

The Agrarian versus Frontiersman in Midwestern Fiction

by
Barbara Meldrum

Our American conception of the West has been dominated by two cultural myths, the myth of the garden and the myth of the western hero.¹ Identified with the first is the figure of the American farmer; with the second, the frontiersman. Each of these figures is associated with a cluster of values we tend to link with the settlement of the western frontier. The agrarian life is supposed to ennoble man, encouraging the dignity and self-respect that come from self-sufficiency, and discouraging the corruption of morals that comes from a metropolitan environment and an industrial economy. Jefferson calls the laborers of the soil the chosen people of God, and Crèvecoeur praises the American farmer for his industry, independence, domestic commitment, and his contribution to a growing national economy.² The frontiersman plays an essential role in opening up new western lands for settlement; this task of trailblazing and pioneering is seen as an essential part of the cycle of western development even by those, such as Crèvecoeur, who condemn the character of the frontiersman. Those who view the frontiersman more positively praise his heroism, his freedom, independence, adventurousness--his assertion of self above man-made laws.

In the saga of western settlement man returns to a primitive state where he is removed from an eastern or European civilization and is dependent upon nature for his survival. Frederick Jackson Turner, in his classic essay on the frontier, claims that this primitivism leads to a "perennial rebirth" which fosters the development of a distinctively American character, marked by its individualism, resourcefulness, and sense of freedom. The existence of free land is essential to this development, and Turner believes an agrarian economy will best foster American democracy. He affirms a unified ideal wherein the best traits of frontiersman and agrarian are combined and are attainable through the cyclical experience which occurs when one is "reborn" on the frontier and passes through the primitive to the civilized stage of development.³

Many American writers have not been as positive as Turner about the interrelationships of western environment and human fulfillment. Defeat and disillusionment haunt the characters of western fiction when the better life they seek so often eludes them or proves to be a hollow achievement. The reasons for defeat are various and often complicated. Some light can, I believe, be shed on the nature of their defeat by examining the interrelationships of agrarian and frontiersman traits and values. The western farmer seeks individual fulfillment in a way of life that obviously demands a close relationship to the land. But he is not pure agrarian; he is usually a blend of the agrarian and the frontiersman, and the frontiersman traits frequently promote exploitation of the land and domination of other people. Moreover, the agrarian ideal of home, family, and prosperity often leads to a spiritually unfulfilling materialism.

We can see these interrelationships in representative novels of three midwestern writers who focus on farm families of immigrant background. The first, Ole Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, presents the pioneering experience of sod-breaking settlers. The second, Sophus Winther's Grimsen trilogy, portrays Danish immigrants who begin as tenant farmers and who never attain freedom from landlord or mortgage-holder. The third, Frederick Manfred's *This Is The Year*, dramatizes the aspirations and failures of the son of an immigrant pioneer.⁴

Rolvaag's Per Hansa is both frontiersman and agrarian; his achievements and his failures stem from the duality of his own character. Like Crevecoeur's new American, he has come to the New World to realize a dream of freedom, independence, and prosperity, and he seeks to achieve fulfillment of that dream through farm labor on his own land. Like Turner's mythical frontiersman, he returns to primitive conditions and struggles with natural forces as he seeks to transform the "Endless Wilderness . . . into a habitable land for human beings" (p. 287). His dream is a fairy tale of a new kingdom of independence, individual dignity, and material abundance. He wants to share this dream with his wife Beret, but the agonizing truth slowly emerges that she cannot share his dream because she can "never be like him" (p. 221). He, like so many other adventurers, he has believed that movement westward would bring him to the Promised Land. But Beret calls that west-fever a plague (p. 219), and perhaps it is a more subtle, insidious plague than the locusts which maraud the settlers during their early years of sod-breaking. The west-fever calls forth the frontiersman traits, and

these traits do not always promote agrarian values.

The novel focuses on two overlapping conflicts: the first is the pioneer's struggle to master the environment and in so doing to wrest material success from the resources of nature. The second is the conflict between Per Hansa and Beret. These conflicts overlap, for marital tensions emerge and are fostered by Beret's difficulties in adjusting to the barren, primitive, uncivilized life on the prairie and by Per Hansa's absorption in the challenging tasks of pioneering. Per Hansa's frontiersman traits plus good luck usually enable him to succeed in his struggle with nature and, curiously, although Per Hansa is a farmer, the memorable scenes do not focus on farming experiences but on what could be called frontiersman adventures. Often these episodes also contribute to marital tensions. In the opening chapter Per Hansa discovers the trail of his comrades through some rather astute tracking in the darkness of night (a feat that surely rivals some of Leatherstocking's exploits). But his self-assured confidence and desire to protect his wife have kept him from sharing his concern when they were lost, and this tendency toward masculine over-protectiveness contributes to their marital difficulties. Later, Per Hansa courageously meets the Indians who camp nearby and wins a pony through his daring deeds of fearless communication. But his taunts before the frightened women and children of the settlement "coarsen" him in Beret's eyes and she reprimands him before others for the first time in their many years of marriage (p. 70). Other exploits are the exploits of the frontiersman more than the farmer: Per Hansa is the only one who can be depended on to find the lost cows, he devises an ingenious scheme for trapping ducks, he trades furs with the Indians not simply to augment family income but to get away from the confines of winter homelife and pursue adventure, and he makes his way through a snowstorm by keeping before him an image of western conquest as he pushes onward toward the Rocky Mountains even though he is actually traveling east rather than west (p. 255, 265). Even his early sowing of wheat stems more from frontiersman than agrarian traits, for this neophyte farmer is impatient and reckless, gambling great odds in the manner of the Forty-niner Adventurer Frank Norris describes in *The Octopus*.⁵

Perhaps the best example of the conflict between frontiersman and agrarian traits occurs when Per Hansa discovers stakes with strange names on them, indicating that others have laid claim to the property his neighbors thought was theirs. Beret's premonitions are correct when she recalls the tales she has heard. "of how people in

this wild country would ruthlessly take the matters of law and justice into their own hands" (pp. 122-23), for Per Hansa recognizes that even if the law is on his friend's side, the law is too far away and these claimants may try to take the land by force (p. 137). Indeed they do; but Hans Olsa's powerful body is equal to the challenge, and he not only strikes down the challenger who has threatened him with a sledge hammer, but he picks up the man and hurls him "over the heads of the crowd" where he crashes into a wagon (p. 143). Beret is deeply disturbed by Per Hansa's behavior, for he has removed stakes which were sanctioned by old world traditions as sacred landmarks. Even though she learns that the stakes were illegally placed, she is not comforted, for "would he have done any different" if they had been legal? She believes that "this desolation out here called forth all that was evil in human nature." Even though the opportunities for free land seem to be limitless, people seek by "deceit and force" to make their own way and to satisfy their greed. The crowning blow comes for Beret when she hears her husband tell his friends "in a loud voice, with boisterous, care-free zest," how he had found the stakes and had destroyed them. Beret reprimands Per Hansa before the others for taking pride in an act that would have been a "shameful sin" in the old country. When Per Hansa retorts that the easiest, simplest way to cope with such difficulties is to "kick the dog that bites you," Beret replies that such a code is "poor Christianity" and cautions, "we'd better take care least we all turn into beasts and savages out here!" (pp. 148-50). Turner's notion of a "perennial rebirth" in the western wilderness takes on somber dimensions in Rolvaag's novel. The structure of this chapter underscores the sinister implications, for it begins with Per Hansa's romantic fairy tale vision of fulfillment of his agrarian dreams as his restless blood pushes him onward "toward the wonders of the future" made possible by "endless" rich soil (pp. 107-09). The chapter ends with Beret's reprimand and a marital rift (p. 150).

This episode prompts Beret to see her husband with new eyes. "Was this the person in whom she had believed no evil could dwell?" (p. 148). Beret's religious views may be dogmatically narrow, even inseparable from her psychotic behavior; but if she is a "clinical case," she is, as Robert Scholes has pointed out, "a case like Cassandra, and the fires of prophetic truth shive through her madness."⁶ She sees sin in their prairie life, for here where "Earth takes us" (p. 432) man has no time to think of God, only of self and pressing material needs. Hans Olsa lies on his deathbed after valiantly struggling to protect his cattle from a blizzard; but his

concerns were primarily material ones as he recognized that failure would make him "a considerably poorer man" (p. 419), and Beret's admonition to Per Hansa rings true: "You know what our life has been: land and houses, and then more land, and cattle! . . . Can't you understand that a human being ever becomes concerned over his sins and wants to be freed from them?" (p. 442). When Per Hansa continues to resist her efforts to get him to go for the minister, she wonders, "Had he become stone blind?" (p. 446). Beret has become obsessed with sin--her own and others--and she has prayed fervently for her husband (p. 441); but he never sees with her eyes, and in the final image of the book his vacant eyes face, in death, the west which has been the impetus of his fairy tale vision of the future. In hope he had named his son Peder Victorious; but Beret had cried out against the name: "How can a man be *victorious* out here, where the evil one gets us all!" (p. 368). It is true that the minister assures Beret that the name is not blasphemous and, in the sequel to this novel, the minister urges Beret to "learn to find the good in your fellow man."⁷ But extreme though Beret's views may be, she has prophetic vision: she knows that the land takes not only their lives but their souls, and her gloomy vision is confirmed in Peder's ironic destiny.

Per Hansa is a giant, a western frontiersman who performs mighty deeds of valor to found an agrarian kingdom for his sons. He shares the frontier spirit which affirms that "everything was possible" on that "endless plain"--"There was no such thing as the Impossible any more" (pp. 414-15, 241). But during a blizzard that is likened to Noah's flood which was sent by God to purge the earth of sinners, Per Hansa is forced out to his death by his dearest friends and by his wife, for they too have come to believe that Per Hansa can do the impossible.⁸ Per Hansa knows full well the perils of nature, and he has also learned his own limitations as a human being; but he is a victim of the reckless western spirit he has helped to promote and seems to embody. The very traits that have helped him so often to overcome difficulties now conspire to thrust him out into the awful solitude of the snowswept prairie. His death comes from physical causes, but is emblematic of the prairie solitude which is "a form of freedom" some cannot endure (p. 363). He is frozen in the posture of one resting before pressing onward toward the west; but his rotting corpse, anachronistically clad in warm clothes when discovered in the warmth of May, suggests a purpose that has gone sour.

Rolvaag's novel focuses on the pioneering farmer, a

frontiersman claiming free land in the western wilderness. Winther's Grimsen trilogy also portrays immigrants inspired by a western vision of free land, independence, and prosperity (I, 3). But these Danish immigrants arrive in the 1890's when, as Turner points out, the frontier has closed. There is no free land, and the Grimsens must rent a run-down farm and struggle not only with nature but with an economic system that keeps them in perpetual subjection no matter how hard they may work. In such a context the frontiersman traits seem to recede and the agrarian concerns are foremost.

The Grimsens come to America seeking a better way of life. But true to the pattern of development in the American West, they experience a reversion to primitive living. This primitivism is not, however, the return to nature attended by a "perennial rebirth" that Turner spoke of; rather, it is a primitivism of poverty and cultural alienation. They left a comfortable home in Denmark but now find themselves in an unpainted, tumbledown house that looks "more like a chicken house than a human dwelling place" (I, 18). Meta struggles to bring the values of the civilization she knows into this house, but is continually frustrated by crushing poverty. She cleans away the accumulated filth; but her patches on the deteriorating walls only partially conceal the gaping holes, and her efforts to install wallpaper are doomed to failure when the paper refuses to stick to the rotten walls. She plans a baptismal service for her young daughter, seeking to follow the religious traditions of her past; to prepare for the minister's visit, she persuades Peter to buy a porcelain wash basin, pitcher, and pot so that their home "will look a little bit civilized" (I, 32). Her materialistic goals are necessarily extremely limited by the poverty they endure, but there is no doubt about the nature of her aspirations as she seeks to achieve some measure of comfort and beauty in their home.

Peter pursues materialism of another sort. While not opposed to Meta's more feminine concern for their dwelling, he invests in possessions that will promote his farmwork. Even though he knows that he cannot take permanent improvements with him if he should leave his rented farm, he invests anyway to facilitate his work and to increase his chances for profit. Although he seems to be improving his condition, he is actually developing the farm for his landlord. When the day comes that he must lose the farm, he realizes he has spared himself little but has done virtually nothing to improve the inside of the house. Like Per Hansa, he seeks development of his land as a means to achieve family stability and well-being--agrarian values, but they are affirmed in ways that seem to neglect his wife

and family. Paradoxically, the male agrarian's materialism stems from feminine values of home, family, and prosperity; but these ends are sought in ways that often deny the very goals they seek to affirm.

In spite of continued frustrations and disappointments that stem from economic conditions, the Grimsens do affirm positive agrarian values in their way of life. Although cash may be in scarce supply, they never lack for food, and the abundance of nature seems to promote a sense of security and well-being. Moreover, even when nature is uncooperative and crops are disappointing, these people recognize and accept the fluctuations of nature, for the "battle with the elements" is one they can understand; it is the "invisible foe" of the economic system which finally conquers them (III, 247; see I, 279). Their work with the soil may be wearing to the body and financially unrewarding, yet this work is valuable discipline and is honorable. Even when threatened with economic ruin, Peter will not allow his sons to work in a stone quarry, for such work would be beneath the dignity of a farmer (III, 186-87). The title of the third volume of the trilogy, *This Passion Never Dies*, refers to the passion for the land--Peter's old world peasant heritage which first drew him to America in search of the Promised Land and which is the legacy he passes on to his sons. All but one of his sons leave the land for other vocations; but they carry with them the values their farmlife has nurtured. When Hans' American wife charges that he is like all the Danes--"You don't want a wife, you want a kitchen slave"--he affirms the value of work by relating it to American development: "if I know anything about American history, of what Americans have had to do to turn a wilderness into a civilized nation, then the Danes I know are more truly American than you and your kind" (III, 96-97).⁹ The Grimsens may not have achieved the realization of their dreams, for America promises more than it gives (III, 234) but, like Crèvecoeur's farmers, they have affirmed values that are associated with agrarian life and in so doing they have also affirmed their identity as Americans.¹⁰

Also undergirding the Grimsens' agrarian values are frontiersman traits. Both Peter and Meta emigrated as courageous individuals willing to face the uncertainties of life in a new land (see III, 234, 280). Peter is especially attracted by country that provides real "scope for a man" (I, 27). He is challenged by the "possibilities for the future" (I, 279), an American future that seems to demand severance from a European past. In typical frontier fashion, the past is left behind--by action if not by sentiment for, as Peter and Meta

discover, "While they had been facing east in their dreams their thoughts and actions had been turned west, until now they were a part of the new world" (I, 305). "Our thoughts go back, but our hands work here" (III, 233). Although this new country seems to demand some sort of repudiation of the past, the anti-intellectualism of the westward, future-oriented, self-indulgent frontiersman seems to be lacking.¹¹ Both Rolvaag and Winther write of first generation emigrants who possess the courage and love of freedom of the western pioneer, but who still cling in important ways to old world culture and consequently establish some sense of continuity in the transition from old world civilization to new world primitive frontier an American identity.

Another aspect of the frontiersman influence can be seen in the Grimsen boys' fascination with the western mythology of the dime novels. Not only are they avid readers, but they act out the tales in play by adopting the roles of their heroes and inventing their own adventures. In true western fashion, they take the law into their own hands as they fantasize the lynching of their family's enemy, the loan shark Jacob Paulson. But their fantasy of lawless freedom and individualistic justice culminates in a sadistic adventure when they begin to torment a stray dog, then finally kill it in wanton violence (I, 108-17). This orgy of misdirected assertiveness is later paralleled by a real life adventure when the pupils of the country school are led by the Grimsen boys in revolt against a tyrannical schoolmarm. Their revolt is conceived in a desire for justice that is not forthcoming within the system; by taking matters into their own hands, they succeed in freeing themselves from the teacher, but their revolt gets out of control as revenge twists justice into excessive violence and a destructiveness which harms even them (I, 150-62). These echoes of frontierism suggest the sinister side of the western hero myth; but the positive side is also present. The young Hans finds it useful to identify with Buffalo Bill when he needs courage to brave the night fears that plague him while carrying out an errand (I, 224). Years later, when as a young man he faces a seemingly impossible task, his brother calls him by the name of one of his dime novel heroes, and this association gives Hans the confidence he needs (III, 268). Before his mission is accomplished, he needs further bolstering of his confidence, and this time the inspiration comes from memories of his father, who had inspired him with the same courage and determination which had enabled him to pursue his goals with unflinching determination (III, 227). In Peter the agrarian and the frontiersman meet in concord as the positive traits

complement and reinforce each other. Winther's trilogy thereby affirms the American ideal of progress through an affirmation of the western spirit.

Winther comes the closest of these three writers to affirming the American Dream through a Turnerian view of western development. However, the positive resolution of the tale pertains to the son rather than to the father; Peter Grimsen is defeated, for he loses the farm he sought to make his own for so many years. The sources of his defeat lie not within himself, but outside the self in a socio-economic system that leaves him helpless. The fact that this trilogy was written in the 1930's by a confirmed naturalist no doubt does much to explain the portrayal of Peter's destiny.¹² Even though the frontiersman-agrarian traits and values may coexist in a harmonious balance within the Grimsen family, Peter suffers defeat. But we can, I believe, see further evidence of a destructive imbalance in the people through whom the external economic forces act upon Peter. Jacob Paulson is another Danish immigrant, but one who early learns to live off the misfortunes of others by becoming a money-lender and mortgage-holder. He and others like him become land-hungry; their greed leads to overextension; although ultimately defeated, they bring down with them the honest, hard-working farmers such as Peter Grimsen. Arthur Moore, in his study of the frontier mind, claims that greed is a form of economic anxiety which emerges on the frontier when the expectation of an "Earthly Paradise" is frustrated by the disappointing realities of frontier life.¹³ In Winther's fiction an avariciousness born of the frontier experience leads indirectly to Peter Grimsen's defeat.

The sources of failure are again internalized when we turn to Frederick Manfred's *This Is The Year*. Of the three authors considered here, Manfred provides the most intense examination of man's relationship to the land itself, revealing that the life of the farmer does not necessarily lead to the positive character traits we have come to associate with agrarianism. The protagonist, Pier Frixen, never wavers in his commitment to farming and he does love the land. But he doesn't know how to love the land. Similarly, he doesn't know how to love his wife. Manfred has carefully interwoven his tale by equating the land with woman so that marriage to woman parallels "marriage" to the land. As Pier takes over his father's farm, productivity and barrenness of farm and family coincide, and failure to his wife corresponds with his failure to the land. Moreover, the reasons for failure are the same in both realms, and these reasons stem from Pier's frontiersman traits.

Pier's father was a Frisian immigrant pioneer, homesteading in the northwest corner of Iowa. Pier was named for a Frisian hero, Great Pier, a fighter for Frisian freedom. Other allusions to Frisian legendary history link Pier to a glorious past of valiant conquest. Frank Norris once wrote that the westward frontier movement began when the Frisians invaded Britian--the "Wild West . . . of that century."¹⁴ If so, then the Frisians were the first frontiersmen, and Pier is their twentieth century agrarian descendant, a man who thrills to the fight and gamble of farm life (p. 300). He is true to his heritage in his consistent desire for freedom, his stubborn independence, and his reliance on physical prowess. Both Pier and his father show little respect for the law as they illegally seine fish in the Sioux River, and Pier resists what he calls government interference when his cattle must be inspected for tuberculosis. His rugged individualism will respond to a neighbor in distress, for he fights to rescue a neighbor from foreclosure; but that same individualism keeps him from listening to the advice of Pederson, the county extension agent, and from accepting government price supports that might prevent (or at least delay) foreclosure on his own farm. Pier is a dogged fighter and thereby wins the respect of even his enemies (see p. 590). But determination, fortitude, self-assertion, and a fighting spirit are not enough to ward off persistent drought and its economic consequences. Indeed, these traits prompt Pier to pursue a single direction without regard for alternatives, and that single-mindedness hastens Pier's defeat.

Pier's son, Teo, sums up his father's problem succinctly when he says "You never stop to think things out. You rush into things too much. You figure everything's got to be done in a hurry. By bullin' it through. Maybe that was all right in old pioneer days. But not now" (p. 575). Pier is an exploiting frontiersman who takes all he can get and pushes his way with bullish power. He may love the land, but he doesn't know how to love it, just as he loves his wife Nertha but doesn't know how to express that love in ways that will nurture and preserve it. He rapes his wife as he rapes the land. Nertha, who is named for the goddess of earth, bears but one son, then is barren in spite of Pier's desire for more sons, and deliberately miscarries to avoid bringing another son under her husband's domination. She ages prematurely, a worn out, unattractive, nagging woman. So the earth responds to Pier's bulling ways. Because he plows uphill and downhill instead of contouring, erosion creates a gully that eventually eats away the foundation of his home. Because he overtills the land, he turns it into dust to be blown by the wind or

washed away by rain. He never learns what the land is really like, never makes himself fit the land; instead, he tries to make the land fit him (p. 574).

The only adaptability Pier consistently demonstrates is an ingenuity that gets him out of several tight spots when his will to survive asserts itself. On three occasions Pier nearly falls to his death, but in each instance he survives. First he slips and falls from the peak of his barn roof after repairing the cupola. When efforts to grasp the cleats fail and he realizes he can't stop the fall, he turns over and over on the sloping roof so that he will fall into the manure pile instead of on the hard earth. The plunge into the soggy manure is a kind of baptism, for Pier has been daydreaming about another woman and he feels that "this green soup, this stink, made up for, canceled out, the sin of dreaming about Kaia. The manure had washed his sins away" (p. 121). He laughs at his close brush with death; but his "baptism" does not make him a better husband. Years later he climbs up his windmill to unjamb it, but the weathered ladder rungs give way and he cannot find a solid hold. Again he uses his wits, realizes that a fall straight down will break him on the widening uprights, and decides to leap away from the windmill. His mind conjure up a western image of Indians falling from ponies, somersaulting and avoiding injury. And so he prepares to land. "He was sure of himself. He had a plan." In his somersaulting roll his legs absorb some of the shock, then spring out like grasshopper legs and thrust him forward. His nose is shattered, but otherwise he escapes serious injury (p. 238).

Both of these falls occur while Pier is performing tasks essential to the farmer, but tasks which require grit and daring. Manfred may be suggesting some of the heroic aspects of a farmer's life. It takes a real man to scale those heights, and it takes a resilient, ingenious man to survive the perils that could so easily lead to death. But Pier's third fall does not occur in the course of his agrarian duties. His wife has just died after wasting away in mind and body, and Pier is consumed by guilt because he feels responsible for her death. He wanders out to Devil's Gulch, stares at the water beneath him, fascinated by how easy it would be to die--just a slip of the foot--and he falls, plunging into the dark waters. But instead of surrendering to death, his will to survive reasserts itself, he finds it hard to die, he struggles against the undertow and thrusts himself up into the air. He has descended into a "great watery womb" and has been reborn (pp. 503-05). But this rebirth does not lead to a new life. The reasons why Pier's rebirths are abortive are suggested by the complex

symbolism of Devil's Gulch.

The gulch lies near Nertha's family home; some of her happiest memories are of wandering in the fields near the gulch, picking wild flowers and herbs. But these flowers are beyond the gulch, and Nertha is prepubescent (p. 283). The gulch with its red lips, its slash in the earth, is identified with woman: when Nertha tells Pier she is pregnant, the image he immediately sees is Devil's Gulch (p. 233); when Pier falls into the waters of the gulch, he has entered a womb. But the womb becomes a grave, it is the devil's gulch, and the only exit from the abyss is to scale the Devil's Stairway (p. 505). The gulch is to Pier "the mouth of a toothless, bloody-gummed monster" (p. 111), and when he falls from the windmill he sees "black death below. It grinned up at him. It was as distinct as the red-gummed laugh of Devil's Gulch" (p. 237). The sexuality suggested by the gulch is fraught with possibilities for life and death, fertility and barrenness, like the earth which Pier also seeks to know and to master.¹⁵ Pier is drawn to the earth by a gravitational force both physical and spiritual. The same earth that can respond with bountiful crops can also break his body.

Pier has the physical resilience to survive his encounters with earth. But he lacks an inward development that would teach him how to love. Pederson tells Pier, "With just a little more sense you'd make a perfect fit. It takes a hero to live out here . . . where have you ever seen country with bigger ups and downs than this here God's country? . . . it takes a hero to survive such stuff. A hero who thinks" (pp. 064-05). But Pier does not "think." He begins to see where he has gone awry, but he lacks the ability to pull it all together and chart new, positive directions. He has survived each encounter with death, and he survives the loss of his farm with typical resilience--"I'm a young buek yit. My heart's still green," he says as he leaves the farm he has ruined by his stubbornly exploiting farming methods. But he has been reborn before, without gaining greater wisdom. Pier hasn't really changed.¹⁶ He moves out into space, looking for another place, another life. He sings the same song he had sung when the tale began with his wedding day. The first chapter was titled "The Promised Land," and the last chapter is "God's Country." The Promised Land Pier had sought through his marriage to Nertha and to the land has not been found. He carries in his suitcase the biblical placard Nertha had brought to their home: "the EARTH is the LORD'S and the FULLNESS THEREOF" (p. 613). Pier never fully realizes the ways in which that land belongs to God. As he once possessed Nertha physically but realized how little

he knew her and how limited was his ability to possess her (p. 61), so he has sought to possess the land but has never really known it and has failed to make it his. Like Guthrie's Boone Gaudill in *The Big Sky*, he has ruined his paradise, has destroyed what he loved most, and he has no place to go.

Pier fails because he cannot integrate the frontiersman and the agrarian within himself. As he stands pondering his fate, he tries to understand what has happened:

Why hadn't he and the land been able to get along? Why? Pier lifted the massive question in his mind and turned the long bole of it over. Why?

He had loved Siouland. He had wanted it. He had tried to tie himself to an alien past, to the old Moond Builders, to the Sioux, to the heroes Jesse James and Buckskin Teddy. To Cyclops and Ulysses even. What was wrong?

Ae, he had tried to catch his anchor into the soils, had tried to get his roots down so deep that neither the wind nor flood, heat nor cold, could ever tear him out again . . . and had failed.

Did a man have to die before he became a part of the old lady earth? Did a man's land work easier after it had been sweetened with the dust of his blood and brains?

Pier stood up and shivered. Life was a double task here on the new prairies. A man had to fight the Alde Han, the elements; a man had to get his roots into the soil, earn his birthright. A double task. Ae. (p. 611; ellipses are Manfred's)

Pier is not equal to the double task. Instead, he is split, divided. He has sought to disassociate himself from his Frisian past in an effort to be truly American.¹⁷ In the process he has lost the sense of family identity and continuity that would prompt him to treat his aged parents with respect and affection. His efforts to identify with the heroes of the past come too late, for he is alien, alone. As he wanders through the empty rooms of his home for the last time, the ground gives beneath him; the erosion he has failed to check breaks the house asunder. Walking away from the house, he turns for one last look; the house his father had built "lay cleaved beneath the skies" (p. 614).¹⁸ So ends the pioneer's dream. Like Poe's House of Usher, the house of Frixen is sinking, reclaimed by the earth. Pier leaves, singing defiantly. He is resilient, and he survives; but his endurance is not the sort that will help him ultimately to prevail. His is but a Pyrrhic victory.¹⁹

These three writers, Rolvaag, Winther, and Manfred, have addressed in various ways the relationship between man and the earth in the context of a pioneering midwestern American experience. They all share in affirming an agrarian love for the land; yet none portrays a clearly victorious ending. Indeed, in various ways, each points toward alienation from the land. The most optimistic of the three, Winther, shows that the values of the father can be passed on to the son, but that son will work out his

own vision that he plans to leave the midwest in search of a new life farther west (III, 265). Per Hansa's son, Peder, may remain for a time on the family farm; but both his marriage and his hopes for a political role in the destiny of his agrarian region are shattered;²⁰ like Manfred's Pier, he really has no place to go. All these male protagonists experience defeat. Except for Winther's Meta, their wives seem to thwart the realization of their dreams and contribute to their fate. Failures with the land are paralleled by failures in love.

But these writers also join in affirming a western frontier spirit--a spirit of rugged individualism marked by courage, fortitude, and love of freedom. Here, however, the affirmation is far more ambivalent, for freedom can mean alienation, solitude, and a false assumption of limitless possibilities. A frontier psychology assumes that one can always go someplace else; failure can be blamed on circumstances--an economic system, the weather, other people; the rugged individual can pick himself up and begin again elsewhere. But what happens if there is no place to go? One can argue endlessly the pros and cons of Turner's frontier thesis. Undoubtedly it is simplistic. But whether one juggles with dates and places, as Walter Prescott Webb and others have done; or whether one uses a mythical perspective, as Robin Winks does when he says that some countries have appropriated a frontier concept because they needed it--however one turns the question, there does seem to be something valid in the thesis: we once had a frontier, but we don't have it now. With our shift away from frontierism come new ways of looking at the individual. Perhaps it would not be too far afield to suggest that Freudian psychology may be another product of the frontier era. To Freud, neurosis arises from the suppression of instinct; civilization is "founded on the suppression of instincts. . . . Every individual is virtually an enemy of civilization." The work of more contemporary psychologists seems to chart new directions that may be more atune to a frontierless society: man's basic need is "good personal relationship"; society is regarded as "the normal expression of man's needs to relate to others, while the family is the context in which individual potentialities are fostered."²¹

Rolvaag, Winther, and Manfred write from a frontier perspective. Yet they all see that physical conquest and movement in space are not necessarily modes of victory. Each writer in various ways make us look inward for the source and the solution to our problems. In so doing, they point the way for individual growth in a frontierless era.

University of Idaho

NOTES

¹Henry Nash Smith defined and described these myths in his pioneering study, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950). Other critics have built upon Smith's work. For a recent study of the two conflicting myths see Jay Curran, *Western American Writing: Tradition and Promise* (Deland, Florida: Everett/Edwards, 1975).

²See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XIX, and J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, Letter III.

³Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), in *The Frontier in American History*, ed. Ray A. Riddington (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), pp. 2-4, 37.

⁴References, cited in the text, are to the following: O. E. Rolvaag, *Civets in the Earth*, Perennial Classic Edition (1927; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Sophus Keith Winther, *Take All to Nebraska* (New York: Macmillan, 1937); *Mortgage Tout Heart* (New York: Macmillan, 1937); *This Passion Never Dies* (New York: Macmillan, 1936); volume numbers refer to the novels in order of publication; Feike Feikema [Frederick Manfred], *This Is The Year* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1947).

⁵*Complete Works of Frank Norris* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1967), II, 14. See also Norris' essay, "The Literature of the West: A Reply to W. R. Lighton," in *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. Donald Pizer (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1964), pp. 104-07. Per Hansa does differ somewhat from the exploiting Adventurers of Norris: unlike them, he has a love for the land and does not consciously exploit it.

⁶"The Fictional Heart of the Country: From Rolvaag to Gass," in *Ole Rolvaag: Artist and Cultural Leader*, ed. Gerald Thorson (Northfield, Minn.: St. Olaf College Press, 1975), p. 3.

⁷O. E. Rolvaag, *Peder Victorious*, Perennial Classic Edition (1929; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 169.

⁸See pp. 443, 445, 451. Beret is less optimistic than Hans Olea and Sorine, for she states that God will forgive if one tries to do the impossible but fails. Nonetheless, she seems to be reasonably confident that Per Hansa can do the "impossible"; her attitude contrasts dramatically with her earlier resentment when others urged Per Hansa to do things for them which they felt only he could do.

⁹For other affirmations of agrarian values see II, 232, 271.

¹⁰For further discussion of the Americanization of the Crimsens see my essay, "Duality and the Dream in S. K. Winther's Crimsen Trilogy," *Prarie Schooner*, 49 (Winter 1975-76), 311-19.

¹¹For a provocative study of the frontiersman character with emphasis on the negative traits, see Anhur K. Moore, *The Frontier Mind: A Cultural Analysis of the Kentucky Frontiersman* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1957).

¹²Winther has affirmed a naturalistic philosophy in many conversations, lectures, and letters. He carefully explicates the relevance of determinism to tragic drama in his *Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study* (New York: Random House, 1934), and Desmond Powell has noted that Winther's naturalistic philosophy gives unity to his fiction in "Sophus Winther: The Crimsen Trilogy," *American-Scandinavian Review*, 36 (June, 1948), 144-47.

¹³Moore, pp. 23-29.

¹⁴"The Frontier Gone at Last," in *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, p. 111.

¹⁵Cf. p. 54: "the country had been full of evil. It had not made man prosperous or happy. . . . The land was a woman, treacherous, touched, bewitched."

¹⁶Manfred has said of Pier, "he learns the lesson that you have to become a piece of the earth. Son of the earth. Not a destroyer of the earth. A son of the earth. Like a son loves his mother. You have to live with it and love it and protect it. . . . He isn't a lover of (the earth or his wife) until it is almost too late. Of course, he at the end says his heart is still green and he will pick up again somewhere else." *Conversations with Frederick Manfred*, ed. John R. Milton (Salt Lake City: Univ. of Utah Press, 1974), pp. 87, 89. I am not convinced that Pier has changed for the better: he has survived, unchanged, too many times in the past. Although the closing scene leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to what Pier should have learned, he still wonders, he is defiant, even cheerful. I asked Manfred

about his comments on Pier, and he acknowledged that Pier hasn't learned very much. (It should be noted that John Milton asked him a leading question in *Conversations*.) In a letter written after this essay was completed, Manfred clarifies his conception of Pier: "I wanted to show a rather noble fellow named Pier who was asked to come to terms with a 'new place' with a learning that was inadequate. At the end he at least has his wits left and perhaps in the next phase, next life, such as him will finally have 'learning' enough to handle living in a 'place.' There is a hint that his son has learned. And by learning I don't mean book learning, I mean life learning. It is supposed to be a tragedy. From the moment you meet him you know he is doomed not to make it in that place." (Manfred to Meldrum, May 27, 1977)

¹⁷Pier tries to reject his father's old country ways of farming (p. 9) and old country heroic tales (pp. 189-90). But, like Rolvaag's Peder who finds he is more Norwegian than he ever dreamed, Pier is like his father and repeats the patriarchal pattern.

¹⁸The cleavered house recalls the death of Pier's father: cut in half by a saw that flies away from its mounting (p. 271). Pier's father refuses to adjust to the new machines; ignoring the machine can be fatal, for he should have known not to stand in front of it. Neither Pier's nor his father can "think" in the ways demanded by prairie life. Only Pier's son, Ted, reveals that ability to "think"; hope for the future rests with him, but Manfred chooses to focus on Pier's fate, not on Ted's promise.

¹⁹I have alluded to comparisons with Guthrie's *The Big Sky* and Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher," both tragic tales of American literature. Manfred's tale is also a tragedy, but of a very different sort: his hero is even cheerful in the face of disaster, and he expects to begin again, elsewhere. The overall theme is tragic, but the tone is not. Perhaps however, Manfred's kind of tragedy is even more truly "American" than that of Poe or Guthrie (authors who rely on more traditional tragic modes). Manfred's hero is typically American in thinking he can go someplace else and "make it", perhaps he will, and American resilience, even after Watergate, amazes foreigners more than ourselves). But the possibilities of self-fulfillment elsewhere are doubtful, and Pier's lack of insight is in itself tragic: he is another "innocent" American.

²⁰See Rolvaag, *Their Father's God* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), pp. 330-38.

²¹David Holbrook, "R. D. Laing and the Death Circuit," *Encounter*, 31, No. 2 (1968), 37-38. Holbrook quotations are from Freud and Harry Guntrip.