

NOTE ON THE THEME OF COLLECTIVE GUILT
IN WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

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The situation at the end of Wills Cather's short story, "The Sculptor's Funeral," has elements the reader of short fiction with western American settings may find familiar. The setting here is Sand City, Kansas, where the townspeople have gathered in the dining room of the Merrick house for the wake of Harvey Merrick, the sculptor of the title. After achieving great fame in the East, the sculptor has returned to his birthplace to be buried. While he lies dead in the parlor, he is being figuratively anatomized--criticized spitefully and mercilessly--in the dining room, until his boyhood friend, the lawyer Jim Laird, leaves his vigil by the coffin and enters the room where the townspeople are speaking ill of the dead. Jim Laird is a drunk, but the townspeople are afraid of him because of the sharpness of his tongue, which he uses effectively, but not necessarily honorably, in the courtroom. Laird proceeds to blast in turn the bankers Phelps and Elder, the old army veteran, the real-estate man, the cattleman, and the others who have been criticizing Harvey Merrick because he was never a shrewd horse trader, never made a lot of money, and just generally came shy of the town's idea of a great man. Laird asks them why it is "that reputable young men are as scarce as millionaires in Sand City." Then he tells them why:

Because you drummed nothing but money and knavery into their ears from the time they wore knickerbockers; because you carped away at them as you've been carping here tonight, holding our friends Phelps and Elder up to them for their models, as our grandfathers held up George Washington and John Adams. But the boys were young, and raw at the business you put them to, and how could they match coppers with such artists as Phelps and Elder? You wanted them to be successful rascals; they were only unsuccessful ones--that's all the difference. There was only one boy ever raised in this borderland between ruffianism and civilization who didn't come to grief, and you hated Harvey Merrick more for winning out than you hated all the other boys who got under the wheels.¹

This scene, in which one somewhat alienated figure berates his townsmen and makes clear to them their collective guilt for a great wrong, echoes in theme other examples of western American short fiction. For instance, though other circumstances are quite different in Stephen Crane's "The Blue Hotel," the setting--Fort Romper, Nebraska--and the concluding scene have much in common with the Cather story. At the end of "The Blue Hotel," a character identified only as the Easterner argues that the story's climactic event--the killing of a Swede--is not the fault of the gambler who actually stabbed him but a collective act for which the whole group

present that night is guilty. The Easterner refers to the fact that the evening's festivities began with a card game, an accusation of cheating, and a fight:

Johnnie was cheating. I saw him. I know it. And I refused to stand up and be a man. I let the Swede fight it out alone. And you--you were simply puffing around the place and wanting to fight. And then old Scully himself! We are all in it! This poor gambler isn't even a noun. He is kind of an adverb. Every sin is the result of a collaboration. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede. Usually there are from a dozen to forty women really involved in every murder, but in this case it seems to be only five men--you, I, Johnnie, old Scully; and that fool of an unfortunate gambler came merely as a culmination, the apex of a human movement, and gets all the punishment.²

The resemblance suggests a connection between the two stories, some traceable influence of the Crane story, published just before the turn of the century, on the Cather story, published in 1905. We know of Cather's meeting with Crane when he was in Lincoln and of the impression he made on her. An article she wrote about him between the publication dates of the two stories attests to his personal influence.³ But the resemblance between the two scenes is much less substantial than one of identical situations or plot elements; it is only a thematic similarity having to do with collective guilt. Yet it is legitimate to ask how frequently the theme shows up in western fiction, and other questions suggest themselves as well. What is its pedigree? Is it a theme specific to western literature? Does its presence say anything about the worth of the work in which it occurs?

Other examples of the theme are not hard to find. In the same genre, and perhaps the only instance where the theme is used comically (though still with tragic overtones) is Twain's "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg." Here the townspeople's dishonesty and meanness are exposed in a public gathering where the citizens are forced to hear--and to acknowledge--that it might indeed be better to go to hell than to Hadleyburg, or that maybe the latter is just a way station on the road to the former. Then they are given a demonstration about untested virtue and a lecture about it by letter from the stranger.

The collective guilt, as in the Twain and Cather stories, need not be over a killing or strictly over a criminal act at all. But in many works it is indeed a killing that inspires the guilt, and often it is a lynching. Walter Van Tilburg Clark's The Ox-Bow Incident is the western novel that comes most readily to mind in this regard. Among movies, John Sturges's Bad Day at Black Rock (1955) has Spencer Tracy uncovering a conspiracy of townspeople in the killing of a Japanese farmer. The movie is set in 1945, but ten years of distancing means that war hysteria recedes and racial strife comes forward as motivation for the murder. The farmer is Japanese, but his story underlines how the theme of collective guilt connects closely with that of racial conscience over the

lynching, slaughtering, and other mistreatment of Indians and blacks.

Since the theme is clearly a tragic one, it seems reasonable to ask whether it has classical tragic origins. Greek tragedy by its nature isolates a single person who suffers for a group perhaps, as Oedipus does in cleansing Thebes, but the guilt is most definitely his rather than that of the polis. When the tragic hero engages in a hubristic struggle with the gods, he does it alone. Citizen choruses indeed sometimes sound like self-righteous posses or even lynch mobs, but they do not act, and only in action, whether deliberate or impulsive, knowing or unknowing, is guilt acquired by the protagonists of tragic drama. There is some exploration in these plays of an element which affects collective guilt in the stories we have looked at--I mean the failure to act to prevent the doing of wrong. Ismene's situation, in Antigone, is a case in point. But she does not acquire the responsibility for Antigone's action (though she tries to do that), nor does she share in Creon's guilt by her initial failure to help her sister. The Greeks certainly dealt with the question of collective moral responsibility, but in political and philosophical treatises rather than in tragedy. And even in a genre that stands between philosophy and tragedy, Plato's Apology, there is no attention paid at all to the thoughts or doubts or those 280 citizens, that Athenian posse, who convicted Socrates. The spotlight is on Socrates, his defense of a way of life and his acknowledgment of the necessity to obey the polis by making a good death. Never does he berate the citizens, as perhaps they deserve, for even being at this trial, which is after all a kind of lynching.

But though there are no classical precedents for the theme of collective guilt, there are precedents in the Old Testament--archetypal episodes in the Genesis stories of Noah, the Tower of Babel, and Lot, and in the golden calf story in Exodus.⁴ In some of these stories the matter is general wickedness rather than collective guilt, but the Tower of Babel and golden calf episodes both involve collusion and cooperative blame. The golden calf story comes closest to those we have been examining in that Moses is a human agent, somewhat alienated, who brings his people to a recognition of their guilt, although in Exodus the people's reformation is an untragic feature that is not found in our western stories. A common feature of the biblical archetypes is the group in transition from one state to another--the end of an era, perhaps the beginning of another, destruction and reformation, if not an actual exodus from one land to another.

It is as if the theme needed a frontier. It is unlikely that the theme is exclusive to literature of the American West. There is something like it in literature of social criticism. Charley's "Nobody dast blame this man" speech at the end of Death of a Salesman is an example; it puts the blame for the destruction of Willy Loman on us, on society. But the responsibility and the guilt is much more diffuse in such examples than in the stories of Cather and especially Crane and Van Tilburg Clark. And certainly the facts of frontier life go a long way toward explaining the frequency of

the theme in western literature. However much the posse may have been a convenience for the sadistic and blood-thirsty impulses of some, it was, in the absence of any regular law enforcement, also a necessity. Communities needed to act in concert for their own protection and perpetuation. Sometimes they tried to perpetuate their own twisted or venal mores as well as order.

But finally there are aspects of the theme of collective guilt which are not tragic but hopeful--about the societies the literature depicts and about the literature itself. The appearance of responsibility and guilt in the social groups in these stories means that individual moral sense and conscience has come to the surface. It has not been overwhelmed or submerged in group action. The mob can only continue to triumph when individual conscience loses itself in mob action and takes no responsibility for what occurs. But individual conscience survives the group action which works toward the anonymity and absolution of each member of the mob. Guilt means recognition that there was a choice, is a choice, will be a choice. It opens the way for morality expressed as the rule of law.

The theme also signals a maturity in western literature in that it internalizes the frontier, this "borderland between ruffianism and civilization" as Laird calls it in the Cather story. The external frontier, where civilization meets the unknown, the chaotic, the savage, and the dangerous, gives way as setting to this meeting place in the human soul.⁵ The adventurous external struggle between order and disorder is transformed into a psychological battle between these elements in each person's psyche. The characters are forced to turn inward and acknowledge of themselves that "this also has been one of the dark places on the earth." In "The Blue Hotel," the Swede is fearful because he knows that "some of these Western communities" are very dangerous. The Easterner thinks he knows the origin of the Swede's fear:

"... it seems to me this man has been reading dime novels, and he thinks he's right in the middle of it--the shootin' and stabbin' and all."

"But," said the cowboy, deeply scandalized, "this ain't Wyoming, ner none of them places. This is Nebrasker."

"Yes," added Johnnie, "an' why don't he wait till he gits out West?"

The travelled Easterner laughed. "It isn't different there even--not in these days. But he thinks he's right in the middle of hell."⁶

At the end of the story the Easterner tries to make the cowboy understand that the dangerous Western community the Swede feared was indeed there all the time, within the five men who become responsible for the Swede's death. In this and other stories, the theme of collective guilt is one way western writers take hold of the frontier that lies within.

NOTES

1. Willa Cather, The Troll Garden (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1905), 77.
2. Stephen Crane, The Open Boat and Other Stories of Adventure (New York: Doubleday & McClure, 1898), 31.
3. The article, which appeared pseudonymously in The Library in June, 1900, was reprinted in Prairie Schooner 23 (1949), 231-36. See also Mildred R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961).
4. I am indebted to Warren French for pointing out the Old Testament Parallels.
5. John Carvelti, The Six-Gun Mystique (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971), 34-36. John Carvelti provides a good discussion of the importance of setting in the western and he summarizes on the importance of the Frontier from Frederick Jackson Turner, Henry Nash, Smith and others.
6. Crane, The Open Boat, 22.