Lonesome Dove: Mythic Vs Realistic Essay, Research Paper

Myth versus Realism in the “Old West”

LONESOME DOVE

While Larry McMurtry honors certain mythical features of the “Old West,” his epic, Lonesome Dove, is the quintessential representation of the realism of the “Old West.” By contrast, mythic representations of the “Old West” tend to look absurd and silly. Stories such as the one portrayed in the film “True Grit” appear to be ridiculous because of their one-dimensional presentation of characters, including women; their passive, utopian environments; and their conveniently distinct depiction of good and evil. Larry McMurtry’s Lonesome Dove presents characters not larger than life but complex, women who are not frightened and dependent, but self-sufficient and wise. “McMurtry is unfailing acute on the life of women in this man’s world” (Clemons, Contemporary Literary Criticism 254). In mythic representations such as “True Grit” villains are not people with complicated backgrounds which cause their poor behavior. Nor are there Indians or black people in “True Grit” although the “Old West” was populated by them. “All of Mr. McMurtry’s anti-mythic groundwork-his refusal to glorify the West-works to reinforce the strength of the traditionally mythic parts of Lonesome Dove by making it far more credible than the old familiar horse operas” (Lemann, Literary Criticism 257) such as “True Grit.”

In the film “True Grit” Rooster Cogburn typifies the preposterous qualities of a mythical United States Marshall. He acts alone in hunting down serious killers, but this is no problem because Rooster, even though a drunk, earlier has brought to justice a wagon-load of wrongdoers. Later, with the reins of his horse in his teeth, Rooster shoots all of his antagonists except for his arch enemy who shoots Rooster’s horse out from under him. Just as the arch enemy, Robert Duvall, is about to shoot Rooster, from far away someone conveniently kills Duvall. Rooster is a man whose weaknesses never pull him down, because he is “larger than life” (Hirsch, E! Online 2). Rooster Cogburn is a character of mythical stature whose defects never prevent him from accomplishing his heroic deeds.

Larry McMurtry’s characters in his novel, Lonesome Dove, demonstrate actual “grit.”

While Augustus (Gus) McCrae is an indolent man, unlike Rooster Cogburn, Gus is not ashamed of his laziness. “It’s a good thing that I ain’t scairt’ to be lazy” (McMurtry 9). Gus would rather have a whisky bottle in his hand than a shovel (Horn, Literary Criticism 255), but his crew forgives his weaknesses because they respect his heroic capabilities as an authentic, fierce fighter and loyal friend. Gus McCrae’s former Texas Ranger partner , Captain Woodrow C. Call, proves himself a terrific leader and an excellent cowboy who at the same time lacks typical cowboy sociability. “He heads for the river because he is tired of hearing us yap, he ain’t a sociable man and never was” (McMurtry 26). Unlike Rooster Cogburn, who always acts flamboyantly, Woodrow Call’s personality changes dramatically because he is genuinely influenced by his circumstances. He is always the first to react to danger including anticipating poisonous snakes while on the trail, and occasionally saving his crew from harm. Call acts the part when needed. The “portrayal of McCrae and Call,?as both heroic and endearingly human,?particularly delighted critics” (Literary Criticism 253).

The foolish humor in “True Grit” attempts to create the belief that a one-eyed, alcoholic man who falls off his horse can individually solve problems because he has “true grit.”

The gritty Rooster Cogburn lives with a little Chinese man and a cat which seems silly in the way it provides humorous relief. This is a common gimmick that film makers use who represent the “Old West” in a mythic way. Rooster’s eating habits also characterize him comically. He often puts rock hard bacon bits into his mouth, even offering them to dainty women like Kim Darby who is shocked by the offer. Other aspects of humor arise when at the film’s conclusion. Rooster rides away while improbably jumping over a fence in a manner of an agile young cowboy. In fact, Rooster is a cowboy cut-up whose drinking habits lead to?laughable incidents” throughout the film (Hirsch, E! 2).

In contrast, reviewers praised Larry McMurtry’s chronicle of cowboy life in the nineteenth century “as a humorous yet sincere tribute to the American West” (Literary Criticism 253). McMurtry provides his characters with realistic humor as when Woodrow reflects on his partnership with Gus:

It’s odd I partnered with a man like you, Call, Augustus said. If we

was to meet now instead of when we did, I doubt we’d have two

words to say to one another. Woodrow Call responded, I wish

it could happen then, if it would hold you to two words. (Literary Criticism 257)

The exchange between Call and McCrae portrays two genuinely good friends and “gritty” cowboys expressing humor ironically to each other. Call and McCrae converse credibly, not in

the gimmicky way that the characters in “True Grit,” or those of typical unrealistic western genre talk to each other.

The treatment of women in mythical representations of the “West” varies sharply with their realistic treatment in Lonesome Dove. In mythical representations women tend to be either dependent and frightened without much personality, or planning exaggerated “missions of revenge” such as the Matty Ross in “True Grit.” In the mythical “Old West” men always arrive just in time to save the day. The women in need constantly search for a man “with grit.” In the mythical “West” there are no gritty women, but there are those who can improbably accomplish what men cannot. Matty can ride her horse across a river while Rooster and his partner take a ferry.

Lonesome Dove realistically depicts women such as Clara Allen and Lorena Wood who are “glorious [in their] individuality.” Clara and Lorena are “willful and passionate” and possess “charismatic” personalities (Horn, Literary Criticism 255). Also, in realistic portrayals a cowboy can be involved with two women simultaneously. One may even be a prostitute such as Lorena who is never-the-less beautiful and “delicate as a desert rose” (255). On the other hand ,Gus can love Clara, a plain, sensible woman married to a dying man. Clara is an authentic, Western woman, caring for three children while also running a horse ranch. Instead of being frightened by the frontier and grasping the hand of the man next to her, Clara cares for a dependent man while bravely facing the demands of the frontier. Clara’s home lies twenty miles from the nearest town, “a place where Indians were a dire threat, though Clara didn’t seem to fear them” (McMurtry 653).

Unlike mythical treatments of frontier women, the realistic portrayal permits them to evolve. Lorena begins her relationship with Gus by having contempt for him. She treats Gus crudely, “Don’t you cheat, Gus?. If you cheat I won’t give you no pokes” (519). Gradually, Lorena begins trusting Gus to hide her from the harsh reality of her career and life. She begins to love Gus so strongly “that sex, somehow, weakens [and they] become best of friends” (Horn, Literary Criticism 255). Only in a realistic depiction of a Western woman could the portrayal of a prostitute be dynamic enough to be interesting apart from her sexual life.

Mythical or realistic depictions of characters and their actions also influence the treatment of good and evil in “True Grit” and Lonesome Dove. In “True Grit” the villains are unambiguously always bad with no character trait that redeems them or makes them appear fully human or makes them somewhat likeable. In one scene Rooster Cogburn interrogates some villains whom he believes are about to rob a bank. Suddenly, one begins to talk, and as he speaks, another takes out a knife and cuts off the speaker’s fingers. No aspect of friendship between the two is evident. Each is a one-dimensional character. Each is a villain and therefore always “wrong.” Therefore, one deserves to be harmed by his partner without mercy while the partner himself deserves being killed by Rooster who is always “right” in these matters because he is the “good guy.”

By contrast, the characters in Lonesome Dove are not easy to love or hate. They encourage conflicting emotions because they are complicated. The distinction between good and evil, right and wrong is not always clear because fictional events are portrayed realistically, as they might have occurred in the Old West. In one tragic scene, Deets a likeable, former Texas Ranger who happens to be black, is killed by a young Indian who is ignorant that Deets is trying to rescue a small, blind Indian boy. Deets once pursued Indians under the command of Woodrow Call and Augustus McCrae, and now he is with them pursuing a small group of mostly women and children together with a few young braves not yet of fighting age. Call fires a shot to disperse the Indians who hastily leave one, small, boy behind who cannot see. Deets tries to save the boy, but in the confusion is slain by the young brave. It wasn’t right for the brave to kill Deets, but the brave couldn’t weigh all the facts. He only understood that when guns fire, usually Indians are killed, and he had never associated a cowboy with someone who might be helpful or good. In his passionate attempt to “save” the boy, the young brave “couldn’t stop coming and couldn’t stop hating either?.” (McMurtry 800).

It was not clearly wrong or immoral for the Indians to take the horses when all the factors surrounding the incident are considered. Of the twenty Indians involved, most of them were women and children and therefore not a threat to Call and the others. Furthermore, the Indians took the horses for food; they had been starving. They were without food because of the effects of the war they had fought with the white man over land the white man was taking from them. Gus understands this dilemma immediately when he sees the hungry Indians eating the horses: “These aren’t the mighty Plains Indians we’ve been hearing about?Let’s go, we don’t want to be shooting these people, although it would be a mercy?.”(798). Neither Call nor Macrae administer instant justice. The world of good and evil is not defined in the clear cut black and white manner as for Rooster Cogburn. Both Call and McCrae are troubled over the death of Deets. “[Call] could not get over his surprise. Though he had seen hundreds of surprising things in battle, this was the most shocking?.” (802).

The “half-breed” Blue Duck is a complicated character whose life and actions blur the line that separates good and evil. Blue Duck was an old foe of Call and McCrae in their Texas Ranger days of hunting Indians. Blue Duck carried out many bad deeds in his life including shooting another Indian in the head in order to convince the rest that it was not a good idea to reveal his location to the white men. He could just as easily kill a white man. At the end of his life when he was finally caught, he jumped out of a window to his death taking a white deputy with him. Blue Duck turned out committing evil deeds, but he was a product of two cultures which each rejected him, the Indian and the white. He was half Indian and half white, but he was all confused. He was bound to be a “sufferer,” it was his only means of survival. Cultures can be judged just as easily for their actions as individuals, and the results of such judgements are not always easy to define. Reality brings with it ambiguity.

The role of environment in mythical stories of the “Old West” is a background paradise. Whereas in realistically told stories such as Lonesome Dove, it plays a more active, determining role. In “True Grit” the environment is never a factor that hinders the achievement of Rooster Cogburn’s goals. Neither Rooster nor his companions ever confront a hail of grasshoppers which can throw him off his horse. He can accomplish this on his own. Rooster is never stopped from pursuing the killer of Matty Ross’ father because of a violent wind or sand storm. Unlike Woodrow Call who is obsessed with the surrounding environment because it brings the threat of Indians, Rooster Cogburn rides through an harmless environment that is more like a paradise than like a place where “the earth is mostly just a boneyard but pretty in the sunlight” according to Gus McCrae (Horn, Literary Criticism 255).

Larry McMurtry portrays the environment of the “Old West” almost as if it were another character because of its ability to alter the lives of the actual characters. If one character could shoot another without mercy, then the environment could also cause harm without pity. In Lonesome Dove when their comrades have suffered from some environmental “attack” such as a wind or rain storm, the other cowboys react to their safety as if they had been attacked by Indians. When Newt became lost, the first question he asked the others upon returning was “Did the grasshoppers hurt anybody?” (McMurtry 570). Yes, they attacked the cowboys by covering the cattle and eating their clothes. Grasshoppers coming out of the environment spooked Jasper’s horse which threw him causing him to break a collarbone (571). Sean O’Brien was “attacked” by a water moccasin and dies not because he made a poor choice against a human enemy such as not drawing his gun fast enough but because the environment was dangerous, and like a bad person could be harmful if it was disregarded long enough. Bill Spettle lost his life together with twelve cattle in a thunderstorm. This same storm altered the lives of the cowboys by hindering the herd’s progress. It might not be a person but instead rain, hail, or grasshoppers which by their actions could alter the direction of the actual characters’. In this way the environment could appear to be another character and at times a threatening one.

Larry McMurtry was raised on a Texas Livestock Ranch which provided him an intimate understanding of Texas, cowboys, and the whole culture surrounding ranch life. As a boy he often spoke with older men who knew the experience of the “Old West” well. His uncles often told him “about the days when the range was open [and about] ?wily Indian villains [such as Blue Duck] and the good-hearted?Lorena” (Literary Criticism 253). With such a personal influence, McMurtry was informed and inspired to see if he could make the tales of the old days “real” (253).

McMurtry’s background allows him to write a Western novel “known for its realism” (Martin, personal interview). Lonesome Dove separates itself distinctly from mythic representations of the “Old West” by its realistic treatment of characters including women; the environment; and the forces of good and evil. Cowboys can be formally educated, even if flawed. Gus McCrae’s Latin could be comical. It translated: “The cluster of grapes-many sided, parti-colored, diverse-through living, begets one grape” (Sewell, Literary Criticism 261). At the same time Gus poor Latin brought pleasure to a dying man like Wilbarger, and it was an honest description of Gus, Jake Spoon, and Woodrow Call (261). McMurtry’s depiction of people, morality, and the environment of the “Old West” contains a power that “rests in the awesomeness of the myth of the cowboy. The myth, heretofore, foisted upon gullible audiences by Hollywood, can now be drawn from the fiction of one who knows the myth” (Sewell, Literary Criticism 261) to represent it realistically.

1. Clemons, Walter, et. al. “Larry McMurtry, Lonesome Dove.” Contemporary Literary Criticism 44 (1986): 253-262.

2. Contemporary Authors Volume 5-8. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1984 P. 767

3. Martin, Linda. Personal Interview. April 1998

4. McMurtry, Larry. Lonesome Dove. New York: Pocket Books, 1985.

5. Skow, John. “Climbing the Foothill.” Time 4 Sept. 1995: 65.

6. “The Box: Lonesome Dove.” 99 Lives 16 pp. Online. Internet. 2 May 1998.

Available http://www.99 Lives.com/features/box/ldepi2.html.

7. True Grit. Dir. Henry Hathaway. Perf. John Wayne, Glen Campbell, Kim Darby, Robert Duvall, Dennis Hopper, and Jeremy Slate. Malofilm Group, 1969.