The situation at the end of Willa Cather's short story, "The Sculptor’s Funeral," has elements 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."

This scene, in which one somewhat alienated figure berates his townsman 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

NOTE ON THE THEME OF COLLECTIVE GUILT

IN WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

Michael Cohen
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.

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. But the
resemblance between the two scenes is much less substantial
than one of identical situations or plot elements; it is only
thematically similar 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 thematic 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 intested 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
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lynching, slaughtering, and other mistreatment of Indians and

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 a.t

all to the thoughts or doubts of 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 Towir of Babel, and Lot, and in the golden calf story in

Exodus. 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 reform ation is a

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 dare 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. 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, nor 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."

At the end of the story the Easterner tries to make the cowboy understand that the dangerous Western community the Swede feared was indeed true 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.
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3. The article, which appeared pseudonymously in The Lincoln in June, 1900, was reprinted in Prairie Schooner 23 (1949), 233-35. 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.


6. Crane, The Open Boat, 22.

VIGILANTES

When vigilantes are mentioned, the image is of quick and severe frontier citizen justice being applied to horse thieves. The coming of civilization, however, did not end the vigilantes in Kansas. Bank robberies increased to alarming proportions in the state during the 1920s. The Kansas Banker's Association helped to organize vigilante groups in communities throughout the state. They were armed, trained in marksmanship, and instructed in the correct response to attempted robberies. Some groups were never tested, but some chased and shot bank robbers. There is disagreement on the influence of the vigilantes in curbing bank holdups. Eventually it was concluded that professional law officers were needed to catch professional criminals, and the vigilantes passed into Kansas history.

From PLAINS TALK