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Vagabondage in the Land of Nod: the Cain and Abel Myth in Western Fiction and Film

In an echo of the decree expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, God exiles Cain with words that have special relevance to the Western: "A fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth" (Gen. 4:12). As punishment, few fates in the primitive world were worse than drifting through wilderness separated from family and tribe. A common theme in early literatures, it is ubiquitous in the semi-barbaric culture of the wild West, and its use in Western fiction is tied to a profound change in the genre that became evident at mid-century. Before this period, the wandering, Cain-like figure was generally an adversary of civilization. Closely associated with raw wilderness, he was a law unto himself and resisted efforts at control and order. In the early part of the Eisenhower era, however, the wandering character often appeared as the strange and lonely savior of the human community, one who singlehandedly defeats the forces of chaos and departs. The shift is a radical one.¹ Its influence is felt in both horse operas and less formulaic Western plots, and it makes Western fiction unique in its incorporation of what Wyn Kelly has termed the two major Cain traditions: the Augustinian with its monstrous villains and the Romantic with its violent yet sympathetic champions of the oppressed.

Traditionally, theologians have founded their interpretations of the Cain and Abel story in the conspicuous polarities represented in the two brothers: herdsman and tiller of the soil, sacrificer of animal flesh and tither of plants, the old vs. the young, the heir vs. the disinherited, the obedient vs. the rebellious, and the manipulator of nature vs. the embracer of natural rhythms. The most meaningful duality, however, could involve the mobility of the first family's offspring. It is a theme implied first in the farmer-shepherd opposition but one which receives special emphasis in Cain's curse of vagabondage.

The archetypal significance of the myth's mobile-stationary theme can be inferred in a comment of French novelist Michel Tournier in *The Erlking*, a novel about the picaresque Abel Tauffages. "The quarrel of Cain and Abel," Tournier writes, "has gone on from generation to generation, from the beginning of time down to our own day, as the atavistic opposition between nomads and sedentaries" (34). Siding with the nomads, Tournier adds, "[T]his hatred is far from extinct. It survives in the infamous and degrading regulations imposed on the gypsies," as well as, until recently, in residential regulations for voting (34).

John Cawelti's description of the "dialectical structure" of Westerns (73) with its conflicts involving cowboys and farmers, outlaws and merchants, and Indians and pioneers makes Westerns seem like faint versions of the Cain-and-Abel-myth, which places so much stress on opposing cultures.² The cardinal role of movement in Western fiction is understandable, given its importance in the historic drive to settle the West. Early figures in the American West were wedded to a peripatetic life: Indians following buffalo; trappers moving from stream to stream; cattle drovers trailing vast herds; outlaws and gunfighters fleeing arrest; and prospectors searching for gold. Michael Kowalewski speculates that the West's fabled aridity was the initial reason for the constant movement (14), but the end result was a vast restlessness, a perpetual quest for something better, which has come to be identified with the West.

Whatever the cause of the Westerner's mobility—whether it is geography or a desire to escape or a search for new opportunity—Western fiction has stressed the conflicts arising from nomadic and sedentary ways of life. In nineteenth-century America, stationary figures such as shopkeepers and farmers were predictably apprehensive about the more nomadic Western figures, viewing them as wild and ungovernable. In opposition to the spontaneity, variety, and individualism prized by the wandering Westerner, these immobile settlers valued cooperation, hard work, respect, responsibility, and the communal virtues of compromise and prudence. Symbolized at various times by the fence, the plow, and the shop, sedentary Western culture relied on stability and security, whereas the nomadic culture, whose emblem became the horse, came to value individual difference, contact with nature, and a continual search for new horizons.

Cain, the first sinner and first fugitive, is a prototype of many wandering figures in Western fiction. In early Westerns he is represented by the outlaw, the Indian, and to some extent the cattle drover. In later Westerns he is often represented by the roaming gunfighter who because of a violent past suffers from remorse and ostracization. Like Shane and Zane Grey's Lassiter, this figure often reiterates the pattern described in Coleridge's poem "The Wandering of Cain," in which travel is expiatory. In other Westerns such as the television series *Lazarus Man*, the wandering is associated with a search for identity.

The mobile-stationary theme also dovetails with the subject of hostile brothers in Western fiction, with one of the brothers playing the role of the Cain-like nomad and the other the sedentary Abel. Nowhere are these motifs more evident than in three post World War II Western films that feature fraternal conflict. In each, the Cain figure is as untamed as the vast range he is

identified with. In *Duel in the Sun* (1947) Lewt McCanles, played by Gregory Peck, is a wild and reckless cattleman. Jesse McCanles, his brother, is the proponent of the settled life. In opposition to the dark and disheveled Lewt, the blond, urbane, and well-educated Jesse becomes an attorney and leaves the ranch for a life in town. Lewt, along with his father, is opposed to the coming of the railroad, while Jesse supports it, even though the lines, which come to symbolize civilization and restriction, will bisect the McCanles ranch. The antagonism between the brothers, which is exacerbated by their love of the same woman, intensifies to the point that Lewt tries to sabotage the railroad then takes to the open range, returning to the ranch only for supplies and communication with his father, who, while supporting Lewt, becomes a raging symbol of an archaic way of life. As Jesse gravitates toward the settled life, Lewt gradually becomes more barbaric. In this tale of a vanishing cattle culture, Lewt, the untamed wanderer, is as doomed as the buffalo in a soon-to-be civilized West. *Winchester '73* (1950), which reiterates the opposition between a roaming outlaw and his brother, focuses on the range rider's most prized possession, the Winchester repeating rifle. When they are finalists in a marksmanship contest, no one would suspect that the Jimmy Stewart character (Lin McAdam) is brother to Dutch Henry and that he has been pursuing Dutch for killing their father. The bewhiskered Dutch is a polar opposite to the openhanded Stewart character. With his harsh talk, his overbearing manner, and brutal reputation, he is a worthy opponent made all the more menacing by the fact that he shoots and rides as well as his brother.

In *Vengeance Valley* (1951) the evil brother, Lee Strobie, is more diabolic, if less threatening. His opponent, his foster brother, played by Burt Lancaster, has the appropriate name of "Owen Daybright" and stands for all that is good about the settled life. Among the sinister Lee's transgressions are a refusal to accept responsibility for a child he fathered out of wedlock, stealing from his father, and plotting to kill Owen. Like Lewt McCanles and Dutch Henry, Lee is associated with the lawless wilderness, but his maliciousness is surprising only to his father. As in *Winchester '73* there is virtually no attempt to account for Lee's waywardness. In the end Arch Strobie, his father, merely laments the fact that he did not recognize the evil in Lee earlier.

In each film, the stable, normative character is the brother associated with order and progress; and the errant, wandering brother is killed off. Contrary to the notion of a romantic, misunderstood Cain figure, like Byron's and Gessner's, the wilder brothers are brutish and inhuman. As in *The Virginian* (1902), the plots in these narratives assume the value of roads, schools, businesses, and an orderly life. It is a theme which is expressed particularly well in another Western classic, one which contains a pertinent reference to Cain. In

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, Jimmy Stewart (Ransom Stoddard) is again the representative of the settled, civilized life, but he is assumed to be the killer of outlaw Liberty Valance, who is played by Lee Marvin, and during a campaign for the Senate, a speaker for his opponent charges that he has the “mark of Cain” on him, a charge which is augmented by a prediction: “the mark of Cain will be on all of us if we send this man to Washington.” Stoddard is elected, however, and although the community never learns the identity of the true slayer of Valance, the film expresses the common theme that until law and order come to the West, peaceful men must occasionally resort to violence.

In Western fiction, praise of the settled life is suggested most effectively in the hero's change in economic status and personal relationships. When Max Brand's sympathetic outlaw, Willard Herbert, in *Brothers on the Trail* (1933) ends his life on the run and accepts a job as foreman in a mine, the change, far from seeming out of place, appears appropriate and even predestined. The second change, represented by marriage, completes the protagonist's transformation, as it does in *The Virginian*. But marriage, like a steady job, occurs only after exploration of several alternative relationships, and it is at this juncture that women become central figures in the nomadic-sedentary opposition, with white women traditionally carrying the torch of civilization and minority women and mixed-breeds like Pearl Chavez in *Duel in the Sun* occupying the opposite pole.

The power of the mobile-sedentary conflict is just as evident in recent Western fiction; yet in these works the figures associated with wandering are more likely to resemble Cains from the Romantic tradition. One especially interesting work is the 1995 film *Shadows of Desire*. In this story hostile brothers compete for a beautiful girl who loves the Abel-like brother but finds herself, like Pearl Chavez, vulnerable to the charms of his reckless sibling. Sonny, the wild and reckless figure, has a history of criminal activity. As a boy he had maliciously wounded his brother with a shotgun, and now he is involved with the mob. He deceives his mother, who, like many a parent in Cain-Abel dramas, ironically exhibits a preference for the Cain figure. When Jude falls for the girl, Rowena, played by Nicolette Sheridan, Sonny seduces her, then taunts Jude. The apparent Abel figure, Jude, is typically self-effacing. His limp, the result of Sonny's shotgun blast, has special symbolic importance in the mobile-sedentary paradigm. Long a supporter of his brother, in spite of his brother's abuse, he has encouraged Sonny and stolen from his mother to pay Sonny's mob debt. However, when Sonny finally provokes a fight, Jude pushes him against a wall with such force that Sonny is killed. Afterwards, Jude, whose name is a variant of “Judas” (a Biblical figure occasionally connected

with Cain), is consumed by remorse and assumes a Cain-like role, even to the point of contemplating departure. “Cain,” he tells a friend, “was condemned to wander the face of the earth.” In the end, in spite of his friend’s reply—“You ain’t no Cain”—and in spite of Rowena’s sincere apology and desire for marriage, as well as the town’s good will, Jude opts for the life of a fugitive.

The 1993 novel, *Montana 1948*, by Larry Watson, provides another illustration of a dashing, Cain-like figure and a pedestrian brother who, like Jude, becomes a fugitive after his brother’s death and, in so doing, completes a similar switch in Cain-Abel roles. Like Jude, Wesley Hayden, the sheriff of Bentrock, Montana, is modest, plodding, and predictably crippled—as a result of a boyhood accident with a horse. Frank, his brother, is an honored athlete, war hero, and respected physician. Like Lewt McCanles, Frank is the acknowledged favorite of his frontiersman father. He is also similar to James Durisdeer in Stevenson’s *The Master of Ballantrae* who, while committing a variety of offenses is, nevertheless, favored by the townspeople, a fact which allows him to abuse Indian women in his care. In *Montana 1948* the conflict between the brothers occurs when the Abel figure must arrest his brother who, he determines, is responsible for the death of an Indian woman he had raped. Frank’s suicide while under “house arrest” in Wesley’s basement unfairly blemishes Wesley’s reputation with the townspeople, and Wesley, like Jude, feels compelled to leave town.

In the annals of the Western, the Cain figure who agonizes most about leaving town is Will Kane in the film *High Noon*, which represents an early reversal of the civilizing theme. Based on a 1947 short story by John Cunningham called “The Tin Star,” *High Noon* replies to stories like *Duel in the Sun* with a picture of craven townsmen. Unlike Jesse McCanles, the citizens in the film’s Hadleyville are as hypocritical as those in Mark Twain’s Hadleyburg, and the alterations that the film makes in the Cunningham story emphasize the shift in values in this Western, which has been seen as a Cold-War critique of America’s failure to support independence movements in the Communist world.³ First the name of the main character is changed from “Doane” to “Kane,” partly, no doubt, to emphasize how thoroughly Kane becomes an outcast in his own town and partly, as Richard Slotkin admits, because “there is a side of Kane’s nature that is akin to Miller’s [the outlaw’s]” (393). There is no doubt, however, about the most reprehensible figures. The film begins with what is normally the last act in the nomadic-sedentary drama: a marriage. After Kane the bridegroom is honored by an admiring community (“We are all your very good friends,” intones the mayor), the townspeople hear about the return of the outlaw Frank Miller and suddenly abandon Kane.

No Western figure is more unfairly ostracized than Will Kane; how-

ever, he refuses to bow to the pressure. Gary Yoggy in his essay on the television Western lists Republic Studio's Ten Commandments of the Cowboy, many of which demand a stay-put orientation. Among the rules there are stipulations that "he must never go back on his word . . . he must always tell the truth . . . he must help people in distress . . . [and] he must respect women, parents, and his nation's laws" (164). Will Kane is a true Republic hero. He will never back down. As his first name implies, he is a man of conviction. In contrast to the short story, each of Kane's deputies deserts him; even his bride, a Quaker opposed to violence, prepares to leave on the train, while a character who represents another alteration in the story, a former lover of the sheriff, tells Kane's bride that if Kane were her man, she would support him at all costs. Like Pearl Chavez, Helen Ramirez (Katy Jurado) stands in marked contrast to the blond Grace Kelly, who plays the morally pure but unrealistic Amy. A dark Mexican of shady repute (she has also been the lover of Miller and Kane's most traitorous deputy), she is ultimately responsible for Amy's decision to stay and fight.

Will Kane's willingness to protect the town before leaving is another instance of self-sacrifice found in Westerns with Cain and Abel echoes. Like Shane, and to a certain extent, Jude in *Shadows of Desire*, these Cain figures skilled in violence take on Christ-like roles, which make them more tragic because of their characteristic inability to enjoy the fruits of their heroism. Shane, for instance, says, "A man is what he is . . . there's no breaking the mold. I tried that and I've lost. . . . There's no going back from a killing. . . . Right or wrong, the brand sticks and there's no going back" (263). Michael Marsden adds that "the hero finds, ironically, that once the battle has been won, his magical weapon and he are no longer welcome in the now secure society" (286).

One functional reason for Shane's departure is that within the narrative it dissolves a love triangle. However, a better explanation for his renewed vagabondage is one which hints at a tragic quality. It involves the gunfighter's kinship with the tradition of the "sacred executioner." As Chaym Maccoby has defined the tradition, it refers to a figure such as Cain or Romulus "who slays another person, and as a result is treated as both sacred and accursed" (7), accursed because of the killing but sacred because "some good consequence will be seen to flow from the slaying: a city will be founded, or a nation will be inaugurated, or a famine will be stayed. . . ." (8) The fact that malevolence might be involved is not as important as the fact that a significant benefit follows from the slaying. This explains the failure to execute the killer, who will "be cursed, but not put to death" (Maccoby 8) and will be "condemned to long wanderings" (7). Richard Quinones writes that it is a "legend of the fratricidal

foundation of the state, or of a people,” and it “becomes a parable. It comes to stand for the inevitable sacrifices and losses that are part of the conditions of life” (39). In similar fashion, the Western gunfighter kills the menacing figure representing disorder; yet, like the Cain figures in *Shadows of Desire* and *Montana 1948*, he feels compelled to leave, and like Cain he seems to have something about him that protects him during his wandering. At the end of *Shane*, Mr. Weir tells the Starretts, “He’s alive all right. Wilson got to him. But no bullet can kill that man” (266).

The pattern established by *Shane* is copied in a number of Westerns, and one, Cameron Judd’s *Caine’s Trail* (1977), offers special insights into the Cain-Abel conflict. With names echoing those of the New Testament apostle as well as the first murderer, the nomadic Simon Caine is doomed forever to a life outside the pale of civilized society. Like Josey Wales, he is an outlaw in the post-Civil War South because he has killed the Union raiders who murdered his wife and child. He does not, however, have the temperament of a killer, and “he was weary of killing of running” (6). Like Will Kane and so many other Cain figures, he is a pariah, even among those closest to him. His brother, Brice James, has changed his name to avoid any connection with Simon. When Simon comes to Brice’s place, Brice refuses to receive him, telling Simon his retaliation for his wife’s and child’s murders “ ‘was bushwhacking. Lynching . . . not justice’ ” (8). Thus Simon is condemned to wander in order to avoid government agents and detectives hired by the family of the men he killed. Brice tells Simon: “ ‘You carry death wherever you go’ ” (8).

In a pattern consistent with the self-sacrificing gunfighter, Simon risks his life to rescue Brice’s son when he is kidnaped by outlaws seeking a ransom. After this, Brice makes a place for Simon at his house. However, Simon knows the problems his presence will bring; so he leaves. In fact, he leaves during the night because another character has asked to ride with him and Simon knows anyone he associates with is a marked man.

Such sacrifice contributes to the characteristic melancholy of many Westerns written after mid-century. Condemned to a life of wandering, the sympathetic Cain figures in these works are solitary, forlorn characters, and their condition complements other tragic Western themes such as the vanishing wilderness and loss of a culture. In the film version of *Shane*, the two major opponents are presented as nomadic figures whose way of life is dying. Riker, the rough-hewn cattle driver says to Shane: “Your days are over,” and Shane replies, “Yours are too; the only difference is that I know it.”

Shane is perhaps the best-known representative of the Western hero who gives up the settled life and, like Leatherstocking, remains outside society. The pattern, however, is just as evident in less formulaic Western narratives,

many of which contain echoes of the Cain and Abel myth. In James Harrison's *Legends of the Fall*, the opposition between wilderness and town and between freedom and restraint are manifested in the fraternal conflict of Tristan and Alfred Ludlow. Tristan roams the world, whereas his brother becomes a U.S. Senator with connections to the mob. In an echo of many Cain-Abel narratives (e.g. *Montana 1948*, *Shadows of Desire*, and *Duel in the Sun*) in which the father sides with the Cain figure, William Ludlow displays an obvious sympathy for the unmanageable Tristan. Living an isolated life on a Montana ranch, William has always hated governmental agencies. As a result, he rejects Alfred when Alfred becomes a representative of the government, and in the end he shoots the corrupt policemen who come for Tristan. (Interestingly, the film version has Alfred shoot them, after which there is a sentimental reconciliation between the brothers).

Hank Stamper of Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion* is perhaps the ultimate exemplar of Western independence. He is not only cut off physically from the townspeople by the raging river but defies the powerful union with his fists and his decision to continue with his logging business. Stephen Tanner has noted Hank's role as Western hero (57), calling attention to "stock phrases" of the Western like "one of the toughest hombres this side of the Rockies" (69). Like the Western gunfighter, Hank "must prove himself with challengers" (71). He is, in Tanner's words, the very "mold of the cowboy hero" who opposes the "values of a technological, collectivist society" (69).

Lee Stamper, Hank's brother, is the representative of the Eastern establishment in *Sometimes*, but in a pattern popularized by Theodore Roosevelt and Owen Wister, Lee, the suicidal, pot-smoking, English graduate student, comes to the West and eventually acquires a different identity. Thus the East and trappings of civilization are supplanted by an allegiance to nature and the independent life, two values which have been typically associated with Western fiction. But the influence of nature, in all its positive and negative complexity, appears to be different in later Westerns. Unlike its baleful influence in *Duel in the Sun*, nature carries spiritual implications and its harshness provides training in self reliance. The narrator in *A River Runs Through It*, another novel with echoes of the Cain-Abel myth, is moved by the animistic force of nature. He says, "I am haunted by water," and he contends that words lie mysteriously beneath the river's rocks (104). The river also figures prominently also in *Sometimes*; yet it is not an entirely benevolent symbol. On the positive side, the rain-swollen river separates the Stamper family from the town, but it also threatens to destroy their house and tests their ingenuity for survival. In *Legends*, nature appears in the vast oceans which Tristan sails and the sublime Montana hills where Tristan hunts and where Ludlow family members

and friends are buried.

The Indian, traditional symbol of wilderness, appears in each novel in different roles. In *Legends*, One Stab is idealized as a surrogate father in a pattern reminiscent of Sam Fathers in Faulkner's *Go Down Moses*. Tristan respects his father but loves One Stab. When a hotel clerk refuses to give One Stab a room, Tristan beats the clerk to a pulp. Similarly, Paul in *A River* winds up in jail for assaulting a man who had called Paul's Indian date "Wahoo." On the other hand, the only native American in *Sometimes*, Indian Jenny, appears as a diminished, somewhat comic figure who lives on welfare and a gnawing regret that Henry Stamper did not marry her.

The nomadic-sedentary opposition in these novels includes some interesting variations. At the end of *Sometimes*, it is not the Western hero, Hank, who departs for unknown places. It is his wife, Viv, who through contact with Lee has learned how limited her life is. In *Legends*, Tristan, the Cain figure, is clearly the untamed wanderer. Harrison writes that Tristan is "like Cain" in that he would never take an order from anyone (209). During much of the novel he appears immune to the allure of the settled life as he roams the world on his boat and defies both legal restraints and domesticity. Paul, in *A River*, is not a traveler but is one who expresses his restlessness through excessive drinking, gambling, and whoring, as well as in a refusal to marry. Author Maclean gives a nod to the myth of the first brothers when Paul's brother, the narrator, despairs of changing Paul:

Yet even in the loneliness of the canyon I knew there were others like me. . . . We are probably those referred to as "our brothers' keepers," possessed of one of the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting of instincts. It will not let us go. (28-29)

The Cain figures in *Legends*, *Sometimes*, and *A River* reiterate a popular archetype in Western fiction which Cawelti has designated as the "benevolent outlaw" (76). Like Deadwood Dick and innumerable figures of Western legend, Tristan, Hank, and Paul, are reckless but essentially good men who have suffered at the hands of the establishment and who challenge its control. As sympathetic Cain figures, they reveal that if, in opposing this power, the Western hero must accept ostracization, and even exile, that is a small price to pay for maintaining independence and a connection with the sustaining wilderness. In this way, these recent novels remind us of Western fiction's shift in allegiance from the sedentary to the wandering life and to some important ways in which the genre has been influenced by the oldest myth of human conflict.

Notes

1. Christine Bold writes: "In the later Westerns, the hero changes from the Virginian type, who ends his adventures in matrimony, to the Leatherstocking kind, who remains outside societal relationships, wandering from one adventure to the next" (95).

2. Cawelti sees the nomadic, or savage, Westerners as committed to "freedom," "deep camaraderie," and "personal honor" (34), whereas the sedentary townspeople are motivated by "mutual loyalty and political and economic achievement" (31).

3. Richard Slotkin discusses this political meaning of *High Noon* in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. 1992. Norman, OK: U Oklahoma P, 1998. 395.

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