of ten states is rapidly becoming depopulated and appears doomed to become, in drear reality, the Great American Desert shown on early maps and so described by writers until less than eight years

ago. . . ." During the 1930s, "the death knell of the plains was sounded and the birth of the Great American Desert was inaugurated with the introduction and rapid improvement of power farming." According to Svobida, the encroaching desert devastated ranching, farming, and progress, even though many local and national leaders denied the extent of the permanent environmental devastation.[26]

*An Empire of Dust* described the death of an agricultural civilization through the eyes of one wheat farmer. The drought might have served only a temporary setback to the region as a whole, Svobida suggested, but "the winds began to attack the soil which was no longer anchored by the grass roots." Furthermore, "the black clouds of dust that blot out the sun, cross half a continent, and travel far out to sea," leaving behind the remains of "the new Great American Desert!" Consider the power of the desolate scene that appeared when the storm lifted, as "cattle had huddled in fence corners, by trees, in ditches, behind steep banks."–they were all dead. Across the region, ranchers buried "decaying carcasses," and Svobida believed that "many wheat farmers are coming to the belief that it may already have become established beyond the knowledge and skill of the Government conservation experts to restore the wasted land, or even to check seriously the processes of destruction now in operation in the Great Plains."[27] Though Svobida's wheat farm failed to survive these dust storms and adverse climate, he resolved at first to save his land at all cost.

The Great Plains farmer felt as if nature toyed with him, even while the drought, dust, and wind flouted and shattered a society's ideals. Svobida "had worked incessantly to gain a harvest, or to keep my land from blowing, and no effort of mine had proved fruitful" while reaching "the depths of utter despair."[28] During an encounter between a service station attendant and a tourist in Liberal, Kansas, Svobida recalled:

> The tourist stated with emphasis: "Why, this country is nothing but a desert!" The filling station attendant, resentful of this remark coming on the heels of the visitor's impressions of Death Valley, retorted: "You went through worse desert back there in California." "Yes, that is true enough," the tourist agreed with a smile, "but there aren't any fools out there trying to farm it!"[29]

For Svobida, the term desert seemed appropriate, indeed, since the scale of environmental crisis produced more than crop failure–it produced the failure of fundamental American ideals.

According to Svobida, the region known as the nation's breadbasket instead represented a land where living men and women became insane from the strain, or at least abandoned all hope of farming. In his autobiography he surveyed hundreds of square miles of land and found them "completely bare, unprotected from the sunrays, which they absorbed like fire brick in a kiln, creating the wind which, in turn, brought it to our land, to the destruction of our growing crops." While Svobida vowed to make "my last stand in the Dust Bowl," another dusted-out farmer warned him that if "a man took a lot of machinery out into the middle of the Sahara Desert to start farming, we'd call him crazy, and probably commit him to an asylum; but, so far as I can see, we are

doing exactly the same thing when we go on trying to farm in this part of the country." Furthermore, the Kansan feared that "the greatest desert in the United States" had been created across places that no longer supported farming. Svobida concluded that, with the exception of a few favored localities, the "whole Great Plains region is already a desert that cannot be reclaimed through the plans and labors of men."[30] While the autobiography underscored human frustration and failure, the cautionary tale left no doubt that humans sacrificed themselves to an empire of dust.

One of the era's most outspoken voices, William Allen White, editor of the Emporia *Gazette* of Kansas, recognized the transformation of the environment, even though he evinced a passion for regional boosterism. In fact, *The Changing West*, published in 1939 as the anxious decade closed, summarized not only White's encounters with the land beyond the Mississippi but also his reflections upon the significance of the nation's metaphorical trek through time and across space. "Why," asked White, was "that West which they made here in these wide valleys, across these bleak deserts . . . so different a civilization from that which the ancient pioneers established in the valleys of the Nile, the Euphrates, and the Ganges?" The answer seemed to be a matter of destiny, according to White, since "millions of acres lying in what was once the Great American Desert" matured with intelligent efforts into "a brand new world."[31]

Although White recognized the challenges of an arid environment, the adversity of nature instilled great courage into the character of Plains men and women, or so he claimed. The "grandson of the American pioneers" refused to assume "a peasant's status," continued White, and the resilient forefathers

> who died in the last decade of the old century, if they could see us today, would behold here the Utopia of which they dreamed. . . . Concluding, let me reiterate that what man did with the fabulous increase in wealth that came with the settlement of the West, man can do now as he plunges into the new era. But he must carry in his heart the two things that made the wilderness blossom as the rose: first, a neighborly faith in the decency of man; second, a never faltering vision of a better world.[32]

That vision, at least according to White's optimism, declared ecological independence for a new kind of chosen people who conquered the Great Plains environment of depression America.

Writers and poets during the 1930s described human tragedy with their word picture scenes of the region, establishing a contextual image that shaped the work of later authors such as Lois Hudson. Indeed, all of these works marked a continuing American fascination with the dynamic meanings of the Great Plains as a desert, revisiting early nineteenth-century myth in the hard times of this particular decade. Texts written during the Great Depression represented dusty trails, devastated homes, failing crops, dying livestock, and human abandonment, even as they portrayed the mysterious forces that worked to alienate humans from the land and from each other.

Instead of a frontier setting for a validation of national progress, the ecological moment underscored metaphors about a decline and fall of American civilization with a sense of desperation.[33]

Although literary sources identified a world of desolation, waste, and desertion at the end of the nation's trails across the Great Plains, this modern setting signified more than simply the end of American dreams. Talented writers discovered the living in a dead land, and by the end of the decade they used the drama of dust and depression so familiar to their national audience as a theatrical background for preaching the message of an American resurrection. For the literature of the depression era, this kind of desert elevated the environmental conditions of the region to a symbolic level of cultural renewal and redefinition, ultimately offering a place of redemption for both a people and a nation.

## NOTES

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29. Svobida, *An Empire of Dust*, 95-96.

30. Svobida, *An Empire of Dust*, 105, 123-124, 142, 169, 185, 203.

31. William Allen White, *The Changing West* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), 5-6, 53-54, 71, 79, 89, 137; James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 126-129; For a novel set in the nineteenth-century with a similar conquering theme, see John Ise, *Sod and Stubble* (New York: Wilson-Erickson, 1936).

32. White, *The Changing West*, 71, 79, 89, 137.

33. Wilson, "Depression, Dust, and Defiance," 260-272; See also Brad Lookingbill, "A God-Forsaken Place: Folk Eschatology and the Dust Bowl," *Great Plains Quarterly* 14 (Fall 1994): 272-286.