

NATURALISM IN PROSE FICTION  
OF THE AMERICAN WEST: ITS  
ORIGIN AND SIGNIFICANCE

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The question to be considered here is whether there exists in a selected combination of works by Edgar Watson Howe, Hamlin Garland, Frank Norris, Jack London, Ole Rolvaag, Vardis Fisher, and Walter Van Tilburg Clark evidence of the same idealism implicit within the foremost historical interpretations of the American West. The reason for attempting to answer this question by means of a detailed comparison is my conviction that particular expressions suggestive of naturalism appearing variously within these works are in fact efforts to define an ethical response to the tremendous environmental forces which have shaped Western life.

Traditionally, naturalism in literature is a philosophical concept converted to a definite style; this naturalistic style affirms the physiological basis of all nature, including psychology and all other processes commonly known as mind or spirit. It also adheres to deterministic principle, and attempts to create an impression of scientific objectivity applied to art. When added to realism, which is a truthful imitation or reproduction of life (however individually accomplished), naturalism portrays people and situations caught within

the grip of racial influence and environmental force, against which no free will is admitted.

The naturalism of the authors above is therefore hardly a pure naturalism. They do not rely upon scientific fidelity to determinism so much as upon their own doctrines relating to social problems in the West. But although naturalism appears in a secondary position most of the time, it does abound within the structure of the novels and short stories to be reviewed below; it is evident in this particular genre of Western writing according to various treatment, which will be pointed out, and it unites ultimately with that unique idealism attributed by historians to the psychology of the westward movement.

The manifest idea of this thesis is to suggest a common impression, or series of impressions, whereby the works at hand are seen to uphold the conviction that this Western naturalism is a branch of a larger Western idealism.

## I

### THE IDENTIFICATION OF NATURALISM IN THE WEST

C.C. Walcutt, America's foremost student of naturalism, has published a comprehensive study, American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream, in which he states:

Something extraordinary happened to the American novel about 1890, when what is called the Naturalistic Movement began to gather momentum. It was a wonder, a scandal, and a major force. Its effects appear everywhere today, both in fiction and in popular attitudes, for it reflects at once our faith in science and our doubts about the modern scientific world. And perhaps because the effects of science have been so disturbing and ambiguous, the true character of naturalism has not been determined. In one form it appears a shaggy, apelike monster; in another, it appears a godlike giant. Shocking, bestial, scientific, messianic--no sooner does its outline appear to grow than, like Proteus, it slips through the fingers and reappears in another shape. The critics reffect its elusiveness. Whereas one authority describes it as an extreme form of romanticism, another counters that it is the rigorous application of scientific method to the novel. When others say it is desperate, pessimistic determinism, they are answered by those who insist that it is an optimistic affirmation of man's freedom and progress. These authorities are not all mistaken. On the contrary, they are all correct. But each has reached his conclusion by looking at different aspects of naturalism, at different times between 1890 and 1940, and having committed himself to a confining definition he has found it difficult to consider other areas and aspects of the subject.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Charles C. Walcutt, American Literary Naturalism: A Divided Stream (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1956), p. 3.

Walcutt's thesis is that naturalism in America is a direct result of American transcendentalism, that it recognizes Zola as the "fountainhead of naturalistic theory and practice," and consequently that it has operated within the tension of a "divided stream" from which it obtains at once both its strength and its apparent contradiction. This imaginative dialectic is most clearly explained when he adds:

The naturalistic novelist while he portrays with loathing and bitterness the folly and degradation of man is also affirming his hope and his faith, for his unspoken strictures imply an equally unspoken ideal which stimulates and justifies his pejorative attitude toward the world about him. The act of criticism, furthermore, is an act of creative intelligence which in itself denies what it may be saying about the futility of life and the folly of man. This denial is a term in the dialectic of art; it is as much a part of the total effect of the work of art as its stated or implied scientific hypothesis. Hence all "naturalistic" novels exist in a tension between determinism and its antithesis. The reader is aware of the opposition between what the artist says about man's fate and what his saying affirms about man's hope.<sup>1</sup>

It is evident from this study, therefore, that to speak of naturalism as being pessimistic with the authoritative definition in mind is to place automatic restrictions upon its essential purpose in American fiction. Moreover, the truth of this idea becomes clear with any careful reading of the so-called "pessimistically deterministic" authors (as the present thesis attempts to point out, though it is not the primary objective).

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

On the other hand, V.L. Parrington asserted that naturalism from Zola on down implied an obsession with gloom in the author's ultimate philosophy, as:

the last remaining vestiges of the old French romanticism were swept away; a benevolent egocentric universe was become unthinkable; progress was no longer the inherent law of matter and of life; but instead, everywhere change, disintegration and reintegration, a ceaseless and purposeless flux to what final end the human mind could not forecast.<sup>1</sup>

This is a representative contrast of opinions; one side claims naturalism to be only one part of some larger concept, and the other finds it to be an end in itself. In view of the specific kind of naturalism to be discussed here, the former is for the moment more acceptable. To characterize the view of Walcott in other words, naturalism and transcendentalism are reconcilable in the same general reference as are Taine's racial determinants and Emerson's oversoul. Thus the typical "victim" of external forces in American naturalistic fiction can indeed be thought of as having a will. The degree of its freedom depends upon the amount and kind of naturalism with which it appears in context.

F.L. Paxson described the character of the West in terms that might well be noted at this point, in order that we may see more exactly the specific milieu which is

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<sup>1</sup>Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1930), III, p. 318.

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being considered here in relation to the "Naturalistic Movement":

In analyzing the psychology of the West, it must never be lost sight of that the persistent fight with nature made of the pioneer an individual with sharply developed peculiarities. It is a nice question whether the equalitarian or the individualizing forces were the weightier....The equalitarian conditions bred a dislike of superiority; and the individuation produced a high regard for those in whom it was most pronounced. There was also in the Western character, and quite as firmly grounded in experience as either of these, an expansive trait that the word idealism only roughly describes.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere, Paxson marks another historical distinction with which a great deal of Western literature concerns itself:

The religious currents that flowed most freely through the West were protestant and dissenter....The church of Rome and the church of England were notably absent from the group of religions that met the frontier needs.<sup>2</sup>

For an explanation of how the West and its unprecedented combination of environmental features affected the growing trend toward realism in literature during the last years of the nineteenth century, the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893 provides an opportunity to contrast two men--one a historian, the other a promising young author.

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick L. Paxson, History of the American Frontier 1763-1893 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924), p. 251.

<sup>2</sup>Frederick L. Paxson, When The West Is Gone (New York: Henry Holt, 1930), p. 81.

The first of these was Frederick Jackson Turner, who addressed the 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association with a hypothesis that was to mark the start of a new era in the interpretation of American history:

The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people--to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier...American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West.<sup>1</sup>

Just one month before this monumental doctrine--the Frontier Hypothesis--was launched, and in the same city, a "bushy haired young radical" from the Midwest

made the second major decision of his life. The first had been to leave his Middle-Border farm home for a lonely decade of self-education in Boston. One result of that decision had been the drab but powerful stories collected as Main-Travelled Roads in 1891. Now its author was back, and his second decision was to stay. It was apparent that Chicago, now that the Exposition had established the city as the cultural capital of at least the Middle Border, would soon become the center of the new literature of which Hamlin Garland was already feeling himself to be a major prophet.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), pp. 2-3.

<sup>2</sup>Robert E. Spiller, Introduction to Hamlin Garland's Crumbling Idols (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1952), p. i.

The literary prophecy of Hamlin Garland was in turn to be felt mightily, when, just one year later, his twelve critical essays collectively entitled Crumbling Idols were published.<sup>1</sup> In this volume, Garland gave forthright utterance to a hitherto recondite idea--that the application of more candid literary styles would emancipate the new culture from its pretensions to established form, and most truthfully set forth a distinctly American expression. To realism, Garland added his faith in impressionism, and called the result "veritism."

Veritism, like the basic realistic technique which demands honesty and truth in factual reproduction, is a style that gravitates away from overt recognition of the fanciful or the unreal; but at the same time it finds meaning in the individual's own perception of life and nature. The burden of necessary restraint is placed upon a conscientious devotion to truth. The elements of both idealistic naturalism and irrepressible evolutionary progress are unquestionably present:

The realist or veritist is really an optimist, a dreamer. He sees life in terms of what it might be, as well as in terms of what it is; but he writes of what is, and, at his best, suggests what is to be, by contrast. He aims to be perfectly truthful in his delineation of his reaction to life, but there is a tone, a color, which comes unconsciously into his utterance,

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<sup>1</sup>Hamlin Garland, Crumbling Idols (Chicago: Stone & Kimball, 1894).

like the sobbing stir of the muted violins beneath the frank, clear song of the clarinet; and this tone is one of sorrow that the good time moves so slowly in its approach.

He aims to hasten the age of beauty and peace by delineating the ugliness and warfare of the present; but ever the converse of his picture rises in the mind of the reader. He sighs for a lovelier life. He is tired of warfare and diseased sexualism, and Poverty, the mother of Envy....With this hate in his heart and this ideal in his brain the modern man writes his stories of life....

This element of sad severity will change as conditions change for the common man, but the larger element of sincerity, with resulting contemporaneousness, will remain. Fiction, to be important and successful, must be original and suited to its time.<sup>1</sup>

In fact, no more positive comparison with the particular naturalism outlined by Walcutt and followed in the present discussion can be found than Garland's summary statement:

In evolution there are always two vast fundamental forces: one, the inner, which propels; the other, the outer, which adapts and checks. One forever thrusts toward new forms, the other forever moulds, conserves, adapts, reproduces. Progress is the resultant of these forces.

The force that flowers is the individual, that which checks and moulds is environment.<sup>2</sup>

Here, then, is a reassertion of Emerson's concept of Man Thinking. More important, Garland was looking West to the fruition of his ideal.<sup>3</sup> And if the rather lavish tone of the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 52-53.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 12-15.

following passage can be overlooked, it is possible to see in Frederick Jackson Turner an important spiritual relationship with both the American Scholar and Hamlin Garland:

...to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom--these are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier.<sup>1</sup>

Henry Nash Smith, in his classic study of the West Virgin Land,<sup>2</sup> would write off Turner's vague idealism as the product of a dying agrarian tradition; but it is interesting to note that he sympathizes with the great historian's extended attempts to redefine the American experience for the civilized and technology-minded post-frontier era.<sup>3</sup> It is in fact this notion which serves to direct any sound appraisal of uniquely Western fiction, for Smith overshot his mark in concluding that agrarian principles are the constant source of frontier idealism. Nevertheless, a great source of material for the Western naturalist came from this same agrarian tradition, whose first death throes coincided with the rise of that literary

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<sup>1</sup>Turner, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (New York: Vintage Books, 1957).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 300-305

style; and it is at this moment that the main environmental factors so necessary to the style's unique place in the flow of American ideas are first seen as a unified force in American history.

Having established, therefore, some suggestion of this unity connecting the Frontier Hypothesis with that which is called Western naturalism, it remains to set forth more completely evidence of circumstances surrounding it. For this task, I have attempted to limit myself to an emphasis on agricultural frontiers; the two exceptions being Jack London and Walter Van Tilburg Clark, who are associated with the mining and cattle-raising frontiers, respectively. Some overlapping is inevitable, keeping in mind that the nature of the Frontier Hypothesis is the generic idea uniting various kinds of environmental determinants in their combined effect upon Western naturalism. This embodies roughly the same idea that has led Ray West to define the proper fictional theme of the Western novelist as the struggle to fashion order out of chaos--in both individual mind and natural universe<sup>1</sup>--indeed a broadly inclusive definition, as broad perhaps as any reference to so vast a scheme must be; but its regional point of view is implicit, as is its unique compatibility with Western naturalism.

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<sup>1</sup>Ray B. West, Jr., Rocky Mountain Reader (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1946); p. 24.

Very little scholarship has been devoted to American naturalism as a unified movement, and none has attempted specifically to relate the Frontier Hypothesis or its implications to evidence of the movement in the West. A few references, such as Smith's chapter on the agricultural West in literature,<sup>1</sup> Walter Prescott Webb's account of literature on the Great Plains,<sup>2</sup> and a comprehensive study of mining themes by Frank Merchant,<sup>3</sup> afford a wide choice of closely allied material, however. They are suggestive of the general motif, and point inevitably to "disillusionment" on the then economically depressed (for miscellaneous reasons) Western frontiers as a factor in the generation of a divided stream of optimism and pessimism--the one stemming from pursuit of social reform, the other conscious for the first time that the "Garden of the World" had in one way or another rebuffed the simple agrarian hopes of the Jeffersonians. Moreover, the free land frontier--symbol of American expansion and perennial rebirth--had officially disappeared as of 1890.

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, op. cit., pp. 246-290.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1931), pp. 453-484.

<sup>3</sup>Frank Merchant, "The Theme of Prospecting and Mining for Gold and Silver in the American Novel" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of English, University of Denver, 1951).

These events, coupled with strong influences from European naturalists in both philosophy and literature,<sup>1</sup> and the unchecked centralization of economic power in certain irresponsible quarters, engendered a feeling of despair that found expression in part in the theories of deterministic materialism. How these theories were actually applied to literature is a study of another dimension-- where despair is the tool, not the attitude, of the author.

In order to understand the overall picture of Western naturalism, it is necessary to know how realism in frontier literature and incipient social forces in frontier phenomena moved irrepressibly toward one another, culminating in the great synthesis of the nineties, when, as has been shown, so many diverse kinds of thought began to run parallel. The technique of realism was much slower in adapting itself to American fiction than to European, for reasons which are elusive; Garland thought it to be restrained by that frame of mind in which the American had been trained not to look for natural expression, but schooled to "the creation of blank-verse tragedies on Columbus or Washington."<sup>2</sup> This awkward situation was especially felt in the West, where the practical necessities

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<sup>1</sup>These influences are dealt with in some detail in Lars Ahnebrink's The Beginnings of Naturalism in American Fiction (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950).

<sup>2</sup>Garland, op. cit., p. 11.

of life in a roughhewn environment were at once respected and despised; the agrarian utopia of hardy and virtuous yeomen, as Smith has characterized it, with its ideals rooted in the Garden of the World myth "were poetic ideas... but they could not be brought into fictional expression. The difficulty lay in the class status of the Western farmer."<sup>1</sup> This remnant of stratified social value, and the prevailing taste leading to sentimental and heroic styles--principally those of English origin--stunted what few realistic impulses were felt by such renowned frontier champions as Cooper, Timothy Flint, or even Caroline Kirkland; although it is generally agreed that the latter came the closest to being America's first realist with her candid portrayals of frontier life in southern Michigan in the 1830's. However, the realization of significance in the frontier epoch had yet to develop into a native literature. The lines were drawn, as it were, but, as Smith so unerringly points out:

The conflict would not be resolved so long as they clung to the theory of civilization with its fixed series of social stages. For the West could have only one place in such a scheme: it was primitive and therefore unrefined. This was indeed the defining characteristic. In proportion as the West lost its primitive character it became indistinguishable from the East and there was no basis for a characteristic Western literature. Writers who were attracted by Western materials had an obscure awareness that the unprecedented adventure of agricultural settlement in the Mississippi Valley was somehow worthy

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, op. cit., p. 246.

of imaginative interpretation. The theory of progress and civilization, on the other hand, could take no account of novelty except as an increase of enlightenment in the most advanced societies. Abstract and rationalistic as it was, it implied that only the most advanced stage of social development produced characters worthy of admiration. The theory offered little ground for finding a value in America as contrasted with Europe, or in the American West as contrasted with the American East. From Cooper's day to that of Hamlin Garland, writers about the West had to struggle against the notion that their characters had no claim upon the attention of sophisticated readers, except through their alarming or at best their picturesque lack of refinement.<sup>1</sup>

In the style of Western literary expression which found its voice in the combined emergence of naturalism, the critical theories of Hamlin Garland, the Frontier Hypothesis, and social insurrection, patterns of a new unity in native Western self-consciousness--innocently democratic, aggressively egotistical, pragmatically erudite--eclipsed both vulgar and classical movements in importance to the thoughtful average Westerner. The prologue to Virgin Land outlines the intellectual background of the new style;<sup>2</sup> from Franklin to Emerson to Whitman the germ had been carried hidden in the standard paeans to progress and the advance of civilization, but had been suppressed until this time on the frontier itself by the inhibitions outlined above. In popular taste the shift from the "alarming" dime-novel to Owen Wister's The Virginian marked the same

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 3-13.

epoch that witnessed the shift from Victorianisms to Twain and Henry James in belles-lettres. And the new breed of Westerner entertained neither a blissful nor a condescending smile as he read in Norris's The Octopus of the poet Presley's search for a "Song of the West." The thrust of naturalism was imposing symmetry on the socially-conscious reflections of the Western fiction writer.

The works which have been selected to illustrate various patterns of this unique Western literary style are Edgar Watson Howe's The Story of a Country Town (1882); Hamlin Garland's Main-Travelled Roads (1891); Frank Norris's The Octopus (1901); Jack London's A Daughter of the Snows (1902) and The Call of the Wild (1903); Ole Rolvaag's trilogy: Giants in the Earth (1927), Peder Victorious (1929), Their Fathers' God (1931); Vardis Fisher's Toilers of the Hills (1928); and Walter Van Tilburg Clark's The Ox-Bow Incident (1940). Reviews follow chronological sequence in the next chapter.

## II

### VARIATIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF WESTERN NATURALISM

The Story of a Country Town<sup>1</sup> by Edgar Watson Howe (1853-1937) is something of a pioneer in the emerging realistic tradition of the Trans-Mississippi West; though it should not in itself be regarded as more than a precursor of any naturalistic tendencies. It deals with the lives of a number of farm folk whose connection with the country town is incidental to their own development.

Ned Westlock, narrator of the story, begins with a passage that foreshadows the tone of what is to follow:

I became early impressed with the fact that our people seemed to be miserable and discontented, and frequently wondered that they did not load their effects on wagons again, and move away from a place which made all the men surly and rough, and the women pale and fretful. Although I had never been to the country they had left, except as a baby in arms, I was unfavorably impressed with it, thinking it must have been a very poor one that such a lot of people left it and considered their condition bettered by the change, for they never talked of going back, and were therefore probably better satisfied than they had ever been before. A road ran by our house, and when I first began to think about it all, I thought that the covered wagons traveling it carried people moving from the country from which those in our

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<sup>1</sup>Edgar Watson Howe, The Story of a Country Town (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, Inc., 1882).

neighborhood came, and the wagons were so numerous that I was led to believe that at least half the people of the world had tried to live there, and moved away after an unfortunate experience.<sup>1</sup>

Here is the principal indication of determinism lurking behind the subsequent tragedy (for that is what it becomes ultimately). And it is clear that the westward exodus, imparting as it does a transitory tension to the air, offsets the desirability of material security that is ineffective in the greater pull of virgin land:

In the dusty tramp of civilization westward--which seems to have always been justified by a tradition that men grow up by reason of it--our section was not a favorite, and remained new and unsettled after counties and States farther west had grown old. Every one who came there seemed favorably impressed with the steady fertility of the soil, and expressed surprise that the lands were not all occupied; but no one in the great outside world talked about it, and no one wrote about it, so that those who were looking for homes went to the west or the north, where others were going.<sup>2</sup>

Ned's quality of innocence and the constant reiteration of his first theme--"Ours was the prairie district out West, where we had gone to grow up with the country"<sup>3</sup>--forecast the naturalistic effect in treatment of environment that runs through the remainder of his account.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 1-2.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

The story involves both the narrator and his family, as he has said, "growing up with the country." Ned's own role is unusually external to the action, considering both his potential and explicit importance as an influence upon the other characters. His closest friend is Jo Erring, a young uncle of his who is the principal actor in the tragedy which unfolds. Jo becomes smitten with a girl who is socially his better, and strives to effect their marriage as a complement to his driving ambition in life--the successful operation of a gristmill which he builds on little more than credit and muscle. His boyhood has been all work and no play on the Kansas prairie, imparting to him the practical zeal of ambition untempered by understanding of or countenance of human frailty; this constitutes the tragic element, which Howe ascribes to the hardships of the man's youth. As it develops, Mateel Shepherd, the girl with whom Jo would share his success in life, is well-bred and socially attractive but shallow. From her shallowness she is weak, and from her weak character has come a mistake which Jo is by nature incapable of viewing together with his image of her--an earlier flirtation with Clinton Bragg, a mysterious young man with a sullen temper and uncertain social background. Their marriage breaks apart with Jo's pride pitted against the floundering Mateel, and the conflict

ends in divorce (alone something of an innovation in the Western novel), murder, and suicide.

A concurrent tale involves the fall of the Rev. Mr. John Westlock, Ned's stern father. Puritanical to the core, his life has been unremittingly tense in growing up with the country and heeding the demands of his God at the same time. When he runs away with a woman he does not love, even he cannot explain why in a farewell letter to his son:

I shall not attempt to tell you why I am going away, for I do not know myself, except that I am discontented as I am, which has been my condition since I can remember. I don't know that I believe the step I am taking will make me more contented, but I know I cannot remain as I am, for the Devil has complete possession of me, and leads me to do that which is most disgraceful and wicked.<sup>1</sup>

Moving westward again, the Rev. Mr. Westlock fulfills a characteristic yearning of the early Western naturalist to use the traditional "safety-valve" as relief for the failures of the old frontiers. Howe's frequent noting of the euphemism "killed by the Indians" emphasizes the nature of its use.

Ned himself seems curiously to grow up with the country without receiving any scars; he thrives, marries a virtuous maiden, and ends his tragic story with almost a shrug of the shoulders.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

Of first importance to the many ideas within this story are Howe's rather quaintly-named personalities, each of whom represents something of a stereotyped concept: Lytle Biggs, the braggart gentleman farmer whose attitude refutes the theory of the virtuous yeoman; the Rev. Mr. Goode Shepherd, Mateel's bourgeois father and successor in the pulpit to the sterner Rev. Mr. Westlock; Big Adam, a ludicrous attempt to milk humor from the moribund environment; and Clinton Bragg, the despicable (for no obvious reason, except that he beats his horse) outcast of society.

In Howe's technique, Ned's ruminations form a greater part of the text, although there is a formal interweaving of straight exposition without which it would be difficult to follow the plot. Dialogue is not as effective as in The Hoosier Schoolmaster by Edward Eggleston or Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn for example--where Ned Westlock's contemporaries, Bud Means and Huck Finn, are brought to life through the articulate application of native dialect--it suffers from clumsy asides as well as stilted syntax. The climactic scene where Jo Erring's intransigent jealousy forces his unhappy wife from their home offers a characteristic example of this weakness, as well as that of Ned failing to respond to his friend's need:

As I paid respectful attention, and her husband none at all,--his face was turned from her,--she addressed herself to me again:--

"I hope it will be always understood that I am taking this step not in anger, but because I feel I must do something. I cannot live as I have been living, and self-preservation suggests action of some kind. Perhaps what I am doing is not wise, but I can think of nothing else. I have always felt that I should have been more independent, and asserted myself more. I hope he will understand, and respect my determination."

Although I felt I ought to interfere, I knew it was useless and idle, and perhaps would offend them both, so I held my peace.

"If he will ask me to remain," she was losing her dignity and composure very rapidly, and when I realized how pale and weak she was I wondered she had held up so long, "I will reconsider; or I will ask you to take me home, instead of Clinton Bragg, if he desires it. I will do anything he wishes."

Not a word, Jo? Will you refuse your trembling wife advice when she asks it, and then hold her responsible if she adopts the wrong course?<sup>1</sup>

There are also several epistolary sequences of some length, such as the Rev. Mr. Westlock's farewell letter to his son, which contribute further to breaking up the stream of action and placing the reader at the mercy of Howe's dull rhetoric.

Despite its antiquated language--reminiscent of the class-conscious literary society defined above by Smith--this work succeeded in bringing in new ideas which were to underly many subsequent Western novels; and it is quite clear that the most important of these was the effect of the specific Western environment upon man. To the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 279.

degree that environment becomes more and more a determining force in the lives of the characters, traces of what was later to be incorporated into Western naturalism appear, justifying Howe's pioneering efforts.

Main-Travelled Roads<sup>1</sup> is a direct successor to The Story of a Country Town in style and content if not necessarily in technique. Howe demolished the myth of the yeoman and it was left only for Garland to do the same with the myth of the garden, while at the same time casting off the last fetters of frontier class-consciousness. In a fresh, direct, realistic way Garland wrote this volume of short stories in the mood of the literary iconoclasm which he was to lay bare to the world three years later in the critical theories of Crumbling Idols.

A prologue opens the volume, indicating a point of view new to the West:

Mainly it [the main-travelled road in the West] is long and wearyful, and has a dull little town at one end and a home of toil at the other. Like the main-travelled road of life it is traversed by many classes of people, but the poor and weary predominate.<sup>2</sup>

The effects of the stories vary from one to another, and some tend toward naturalistic situations more than others. Briefly, and in order of presentation, those are as follows:

(a) "A Branch Road" relates the story of a sensitive

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<sup>1</sup>Hamlin Garland, Main-Travelled Roads (New York: Harper and Bros., 1891),

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

young man, who, because of a misunderstanding with his best girlfriend, emigrates in despair to Arizona. Seven successful years later he returns to find the girl, whom he has not been able to forget, going to seed as the wife of a dull farmer in a stagnant agricultural frontier. They discover that their love is not dead, reflect on the bitter life that is slowly destroying the girl, and, snatching up her infant from his crib, depart together in secret. Their ultimate goal is to discover the beauties of life in the East and in Europe.

Garland's descriptions of sordid farm life are the core of what may be termed naturalistic in "A Branch Road." However, the theme of going West to make a quick fortune is paradoxically an extension of the same myth which is destroyed in Garland's drab Midwest portraits. It accents a certain hollowness in the author's repeated maxims on realistic treatment of Western themes, but at the same time points up his latent sentimental tendencies. The conclusion of the story is likewise comparable to that which Garland later called "backtrailing" in search of identity with the fountains of inherited cultural forms. Outside of these suggestive allusions, the environment is rather static in connection with the plot.

(b) "Up the Coolly" portrays the successful son of a farm couple come home from the East to recapture his happy youth. His family, including an unsuccessful and accusing brother whose task has been to maintain the parents as well as a growing family, has been forced by the general deterioration of the local economic situation to sell the family farm; his own guilt for their condition is brought into the open, and his efforts to make amends for his long neglect are answered bitterly by his brother:

"I mean life ain't worth very much to me. I'm too old to make a new start. I'm a dead failure. I've come to the conclusion that life's a failure for ninety-nine percent of us. You can't help me now. It's too late."<sup>1</sup>

Again are contrasted the economic determinism of the ill-fated small Western farmer and the unlimited success of the refugee from it--this time veiled in an obscure reference to working one's way up in the affluent theatrical circles of the effete East. But the melancholy motif of the former is the prevailing force, and the element of naturalism affirms a shattering of the garden myth.

(c) "Among the Corn-Rows" is an example of Garland's romantic impulse, although its overtones relate it unmistakably to more serious Western themes, such as the conflict

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

of frontier social forces. A bachelor homesteading in Dakota is celebrating the spirit of the pioneer, encouraged by a friend's exhortations--one of which contains a curiously ambiguous and revealing mention of "the strange social conditions on this sunlit Dakota prairie,"<sup>1</sup> and convinced that he is better off where "the cussed European aristocracy hadn't got a holt of the people" as it had in his native Wisconsin.<sup>2</sup> Yet he is also moved by the desire to have a wife. The scarcity of women on the frontier coupled with the practical necessities of his vocation send him off to Wisconsin for exactly ten days--no more nor less--to find a mate. Although the story is essentially one of humor, it touches more profound notes as the young man finds his bride-to-be toiling in the hot corn-rows of her Norwegian-American father's farm. She is already in a rebellious mood against her family's old-world ways, and her dream of the West and marrying a "Yankee" is fulfilled as they flee westward together.

(d) "Under the Lion's Paw" is the most frequently mentioned story of the collection. This is the record of a poor emigrant farmer being checked and molded by the frontier environment, against which his efforts are futile. Originally from "Ingyannie," driven out of Kansas by a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 136.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 139.

grasshopper plague, the farmer and his family take refuge in an Iowa community, where a land speculator gives him a verbal option to buy an abandoned homestead if he will but lease it long enough to make the down payment from crops. In the course of three strenuous and sacrificing years, the farmer improves his financial position and the farm's capacity until he feels able to close the deal. The speculator, in the meantime, adds the value of the farmer's own improvements and a fictitious time-increment to the price. Given the general economic situation of farming, this policy could mean that the farmer might be forced into tenant farming the rest of his life. Unwilling to face such an alternative, the farmer defiantly orders the speculator to make out the deed and mortgage.

Without assurance that the farmer will succeed--indeed with a conviction that his road ahead will be as rough as heretofore--the reader is made aware both of Garland's recognition of the natural forces working against the garden myth and of his own strong moral opposition to land speculation on the settled frontier. The story is therefore successful as Western naturalism, despite its technical flaw in omitting more detail of the speculator and the frontier pressures which determined his dishonor.

(e) "A Day's Pleasure" is a touching slice-of-life which depicts the day in town of a typical farmwife. The woman is able to leave her sordid home and quarrelsome children, for the first time in six months, to do some shopping. Her small list of items is pitiful--two spools of thread, six yards of cotton flannel, a can of coffee, and a pair of mittens. Too proud to sit in the general store waiting for her husband, who has forgotten her in his day-long search of camaraderie, she takes up her purchases and grubby infant and shuffles aimlessly about the hot, dusty town. A sympathetic woman invites her into a clean, middle-class home, and the life of the farmwife is temporarily brightened by the simple charm of an ordinary room and friendly spirits.

Clearly, this is not a story in the usual sense. By way of action and climax, however, it becomes more than an anecdote; the transformation of the farmwife's bitterness into calm hope is a sudden and effective turn. The value of the story shows through the futility which underlies every gesture of tenderness on the harsh frontier, and probes the reader's sense of justice and humanity.

The remainder of the main-travelled roads lead past a soldier's homecoming, the romance of a farm girl with the creamery man, a sentimental old farm couple, and sketches of good spirits in small towns far back of

the frontier. Fragments of interesting material related to Western naturalism appear in these from time to time, but they are on the whole more concerned with isolated sentimental and psychological themes.

Frank Norris (1870-1902) was the first Westerner to find success utilizing the naturalistic method of Emile Zola--romantic power of emphasis derived from exposing the uglier forces of deterministic materialism. His earlier tales of San Francisco, Vandover and the Brute (1895, published 1914) and McTeague (1899), are evidence of his purest and simplest use of determinism.

Norris conceived The Octopus<sup>1</sup> as the first part of a trilogy dealing with the staff of life--wheat. His ambition was to define the primordial dominance of this basic life form in terms of its effect upon man, and his point of view was universal, achieved through the medium of a regionalistic interpretation. The Octopus has to do with the growing and shipping of the wheat; The Pit, a novel centered around the Chicago commodity exchange, is the second part of the trilogy; and the third part was to have been The Wolf, dealing with the consumption of the wheat by the people of the world. Norris's death in 1902 cut short the sequence, but we have the first two

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Norris, The Octopus (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1901).

works as evidence of his monumental contribution to Western naturalism. That his style is in some measure an outgrowth of Zola's influence does not obscure the predominantly Western cast of his attitude toward the contemporaneous mind and pulse of society, which is, as has been pointed out, the major incentive of American naturalism.

Moreover, The Octopus is a particularly apt and consistent reflection of that Western milieu defined by Frederick Jackson Turner and Henry Nash Smith. Turner's kind of idealism in interpreting American history is Norris's kind of idealism in analyzing the purpose of the American novel.<sup>1</sup> And in no other author's work are the myths and symbols of Smith's West more convincingly brought to light.

The story takes place in California's San Joaquin Valley at the turn of the century. It is to some extent based upon an actual event in California history, though not intended to be a roman à clef.<sup>2</sup> The cast of characters is long, and the panoramic sweep of the action ranges up and down the great valley. The "octopus" is the railroad--symbol of the new age on the frontier.<sup>3</sup> The conflict of farmer and railroad, however, is distinctly incidental to

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Norris, The Responsibilities of the Novelist (Collected Works, Vol. III; New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1928), pp. 65-67.

<sup>2</sup>Ernest Marchand, Frank Norris: A Study (Stanford University, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1942), p. 74.

<sup>3</sup>Smith, op. cit., pp. 182-183.

the pervasive encroachment of the wheat itself as the decisive power.

The railroad had given vast amounts of its deeded government grants over to certain big wheat growers as their incentive to build up the amount of planted acreage. Option to buy at a later date was guaranteed at two dollars and a half per acre "and up." The parallel to Garland's "Under the Lion's Paw" is notable, at least in principle; one may infer that the same forces of greed preyed within the speculative range of all Western investments during the frontier period of expansion and federal involvement (i.e., homestead laws, railroad grants, land office chicanery, etc.). Norris, however, epitomizes them more completely than does Garland in the epic implications of his theme--the unrelenting power of the wheat over men's rational machinations.

Several of the leading wheat growers of the valley, led by Magnus Derrick--their spiritual leader whom they address as "the Governor"--form a league to resist the railroad when it ultimately demands impossible prices for the optioned acreage. In doing what appears to be right, they are involved in bribing the state board of railroad commissioners, and the ethical stature of the men--particularly that of "the Governor"--begins a carefully documented decline. When violence and bloodshed

result from the railroad's effort to seize the land, the railroad prevails, and even the idealistic poet Presley, searching for meaning in the drama as his "Song of the West," becomes convinced of the only possible right--the wheat, symbol in its perennial rebirth of life itself.

The characters in the story have a habit, not uncommon in Norris's works, of dying violent or dramatic deaths. Magnus Derrick is allowed to live, but in a state of mental derangement resulting from his own moral confusion in the face of the great forces opposing him--including a son who sold him out to the railroad. Even the evil representative of the railroad, S. Behrman, whose greed for Derrick's Rancho Los Muertos has precipitated much of the difficulty, accidentally trips into the hold of a cargo ship loading wheat in San Francisco, and is literally smothered by the roaring tide of grain.

The thoughts of Presley, which serve throughout as a kind of cement for the plot, inscribe the epitaph of the story:

Men--motes in the sunshine--perished, were shot down in the very noon of life, hearts were broken, little children started in life lamentably handicapped; young girls were brought to a life of shame; old women died in the heart of life for lack of food. In that little, isolated group of human insects, misery, death, and anguish spun like a wheel of fire.

But the WHEAT remained. Untouched, unassailable, undefiled, that mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm,

indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, restless, moved onward in its appointed grooves. Through the welter of blood at the irrigating ditch, through the sham charity and shallow philanthropy of famine-relief committees, the great harvest of Los Muertos rolled like a flood from the Sierras to the Himalayas to feed thousands of starving scarecrows on the barren plains of India.<sup>1</sup>

Jack London (1874-1916) as an author was in some respects the stereotype of his own frontier characters in A Daughter of the Snows<sup>2</sup> and The Call of the Wild<sup>3</sup>--self-sustaining to a point but full of bluff from there on. These two novels are centered around the typical London motif of man the beast--an atavistic creature, who, given a frontier environment, finds natural expression in ruthless egotism. London lived a rough life from boyhood, and knew at first hand the scenes of his frontier stories, wherein the wilderness is given almost a will to destroy, against which man can exert only a will to survive; his application of the naturalistic style is therefore often highly dramatic, and only when his absolute primordialism turns into burlesque is the drama weakened. Eventually, all conflicts in this pattern are

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<sup>1</sup>The Octopus, p. 438.

<sup>2</sup>Jack London, A Daughter of the Snows (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1902).

<sup>3</sup>Jack London, The Call of the Wild (New York: Macmillan Co., 1903).

reduced to a single question: is the primordial a more powerful sense in man than the ethical? Rather than attempting a reasonable synthesis of these two opposites, London maintains an illogical respect for brute superiority; for this reason his frequent lapses into standard moralization are often regarded as inconsistent. On the other hand, it would not be too daring to say that these two works at least fulfill a typical function of Western naturalism in realistically portraying frontier determinism as a tool of the author's thoroughly Western, if admittedly paradoxical, idealism.

A Daughter of the Snows is a dime-novel plot packed with naturalism that starts and stops without much sense of order. Nevertheless, it is there, and contributes to London's principal themes of determinism, violence, and survival. Frona Welse is the daughter of a mining camp merchant returned to her native Northland after some years' traveling and schooling. Early on, London takes pains to show her as something of a Valkyrie in skirts beating her male freighters up over the Chilcoot Pass and canting endless praise of her Wotan-like father, Jacob Welse. This theme of Frona surrounds her presence through the entire string of adventures which passes for plot, until she admits rather incidentally her marital designs on

Vance Corliss, a young mining man who has risen to her standards the hard way by meeting the primeval challenge of the Northland. One of the adventures involves the undoing of Gregory St. Vincent, a cad whose false credentials of heroism have momentarily swayed the heart of Frona, who is more in search of a brave comrade than a husband in the first place. His cowardice is known to the reader almost from the beginning, but it remains for Frona to discover it herself while playing Portia in his defense on a murder charge, whereupon she claims Vance Corliss as her own.

This pleasant nonsense ordinarily does not dim the power of London's narrative, which flows over the single theme of the frontier rather consistently. Whether expressed in terms of climate, remoteness, geology, or frontier society, the deterministic effect of the environment in men's lives is a basic device used by London to arrive at his pet idealizations--Nordic supremacy and survival of the fittest. Even the idea that the villain is a coward fits this scheme, whereby he has violated the primordial "faith of food and blanket" by not defending his host from attackers.<sup>1</sup> Certainly these ideals, however dubious to the modern reader, are in keeping with that special psychology of the West defined above by Paxson.

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<sup>1</sup>A Daughter of the Snows, pp. 25 and 333.

Unfortunately, there are a number of conspicuous artificialities, such as Frona's chastity and Corliss's impenetrable heroic image, which cast suspicion upon London's avowed naturalism; actually, they represent technical flaws which must be regarded outside the meaning of the various themes as well as the obvious inside. Frona is nonetheless a unique character for London's making her a virgin among beasts.

The Call of the Wild presents man the beast in the literal form of Buck, a California dog kidnapped from his plush home to be sold in Alaska as a sled-dog for the Yukon trail. Using the theme of Vance Corliss, ostensibly without the necessity of moral obstructions, London shows the primordial life force of Buck battling the wilderness for his very existence and emerging the victorious leader of a wolf pack. Though all of his sled-mates and a few incidental humans perish under the same conditions, Buck survives. In creating a character whose reactions to environmental stimuli are barren of the semblance of will, however, London has failed to impart a justification for Buck's victory. He has merely thrown in some unsuitable human values for the dog to exhibit--love, pride, courage, revenge--all of which confuse the reader looking for an allusive determinism from which to obtain a meaning for

the story. A man's position in the same environmental situation can only be guessed at, whereupon the determinants take on a potential rather than actual significance, however strongly London paints them or Buck follows them.

It is apparent that the weight of milieu lay heavy upon all of London's efforts to create a wilderness superman on the northern mining frontier, and the elements of naturalism in his work which reflect that problem can, despite technical weaknesses, be traced from point to point--immigration, fear, practicality, adaptation, confidence, egotism. That the primordial egotist is not a superman at all suggests the similar fallacy of the noble savage and all the myths it feeds upon. Even London found it necessary to settle his issues in the idealistic concept of poetic justice; therein lies the ethical end of his reason-nature principle, and it is only a short jump from there to the spiritual optimism of Frank Norris and Frederick Jackson Turner.

Ole Rolvaag (1876-1931) wrote in Norwegian, but his trilogy of the Holm family is a record of the Dakota frontier as a unique Americanizing influence, and his purpose was to instruct his Norwegian-American readers in their special roles as Americans. His main theme is

cultural conflict, which takes its form from the collision of the liberal frontier and the tightly dualistic European tradition. Rolvaag's naturalism is tied quite naturally to Ibsen, as well as to the terse idiom of Norse folklore.<sup>1</sup> Yet there is a pronounced similarity between Rolvaag's analysis of the forces at work building frontier character and that of other writers in the Western naturalistic tradition. Moreover, he sought not only an axiom for immigrant adjustment to the new world, but an answer to the same question of Howe and Garland: what is the purpose of the West beyond its obvious exterior of deterministic materialism? In the optimism of Per Hansa and his son Peder Victorious, as well as that of Rolvaag himself, the answer is evident.

Giants in the Earth<sup>2</sup> is the best known of the three novels, and has within it most of the ideas which sustain the trilogy to its completion. Per Hansa (equal to Peter, son of Hans) is the embodiment of the pioneer spirit in all respects; his every movement is aggressively inquisitive of nature, and unheeding of supernatural fears. From Nordland in Norway he comes to America in search of greater personal opportunity to develop his restless spirit, and with him

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<sup>1</sup>Theodore Jorgensen and Nora Solum, Ole Edvart Rolvaag: A Biography (New York: Harper & Bros., 1939), pp. 344-345.

<sup>2</sup>Ole Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth (New York: Harper & Bros., 1927).

comes his wife Beret, a mother symbol whose nobility and courage are one with her man and her native culture. When they arrive at the very edge of the Dakota frontier and stake out the earth that is to be their new and permanent home, the sensitive Beret becomes sick with fear of the new environment, and imagines in time that giant trolls are lurking about the vast, forbidding plains as agents of retribution for her leaving God and homeland behind. Temporary insanity draws her away from her husband until a pastor comes to the community and quiets her fears of imagined sins. She accepts the new country with a calm resignation but fierce reserve that rules her spirit throughout the trilogy. Her new piety then becomes the instrument of her husband's death as she nags him into braving an impossible blizzard in order to bring the pastor for a dying friend. The body of Per Hansa is found the following spring sitting against a haystack on a hillside facing westward, and the first phase of the saga is ended.

Peder Victorious<sup>1</sup> picks up the cultural conflict in the second generation. It relates the development of Beret's youngest son, born in Dakota and christened by his late father. Peder is the spirit of the pioneer

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<sup>1</sup>Ole Rolvaag, Peder Victorious (New York: Harper & Bros., 1929).

reborn, but with a native American character that attempts desperately to break away from his mother's dominating influence. Through one minor episode after the other the expanding Dakota community of all nationalities exerts on Peder the pressures necessary for his rejection of a dimmer heritage in favor of the one more natural to him-- the Western ideal of new frontiers creating new opportunities for progress. The book ends with his betrothal to an Irish Catholic girl, endorsed by Beret's pathetic assent.

Their Fathers' God<sup>1</sup> is a record of Peder's marriage to Susie Doheny and the struggle to find a common ground for the two conflicting faiths--Beret's intense Germanic convictions and Susie's grip on the Roman tradition. The first child of the union is secretly baptized by both women, first as Peder Emmanuel, then as Patrick St. Olaf. In the meantime, Peder's political ambitions grow to the extent that he must look to the solidarity of his family for support; when he finds none, and sees the cultural factions of the community growing wider apart because of his poor example, his anguish is overwhelming. Beret, worn out from her inner conflict, suddenly dies, and Susie gravitates closer to her priest and family. In a violent scene, Peder destroys her religious articles,

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<sup>1</sup>Ole Rolvaag, Their Fathers' God (New York: Harper & Bros., 1931).

and she leaves him the following morning.

Rolvaag's sympathy is divided between the two Viking men on one side and Beret on the other. He wants to see the destiny of the New World fulfilled and its common ideals applied for the benefit of humanity, but the love of his own heritage and tolerance for those of other new Americans compels him to support an impossible synthesis. His own depth in understanding the powerful mutating influence of the West works against him, for he has shown the frontier to be the constant symbol in the lives of its people, and the inherited dogma of the Old World is not always reconcilable with it. The naturalism of Rolvaag is framed by three sustaining patterns at once--the recognition and fear of natural forces, the synthesis of a reason-nature principle, and an attack on dualism; and all of these patterns direct the reader toward an awareness that the traditional social and religious forms disintegrate within themselves under the dominant frontier influence. By refusing to heed the call for expansion and readjustment on all levels of human experience, Beret must assume ethical responsibility for her own tragedy. Likewise Susie fails to discard what are not acts of faith, but only superstitious pretensions, and brings about more disaster. Rolvaag shows clearly their

weaknesses and implies their culpability; and the environment, free of the stigma of evil, becomes a more convincing determinant while at the same time a positive affirmation of Western idealism--shown in the portrayal of Peder as a constant symbol of innocent hope. It might be worthwhile to note that Rolvaag, the recognized champion of a Norwegian-American culture, selected his final resting place on a prairie hillside facing west.

Vardis Fisher (1895- ) is a native son of Idaho, and Toilers of the Hills,<sup>1</sup> one of his first novels, has its setting there in the years just before World War I. He is closely identified with the folk image of the Mormon frontier, an impression which gathers strength as one reads the story of Dock Hunter and his wife Opal. Fisher is meticulous in his use of dialect, and is especially careful to document the rugged details of frontier life--whether it be Dock's permanently tobacco-stained lower lip and habit of wearing one set of long underwear through the whole winter, or a cataloging of every vile bit of extraneous matter in the water cistern. And through it all runs the theme of simple folk completely oblivious to all but their immediate environment.

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<sup>1</sup>Vardis Fisher, Toilers of the Hills (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers Ltd., 1928).

Toilers of the Hills is the story of a simple man coming to terms with inhospitable nature, and of his wife's failure to do the same. Opal Hunter hasn't the fierce loyalties of Beret Holm, but her femininity is sharply contrasted with her husband's primordial features set against the backdrop of a practically uninhabitable area. The myth of the garden hasn't a chance to survive in the sage hills of Idaho, and Dock Hunter's minor success in perfecting a dry-farming method does not overbalance within the story the effect of the early years on his wife's gradual loss of beauty and hope. The reader is aware of a subtle undercurrent throughout the battle with the land, in which Opal comes at last to a melancholy resignation with her lot, and through this sees her husband for the first time. In the meantime, he can argue with her: "Ope, I've conquered them hills at last. Why don't I hear you speak, I wonder?" But she has been thinking other things:

He could be cheerful, and out in the fields he could sing his songs; he could build greater dreams than his last, and at night he could turn to her with a kiss and tell of them. But in the next dry year, or in this, when he went to find his grain burning or its kernels black with smut, he would fall again into old ways and he would curse his God. He would live in his terrible silence, broken only by oaths or a muttering in his sleep. His smile would be a snarl and his hands would be hungry for cruel deeds. She knew, and all his words would not make her forget. Out of this year they would go again into the old blind ways of struggle and pain, and inch by inch they would yield to the invisible power of these hills.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p.350.

Then, while looking at her pale sister-in-law, whose spirit was the only live part of her left after an unbelievably hard life following an itinerant husband, Opal raises herself to comprehension: "I guess we'll both go on here. There ain't a thing else to do."<sup>1</sup>

Fisher succeeds admirably in the restraint of his interpretation, for he falls neither into the myth of the garden nor into its opposite myth of the great American desert. His naturalism treats the Idaho frontier in a manner consistent with the Western ideal, yet activated by determinants outside that ideal. Opal and Dock are real characters, independent of the reader's moral involvement, contributing to a clear naturalistic causality which sets off their simple but inevitably positive reaction.

Walter Van Tilburg Clark (1909- ) is a Nevadan whose place in Western naturalism depends to a large measure upon The Ox-Bow Incident,<sup>2</sup> written during 1937 and 1938 when mob violence and demagoguery were problems of universal importance. Clark reached back to 1885 and created an "incident" which was motivated by the particular

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 353.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Van Tilburg Clark, The Ox-Bow Incident (New York: Random House, 1940).

deterministic elements of the remote cattle-raising frontier of Nevada; the result is a classic statement on justice. Aside from some very minor slips in idiom which are understandable, Clark achieves a high degree of verisimilitude in the uninterrupted narrative of Art Croft, literate cowboy.

Art and his partner, Gil Carter, ride into Bridger's Wells after wintering on the range and working a spring roundup. The tension built up over this annual period of isolation and self-denial is held in common among all the cowboys converging on Canby's saloon, and, before the chance comes for the men to spill out their pent-up violence on one another, a boy rides into town with the tale of a rustling and murder on a ranch ten miles south of town. In the absence of the sheriff, and despite the opposition of a handful of townspeople, a mob forms to hunt down the killers. It finds a leader in an embittered ex-Confederate officer who also supplies the spoor, and dashes off into the stormy mountain pass west of town. There it finds three men in a small valley called the Ox-Bow, driving stock apparently stolen from the care of the murdered cowboy. A tortuous night of mock suspense ends in the hanging of the three men at dawn. Shortly thereafter, the man thought to have been murdered

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meets the mob in the pass and explains that the cattle were legally purchased. Two suicides result and Clark prolongs the soul searching, but the point has already been made effectively.

The narrator bears close watching throughout this short novel. His is not exactly the role of the chorus, but it comes very close to it. His lack of moral consistency as a character swings him back and forth between the conflicting forces, setting a perspective through which the reader may identify closely with each of the many characterizations. This is clearly not the customary "western" story, despite its appearance.

### III

#### TYPES OF ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINANTS COMMON IN WESTERN NATURALISM

Frontier geography is unquestionably the first environmental concern of the Western naturalist. Rivers, plains, snow, soil, drought, mountains, rainfall, distance, forests, and all their effects are highly important to the author concerned with frontier determinism in its most basic form. And the interjection of the scenic--the gross, the colorful, the bizarre in nature--must be read, however ingenuous it seems on the surface, as evidence of environmental forces at work on a scale quite different from that which might operate in a more civilized or institutionalized milieu. The sharpness and primeval appeal of the picturesque in Vardis Fisher, for example, is not mere scenery but a representation of the overwhelming and tenaciously deterministic power of nature fixing itself into the very scheme of characterization:

Mile after mile they crawled over the old hills, sweat lathering between the horses' thighs, the wheels turning up dust like clouds of gray smoke or the dust flowing like dirty flour over the fellies. Endlessly ahead were rolling hills or flat wastes of sagebrush, with here and there darker spots where mountain mahogany grew or

serviceberry bushes, and in coves or on high hill-sides were pale groves of aspens. To the east, before them, was a circling rim of mountain-peaks, rising to altitudes of barren stone or falling down to broken backs along which pines grew against the sky. In the southeast the mountains were split asunder where Snake River came through, and beyond was a bluish vista of Swan Valley and of Grand Valley, still farther beyond. Everything around them was motionless and heavy with heat, not even a small wind was moving over these hills. And everywhere were silences, strangely apart and alone: the small green silences in coves along their way, the round silence of each hill or the flat silence of each plain, great solitudes that filled the sky and lay over the mountains and beyond. There seemed to be no sky, Opal thought; only thin dusty air no bluer above than below, only whitish altitudes as far as the eye could see.<sup>1</sup>

Or perhaps the scenic is utilized as a combined determinant-foreshadowing element. Such a device is used by Clark to activate the pensive lynch mob of Bridger's Wells, shifting attention from the erratic starts of moral abstraction--a largely rhetorical argument to begin with--to the relentless momentum of raw nature, reflected in a unity of men and the Nevada frontier:

The sky was really changing now, fast; it was coming on to storm, or I didn't know signs. Before it had been mostly sunlight, with only a few cloud shadows moving across fast in a wind that didn't get to the ground, and looking like burnt patches on the eastern hills where there was little snow. Now it was mostly shadow, with just gleams of sunlight breaking through and shining for a moment on all the men and horses in the street, making the guns and metal parts of the harness wink and lighting up the big sign on Davies' store and the sagging white veranda of the inn. And the wind was down to earth and continual, flapping the men's garments and blowing out the horses' tails like plumes....It was a heavy wind with a damp,

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<sup>1</sup>Toilers of the Hills, pp. 3-4.

chill feel to it, like comes before a snow, and strong enough so it wathered under the arcade and sometimes whistled, the kind of wind that makes me think of Nevada quicker than anything else I know. Out at the end of the street, where it merged into the road to the pass, the look of the mountains had changed too. Before they had been big and shining, so you didn't notice the clouds much. Now they were dark and crouched down, looking heavier but not nearly so high, and it was the clouds that did matter, coming up so thick and high you had to look at them instead of the mountains. And they weren't firm, spring clouds, with shapes, or the deep, blue-black kind that mean a quick hard rain, but thick, shapeless and gray-white like dense steam, shifting so rapidly and with so little outline that you more felt than saw them changing.

Probably partly because of the sky-change and partly because a lot of them were newcomers who hadn't heard that there were any doubts about this lynching, the temper of the men in the street had changed too....I couldn't help thinking about what Davies had said on getting angry enough not to be scared when you knew you were doing wrong. That's what they were doing all right....Every minute it was getting harder for Davies to crack. They were going to find it easy to forget any doubts that had been mentioned. It just seemed funny to think I'd been listening to an argument about what the soul of the law was. Right here and now was all that was going to count.<sup>1</sup>

The narrator, Art Croft the cowboy, has just before this remarked on the nature of Western logic and frontier habits of consciousness:

There's another thing I've always noticed, that arguments sound a lot different indoors and outdoors. There's a kind of insanity that comes from being between walls and under a roof. You're too cooped up, and don't get a chance to test ideas against the real size of things.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Ox-Bow Incident, pp. 53-54.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

It should be apparent, therefore, that the scenic in nature can often be a necessary chain in the link of the Western naturalist; only where it serves the function of incidental sentiment does it cease to hold meaning in itself. The Western writer who recognizes this distinction and is able, as Ray West says, to "rearrange the mountains at his pleasure," approaches his unique literary heritage with the most integrity, and not he who transplants a preconceived truth which may or may not fit the special qualities of its new environment. The formative characteristics of Western geography are not easily dismissed from the impressions of the truly Western--hence either realistic or naturalistic--author, for their absence deflates all that is the body of his truth. If universal values are to spring from any native art, they must pass the test of "local color" outlined by Hamlin Garland:

As the reader will see, I am using local color to mean something more than a forced study of the picturesque scenery of a State. Local color in a novel means that it has such quality of texture and background that it could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native. It means a statement of life as indigenous as the plant-growth. It means that the picturesque shall not be seen by the author--that every tree and bird and mountain shall be dear and companionable and necessary, not picturesque; the tourist cannot write the local novel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Crumbling Idols, p. 64.

That the art of naturalism in Western prose fiction is directly owing to the Westerner's intense preoccupation with geographical influences is shown variously in the works reviewed in Chapter Two. Garland's tree and bird and mountain can be any one of a number of things--most often, however, those elements of size, terrain, and climate which constitute the principle dimensions by which the West may be physically set apart. Western American geography is a widely assorted contrast of phenomena within this definition. Attempts to define the area as a single physical unit have failed for nearly two centuries--from Major Long's popularization of the term "Great American Desert"<sup>1</sup> and Walter Prescott Webb's overdrawn (but substantial) documentation of the scourge of aridity,<sup>2</sup> to the fallacious scientific optimism of Josiah Gregg<sup>3</sup> and subsequent literary perversities traveling under the guise of any one of the ubiquitous commercial appeals to vulgarity. And they have so confused the picture that it is difficult to consolidate the truth. In the sense of an axiom it does not really exist, but must be formed from a combination of lesser truths as varied as are the

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, op. cit., p. 203.

<sup>2</sup>Webb, op. cit., pp. 3-9.

<sup>3</sup>Smith, op. cit., p. 208.

geographic phenomena themselves. At this point Turner's comprehensive explanation of the frontier becomes at least a common base for a literature whose main cultural tie is the predominant conflict of the West--the struggle between the chaos of the natural universe and man who is not its master.

The westward movement was from the first a great physical expansion based upon economic exploitation. "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of settlement westward, explain American development," said Turner.<sup>1</sup> But whether the lure of the land itself or an economic upshot--mineral wealth, grazing opportunities, transportation and commerce--is the source of any particular frontier cannot controvert primary geographical concerns; the area of free land was above all vast, and its settlement proceeded for over a century in a constantly changing pattern, where distance and size were often measured in largely emotional terms as the unseen forces of a strange world began to shape the destiny of its new inhabitants. The Western naturalist has taken this theme in order to fashion his own idealistic concepts of life.

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<sup>1</sup>Turner, op. cit., p. 1.

Most obvious of the great natural forces dominating life in the West was that of sheer wilderness, and it influenced man in direct proportion to its size and barbarity. The character of such a land was especially inhospitable to the average woman, as Jack London pointed out in order to contrast his exceptional Frona:

They may be soft and tender and sensitive, possessed of eyes which have not lost the lustre and the wonder, and of ears used only to sweet sounds; but if their philosophy is sane and stable, large enough to understand and to forgive, they will come to no harm and attain comprehension. If not, they will see things and hear things which hurt, and they will suffer greatly, and lose faith in man--which is the greatest evil that may happen them.<sup>1</sup>

This is in fact exactly what happened to Beret Holm, who started her life on the Dakota prairie with an obsessive fear that was to plague her for the rest of her life:

The broad expanse stretching away endlessly in every direction, seemed almost like the ocean--especially now, when darkness was falling. It reminded her strongly of the sea, and yet it was very different....This formless prairie had no heart that beat, no waves that sang, no soul that could be touched...or cared....

The infinitude surrounding her on every hand might not have been so oppressive, might even have brought her a measure of peace, if it had not been for the deep silence, which lay heavier here than in a church. Indeed, what was there here to break it? She had passed beyond the outposts of civilization; the nearest dwelling places of men were far away. Here no warbling of birds rose on the air, no buzzing of insects sounded; even the wind had died away; the waving blades of grass that trembled to the faintest breath now stood erect and

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<sup>1</sup>A Daughter of the Snows, p. 202.

quiet, as if listening, in the great hush of evening....All along the way, coming out, she had noticed this strange thing: the stillness had grown deeper, the silence more depressing, the farther west they journeyed; it must have been over two weeks now since she had heard a bird sing! Had they travelled into some nameless, abandoned region? Could no living thing exist out here, in the empty, desolate, endless wastes of green and blue?...How could existence go on, she thought, desperately? If life is to thrive and endure, it must at least have something to hide behind!...<sup>1</sup>

Beret's subsequent rejection of her husband, done as a means of penance to ward off the giants in the earth, is the final step which London has hypothetically suggested.

Similarly, Annie Derrick--wife of Magnus Derrick--lives in a state of constant fear on her husband's vast wheat ranch:

...she had been sitting, thoughtful, in her long chair, an open volume of poems turned down upon her lap, her glance losing itself in the immensity of Los Muertos that, from the edge of the lawn close by, unrolled itself, gigantic, toward the far southern horizon, wrinkled and serrated after the season's ploughing. The earth, hitherto grey with dust, was now upturned and brown. As far as the eye could reach, it was empty of all life, bare, mournful, absolutely still; and, as she looked, there seemed to her morbid imagination--diseased and disturbed with long brooding, sick with the monotony of repeated sensation--to be disengaged from all this immensity, a sense of a vast oppression, formless, disquieting. The terror of sheer bigness grew slowly in her mind; loneliness beyond words gradually enveloped her. She was lost in all these limitless reaches of space. Had she been abandoned in mid-ocean, in an open boat, her terror could hardly have been greater. She felt vividly that certain uncongeniality

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<sup>1</sup>Giants in the Earth, pp. 37-38.

which, when all is said, forever remains between humanity and the earth which supports it. She recognized the colossal indifference of nature, not hostile, even kindly and friendly, so long as the human ant swarm was submissive, working with it, hurrying along at its side in the mysterious march of the centuries. Let, however, the insect rebel, strive to make head against the power of this nature, and at once it became relentless, a gigantic engine, a vast power, huge, terrible; a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness, no tolerance; crushing out the human atom with soundless calm, the agony of destruction sending never a jar, never the faintest tremor through all that prodigious mechanism of wheels and cogs.<sup>1</sup>

Norris's recurrent motif of the land and its fecundity is expressed in like terms, seen through the eyes of Presley:

Beyond Annixter's, beyond Guadalajara, beyond the Lower Road, beyond Broderson Creek, on to the south and the west, infinite, illimitable, stretching out there under the sheen of the sunset forever, flat, vast, unbroken, a huge scroll, unrolling between the horizons, spread the great stretches of the ranch of Los Muertos, bare of crops, shaved close in the recent harvest. Near at hand were hills, but on that far southern horizon only the curve of the great earth itself checked the view. Adjoining Los Muertos, and widening to the west, opened the Broderson ranch. The Osterman ranch to the northwest carried on the great sweep of landscape; ranch after ranch. Then, as the imagination itself expanded under the stimulus of that measureless range of vision, even those great ranches resolved themselves into mere foreground, mere accessories, irrelevant details. Beyond the fine line of the horizons, over the curve of the globe, the shoulder of the earth, were other ranches, equally vast, and beyond these, others, and beyond these, still others,

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<sup>1</sup>The Octopus, pp. 119-120.

the immensities multiplying, lengthening out vaster and vaster. The whole gigantic sweep of the San Joaquin expanded, Titanic, before the eye of the mind, flagellated with heat, quivering and shimmering under the sun's red eye. At long intervals, a faint breath of wind out of the south passed slowly over the levels of the baked and empty earth, accentuating the silence, marking off the stillness. It seemed to exhale from the land itself, a prolonged sigh as of deep fatigue. It was the season after the harvest, and the great earth, the mother, after its period of reproduction, its pains of labour, delivered of the fruit of its loins, slept the sleep of exhaustion, the infinite repose of the colossus, benignant, eternal, strong, the mourisher of nations, the feeder of an entire world.<sup>1</sup>

This celebration of the same vital force--Norris's mystic ideal--which so frightens Annie Derrick is a part of Presley's ultimate Song of the West, as:

He seemed for one instant to touch the explanation of existence. Men were nothings, mere animalcules, ephemerides that fluttered and fell and were forgotten between dawn and dusk.<sup>2</sup>

Such deep feelings are often attached to the awe inspired by physical magnitude, in even the simplest of creatures--almost as if the primordial were rising under the single impetus of the wilderness. Vardis Fisher shows this idea in his creature who loves the land as a man, and at the same time is one with it:

The few trees were naked and looking more dwarfed now without their leaves; tumbleweeds had gathered in coves or lodged among bushes; and on ridges and hillsides spots of white earth grew

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 29-30.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 425.

larger as foliage withered and grass died. And as Dock watched all these things of earth and sky, the rains circling around him on all sides, the earth drying to powder under his feet, he came to feel, he told Opal one day, a great and strange loneliness everywhere about, in no way alive as he knew life, but brooding over the hills. It was above the sky or invisible in the air beneath. He could feel its presence in the earth above and around, complete. Perhaps it was only a crazy fancy of his, born of labor too severe; but wherever he went now it was with him, except down on the river, and when there he seemed to leave it for an hour, up in the sky beyond the rim of the mountain.<sup>1</sup>

The presence was not alone a thing of the dying year, or of the absence of any life force. Dock felt much the same when he worked the land:

Sometimes the thud of his grubbing hoe would come like a strange sound out of the loneliness, or in his ears would awaken the echo of an oath, as of an unfamiliar sound never before heard; and upon him he would feel a sudden pressure as if the sky had come down. Or again, more commonly as time went, he would be aware of a flash of kinship for all these things as if he had long known them, as if their ways were his own. He was bewildered, he said, and the look on his face filled Opal for a moment with terror.<sup>2</sup>

The conflict between the man of the frontier and his wife is evident again in Toilers of the Hills when Opal, whose bitterness grows as rapidly as does Dock's love of his farm, reproaches him for his personal habits:

Once she said to him, when his face and hands were black and his clothes full of dust:  
"You seem like a chunk of earth growed up. You

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<sup>1</sup>Toilers of the Hills, pp. 59-60.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

just seem like a piece of ground grew up on legs and movun around, that's all." And when he answered with only a surprised stare, she went on: "You seem to think them ugly hills is your kids or something. You seem just like a big chunk of them to me."

"For God sake, Ope, what are you aimun to say?"

"I say, you seem to think them hills is your kids or something. You'll want to marry one of them hills. I'm mistook if you don't think all them hills is alive."

"Why, of course them hills is alive, Ope! You don't think dead things grewed all them sage-brush, do you? Them hills is alive, Ope, though we mighten know just how."<sup>1</sup>

Opal reacts to this much as her sister characters elsewhere in the realm of the Western naturalist; she cannot see man and the wilderness in an effective union:

Sometimes when Dock was out on the hills, she would sit where she could watch him and she would wonder at what she saw. For she would see, with an acuteness unfamiliar to her, a thing small and alone moving out there, a tiny thing on a great gray breast and under a wide solitude that knew no sound but the sound of hawks and mighty winds and the sweep of mighty storms. Above him was the great wakeful loneliness of the sky, limitless and gray, and under him were the rolling dry hills with their mask of death or of gray life that was like death, and around him were mountains that walled him in. Out there he was digging tiny holes into this huge dead breast or he was scarring its surface with tiny furrows, and above and around him loomed an awful power, unseen but felt, that mocked his labor or with effortless will spread sickness over these things that he loved and strove to make grow.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 99-100.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

She feels in her own uncultured way the same forces which drove Beret Holm nearly insane, and in the process almost loses hope. This vast wilderness, whatever its specific form, is by itself without a doubt one of the most powerful determinants in Western naturalism.

The Great Plains authors felt the presence of wilderness especially in terms of space. Even the church in The Story of a Country Town is made to supplement its symbolic place in the story through the effect of physical prominence:

On the highest and bleakest point in the county, the meeting-house was built, in a corner of my father's field. This was called Fairview, and so the neighborhood was known. There was a graveyard around it, and cornfields next to that, but not a tree or shrub attempted its ornament, and as the building stood on the main road where the movers' wagons passed, I thought that, next to their ambition to get away from the country which had been left by those in Fairview, the movers were anxious to get away from Fairview Church, and avoid the possibility of being buried in its ugly shadow, for they always seemed to drive faster after passing it.<sup>1</sup>

When I think of the years I lived in Fairview, I imagine that the sun was never bright there (although I am certain that it was), and I cannot relieve my mind of the impression that the cold, changing shadow of the gray church has spread during my long absence and enveloped all the houses where the people lived.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Story of a Country Town, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

And Rolvaag's sensitiveness to shadow is likewise a prominent feature in his trilogy, for example:

A gust of wind, sweeping across the plain, threw into life waves of yellow and blue and green. Now and then a dead black wave would race over the scene...a cloud's gliding shadow...now and then....<sup>1</sup>

But these are mere superficial features which emphasize the author's awareness of plains phenomena. In direct application to the characters, Beret, for example, is deeply affected by their proportions. The typical Great Plains thunderhead represented something dreadful in her mind even after she had recovered her wits in Giants in the Earth:

Beret was gazing at the western sky as the twilight fast gathered around her; her eyes were riveted on a certain cloud that had taken on the shape of a face, awful of mien and giant-like in proportions; the face seemed to swell out of the prairie and filled half the heavens.

She gazed a long time; now she could see the monster clearer. The face was unmistakable! There were the outlines of the nose and mouth. The eyes--deep, dark caves in the cloud--were closed. The mouth if it were to open, would be a yawning abyss. The chin rested on the prairie....Black and lean the whole face, but of such gigantic, menacing proportions! Wasn't there something like a leer upon it?...And the terrible creature was spreading everywhere; she trembled so desperately that she had to take hold of the grass.<sup>2</sup>

The most descriptive passage in Plains naturalism relative to the whole Western experience is likewise found in Giants in the Earth. Garland first touched upon it when

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<sup>1</sup>Giants in the Earth, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 330.

he wrote such rhapsodic phrases as "No other climate, sky, plain, could produce the same unnamable weird charm."<sup>1</sup> Rolvaag was interested in a more comprehensive view of the question, as evidenced best by the melancholy but strangely optimistic prologue to his chapter entitled "The Great Plain Drinks the Blood of Christian Men and Is Satisfied":

Many and incredible are the tales the grandfathers tell from those days when the wilderness was yet untamed, and when they, unwittingly, founded the Kingdom. There was the Red Son of the Great Prairie, who hated the Palefaces with a hot hatred; stealthily he swooped down upon them, tore up and laid waste the little settlements. Great was the terror he spread; bloody the saga concerning him.

But more to be dreaded than this tribulation was the strange spell of sadness which the unbroken solitude cast upon the minds of some. Many took their own lives; asylum after asylum was filled with disordered beings who had once been human. It is hard for the eye to wander from skyline to skyline, year in and year out, without finding a resting place!...

Then, too, there were the years of pestilence--toil and travail, famine and disease. God knows how human beings could endure it all. And many did not--they lay down and died. "There is nothing to do about that," they say who survived. "We are all destined to die--that's certain. Some must go now; others will have to go later. It's all the same, is it not?" The poor could find much wherewith to console themselves. And whisky was cheap in those days, and easy to get....

And on the hot summer days terrible storms might come. In the twinkling of an eye they would smash to splinters the habitations which man had built for himself, so that they resembled nothing

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<sup>1</sup>Main-Travelled Roads, p. 134.

so much as a few stray hairs on a worn-out pelt. Man have power? Breathe it not, for that is to tempt the Almighty!...

Some feared most the prairie fire. Terrible, too, it was, before people had learned to guard against it.

And it was as if nothing affected people in those days. They threw themselves blindly into the Impossible, and accomplished the Unbelievable. If anyone succumbed in the struggle--and that happened often--another would come and take his place. Youth was in the race; the unknown, the untried, the unheard-of, was in the air; people caught it, were intoxicated by it, threw themselves away, and laughed at the cost. Of course it was possible--everything was possible out here. There was no such thing as the Impossible any more. The human race has not known such faith and such self-confidence since history began....And so had been the Spirit since the day the first settlers landed on the eastern shores; it would rise and fall at intervals, would swell and surge on again with every new wave of settlers that rolled westward into the unbroken solitude.<sup>1</sup>

This is not the old agrarian myth, nor does it picture the garden of the world; it most nearly approximates, despite some of its sad overtones, the Western ideal which recurs again and again in the broad stream of Western naturalism, sustained by the Frontier Hypothesis.

The factor of climate is but another frequent determinant appearing within the work of these authors. Its use varies from story atmosphere to restoration of the primeval. As it approaches the latter category, it loses

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<sup>1</sup>Giants in the Earth, pp. 424-426.

its incidental quality and becomes a monstrous force indeed --active, as with a blizzard, or passive, as with a slow drought.

London would have climate the prime determinant of racial characteristics in order to suit his own theories:

Where nature shows the rough hand, the sons of men are apt to respond with kindred roughness. The amenities of life spring up only in mellow lands, where the sun is warm and the earth fat. The damp and soggy climate of Britain drives men to strong drink; the rosy Orient lures to the dream splendors of the lotus. The big-bodied, white-skinned northern dweller, rude and ferocious, bellows his anger uncouthly and drives a gross fist into the face of his foe. The supple south-sojourner, silken of smile and lazy of gesture, waits, and does his work from behind, when no man looketh, gracefully and without offence. Their ends are one; the difference lies in their ways, and therein the climate, and the cumulative effect thereof, is the determining factor.<sup>1</sup>

Garland's end is different, but his impact on the reader is more convincing when he catches a brief glimpse of bleak life in this veritist's impression:

A farm in the valley! Over the mountains swept jagged, gray, angry, sprawling clouds, sending a freezing, thin drizzle of rain, as they passed, upon a man following a plough. The horses had a sullen and weary look, and their manes and tails streamed sidewise in the blast. The ploughman, clad in a rugged gray coat, with uncouth, muddy boots upon his feet, walked with his head inclined toward the sleet, to shield his face from the cold and sting of it. The soil rolled away black and sticky and with a dull sheen upon it. Near by, a boy with tears on his cheeks was watching cattle; a dog seated near, his back to the gale.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A Daughter of the Snows, p. 201.

<sup>2</sup>Main-Travelled Roads, p. 87.

Dock Hunter's fight with the Idaho benchland is mainly a fight against drought. While nearby valleys from which he had emigrated (senselessly, in Opal's opinion) remained green, the hills were continuously parched:

Dust storms would move languidly like mountains of smoke, and often in late afternoon Opal could not see beyond the radius of a mile. Dust-clouds came over and through her house, covering everything with a coating of gray, or they were blown far up like a thin sheet of fog and turned golden by the sun. Vegetation everywhere, even the greenest leaves of the aspens, was turned whitish with earth, and when she kicked a sagebrush or shook a tree there would fall a shower of dust.<sup>1</sup>

To portray the geographical elements honestly and follow the course they point--this is the integrity of the Western naturalist, as he tries to come to grips with the elusive meaning of their effect upon man and the westward movement. Some are more successful than others, naturally, but all share the same track along the divided stream toward some particularly Western ideal.

On another level, the structure of Western society and the track of its development are set forth in Western naturalism with a like purpose in mind; and they are shown to be intimately connected with both physical environmental circumstances and the economic problems created thereby. It was a classless society from the start, despite the

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<sup>1</sup>Toilers of the Hills, p.237.

remnants of class strata which lingered on at the surface and affected early Western literature.<sup>1</sup> When the Naturalistic Movement began, these superficialities were swept away in a tide of literary self-realization. An indication of this is the ill-fated Jo Erring, with his unrealistic aspirations, thinking Mateel Shepherd's shallowness an affectation of all "upper-class" gentility and only realizing the truth as he discussed his feelings with Ned just before the wedding:

"Somehow we always have to wait until the pleasure of an event is blunted by familiarity. Imperceptibly, as she became a possibility, I made the discovery that she is not an angel, for angels do not live in the woods, and they do not marry millers."<sup>2</sup>

Jacob Welse knew only the social conventions of his native backwoods, and consequently developed the attitude that society had neither angels nor anything else invisible to natural experience:

And here, in the mellow of time, he got a proper focus on things and unified the phenomena of society precisely as he had already unified the phenomena of nature. There was naught in one which could not be expressed in terms of the other. The same principles underlaid both. Competition was the secret of creation. Battle was the law and the way of progress. The world was made for the strong, and only the strong inherited it, and through it all there ran an eternal equity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Smith, op.cit., p. 260. (See also above)

<sup>2</sup>The Story of a Country Town, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup>A Daughter of the Snows, p. 58.

Although this doctrine touches upon the bestial and the inhumane, it is an integral part of the ideal which rebuilt society in the vacuum of the West, and gradually replaced the older class structure. But the danger in such a process was great. As Shelgrim, the railroad president in The Octopus, pointed out to Presley with cold-blooded precision when the poet sought to reproach him:

"Believe this, young man...try to believe this--to begin with--that railroads build themselves. Where there is a demand sooner or later there will be a supply. Mr. Derrick, does he grow his wheat? The Wheat grows itself. What does he count for? Does he supply the force? What do I count for? Do I build the railroad? You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men. There is the Wheat, the supply. It must be carried to feed the people. There is the demand. The Wheat is one force, the Railroad, another, and there is the law that governs them--supply and demand. Men have only little to do in the whole business. Complications may arise, conditions that bear hard on the individual--crush him maybe--but the Wheat will be carried to feed the people as inevitably as it will grow. If you want to fasten the blame of the affair at Los Muertos on any one person, you will make a mistake. Blame conditions, not men."<sup>1</sup>

The conditions, then, promoted evil in the form of uncontrollable force. But they also worked for a democratic shift in society; and as the process was fulfilled, it was inevitable that a socially emancipated populace would fall prey to demagoguery exploiting the growing pains of the

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<sup>1</sup>The Octopus, p. 358.

westward movement for diverse selfish reasons.

Marxism and fascism were known in this time--not always by those names, but nonetheless known. Presley fell in with a member of the former faction--Caraher the saloonkeeper, whose wife's death had occurred in the violence of a railroad strike--immediately after the massacre of the ranchers at Los Muertos, and told him, "You are the only one of us all who is right. I'm with you from now on. By God, I, too, am a Red!"<sup>1</sup> But later, after his meeting with Shelgrim, and in viewing the scene of the massacre again:

He did not stop at Caraher's saloon, for the heat of his rage had long since began to cool, and dispassionately, he saw things in their true light. For all the tragedy of his wife's death, Caraher was none the less an evil influence among the ranchers, an influence that worked only to the inciting of crime.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise the menace of a fascistic influence lurked within the milieu. Jack London might have been interested in (or repelled by) The Ox-Bow Incident. Major Tetley, the ex-Confederate officer, is a notorious example of a "leader" image, against which Davies the storekeeper finds hard going when he attempts to fight the conditions of frontier justice with the logic of universal law:

"Law is more than the words that put it on the books; law is more than any decisions that may be made from it; law is more than the particular code of it stated at any one time or in

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<sup>1</sup>The Octopus, p. 358.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 416.

any one place or nation; more than any man, lawyer, or judge, sheriff or jailer, who may represent it. True law, the code of justice, the essence of our sensations of right and wrong, is the conscience of society. It has taken thousands of years to develop, and it is the greatest, the most distinguishing quality which has evolved with mankind. None of man's temples, none of his religions, none of his weapons, his tools, his arts, his sciences, nothing else he has grown to, is so great a thing as his justice, his sense of justice. The true law is something in itself; it is the spirit of the moral nature of man; it is an existence apart, like God, and as worthy of worship as God. If we can touch God at all, where do we touch him save in the conscience? And what is the conscience of any man save his little fragment of the conscience of all men of all time?"<sup>1</sup>

Clark seems to be speaking through Davies in this powerful plea, which fails to contain the steady progress of the plot toward disaster, but contrasts it briefly and directly with the idealism that is the meaning of the naturalistic story whence it comes.

To digress on this point for a moment, it is well to note a reiteration of a similar principle in Paxson's When The West Is Gone, perhaps the foremost example of prophecy in the area of Western history:

I may be unduly hopeful in suspecting that if the United States can continue to elevate citizenship above class-interest its example will have a tendency to disprove the inevitableness of class antagonisms, and will offer a different and more wholesome ideal than those of Marx, Lenin, and Mussolini. I cannot believe that democracy is done for, or that on the whole there is any superior

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<sup>1</sup>The Ox-Bow Incident, p. 49.

foundation for government and the social order than that of the common people who live within them.

I may be wrong as well in imagining that the world can work out a federal order, with a fair balance between the principles of autonomy and uniformity; or that our nationalist United States may yet come cheerfully to accept a limitation of that nationality as it becomes absorbed within a federation of the world. Yet I believe that this too is something more than barely possible. And in both cases my confidence is grounded upon testimony that seems to me to be derived from an examination of our frontier past.<sup>1</sup>

An examination of the immigrant theme in Western naturalism impresses more deeply the idea that the frontier was directly responsible for the formation of a new social structure. Here the lines of contrast are drawn sharply. The principle problem in Peder Victorious, for example, is the difference in languages:

No questions were asked about a man's past--that might have been embarrassing to many; but did he have his head in the right place? And was there anything in it? And could he express himself? A confusion of tongues far worse than at the time of Babel set in; neither before nor since have such liberties been taken with English speech; and the language which the people brought with them, fared not one whit better.<sup>2</sup>

In matters of religion, too, the immigrant's frontier was far more trying, even, than that of the Rev. Mr. John Westlock, who had only to contend with a native dualistic religion that was incogruous and disrupting in the pattern of his rugged life. Beret Holm had to

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<sup>1</sup>Frederick L. Paxson, When The West Is Gone (New York: Henry Holt, 1930), pp. 135-136.

<sup>2</sup>Peder Victorious, p. 116.

face the frontier faith of her husband and son with a foreign loyalty--in tongue and religion; and when her son married a girl whose faith was that of neither her mother-in-law nor her husband, the natural animosity which developed and led ultimately to disaster overwhelmed all other considerations in their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Without the age-old traditions, whether they could be accepted into the Western experience or had to be lived outside it, some form of religion consistent with a society redeveloping its institutions in the wilderness was inevitable--especially given the strong evangelical, protestant, and dissenter background noted by Paxson. The great Mormon exodus, and indeed the entire Mormon experience, was based upon a revealed folk-interpretation of Hebraic antiquity;<sup>2</sup> therefore it is not surprising that Dock Hunter and his wife live their religion so close to the soil. Dock took all of nature seriously:

Cedars were good trees, and maples and red pines; but aspens and cottonwoods weren't worth the sod they grew on. God might as well have made good trees instead of poor ones, nighthawks instead of magpies, dragon-flies instead of ants, and elk and deer instead of skunks and coyotes. "Without I could a-made a better job of this-here world, Ope, why, I'm a plumb fool to speak about it. Some says

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<sup>1</sup>Their Fathers' God, pp. 330-337.

<sup>2</sup>See Vardis Fisher's Children of God (1939).

we can't understand God's ways and God made all things for the best. Mebbe that's so, but I can't see it with the eyes I got now. I tell you what I think. I think things ain't turned out the way God figgered. I think things is just a-gettun away from God's control, that's what I think. And if you'll give your mind to it a little bit, why, you'll see I'm right."<sup>1</sup>

The substitution of ethical virtue for formal religion is another common observance of the society in the process of organizing new values; it tends to retain the heart of the matter and discard the rest, just as it would treat anything else ill-suited to become a part of the new deterministic chain--the kind of situation where immediate human experience dictates value.

From the nature of its social conscience more than from any other one factor, from the desire to forge an ethic as expansive and as liberal as the physical, social, and economic innovations in life dependent upon the frontier concept, came the symbol of freedom and national greatness for America--Manifest Destiny. Combined with Jefferson's agrarian ideal, it seemed early in the nineteenth century to embrace an entire Utopian scheme; and when the agrarian ideal passed into oblivion toward the close of the century, it appeared that the Manifest Destiny of the American nation was itself only a passing myth as artificial as the physical frontier which had supported it. The Western naturalist, inspired as he was to find the ideal within the deterministic forces that

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<sup>1</sup>Toilers of the Hills, pp. 67-68.

that had shaped the Western mind, discarded the myth of the yeoman and took up the cause of the new spiritual and economic pioneer. As Lucy Lockwood Hazard put it, the Westerner--like Norris--was something of a mystic:

Never in the most crudely materialistic maneuvers of the pioneer was there completely lacking the redeeming motivation of the frontier spirit: the sense of something beyond, of the open road, of the best that was yet to be; the resolution to carry on a little longer; the passion to create values where none existed before--even if they were fictitious values of speculation. The lust for gain, the relentless drive to labor, were real enough; yet, though they for a time threatened to obscure the spiritual motives of pioneering, they were after all merely incidental, not fundamental.<sup>1</sup>

The works of Western naturalists were after all not Jeremiads, but evidence of faith in a greater significance of the new society emerging from the frontier. This is the source of Presley's first yearning to create his epic:

He strove for the diapason, the great song that should embrace in itself a whole epoch, a complete era, the voice of an entire people, wherein all people should be included--they and their legends, their folk lore, their fightings, their loves and their lusts, their blunt grim humor, their stoicism under stress, their adventures, their treasures found in a day and gambled in a night, their direct, crude speech, their generosity and cruelty, their heroism and bestiality, their religion and profanity, their self-sacrifice and obscenity--a true and fearless setting forth

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<sup>1</sup>Lucy Lockwood Hazard, The Frontier in American Literature (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1941), pp. 277-278.

of a passing phase of history, uncompromising, sincere; each group in its proper environment; the valley, the plain, and the mountain; the ranch, the range, and the mine--all this, all the traits and types of every community from the Dakotas to the Mexicos, from Winnipeg to Guadelupe, gathered together, swept together, welded and riven together in one single, mighty song, The Song of the West.<sup>1</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Thus far, this exposition has ranged fragmentarily across a special sector in American literature in order to suggest certain common values which unite it--certain ideals contained within the category defined as Western naturalism.

Naturalism was related to the American West in the first chapter. Its variations which appear in a selected group of authors was discussed in the second chapter. Using the same group of authors and works, the third chapter endeavored to point out predominant Western environmental factors in Western naturalism.

Through all of this, the question of what, exactly, the "Western ideal" consists of has not been answered specifically. The reason is that to pinpoint such a broad idea would require an exhaustive study in itself--probably in one of the social sciences. Even there the emphasis is on variable qualities rather than exact science.

I have chosen rather to characterize a vague undercurrent within serious and socially sensitive Western fiction as this ideal, based largely upon the historical analyses of several scholars who have probed deeply into

the unique Western milieu. But if the broader notion is dependent for its definition upon these non-literary sources, the ideal itself springs unmistakably from the pages of these seven authors and their works reviewed and discussed above. In these sources lies the significance of naturalism that is specifically Western.

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