

# “ALMOST A WESTERN”: THE DEEP SOUTH AS THE MYTHIC WEST IN WILLIAM GAY’S *THE LONG HOME*

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## ABSTRACT

The essay outlines the workings of the Frontier Myth and shows how it has influenced contemporary southern writers, in this case the Tennessee writer William Gay. Gay is widely regarded as a southern writer, but in his debut novel *The Long Home* (1999) he draws heavily on traits from the American western. The essay discusses how elements of the Western myth fuse with characteristics of the southern Agrarian tradition. The western elements can be found in Gay’s depiction of landscape and characters, as well as in the larger thematic oppositions of civilization and wilderness. Ultimately, Gay succeeds in fusing the literary traditions of the South with the literary and filmic conventions of the popular western, thereby expanding the range of southern fiction.

## KEYWORDS

twentieth-century southern literature; William Gay; the myth of the American West; American TV culture of the 1950s; westerns; masculinity

Tennessee writer William Gay, author of three novels and a collection of short stories, is understandably considered a southern writer, mining the same vein as William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Cormac McCarthy, and Larry Brown. The clear gothic undercurrents in his work, as well as the strong connection to place—always rural Tennessee—certainly link Gay to the southern literary tradition. William Giraldi enrolls Gay alongside Barry Hannah, Cormac McCarthy, and Harry Crews in the renegade pack he calls “the four living horsemen of the Southern apocalypse.”<sup>1</sup>

However, another tradition can be traced in Gay’s work, that of the mythic American West. This is not surprising, given the overarching influence of the Western myth on American culture. The myth is deeply embedded in the American consciousness, as Richard Slotkin asserts: “The terminology of the Myth of the Frontier has become part of our common language, and we do not require an elaborate explanatory program to make it comprehensible.”<sup>2</sup> He furthermore explains that myths are stories drawn from history. By being used over many generations, these stories have acquired “a symbolizing function

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1. William Giraldi, “A World Almost Rotten: The Fiction of William Gay,” *Southern Review* 45, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 331.
  2. Richard Slotkin, “Myth and the Production of History,” in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 72.

central to the culture of the society that produces them . . . they become structural metaphors containing all the essential elements of a culture's world view."<sup>3</sup> Whereas the southerners of the past were intrigued by the opportunities of the actual frontier, today's southern writers must make do with the imaginative powers inherent in the myth of the frontier. But where the literary works of James Fenimore Cooper and Owen Wister inspired and animated a century of literature, a new art form would take over. Richard Slotkin claims, quite rightly, that the Western movie and its television spin-offs of the 1950s and 1960s became "the most prevalent genre of popular-culture narrative."<sup>4</sup> Like the rest of their generation reared on television and Saturday movie matinees, many of today's southern writers have been shaped, unconsciously or not, by the aesthetics of the Western. This is a tendency that Robert Brinkmeyer examined in *Remapping Southern Literature* (2000).<sup>5</sup> But where that book focused on southern writers who placed their fiction in the West, many novels that are placed in the South also display Western influences. The direct manifestation of the Western myth in the Deep South can be found in southern novels by writers such as Barry Hannah, Larry Brown, Lewis Nordan, Chris Offutt, Tom Franklin, Dwayne Sherman, and, as this essay will show, William Gay. All these writers—to some extent—turn their backs on the tired old southern tradition and look westward instead, while keeping their fiction on southern ground. As this essay will demonstrate, Gay remains loyal to the Agrarian tradition of southern literature while fusing it with the tradition of the American Western.

Growing up in the 1940s and 1950s, Gay was infused with the Western, at that time the most popular genre. As Gay put it in an interview, "when I was a kid I was reading so much of other people who [wrote Westerns], like Zane Grey, that I tried" writing Western stories.<sup>6</sup> When asked about the influence of popular Westerns on his own life, William Gay sees a direct link between his work and the Western movies of his youth. He calls *The Long Home* (1999) "almost a Western," and elaborates: "I think in *The Long Home* I was influenced by Western movies that I'd seen, more so than Western novels that I'd read. I've been influenced by a lot of Westerns." Gay especially points out Marlon Brando's *One Eyed Jacks* (1961) as one of his "favorite movies. I've probably been influenced by that . . . the relationship between Marlon Brando and Karl Malden, where Karl Malden is the older guy who steers him wrong, and then he's gonna get revenge on him. I think *One Eyed Jacks* has influenced my stuff. And the movie *Shane* is another one of my favorite movies. I can't see that in my stuff, but it's one of my favorite movies anyway. The idea of a hero or somebody who's uncorrupted or uncorruptible, like *Shane* was."<sup>7</sup>

3. Slotkin, "Myth," 70.

4. Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), xi.

5. See Robert H. Brinkmeyer, *Remapping Southern Literature: Contemporary Southern Writers and the West* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000).

6. Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, personal interview with William Gay, June 7, 2006.

7. Bjerre, personal interview with William Gay.

Central to Gay's fiction is the conflict between traditional values and modern forces, a paradox essential to the Western but also one that writers such as Faulkner and the southern Agrarians recognized and tried to resolve. In other words, he writes out of the strong tradition of America as an Agrarian paradise, as pointed out in Henry Nash Smith's seminal *Virgin Land*. But he is also painfully aware of the "machine in the garden," as Leo Marx has termed the clash between technology and the pastoral ideal.<sup>8</sup> There is certainly a strain of the insistence on community and traditional society as opposed to ruthless progress in Gay's fiction. In this sense, *The Long Home* can be seen as a tribute to a bygone Agrarian era.

One of the seminal elements of the Western is the landscape. John Cawelti argues that what most clearly defines the Western is "the symbolic landscape in which it takes place and the influence this landscape has on the character and actions of the hero." Cawelti sees the symbolic landscape as "a field of action" for the genre's central conflicts.<sup>9</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell adds to the assertion, arguing that the Western is "devoted to the terrain from which it takes its name, focusing the reader's glance on landscapes apparently as numerous as Westerns themselves."<sup>10</sup> The same could be argued of southern fiction, where detailed landscape descriptions are abundant. Attention to local landscapes has formed one of the most distinct trademarks of southern literature, where the importance of place has long been one of the dominant themes.

In *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, Jane Tompkins stresses the crucial importance of the landscape to the Western: "In the Western as in Genesis, the physical world comes first. The only difference is that instead of being created by God, it *is* God," she asserts, and goes on to describe the typical desert Western landscape as

an environment inimical to human beings, where a person is exposed, the sun beats down, and there is no place to hide. But the negations of the physical setting—no shelter, no water, no rest, no comfort—are also its siren song. Be brave, be strong enough to endure this, it says, and you will become like this—hard, austere, sublime. . . . The landscape challenges the body to endure hardship—that is its fundamental message at a physical level. . . . Its spiritual message is the same: come, and suffer.<sup>11</sup>

Mitchell, too, stresses the role of the landscape in Western novels in defining "the moral stature of different characters."<sup>12</sup> When Tompkins's and Mitchell's readings of the Western landscape are applied to Gay's *The Long Home*, it

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8. See Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 229.

9. John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 193.

10. Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 34.

11. Jane P. Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 70–71.

12. Mitchell, *Westerns*, 30.

becomes clear that Gay uses the southern landscape of Tennessee in this Western way.

In *The Long Home*, the landscape surrounding the characters is described as a looming, ever-present force. Not only is it indifferent to people, it might possibly be hostile. A telling passage reveals people as mere puppets in a landscape they have no control over: "The men looked like animated miniatures, unreal, against the muted winter landscape they milled and moved without purpose about one of their number who had fallen and lay unmoving, a puppet unstrung perhaps, or one who had fled at last the exhortations of a mad puppeteer."<sup>13</sup> While this passage suggests people's insignificance compared to nature, a few exceptional characters stand out.

Dallas Hardin, the villain of *The Long Home*, appears in the community after an earthquake has opened an abyss smelling of brimstone in the ground. Gay thereby suggests that Hardin has been spewed from the ground like the devil incarnate. This would suggest an inversion of the typical Western hero emerging from the landscape—a fitting entrance for a villain, especially when compared to William Tell Oliver, one of the heroes, who enters the novel coming "out of the woods" (9). Oliver displays an obvious familiarity with his natural surroundings and he passes his knowledge of the natural world on to Nathan, the young protagonist.

Gay also places his characters in extreme surroundings. The opening of the novel finds William Tell Oliver surrounded by harsh weather: "The rain fell in sheets, sluicing off the unglutted tin, dissipated to spray the wind took. Thunder boomed almost directly above him, a few scattered pellets of hail fell and lay gleaming white as pearls in the mud. The trees were in constant motion, all the world he could see was animate. The chaff-filled air seemed electric, unreal" (14). But like the Leatherstocking character he is—more on this later—the old man is at home in a natural environment and the violent storm does not faze him; while it rages he eats dinner and drinks coffee outside on the porch, an obvious display of a man in control.

The first time we meet Nathan, the other protagonist, he too is surrounded by violent weather, but this time the descriptions are much more intense. He wakes up in the middle of the night to lightning "staccato and strobic," which disappears "in abrupt negation to a world of total dark so that the room and its austere furnishings seemed sucked down into some maelstrom and consigned to utter nothingness, to the antithesis of being . . . Ovoid and tracking west [the clouds] look composed of some gleaming alloy, a vast armada visiting upon the world a plague of fire then fleeing on to some conjunction of all the world's storms" (20–21). Apart from evoking the neo-Biblical language of Cormac McCarthy, the examples illustrate that Gay's use of the landscape points to Tompkins's comments on Western landscapes, where "the physical

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13. William Gay, *The Long Home* (Denver: MacMurray and Beck, 1999), 223. Hereafter cited in text.

world comes first”<sup>14</sup> and where that physical world is hostile to the people inhabiting it.

It should also be mentioned that apart from the violent weather the characters are immersed in, a literal wilderness exists close to the small community. The Harrikin, as it is called, is “a land in ruin, a sprawling, unkept wood of thousands of acres . . . a country where civilization had fallen and vanished” and where the “faint vestigial imprint of where a road had been” is “choked by the willows lowering upon it” (155). This wilderness does not feature prominently in the novel—it is used much more extensively in Gay’s third novel, *Twilight* (2006)—but its presence does create a historical echo of the South as a frontier.

Apart from the landscape, one of the trademarks of the Western, both in literature and film, is its resistance to language. In her book, Jane Tompkins examines this strained relationship. “The Western is at heart antilanguage,” she asserts. “Doing, not talking, is what it values.”<sup>15</sup> “Westerns distrust language,” she continues, because “words are weak and misleading, only actions count; words are immaterial, only objects are real.”<sup>16</sup> This ideology is rooted in the male hegemonic tradition, which systematically excluded everything traditionally coded as feminine, such as language and emotions. As Tompkins points out, this creates an interesting paradox: “In order to exist, the Western has to use words or visual images, but these images are precisely what it fears. As a medium, the Western has to pretend that it doesn’t exist at all, its words and pictures, just a window on the truth, not really there.”<sup>17</sup> The same can be said of Western novels, of course, and here the paradox is even more striking. Books are nothing *but* words, yet many Western novels display the same opposition to language as their celluloid cousins.

But does the Western’s distrust of language fit into southern literature and a southern culture, which is, at heart, as Jan Nordby Gretlund puts it, “an oral and aural culture?”<sup>18</sup> In Westerns, Tompkins explains, “the impassivity of male silence suggests the inadequacy of female verbalization”<sup>19</sup> and silence thereby establishes male dominance. Not so in the South: “The sound of silence has always startled the Southern ear,” Gretlund asserts. “Silence is experienced as an unnatural absence.”<sup>20</sup> Gretlund draws on a long line of southern writers who have shunned silence, from Edgar Allan Poe to the Vietnam War generation of southern writers, such as James Dickey. According to Gretlund, the reason is that “knee-high in tall-tales, narrative

14. Tompkins, *West*, 70–71.

15. Tompkins, *West*, 50.

16. Tompkins, *West*, 49.

17. Tompkins, *West*, 51.

18. Jan Nordby Gretlund, “Southern Silence?: A. R. Ammons, James Dickey, and Donald Justice,” in *Frames of Southern Mind: Reflections on the Stoic, Bi-racial and Existential South*, ed. Jan Nordby Gretlund (Odense: Odense University Press, 1998), 161.

19. Tompkins, *West*, 59.

20. Gretlund, “Silence,” 161.

poems, family legends, sentimental pastorals, family legends, or just personal memories most Southerners know that what they communicate is not only entertainment, but also instruction. The ceaseless flow of sound is the process by which a sense of the past is integrated with the sense of place."<sup>21</sup>

Like Gretlund, Richard Gray emphasizes the southern literary tradition and its penchant for talk, from Twain to Faulkner and then Welty and to the writers of the 1990s. True to tradition, all these writers have "seen the need to talk as not just a moral imperative but an existential one." To these southerners, Gray stresses, talk was something human beings "had to do if they were fully to function as human."<sup>22</sup> All this obviously sounds like quite the opposite of the tradition of the Western, where talk is frequently frowned upon and considered a danger by the strong, silent male hero, who became an archetype of hegemonic masculinity. And while Gay's language is beautifully crafted and complex, many of his characters sometimes talk like Western heroes.

In his book *Phallic Critiques*, Peter Schwenger looks at the traditional depiction of what he calls masculine and feminine writing styles. While this smacks of essentialism, Schwenger is not claiming an archetypal difference between the sexes: a "masculine style . . . is not a style 'natural' to man," he notes, "but one that is artificially created."<sup>23</sup> He links the construction of these styles of masculinity to the changing societal norms imposed on the sexes throughout history.

The masculine role in the 20th century, Schwenger argues, "has become that of the 'natural' man, whose gestures are less civilized."<sup>24</sup> This particular masculine role, built on the traditional traits of the male working class, "designates a certain toughness of language as appropriate."<sup>25</sup> Tompkins identifies the same dynamics at work in the Western: despite the genre's mistrust of language and its tireless creation of "situations whose message is that words are weak and misleading," that "only actions count" and that "words are immaterial . . . the next thing you know, someone is using language brilliantly, delivering an epigram so pithy and dense it might as well be a solid thing."<sup>26</sup>

In *The Long Home*, the young protagonist, Nathan Winer, displays a blatant example of masculine control over language. Even though we learn that Nathan reads Carl Sandburg poems, he is the silent type who, when he speaks, goes straight to the point. His first exchange with Amber Rose, his romantic interest, encapsulates Nathan's relationship to language. After he

21. Gretlund, "Silence," 161–62.

22. Richard J. Gray, *Southern Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 416.

23. Peter Schwenger, *Phallic Critiques: Masculinity and Twentieth-Century Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 12.

24. Schwenger, *Critiques*, 9.

25. Schwenger, *Critiques*, 14.

26. Tompkins, *West*, 49.

has paid her a compliment, she tells him: "Well, you can talk. I didn't know if you could or not. You ought to try it more often." While her comment is delivered teasingly, it contains a seed of the patriarchal gender ideology of the Western, where women try to assert their ideology over the man. Nathan's reply, "I might if I had someone to talk to. . . . No need in telling myself things I already know" (142), is exactly as terse and distanced as is expected, and in the tradition of the Western hero's laconic quips; it "cuts people off at the knees," to borrow Tompkins's phrase.<sup>27</sup> However, the situation is complicated when we are told that to Nathan, "all his words sounded dull and clumsy" (142). So even though he displays a masculine control over language, it is merely a performance meant to cover a basic insecurity when it comes to language, an insecurity that explains his strained relationship with words.

Nathan's impatience with language is further emphasized when he is compared to Motormouth Hodges, his friend and a character who serves as comic relief in the novel. Motormouth is basically a fool, and he is repeatedly depicted as someone who cannot stop talking. Riding in a car with Motormouth, Nathan feels "imprisoned . . . by the compulsive timbre of Motormouth's voice, a drone obsessed with spewing out words without regard for truth or even for coherence, as if he must spit out vast quantities of them and rearrange them to his liking, step back, and admire the various patterns he could construct" (154–55). Again, Tompkins's discussion of language in the Western can be applied. The language that Motormouth spews out is "gratuitous at best; at worst it is deceptive. It takes the place of things, screens them from view, creates a shadow world where anything can be made to look like anything else."<sup>28</sup> The real problem with Motormouth's drone is that there is no truth to it, which in Nathan's view makes it merely a redundant show of language. When Motormouth later tells Nathan that he looks like a man picking cotton, except "you grabbin trouble with both hands and stuffin it in a sack and never once lookin over your shoulder" (175), he again displays an affinity for language, in this case one that requires thought. The parable is an example of the "reflection and negotiation that language requires," as Tompkins puts it, and exactly those qualities are what the Western finds superfluous and even destructive.<sup>29</sup> And Nathan seems to be of the same opinion, as he lets Motormouth know: "I never was one for parables and hard sayings," he sneers. "You got anything I need to hear just say so straight out" (175). His command echoes countless Western heroes, who favor action over words. One of the best examples can be found in John Ford's Western *The Searchers* (1956), where Ethan Edwards, eager to get on his horse and pursue the killers, rudely tells an older woman to "get to the point," and later tells the hymn-singing mourners to "put an Amen to it."<sup>30</sup>

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27. Tompkins, *West*, 51.

28. Tompkins, *West*, 52.

29. Tompkins, *West*, 52.

30. John Ford, dir., *The Searchers* (Warner Bros., 1956).

At the same time as Nathan's impatience with words serves to portray him as more of a man than Motormouth, his use of words further cements his tough masculinity. When Nathan confronts the ruthless killer Dallas Hardin about his right to date his step-daughter Amber Rose, he uses tough words to challenge him and to assert his authority: "Don't hand me that daughter shit, save it for somebody that believes it" (178). It must be mentioned that the entire community fears Hardin, for good reason, and that nobody would dare talk to him that way. And Hardin himself is surprised: "Nobody talks to me that way anymore," he tells Nathan. "I done growed out of puttin up with it" (178). As is the case with Western heroes, Nathan uses language only when necessary, and his use of tough, confrontational language is based on his belief that he can back it up with physical action. Even after he has been severely beaten up by Jiminiz, Hardin's henchman, Nathan proves his manhood by continuing to verbally threaten Hardin. Lying in a pool of his own blood, Nathan boldly proclaims "You better make him kill me, . . . [b]ecause if I live you won't. You're a dead man" (211). The fact that Nathan is only beaten up further after this threat does not undermine the legitimacy of his words, nor that of the failed action behind it: he is not scared off by the heavy beating and intends to go through with his threat, which, of course, serves to manifest his manhood further.

Like many southern writers, William Gay populates his fiction mainly with poor whites, in his case, those who live in the rural backwaters of Tennessee. This interest in "plain folk" represents a break with the genteel tradition of the southern plantation novel and points perhaps to the influence of the Western, in which the (apparently) common man is heralded as a hero. The characters of *The Long Home* are, with few exceptions, all plain folk, and several of them are imbued with the heroic traits also found in the Western hero.

Sheriff Bellwether, one of the minor characters of the novel, is a genuine hero, who was wounded at Pearl Harbor and received a "Purple Heart and a Distinguished Service Cross." Bellwether's body is proof of his physical heroism: "He had a series of scars climbing the length of his right leg and a starshaped explosion of scartissue on his back where shrapnel had struck him. He was a local boy. The best thing you could say about him," we are told, "was that he was honest, the worst that he was a sorry politician" (48–49). Yet since honesty is one of the most revered traits, and since the word politician smacks of both intellectualism and the abuse of power, being a sorry politician becomes a badge of honor for Bellwether. In a county where most politicians are corrupt and owned by the villain Hardin, Bellwether mirrors the countless tiresome individualist Western heroes who dare to stand up against oppression. Bellwether "washed his hands all by himself. He did not work well with the local judges, both of whom Hardin carried folded like banknotes in his pocket. He had been born poor and doubtless would so remain" (49). In other words, besides being a hero in the spirit of Western cowboys, Bellwether is also a "good ole boy," which is just as important.



Nathan Winer is the son of a carpenter and, in line with the above-mentioned tendency to praise working-class skills, he is not afraid of hard labor. "You go at every job as if it were the last one and you're trying to finish up," his boss commends him. In fact, Nathan is depicted as exceptional because he is not lazy like the rest of the workers around him. "You must be a throwback or something. A mutant," his boss ponders (27). But not only is Nathan a hard worker; he enjoys the work and, more importantly, respects the tradition behind it. Handling his tools, Nathans hands are "gentle and respectful" and he finds the tool itself "awesome, almost occult, ageless, in this sheer condensation of knowledge" (116). When he starts working for Dallas Hardin, Nathan emerges as a natural carpenter, one who takes pride in his perfect work: he "discovered an affinity for planes and angles, for the simple rightness of things. His corners formed perfect squares and they stood plumb as a level could plumb them" (129–30). This sums up Nathan's attitude towards the world; the same attitude is reflected in his use of language. Nathan's world is one of clear angles and straight talk. There are no hidden agendas and what you see is what you get. In that sense, his ideology is reminiscent of the Western hero's, as Tompkins sums it up: "[H]ard work is transformed . . . from the necessity one wants to escape into the most desirable of human endeavors: action that totally saturates the present moment, totally absorbs the body and mind, and directs one's life to the service of an unquestioned goal."<sup>31</sup>

The pride in physical labor also points to part of the Agrarian tradition. In the Introduction to *I'll Take My Stand*, the southern Agrarians claim that the "first principle of a good labor is that it must be enjoyed. . . . The act of labor as one of the happy functions of human life has been in effect abandoned," they lament, "and is practiced solely for its rewards."<sup>32</sup> Nathan Winer is, it seems, the last of a dying breed. Soon, Nathan's sense of self-consciousness merges with his work: "I am a carpenter, he thought. He was something, somebody, there was a name he could affix to himself. And there was a routine and order to these days that endeared them to him, they were long, slow days he would remember in times to come when order and symmetry were things more dreamt than experienced. I am paying my way, he thought, carrying my own weight" (167–68). While Nathan certainly embodies an Agrarian trait, he is also an example of a self-made man, an artisan hero with roots in the mythic pioneer.

Opposed to the joyful labor performed by skilled hands, Gay also depicts—in line with the Agrarian view—the degrading aspects of industrial labor. One example is the scene where Nathan and Motormouth have been hired to catch chickens in order to empty the enormous chickenhouses:

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31. Tompkins, *West*, 12.

32. Twelve Southerners, "Introduction: A Statement of Principles," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), xl–xli.

“Weary arms loaded with somnolent chickens upraised for the packer to take. Fourteen chickens to the crate, an inordinate amount of empty crates to be filled. . . . In the hot, fetid dark the air was full of down and small feathers drifting in the windless air and they stuck to the sweaty skin of the catchers and in their hair and eyelashes and in the white fluorescence the catchers took on a look curiously alien, like vaguely sinister folk lightly furred” (40). Here we have the ugly face of industrial labor, which not only degrades people but robs them of their individualism. In this kind of assembly-line work, even an exceptional worker like Nathan is close to breaking: “Winer’s arms grew weary. He was used to working and he knew to pace himself but even so six thousand chickens is a lot of chickens and the pace they had to keep was numbing” (40). But he stoically pulls through without losing face. The same cannot be said of Motormouth, Nathan’s friend. Just as the use of language was used as a means of distinguishing between the manly Nathan and the effeminate Motormouth, their different attitudes towards work serve to distinguish between man and fool. Compared to Nathan, Motormouth “fared far worse. He grew hot and sweaty, his face so infused with blood he looked flayed. . . . [H]is thin arms trembled spasmodically and he had a panicky look in his eyes as if he worked always a few degrees past the limits of his endurance” (40). While the description obviously serves to contrast Motormouth’s lack of physical stamina to Nathan’s masculine and stoic endurance—something I will return to in detail below—it is still a harsh criticism of an industrial society that values gain and profit over the well-being of the individual.

Gay’s critique turns even harsher in the scene where Nathan and Motormouth seek employment. The two head to the town of Clifton and seek out the docks, where strong men are loading railroad ties onto a barge on the river. Gay’s description of the workplace paints a bleak and uninviting picture of men trapped in a dreary landscape who perform almost mechanically in a job that resembles assembly-line work:

The barge rocked in the cold gray water, a wind . . . blew scraps of paper past them and aloft over the river like dirty stringless kites. Nameless birds foraged the choppy waters and beyond them the river’s farther shore looked blurred and unreal and no less bleak and drear than this one.

. . . Two men in the aft of the boat took the ties as they came off the chute and aligned them in stacks. The chutes seemed always to have a tie coming off, a tie sliding, another one being loaded on. An almost hypnotic ritual of economic motion. The workers were big men, heavily muscled, even in this cold wind off the river they worked in their shirtsleeves. (184–85)

This is a small-scale example of the evil industry of the cities that the Agrarians raged against. They complained that “under the industrial regime,” the modern worker’s “labor is hard, its tempo fierce, and his employment . . . insecure.” In the industrial regime, they warn, “labor becomes mercenary and servile,” and they regret the fact that “many forms of modern labor are

accepted without resentment though they are evidently brutalizing.”<sup>33</sup> The brutalizing aspect becomes clear when one of the workers tries to free a tie that has jammed the chute. Another tie slams into his hand and severs four of his fingers. Gay’s depiction of this mangling is clearly an echo of the Agrarian mistrust of the industrial order. However, Gay’s men are not mere slaves to the system. He imbues them with a dignity that further confirms his allegiance to the working class, the plain folk. After the worker has lost his fingers, his “eyes were closed and his face ashen and it wore an expression of stoic forbearance” (185). Here, Gay has created an archetypal masculine hero, one for others to admire and learn from. He serves as a critique of one hegemonic order (“the industrial regime,” to use the Agrarian phrase) but at the same time he establishes a new form of hegemony, working-class masculinity.

In *Masculinities*, R. W. Connell echoes the critique of the industrial system, arguing that “industrial labour under the regime of profit uses up the workers’ bodies, through fatigue, injury and mechanical wear and tear.” Connell also points out the paradox that the manual worker’s vulnerability “comes from the very situation that allows them to define masculinity through labour. Heavy manual work calls for strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity and toughness, and group solidarity. Emphasizing the masculinity of industrial labour,” he adds, has served as “a means of survival, in exploitative class relations.”<sup>34</sup> William Gay’s male characters, at least those we are meant to sympathize with, all embody these distinct working-class traits, and Nathan more so than the rest. After having witnessed the accident, Nathan and Motormouth turn their backs on the prospect of working at the docks. Since Nathan has already established himself as a natural when it comes to work, his rejection of the work at the docks is in itself a major condemnation of the industrial ideology behind it.

Before the accident, we have yet another situation where Nathan is depicted as exceptional, and again, Motormouth serves as the blank screen upon which Nathan displays his superiority. Watching the workers at the docks, Motormouth displays his ignorance by claiming, “Hell, they ain’t nothin to it.” But Nathan knows otherwise. His natural ability as a true worker allows him to take stock of the situation. And once again, he refuses to acknowledge Motormouth’s jabber with words: “Winer didn’t reply. He was studying the ties. They were nine-by-twelve green oak he judged to be ten or twelve feet long and they had a distinctly heavy look about them despite the deceptive ease with which they were slung onto the chutes” (184). Even from a distance, Nathan is able to decipher the inherent danger in the work that Motormouth considers easy money. And Nathan’s intuition proves right moments later when the worker is mangled in the accident.

Another factor that adds to the construction of working-class masculinity is anti-intellectualism. It is, in fact, an integral part of working-class

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33. Twelve Southerners, “Introduction,” xl–xli.

34. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 55.

masculinity that many of the male protagonists embody. Marcel Arbeit explains that “in Southern country and small town areas, ‘intellectual’ is a dirty word. It implies the formal education that alienates the good country boy or girl from their roots and makes them feel superior to their former peers.”<sup>35</sup> The tendency is emphasized in the scene where Nathan clashes with his mother’s boyfriend Leo Huggins, who is a salesman of “waterless cookware” (131). Leo is not too impressed with Nathan’s profession as a carpenter: “I reckon it’s all right if you can make any money at it,” he tells Nathan. “I never could make a livin at public work. Had to do what I could with my brains,” to which Nathan thinks to himself: “And your mouth,” once again coupling intellect and verbal eloquence, both considered negative characteristics by Nathan. Leo is not exactly an intellectual, but his distinction between brain work and body work does create a clear dichotomy. Nathan is equally unimpressed by Leo’s trade, which he considers feminine work: “[H]e caught himself staring at the big white hands that did not look as if they’d ever done an hour’s labor, the fingers soft and freckled as bleached sausages, the still upturned palms tender and virginal as a baby’s” (132). Clearly, Leo has made the mistake of attempting to rise above physical labor to intellectual work.

What we are witnessing here is two opposing performances of masculinity by Leo and Nathan. Leo constructs his masculinity around an idea of intellect and therefore considers men who rely on their hands as inferior. Nathan, on the other hand, equates manual labor with true masculinity, and by that definition any other type of work is believed to be un-masculine or feminine. For the logic behind this performance, we can again go back to R. W. Connell’s explanation of how heavy manual work demands “strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity and toughness, and group solidarity,” and how this performance of working-class masculinity has been used as a means of survival.<sup>36</sup> While both sides of the opposing notions of masculinity are presented to us, there is no doubt that Gay is on Nathan’s side, since Leo comes off as a snobbish buffoon. It is the same dynamic we see at work in many Westerns, where, as Tompkins points out, “salesmen and politicians, people whose business is language,”<sup>37</sup> are treated with contempt and often depicted as effeminate when compared to the hard-working cowboy who defines his masculinity through physical acts such as horse-riding and cattle-branding.

After having established Nathan as an exceptional working-class hero, in line with both the Western and southern traditions, Gay re-establishes his masculinity by placing him in a climactic position well known to the Western hero: he is beaten up by the villain. This is quite a common occurrence in

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35. Marcel Arbeit, “Send the Bloody Intellectuals to Gym’: Harry Crews’s Educated Super(wo)men and Victims of Both Sexes,” in *The Many Souths: Class in Southern Culture*, ed. Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2003), 167.

36. Connell, *Masculinities*, 55.

37. Tompkins, *West*, 51.

the Western, Mitchell points out. He notes an “almost obsessive recurrence of scenes of men being beaten—or knifed and whipped, propped up, knocked down, kicked in the side, punched in the face, or otherwise lacerated, clubbed, battered, and tortured into unconsciousness.” The purpose of the violence done to the hero, he argues, ties in with the genre’s celebration of the male physique. But why then, asks Mitchell, does violence so often destroy the male body? Basically, it is all about display. These “beating scenarios,” repeated countless times in a century of Westerns, are of “central importance . . . in the Western’s construction of masculinity,” Mitchell argues. In that sense, Western heroes are beaten and knocked down, “simply so that they can recover in order to rise again . . . so that we can *see* men recover, regaining their strength and resources in the process of once again making themselves into men. The paradox,” Mitchell points out, “lies in the fact that we watch them become what they already are, as we exult in the culturally encoded confirmation of a man again becoming a biological man.” The traditional Western has tirelessly promoted an essentialist view of gender, a belief that gender is natural and unchanging. The irony is, of course, that the Western again and again undermines that ideology through plots that demand the creation and re-creation of manhood. “That ongoing process,” Mitchell points out, “draws into question the assumption everywhere else reinforced—that a ‘man’s man’ always exists before the effect of cultural processes are [sic] seen.”<sup>38</sup>

The two pages describing Nathan being beaten up by Jiminiz, Hardin’s henchman, read like a classic Western saloon brawl. After having been knocked down, he struggles on all fours and manages to get up again, only to be hit “full in the face” and “hit the floor limbernecked with his head slapping the hardwood flooring” (210). Even though he has been beaten, Nathan’s fighting spirit is recognized by Hardin: “He’ll get up . . . He ain’t got sense enough to lay down and quit.” As predicted, Nathan refuses to give up and even threatens Hardin and Jiminiz. Then Nathan gets up, “blood welling in his mouth and his eyes had a slick, shiny look like glass.” Jiminiz moves in on him again, “and the last thing [Nathan] saw was the dark bulk of Jiminiz coming on and Jiminiz hit him some more but he had stopped feeling it” (210–11).

Immediately after the beating, a scene follows in which Nathan washes his wounds and studies “his cuts in the mirror” while Oliver watches. Nathan downplays his role as victim in the fight, claiming that he started it himself and saying, “I had some idea I was tougher than I turned out to be” (211). This again is part of a performance that, by understating his efforts, serves to enhance the image of Nathan as a man of resolve, someone who does not let others push him around and who is not afraid to bleed and hurt for what he believes in. Nathan may have been beaten and, as Oliver puts it, he “shore ain’t goin to be much in the purty department for a good long while” (212),

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38. Mitchell, *Westerns*, 169–75. Mitchell’s italics.

but his broken face is itself a mask in a performance of a resolute masculinity, one that Nathan plays out by various means throughout the novel.

A few other male characters besides Nathan Winer need to be mentioned. As I have already made clear above, Nathan's friend Motormouth is used to emphasize Nathan's superiority as a man. Motormouth's lack of "true" manly skills further enhances our image of Nathan as a "real man." This method, in part, grows out of the tradition of male bonding in American literature, which Leslie Fiedler pointed out in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Fiedler points to Rip Van Winkle and his flight from "the drab duties of home and town toward the good companions" as the point of origin of this tradition, and it is obvious how the Western has turned these specific traits into the genre's cornerstones. Ever since Rip, Fiedler asserts, "the typical male protagonist of our fiction has been a man on the run, harried into the forest and out to sea, down the river or into combat—anywhere to avoid 'civilization,' which is to say, the confrontation of a man and woman which leads to the fall into sex, marriage, and responsibility."<sup>39</sup> Fiedler focuses on the cross-racial aspect of the bond, from Melville's Ishmael and Queequeg, Cooper's Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, and Mark Twain's Huck Finn and Nigger Jim.

Continuing Fiedler's discussion, Michael Kimmel brings the list of cross-racial male couples into the twentieth century with examples like the Lone Ranger and Tonto, *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, and Lt. John Dunbar and Kicking Bird of Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990). Kimmel argues that the cross-race male bond serves as a way "to present screens against which white manhood is projected, played out, and defined."<sup>40</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell also discusses this structural device, focusing on the Western. He argues that the restraint that the Western hero embodies "sharply distinguishes him from other men—indeed, it requires the distinction of others whose lack of restraint provides a foil to the true man's achieved coherence," just as excessive violence by others is used to point out the hero's self-restraint. By listing numerous examples from Westerns such as George Marshall's *Destry Rides Again* (1939), John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939), Howard Hawks and Arthur Rosson's *Red River* (1948) and Anthony Mann's *The Far Country* (1954) featuring marginalized men "defined by hypersensitivity, social affectations, and verbal exorbitance," Mitchell points out the Western's traditional structure of posing "inadequate men" against "the upright hero." What these inadequate men enact, he argues, is "not so much the failed man . . . as an unworkable combination of masculinity and feminine excess."<sup>41</sup> It is exactly this construction that is employed in *The Long Home*, and Motormouth is depicted as embodying this "unworkable

39. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960; Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997), 26.

40. Michael S. Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 66.

41. Mitchell, *Westerns*, 166.

combination.” And throughout the novel it is Nathan and his performance of masculinity that gain from Motormouth’s insufficiency. It is not that Motormouth does not wish to be seen as a man. In fact, as we learn early in the novel, his idea of manhood is based on the iconic masculinity displayed by the Western hero. Motormouth is desperate to get his hands on a certain pair of cowboy boots because, as Lee Clark Mitchell observes, talking about the cowboy’s elaborate costume, “clothing properly worn conveys a personal, highly gendered meaning.”<sup>42</sup> Motormouth believes that once he puts on those boots, he will simultaneously step into a certain type of tough masculinity, with all the heroic and mythic masculine ideals the cowboy connotes: “They had cunning silverlooking chains draped about the ankles that had a Mexican look and . . . he’d think of the musical clinkling the chains would make as he strode into the poolroom” (41). Clearly Motormouth’s image of himself in the boots is based directly on the iconographic masculinity embodied by the traditional movie Western hero. And inherent in Motormouth’s fantasy of entering the poolroom is, of course, his wish that the men and women in the poolroom will look at him. He dreams, in other words, of being looked at, accepted, and taken for a real man. Continuing his examination of the cowboy’s costume, Mitchell argues that “one of the reasons the cowboy attracts so much notice is precisely because of this sensitivity to the power of the gaze, of looking itself. He draws our attention . . . by positioning himself as an object worth gazing upon.” And this is where Motormouth’s cowboy boots fit in. For, as Mitchell points out, the cowboy’s dress has become “a kind of language, signaling in fiction the kind of moral, emotional being he is.”<sup>43</sup> It is this “language” that Motormouth hopes to “speak” by obtaining the boots. But as expected, his dreams of achieving a state of “true” masculinity come to nothing, at least the way Gay presents him next to Nathan. The point Gay seems to make is that where Motormouth must seek artificial ways of obtaining a mask of manhood, Nathan simply *is* a man.

All of Motormouth’s attributes are somehow feminized, be it his penchant for senseless talking, his lack of physical stamina (both mentioned above), or, in fact, his entire personality. Hardin sums up Motormouth’s failure to act like a man when he tells him, “You let people run over you. You don’t stand up for yourself” (220). Again, Motormouth’s behavior is exactly the opposite of Nathan’s. Nathan acts instead, for which Hardin respects him, despite their antagonism. Motormouth’s failure to stand up for himself is emphasized when he chooses to escape to Chicago to stay clear of his ex-wife’s new man, who is looking to beat him up. That he chooses a big city like Chicago also speaks volumes. In both the Western and in much of southern literature, big cities are places of corruption, greed, and, also, paradoxically, female authority. Still, it can be argued that it takes a certain amount of stamina to make it in Chicago, so it comes as no surprise when Motormouth returns to Tennessee

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42. Mitchell, *Westerns*, 164.

43. Mitchell, *Westerns*, 164–65.

some months later having suffered something close to a nervous breakdown. Whether in the city or a rural area, Motormouth simply does not have what it takes, but at least his lacks have a purpose within the novel: they serve to point out Nathan's many natural strengths and thereby depict him as a unique exemplar of masculinity.

Another minor character, but one with a much bigger role to play, is William Tell Oliver, the solitary old man at the margins of the story, who considers himself a father figure to Nathan. Oliver's role as father figure is played out throughout the novel and mirrors the father-son relationships in classic Westerns like George Steven's *Shane* (1953) and John Farrow's *Hondo* (1953), and, as Gay acknowledges, the relationship between Rio and Dad Longworth in Marlon Brando's *One Eyed Jacks*.<sup>44</sup> In much the same way as the Western heroes, Oliver passes on his knowledge to a boy he considers his son. Not only does he initiate Nathan into the ways of nature by teaching him how to find ginseng in the woods; he also passes on his ideological wisdom, which again mirrors the rugged individualism of the traditional Western hero: "When you come right down to it, a man's always by hisself anyhow," he tells Nathan. "When push comes to shove all you got's yourself" (87). It is exactly this ideology of individualism that causes Nathan to want to kill Hardin. Also adding to the tension, of course, is the southern burden of male honor.

While Nathan is the protagonist of the story, it is actually Oliver who turns out to be the actual hero of the novel. After the prologue, *The Long Home* opens with the words "William Tell Oliver came out of the woods . . ." and after he has acted and killed the villain, in the final pages of the novel, Oliver concludes that "I never needed nobody anyway," instead relying on the various phases of nature as his only company, since they "were the only things that lasted" (256, 257). In many ways Oliver is reminiscent of a traditional Frontier hero, as described by Richard Slotkin, who sums up the general pattern:

The protagonist is usually represented as having marginal connections to the Metropolis and its culture. He is a poor and uneducated borderer or an orphan lacking the parental tie to anchor him to the Metropolis and is generally disinclined to learn from book culture when the great book of nature is free to read before him. His going to the wilderness breaks or attenuates the Metropolitan tie, but it gives him access to something far more important than anything the Metropolis contains—the wisdom, morality, power, and freedom of Nature, in its pure wild form.<sup>45</sup>

It is worth noting that not only Oliver, but also Nathan fits into this pattern. Nathan's dead father and indifferent mother practically make him an orphan who is taken under Oliver's wing. In addition, the Frontier hero's distaste for book learning is mirrored in the anti-intellectualism discussed above. But it is Oliver who most obviously embodies the traits of the Frontier hero. In his marginal connection to the community and not least in his relationship with nature, it certainly makes sense to see him as a Frontier hero, in other words,

44. Bjerre, personal interview with William Gay.

45. Slotkin, *Environment*, 374.



a Leatherstocking figure. His body is proof of his intimate relationship with nature; he has “skin so weathered and browned by the sun and aged by the ceaseless traffic of the years that it had taken on the texture of some material finally immutable to the changes of the weather . . . a kind of whang leather impervious to time or elements, corded, seamed, and scarred, pulled tight over the cheekbones and blade of nose that gave his face an Indian cast” (10). Apart from obviously echoing the language of Faulkner, this passage presents Oliver as a man who not only resembles an Indian, but whose knowledge of nature is literally inscribed on his body.

To add to his status as a traditional hero, Oliver mirrors Cawelti’s description of Cooper’s Leatherstocking hero as a “marginal, lonely man of the wilderness who hates the restrictions of society and who fears, above all, the operations of a social authority that he does not understand or feel he needs.”<sup>46</sup> Oliver’s voluntary status as a recluse is based on his mistrust of society and, not least, the corruption he witnesses in the judicial system and among the local police. From his spot in the woods, Oliver looks down on Hardin’s lot, and he has witnessed much of the crime and corruption that has taken place there: “Oliver was never surprised anymore and sometimes he thought he’d seen all there was to see” (11). His mistrust of the system has grown into a state of indifference about society in general.

Furthermore, Oliver’s shady past makes him an ideal Western hero, in the traditional sense. Cawelti describes the classical hero as “a man of the wilderness who comes out of the old ‘lawless’ way of life to which he is deeply attached” (193). We get several examples throughout the novel of Oliver’s past, some from himself and others from various people whose idea of him is based on old rumors that have no doubt grown into tall tales. Motormouth, always the bearer of loose talk, tells Nathan a story of how in his youth Oliver caught his wife with another man named Ingram. “He may not now but he used to be rough,” Motormouth says, “They took to scufflin . . . and he pulled a gun on Oliver. They was fightin over it and somehow Ingram got shot through the heart.” When Oliver is out of jail after being charged with justifiable homicide, Ingram’s brother attacks him with a pocketknife, and, according to Motormouth, “Oliver jerked a axehandle out of a barrel and like to took his head off” (38–39). Stories like these are the stuff myths and legends are made of, and Oliver emerges as a figure whose violent past lends him an aura of myth.

Richard Slotkin elaborates on the pattern of the violent Frontier hero, explaining how the hero’s violent spirit “and the violent means by which he has gained his wisdom are inseparable from the regenerative process he initiates.” The hero can therefore only serve as a social benefactor, Slotkin argues, “when he operates on the edge of society, where it confronts the unsocial wilderness.”<sup>47</sup> This aspect becomes important as the novel progresses and a confrontation between Nathan and Hardin seems inevitable.

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46. Cawelti, *Adventure*, 201.

47. Slotkin, *Environment*, 374–75.

This is where Oliver emerges as the hero of the novel. His friendship with young Nathan Winer brings a sense of humanity back to the old outcast, and more importantly, awakens a sense of duty in him. Because of his apathy, Oliver has neglected to expose the most crucial of Hardin's many secret crimes: the killing of Nathan's father. Throughout most of the novel, Oliver yearns to take action: "Course I got to do something," he thinks. "Wrongs needed someone to right them and words ought to be said but he did not feel worthy of saying them" (70). His hesitation is bound up in a previous confrontation with Hardin in which he ended up on the ground, bloody. The humiliation of the outcome leaves his mind in "*a torrent of rage and disbelief*," and he ponders revenge: "*I will lay for him and shoot him,*" he thinks, but the threat is empty because "*he knew already he wouldn't. I am old, he admitted for the first time, old, tired of it all. All I want is to be let alone, all I want is for things to run along smooth. All I want is peace, and an old man ought to have that, if nothin else*" (120, Gay's italics). Yet despite the resignation that has kept him from getting involved, Oliver is concerned for Nathan and worried how the young man will react if his father's killer is exposed.

The concerns bring about a change in old Oliver: "If he ever finds it out nothin won't stop him from killin Hardin and he'll live out his life in the pen, Oliver thought. If I wasn't soft in the head I'd a killed him myself a long time ago" (71). It is not until the truth about Hardin's killing is out and it is only a matter of time before Nathan hears it and confronts Hardin that Oliver finally decides to act. Like a retired gunslinger whose guns were put to rest ages ago, Oliver gets back in the saddle, so to speak, for the final confrontation that will correct his past wrongs and rid the community of their fear. "God knows somebody's got to do it," he thinks to himself, "and it looks like it's goin to have to be me" (235). This humble logic points directly back to the traditional Western hero, who, after first trying to avoid involvement in a conflict, finally lives up to the responsibility that falls to him and carries out the duty he was created to perform. Oliver sets a trap for Hardin, and even though the trap backfires and Hardin beats him up, Oliver manages to shoot and kill him.

By relying on the wisdom gained by past violence, and by using that violence actively, Oliver kills off Dallas Hardin, the brutal and selfish entrepreneur who has kept the community under his control for years. In this way, Oliver acts in the pattern of the Western hero who goes outside the law in order to uphold it and who thus serves as a regenerative force. However, like other Western heroes before him, after fulfilling his duty, Oliver must then retreat back to the wilderness from which he came. This retreat can be seen as a denunciation of civilized society, but there is also a touch of tragedy to the lone hero forced by his past burdens to live life in solitude. Gay, too, makes use of this aspect when he describes Oliver's self-chosen exile: when Oliver concludes, on the last page of the novel, that he does not need anybody else and that the natural world around him is all that matters, it is "a spare and bitter comfort" (257). In other words, Gay recognizes the burden of Oliver's sacrifice, a burden that he must carry alone, just like numerous Western

heroes before him, perhaps best embodied in the archetypal Shane, who gave up his romantic dream and returned to his former life of violence in order to redeem a small community. At the end of both the novel and the film, Shane rides away from the people he had come to like, away from a boy who idolizes him, and away from the woman he secretly loves.<sup>48</sup>

Jane Tompkins sees this act of sacrifice as one of the key elements of the Western. The sacrifice is bound up with the hero's numbing of his own feelings, a result of the violence and horror he has witnessed and the personal losses he has experienced. In Oliver's case, the mythic status of his violent past is checked by his actual memories of his dead son and his resulting failed marriage. This background serves to make him a full character for the reader, and it provides a telling comment on the invisible yet tragic ingredients in the making of myths and legends. Without the numbness of the hero, Tompkins continues, he would not be capable of inflicting pain on others. However, unlike the villain, the hero is still able to feel something, despite all the horror and violence he has endured, and this distinguishes him from his antagonist. But in line with the strict rules of masculinity that govern the genre, the hero is not allowed to express his feelings openly. Here lies the seed of the tragic element of the Western hero: "The numbing of the capacity to feel," Tompkins states, "requires the sacrifice of his own heart, a sacrifice kept hidden under his toughness, which is inseparable from his heroic character." This, of course, makes the Western hero a Christ-figure, despite the genre's rejection of Christianity. Nowhere is this more obvious than in *Shane*. Finally, having "renounced his heart so that others might keep theirs . . . he rides away alone. And he must do this not because he is a murderer and therefore not to be trusted, but because having hardened himself to murder, he can no longer open his heart to humankind."<sup>49</sup> This is what makes the Western hero such a tragic figure, and, in *The Long Home*, Oliver follows in Shane's footsteps. That Oliver realizes the reality of this tragedy—the "spare and bitter comfort" he finds in his solitude—only makes him more of a hero because it further enlarges the scope of his sacrifice. By exiling himself he sets free the community and especially Nathan, who has left town to pursue his romantic interest.

So ends *The Long Home*, a novel that fuses the southern literary tradition with that of its lowbrow cousin, the Western. By fusing the two, Gay is actively working himself out of his inevitable pigeonhole next to Faulkner and other southern greats. Simultaneously, he is expanding the very notion of southern literature, breaking down some of the walls that have been raised around it. *The Long Home* is a tribute to the genres that have formed Gay as a writer: the southern fiction of Faulkner and McCarthy, as well as the Westerns that Gay grew up reading and watching. The echoes of the Western are as loud as those of Faulkner, suggesting both the fluid nature of so-called regional literature and the seemingly timeless power of the Western myth.

48. See Jack Schaefer, *Shane* (1949; New York: Bantam Books, 1975), 144.

49. Tompkins, *West*, 218–20.

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