Having once surveyed the scholarship on Larry McMurtry, I knew that the maturation theme in his works had been touched in a number of significant articles. Yet much more could be said. As I was catching up on recent McMurtry scholarship, I found to my pleasure a sound critical study, Charles Peavy’s *Larry McMurtry* for the Twayne U.S. Authors Series. The find was a mixed blessing, however, for I quickly discovered that Mr. Peavy’s coverage of the maturation theme is most thorough, leaving few of my observations about the book to be new. It therefore became my intention to comment on several significant contributions made by Peavy and then to move to several insights of my own.

Particularly significant as new contributions to McMurtry studies are passages from interviews that McMurtry has granted and draft versions of many of his novels. These new contributions are used by Peavy in two important sections of his work dealing with *The Last Picture Show*. In his second chapter, “McMurtry’s Novels,” he accurately characterizes the novel’s action as centered on “the sexual adventures and misadventures of Sonny Crawford as he struggles toward maturity in the emotionally crippling environs of Thalia.” Peavy clearly identifies the plot as “concerned with the rites of passage of Sonny Crawford and his friend, Duane Jackson.” In the summary and analysis of the plot, Peavy identifies a significant correspondence between the novel and traditional rites of passage: the presence in Sam the Lion and Genevieve of surrogate parents, who give in the one case fatherly advice and strict admonitions and in the other “motherly concern and affection.” Such connections are further explored in Chapter Three “Major Themes in McMurtry’s Fiction,” in which Peavy suggests:

The main action of the novel is concerned with the emergence into manhood of a high school senior, Sonny Crawford. His sophistication (or loss of innocence), as well as that of his peer group, is accomplished through sex. It is...
through the medium of sex that the inhabitants of Thalia seek (and find) their identity. In this assertion Peavy has put the major concern in his exploration for rites of passage on the sexual. There is no denying the heavy emphasis on sexual experiences of all kinds, involving many characters, as fundamental experience in the lives of the youths of Thalia. Nevertheless, if the novel has significance in its treatment of the rites of passage, it should deal with more than sexual experience. It is the concentration on the sexual, I think, which leads Peavy to regard The Last Picture Show as less successful than the earlier McMurtry novels, Horseman, Pass By and Leaving Cheyenne, especially in characterization. Admitting that the characterization of the older women in Sonny's life (Genevieve and Ruth) does have "subtle nuance," Peavy concludes his treatment of themes in the first three novels by the following assessment of McMurtry's early work:

The themes of loneliness and lost love recur in McMurtry's novels, but the most important theme in the first three novels is the male protagonist's achievement of manhood (with its accompanying loss of innocence). These males are accompanied in their rites of passage by women who are older or, as in the case of Molly in Leaving Cheyenne, more sophisticated in their emotional maturity. Clearly, to him Sonny's rite of passage is sexual in nature, especially in his affair with Ruth Popper. Peavy insists at the same time that McMurtry is not guilty in the book of overemphasizing the role of sex in small town life, especially in the lives of young people: "Some of McMurtry's sexual scenes are high symbolic, all are important thematically, and none should be taken as sensational."

Unfortunately, Peavy does not give any justification for this assessment. Before turning to the non-sexual experiences in Sonny's maturation, I want to consider this issue of sensationalism in the novel. For while it is true that a novel of maturation should have more than the sexual for a basis, the sexual should be seen as believable, as an integral part of the character's experience and not as exploitation by the writer. I concur totally with Peavy's judgment that the sexual experiences in the novel are accurate. Having passed my own adolescence in a small ranching and oil town of Texas in the 1950's, I was struck from my first reading of the book by the accuracy of McMurtry's capturing of the atmosphere of such towns and the poignancy of Sonny's sexual encounters. Concurrent with the first awakening of sex within me and many of my peers was the acquiring of an almost mythical name, Bila. That name, spoken secretly and with mysteriously dirty significance, conjured up notions of sex for youngsters having only the faintest notion of what
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sexual intercourse actually was. Gradually as more and more of us
passed through puberty, the name took on a clearer significance.
Bila was the woman with whom some had, or claimed to have had,
their first sexual experience. That Bila was a social outcast, a Mexi­
prostitute, made the experience all the more an adventure. The
presence of Bila in my home town experience makes the Jimmie Sue
episode (in which Duane and his friends try, over Sonny’s objec­
tions, to introduce Billy to sex) an accurate picture of first sex. In
Luling, Texas, my home, the next sexual episode for a young man
was usually in the back seat of a car on Davis Hill—similar to
Sonny’s episodes with Charlene Duggs in the pickup truck. If not on
Davis Hill the young men of Luling sought sex in a most convenient
brothel some fifty miles distant in LaGrange. This is the “Chicken
Ranch” now made famous by Texan Larry King in an article for
Playboy and in the delightful musical “The Best Little Whorehouse
in Texas.” Sonny and Duane’s experiences in the houses of Wichita
Falls are cold and impersonal; the LaGrange experiences seem less
so, but that may have more to do with the general mythologizing
that has been done about the “Chicken Ranch.” For example, Miss
Edna, the madam of the house, called Miss Mona in King’s musical,
frequently turned away young men who arrived too drunk to
behave according to her rules of conduct. She once turned away a
ear load of freshmen from the University of Texas, saying, “Now ya’ll
go on back home, and come back anytime you’re sober enough to en­
joy yourselves.” For a seamier if more exotic adventure than
LaGrange, young men of Luling headed to the border cities of
Mexico, just as Sonny and Duane do in their long trip to Matamoros.
The bars and prostitutes of Boys Town in numerous Mexican cities
gave Luling youth an introduction to pornography not so readily
available as in American cities today. Like the Thalia boys, Luling’s
found the trip home from Mexico to be an almost unendurable com­
bination of hangover and fear of veneral disease.

One last personal reminiscence seems necessary even if unsavory in order to establish that the sexual scenes of The Last Picture
Show are not unrealistic. On an evening in the Spring in the late fif­
ties, some fifty feet from one of the busiest highways in the nation,
U.S. 90, more than twenty young men are reported to have stood in
line outside the men’s room of a service station, passing from one to
another the condom used for sexual intercourse with a girl lying in­
side on sacks of feed. Little surprise then that nothing in McMurtry’s
novel seems gratuitous sensationalism to me.

If these examples suffice, Peavy’s assessment of the sexual scenes
in the novel is valid. To be successful literature of rites of passage must have such correspondence for its readers. Beyond such correspondence, successful portrayals of the rites of passage must do more—must deal with features which go beyond the sexual awakening of the maturing individual. The mythological components of rites of passage are certainly more complex. If Sonny is indeed undergoing such rites, the reader should be able to see changes in him, new stages of his development, new insights which have come to him from the older and presumably wiser individuals with whom he comes in contact.

In his excellent article on the initiation themes in McMurtry’s works, Kenneth W. Davis cites Mordecai Marcus and Ibah Hassan for definitions of initiation in fiction. He is interested most particularly in Marcus’s use of the concepts of tentative, uncompleted, and decisive initiations. These evaluations he applies to several types of initiations undergone by McMurtry’s young heroes: sexual initiation, physical-challenge initiation, and initiation through encounters with death. In judging Sonny’s experiences, Davis finds the sexual initiation to be “characterized by overlapping of the uncompleted and the decisive types.” More clearly decisive is the initiation undergone by Sonny in encountering death, twice, through the loss of Sam and Billy:

Sonny Crawford, at last, has experienced through a violent encounter with death, a decisive initiation which reveals to him a devastating vision of the impersonal cruelty of a fate which can strike down an innocent victim such as Billy.

This discussion by Davis puts proper emphasis on the non-sexual initiation experiences in Sonny’s life as being the more significant, or at least the more indicative that Sonny has indeed made a passage from the one stage of awareness to another. I think it necessary to explore the non-sexual initiation one step more. Davis’s work deals with the initiation through the death of Sam and Billy, but he does not deal with the role of Sam as initiator. Peavy in his work labels Sam the Lion the father figure in Sonny’s life, the surrogate father to replace Sonny’s own weak and ineffectual parent. To be seen as the type of figure described by authorities of mythological structuring, Sam needs further definition.

To get at the role I see for Sam in Sonny’s initiation or rite of passage, I want to consider some insights provided by two prominent spokesmen on myths and their symbolic importance in the life and literature of man. Erich Neumann, the brilliant disciple of Karl Jung, details the role of rite in the education of young males by their
Literature of rites of passage has been used to define and create new insights which have come through a variety of sources. Beyond such core aspects of the rites of passage must come the sexual awakening and the initiation. So many societies have ritual rites including the rites of passage which must do some specific thing. The literature of rites of passage may include some specific function of the rites of passage in society. The rites of passage are often used in the development of masculinity and of the individual's consciousness of himself, but for the development of culture as a whole.

This horizontal organization of age groups obviates personal conflict in the sense of a hostile father-son relationship, because the terms "father" and "son" connote group characteristics and not personal relations. The Older men are "fathers," the young men "sons," and this collective group-solidarity is paramount. Conflicts, so far as they exist at all, are between the age groups and have a collective and archetypal, rather than a personal and individual, character. The initiations enable the young men to rise in the scale and to perform various functions within the group. The trials of endurance are tests of the utility and stability of the ego, they are not to be taken personologically as the "vengeance of the old" upon the young, any more than our matriculation is the vengeance of old men upon the rising generation, but merely a certificate of maturity for entry into the collective. In almost all cases, age brings an increase in power and importance based on the increased knowledge gained through successive initiations, so that the old men have little cause for resentment. 44

Neumann's interest is centered on the father-son relationship existing between tribal elders and the young males to be initiated. He goes on to probe the elements of character, which in addition to physical elements, initiation rites were meant to improve:

Fire and other symbols of wakefulness and alertness play an important part in the rites of initiation, where the young men have to "wake and walk," i.e., learn to conquer the body and the rites of the unconscious by fighting against it. Keeping awake and the endurance of fear, hunger, and pain go together as essential elements in fortifying the ego and schooling the will. Also, instruction and initiation into the traditional lore are as much part of the rites as the proofs of will power that have to be given. The criterion of readiness is an undaunted will, the steady ability to defend the ego and consciousness should need arise, and to master one's unconscious impulses and childish fears. Even today the initiation rites of primitives still have the character of an initiation into the secret world of the masculine spirit. Whether this spirit lies hidden in the stock of ancestral myths, in the laws and ordinances of the collective, or in the sacraments of religion, is all one. They are all expressions, differing in rank and degree, of the same masculine spirit which is the specific property of the male group. 45

The major function of tribal elders is identified by Neumann as instruction in the values of the tribe. Initiation becomes the method for such instruction. Neumann writes:

"The fathers" are the representatives of law and order, from the earliest taboos to the most modern juridical systems, they hand down the highest values of civilization, whereas the mothers control the highest, i.e., deepest, values of life and nature. The world of the fathers is thus the world of collective values; it is historical and related to the fluctuating level of conscious and cultural develop-
The prevailing system of cultural values, i.e., the canons of values which give a culture its peculiar physiognomy and its stability, has its roots in the fathers, the grown men who represent and reinforce the religious, ethical, political, and social structure of the collective.

These fathers are the guardians of masculinity and the supervisors of all education. That is to say, their existence is not merely symbolical; as pillars of the institutions that embody the cultural canons, they provide the upbringing of each individual and certify his coming of age. It makes no difference how this cultural canon is constituted - whether laws and rules be those of a tribe of head-hunters or of a Christian nation. Always the fathers see to it that the current values are impressed upon the young people, and that such those who have identified themselves with those values are included among the adults. The advocacy of the canons of values inherited from the fathers and enforced by education manifests itself in the psychic structure of the individual as "conscience." * (Neumann p 172-3)

To explore more particular information about the manner in which rites of passage serve man and his society, I wish to cite several passages from one of the most famous of the critics of myth, Joseph Campbell. According to him:

The tribal ceremonies of birth, initiation, marriage, burial, installation, and so forth, serve to translate the individual's life-experiences into classic, inspirational forms. They disclose him to himself, not as this personality or that, but as the warrior, the bride, the sage, the priest, the chieftain; at the same revealing for the rest of the community, the essence of life and death and the circle of the individual stages. All participate in the ceremonial according to rank and function. The whole society becomes visible to itself as an imperishable living unit. Generations of individuals pass like anonymous cells from a living body, but the sustaining, timeless form remains. By an enlargement of vision to embrace this super-individual, each discovers himself enhanced, enriched, supported, and magnified. His role, however minute, is seen to be intrinsic to the beautiful festival-image of man—the image, potential yet necessarily initiated, within himself. **

Frequently for the individual to discover his role a guide is necessary. Campbell sees the function of that guide as comparable to that in modern society of the psychoanalyst:

His role is precisely that of the Wise Old Man of the myths and fairy tales whose words assist the hero through the trials and terrors of the world adventure. He is the one who appears and points to the magic shining sword that will kill the dragon-terror, tells of the waiting bride and the castle of many treasures, applies healing balm to the almost fatal wounds, and finally dismisses the conqueror, back into the world of normal life, following the great adventure to the enchanted knight.***

From these discussions of certain initiation figures I would like to merge several into a composite that will serve for the pattern of Sam. The older men of the tribe, the Elders described by Neumann as "the fathers," must pass on the important spiritual elements of their society to the young men. The Wise Old Man described by Campbell
gives magic words or signs to the younger being guided. Taken together these two figures become the Wise Elder. This image is apt for Sam the Lion.

The single most interesting scene in the novel to be considered for its ritualistic patterning is the trip to the stock tank. The fishing trip, like Hemingway's symbolic journey for Nick in "Big Two-Hearted River," places the initiate in nature, near the source of redeeming, purifying water. The brown water of a large stock tank is hardly a pure, or purifying, source, until it is seen in contrast to the deadness of the landscape around Sonny:

The gray patterns and the distant brown ridges looked too empty. He himself felt too empty. As empty as he felt and as empty as a country looked it was too risky going out (into it—he might be blown around for days like a broomweed in the wind. (p. 217)"

Out in the open country the norther gusted strongly across the highway, making the truck hard to hold. Once in a while a big ragweed would shake loose from the barbed-wire fences and skitter across the road, only to catch again in the barbed-wire fence on the other side. The dry grass in the pastures was gray-brown, and the deadless winter mesquite gray-black .... Except for a few sand-scraped ranch houses there was nothing to see but a long succession of low brown ridges, with the wind singing over them .... Sonny sometimes got the funny feeling that he was driving the old truck around and around in a completely empty place. (pp. 15-16)

The contrasting mood at the tank is immediately apparent.

Sonny was stretched out on his stomach in the Bermuda grass along the base of the tank dam. The May sun on his back was so warm that it made him drowsy, and he was almost asleep .... (p. 121)

Very central to the ritual to be played out in this natural haven for Sonny is the presence of his Wise Elder. Just as Ike McCaslin in Faulkner's "The Bear" has a spiritual guide in Sam Fathers, so Sonny has in Sam the Lion. That Sam is his leader is established in a most unusual act with phallic symbolic import—an act of imitation. Sam urinates from the edge of the stock tank, "watering the grass" he calls it. Soon Sonny follows:

In a moment he himself had the urge to water the grass in the way that Sam had, and he walked to the edge of the dam to do it. He felt warm and well and was fairly pleased by the spirit of his own water, even stretching himself a little to see if he could send a stream all that way to the foot of the dam. (p. 122)

Realizing that Sam has seen him, Sonny is at first embarrassed and then puzzled by Sam's reaction. The older man is reduced to tears from laughing and then he curses his old age. Because Sonny continues to be puzzled by these actions, Sam explains:

"I'll tell you what it was, son," he said, looking at Sonny a little carefully. "Seeing you pissing off the dam reminded me of something . . . . Reason I always drag
you all out here probably—I'm just as sentimental as anybody else when it comes
to old times. What you reminded me of happened twenty years ago—I thought a
young lady swimming here. . . . We come out here swimming one day without
our bathing suits and after we got out of the water I walked off up there to pin. (p.
123)

In doing so, Sam accepted the lady's bet that he couldn't reach the
water at the bottom of the dam, the target Sonny had tried to reach.
In trying to find out more, Sonny learns only that the incident was
felt by Sam to have been a craziness, as he calls it, to which he ad­
mits he might succumb again if the lady were available. He wonders
if such craziness is being ridiculous, concluding finally:

"It isn't, really," he said. "Being crazy about a woman like her's always the right
thing to do. Being a decrepit old bag of bones is what's ridiculous." (p. 124)

With the subject of such love before them, Sam turns their conversa­
tion to Sonny's affair with Ruth Popper:

"I don't exactly know what to do about her," Sonny said hopefully.
Sam the Lion laughed almost as loudly as he had on the tank dam.
"Don't look at me for advice," he said. "I never know exactly what to do
about anybody, least of all women. You might stay with her and get some good
out of her while you're growing up. Somebody ought to get some good out of
Ruth." (pp. 124-5)

In this very important passage Sam has served as a Wise Elder for
Sonny, whether he has intended to or not. In this important isolated
spot, he has pointed out Sonny's imitation of his own actions. First
in the act of urination from the dam and then in having a secret and
"crazy" love. Before the two leave the discussion of such secrets, Sam
gives Sonny a piece of information that can be identified as the kind
of information the Wise Elder often passes to an initiate—an evalua­
tion of the value of life, enigmatic as the statement may be.

"Is growing up always miserable?" Sonny said. "Nobody seems to enjoy it
much."

"Oh, it isn't necessarily miserable," Sam replied. "About eighty percent of
the time, I guess." (p. 124)

This scene rather dramatically reveals an initiation pattern, the
passing of important insight from the Wise Elder to the initiate.
Whether or not Sonny, as initiate, has learned from the information
is a question best answered in examining his response to Ruth in the
final scene of the novel.

Before dealing with that important passage, I should point out
that the Sam-Sonny relationship later follows the pattern of a Wise
Elder and initiate when Sonny assumes the role of Elder after the
death of Sam. It is Sonny who takes on Sam's guardianship of the
mentally retarded Billy. When Billy is killed by a truck, it is Sonny
sentimental as anybody else when it comes happened twenty years ago— I brought a come out here swimmin' one day without the water I walked off up there to piss. (p.

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In the act of returning Billy to the picture show, Sonny has placed him as it were on an altar. Sonny has performed an important ritual act, showing that he has. if only instinctively, taken over some of Sam's functions.

To see if he has also assumed some of the wisdom of Sam such as that conveyed in the incident at the stock tank, it is necessary to consider Sonny's final return to Ruth. During the early stages of their affair, Sonny is surprised—then satisfied—that this older woman takes great satisfaction in having him as her lover. But Sonny shows little concern, little care for her as a person.

He does illustrate some guilt feelings when he will not participate with the young boys who copulate with the little blind heifer.

I had something to do with Mrs. Popper, though he was not certain put what. It didn't seem right to kiss Mrs. Popper and still fiddle around with heifers, blind or not. He suddenly felt like he had graduated, and it was an uneasy feeling. (p. 88)

After Jaey shows an interest in Sonny, he is easily drawn away from Ruth, but he has a gnawing sense of guilt, as he and Jaey drive out to the lake.

It was exactly what Sonny wanted to do, but as he drove there his uneasiness increased. The thought of Ruth popped into his mind—They had seen each other that very afternoon, and had had an ardent, sweaty, good time.
Driving to the lake, it occurred to him that in a way he was hounded to Ruth, but with Jacy sitting close beside him, light-voiced, her hair fragrant, her arm cool, it was hard to keep Ruth in mind. (p. 179)

Once Jacy has Sonny convinced of her love for him Ruth is excluded from Sonny’s life but not his conscience:

After the first date with Jacy he did not once go back to Ruth’s. He could not have faced her. At times he missed her, and he often missed making love to her, but he did not go back. Sometimes in the middle of the night he would wake up and feel nervous and ashamed. Late at night he could not help facing the fact that he had treated Ruth shamefully and probably hurt her very much... It wasn’t right and it made him feel terrible, but at the same time he knew he wasn’t going to quit going with Jacy. He was being unfair to Ruth, but what he felt for Jacy was beyond fairness. He had a chance to have something he had always wanted, and he wasn’t going to pass the chance up... All the same, he hated being the cause of Ruth’s suffering. The only way he knew how to handle it was just not to go near her, or to say anything to her, or to try to justify what he had done. (p. 180)

Subsequently, when Gene Farrow has broken up the marriage of Sonny and Jacy, Lois points out to him that he has been foolish: “You’d have been a lot better off to stay with Ruth Popper.” (p. 197) Later as she and Sonny have made love, Lois tells him to stop worrying about how much he is worth to the woman, to stop having an inferiority complex about himself. Instead he should concentrate on how much worth he is to himself. When he appears saddened by the conversation, Lois asks:

“Why do you look so sad? You’re fine, Sonny.”
“I was just thinking of Mrs. Popper,” he said. “I guess I treated her terrible.”
“I guess you did,” Lois said. (p. 201)

After Billy’s death, Sonny, with no apparent motivation, returns to Ruth’s house. Her angry outburst, including hurling Sonny’s cup of coffee against the wall, shocks him especially when she concludes by accusing him of mistreating those closest to him:

“I guess just because your friend got killed you want me to forget what you did and make it all right. I’m not sorry for you! You would have left Billy too, just like you left me. I bet you left him plenty of nights whenever Jacy whistled. I wouldn’t treat a dog that way but that’s the way you treated me, and Billy too.” (p. 218)

Sonny had not thought of himself as deserting Billy, and he doesn’t try to respond, defend, or excuse himself. Instead he experiences relief in having her so mad at him. He reaches for her hand, as if to resume the relationship as though nothing had happened. Ruth thinks to herself that after all that he had done to her had been because he was only a boy. Summoning strength from within her, she resolves to go through the experiences again, even if they must...


The words don't come to her. She can only say, in the moving words that end the novel, "Never you mind, honey... never you mind." (p. 220)

Is this a scene that establishes any sense of maturity in Sonny? Certainly Ruth's characterization of him as a boy undercuts any estimation of his maturity. The sign of his maturity is seen in Ruth's response to him. She has exempted him from the necessity of an apology; yet she knows that he is sorry for what he has done. He has cared for her even if he has not been able to tell her so. He has learned from Sam that love, crazy as it is, is to be treasured. It may well be the twenty per cent of good that comes to each life—if Sam were right in saying that only about 80 per cent of life was miserable. Lois has told him that self worth is the most important thing in love. In returning to Ruth, Sonny is doing what he knew he should do long before. He no longer has a reason to feel ashamed of himself. He has, in returning, expressed his shame to Ruth, suffered her anger, and in taking her hand showed that he can be as Lois advised him, comfortable with himself. Ruth, with great insight, has been willing to take Sonny back, sensing his inability to express in words what he has gone through and what he has learned. In her own inability to say the words that will help Sonny know about life, she has seen how difficult such an effort is. Her final lines, then, exempt him from saying anything. His presence says it all, and he need not "mind" about the words.

From the elders around him, Sonny Crawford has learned enough to undergo many maturing events. He is at the end of the novel, although only a boy, one who has concern for others and who seems to have achieved a sense of self worth that stems from doing the right thing in a relationship with another person. The crucial act for Sonny is to resume his relationship with Ruth, not because there is no other relationship, but because Sam, Genevieve, and Lois have all shown him that there is something in the relationship for both of them—that Ruth deserves some good in life, maybe even the 20 per cent of good that a relationship with a silly boy will bring. At least
he by grasping her hand shows that the relationship is still alive for him. That is enough for Ruth. She has a sense of the change that has taken place in Sonny— he has learned to see the little good in life and to see the worth in accepting that little good from Ruth. He has through his Wise Elder Sam experienced a significant rite of passage.

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NOTES

"The following are the most significant articles on McMurtry's use of rites of passage:


Charles D. Peavy, "Coming of Age in the Southwest: The Novels of Larry McMurtry," Western American Literature, 4 (Fall 1969), 181-198.


Peavy, p. 36

Peavy, p. 30

Peavy, p. 35

Peavy, p. 53

Peavy, p. 50. In this statement Peavy is more generous than Landis who writes that the "characters are largely given to stereotypes. Landles, p. 28 (see note 1 above). Landles is particularly upset by the aftermath of sexual pursuit in the lives of Saints and Daane immediately after the death of Sam the Loan, concluding that "we would have to conclude that the failure to dramatize the meaning of such an important event is responsible..." Landles, p. 28.

Landles, p. 34

Landles, p. 35

Landles, p. 33 (see note 1 above).

"Doxas, p. 33.

"Doxas, p. 42.

"Ibid.


"Saxton, p. 132.


"Campbell, pp. 9-10.

"Larry McMurtry, The Last Picture Show, (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1976). All subsequent references are to this paperback edition and are noted in the text by page reference. I have chosen to use the paperback edition for the convenience of the many who may find that the original Dell Press edition is unavailable.