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RUTLEDGE

THE FICTION OF JESSAMYN WEST

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A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

OF THE FICTION OF JESSAMYN WEST

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of the Department of English

of the

University of New Mexico

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Ada Rutledge

June, 1952

This thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Committee of the University of New Mexico in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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DATE

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PREFACE

This study of the fiction of Jessamyn West consists of an examination of a representative number of her published short stories and examines her three books, The Friendly Persuasion, A Mirror for the Sky, and The Witch Diggers.

My introductory chapter takes up Miss West's writing career, which by popular standards may be considered an exemplary success at this twelve-year mark, and summarizes some individual characteristics of her work that have remained constant throughout her entire period of production. Some concrete examples are offered for comparison of her early work with that of a later period. Certain features of the author's beliefs and attitudes, as well as her style and subject interests, are touched upon briefly (these are discussed in later chapters upon appropriate occasion).

Biographical matter, except as it applies directly to Miss West's writing experience, is minimized, since at this point in her career materials for an intensive study of her life history are not available. Such biographical facts as have been found are given in the second chapter of the thesis. In this chapter I discuss the separate stories that make up her first published book, The Friendly Persuasion, which I shall treat as a novel. Since this book is based upon Quaker beliefs and practices, in which Miss West was reared, it is pertinent to examine here some of the

broader concepts of Quaker philosophy, especially as they apply to dominant themes of the story chapters of the book.

In order to indicate the breadth and variety of Miss West's materials, as well as to show her technical abilities in the handling of them, I have made a critical examination of certain short stories. It is appropriate to discuss the separate short stories at this point in my study instead of later because Miss West is best known as a short story writer, and before proceeding with the discussion of her longer works of fiction it is an advantage to evaluate her writing ability in the short story field, where she has most distinguished herself.

I have selected a number of stories of various types to illustrate her use of symbolic imagery and detail. Other phases of her writing which include a humorous style and psychological content on a human interest level are also discussed in consideration of certain stories selected to demonstrate these characteristics. Overlapping of story types, subjects and themes, makes absolute categorizing impossible. No attempt is made to organize the stories into separate groupings, except when such arrangement is convenient and natural. My purpose is to make an extensive coverage while at the same time aiming towards intensive critical treatment of particular stories chosen to illustrate significant phases of the author's work in the field of the

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I have selected a number of stories of various types to illustrate her use of symbolic imagery and overall phases of her writing which include a numerous series of psychological concerns in a human intimate level. Wiese also discussed in conjunction of certain stories selected to demonstrate these characteristics. Overlapping in story type, subjects and themes, some possible recommingling is possible. My attempt is made to organize the stories into separate groupings, according such arrangement in convenience and interest. My purpose is to make an extensive coverage while at the same time giving somewhat thematic critical treatment of particular stories chosen to illustrate significant phases of the author's work in the field of the

short story.

The major portion of Miss West's published poetry appears in A Mirror for the Sky, the book length script for an opera based upon the life of John James Audubon. Poetry published elsewhere is treated in the third chapter of my study, along with the lyrics for the opera script. In similar manner, the comparatively small amount of prose other than fiction she has written (magazine articles, book reviews, etc.) is mentioned as the occasion occurs in the various chapters as it pertains to the subject. Since my emphasis is expressly upon Miss West's fiction rather than her poetry, the only reason I have chosen to include her poetry briefly in my study is to point out her consistent adherence to certain philosophic concepts, which she expresses in the medium of verse as well as in prose.

My final chapter gives a detailed criticism of The Witch Diggers, Jessamyn West's most recent book, the first long novel she has published. In conclusion, the novel is evaluated on its own merits and in its relation to her previous writings and to contemporary American literature in general. Here, as throughout the study, the opinions of critics and reviewers are cited when important insight is afforded. The appraisal derives chiefly, however, from a system of standards I shall have previously established for the judgment of her former writings. This, in effect, constitutes a critical summing up of a career which to the

present time has shown steady growth in a direction that promises continued development.

CHAPTER I

MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS

Jessamyn West is one of America's young fiction writers whose work merits more critical attention than it has received up to the present time. Since her stories first began to appear in 1940, she has regularly received honorable mention in the annual collections of selected best stories in which many of her own stories have been reprinted. Reviews of her longer works have with few exceptions been favorable. No critic has attempted, however, to make a critical appraisal of her total production. Neither has a thorough examination of any single short story been made, although she has written a number of stories that invite analytical treatment for discovery of symbolic meanings and multiple intentions.

The evaluation of a beginning literary career is self-limited. To attempt an authoritative appraisal of an author's work in its formative stages is impossible. However, a practical judgment can be made with some degree of adequacy. An estimate can be made of an author's talent, of the significance of its direction, and of the possibilities that lie within its scope, and also an estimate upon grounds of comparative judgment, if answers are formulated to the following questions: (1) Has the author anything to say?

CHAPTER I

MAJOR PHENOMENOLOGIES

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nificance of the situation, and of the possibilities that
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following questions: (1) Has the author anything to say?

(2) Has he command of a technique adequate for its expression? (3) Has his statement any value, whether immediate or lasting? (4) Has what he says, or his way of saying it, an individuality that holds interest to a degree that sets it apart?

It is important to study an author's technique, for it is by technical skill in the handling of subject matter that his ideas are communicated. The subject or theme, however worthy, does not compel of itself. The technique of the writer--his style and presentation as much as his expressed opinions--attracts or alienates the reader. A persuasive technique is more essential to the building of an effective narrative than the possession of a vast stock of storymaking timber. The mastery of writing technique does not guarantee that the end product will be a work of art, but it may safely be said that no work of art can emerge without the mastery of technique. When found in perfect union, the two can never be distinguished or analyzed individually. Consequently, any reference to the art of Jessamyn West's writing will imply an adequate technique; the term technique will be employed in its broadest sense to mean style, method, or "way of doing."

It is in Jessamyn West's "way of doing" as much as in what she does that her individuality lies. Certain characteristics may be noticed in a consistently large part

of her writing. These are seen in (1) her selection of subject matter; (2) her application of natural talent for description; (3) her absorption with nature in all phases and the use she makes of it; (4) her personal attitude about love; (5) her skillful handling of humor; (6) her use of child characters.

The subjects Miss West deals with are ordinarily simple, though often deceptively so, and the experiences she depicts are so typically "everyday" that the romance with which she often invests them would be incongruous if it were not so persuasive. It is in respect to her art of persuasiveness that her mastery of technique is recognized. Development of skills, like the broadening of subject interests, is partly the result of practice. The acquirement of individual style in Miss West's writings may be seen if one examines her fundamental gifts and observes the way she has developed them.

The earliest stories of Jessamyn West, published in 1940, reveal some qualities that have remained constant throughout her writing production. It may be assumed that these qualities discoverable in her early work are basic to her individual talent. Among these is the gift for pictorial delineation of observable reality and an aptness for selecting the exact image to fit the scene and circumstances so as to transfer the image to the reader's vision in spontaneous recognition. This quality is apparent

in the following descriptive passage from "The Child's Day," the first story by Miss West accepted for publication:

> There the sun was near to setting, red in the dust, and the lights in the distant well riggings already blazed. She watched the sun drop until the black tracery of the derrick crossed its face.[1]

A little girl stands at the window and watches the sun go down. She is alone in the house, her parents away. It is a scene of loneliness and quiet, in correspondence with the child's own solitude, the aloneness of adolescence, and the quiet of her present mood at the end of a day spent in capriciously imaginative make-believe. There is also the correspondence of space--the space of the desert and the distant reaches of the maturing personality. All this the child shares with outside nature, momentarily quiet and still, seen in innocent wonder through the window glass. The outline of the oil derrick against the setting sun tokens more than pictorial interest. It symbolizes the world beyond the windowpane partially obscuring the sun, a physical environment in which the child is now only passively engaged but which she will one day enter. Although the story does not tell us, we know that she will leave this environment behind. Minta is designed for wide horizons. A single day of observing her actions through the eyes of Jessamyn West tells us so.

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[1] Jessamyn West, "The Child's Day," The New Mexico Quarterly, X (November, 1940), 233.

In the following descriptive passage from "The Child's Day," the first story by Mims ever accepted for publication:

> There the sun was near to setting, red in the dust and the lights in the distant well trighing already clear. She watched the sun drop until the blunt tracery of the derrick crossed its face.[1]

A little girl stands at the window and watches the sun go down. She is alone in the house, her parents away. It is a scene of loneliness and quiet, in correspondence with the child's own solitude, the aloneness of adolescence, and the quiet of her present mood at the end of a day spent in capricious imaginative make-believe. There is also the correspondence of space--the space of the desert and the distant reaches of the maturing personality. All this the child shares with outside nature, momentarily quiet and still, seen in innocent wonder through the window glass. The outline of the oil derrick against the setting sun takes more than pictorial interest. It symbolizes the world beyond the windowpane partially obscuring the sun, a physical environment in which the child is now only passively engaged but which she will one day enter. Although the story does not tell us, we know that she will leave this environment behind. Mims is designed for wide horizons. A single day of observing her actions through the eyes of Jessamyn West tells us so.

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[1] Jessamyn West, "The Child's Day," <u>The New Mexico Quarterly</u>, X (November, 1940), 293.

The correspondence implied between the momentary mood of the child and that of outside nature may be incidental, so far as Miss West's purpose is concerned. More may have been read into the simple descriptive passage than was originally intended by the author, more perhaps than was consciously written. Extensions and meanings later developed in the narrative or only suggested have been projected into this relatively unimportant descriptive scene that appears near the beginning of the story. In her later writing, however, a conscious technique for creating matching moods and rhythm patterns between human nature and physical nature has been developed. In The Witch Diggers, her last novel (1951), occurs the following description; it resembles the one above only in that it describes the end of day:

> The day had first darkened, then lightened as he stood by Stony Creek. Just before sundown the clouds along the western horizon broke open exposing a rim of light, orange-yellow like the yolks of spring eggs.

And then the following paragraph continues:

> Christie felt both happy and unhappy, cold and feverish, hurried and with the whole of time before him. His mother was dead. Death awaited him. Yet out of this sorrowful knowledge, even because of it, he was experiencing happiness and exultation. Now, he was not dead. Now, the whole area of his body, and inside his body unnumbered miles of nerves and veins were his with which to experience the world.[2]

Thematically considered, there is nothing new in this play of light and shadow to show that one exists as

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[2] Jessamyn West, The Witch Diggers (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), pp. 13-14.

The correspondence implied between the momentary mood of the child and that of outside nature may be intentional, so far as Miss Heath-Stubbs is concerned. Here may have been read into the simple descriptive passage that which is actually intended by the author, more perhaps than was consciously written. Extensions and meanings later developed in the narrative or only suggested have been projected into this relatively unimportant description. Such suggestions may near the beginning of the story. In later writing, however, a conscious technique for creating mood and rhythm patterns between human nature and physical nature has been developed. In The Wind Flowers, her last novel (1951), occurs the following description; it resembles the one above only in that it describes the end of day:

The day had first darkened, then lightened as it stood by stony green. Just before sunset the clouds along the western horizon broke open exposing rifts of light, orange-yellow like the yolk of spring eggs.

And then the following paragraph continues:

Christie felt both happy and unhappy, cold and feverish, hurried and slow the whole or line before him. His mother was dead. Death awaited him. Yet out of this apparently inconclusive, even boorish of it, he was experiencing happiness and exultation. How he was not dead. Nor, the worst worse of his body, and inside his body unknowing [illegible] of nerves, veins were like with which to experience the world.

Thematically considered, there is nothing new in this play of light and shadow to show that one writes only

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Jessamyn West, The Wind Flowers (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), p. 1-2.

the result of the other. This checkerboard contrast of light and darkness is a predominantly transcendental concept of a compensatory balance running through all nature. What is shown here is the way Jessamyn West in her later writing appropriated by conscious control a device that had worked successfully, though perhaps unconsciously, in her earlier works. The simile that describes the sun breaking through the clouds does multiple service. The young man, unfamiliar with farm life, is seeing nature (and life) in unfamiliar relationships and seeing it creatively. The immediate comparison of the burst of sunlight in a dark sky with the brilliance of egg yolks, a source of life, is something more than a casually chosen pastoral image. The impact of the simile is strengthened by a symbolic extension of imagery to reality.

The examples I have just given of Miss West's use of poetic rhythm patterns for the achievement of emphasis were chosen especially for their simplicity. In situations of complexity and breadth she applies this technique of repetitive symbolic suggestion with remarkable effectiveness. The stories that make up her novel <u>The Friendly Persuasion</u>, for instance, would be scarcely more than episodic sketches or humorous anecdotes except that they are bound together in a community of feeling. This feeling is both an attitude toward nature and an attitude toward God and mankind, wherein the main characters are all in unquestioning agreement.

Nature, in Miss West's vision, is generously benevolent. In creating the Birdwell family, she chose a nursery farm as being the proper setting for her characters to perform in accordance with her plan. In such a setting reciprocal benevolence between man and nature could be convincingly demonstrated. She admits regretfully that these conditions are more utopian than real. "It is utopian (in so far as I'm concerned) in that it creates an imagined (and to me) pleasant world."[3]

Preoccupation with the wonder of seasonal change is so apparent in all that Jessamyn West writes that scarcely a commentator fails to take note of it. The activities of the seasons are not applied solely for the purpose of setting the scene or describing it. Miss West uses her descriptive talent selectively and functionally. Her descriptions of seasonal change, besides being in themselves decorative, give basis to the action of the stories. Frequently her narratives progress along a delicate thread of time, observed through seasonal change and consequential growth or blight. Sunrise grows gradually to noontime and descends to evening and to night. The seasons grow into each other and out again. The seasons pass and the years, and the characters who people the stories partake of the change as of a feast. Time alters but does not destroy. In the world of Jessamyn

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[3] Jessamyn West, "On an Author," New York Herald-Tribune Book Review, XXVII (February 18, 1951), 2.

Nature, in Miss West's vision, is generously benevolent. In creating the Midwest family, she shows a natural type as being the proper setting for her characters to exist in accordance with her plan. In such a setting realistic benevolence between man and nature could be convincingly demonstrated. She admits regretfully that these conditions are more utopian than real. "It is utopian (in so far as I'm concerned) in that it creates an ideal land to be pleasant with."[3]

Preoccupation with aspects of nature, but not as apparent in all that Jessamyn West writes, may account a commentator fails to take note of it. The activities of the seasons are not applied solely for the purpose of setting the scene or describing it. Miss West uses her descriptive talent selectively and functionally. Her descriptions of seasonal change, weather being in themselves descriptive, give basis to the action of the stories. Frequently her narrative progresses along a definite thread of time, observed through seasonal change and consequently growth or blight. Sunrise grows gradually to noontime and darkness to evening and to night. The seasons grow into each other and out again. The seasons rate and the years, and the characters who people the stories partake of the change as of a fact. Time alters but does not destroy. In the world of Jessamyn

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[3] Jessamyn West, "On an Author," New York Herald Tribune Book Review, XXVII (February 13, 1953), 4.

West's fiction time is an agent neither of willful nor heedless destruction. It represents opportunity for growth to all living things. This idea is basic to Miss West's philosophy concerning the ideal. The sorrowful ending of The Witch Diggers would be absolute in its tragic outcome except for the redeeming promise of time's generous gifts. Miss West salvages from the wreckage a morsel of living knowledge. This knowledge is the understanding of the meaning of love.

An article entitled "Love," which the editors of The Ladies Home Journal commissioned Miss West to write for that magazine, expresses intimately and with informal clarity the author's own beliefs about love. In this article Miss West talks about her cousin Reverdy, a character who, whether real or fictional, has "served" love self-consciously and egocentrically but has missed its true meanings and rewards. The effort to make oneself lovable, approved and self-approving, instead of simply loving becomes a "search [that] only spoils the rest of life; it defeats its own object by making the searcher himself ultimately unlovable."[4] This observation apparently took an early hold upon Miss West's imagination, for she has utilized it frequently as a theme in her stories. She has explored its facets through a variety of situations: sexual love, love of God, love of

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[4] Jessamyn West, "Love," The Ladies Home Journal, LXVI (September, 1949), 226.

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[1] Jessamyn West, "Love," The Ladies Home Journal, LXVI (December, 1949), 220.

family, love of nature, love of humanity. The ruling idea can be shown to have its origin in religion. It derives from the age-old controversy concerning "grace versus works," and Miss West, a Quaker, understandably favors "grace."

The "love" theme seems to be almost the sole theme of Miss West's fiction. It is without doubt a major one. It is the theme for one of her earliest stories, "Reverdy" (1943). (The name of this story and of its principal character are the same as the one used in the magazine article, "Love." The characterization, however, is not the same, although both article and story stem from the same idea.) This persistent theme is precisely stated in the conclusion of The Friendly Persuasion when Jess Birdwell says:

> 'I'm eighty years old. All my life I've been trying one way or another to do people good. Whether that was right or not, I don't know, but it comes over me now that I'm excused from all that. . . . From now on, . . . I don't figure there's a thing asked of me but to love my fellow men.'[5]

The power of love, abiding and self-proving, is again depicted in A Mirror for the Sky (1948). The love that James and Lucy Audubon feel for each other, James's love for his dream (and Lucy's faith in that dream), transcends all hardships and dispels all fears and doubts. In The Witch Diggers (1951), Cate's sorrowful realization is: "All the planning in the world would not have saved Christie, but love would.

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[5] Jessamyn West, The Friendly Persuasion (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), p. 226.

family, love of nature, love of humanity. The unity here can be shown by have has origin in religion. It derives from the age-old conservative concerning "gross vanity (pride)" and Miss West, a modern, secular and/or "gross".

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> 'I'm eighty years old. All my life I've been trying one way or another to do people good. Whether that was right or not, I don't know. But it comes over me now that I've escaped from all that. . . . From now on, . . . I don't figure there's anything better offhand one to love my fellow man.'[2]

The power of love, sublime and self-revealing, is again depicted in A Mirror for the Sky (1948). The love that Sara and Lucy Audubon feel for each other, Sara's love for Philip Green (and Lucy's feeling for Mark Green), transcends all hardships and dispels all fears and dangers. In The Witch Diviner (1951), Gale's personal realization is: "All the planning in the world would not have saved Christie, but love would

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[2] Jessamyn West, The Friendly Persuasion (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), [illegible].

Love would have kept him alive and she had denied love."[6]

Besides these explicitly direct uses to which Miss West has applied her love theme, there are numerous stories that play upon the idea indirectly. Love, as Miss West sees it, is outward in its manifestations. It reaches directly towards its object without a circuitous turning back into the self for testing of its effects--its rewards and penalties. Love is not a manner of doing but an expression of being. When Jessamyn West creates a character recognized as being "lovable," she literally means "able to love." Reciprocation follows or not, depending upon the worthiness of the object loved. The fact of loving is the chief thing, however.

Some characteristics of Miss West's writing that were apparent at the beginning of her career have been pointed out. These have remained constant throughout the period of time her work has been appearing. Another important characteristic that has not been mentioned is her humorous style. It would be misleading to call Miss West a humorist, for that term is too exact in its application, yet no other characterization fits her so well. One does not speak of Hawthorne as a humorist, even though throughout all his fiction there is a hint of gentlest mirth that moves quietly over morbid surfaces. Morbidity is not

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[6] West, The Witch Diggers, op. cit., p. 439.

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[6] West, The Wind Blows, op. cit., p. 423.

characteristic of Miss West's writing, however. The playfully whimsical turn of phrase that so often brings a smile to the reader's face without awareness of what occasioned it does not, as in the case of Hawthorne, have a contrapuntal purpose. It exists for its own sake. It is a stylistic device, though, and not a characterizing one. Miss West's stories, although humorously presented, do not as a rule aim at being solely funny. At best her humor is subtle and quick, closer perhaps to gentle wit of a kind that is commonly described as "dry," particularly when she is being slightly satirical. Sometimes she attempts humor in boisterously exaggerated forms in which she does not succeed so well (as in the graveyard scene of The Witch Diggers, where incongruity is more farcical than comic). In lighter outlines her humor often resembles Mark Twain's. She has his flair, certainly, for homely caricature. "The Carnal Room," a story which was published in Collier's (July 21, 1945), and reprinted in The Friendly Persuasion the same year under the title "Yes, We'll Gather at the River," is an outstanding example of caricature in the Mark Twain manner.

Another characteristic of Jessamyn West's writing, which might properly be regarded as a limitation rather than a virtue, is her preoccupation with child and adolescent characters. Specifically, the early-teen-age girl has served most prominently as the sounding board of Miss West's fictional perceptions. According to Leslie A. Fiedler, it

is the mark of timidity, and fear of experience and of language, that causes writers to retreat into a child's world, "a manageable world toward which they can condescend a little with the gentlest of sentimentalities."[7] This is often true, although there are grand exceptions like Huckleberry Finn. It is a temptation to a beginning writer to explore a world of easy recognitions before plunging into the complex world of adult experience where hard-gained lessons are more often an end rather than a means. The importance of the lesson learned by each of the adult characters in The Witch Diggers, for example, is strengthened by the certainty that at least one person, eleven-year-old Em, will profit from the experience of her elders.

Ivan Karamazov said, "I took the case of the children to make my own case clearer."[8] Up to this point in her writing, the case of Miss West has been largely that of seeding experience rather than harvesting it. In the major part of her fiction a child's world suits her purpose exactly. She likes to shape a character of sensibility, imagination, and caprice, and turn loose upon it the electrifying vibrations of awakening maturity. The spring towards life and the comprehension of life, however helter-skelter it may be,

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[7] Leslie A. Fiedler, "Style and Anti-Style in the Short Story," Kenyon Review, XIII (Winter, 1951), 163.

[8] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov (New York: The Modern Library, 1943), p. 289.

positively asserts in these times of negation and death-wishing a note containing health and soundness. It is an attitude towards life that abounds in all that Miss West writes.

In Walter Lippman's A Preface to Morals, he makes a statement that seems pertinent here:

> I venture to believe that any theory of art is inevitably implicated in some philosophy of life, and that the only question is whether the artist is conscious or unconscious of the theory he is acting upon. For unless the artist deals with purely logical essences, provided he observes and perceives anything in the outside world, no matter how he represents it or symbolizes it or comments upon it, there must be implicit in it some attitude toward the meaning of existence.[9]

Jessamyn West has a definite attitude toward life that had, apparently, resolved itself into a personal philosophy by the time she began publishing. The consistency of her expression of it signifies that it is not only a conscious attitude, but one that seems to bear upon her with some urgency. If her expression of what she "observes and perceives" is better represented by retreat into a world of child experience, and symbolized by simple rather than complex action, according to Mr. Lippman's statement her purpose justifies her practice.

I have not meant to imply that Jessamyn West does not deal with complicated ideas. She is inclined to disguise

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[9] Walter Lippman, A Preface to Morals (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), p. 107.

complexities, though, by use of straightforward narration and a minimum of speculative theorizing. She herself, whether as author, editor, or commentator, remains outside the action of her stories. Thus detached from the scene of action, she is able to project a point of view that appears to be particular to the characters involved. "Mr. Powers," a story published in the New Yorker (July 24, 1948), records on the surface only the most trifling of conflicts dramatized by the irrational action of a young girl, but when it is examined closely it reveals a serious psychological reality: the absolute morality of innocence. Another story, "Alive and Real," published in Harper's Bazaar (September, 1947), likewise simple in its narrative outline, accepts a burden of international, or even cosmic, guilt. Both of these stories and many others are so deceptively simple that their serious content is easily missed, since there is never apparent even the slightest bit of homilectic theorizing to point to the moral or lesson that is subtly presented. The action is ordinarily simple. The characters are simple only as their actions reveal them. Human life is never simple, however simply the great mystery may be clothed. It is this mystery about which Miss West has much to say. She breaks it down into simple forms and analyzes it through her own individual observations.

In reference to the questions that were listed earlier

for evaluating an author, it has been shown that Jessamyn West does have something to say--an attitude towards life that she expresses through the medium of fiction writing. It can be shown by the examination of some of her representative works of fiction that she has command of a technique adequate for expressing it. Her success by popular standards would indicate that what she has to say has sufficient value to gain and hold the interest of readers. Whether this interest is provided by values of a kind that are of only passing worth or by those that may have some permanent literary significance, it will be the purpose of this study to decide.

CHAPTER II

THE FRIENDLY PERSUASION: A NOVEL OF QUAKER LIFE

The actual order in which Jessamyn West's first published stories were written I have not been able to determine from judgment of merit or maturity. Her own statement seems valid enough for our purposes here. She says:

> I lived in Indiana only until I was six. I am by all I know a Californian, and by all I imagine, a Hoosier. I listened as a child to many tales told by my homesick parents--then young people in their twenties--and it had for me, this lost country of snow and falling leaves and thunderstorms, an enchantment California did not. So it was natural for me, in the beginning of writing, to write of Indiana first.[1]

The stories having an Indiana background began appearing in the latter part of 1940. Even earlier the same year she had published a few stories in the little magazines, the editors of which had offered her encouragement. In a letter requesting that she submit other stories for consideration, Dudley Wynn, then editor of the New Mexico Quarterly Review, commented upon the vividness of her writing and was otherwise uncommonly expressive of praise, considering that he was dealing with a hitherto unpublished young writer feeling her ground questioningly and uncertain of her own readiness for publishing. In the letter he stated: "You can write. . . . Do you think it flattering

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[1] Jessamyn West, "On an Author," New York Herald-Tribune Book Review, XXVII (February 18, 1951), 2.

if I tell you that maybe you will be the Mary Wilkins Freeman of the 1940's?" Then he added in postscript: "Don't ever lose your beautifully authentic folk speech."[2]

In August of that year Mr. Wynn accepted "The Child's Day," but before it appeared in print in November Miss West had had other stories accepted by American Prefaces, Prairie Schooner, and Nutmeg. In response to Mr. Wynn's request for biographical information at the time of this first acceptance, Miss West wrote:

> I was born in Indiana--down near the Ohio-Kentucky line. Graduated from Whittier College in Southern California. Did graduate work at the University of California--went to Oxford for that purpose but was diverted. Worked on a small town newspaper, taught school. In past eight years have reduced the t.b. pronouncement from "far advanced" to a cautiously spoken "cured." To a cure chaser, this is, of course, the crown flower of his life, which nothing else will ever equal. Am now a non-professing housewife. . . . I think the first half of this autobiography is all that need see the light of day, don't you?[3]

The latter part of the biography has been understandingly withheld by later editors and publishers (if they know these facts at all). Since in none of Miss West's writing either her experiences in England or those of anxious convalescence are explored, there has been little reason to attach biographical significance to these phases of her life. Yet it is reasonable to suppose that it was during these

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[2] Dudley Wynn, from a ltter to Jessamyn West, April 8, 1940.

[3] Jessamyn West, from a letter to Dudley Wynn, September 27, 1940.

if I tell you that maybe you will be the first Indiana woman of the 1940's." Then he added in postscript: "Don't ever lose your beautiful authentic folk speech."[2]

In August of that year Mr. Wynn accepted "The Dunlap Day," but before it appeared in print in November Miss West had had other stories accepted by American Magazine, Prairie Schooner, and Women. In response to Mr. Wynn's request for biographical information at the time of this first acceptance Miss West wrote:

> I was born in Indiana--down near the Ohio-Kentucky line. Graduated from Whittier College in southern California. Did graduate work at the University of California--went to Oxford for that purpose but was diverted. Worked on a small town newspaper, taught school. In past eight years have pedaled the t.v. pronouncement from "far wiyoness" to a semi-literary spoken "word." To a sure success. This is, of course, the crown flower of my life, which nothing else will ever equal. Am now a not-particularly successful. I think the first half of this autobiography is all that need see the light of day, don't you?[3]

The latter part of the biography has been unfortunately withheld by later editors (who, we wonder, know these facts at all). Since in more of Miss West's writing either her experiences in England or those of extreme convalescence are explored, there has been little reason to attach biographical significance to these phases of her life. Yet it is reasonable to suppose that it was during these

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[2] Dudley Wynn, from a letter to Jessamyn West, April 6, 1940.

[3] Jessamyn West, from a letter to Dudley Wynn, December 27, 1940.

years that she prepared herself for her career as a writer, for by the time she began to publish her work bore the remarkable freshness of the beginning writer but certainly not the "greenness" of the unselective amateur. What she offered was a product of discriminating judgment that accomplished fully as much as it proposed.

It was the Quaker stories that brought Jessamyn West wide notice, and it is by them that she is commonly identified today, even though she has so extended the scope of her subject interest in the past decade that the amount she has written about the Quakers is slight compared with her production as a whole. Her publishers, Harcourt, Brace and Company, have emphasized her Quaker background to such an extent that she is as commonly identified with the Middlewest as with California. When I requested some biographical information from her publishers, they sent the following mimeographed statement:

> Jessamyn West is a Quaker, born in Indiana. She was educated in California, and after graduating from Whittier College she went to England to study. On her return she attended the University of California. For the last few years Miss West's short stories have been appearing in Collier's, The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's, Harper's Bazaar, The Ladies Home Journal. Most of these stories were collected in her first book, The Friendly Persuasion, published in the fall of 1945. She is married and lives in Napa, California.

Essentially the same information appears on the jacket of her novel published in 1951. It also has an Indiana setting. There is perhaps some publicity advantage in stressing the

Indiana background and influence to have it appear that the author is as close geographically as she is in spirit to the Indiana country she writes about. Since in Miss West's case her Quaker upbringing derives from the midwestern region, the significance of this background as it affects her writing is naturally recognized. In the line of American Quaker writers which began in Revolutionary times, so far as I am aware Jessamyn West is the single spokesman for Quakerism writing fiction today. It is noticeable that scarcely any addition--nothing, in fact, but her publishing record--has been made to the facts of her biography in the past decade. Out of these facts all that need concern us here are her beliefs. I have not, therefore, looked for further information concerning the author's personal life history. I have sought instead to inform with some degree of comprehension my statements about her religious and philosophical beliefs, since these are basic to all that she writes.

Before examining the Quaker stories upon which Miss West's reputation as a writer was first established, and in my opinion still largely rests, it will be an advantage to preface my criticism with some remarks about the history of Quakerism in America.

As a birthright Quaker (both of her grandmothers having been Quaker ministers),[4] Jessamyn West is one of a

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[4] Harper's Bazaar, LXXVIII (October, 1943), 155.

line of Quaker writers who, though not numerously represented in American literature, have had a respectable hearing and strong literary influence. To go down the line chronologically, chief among these are: John Wollman (1720-1722), Quaker diarist of the Revolutionary War period; Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), often described as being the "first professional man of letters in the United States"; Bronson Alcott (1799-1888), whose background of Quaker mysticism was merged in the rise of New England Transcendentalism; John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892), whose writings concerning the issues of the Civil War period have charged his name with greater fame, perhaps, as an outspoken liberal than as a poet; Walt Whitman (1819-1892), whose democratic vision embodied all the principles of Quakerism projected, however unrealistically, upon the rapidly expanding American scene of his times. Greatest of them all, insofar as his influence became rooted in the American democratic tradition, is William Penn, the first and foremost, who is better known for his democratic, humanitarian theories of statesmanship than for his writings.

Despite this evidence that Quaker thought has constantly had a representative voice in American letters from colonial times to the present, in the opinion of Woodbridge Riley the total contribution is negligible. Mr. Riley says: "Besides being inarticulate, native mysticism was inopportune. At the end of its century Quakerism should have borne the

fruit of literary expression. But circumstances were against that fruition."[5] These circumstances were due to "psychology of race and the survival of the fittest. . . . The soft-hearted were supplanted by the hard-headed."[6] One point that Mr. Riley makes deserves full consideration here, because it bears strongly upon the evaluation of the effectiveness of a book such as Jessamyn West's The Friendly Persuasion and its chances of survival, whatever its artistic worth and whatever its immediate reception. In summing up his remarks about American Quakerism, Mr. Riley says:

> We must now attempt to estimate the value and results of early American mysticism. It was unorthodox, it was inarticulate, it was inopportune. Was it ineffective? There are some who hold that mysticism is by nature passive and theoretical, not active and practical. They claim that the mystical life is a life of contemplation, not of ethical energy; that the individual, being lost in the excess of divine light, loses his sense of personality. To such critics we offer these facts: William Penn's treaty with the Indians, John Woolman's protest against slavery, and the continued agitation of the Society of Friends against militarism. . . . To those who would scornfully say that mysticism is by nature theoretical and never practical, we point not only to this list of amancipators, abolitionists, pacifists, but to the causes which underlay their activities. That cause has been suggested by Whittier. It was that they were men who sincerely applied their minds to true virtue and found an inward support from above. Nevertheless a compromise must be made between critic and defender. Our early American mysticism was in a sense ineffective. Privately the practice of quietism engendered a state of tender

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[5] Woodbridge Riley, American Thought From Puritanism to Pragmatism and Beyond (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1915), p. 41.

[6] Ibid.

> sensibility and an appreciation of the higher morality. But publicly the movement did not spread because it was not truly a social movement. [My italics.][7]

Aims of social consciousness have been much in prominence in twentieth-century American literature and in the critical evaluation of it. Since Miss West does not appear to concern herself with immediate social problems, and least of all with social movements, any success she may have achieved is all the more worthy when measured by contemporary critical standards. Her concern is with the individual human being, first as a person and then as a social member. Critics have qualified their praise of The Friendly Persuasion in mentioning the limitations set upon the book because of particularity of period, region, and character--all of which points to lack of universality in its concepts. If it can be shown, however, that the novel is based upon a rich philosophic heritage, it may be denied that its cultural content is isolational or unique.

How great a part has Quaker thought played in the shaping of American character and of its social surroundings? How much has Quaker influence, either as a leading or a reactional force, gone into the creation of the social culture of the western hemisphere? If one may rely upon Ernest Sutherland Bates's evaluation of the Quaker cultural contribution, as he discusses it in his chapter "The Rise

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[7] Ibid., pp. 42-43.

and Rule of Quakerism in America" in American Faith, the facts are astounding. According to Mr. Bates, Quakerism is derived from the earliest of the protestant religious sects, the Cathars, which sprang up in Europe in the eleventh century, some five hundred years before the time of the Reformation. Crusaders returning from the Holy Lands, sick of warfare and observing from the remnants of primitive Christianity encountered in their travels none of the glorification of war and conquest fostered by the Catholic Church of the Holy Roman Empire, declared themselves pacifists by example of Christ. From this germinal beginning the line of descent is clear, as given by Bates:

> From Cathars to Waldenses--from Waldenses to Lollards--from Lollards to Moravians--from Moravians to Anabaptists--from Anabaptists to Baptists--from Baptists to Quakers. . . . It does not matter that there are broken links in the chain where direct influence must be inferred rather than proved. One may, if he wishes, argue that the whole chain is merely a striking example of the truth that similar conditions produce similar results.[8]

Bates describes these conditions as having been for the past one thousand years conditions of war, of civil or clerical authority that tended to paralyze individual freedom of expression or enterprise, of inequitable discrimination and persecution, and the abuse of the humane conscience. Adjustment of such conditions has resulted in democracy as

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[8] Ernest Sutherland Bates, American Faith, Its Religious, Political and Economic Foundations (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1940), p. 176.

we know it today.

The Quakers, firm, if passive, held out consistently in their attitudes of uncompromising protest against intolerable social conditions as a matter of religious principle. Their weakness lay not in resolution but in action, and particularly in an inarticulation due to retarded views towards advanced education. In a growing country like America, where outward action rather than inward conviction set the pace, the decline of Quakerism was inevitable. Mr. Bates states it thus:

> . . . Any historian in 1700, judging of the future in terms of apparent tendencies would have been likely to forecast a Quaker America.
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> But the Quaker America never materialized. There was not even to be a Quaker Pennsylvania. By the end of the eighteenth century the Friends no longer guided the ethics or politics of a single state. Those who had started out to convert the world in the dream of winning Sultan and Pope to their cause, were now apparently content to accept the position they have ever since occupied of a minor sect among many sects. The decline of the Quakers in external power was almost as rapid as their spectacular rise.[9]

The reasonable causes for this rapid decline, other than those already indicated, need not concern us here. What was contributed to the character of American thought - concerning separation of church and state, freedom of expression, the rights of the individual, and the obligation of humanitarian practices, during the century of the new nation's formation when Quakerism was at its strongest peak,

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[9] Ibid., p. 198.

is what remains important today. From whatever sources these democratic principles may have derived, the ideal continues to hold regardless of what the reality may be.

In writing the stories that comprise her book The Friendly Persuasion, which for realization of its larger aims I shall examine as a novel rather than as a short story collection, Miss West created a microcosmic universe built upon this ideal and peopled it with plausible individuals who supported it. It is a novel depicting in homely, humorous terms a religious pilgrimage. The "plot" is organic--fashioned by the philosophy upon which it is also based. The incidental action controls and is controlled by that philosophy. There is no older scheme of fiction plotting in all literature. Our greatest fictions have been resolved upon such a scheme: The Book of Job, The Iliad, The Divine Comedy, Pilgrim's Progress, and, of course, The Scarlet Letter, are examples. What Miss West attempts with light-hearted humor and whimsy has been explored in more serious vein down deeper, darker channels since the beginnings of our literature. Neither her intentions nor her attitude is unserious. Lightness and humor are the tools she works with best. Technical efficiency is as necessary to the creation of a minor work of art as to a major one. Humor is her forte, and she never uses it so well or to such artistic advantage as she does in The Friendly

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Persuasion. It is unfortunate, though, that the sheer excellence of the humor has so overwhelmed the philosophic content of the book that the latter has mainly been ignored in critical appraisal. I hope in my own appraisal to be able to show the artistry by which Miss West reconciles these double factors.

The Friendly Persuasion was published in 1945, exactly five years after the first of the stories appeared in print. So far as I have been able to detect, no revisions--other than the renaming of some of the stories for suitability as chapter headings in place of story titles--were made upon publication of the book. The stories appear as they did in magazine publication and represent, I imagine, the editorial labors of a number of the various editors who gave the stories initial sanction upon their separate merits. I suspect that some editorial advice, and perhaps some revision--principally cutting--may have gone into these stories before they were originally published. For Miss West, in the beginning of writing, was self-admittedly "long winded,"[10] and even to the present time she is extraordinarily receptive to editorial recommendations. Particular evidence of this friendly tendency to take, and even invite, constructive criticism of her work will be shown when in the following chapter I take up certain short stories for examination

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[10] Jessamyn West, from a letter to Dudley Wynn, undated.

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The selection and arrangement of the Quaker stories, as they appear in the book, is so ably done that they fit together logically, although loosely, and form a structure firm enough to be called a novel. The first of these stories, "Music on the Muscatatuck," was published by Prairie Schooner in the summer of 1940. Until Harper's Bazaar accepted a second one, "The Illumination," in October, 1943, Miss West's stories had received recognition only from the editors of the "little" magazines. Immediately after the appearance of the story in Harper's Bazaar, the Quaker stories caught on like wild fire in prairie grass and were absorbed into print as fast as the favored editors could lay hand on them.[11] Collier's published "Shivaree Before Breakfast" in its January 22, 1944, issue. The Atlantic Monthly published three in rapid succession

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[11] Between 1940 and 1945, while the Quaker stories were being published, other stories of Miss West's that had different background and different fictional approach from the ones typified as the Quaker stories were appearing with frequency not only in the magazines that published the Quaker series but in other magazines as well. This sudden rise in popularity from virtual anonymity is to a great extent attributable to Miss West's having secured an appreciative and enterprising literary agent at the opportune time when her writing had reached a marketable maturity. There has been no stinting either on the part of the author or of her agent in the expression of mutual esteem and confidence. In an article "The Story of a Story " (The Pacific Spectator, Summer, 1949), she calls him "my agent Henry Volkening, a man of great good judgment." In a letter I received from Mr. Volkening, written on September 30, 1950, shortly before her novel The Witch Diggers was published, he says of her: "She's unique. For she unwittingly sells a quality which is the one we need today for actual survival, a vitality built not upon anger, but upon love."

the same year: "A Likely Exchange" in July, "First Day Finish" in August, and "Lead Her Like a Pigeon" in December. In July of the next year (1945) three more were published: "The Meeting House" by Atlantic Monthly, "A Pretty Thing" by Ladies Home Journal (retitled "The Vase" when reprinted in the book), and "The Carnal Room" by Collier's (also given a different title, "Yes, We'll Gather at the River," in the collection). In August Collier's published "The Pacing Goose," and in the same month "Homer and the Lilies" appeared in The Ladies Home Journal. The New Mexico Quarterly Review published "Pictures From a Clapboard House" in its Summer, 1945, issue. The last of the stories, "The Buried Leaf," appeared in the September Atlantic.

The fourteen stories in loose sequence cover a period of time beginning in the 1850's, extending from the early years of Jess and Eliza Birdwell's marriage to those of advanced old age. Jess is a thrifty Indiana nurseryman in prosperous circumstances, a befitting reward for honest dealing in matters of commerce--a reputation that was conscientiously sought by Quaker tradesmen and universally recognized by those with whom they were associated in business.[12] Eliza, his wife, is a Quaker minister. Besides preaching at the Meeting House on First Day, she manages her household, which consists of a large brood of children

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[12] Bates, op. cit., pp. 201-203.

the same year: "A Likely Exchange" (in April), "First Day Finish" in August, and "Lead Her Like a Pigeon" in December. In July of the next year (1945) three more were published: "The Meeting House" by Atlantic Monthly, "A Pretty Thing" by Ladies Home Journal (retitled "The Vase" when reprinted in the book), and "The [illegible]" by McCall's (also given a different title, "Yes, We'll Gather at the River," in the collection). In August McCall's published "The Pacing Goose," and in the same month "Homer and the Lilies" appeared in The Ladies Home Journal. The New Mexico Quarterly Review published "Pictures from a Japanese Printshop" in the Summer, 1945, issue. The last of the stories, "The Buried Leaf," appeared in the [illegible] Atlantic.

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[12] Bates, MS. [illegible]

of various ages, her husband, and the hired man. Eliza has her hands full, for it is she who guards over the others, including Jess, to preserve the "friendly" way of life she professes in the pulpit and aspires to in her own daily living. She expends patient anxiety, and a little temper, too, for Jess is impulsive and hard-headed and somewhat given to worldly vanity. The children, though Quaker to the bone, are more individually involved in modern notions than befits their station as children of the minister. Besides, Eliza has her own willful nature to contend with: a good-looking woman with a shrewd wit and a sharp tongue, however solidly molded by gentle disciplines of Quakerism, is not immune to personal ambition.

Concerning what critics have ventured to say with regard to the probable facts and family anecdotes upon which many have assumed The Friendly Persuasion to be based, Miss West says:

> People take it for granted that The Friendly Persuasion is based largely on fact. It isn't. It has four or five "facts" in it, as, my great-grandfather did buy an organ of which my great-grandmother, a Quaker minister, disapproved, etc. . . . Friendly Persuasion is not nostalgic, as has been said, since it does not report anything I remember. It is utopian (in as far as I'm concerned) in that it creates an imagined (and to me) pleasant world.[13]

Even if the stories are imaginary, as Miss West says, the characterizations given to Jess and Eliza are apparently

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[13] West, "On an Author," op. cit.

based upon the fact of the single family anecdote she mentions above: the somewhat wayward unorthodox Quaker great-grandfather and his wife, the disapproving straight-line Quaker minister. The story about the purchase of the organ is the first one given in the book. This story sets the key for the personalities of Jess and Eliza. Jess is described as being "a fiery Republican, as fiery at least as a Quaker's apt to be,"[14] but "with a heart as soft as a pudding."[15] Eliza keeps him in hand more often by compromise of her own principles--rationalized into a form of partial acceptability--than by any giving in on Jess's part. Still she has her way most of the time, and the rest of the family follows her lead. As one of the lyrics in A Mirror for the Sky reads, "Woman is the forred wheel, / Start her and the hind ones foller."[16]

In "Music on the Muscatatuck" Jess manages to have a Payson and Clarke pump organ installed in the Birdwell household in spite of Eliza's protest: "Remembering thy children and my ministry, is thee still set?"[17] Jess being "set,"

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[14] Jessamyn West, The Friendly Persuasion (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), p. 6.

[15] Ibid., p. 12.

[16] Jessamyn West, A Mirror for the Sky (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 22.

[17] West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 13.

the organ is moved in--but up into the attic. Eliza's humiliation is complete when the Ministry and Oversight Committee calls to see for itself if there is any truth in the rumor that the Birdwells are harboring a Methodist devil's trap in a Quaker home. ("To the Quakers music was a popish dido, a sop to the senses, a hurdle waiting to trip man in his upward struggle."[18]) Eliza, "being on the whole a reasonable as well as a pious woman,"[19] is able to justify Jess's backsliding on the ground of his weakness for high-pressure city salesmanship as being something less objectionable than defiance of righteousness.

For all its absence of ornament and ritual, the Quakers retained a high degree of the mysticism which, as dissenting pilgrims, was their heritage from the Mother Church. George Fox, the itinerant shoemaker who founded Quakerism in America, was truly a mystic, "subject to the hearing of strange voices, to visions and trances."[20] It is not strange, then, that Josh and Labe, the young sons of Jess and Eliza, should behave with reasonable understanding and little ado, under the circumstances, when Old Alf, a neighbor, is caught talking to himself out of loneliness addressing his "Molly darling." The boys, bent on a bit of shivaree mischief because of their

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[18] Ibid., p. 4.

[19] Ibid., p. 13.

[20] Bates, op. cit., p. 178.

The organ is moved up--but up in the attic. Elisha Damaliation is complete when the ministry and overseeing committee calls to see for itself if there is any truth in the rumor that the Witchella crank morning's whipoorwill lovin'a trap in a Quaker home. (To the jukebox music was a popular ditto, a cop to the banner, a muddle waiting to trip man in his upward struggle.[18]) Elisha, "having on the whole a reasonable as well as a pious woman,"[19] is able to finally hoodwinkling on the ground of his reputation for uncommon city salesmanship as being sufficient proof of his defiance of nightcrawness.

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18 Ibid., p. 4.

19 Ibid., p. 17.

20 Bates, op. cit., p. 178.

suspicions that Old Alf at his advanced age (and a little daft at that), has acquired a young wife, quietly return home to eat their breakfast with promises to Alf that his secret is safe when he tells them: "She ain't nobody. She don't exist. I just made her up. I talk to her--just to hear my own voice. I just pretend she's my wife. There ain't no harm in it--or none as I can see anyways, and besides I never figured anybody'd hear me."[21] Their Quaker training has given the boys a comprehension of the meaning of communion with God and fellowman, and the need of it for comfort in times of loneliness. This is the "Quaker lesson" revealed in the story "Shivaree Before Breakfast."

"The Pacing Goose" is Eliza's own story. More than any other incident in the book, this story shows Eliza simply as a woman rather than as a wife, or a mother, or a preacher. Eliza's pet goose, Samantha, has been lured off to a neighbor's flock. When accusations, bribes, and threats fail to cause the unfriendly neighbors to return Samantha to her owners, or to admit Eliza's ownership, Eliza takes the complaint to court. Quakers are above all opposed to civil wrangling. "As sharers in God's promise, all men were brothers, who should not go into courts of law against one another, far less make war on one another."[22] Law to Eliza

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[21] West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 26.

[22] Bates, op. cit., p. 178.

suspicions that Lila Kirk at the moment was, with a little
daft at that), has counted a young life, quietly, reason
nana to set their breakfast with promises to-day's mysteri
secret is safe--when he walks down this sunny morning
don't exist. Lizbeth only see us. I talk to her--just
my own voice. I just pretend she's my wife. There ain't
here in 19--or more so I can see anyone, and nothing
figured anybody's been me."[21] Thus Lizbeth's reality
given the boys a sour reminder of the meaning of
with God and fellowmen, one's sense of it
times of loneliness. This is the "hunger in
in the story "Solvers Before Breakfast."

"The Pasture Gone" is Lila's own story. Here
any other tyrant in the end. Lila's story
as a woman rather than as a wife, or a mother, or a
Lila's pet goose, Grandma, has been lured off to
bor's flock. When Hannah's brother, and threats
cause the unfriendly neighbors to send word to her
owners, or to which Lila's uncle is, Lila goes to
plaint to court. Hannah's employer all agrees to give
trespassing. "As dangerous in God's sight, all
brothers, who did not go into court, all
another, for there were her on the
[21] West, The Flamingo Grove, op. cit., p. 26.
[22] Bates, op. cit., p. 128.

was "all Greek and turkey tracks."[23] Furthermore, Quakers do not take oaths--they affirm; and to call the judge "Your Honor" is an impossibility, the only valid distinctions among Quakers being those of "personal merit; rank and honor entitled no man to reverence, so it was not permissible to recognize class distinctions in speech."[24] "We Quakers," Eliza told the judge gently,"do not make use of such titles. What is thy name? I think thee'll go far in our state and thy name's one I'd like to know."[25]

Whatever Eliza may have lacked in her comprehension of legal matters is made up for in her understanding of human nature, and also in her knowledge of the usefulness of her own femininity:

> The judge appeared somewhat distraught, undecided as to whether to make the tone of the court brisk and legal (if possible) or to follow Eliza's lead of urbane sociability.
>
> "Pomeroy," he said and made a slight bow in Eliza's direction.
>
> Eliza returned the bow, deeper and with more grace. "Friend Pomeroy," she said, "it is indeed a pleasure to know thee."[26]

Eliza won her case and the recovery of Samantha by declaring with extreme earnestness that she could identify her goose positively because she was a "pacer."

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[23] West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 40.

[24] Bates, op. cit., p. 178.

[25] West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 41.

[26] Ibid., p. 43.

> Judge Pomeroy lifted his head. He had no desire to be further instructed as to the history, habits and breeds of geese, and he liked to see a trial settled by some such little and too often overlooked subtlety. Judge Pomeroy brought down his gavel. 'The court awards decision in favor of the plaintiff. Case dismissed.' While the silence that followed on his words still prevailed Judge Pomeroy stepped briskly and with obvious pleasure out through the rear door.[27]

"Lead Her Like a Pigeon," which makes up the fourth chapter of the book, was reprinted from the Atlantic Monthly in the Prize Stories of 1945: the O. Henry Awards. Of the four Quaker stories that were published in 1944--one in Collier's and three in Atlantic Monthly--this story is in my opinion the least arresting. It concerns a bit of parental matchmaking, and daughter Mattie, although pleased in prospect, is nevertheless chagrinned by the obviousness of Eliza's scheming to be "shut" of her. As a story standing alone, I find little besides its winning style and quaint humor to recommend it for special honor. As a chapter of the book, however, the story provides an important link of progression: the growing up of the Birdwell children to marriageable age as a forecast of succeeding generations. A more important function is served in its showing, through Eliza's action, the means by which matrimonial segregation, as practiced in the early Quaker communities, was preserved.[28] Another function of the story, as it

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Riley, op. cit., p. 43.

appears in chapter form (but which has no bearing when considered singly) is its relation to a later chapter, "Pictures From a Clapboard House," where the idea of matrimonial segregation begins to break down and Eliza's match-making schemes are frustrated. This is an example of the structural devices that interlink the episodes into a tightly integrated work of fiction firm enough to be judged as a novel.

"The Battle of Finney's Ford" may be considered the strongest story in the book. It gets outside the physical vacuum of the Quaker environment to an extent that is not attempted elsewhere. It shows, though, that environment is more than a matter of place, condition, and habit; it is a vestment of the inner as well as the outer being. Josh, the eldest son of Jess and Eliza, decides to join the militia. His reasons for wanting to go to war have little to do with the national issues at stake. Death he considers is a cheater of life, and there has been a lot of unnecessary dying. He will kill, he declares, or give his own life, if it will help put an end to all the dying. Above the ideologic arguments of Eliza, the advice of Jess, and the tears of sister Mattie--even above the sane counsel of his brother Labe, who lacks Josh's impulsive idealism and is less given to youthful heroics--Josh joins the Home Guard and goes off to fight the advancing raiders led by John Morgan. But Josh was soon to learn that war is not all glory and gunfire.

appears in another form (but which has no bearing when considered simply) in the relation to a later character, "Stories from a Chapbook House," where the idea of mechanical segregation begins to break down and Alice's action-making schemes are frustrated. This is an example of the structural devices that interfuse the episodes into a tightly integrated work of fiction first among to be judged as a novel.

"The Battle of Finney's Ford" may be considered the strongest story in the book. It gets outside the physical vacuum of the Quaker environment to an extent that is not attempted elsewhere. It shows, though, that environment is more than a matter of place, condition, and mood; it is a vestment of the inner as well as the outer being. Jeph, the eldest son of Jess and Eliza, decides to join the militia. His reasons for wanting to get to war have little to do with the national issues involved. Death is considered in a character of life, and there has been a lot of unnecessary dying. He will kill, he declares, or give his own life, if it will help put an end to all the dying. Above the idealogic arguments of Eliza, the advice of Jess, and the tears of sister Mattie--even above the same counsel of his brother Abe, who lacks Jeph's impulsive idealism and is less given to youthful heroics--Jeph joins the Home Guard and goes off to fight the advancing raiders led by John Morgan. But Jeph was soon to learn that war is not all glory and romance.

> War appeared to consist not of the dramatic and immediate sacrifice, either of his body in dying, or his spirit in killing, as he had foreseen it at the breakfast table, but of an infinite series of waitings and postponements.[29]

Or, as in the next breath Miss West sums it up homorously:

> Getting ready for war might be a short horse and soon curried, but war itself was a horse liable to stretch, so far as he could see, from July to eternity. . . head at Maple Grove and hocks in Beulah Land.[30]

This quick turn from seriousness to levity is a distinguishing feature of Miss West's style, particularly the way she suddenly attires a serious idea in the comic apparel of lucidrous images. This tendency of a sudden turnabout, as gracefully executed as a simple dance step, was noticed by Mr. Edwin L. Peterson in his review of The Witch Diggers. "As water swirls into brightness at the foot of a rock," says Mr. Peterson, "so Miss West's prose frequently swirls into brightness at the close of a sentence."[31] He offers, then, from The Witch Diggers, some examples not unlike the one I have shown above and concludes in comment:

> Energetic and original figures, these, and yet the originality is seldom strained. They come tumbling into Miss West's sentences as spontaneously as water tumbles over the riffles, and they add sparkle to page after page of excellent writing.[32]

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[29] West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 86.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Edwin L. Peterson, "Three Books and a Place," New Mexico Quarterly, XXI (Autumn, 1951), 357.

[32] Ibid.

May appeared to complete not an accidental and immediate sacrifice, either of a boy in crying or his equals in killing, as he had fashioned it at the breakfast table, but of an infinite series of weddings and postponements.[29]

Or, as in the next month Alma Reed saw it in homeboy:

Getting ready for war might be a short matter and soon curtailed, but war itself was a fairly lively affair, so far as he could see, from duty to everyday . . . need at Angle Grove and Horse in Zenion land.[30]

This quick turn from sarcasm to levity is a distinguishing feature of Alma Reed's style, particularly the way she suddenly utilizes a serious idea in the scale apparel of humorous leaves. This mockery of a sudden burst about, as practically expressed as a single stone step, was noticed by Er. Edwin L. Peterson in his review of The Lizard Dancer. "As water swirls into brightness at the foot of a rock," says Mr. Peterson, "so Alma Reed's prose fra (sic) swirls into brightness at the close of a sketch."[31] He offers, then, from The Mixed Dancer, some extract but unlike the one I have shown above the conclusion is comment:

Energetic and original figures weave, one yet the originality is spread throughout. They pass tumbling into Alma Reed's sonatas in spontaneously as water tumbles over the rifles, and there are many a page after page of excellent writing.[32]

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29 West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 46.

30 Ibid.

31 Edwin L. Peterson, "Three Poems and a Play," New Mexico Quarterly, XXI (Autumn, 1951), 357.

32 Ibid.

Josh's brief experience in the Union Army turned out to be an experience in spiritual growth.

> . . . When he had first come to, found himself lying at the edge of the crick, he had thought he would hate coming home, admit he'd been hurt, not by gun or saber, but by falling over a bank onto his head. Now it didn't matter. Yesterday morning and his talk of dying and killing seemed almost a life-time away . . . the past twenty-four hours a prolonged campaign from which he had emerged, a veteran, with mind much cleared as to what mattered and what did not.
>
> Next time . . . he wouldn't talk so big . . . about fighting . . . and dying. But that didn't matter either, now. What mattered was that he had stood there . . . he had been afraid, but he had stood at the bridge. He had thought of running . . . but he hadn't done it. . . .
>
> And there were the things he had learned . . . that death, when you moved toward it, seemed to retreat . . . that it was only when you turned your back on it . . . and ran . . . that it pursued.[33]

As Howard Brinton explains in his book The Quaker Doctrine of Inner Peace,

> For the Quaker, perfection and its consequent inner peace can be reached when all of God's immediate requirements as understood are faithfully met. These requirements are never so great that the individual cannot meet them. . . . As we are faithful to the light that we have, more will be given. Thus a soldier whose conscience tells him to fight must fight or be a coward.[34]

Eliza and Jess, although pacificists themselves, had not strongly opposed Josh's desire to fight. The experience he gained from it was by Quaker interpretation a religious experience. All of life (including death, if one doesn't

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[33] West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 91.

[34] Howard H. Brinton, The Quaker Doctrine of Inner Peace (Walsingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill, 1948), p. 10.

Joan's brief experience in the Union Army turned out to be an experience in spiritual growth.

> . . . When he had first come to, found himself lying at the edge of the ditch. He had thought he would hate coming home, didn't he'd been hurt, not by gun or sabre, but by falling over a bank onto his head. But it didn't matter. Yesterday morning and his fair of dying and killing seemed almost a life-time away . . . The past twenty-four hours a prolonged sleepless first watch he had emerged, a veteran, with mind much cleared as to what mattered and what did not.
>
> Next time . . . he wouldn't talk so big . . . about fighting . . . and dying. But that didn't matter either now. What mattered was that he had stood there . . . he had been afraid, but he had stood at the ditch. He had thought of running . . . but he hadn't done it.
>
> And there were the things he had learned . . . that death, when you moved toward it, seemed to retreat . . . that it was only when you turned your back on it . . . and ran . . . that it pursued.[33]

As Howard Brinton explains in his book The Quaker Doctrine of Inner Peace,

> For the Quaker, perfection and its consequent inner peace can be reached when all of God's immediate requirements as understood are faithfully met. These requirements are never so great that the humble cannot meet them. . . . As we are faithful to the light that we have, more will be given. Thus a soldier whose conscience bids him to fight must fight or be a coward.[34]

Ellen and Jess, although sacrificing themselves, had not strongly opposed Joan's desire to fight. The experience he gained from it was by Quaker interpretation a religious experience. All of life (including death, if one doesn't

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[33] West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 90.

[34] Howard H. Brinton, The Quaker Doctrine of Inner Peace (Wallingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill, 1948), p. 13.

turn his back on it) is a religious experience, as Miss West shows at the end of the book in the story "Homer and the Lilies"--another example of artistic interweaving of narrative and theme.

"The Buried Leaf" is one of the most beautiful stories in the book. It shows the value of roots and heritage to be the deep source of the human spirit. And especially it points to simple continuity as a thing of beauty. Little Jess digs up a small wooden box while playing near the old cellar site where the pioneering Birdwells of an earlier generation had built their first log cabin in the wilderness. All the family gather around to see what treasure may have been unearthed. The box contains only a crisp, yellowed leaf from the Bible, with the scriptural message which begins:

> And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm and with great terribleness and with signs and wonders. And he hath brought us into this place and hath given us this land, even a land that floweth with milk and honey.[35]

The imagination of the Birdwells is caught up by the circumstances that had occasioned the burying of the leaf fifty years before, when Uncle Jerd and his motherless daughter Mattie had come west to face the hardships and to taste the freedom of frontier life. Jess tells the story as he remembers it, and daughter Mattie, who has felt in her heart

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[35] West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 101.

the social privations of growing up in a backwoods Quaker farm community, is made to feel the romance of life itself, wherever it is lived and under whatever conditions, if it is lived with courage and imagination. The "promised land" is a creation of the spirit rather than a place on a map.

Simple revelations such as this, and of the others in the novel, lose their poignancy in summary. The earnestness that gives them their importance is rendered through the authenticity of speech and action which cannot be imitated in summary so as to give any indication of the way Miss West manages to present such material in a style of lively, sparkling humor.

When Jess Birdwell goes to Kentucky to market his nursery stock, as he does each October, he becomes involved in a horse trade that is the exact answer to Eliza's suggestion that he be on the lookout for a "likely exchange" for their Red Rover, whose promising appearance out-measures his performance. A Mrs. Hudspeth, one of Jess's customers, is in the market for a slow moving horse of genteel appearance for her daughters to drive. She describes her own horse "Lady" thus:

> 'She won't be passed. Otherwise she's fault-free--half Morgan, a prime healthy animal, just turned four and a willing worker. . . . She's a good beast, but she's got to learn to be passed. She's got a fancy she's Lexington. Me and my girls always hittin' it down the pike like the devil's on our tails. No style. It don't appeal to the men.'[36]

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[36] Ibid., p. 115.

the social privations of growing up in a backcoves inner-farm community, he made to feel the richness of life itself, wherever it is lived and under whatever conditions, if it lived with courage and imagination. The "promised land" is a creation of the spirit rather than a place on a map.

Simple revelations such as this, and of the sources in the novel, lose their poignancy in summary. The sentiments that give them their importance is rendered through the authenticity of speech and action which cannot be imitated in summary so as to give any indication of the way Miss West manages to present such material in a style of lively, sparkling humor.

When Jess Birdwell goes to Kentucky to market his nursery stock, as he does each October, he becomes involved in a horse trade that is the great answer to Kitty's supposition that he be on the lookout for a "lively exchange" for their Red Rover, who proved to be a mediocre work-horse in his performance. A Mr. Hudspeth, one of Jess's customers, is in the market for a slow moving horse of genteel appearance for her daughters to drive. She describes her own horse "Lady" thus:

> 'She won't be pleased. Otherwise she's a fault-free half Morgan, a prime healthy animal, just turned four and a willing worker. . . . She's a good beast, but she's got to learn to be pleased. She's not a fancy she's Lexington. We are my girls always listen' it down the pike like the devil's up our tails. No style. It doesn't appeal to the man.[6]

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[6] Ibid., p. 115.

Jess lets Mrs. Hudspeth talk herself into a trade for the handsome but sluggish Red Rover and manages to quiet his Quaker conscience in his acceptance of a little "boot," since the exchange is so obviously satisfactory to both trading parties.

From the standpoint of propriety, Eliza had felt that the "racy-looking" Red Rover was scarcely the kind of horse a preacher should drive to First Day services at the meeting house; yet she regretted that for all his sporting appearance Red Rover was the slowest horse on the road. As an unpracticed judge of horseflesh, Eliza sizes Lady up as being a "good pulling mare." Her approval of Jess's trade is complete. But when Jess starts to pass the Reverend Godley's Black Prince on the road the following First Day a race results. Jess gives Lady the rein and only "the Quaker blood in Jess' veins kept him from shouting with pride at his mare's performance."[37]

> The Reverend Godley didn't have Quaker blood in his veins. What he had was Kentucky horse-racing blood, and when Black Prince got his nose opposite Lady's rump Godley's racing blood got the best of him. He began to talk to his cob in a voice that got its volume from camp-meeting practice--and its vocabulary, too, as a matter of fact--but he was using it in a fashion his camp-meeting congregation had never heard.[38]

Meantime the congregations at the Reverend Godley's

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[37] Ibid., p. 124.

[38] Ibid.

Bethel Church and at the Quaker Meeting House just up the road are placing bets. The excitement is too much for Eliza:

> Jess spared her a glance out of the corner of his eye to see how she was faring. She was faring mighty well--sitting bolt upright, her Bible tightly clasped, and clucking to the mare. . . . 'Thee keep a-going, Lady,' she called. Eliza hadn't had camp-meeting experience, but she had a good clear pulpit voice and Lady heard her.[39]

Lady won the race. But how Eliza won her congregation is the victory of the story. Quakers had been read out of meeting for less, but Eliza who is quick to forgive others was this time able apparently to forgive herself. "First Day Finish" is one of the most entertaining stories in the book--one of the funniest and most exciting incidents in the novel. The incredibly ludicrous situation of preachers of rival churches horse-racing to Sunday services while the congregations of both churches cheer and place bets is a touchy one for handling. The gentle ribbing that Miss West gives to the forms and proprieties of religion, including her own Quaker faith, is a revelation of her sense of proportion: a healthy lust for hearty living can scarcely be regarded as sin, nor subject to its guilt.

The next story, "Yes, We'll Gather at the River," was first published under the title "The Carnal Room." It introduces one of the most fascinating of all Jess's and Eliza's odd assortment of friends and neighbors, Old

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[39] Ibid.

Lafe Millspaugh. Among a host of other eccentricities is Lafe's strong opposition to bathing. Besides have a curious aversion to water, Lafe has some fixed moral convictions concerning people who "loll" about in bathtubs. When Jess asks Lafe, who is a good carpenter, to build a bathroom onto their house for the installation of a new-fangled bathtub he has bought without Eliza's knowledge, Lafe lets go his judgment without sparing:

> 'Nekid,' said Old Lafe Millspaugh. 'Mother-nekid. Stretched out in that room, not so much as a pair of drawers between you and your Maker. Not so much as a G-string to signify you're man or fish. A carnal room, Jess Birdwell, a fester on the township, a downright invitation to. . . .'[40]

When Eliza hears about the bathtub her objections are along the lines of Lafe's. She remembers what happened to the Romans. And she remembers, too, what she had overheard Lafe saying: "I heard him plainly say it'd be a carnal room. Friend Millspaugh and I don't see eye to eye in many ways--but there we do. It'd be neighborhood talk, Jess, a room like that."[41] It was not that Eliza could pin her objections down to that which was "truly un-Christian, she supposed, but moving toward an ease and a laxness which was far removed from the early churches' admonitions."[42]

Lafe, as a matter of professional hire, agrees to

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[40] Ibid., p. 137.

[41] Ibid., p. 140.

[42] Ibid., p. 141.

Lafe Millsaugh. Among a host of other eccentricities is Lafe's strong opposition to bathing. Bathing here a curious avocation to-wuns, Lafe has some fixed moral convictions concerning people who "foil" about in bathtubs. When Ozra asks Lafe, who is a good carpenter, to build a bathroom onto their house for the installation of a new-fangled bathtub he has bought without Eliza's knowledge, Lafe lets fly his judgment without sparing:

> 'Wenia,' said old Lafe Millsaugh. 'Modern-makin. Stretched out in that room, not so much as a pair of drawers betwen you and your Maker.' Not as much as a G-string to signify you'ts men or fish. A normal room, long Sunday, a feather on the tommahk, a downright invitation to. . . .'[40]

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Lafe, as a matter of professional pride, agrees to

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[40] Ibid., p. 127.

[41] Ibid., p. 140.

[42] Ibid., p. 141.

build the bathroom. When he has finished, Eliza notices there is no door--that the room is sealed solid, and all the bathroom fixtures sealed inside, for Lafe had been told to build a partition, but no mention had been made of a door. When Jess discovers what Lafe in his contrariness has done, he tears the boards away in a seizure of Irish temper and souses Old Lafe thoroughly. "First time, not counting rains and heavy dews, friend Millspaugh's been wet in thirty years,"[43] Jess tells Eliza.

In this story and the two preceding it ("A Likely Exchange" and "First Day Finish"), Miss West gently mocks the quaint ethics of orthodox Quakerism, its beliefs and practices. Jess and Eliza represent, in the characterizations Miss West has given them, two points of view. Jess is progressively "modern," while Eliza holds to the forms of ancestral orthodoxy. That such differences in religious views could exist congenially in the same household can be explained by what Quakers call "unity in fellowship."[44] In his book The Quaker Meeting, Mr. Howard Collier quotes from a lecture of Howard Brinton, "Creative Worship," which explains this union of feeling, even in the presence of strong differences of opinion. Its social significance is no less

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[43] Ibid., p. 144.

[44] Howard E. Collier, The Quaker Meeting (Walsingford, Pennsylvania: Pendle Hill, 1944), p. 26.

striking than its philosophic and religious significance. Unity in fellowship ideally achieved would, naturally, bring about peaceful relations between nations as well as individuals. As Mr. Brinton states it, "A nice adjustment of individual and social values is arrived at, so that the whole does not dominate the parts nor do the parts go their own way regardless of the whole. Each determines and is determined by the other."[45] This is another way of stating what Quakers have always upheld: the ideal of a workable democracy based upon the establishment of congenial human relationships.

In the next chapter Jess imagines that a wen he has had on his neck for some twenty years has begun to grow, and in a fine state of self-dramatization he explains to Eliza that he believes the "end" is near and wishes before he dies to visit once more the old meeting house in his home town where his parents are buried. Eliza is fairly familiar with Jess's imaginings and is not deeply concerned about his fears. She encourages the journey, though, and Jess sets off on what turns out to be a happy revelation in human relations. He finds his old friends and neighbors a little less well off than he had, through the years, remembered them as being; time has dealt less generously with them than with the Birdwells. He forgets the purpose of his

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[45] Ibid.

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[45] Ibid.

journey, and forgets himself, too, in lending a hand of helpfulness and encouragement to others less fortunate. He returns home a little shame-faced, admitting to himself that vanity, selfishness, and conceit, rather than the offending wen, are his basic ailments.

"The Meeting House," is whimsically amusing, as a piece of folksy story-telling, but not otherwise remarkable. It marks a point in the novel, though, that might be called a change in point of view. The previous chapters, whether they reveal the experiences of the Birdwell children, or of Jess and Eliza, or of the family as a unit, show the vigor and action of youth and middle age. The stories from this point on are shadowed by memory and nostalgia, sentiments of later life; they are stylistically keyed to reflection and repose rather than aspiration and action for their tone and feeling. Point of view altered by the passing of time is truer to life and to reality, perhaps, than the usual fictional devices of shock or sudden revelation commonly employed by writers to produce what is known as "character development." Time alone, which allows for growth, is the character developing agent in The Friendly Persuasion and, for that matter, in most of Miss West's writings. In The Friendly Persuasion, however, its effectiveness is more perfectly realized, since it ties so neatly to the religious idea of the perfectability of man, the single faith that sustains the novel throughout. The faith strengthens as the body declines.

journey, and forgets himself, too, in imagining a temporal metamorphosis and encounters women to whom time forbids. He returns home a little wiser, but only with the minimal that vanity, selfishness, and constant fatness when the offending men, are his basic allegiance.

"The Meeting Place," is unmistakably another, as a piece of fairly story-telling, but not quite convincing. It marks a point in the novel, however, but with no quite a change in point of view. The previous chapters, however they reveal the experiences of the Bidwell sisters, of days and dates, or of the family as a unit, show the vigor and action of youth and middle age. The stories from this point on are endowed by memory and nostalgia, reminiscence of later life; they are explicitly keyed to reflection and reason rather than activation and action for their song and feeling. Point of view altered by the passing of time is truer to life and to reality, however, than the usual fictional devices of magic spiritual revelation commonly employed by writers to produce what is known as character development." Time alone, which allows for growth, is the operator developing agent in The Friendly Persuasion and for this matter, in most of Miss Hale's novels. In The Friendly Persuasion, however, its effectiveness is more perfectly realized, since it lies so nearly to the religious idea of the perfectability of man, and shows Eliza that sustains the novel throughout. The Quaker attitudes as the body idealism.

Jess and Eliza become firmer in their spiritual outlines and more relaxed in their actions and judgments as they grow older. They concern themselves with the abstractions of their belief more than with the physical and material manifestations of it. The transcendental aspects of the Quaker religion are thus enacted rather than explained.

"The Pacing Goose," as I mentioned when I discussed it, was Eliza's own story. It showed Eliza as a young, militant Quaker preacher who found it necessary to act as any woman in struggling with worldly reality, and to submit to it in order to assert her rights as an individual being. "The Vase" is also Eliza's story. It is the story of Eliza grown old and indulging herself in loving sentiment for pleasures past and pain philosophically remembered. The story was first published under the title "A Pretty Thing." Years before, when she was a young married woman, Eliza had started to fashion from a broken lamp chimney an ornament to beautify the parlor. All through the years it had sat unfinished at the back of the secretary along with other bits of feminine gimcracks. At various times she would get out her paints and brushes and add a bit more decoration. The swan she had painted when little Sara died, and a matching swan had been sketched in years later but never completed. The small nimble fingers that had begun the "vase" (as she had come to call it, although Jess pointed out that it couldn't well be a vase since it was open at both ends)

Jess and Eliza become firmer in their spiritual outlines and more relaxed in their notions and judgments as they grow older. They concern themselves with the abstractions of their belief more than with the physical and material manifestations of it. The transcendental aspects of the Quaker religion are thus emphasized rather than explained.

"The Peaceing Dove," as I mentioned when I discussed it, was Eliza's own story. It showed Eliza as a young, militant Quaker preacher who found it necessary to act as any woman in struggling with worldly reality, and to submit to it in order to assert her rights as an individual being. "The Vase" is also Eliza's story. It is the story of Eliza grown old and indulging herself in loving sentiment for pleasures past and pain philosophically remembered. The story was first published under the title "A Pretty Thing." Years before, when she was a young married woman, Eliza had started to fashion from a broken lamp chimney an ornament to beautify the parlor. All through the years it had sat unfinished at the back of the secretary along with other bits of feminine gimcracks. At various times she would get out her paints and brushes and add a bit more decoration. The swan she had painted when little Sara died, and a matching swan had been sketched in years later but never completed. The small nimble fingers that had begun the "vase" (as she had come to call it, although Jess pointed out that it couldn't well be a vase since it was open at both ends)

were now plump and stiff. The vase had come to symbolize for Eliza a thing of beauty, never quite finished and short of practical usefulness, but, like all that is beautiful, perfect in creative vision. "The Vase" is a solemn story of infinite love and understanding. The story, like the vase itself, is open at both ends. It looks forward and back at the same time. It is a story of woman's innate creativeness, which is a part not only of her physical nature but her spiritual nature also. Jess, in contrast, as Eliza observes him in a generalizing sweep that takes in the entire male sex, was "not to be counted on" to understand this absolute feature of feminine nature. "Or maybe, not Jess. Maybe man, any man."[46]

Years of thrift and fruitfulness brought prosperity in a modest measure to the Birdwells. Their older children grown and married, Jess and Eliza settle down in their sixties to the enjoyment of comforts possible in the form of "modern conveniences." Eliza has become more yielding in her disposition towards up-to-date living than she had been at the time Jess had the bathroom built. When gaslights are installed, it is Eliza who plans a big celebration, inviting in all their friends and neighbors to witness the moment when the lights go on for the first time. Eliza, with solemn appreciation of the importance of the occasion--marking, as

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[46] Ibid., p. 165.

were now plump and silly. Was it and was to represent for Eliza a thing of beauty, never quite finished, enough of practical usefulness, but, like all those in possession, perfect in creative vision. The lady is a solemn story of infinite love and consecration. The story, like the vase itself, is open at both ends. It looks forward and backward the same time. It is a story of women's innate creativeness, which is a part not only of her physical nature but her spiritual nature also. Here, in contrast, is Eliza, whose place in a generalizing sense, she takes in the human race, was "not to be counted on" to understand this absolute feature of feminine nature. "She knew, not then, maybe, any man."[46]

Years of thrift and frugalness brought security in a modest measure to the Eliza's. Their older daughter grown and married, Jess and Eliza settle down in Hyde Park to the enjoyment of comfortable possessions, "modern conveniences." Eliza has become an e[illegible] disposition towards up-to-date living that should seem to the time idea that the bathroom built. When gas stoves were installed, it is Eliza who plants a big celebration, inviting in all their friends and neighbors to witness the moment when the lights go on for the first time. Eliza, with solemn appreciation of the importance of the occasion--Jess, as

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[46] Ibid., p. 164.

it does, an era in change--speaks of it as "The Illumination." Concerning change, Eliza questions the meaning of it all: "Is it gaining or losing?"[47] she asks. Jess answers by saying it is both. "The thing being to taste each in its turn."[48] He is puzzled by Eliza's questioning the relativity of values--she who has always seen everything so clearly. "This was a way he seldom saw Eliza. Ordinarily she fit snug and without question into one of her two worlds, this world of work, the next of love."[49] Eliza's puzzlement about the meaning of change stems from a religious and social point of view, but before the evening of the "illumination" is over with Jess is accosted by another bewildering viewpoint concerning flux in the nature of things--the problem stated on a material level that Jess is able to comprehend, and to judge.

A miserly neighbor declares his disapproval of the Birdwell's wastefulness: the display of lights, the overabundance of food, the extravagance of expending in excess of material returns.

> 'A lot of money going down the drainpipe, there. Food and lights nobody needs. Don't it irk you?'
> The old coot ain't ashamed of being a miser, Jess thought. No need my being ashamed for him. For the first time in his life he spoke to the man he knew his forty-year neighbor to be: said farewell to

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[47] Ibid., p. 179.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

it does, an era in change--speaks of it as "The Illumination." Concerning change, Eliza questions the meaning of it all: "Is it gaining or losing?"[47] she asks. Jess answers by saying it is both. "The thing being to taste each in its turn."[48] He is puzzled by Eliza's questioning the relativity of values--she who has always seen everything so clearly. "This was a way he seldom saw Eliza. Ordinarily she fit easy and without question into one of her two worlds, this world of work, the next of love."[49] Eliza's puzzlement shows the meaning of change stems from a religious and moral point of view, but before the evening of the "Illumination" is over with Jess is educated by another bewildering viewpoint concerning flux in the nature of things--the problem stated on a material level that Jess is able to comprehend, and to judge.

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[47] Ibid., p. 179.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

makeshifts and politeness and plunged right into that hard core where Eli lived.

'Money,' he said. 'Thee prizes it above all else?'

'No,' said old Eli Whitcomb, 'not money. Anything you can get your hands on. Anything you can count or measure. There's nothing else to rely on. Looky,' he said, and beat out his words on Jess' arm with a finger as light as a withered flower stalk. 'What's the main idea behind this world? A wasting away--a wasting away. Trees rotting. Ground carried off by the rivers. The sun getting less hot. Iron rusting. I run counter to all that. I put a stop to it. God don't care. Wreckage is his nature. It ain't mine. I save. . . . I save all. Me alone. Against the drift. The rest of you letting it run down the spout.'[50]

The problem of change and flux, Jess must admit in partial comprehension of Eliza's philosophic thoughtfulness concerning it, has many faces. Or, as he says to Eli, "I never figured it in that light."[51] But Eli's theory--the principle of divine destructiveness as opposed to that of growth and betterment--has a ring of falseness that Jess cannot give credence to. All he can say is: "Eli, is thee happy?"[52]

"The Illumination" is a story compacted of images overcast by the symbol given in title. It reveals more deliberate literary artistry than any of the other stories. The author plays upon such words as "day" and "night," "light" and "shadow," in various forms and combinations, using them repeatedly so as to create a pattern of poetic rhythm. Woodbridge Riley, in speaking of the mystical life of

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[50] Ibid., p. 184.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid.

contemplation as opposed to that of ethical energy, says that "the individual, being lost in the excess of divine light, loses his sense of personality."[53] In a sense this is what disturbs Eliza and Jess when they are confronted with new ideas that confound their own beliefs with shadings of contrary judgment. An excess of light, such as that which has come to them with age and experience, like the excessive illumination cast by the new gas-jet lighting system, creates deeper and more impenetrable shadows with each lengthened beam. All the experience they have gained in bringing up a large family of children does not equip them for better understanding of young Jane, the child born to them in later years. They must adjust their vision to the "light" of modern times and the relativity of its values. Still, there is one value that may be held absolute. The end is, after all, the proper judgment of the means. Jess demonstrates this truth when he asks his neighbor: "Eli, is thee happy?"

"Pictures From a Clapboard House" introduces one of Miss West's enigmatic girl-child characters, young Elspeth, the daughter of Mattie. The story is created around Elspeth's childlike perceptions, and the reader is once more transported to a change in point of view--for the story is not Elspeth's but Jess's and Eliza's. Now we see tham as "Grandma"

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[53] Riley, op. cit., p. 42.

contemplation as opposed to that of ethical energy, says that "the individual, being lost in the excess of divine light, loses his sense of personality."[52] In a sense this is what disturbs Eliza and Jane when they are confronted with new ideas that confound their own peculiar brand of judgment. An excess of light, such as that which has come to them with age and experience, like the excessive illumination cast by the new gas-jet lighting system, creates deeper and more impenetrable shadows with even longer and bleaker. All the experience they have gained in bringing up a large family of children does not equip them for better understanding of young Jane, the child born to them in later years. They must adjust their vision to the "light" of modern times and the relativity of its values. Still, there is one value that may be held absolute. The end is, after all, the proper judgment of the means. Jane demonstrates this truth when he asks his neighbor: "Eli, be thee happy?"

"Pictures from a Clapboard House" introduces one of Miss West's enigmatic girl-child characters, young Elspeth, the daughter of Nettie. The story is created around Elspeth's childlike perceptions, and the reader is once more transported to a change in point of view--for the story is not Elspeth's but Jane's and Eliza's. Now we see them as "Grandma"

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[52] Miley, op. cit., p. 42.

and "Grandpa," doting grandparents spoiling and catering to little Elspeth as they would never, in recognition of parental responsibility, have done in the case of their own children.

Uncle Stephen, the "baby" of all the children of Jess and Eliza, is bringing home his new bride for Christmas. Uncle Stephen has a streak of wildness in him, and Aunt Lidy before her marriage to him had been the subject of some loose talk. Eliza had been able to maneuver a "match" for Mattie, but Stephen has married outside the Quaker community. "Oh Jess," Eliza asks, "why'd he have to choose her? Marry outside the Meeting? What he need's a settled, sober-minded wife."[54]

Elspeth perceives a side of her grandmother's nature that we have glimpsed heretofore only fleetingly. Eliza would like to arrange the patterns of her children's lives in accordance with her own plan, and in accordance with what in conscientious earnestness she believes (assuming some divine authority to herself) to be God's plan. The night of the shivaree Elspeth judges for herself the rightness of a kind of love that is based upon something other than "sober-mindedness." She is witness to a spectacle of radiance beside which Grandma's petulance and jealous frustration are of small importance. The break in the cleavage of the

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[54] West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 189.

and "Grandma," doting grandparents spoiling and catering so little Elspeth as they would never, in recognition of personal responsibility, have done in the case of their own children.

Uncle Stephen, the "body" of all the solidity of Jane and Elize, is bringing home his new bride for Christmas. Uncle Stephen has a streak of willness in him. And Aunt Lily before her marriage to his had been the subject of some loose talk. Elize had been able to wheedle a "match" for Lily, but Stephen has married outside the Quaker community. "Oh, dear," Elize says, "why'd he have to choose here? Marry outside the Meeting? What he needs is a settled, sober-minded wife."[54]

Elspeth perceives a side of her grandmother's nature that we have glimpsed heretofore only fleetingly. Elize would like to arrange the patterns of her children's lives in accordance with her own plan, and in conformance with what in conventional circumstances she believes (assuming her divine authority to herself) to be God's plan. The night of the mistaken Elspeth throws for herself the rightness of a kind of love that is based upon something other than "sober-mindedness." She is blind to a superficial or redeemed side which Grandma's petulance and jealous frustration are of small importance. The break in the drawing-room

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[54] West, The Friendly Persuasion, op. cit., p. 189.

generations is shown as Elspeth discovers that beauty is truth and also goodness.

> It was true, it was true. . . . Aunt Lidy's face had shown, gold, with the blaze of torches on it; Uncle Stephen had held the lamp so that he looked like a Christmas angel. Elspeth gazed far away, across the glittering woods toward home. 'Oh mama,' she said, 'it was all true.'[55]

"Homer and the Lilies" is the last story in the book. As the title somewhat suggests, it symbolizes the deaths of Jess and Eliza. The story is really Jess's story, just as some of the previous ones are Eliza's. In this closing chapter of the novel, we see Jess as a feeble old man in his eighties. The final spiritual revelation pictured here tokens that Jess has fulfilled the divine requirements set upon mortal life, has come the full circle towards divine understanding, and is ready now to leave "this world of work" and enter "the next of love."

The narrative content of this last chapter is constructed of Jess's friendship with Homer, a little orphan boy adopted by some neighbors. Jess's love for the child is tender with reminiscence of his own youth. Homer, with his innocence and strange poetic imagination, signifies the unspoiled soul, or, as Jess describes it:

> . . . What we started with and lost. Honesty, he guessed, would come as near as any one word to saying what it was. Wonder, fear, love, there it all was in Homer, nothing glossed over, nothing hidden from

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[55] Ibid., p. 199.

generations is known as Hardy discovers that beauty is truth and also goodness.

> It was true, it was true . . . Aunt Hardy's rage had shown, gold, with the price of torment on it; Uncle Stephen had held the lamp so that he looked like a Christian angel. Hardy, aged far away, gazing the glittering woods toward home. 'Oh mamm,' she sighed, 'it was all true.'[55]

"Honor and the Lilies" is the last story in the book. As the title somewhat suggests, it approaches the theme of Jess and Lilas. The story is really Jess's story, just as some of the previous ones are Lilas's. In this closing chapter of the novel, we see Jess as a lonely old man in his eighties. The final spiritual revelation dramatized seems that Jess has fulfilled the divine requirements set upon mortal life, has done the full circle towards divine understanding, and is ready now to leave "this world of work" and enter "the next of love."

The narrative content of this last chapter is constructed of Jess's friendship with Honor, a little orphan boy adopted by some neighbors. Jess's love for the child is tender with reminiscence of his own youth. Honor, with his innocence and strange poetic imagination, is rather the unspoiled soul, or, as Jess reflects:

> . . . When we started with and lost, honesty, as guessed, would come as read as any one knew to realize what it was. Wonder, fear, love, more it all was in Honor, nothing closed over, nothing hidden from

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[55] Ibid., p. 199.

> sight. It was meeting a human being at first hand, . . . not meeting a person assembled, put together so's to present to the inspecting eye the very object for which it was searching. . . . Pleasure to see something all of a piece, alive clear to the outside.[56]

When Homer dies (of tuberculosis one presumes from the symptoms described), Jess is able to reconcile his personal loss in sober contemplation of the purpose of life, and therefore of death, that could result only from religious maturity--a maturity of understanding attained by the years and bearing little resemblance to the impetuous, questing, and sometimes disorderly philosophy of the younger Jess.

> Jess wasn't sorrowing for Homer. Homer, he didn't misdoubt, had seen more of the world in his twelve years than this whole gathering lumped together, their experiences of seeing, hearing, wondering, bound together in a bundle and counted as that of one. He didn't sorrow for Homer, having some idea, as he did, of the way this world would have used him . . . how people like himself, with the best of intentions . . . trying to do their duty, merely . . . would have hurt and hampered him at every turn.[57]

"Winter dies hard," Jess remarks to Eliza elsewhere in the story. Homer's death had been easy. In Homer's short life his fine sensibilities had not been spoiled, his poetic vision had not been blurred by ugly reality, nor his personal honesty obscured by opinion. It has taken Jess a long lifetime to recover what Homer has never lost.

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[56] Ibid., pp. 208-209.

[57] Ibid., p. 213.

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The book closes on a symbolic note that denotes the passing of Jess, as he says: "From now on Eliza, I don't figure there's a thing asked of me but to love my fellow men."[58] Miss West here employs the device of matching character action with the mood of natural phenomena, a symbolizing technique which I have already pointed out. Notice the symbolic imagery here:

> He got up from the table and went to the window. The earlier resplendence of the sky had faded, leaving only a small finger-shaped stretch of yellow light to show where the sun had been and where it had set. But the coming of dark had never dispirited Jess, and he spoke now with cheerfulness. 'No Eliza,' he said, 'as far as I can see, there's not another thing asked of me from this day forward.'[59]

Reviews of The Friendly Persuasion that appeared at the time the book was published were singularly favorable. They were also singularly similar--praising the book, as a collection of short stories, upon the merits of its quaint humor and the delightful aura of folk feeling created by authentic patterns of speech and action. The purpose of my close summarizing of the separate incidents of which the book is composed was to show the process of growth and interlinking action that makes possible the judging of the book upon its merits as a novel, since it is only when viewed as a novel that it yields up the fullness of its philosophic

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content. No other criticism I have discovered has treated the book in this manner, and therefore its serious side upon which its greater significance rests has been underplayed in the drawing of attention to its lighter, entertaining features. Here I offer an excerpt from a review that is typical of this tendency:

> [The] sketches have all the virtues that such a series, well written, may possess, and all the limitations. To take the limitations first, the effect of the book is episodic rather than cumulative. Inside of a novel the Birdwells might have been perceived in the process of growth. . . . Because, for all the charm and evocative tenderness that flow through these stories, they seem none the less to be enacted inside a vacuum. . . . They offer rewards, too, once we yield to their blandishments, and this is easy enough. Miss West wields a prose of most friendly persuasion. It is as soft and musical as the speech of her Quakers, as sensitive to every manifestation of nature as they, and as ardent in pursuit of the moral verities. . . . . The mood is nostalgic, primitive, like a dream of vanished innocence.[60]

I trust that my analysis of the book, as a novel, succeeds in showing that the author overcomes the limitations pointed out in Mr. Rothman's remarks. If Miss West has, as he considers, failed to demonstrate a "process of growth," then the failure is a serious one since growth is the keynote to which her philosophy is atune and to which her literary aesthetic is bound. It is my argument that she has succeeded exceptionally well in dramatizing a process of philosophic growth and its functions. She sticks strictly to her subject,

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which is the friendly persuasion (and not episodic sketches of individual characters), and reveals its working over a span of time to cover the equivalent of four generations in process of growth and evolution. To point out, these are: (1) the older generation of westward pioneering Birdwells, as Jess tells their story in "The Buried Leaf"; (2) Jess and Eliza; (3) their children; (4) their grandchildren. This is not a narrow undertaking. The delicate adjustments that bind all these characters into a pattern of single purpose reflect careful artistry. The unity of effect witnessed in the total work was not achieved in any one story. Neither has any separate story a claim to outstanding value when judged beside more powerful stories of our time. In fact, in my next chapter I shall show that Miss West has written short stories superior in concept and development to any single one in the present volume. It is as a novel-length work of fiction that Miss West's book must be evaluated so that all its purposes may be seen in fullest perspective.

It is as a novel, then, that I judge The Friendly Persuasion to be a first-rate work of fiction. I have found no patent definition of the novel as a fiction form to alter my judgment of the book upon these terms. In his Aspects of the Novel, E. M. Forster spends some 250 pages in the examination of "aspects," and fewer than a dozen words in defining what a novel is. He cites only the definition given by Abel Chevalley in his book Le Roman Anglais de Notre Temps, which

which is the *friendly persuasion* (and not epidemic attitude of individual characters), and revealing its meaning over a span of time to cover the entire lives of four generations in process of growth and evolution. In brief, these are: (1) the older generation of northwestern pioneering stock, as less tells their story in "The Buried Land"; (2) their sons, Elias; (3) their children; (4) modern generation. Theirs is not a narrow undertaking. The reader is aware that with all these characters there is a plethora of minor personalities, careful artistry. The unity of effect with-and in the total work was not achieved in any one story. Neither was any separate story a match to outstanding work when compared with more powerful stories of our time. In fact, in the next chapter I shall show such Miss West has written short stories superior in concept and development to any single one in the present volume. It is as a novel-length work of fiction that this work should be evaluated so that all its purposes may be kept in rational perspective.

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calls the novel "a fiction in prose of a certain extent."[61] Mr. Forster names the extent, for his working purposes, to be not less than 50,000 words. In the more exhaustive work of Joseph Warren Beach in which the work of some forty novelists is examined,[62] no attempt is made to inform the reader of what a novel is or should be. Charles Neider, editor of the anthology, Short Novels of the Masters, explains in his Introduction that the characteristics of the short story are "brevity" and "full and immediate impact."[63] Longer narratives, he says, "fail to achieve these characteristics."[64] For his working purposes, he designates a limit of 15,000 words for the short story, and when this limit is exceeded the work may conveniently be called a "short novel," a "novelette," or, as Mr. Neider prefers, a "novella." The physical boundary lines that distinguish the short story from the novel are fairly arbitrary. There seems to be no argument that extent is a primary consideration. (As Thomas Wolfe remarked wittily, "A novel is a trunkful."[65]) What

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[61] E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927), p. 17.

[62] Joseph Warren Beach, The Twentieth Century Novel (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1932).

[63] Charles Neider, editor, Short Novels of the Masters (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1948), p. 3.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Dale Warren, editor, What is a Book? Thoughts About Writing (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935), p. 247.

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this difference in extent permits an author to do, and therefore obligates him to accomplish within this medium, is a fair method for judging any work of fiction, whatever the genre.

So to say now that The Friendly Persuasion is a novel of fourteen chapter units, each of which is so sufficiently self-contained as to qualify it as a separate short story, does not make the book less a novel than if the chapters were more dependently interlinked. Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, as one example among many, is a book made up, like The Friendly Persuasion, of a collection of stories relating the experiences of many different characters, all of whom share in common the influences of a particular time, place, and situation. The word that Anderson applied to describe these influences--and the effects of them--was "grotesquerie," the grotesquerie, that is, of the human experience in contrast with that humanly imaginable and aspired to. If a single word were correspondingly applied to Miss West's book, that word well might be "felicity," and by the same token it would describe a state of human experience imagined, aspired to, and ultimately attained. Many of the chapters in Winesburg, Ohio were first published in short-story form, but the book is so successfully integrated that no one thinks of it except as a novel. Like Anderson's novel, The Friendly Persuasion is structurally uncomplicated,

this difference in extent permits an author to do, and therefore obliges him to accomplish within this medium, is a fair method for judging any work of fiction, whatever the genre.

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but artistically unified.

None of the reviews of The Friendly Persuasion, although favorable enough on the slight grounds assumed for judgment, give the book its due. The reason, I believe, is that none conceived it as a novel but as a group of sketches, and, as in the case of Mr. Rothman's review, this categorizing is pejorative in its effect. The book is described in the Book Review Digest thus: "Gently humorous sketches about the life of a family of Quakers living in Indiana at about the time of the Civil War."[66] The Digest description is, of course, gleaned from all the published opinion made of the book. The long favorable review given by Mr. M. F. Melcher in the New York Times describes the book as one having no plot "yet each story complete in itself";[67] the review in the New Yorker (somewhat less favorable, but complimentary, nevertheless, to the author's "sense and taste") calls the book "neither a standard piece of period nostalgia nor the equally standard album of lovable eccentrics. . . . ."[68] Other commentators refer to it as "a series of episodes" (Kirkus),[69] "delightful short stories"

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[66] Book Review Digest, XLI (1946), 757.

[67] M. F. Melcher, "Reviews," The New York Times Book Review, XCV (November 25, 1945), 5.

[68] Anonymous, "Books," The New Yorker, XXII (November 10, 1945), 102.

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(Library Journal),[70] "folk pictures (New Republic),[71] "collection of enchanting short stories" (Yale Review),[72] etc. What this cursory talley reveals is that the book in all cases where I have seen it reviewed, either in full or in part, has been conceived of as being a mere gathering of fragments whose total effect is but the happy accident of the fragments fitting together. This conclusion could easily result in the case of a book that is known by the critic to have been formed from a group of unserialized short stories.

In judging the book as a novel, however, there are limitations apparent that did not greatly lessen the value of the work when regarded merely as a collection of sketches. These limitations appear as the result of established literary convention and deserve arguing.

The Friendly Persuasion portrays a pattern of good living and reward, depicted philosophically in the assumption of the perfectability of man and rendered in terms of humor. Since the beginnings of our western literature, the dramatic scheme has tended to emphasize the condition of man's suffering and indignity in the toils of fate, fortune, predestination, and, in more recent times "crass circumstance"

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[70] Ibid.

[71] William Poster, "Children and Folk," The New Republic, CXIII (December 10, 1945), 810.

[72] Orville Prescott, "Outstanding Novels," The Yale Review, XXXV (Winter, 1945), 384.

Library Journal),[70] "Folk pictures (New Republic),[71] "collection of enchanting short stories" (Yale Review),[72] etc. What this category fairly reveals is that the book in all cases where I have seen it reviewed, either in full or in part, has been conceived of as being a mere gathering of fragments whose total effect is but the happy accident of the fragments fitting together. This conclusion could easily result in the case of a book that is known by the critic to have been formed from a group of unrealized short stories.

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[70] Ibid.

[71] William Foster, "Children and Folk," The New Republic, CXIII (December 14, 1945), 816.

[72] Orville Prescott, "Outstanding Novels," The Yale Review, XXXV (Winter, 1945), 384.

(as viewed in historical progression). Beside these forces of the incomprehensible and unyielding absolute, the struggles of man are magnificent only in the degree of his suffering. Human weakness, identified with ineffectuality, becomes the absolute evil, and divine power the absolute good. Divine justice is synonymous with goodness--questioned but not altered. The fact of evil affords dramatic possibilities that range from intellectual cruelty and viciousness to physical violence, but beside the fact of good these powers are ultimately frustrated and the mortal role remains ineffectual, in the name of cosmic justice. This is an aesthetic irony, for evil, whether conceived as weakness or malignity, has the appeal of familiarity on a human plane--a familiarity that is not comparably conceivable in terms of divine goodness. Witness Milton's Satan and Goethe's Mephistopholes, as classic examples. When Joseph Warren Beach discusses Dostoevski in The Twentieth Century Novel, he notes the charater of Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov as being an exceptional example of masterful creation: "He [Dostoevski] has accomplished that well-nigh impossible feat of making goodness as real and as interesting as evil."[73] [My italics.]

In The Friendly Persuasion Jessamyn West dishonors evil simply by ignoring it. In her creation of a plausible utopia, based upon a philosophy assuming the perfectability

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[73] Beach, op. cit., p. 101.

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In The Friendly Persuasion Jessamyn West dramatizes evil simply by ignoring it. In her creation of a Quaker utopia, based upon a philosophy assuming the perfectability

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[73] Hesse, op. cit., p. 103.

of man and an undoubted hope of heaven, Miss West has ignored the probable, which is all in reasonable "suspension of disbelief" she asks the reader to do. The improbability of Miss West's creation makes it, in a sense, a romance--or as stated above by Mr. Rothman, "nostalgic, primitive, like a dream of vanished innocence."

Another limitation which literary convention puts upon the evaluation of the book is that its main mood is that of humor. Humor like "good" wins lasting honors with difficulty in the literature of our time, which may account for the comparatively few humorous stories one sees published in the better magazines. Critics are ready to applaud that which is humorous and heartwarming, but they do not apparently <u>believe</u> in it strongly enough to elevate literature in the humorous vein to the same status as that held by literature of sober intention and serious presentation.

These two limitations--if realistically acceptable--constitute a fault that I feel is real enough. What the book lacks is depth--a depth that can be perceived as in a sculptured object. What is lacking is enough shadow to embolden the brightness, and enough pain to accent the pleasures Miss West so happily depicts. We are obliged, ultimately, to judge the book as being a novel rich with humor, artfully styled and excellently written, and with a philosophic intention that is discernible but not, after all, compelling. It

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appears that the same factors that have tended to weaken the social effectiveness of Quakerism as a religious movement are the ones that are weakening to the final effectiveness of The Friendly Persuasion as a novel.

CHAPTER III

SOME SELECTED SHORT STORIES

Jessamyn West has written so many short stories that to review them all would exceed the scope of this study. There would be little profit in such an extensive coverage besides, since many of the stories are slight in concept, however well written, and yield at first reading as much as they contain. She has written some exceptionally good stories, however, in which underlying symbols and multiple meanings are discoverable when the stories are closely analyzed. Although there are many stories that would gain an added dimension by such an examination, I have narrowed my selection to a few which represent in my judgment the best examples of this kind. I have chosen stories as widely different from each other as possible to show a sense of variety, and to represent other stories that fall in similar category as to type, style, theme, or method of handling.

Miss West's stories do not group easily. "The Sump Hole," for example, is told in the same mildly humorous style as the other stories in the Cress Delahanty group, all of which concern the simple adventures of an adolescent girl. But the meanings implicit in the morbid adventure Cress and the reader experience in this story set it apart from the others in the group. A degree of satire may be

expected in almost any story that Miss West writes, but it is impossible to name any single story as being wholly satiric. One story--"The Mysteries of Life in an Orderly Manner" (The New Yorker, March 27, 1948), which satirizes in amused toleration the foibles and affectations of the small-town club woman--is a suitable example of Miss West's satirical writing, but its satire merely prickles; it neither probes nor pierces. There are stories in which the humorous content so overweighs any other apparent intention that they might properly be labeled humor stories. Other intentions are discoverable, though, and it is seen that humor is a component rather than the whole. This was the case with the stories in The Friendly Persuasion, where the humorous style and presentation was not the single value upon which the stories were meant to stand alone. Miss West never writes in terms of real tragedy, and rarely occupies herself with any phase of sadness. When she deals with the concept of evil, she pictures it as a psychological abnormality. I can think of no story were malice, simple and concrete, is developed to any extent, although in her novel The Witch Diggers it is explored to good effect. The stories I have selected could most properly be termed as "psychological stories," but this does not typify them absolutely since in all of Miss West's writing her psychological insights into human behavior control the action, explain it, and give it its color. It

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is as well, then, to discard any plan for arranging the stories by type. Each story may be studied separately and all its facets examined, without the handicap of categorization. Labels, as Miss West will testify, tend to limit more than they clarify.

My introduction to the writing of Jessamyn West came in the fall of 1944 when I read her story "Tom Wolfe's My Name" in the galley proofs of the New Mexico Quarterly Review. The back files of correspondence between Miss West and the editor show that neither she nor Mr. Wynn was altogether sure about the ending of the story. In an undated letter written at the time the story was submitted, she asks:

> Do you think it would be better--less mechanical, perhaps, if the guy didn't die? I can't stop being interested in that situation, though. There's a man here who thinks he's Thornton Wilder when he isn't busy being a seemingly level-headed farmer. What does he do when Wilder dies?[1]

Mr. Wynn's answer is missing from the files, but there had apparently been some doubt on his part, too, as to whether the "guy" should die or not, for Miss West writes again later to inquire if the story is being published, and when the editor explains that the manuscript is already in type, she replied.

> It was only that I remembered your saying when you accepted the story that you didn't care much for the ending: the sudden death, and that meantime I had thought of a deathless ending.

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[1] Jessamyn West, from a letter to Dudley Wynn, undated.

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> And I thought, too, that perhaps the story's non-appearance was occasioned by your increasing belief that the ending was not right.
>
> If, however, you can use it as it is, I'm content with it. I enjoyed killing pseudo-Tom when I wrote the story and first thoughts are sometimes as good as second ones.[2]

"Tom Wolfe's My Name" is unlike any other story Miss West has written. In some respects it resembles stories she has written more recently, but it is, of course, one of the earlier ones--published at about the time the Quaker stories were appearing so widely in various magazines. The story is a parody upon the near-fanatic enthusiasm for Thomas Wolfe that swept reading America during the late thirties and early forties. Although I have called it a parody, it is not altogether that. There is some hint of satire, but not of a sharp, cutting kind. Both parody and satire appear as incidental accessories to the telling of a highly fanciful story.

The narrator is a salesman of school textbooks, a fast-dyed realist who encounters on one of his trips to the small town of Burley, California, a grape grower by the name of Tom Sterling. Over some drinks at the local bar, Madden discovers that Sterling is a little "touched." He doesn't talk like an ordinary California farmer. He doesn't in fact, talk like anybody Madden has ever heard before. When Madden asks him his line of business, Sterling replies:

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[2] Jessamyn West, from a letter to Dudley Wynn, September 21, 1944.

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[2] January West, from a letter to Dudley Wynn, September
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> 'I own a vineyard. The very grapes that went into this glass . . . may have grown on my land. Beneath my soil, their million fingered roots, into my sunshine their million fingered tendrils.'[3]

Madden's reaction is what one would expect of a person of his forthright, nonpoetic nature:

> That kind of talk before a guy's got his drink down him--after even--well, it makes you sit up and shake your ears. And this Sterling was enough to make you sit up, even without any of this 'million-footed, million-fingered' stuff. What made you notice him first was his hair. I guess it was lemon-colored hair,--kind of a mixture of yellow, and silver and green. And instead of looking fine and kind of brittle the way most blond hair does, it looked soft like fur. It was smoothed down on top, not a ripple, but around his neck, where it was too long, either because he liked it that way, or hadn't bothered to have it cut, it went into curls.
> But what really got you were his eyes. If they were any color they were air-colored--or maybe water-colored, or ice-colored. Anyway, they were transparent and they were bottomless.[4]

Sterling asks Madden if he has ever met any of the big authors in his connections with the book business. Madden considers this a sane enough question--"the usual questions I get from people who hear I sell books--and don't know authors are the same tissue of artificial dentures, overdrafts and unrequited love as the rest of us."[5]

When Madden asks Sterling politely in turn if the rain is harming his grapes, Sterling's answer is as unsettling as

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[3] Jessamyn West, "Tom Wolfe's My Name," The New Mexico Quarterly Review, XXIV (Summer, 1944), 155.

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> 'No, no. . . . It feeds them. At night I hear not only the rain falling, with a sound of bells in the darkness, but I hear the thirsty vine roots drinking. I lie awake these spring nights and hear the sounds their throats make swallowing--and no other sound, unless perhaps far off in the Napa Valley the clank of great wheels pounding on a rail, and a long whistle like a cry of sorrow across the hills, cutting the night air.
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> 'No, there's more to be heard than that. If you listen long enough on a wet night you can hear the feet of the rain on the surface of the little creeks: the Napa, the Feather, the Yolo, the Rio Hondo. And you can hear the voices of the little creeks deepen as they lose themselves in the mighty plunge and welter of the Sacramento, the San Joaquin. In the night time, while we sleep, immortal rivers flow by us to the sea.'[6]

Sterling apologizes, then, for quoting himself, and explains to the book salesman that his name is really Thomas Wolfe--that the pictures one sees of the big, black burly Tom Wolfe are just a part of a publicity stunt, something Sterling's publishers have thought up to match the vigor of his writing with a public personality that would seem to readers more authentic than the real one. "And you do feel, don't you," he urged, "that the face I chose does represent my writing? That it has a dark October quality?"[7]

"Yes [Madden answers], particularly around the mouth."[8]

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Madden tries to trip him up, but Sterling has an answer for every point. He explains that he spends a part of each year in California growing grapes so he will be close to the people, the land, and growing things, and the rest of the time elsewhere writing. Madden decides the man is quite insane and chooses to humor him in his fancies. When later he inquires about him of one of his customers, the Burley school principal, he learns that Sterling has lived in Napa all his life, and that his people before him farmed the same land. It was only after Wolfe's first novel was published that Sterling began deluding himself that he was Wolfe. His role of self-importance had increased with the growth of Wolfe's reputation.

The book salesman is intrigued by the story and decides to pay Sterling a visit at his farm in Napa, as Sterling had invited him to do. He discovers that Sterling is living in a farmhouse that is a clutter of dirty shirts, frying pans, and empty milk bottles--and enormous ledgers filled with pages and pages of sprawling longhand: the hand-penned manuscripts of all Wolfe's novels. It is Madden's reflection that,

> He was sure going to a lot of trouble to be what he dreamed about. He must have spent half his nights after he was through working on his grapes copying Tom Wolfe in those big ledgers. He was kind of like a religious I figured. A real religious. Not one of these dames who go to prayer meeting and sing, 'I want to be like Jesus,' and let the matter drop there--this Sterling set right out to be the man he wanted to be like. I

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> was ready to hand it to him for doing what he was and handling it the way he was--never letting himself be cornered.[9]

That fall when Madden is in California peddling his books again, he notices in the newspaper on September 16 that Thomas Wolfe has died. Immediately he thinks of Sterling. Glad for this chance to show Sterling up for a phony, and wondering how he will explain himself out of the predicament, Madden jumps in his car and drives up to Sterling's ranch about twenty miles away. He finds the room as before--and Sterling lying on the couch stone dead. "On the floor by the couch . . . was one of the big ledgers--face down, and on top of it Wolfe's "The Story of a Novel," and a fountain pen. It looked like the fellow had been copying the stuff when he died."[10]

The coroner pronounced Sterling's death to be from "natural causes." As Madden said, "Maybe this was a case to remember, not explain."[11]

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California is known to have legion. That could explain the quality of emptiness and transparency in Sterling's eyes. It may be that the story is meant to reveal the personage of Madden and not Sterling at all--to show how the average American intelligence exerts itself to be duped, and reveres the master dupe as one might a saint (a "religious," as Madden said). And again, she may not mean any of these things; perhaps all she intended was to tell a charming tale, dryly humorous, mildly suspenseful, and finally shocking in its unlooked-for irony. The reader, like Madden, and perhaps like Miss West herself, grows to respect Sterling's tenacious idealism, however warped it may be. The answer, I suppose, must rest somewhere in Miss West's unrevealed point of view concerning that odd individual out in California who imagines himself to be Thornton Wilder: In the eyes of Miss West, is such a person ridiculous, theoretically a fraud and therefore a menace? I doubt it. Perhaps the answer lies in the alternate ending she proposed, where the "guy" didn't die at all. Whether he was disposed of in a kindly or an unkindly manner would be interesting to know.

From the standpoint of typicality, the stories in the Cress Delahanty group, dealing with the experiences of an early-teen-age girl, represent a large proportion of Jessamyn West's fiction. The "Cress" stories, all five of which are published in the New Yorker, are with a single exception

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From the standpoint of typicality, the stories in the Green Delaney group, dealing with the experiences of an early-teen-age girl, represent a large proportion of Jessamyn West's fiction. The "Green" stories, all five of which are published in the New Yorker, are with a single exception

"The Sump Hole," only of ordinary merit. They deal with the imaginative and somewhat aggressive girl in early adolescence who crops up uncommonly often in so much of Miss West's writing. She may be Minta (although younger) in Miss West's first published story "The Child's Day"; Mattie or Jane in The Friendly Persuasion; or precocious eleven-year-old Em in The Witch Diggers. This character, with only slight personality variations, appears and reappears in numerous stories published over the years in The American Magazine, Collier's, The Ladies Home Journal, Woman's Home Companion, and other "slick" magazines. We find her as the little sister in an early story, "Reverdy," published in the New Mexico Quarterly Review (Spring, 1943), and the big sister in a later one, "The Ouija Board," published in the Yale Review (Winter, 1950). Wherever Cress (or any of her fictional sisters) appears, there is a good chance that she will steal the show. She is real and vital and courageous; she is given to self-dramatics; and she is capable of being at times the completely odious brat. The remarkable thing about her is the way she reflects the manners and mores of her elders. Her acts of selfishness and pride, her reverence for propriety and convention, her gushes of generosity, and her seizures of pettiness--all patterns in miniature of average adult behavior--show the human creature for what it largely is: an adaptable, imitative animal struggling with the problems of survival, social approval, self-expression and most

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of all the desire to be an individual.

Since a child's reason is not supported by historical documentation of right and wrong, of reality and appearances, as in some degree any grown person's is, its actions and judgments often result in a chaos of blunderings and embarrassments. This is a rich field for dramatic inquiry, and Miss West seemingly never tires of it. She is able to relate adolescent experiences without condescension. She does not rob these child characters of the right to their normal proportions. She treats them with interest and understanding, without application of the authority of adult judgment.

"The Sump Hole" appeared in the New Yorker in December of 1946. The other stories in the Cress Delahanty group were not published until 1948. If Miss West intended to work these stories into a novel, as with the Quaker series, the unevenness in quality between the first one and those that followed (and this does not except "Mr. Powers," despite some of its superior qualities) would make such a plan unadvisable.

"The Sump Hole" carries the strongest impact and is the most lasting in its effect of any story Miss West has written. Its symbolic content is so tantalizing that I hesitate to declare the story a moral or religious allegory, although in its larger outlines it may appear to be so. There are layers of darkness that I can find no pure allegorical meaning to explain. The story outline is simple, and the symbols sustain the narrative rather than decorate

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it. This is the story:

Cress is a thirteen-year-old high school girl. She lives with her parents on a citrus farm at the edge of a small California oil town. She announces to her parents that she has been invited to spend the night with a schoolmate named Ina, whose mother is dead and who keeps house for her oil-worker father. They are poor and live in one of the oil workers shacks on the hill at the opposite edge of the town where both of the girls attend high school. Mr. and Mrs. Delahanty ask Cress some questions about Ina, whom they have never met, but they offer no objections to the visit. Cress, who is something of a snob, is aware that she is in a sense "slumming" (and confesses so to some of her in-group girl friends), but her curiosity to visit Ina's home and to see how the oil workers live has fired her imagination, and she prepares for the overnight visit as if for an especially important event.

On Friday after school the two girls take the bus that goes up to Kettle Hill. Jessamyn West is never better in her descriptive art than when she describes her own California landscape. The pure poetry with which she dresses this typical oil district shows her descriptive writing at its best. I shall quote at length, because the story up to now has been light and sunny, showing the protective atmosphere in which Cress normally dwells. As the bus climbs Kettle Hill an ominous sense of darkening begins to pervade

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the mood of the story, and as the sun sinks the reader feels himself lost, as Cress is lost, in an aura of superstitious blackness.

> . . . Though the settlement was on a hillside, Cress always thought of it as being in a dark pocket. It was dark there, not only because the earth was oil-soaked and pocked with sump holes that shone like greasy bruises in the gray dust, but because the oil people, wishing for something green amid the barren forests of their derricks, had planted, years ago, pepper trees along their streets. Now that the trees were old, their foliage sprayed outward in dense, smothering cascades, setting the oil workers' homes in gloomy caverns of shade. And it was dark there because the hill blotted the sun out early; while children in the valley below still played in the slanting light of the afternoon, the houses of the oil workers would already be deep in evening shadows.[12]

In the next paragraph, we see the itchy fascination this spectacle holds for Cress, for of course it is the lure of the dark unknown, and no fondness for Ina, that has caused her so eagerly to accept Ina's invitation of the visit.

> The sun, going down behind Kettle Hill derrick, sometimes seemed to Cress, watching from her own back steps in the valley, to set it ablaze for a second. She had often seen real flames there when a gusher, coming in with force, blew its casing head and caught on fire. Then until the flames were quenched, Kettle Hill would look like a fiery torch held up toward the night sky, and gas pockets, exploding, would rattle valley windows with a doomsday sound. And even when all was going quietly on Kettle Hill, it was not really quiet there. Day and night the throb and stomp of its engines, the sullen, hollow suck of its pumps filled the air. The sound was so constant that days went by when Cress did not hear it at all; then suddenly, in the dead of night, she would be awakened by it, sit bolt upright, and ask herself, 'What is that terrible sound?'[13]

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[12] Jessamyn West, "The Sump Hole," The New Yorker, XXII (December 14, 1946), 39.

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With the danger of getting ahead with one possible interpretation of the story--and perhaps overreaching my thesis--I risk pointing out that the imagery in the above passages are suggestive of purgatory and of hell. The age-old pepper trees as symbols of hope and futurity denote life amidst desolation. The fire figures, the "doomsday sound," and such words as "constant," are more directly suggestive. There is a feeling of never-ending eternity in the description of the engines that never stop going day or night. Cress is terrified by the phenomena; it disturbs her dreams--a terror is created that she has not yet realized on a conscious level.

As Cress draws closer to the scene, though, her terror gives way to mere excitement. As she remarks to Ina, "I think it's romantic."[14]

> In a way, a peculiar way, it really was. The fading sunlight came through the chinks in the pepper trees and fluttered about upon the hard-packed earth like a covey of yellow evening birds. The houses, though small, and almost all alike, because they were company-owned, were neat and whitewashed.. Their porches were filled with large potted plants growing in cheerful Hills Brothers coffee cans, or with smaller potted plants in green Del Monte peach cans. In some of the houses, the shades were drawn, for here people worked on shifts and one man's night might be his neighbor's day. A picket fence, also whitewashed, ran the length of the street, and each man had a private gate to his yard, weighted in such a manner with old springs and defunct batteries that it swung shut of itself and he need never give a thought to its closing. From under the pepper trees, the derricks were out of sight. It was only the smell of the oil--which was

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With the danger of getting ahead with one possible interpretation of the story--and perhaps overemphasizing theme--I risk pointing out that the imagery in the novel passages are suggestive of purgatory and of hell. The age-old pepper trees as symbols of hope and fairly genuine life amidst desolation. The fire figures, the "doomsday sound," and such words as "constant," are more directly suggestive. There is a feeling of never-ending eternity in the description of the engines that never stop going day or night. Grace is terrified by the phenomena; it disturbs her deeply--a terror is stated that she has not yet realized on a conscious level.

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In a way, a peculiar way, it really was. The feeling sunlight came through the cracks in the pepper trees and flickered about upon the hard-packed earth like a cover of yellow swaying lilies. The houses, though small, and almost all alike, because they were company-owned, were neat and buttoned. Their porches were filled with large motion plants growing in empty milk Brothers coffee cans, or with smaller potted plants in green Del Monte bean cans. In some of the houses, the shades were drawn, for here people worked on shifts and one man's midnight be his neighbor's day. A picket fence, also whitewashed, ran the length of the street, and each man had a plot given to his yard, weighted in such a manner with old grease and defunct batteries that it sprang out of their sand he need never give a thought to its cleaning. From under the pepper trees, the derricks were out of sight. It was only the smell of the oil--which was

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[14] Ibid., 41.

> taste as much as smell--the sight of an occasional sump hole at the end of a side street, and the sound of the pumps that reminded Cress where she was. The sound of the pumps filled the air, deep rhythmical, as if the hills themselves breathed; or as if deep in the wells some kind of heart shook the earth with so strong a beat that Cress could feel it in the soles of her feet as she walked along. . . . When she put out her hand to touch the palings of the fence, the sound was there, too. In the dead wood were tremblings which seemed almost alive and which kept time with the deep, solemn beat of the pumps. This trembling, this sound that she felt in the soles of her feet and the palm of her hand, excited Cress.[15]

The dark forebodings that had intuitively warned Cress, and beckoned her at the same time, begin to disappear. The reality of homely and familiar objects reassures her. She feels herself one with the dark, primitive sounds and throbbings of the surrounding atmosphere. No longer forewarned, she is unprotected from the shock that is shortly to follow.

She and Ina enter Ina's home, and while Ina prepares a simple supper Cress makes herself at home. As soon as Mr. Wallenius, Ina's father, comes home from work, they are ready to eat. Mr. Wallenius is described as being of middle age, large as well as tall, and having the same yellowish white hair as Ina. His manner is cordial and altogether commonplace.

At the supper table, before the meal is served, Mr. Wallenius brings out a Bible, opens it to a particular chapter and asks Cress to read. What she reads is a little shocking--words that she finds difficulty in speaking aloud without blushing. Ina's father asks her if she understands the meaning

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of what she has read, and Cress denies understanding in the fear that she may be asked to explain. "Ah, so," said Mr. Wallenius. "An old-fashioned home, I expect. Your friend, Ina, has been long instructed."[16]

It is tantalizing that Miss West offers no clue here to the exact content of the scriptural reading. At this point she breaks off to talk about the time of day, of Cress's feeling that the time is somehow wrong as she thinks of her own parents at home and what they would be doing at this particular hour of the day. For the question rises: Just <u>how</u> long has Ina been instructed--and in <u>what</u> exactly?

Before this question has subsided, Ina's father asks Cress suddenly if she has ever been kissed. This makes Cress feel very foolish, and when she answers no, Mr. Wallenius remarks that she's big enough to be kissed. To escape this distressing turn of the conversation, Cress offers to help Ina with the dishes. Mr. Wallenius says that Ina must do them alone. "Washing them alone is a little punishment I planned for Ina. A little reminder. Isn't that true, Ina?"[17]

This forcing of embarrassment upon Ina in the presence of her friend is the first real indication we are given that Mr. Wallenius is a sadist. This explains the motives, but not the implications, of his asking Cress to read the forbidden

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Cress is frightened when Mr. Wallenius asks her to go for a walk, but she cannot politely escape. As they leave the house he picks up a big stick, explaining to Cress that they may come across a snake on their walk. He says: "I enjoy killing those fellows."[18] Cress is relieved that the walk has some purpose--"not just wandering about in the dusk with an almost total stranger."[19]

Mr. Wallenius is not content to risk his chances on coming across a snake. He beats the dusty shrubbery as they walk down the road in the gathering darkness. He even goes ahead of Cress to beat the bushes that grow at the edge of a small sump hole near by.

> Sump holes always made Cress uneasy, whether they were large ponds or only small, ragged pools like this one. It seemed unnatural to find a pool of oil instead of water in the ground. This one was stranger than most, because, lying at the foot of a little arroyo down which there was a trickle of water in the winter months, it had stunted willows and elders, dusty castor-bean and tobacco-plant shrubs about it, like a real pond of water. Several birds, having seen the light reflected

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> in it and mistaken it for water and dipping too low, had died there. Dragonflies and moths had darted down to drink and never risen again. It was a very strange place, yet peaceful--no sounds except the pumps, the dry, placid singing of insects in the faded grass, and Mr. Wallenius's quiet poking about in the elder clump. It was half pleasant, half frightening, standing there--frightening to think that if she were as easily fooled as a bird or a dragonfly, she, too, could plunge in and not come out; pleasant to think that *though she stood on the edge of danger, she was safe because she saw it*. [My italics.]

The part I have italicized in the above quotation is surely the theme of the story, whatever its symbolic directions may be. Because of the upsetting experience at the supper table, Cress is now on guard. The brief time that she had relaxed in the presence of harmless appearances, disarmed herself of her intuitive defenses, is past. She is aware of danger, though she does not know what the danger is. The danger signals are, of course, expressed in symbols appearing all the way through the story. Some of the symbols are those of mood, as I have already shown. Others, such as Cress's uneasiness about the peculiarity of the time (comparing the darkness of Kettle Hill at supper time to that of the brightness in the valley below), the unnaturalness of the pool that contains oil instead of water, and the trembling of the earth as if some great heart were beating beneath its surface, are all figures tokening some primitive, savage disorder.

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[20] Ibid., 44.

thick, murky oil of the sump hole. The snake twists around the stick and tries to crawl out. He plunges it down again and again, saying as if in a ritual chant: "Sink--swim. Up--down; in--out."[21]

> Behind the blunt, striving, blinded head making its horrible effort to rise, yet falling back again, the snake's body moved with such energy that against anything with less resistance than oil it would have broken free. But the oil held like fingers. Along the whole of her body, Cress felt the terror and effort of that struggle--the oil in her own eyes, the taste of oil in her own mouth.[22]

Cress cries out to Mr. Wallenius to stop, but he appears not to hear her and continues his awful encantation.

> The snake's head lifted and fell, it kept time, it seemed, not only with the words Mr. Wallenius spoke but with the thud and suck of the pumps and with <u>the rhythmical pressure of Mr. Wallenius's fingers on Cress's hand, which she now realized he was holding</u>. [My italics.][23]

The suspicion has been from the first that the phallic symbols that populate the story so thickly from beginning to end point to a conclusion that the story is one concerned with sexual abnormality of a perverse nature. The symbols I have shown are the most glaring ones. There are numerous images that take on meaning only after the outcome of the story is known.

Cress, of course, does not realize the Freudian

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[21] <u>Ibid</u>.

[22] <u>Ibid</u>.

[23] <u>Ibid</u>.

thick, murky oil of the sewer hole. The snake twists around the stick and tries to crawl out. He plunges it down again and again, acting as if in a ritual chant: "Sink--rise. Up--down; in--out."[21]

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Dress cries out to Mr. Wallington to stop, but he appears not to hear her and continues his awful exorcism.

The snake's head lifted and fell. At last time, it seemed, not only with the words Mr. Wallington spoke but with the thud and suck of the pump and with the rhythmical pressure of Mr. Wallington's thumbs on Grace's throat, which she now realized he was holding, the idol-ice.[23]

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Grace, of course, does not realize the Freudian

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21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

significances of any of the action that has taken place, but her sense of danger is acute. She pulls away from Mr. Wallenius' grip and runs the long distance through the dark towards home. The calm and normality that greet here there in contrast with her recent experiences makes it all seem like a very bad dream.

On the basis of plot only, the story is told in symbols that clearly indicate a Freudian interpretation. If this were all the story is about, it would deserve to stand in high regard among other stories, such as Henry Jame's "The Turn of the Screw," which in the past quarter of a century has been so metamorphosed by the application of Freudian analysis that its original outlines, whatever they may have been, are obscured, if not obliterated, by a haze of multiple conjectures. Like that story, "The Sump Hole" suggests a multiplicity of meanings. The Freudian plot does not disturb the allegorical frame in which it is firmly contained. Nor is James's story diverted from its original horror, from whatever the horror may be interpreted as having derived. "The Turn of the Screw" has been analyzed in an article by Robert B. Heilman[24] with the purpose of constructing a religious allegory, discounting the earlier interpretations that pointed to a Freudian explication. A similar interpretation is possible in regard to "The Sump Hole." I mistrust

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[24] Robert B. Heilman, "'The Turn of the Screw' As Poem," The University of Kansas City Review, XIV (Summer, 1948), 433-445.

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[24] Robert B. Heilman, "'The Turn of the Screw' As Poem," The University of Kansas City Review, XIV (Summer, 1948), 253-263.

Mr. Heilman's tendency to point out correlations so patently that the label becomes more important than its function. To insist that the valley represents the Garden of Eden and Kettle Hill, as seen in its various aspects, purgatory or hell, is, I believe, tantamount to taking a free ride on a hobby horse. It is enough merely to point out that such an interpretation is not without precedence.

An allegorical interpretation holds quite as securely on familiar grounds of reality as when constructed of materials that are mythical importations from the Bible. The valley is, to be sure, a haven of innocence and safety, compared with the sinister hill from which danger beckons. Cress is one of those fortunate persons whose intuitive sense stands guard over her. As she observed when looking at the sump hole, she can stand on the edge of danger and yet be safe because she sees it. The evil which had attracted her to Kettle Hill is dangerous only if she fails to recognize it as evil. Cress is innocent, but not so innocent as Coleridge's Christabel, for example, who is damned by the sublimity of her innocence in not being able to recognize the appearances of evil. This problem might be further explored with profit. It is the theme upon which Henry James constructed a number of novels and short stories. (Miss West is a devotee of James, as I shall show when I talk about her story "Horace Chooney, M.D.") The problem, as I see it, has

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its basis in irony rather than ethics. There is a great difference in the nonrecognition of values and in that of knowledgeable recognition that permits a conscious choice. For this reason, a closely defined Biblical correlation such as that proposed by Mr. Heilman in regard to "The Turn of the Screw" approaches absurdity. The problem ethically stated is found in Isaiah: "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter."[25] The problem that Coleridge, James, and Jessamyn West are all concerned with is not one of moral choice but of discernment.

To develop the meanings suggested in "The Sump Hole" along the lines of religious allegory as fully as I have done with the sexual interpretation would mean following the narrative straight through again to point out the images that would support such interpretation. Mr. Wallenius would conceivably represent Satan, the agent of destruction. The snake would represent life (in a mortal rather than a metaphysical sense), and the sump hole--"a very strange place, yet peaceful"--death. Other interpretations might be considered. If, for instance, we should regard the story as a grim indictment of Puritanism, then Mr. Wallenius would represent God, and the snake a patent symbol of evil knowledge as we think of it in the scriptural sense. Or, if we should

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[25] Isaiah, 5:20.

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To develop the meanings suggested in "the swamp hole" along the lines of religious allegory as truly as I have done with the sexual interpretation would mean following the narrative straight through again to point out the images that would support such interpretation. Mr. Wallenius would conceivably represent Satan, the agent of destruction. The snake would represent life (in a mortal rather than a metaphysical sense), and the swamp hole--"a very strange place, yet peaceful"--death. Other interpretations might be considered. If, for instance, we should regard the story as a grim indictment of Puritanism, then Mr. Wallenius would represent God, and the snake a potent symbol of evil knowledge as we think of it in the scriptural sense. Or, if we should

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[25] Isaiah, 5:20.

place the story upon a purely psychological plane of interpretation, Mr. Wallenius might be the father image. Any of these interpretations are tenable, but none, I feel, compelling. The fact that these meanings are merely suggested in the story, and not developed to their fullest extent, heightens the interest and helps to sustain the suspense created by the narrative as would not have been the case if a purer allegorical formula were discoverable.

The 1947 volume of selected Best American Short Stories, edited by Martha Foley, did not include "The Sump Hole." Neither was it included in the O. Henry Prize Stories for 1947, edited by Herschel Brickell, although another of Miss West's stories, "Horace Chooney, M.D.," was reprinted in that volume. In an introductory note about the prize-winning authors "The Sump Hole" is commented upon in connection with the prize story. If my critical comments about Miss West's fiction appear more self-reliant than is proper to a study of this kind, and if I seem to discredit the importance of the various literary honors she has received, it is because I have not found a large amount of the criticism very illuminating nor the choices in the majority of cases judicious ones. The comments about "The Sump Hole" given by the editors of the O. Henry volume are an example:

> Miss West, whose writing from the beginning of her career has been notable for its variety, struck a new path in "Horace Chooney" and even more noticeably so in a New Yorker story called "The Sump Hole," which

> dealt with another psychopathic individual and which actually arouses the reader's sympathy for a moccasin victim of a sadist's brutality, no mean feat in itself, since moccasins are perhaps the least appealing of the snake family. It is not possible to deny Miss West's right to experiment with different types of stories as she chooses, but there was health in her early Quaker stories such as cannot be found in her recent handling of the morbid and abnormal.[26]

I cannot agree that "The Sump Hole" is ultimately lacking in health. Its fundamental objectives are the same as those in the Quaker stories. The approach is from a different direction. While The Friendly Persuasion has its dwelling in light and moves steadily in a single direction, "The Sump Hole" is an arrangement in chiaroscuro (an effect much needed in the novel to give it added depth) in which light triumphs over darkness. Above all that is morbid and perverse in the story, there is soundness and health as an objective.

Since I have already mentioned "Horace Chooney, M.D.," I will discuss it next. I do not consider it to be one of Miss West's most successful stories, although in its novelty it is one of the more interesting ones. My reason for choosing it for discussion is that Miss West has herself written an analysis of the story, tracing its formulation and development. No appraisal of her writing would be complete without inclusion of what she herself has had to say

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[26] Herschel Brickell, editor, The O. Henry Award Prize Stories of 1947 (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1947), Introduction xv.

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about it. She does this fully in her essay "The Story of a Story," which discusses her method and intention in the writing of "Horace Chooney, M.D."

Dr. Chooney is in some way evil. This is evident at the beginning of the story. The nature of his evil character or the degree of his potential treachery is not known, but what is shown of his thought processes informs the reader that he is no ordinary human being of normal motives and reciprocities.

Dr. Chooney and his wife, Harriet, are in hiding from some previous crime or atrocity in which he was apparently discovered before the opening of the story. The causes for their flight from the city, where he had formerly enjoyed a respectable practice, are not explained. All we know is that he is practicing now in an out-of-the-way country place under an assumed name.

Dr. Chooney is obviously frightened, but not so frightened as he is restless. The quiet of the country and the lack of challenge his present situation affords are, after six months, beginning to pall. Harriet's manner expresses fear and anxiety. She wants him to build up a practice again, and she is especially concerned that everything should <u>look</u> right.

> Dr. Chooney would have preferred to have been more aware of his wife. . . . He berated himself for his faded responsiveness. In their former life in the city, where they had been somewhat gregarious, Dr. Chooney

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Dr. Chooney would have preferred to have been more aware of his wife. . . . He berated himself for his faded responsiveness. In their former life in the city, where they had been somewhat gregarious, Dr. Chooney

> had heard it said occasionally that he stirred up Harriet as one might a placid, quiet animal simply to see it come to life. This was not so. He had never been interested in Harriet's impetuosity or lack of it. If he had stirred her up sometimes, it was only as a means of becoming aware of himself. . . . Was frost interested in the boulder it split? Or wind in the height of the wave it piled up? No, no. His friends had not studied, as he had, the natural forces and did not understand, as he did, that natural forces were interested in effects only as a means of knowing and testing themselves.[27]

On the morning the story opens, Dr. Chooney is visited by a patient--a Miss Flora Chester who lives in a neighboring village. Dr. Chooney receives her in the small office at the front of the house where he and Harriet live. Although it is ten o'clock, Dr. Chooney, a late riser, has not yet had his breakfast. He tells Harriet to bring coffee to the office for himself and Miss Chester.

His patient is unsure of her ailments. She questions whether she may be ill at all. She states her symptoms as being mainly lack of energy and enthusiasm, as she describes the dullness of her life at home with her aging parents. Dr. Chooney examines her in a way that the reader recognizes is not the ethical procedure of a medical practitioner. It is more in the technique of a hypnotist--or an enchanter. Miss Chester is obviously enchanted by the attention and interest she is receiving. Dr. Chooney tells her that she is quite ill of some serious glandular disorder of which he

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27 Jessamyn West, "Horace Chooney, M.D.," Mademoiselle, XXIX (February, 1947), 302.

had heard it said occasionally that he stirred up Hartlet as one might a placid, quiet animal simply to see it come to life. This was not so. He had never been interested in Hartlet's impulsiveness or lack of it. If he had stirred her up sometimes, it was only as a means of becoming aware of himself. . . . Was Frost interested in the breaker in motion or wind in the height of the wave it piled up? No, no. His friends had not studied, as he had, the natural forces and did not understand, as he did, that natural forces were interested in effects only as a means of knowing and testing themselves.[27]

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can cure her if she will cooperate. She is now afraid that she may die. Dr. Chooney, to reassure her, brings out some photographs of a former patient whom he explains was suffering from a more advanced case of the same kind of illness. Miss Chester is even more frightened when she sees the first picture, which looks, she says, as if the girl were dead. Then Dr. Chooney shows a second one picturing the girl reclining in a lawn chair, still somewhat frail, but looking lively and happy. In the next picture she is plump and healthy. Miss Chester is encouraged by such graphic evidence. Dr. Chooney gives her a prescription to have filled and tells her to come back the following Thursday.

Just after Miss Chester has left, Harriet enters the office with the coffee. When she sees the pictures in the order that they are now lying on the table--in the exact reverse order to that which they had been shown to Miss Chester--Harriet goes limp and drops the tray. The thick cream and scalding coffee pour over the pictures. Dr. Chooney sends Harriet off for a mop to clean up the mess, while he carefully blots the pictures with his handkerchief, but without changing them back to their earlier order.

> Looking at them, the well-being he had begun to feel . . . became more pronounced. He could feel quite clearly, along channels too delicate for reason to follow, forewarnings of a delicious reintegration. The tiger's outline had begun once more to assume--from his well-stored mind Dr. Chooney chose the poet's phrase--its fearful symmetry.[28]

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[28] Ibid., 307.

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[25] Ibid., 207.

This is all the story contains in the way of clues. There are hints of motivation--a ravenous ego that feeds upon its own prey, but no clue is given of the actual manner in which this appetite is served. Murder is suggested, perhaps by slow poisoning, but there are also suggestions of sexual criminality of some kind. Whatever it is that Dr. Chooney does to destroy his patients instead of healing them, the reader is not told. The story is written deliberately to baffle, and I do not feel that there has been sufficient character interest created to support the degree of bafflement that is demanded in a psychological horror story of this kind.

When Miss West discusses the story in an article written for The Pacific Spectator,[29] her remarks are mainly concentrated upon the way in which her fiction materials had been suggested to her: first, a run-down mansion on a country roadside, then a doctor to inhabit it, then the neurotic woman patient, etc. The detail concerned with the showing of the pictures was suggested by an experience told to her by her housekeeper, to which Miss West added the morbid implications. These are the properties of place, personnel, and action. Next comes the assignment of roles;

> About the fragment now known as Chooney my imagination began quickly to work. He was an evil man. Why? . . .

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> For one thing the house demanded it. For another, I perhaps demanded it--a part of my personality felt neglected perhaps in the series of stories about good Quakers with which I had been busy. But most important of all Flora Chester . . . demanded that Chooney be evil. She had that particular scent, the scent of the victim, which will unfailingly seek out and draw to it the predatory; will even stir up the predatory in the constitutionally benign. (Chooney however needed no stirring up.)
>
> . . . The seeds of Dr. Chooney's evil (whatever it was) lay in his desire to excite, to even inflame, his own awareness of himself. And this it appeared, and appears to me, to be in itself a considerable evil; certainly contrary to everything taught by the Christian ethic.[30]

As for revealing the actual nature of Dr. Chooney's crime, and his manner of performing it, Miss West affects the Jamesian ruse: "make the reader think the evil, make him think it for himself."[31] Her frequent references quoted from Henry James's The Art of the Novel,[32] in which he describes his methods and intentions when writing "The Turn of the Screw," show that much of the planning technique employed in her writing of "Horace Chooney, M.D.," is imitative of James. She has at least borrowed James's tricks and disguises, and also his enigmatic pose in her discussion of them. It is unlike any other story she has written. It is more tightly constructed, more evenly disciplined, and very consciously elliptical.

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[30] Ibid., 270.

[31] Ibid., quoted, 271.

[32] Henry James, The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1947), pp. 159-179.

"Horace Chooney, M.D." is not a story that moves the reader emotionally. It plays to the intellect rather than to the senses or to the heart. In this respect, Miss West has neglected to follow James's formula. Although there is some question of James's success in working with the formula, as he gave it, and some doubt that he even followed it, or intended to, he at least instructs his readers where their sympathies should lie: with the "hapless children."[33] Miss West's story does not work upon the emotions, nor, as I feel, satisfy the intellect. There is not sufficient challenge in the pondering of riddles merely; the intelligence is entitled to some minimum clues for the solution of them. There is the argument, of course, that Miss West did not set out to write a detective story. Yet she challenges the reader to assume the role of the absent detective. The role is limited, however, only to the discovering of the very obvious fact of Dr. Chooney's maniacal nature--and, to refer to James once more, the discovery of the extent of the reader's own "general vision of evil."[34] Since it is known from the beginning that the doctor is wickedly self-centered, cruel and evil, what remains to be discovered is the direction this evilness takes. No clues are provided for this discovery, and none were intended. The climax of the story

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[33] Ibid., p. 176.

[34] Ibid.

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[33] Ibid., p. 176.

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comes, Miss West tells us, when the pictures are shown.

> This moment, the moment Chooney shows the pictures to Miss Chester, should, I believe, be the emotional high point of the story; the moment when Chooney consciously duplicating by his own planning the ironic character of life itself gives his intended victim a prevue of her own destruction which she mistakenly reads as the guaranty of her salvation. At that moment Chooney permits the bull's horn to pass very close to his body. It is the moment of his triumph. At that moment he is "real to himself," and all that follows will be in a sense anti-climactic. The story fails at this point if some of this is not apparent to the reader--it fails, also, if all of it is apparent to him.[35]

I do not feel that the story falls short for either of the reasons Miss West mentions, but because its "emotional high point" has not been built up to sufficiently to come off as an emotional experience. Whatever is shown of the "ironic character of life itself" is not felt with strong impact or conviction, if, indeed, it is shown at all. Dr. Chooney's motivations are apparent and are even explained, but we see them as a result of his evil character without knowledge of the cause. What is needed is a provision of interest in his psychical condition for its own sake, and for the sake of those who have been and are being victimized by it. Given our knowledge of modern psychology, it is not enough merely to observe a devil perform his assigned role of the archetype villain. As I said earlier in this chapter, Miss West treats evil purely as an abnormality. This may be

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[35] Jessamyn West, "The Story of a Story, op. cit., 270-271.

course, Miss West tells us, when his pictures are shown.

This moment, the moment Chooney shows the pictures to Miss Dworter, should, I believe, be the emotional high point of the story; the moment when Chooney personally duplicating by his own planning the iconic character of life itself gives his intended victim a proof of her own destruction which she mistakenly reads as the guarantee of her salvation. At this moment Chooney permits the built's horn to press very close to his body. It is the moment of his triumph. At that moment he is "real to himself," and all that follows will be in a sense anticlimactic. The story fails at this point if some of this is not apparent to the reader--it fails, also, if all of it is apparent to him.[35]

I do not feel that the story fails short for either of the reasons Miss West mentions, but because its "emotional high point" has not been built up to sufficiently to come off as an emotional experience. Whatever is shown of the "ironic character of life itself" is not felt with strong impact or convolution, if, indeed, it is shown at all. Dr. Chooney's motivations are apparent and are even explained, but we see them as a result of his evil character without knowledge of the cause. What is needed is a provision of interest in his psychical condition for its own sake, and for the sake of those who have been and are being victimized by it. Given our knowledge of modern psychology, it is not enough merely to observe a devil perform his assigned role of the archetype villain. As I said earlier in this chapter, Miss West treats evil purely as an abnormality. This may be

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[35] Jessamyn West, "The Story of a Story," op. cit., 270-271.

the reason why although Dr. Chooney's action causes him to become "real to himself," he is never quite real to the reader.

In spite of what I have said in criticism of the story, it does have a compelling quality. It has not the scope or the depth of "Th Sump Hole," but it has something that "The Sump Hole" does not have: absolute integration. Miss West holds the reader's interest on exactly the cold mental plane that she has chosen for achieving her effects, and she has done this surprisingly well considering that it is a quite different technique she is experimenting with here. Although I do not feel that it is a technique that comes natural to her talent, it is a commendable indication of growth for a writer to discipline himself occasionally in techniques that are not entirely unstrained. The raw seams of effort--of striving for effects--are apparent in this story as was not the case in even the earliest stories that Miss West published. While this may diminish the value of the story, it does not detract from the interest one feels in the author's potentialities but rather heightens it.

"Another Word Entirely" is yet another story that is different from those Miss West most often writes. But it does not have the kind of difference that set "The Sump Hole" and "Horace Chooney, M.D.," apart. It, too, is a probing psychological story, but it is based upon normal human

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psychology and strong moral values.

Two sisters, Margaret and Cathy, enter the St. Mark Hotel in San Francisco and apply at the desk for the double room that has been reserved for them. The desk clerk sizes them up as college girls by their appearance, and he is able to guess the reason for their visit because he has seen the car they arrived in. He knows the chauffeur and the nature of business the car is engaged in. "After the girls had gone inside he said to the chauffeur, 'How's business these days?' but the chauffeur didn't feel jovial. 'It's not a business, it's a racket,' he said."[36]

The story now flashes back to a time shortly previous to pick up its narrative thread. The girls have implored their father to allow them to leave the dormitory for a few days so that they may study for their final examinations. What they need is to be completely away from all social interruptions, and a hotel room seems the only answer. They have a friend, Kurt Leitner, whose full role in the story is not clear, who takes care of all the arrangements.

The girls pack their suitcases with books they will be needing for their review and also the little that they will need in the way of clothing. Margaret is the larger, stronger-looking of the sisters. It is she who assumes the practical role. Cathy is nervous and remote about all that

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[36] Jessamyn West, "Another Word Entirely," The New Mexico Quarterly Review, XVII (Spring, 1947), 63.

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is taking place. Margaret notices that when Cathy begins dressing for the trip she is wearing a soiled, out-at-elbows suit that she never wears except for rough hikes in the mountains. As they are leaving, Cathy asks Margaret to wear her rings. It will look more "responsible" she thinks if one of them is married--but until it's all over with Cathy can't bear to wear her engagement and wedding rings herself. Margaret puts on the rings. She understands what Cathy is feeling:

> . . . She doesn't want to look rich, she doesn't want to look married, she doesn't want to look pretty; she doesn't want, really, to look like herself for a day or two, she decided. Afterwards she would like it to be as if this had happened to someone else.[37]

The need to study for their examinations was not altogether a false excuse. The period of anxiety they have just been through allowed no opportunity for studying. Once they are in their room at the St. Mark, Margaret opens the bags, gets out the books, and they begin to review. Cathy, who still feels weak, and a little shaky from the sulfa tablets she is taking, lies on the bed with pillows behind her, while Maragret begins leading off on their review for the literature examination.

> They began with the questions they had been collecting all year. . . .
> And all the questions moved in one direction and all the answers said the same thing. It's as if the whole of literature, Margaret thought, had been written simply

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[37] Ibid., 66.

is taking place. Margaret notices that when Betty begins dressing for the trip she is wearing a frilled, out-of-date suit that she never wears except for rough hikes in the mountains. As they are leaving, Betty asks Margaret to wear her ring. It will look more "responsible" she thinks if one of them is married--but until it's all over with Betty can't bear to wear her engagement and wedding rings herself. Margaret puts on the rings. She understands what Betty is feeling:

> . . . She doesn't want to look plain, she doesn't want to look married, she doesn't want to look grave; she doesn't want, really, to look like herself for a day or two, she decided. Alternatives she would like to be as if this had happened to someone else.[37]

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[37] Ibid., 66.

> to punctuate this day, this afternoon, this hour. As if no poet had ever spoken of anythihg but birth--or death; of fidelity or infidelity, of love given or love betrayed, of absence or reunion. Where are the safe ones, the bucolic, the sweet, the simple, the melodious? The empty singers of an empty day. . . .
>
> It was as if some kind of spell had been put upon them; as if they were condemned to say whatever word would speak most painfully to Cathy.[38]

Cathy protests that she can't stand it any more. Her sister thinks that the pain has suddenly become worse. "Margaret, remembering what she has heard of . . . was it embolism . . . dropped her own books to the floor and ran to Cathy's side."[39]

I have tried in my summarizing of the story to give an impression of the vagueness of the original. It is not until the word "embolism" appears that the certainty comes as to what really has taken place in the story. The word has two distinct dictionary meanings. The first, as given by Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary: "Intercalation; the insertion of days, months, or years, in an account of time, for regularity." (This applies, of course, to the designing of the calendar year, such as the insertion of an extra day into February each fourth year.) The second meaning is a medical one, and, naturally, the meaning that Margaret has reference to: "The lodgment of an embolus in a tube or canal too small to permit its passage."

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[38] Ibid., 68.

[39] Ibid., 69.

to punctuate this day, this afternoon, this hour. As if no poet had ever spoken of anything but birth--or death; of fidelity or infidelity, of love given or love betrayed, of absence or reunion. Where are the gentle ones, the bucolic, the sweet, the simple, the melodious? The empty aisles of an empty day. . . .

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[38] Ibid., 63.

[39] Ibid., 69.

It is seen that both definitions apply equally, whether Margaret is conscious of it or not. The insertion of a brief space of time into Cathy's life, where her own identity is concealed, and her personality, dress, and even the fact of her being married, are all disguised or hidden, is meant, finally, to restore order and regularity. As Margaret had observed earlier in the story, "Afterwards she would like it to be as if this had happened to someone else."

An abortion is contrary to the life principle. Infidelity is contrary to the love principle. The law of life has been broken because of Cathy's unfaithfulness to her absent husband. (The story was written during the time of the Second World War. The reader unconsciously provides the explanation of the unexplained absence of Cathy's husband. This assumption naturally adds poignancy in the way of timely social comment upon the situation concerned.) The testaments made by the poets concerning life and love, to both of which Cathy has been unfaithful, are more of an indictment than she can endure. She jumps from the bed and declares that she is going to write her husband a letter--tell him everything, and tell him, too, that all will be perfect from this time on.

> 'That's all over,' she said. 'Past. I'm going to write Bernard. Everything from now on, Margaret,' she said, 'is going to be absolutely perfect. I'm going to see to that . . . there's not going to be a single flaw anywhere. I'll give Bernard nothing but perfection

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'That's all over,' she said. 'Fact. I'm going to write Bernard. Everything from now on, Margaret,' she said, 'is going to be absolutely perfect. I'm going to see to that . . . There's not going to be a single flaw anywhere. I'll give Bernard nothing but perfection

from now on . . . I'll see to that . . . I'll watch everything.'[40]

After this naively ironic declaration, Cathy begins to write the letter. But there are words she cannot use, and words that she is not certain how to spell. And everything must be perfect--she will see to that: she'll "watch everything." She doesn't want to use the paper from her notebook--neither does she want to use the "public" paper of the hotel. All must be perfect. Cathy is idealistically grasping for symbols of perfection, and the old ones are lost. At this moment the exactly right word, properly spelled, and the right kind of paper are the only symbols within her reach. She calls down to the desk and asks to have a bell boy go out and purchase some good stationery and a dictionary.

The doorman, remembering the name and the room from which the order has come, remarks to the bell boy: "Those girls aren't going to find the word they're looking for in any dictionary."[41]

Miss West concludes the story directly following this remark. "But he was quite wrong. The word was there and it was another word entirely."[42] As was the case with the word "embolism," Miss West plays upon the idea of "word," meaning logos. I have never seen this kind of word-play handled more

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[40] Ibid., 70.

[41] Ibid., 71.

[42] Ibid.

from now on . . . I'll see to that . . . I'll watch everything."[40]

After this naively ironic declaration, Betty begins to write the letter. But these are words one expect years and words that she is not certain not to recall. And everything must be perfect--she will see to that: "I'll watch everything." She doesn't want to use the paper from her notebook--neither does she want to use the "public" paper of the Hotel. All must be perfect. Betty is idealistically grasping for symbols of perfection, and the old ones are lost. At this moment the exactly right word, properly spelled, and the right kind of paper are the only symbols within her reach. She calls down to the desk and asks to have a bell boy go out and purchase some good stationary and a dictionary.

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[40] Ibid., 72.

[41] Ibid., 73.

[42] Ibid.

functionally and with more effectiveness. I think "Another Word Entirely" is the most nearly perfect short story Jessamyn West has written.

"Public Address System" was published in the October, 1948, issue of Harper's Magazine. Its style and subject interest make it the kind of story that would seem suitable for the men's magazines in the same way that so many of Miss West's stories of domestic life, child psychology, or family problems are suitable for publication in the women's magazines. "Public Address System" is concerned with the installation of an amplifier for announcing ball games at the ball park of a small town named Tenant, near Los Angeles. There are other stories with Tenant as the setting, but "Public Address System" is the one that stands out. The insignificant events of typical small-town life are amplified (to play upon the word a little) so as to assume significant proportions.

Bill Hare is one of the most public-spirited men in Tenant. He belongs to everything. He is an organizer and a booster. He is the decent kind of fellow who likes to see others get a break. As chairman of the committee of Tenant's softball club, the arrangements for buying the public address system and having it installed at the ball park are largely Bill's responsibility--and privilege. Bill thinks it a good idea to "play ball," with the local merchants

as a way of securing local support and good will for the club. No need for going to Los Angeles to buy what can be bought at home. Bill is thinking of his next-door neighbor, Leonard Hobart, a shy, quiet fellow who has an electric shop and who is as good an electrician as any that could be brought in from Los Angeles. There's a good chance, too, that he could do the job of installing the announcing system as well as some expert from the city, and a lot cheaper. The committee turns the matter entirely over to Bill.

Bill goes to see Leonard at his small electric shop, where he finds him at the back repairing a radio. Although next-door neighbors, the two men have only a speaking acquaintance. This is due to Leonard's being the quiet, stay-at-home type of henpecked husband. Bill is no snob; it's only that he's always on the go, always engaged in one kind of civic matter or another and has had no opportunity over the years to get to know the Leonard family next door. Besides, he has unfavorable opinions of Leonard's wife, Nadine, whom he can hear bossily ordering Leonard and the children about at any time, night or day, that he happens to be home.

Just as Bill believed, Leonard says that he can get the equipment for the public address system and can install it for much less than the club had expected to pay. Bill feels satisfied with himself. A part of his satisfaction comes from Leonard's self-humbling expression of appreciation that so important a man in public affairs would think of

coming to him with such feeling of confidence. Bill and Leonard leave the shop together, and by the time they reach their homes they are fast friends.

When the equipment arrives Bill goes with Leonard to the ball park each night to watch the delicate process of the installation. This tokens for Leonard a feeling of self-importance that he has felt a lack of. Nadine and the children have never taken an interest in his work. If he talks about it at home, they go on talking among themselves as if they don't hear him--or as if anything he might have to say is not worth listening to. Bill, who is not only sociable but interested in almost everybody and curious about everything, is a good listener. He asks questions that Leonard is able to answer with authority.

The night that the softball season opens Bill and Leonard go out to the ball park to test the equipment to be sure that everything is all right. A big-time announcer from Los Angeles has been engaged to announce the plays. This is the night that Leonard will take his bow. When Bill turns on the switch, Leonard begins to call out imaginary plays. The address system tests perfectly. What surprises Bill is the quality of Leonard's voice. It is as if he had been announcing games all his life. Although an ordinary spectator who has never played a game of ball, Leonard knows the Tenant team and knows softball like an expert. Bill can barely hide his enthusiasm until he can meet with the committee

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The night the football season opens Bill and Leonard go out to the ball park to test the equipment to be sure that everything is all right. A big-time announcer from Los Angeles has been engaged to announce the games. Tonight the night that Leonard will take his bow. When Bill turns on the switch, Leonard begins to call out machinery plays. The address system works perfectly. What surprises Bill is the quality of Leonard's voice. It is as if he was a born announcing genius all his life. Although an ordinary spectator who has never played a game of ball, Leonard knows the Tarant team and knows football like an expert. Bill can merely ride his enthusiasm until he can meet with his committee

to suggest that they appoint Leonard as the official announcer for all the Tenant games.

Now the trouble begins. Leonard is offered the job and accepts it. Not only has he provided and installed the address system, but he also has the sole charge now of its operation. This does strange things to him. For one thing, he is never at home any more. He is at the ball park trying his voice. The people who live in the neighborhood complain that he keeps at it late at night with such volume and carrying power that they are unable to sleep. They come to Bill, the chairman of the committee, and protest that something must be done. Bill speaks to Leonard, who says that he needs practice since he is new at this sort of thing. This is of course true, so Bill advises Leonard to try speaking a little lower; the athletic club cannot afford to incur local ill will.

Leonard thinks of a better solution: he puts up an address system in his own back yard. The first time the Hares next door hear his voice thundering out in the night with frightening volume, Bill becomes very uneasy. He is somehow responsible. Leonard's wife, Nadine, calls at Bill's office one day and demands that he put a stop to what is going on. Leonard isn't the same person. He acts strangely and even crazy, like a maniac almost. He won't come into the house for his meals. It's as if he isn't even aware of the existence of herself and the children. He pays no heed when

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spoken to. All the neighbors, like the people who lived near the ball park, are beginning to protest. Bill knows this to be true. Leonard is getting a little out of hand.

On the night of the big, decisive games of the season, just before the game begins, Leonard tells Bill to notice that when he announces a play it is a second or so before the play is actually made. In other words, he calls the plays, and the players perform accordingly. Bill realizes suddenly that this is the talk of a lunatic. Leonard is, of course, mistaken, but there is something feverish in his certainty about his powers. Bill tells him that, yes, he will notice.

When the players go out onto the field, Leonard booms out the plays a split second before the plays are made. Bill wonders if something may not be wrong with the address system. Then suddenly something happens: Leonard calls a play incorrectly.

> Bill had never suspected that the mechanism which he had selected and helped install was capable of so much power. It--or Leonard's voice amplified by it, not so much as split the air with sound as filled it. The voice which had arched above their heads settled lower and lower. It became a yoke on their shoulders, a weight, a gravestone pushing them nearer and nearer the earth. The words Leonard had been saying, 'Three strikes and you're out,' he continued to say. But through repetition the words lost their meaning and finally, as words, they disappeared altogether. The sound of Leonard's voice, amplified, became nothing but power, nothing but brute force. Bill could feel it boring him across his shoulders, thundering against his ear drums, and finally, pummelling him inside his head, in the innermost, private and vulnerable recesses of his mind.
>
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Bill had never suspected that the mechanism [illegible] had selected and helped install was capable of [illegible] power. It--or Leonard's voice amplified by it--went so much as split the air with sound as [illegible] voice which had arched above their heads several times and lower. It became a yoke on their shoulders, a weight, a gravestone pushing them nearer and nearer the earth. The words Leonard had been saying, 'There satisfies and you're out,' he continued to say. But through repetition the words lost their meaning and finality--as words, they disappeared altogether. The sound of Leonard's voice, amplified, became nothing but power, nothing but brute force. Bill could feel it boring his eyes, his shoulders, thundering against his ear drums, and finally, pummelling him inside his head, in the innermost, most and vulnerable recesses of his mind.

Bill never knew, no one ever knew, how long it went on nor why they all sat there numb, unmoving for however

> long it did go on. Bill was the first to do anything. Next was the man beside him in the yellow T-shirt. To him Bill whispered--it was impossible to shout above the horrible din of that great, amplified voice, the only way to be heard was to get under it--'The poor fellow is out of his mind.'[43]

That night they took Leonard away.

Nadine, of course, blamed all that happened to Leonard on Bill Hare. "What do you mean, Mr. Hare?"[44] she asks him, when in exasperation he tells her that it is really she who is to blame.

After Nadine is gone Bill repeats her question, looking deeply into himself for the answer:

> 'What do you mean, Mr. Hare?' Bill asks himself, ironically, imitating Nadine's demanding voice. He walks over to his desk, sits down and begins to think about Leonard.
>
> He puts his hat on his head, his feet on his desk. 'What do you mean, Mr. Hare?' he asks himself, but flatly now and without irony.[45]

This is the ending of the story. What does he mean? What does the story mean? What must it mean to all the people in a nation gone mad when they must face themselves finally with the admission that it is they who are responsible for having put a Hitler in power? Once he is there, there is no shouting above him; the only way to be heard is to whisper under "that great amplified voice." I think this is what the

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[43] Jessamyn West, "Public Address System," Harper's Magazine, CXCVII (October, 1948), 101-102.

[44] Ibid., 102.

[45] Ibid.

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[44] Ibid., 102.

[45] Ibid.

story says. This is the best example of any story that Miss West has written for showing her ability to dramatize her material by means of symbolic action without use of specific object symbols and images.

In this story, and in another one, "Alive and Real," published in Harper's Bazaar, September, 1947, Miss West seems to be extending her scope to include matters of global significance. I think there is great promise for her development if she continues in this direction. This is not indicated, however, in the more recent stories she has written. In the last three years I have seen no story of hers that compares, in my opinion, with "Public Address System" or with any of the others I have discussed here in point of excellence or even of interest. The fact that she was for some time occupied with the writing of her novel, The Witch Diggers, published early in 1951, may be a reason, if not an excuse, for the recent impoverishment of her short stories.

I can find no evidence that any of the stories discussed above were written out of Miss West's personal experience. They all appear to contain imagined situations. The pattern of a writer's imagination is, of course, conditioned by what his experience has been and what his knowledge consists of, but these are external supplies for the creative imagination. It happens that all of the stories selected for discussion have a California background (with the exception

story says. This is the best example of any story that Miss West has written for showing her ability to dramatize her material by means of symbolic action without use of specific object symbols and images.

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of "Horace Chooney, M.D.," which has no specific setting). It is significant, I think, that what Miss West has chosen to write about from all of California's variety is as particularized, relatively speaking, as her Indiana material is. The Hollywood industry might be on another planet for any reflection of interest Miss West shows in it. The life of big cities apparently interests her not at all. Of the various classes of society, neither the extremely rich nor the extremely poor seem to appeal as subject material. In avoidance of both squalor and luxury, she writes almost entirely about middle-class people of average education and opportunity. The arty intellectuals of the bohemian strata, citizens of disenchantment, she likewise ignores. Since her characters and fictional situations are so precariously near the edge of mediocrity, it is to her credit that she is able to wring color and significance from these materials. It is especially creditable when one considers that she does this without affecting any sociological attitudes whatever. There is no attempt to romanticize the "common man" as such, nor to comment either upon the meagerness or the blessings of his lot. She is interested only in his psychological and ethical problems, and these are not strictly posed as problems but merely realities. This ties in, perhaps, with her Quaker background.

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In pointing out the significant levels of reality and

symbolism that are apparent in the stories I have discussed above, it has been shown, I believe, that the stories are successfully executed and contain unusual merit. The variety of methods Miss West employs for projecting her purposes, as I interpret them, has been demonstrated. In my opinion ample proof has been given that Jessamyn West has achieved considerable mastery in the writing of short stories. How far she will drive her ability it is too early to predict.

CHAPTER IV

A MIRROR FOR THE SKY: A MUSICAL DRAMA

A Mirror for the Sky is described on its book jacket as "the script for an opera based on an original conception of Raoul Pene duBois for portraying the life of Audubon in a musical drama." Since the play has never been produced and because musical dramas are not so widely read as commoner forms of drama, A Mirror for the Sky is not as well known as Jessamyn West's other writings.

All the information concerning the background for the writing of this work has come to me upon request directly from the author. The name of Raoul Pene duBois was unknown to me until it appeared in connection with A Mirror for the Sky. In answer to my request for some information about him, Miss West not only identified Mr. duBois but explained the commercial arrangements under which the collaboration was effected:

> Raoul Pene duBois is a costume and scene designer who had had for some time a desire to stage a musical based on Audobon's life. He had attempted the writing himself but had not produced anything which satisfied him. At the time The Friendly Persuasion appeared he got in touch with me. We were both in New York at the time, and after a week's talk [he] convinced me that I must try to write such a play. At the time I knew as little of Audubon as I did of play writing--but Raoul's enthusiasm both for the subject and my writing was finally irresistible. Raoul had a partner, who was to produce the musical and I was commissioned at so much a month to write it. I was to use as much or as little of Raoul's outline of his failure as I

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> liked--and in return he was to be billed as he is, as the 'originator.' There were frequent conferences and talks about the play and I had the benefit of Raoul's wide experience of the theater--but the writing was all mine. Gail Kubik was commissioned to write, and did, the score of which recordings were made. . . .[1]

Miss West says that insofar as she knows, all of the biographical material available was consulted in the construction of Audubon's life story. As for sources read, she gives:

> Constance Rourke, Peattie--old things like Life of Audubon, the Naturalist of the New World, by Mrs. Horace St. John--Buchanan's The Life and Adventures of John James Audubon--Lucy Audubon's The Life of John James Audubon--Herrick's Life of Audubon the Naturalist--the Journals and Letters of Audubon. . . .[2]

Although no list was kept, she continues, many books dealing with the historical background "closely or remotely" were also consulted. "At one time we thought a scene at the White House with Jackson would be valuable--I read a lot about Jackson for this. The scene was written but never used."[3]

There is apparently considerable disagreement concerning the facts of Audubon's early life. The source I consulted,[4] which relies for this early data upon Professor F. H.

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Herrick's authenticated studies (one of the sources mentioned above by Miss West), states that Audubon was born at Les Cayes, Santo Domingo, on April 26, 1785, the natural son of Jean Audubon, a French mercantile agent and ship's captain, and a Creole woman. In 1794 he was legally adopted by Jean Audubon and his wife in Nantes, where with his half-sister (the daughter of Jean Audubon and yet another Creole woman), he spent his childhood and early youth. Young Audubon was given a generous education, including two years of study under the artist David at Paris, so that by the time he arrived in America in 1804 he had the polish of a "gentleman." He lived on his father's estate, Mill Grove, near Philadelphia, for a year, spending his time collecting and sketching the birds of the surrounding countryside, and otherwise enjoying himself. He became engaged to Lucy Bakewell, the daughter of a well-to-do Englishman residing on a neighboring estate. In 1805 he went back to France and served in the French navy for a year. Upon his return to America in 1806 he went to work in New York in the counting house of his fiancee's uncle. Shortly afterward he returned to Mill Grove where with a partner, Ferdinand Rozier, he operated a lead mine. In 1807 Audubon and Rozier went to Louisville, Kentucky, and opened a store. The next year he returned to Philadelphia and married Lucy.

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above is given only to show that until Audubon was almost thirty years old no indication of single purpose, which later was to crystallize into almost missionary devotion, had evinced itself in his character. From this time forward, according to Jessamyn West's representation, it is his love story--his marriage with Lucy--that is inseparable from his self-appointed mission to know and to paint all the birds of America that gives him purpose, direction, and inspiration. In two acts composed of a numerous variety of scenes, Miss West dramatizes the main events of Audubon's career. The play opens in Pennsylvania at the time of James's marriage to Lucy, after which they journey by wagon train and by flatboat down the Ohio to Henderson, Kentucky. The following years are filled with hardship. They try to establish themselves in business, first in Kentucky and later in Ohio, lose all their property, and eventually move to Louisiana, where Audubon is obliged to paint portraits and teach fencing and dancing to support himself, Lucy, and the children. (The Dictionary of American Biography gives a somewhat different account of this period. The authors Peattie and Dobson state that it was Lucy who supported the family by working as a governess during this period of time--about twelve years, although for one year at St. Francisville, Louisiana, James contributed to the extent of teaching drawing and music to some of his wife's pupils.)

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Whether in fact or in dramatic fiction, the years on

the western frontier were years of stress and anxiety, but also of happiness. It is this period that is heightened by dramatic emphasis in the play. They are years when Lucy is left alone for months at a time in a wilderness community to look after the children and see to whatever meager support can be wrung from the failing business, while her husband goes off on his regular jaunts collecting and sketching birds. From a domestic point of view, it is the story of Peer Gynt and the patient Solveig all over again--except that Audubon does return at infrequent intervals to tender some love, encouragement, and reassurance to the long-suffering Lucy in exchange for a share of the dwindling proceeds from the business as financial backing for another journey of greater distance and duration. These years are depicted in the drama as being the time of trial, the test of Lucy's love and loyalty and the test of James's art. Both love and art are victorious. Lucy frets, but she never doubts. James makes a trip to Philadelphia where his abilities are recognized. With Lucy's aid (money supplied by her father, according to Miss West, but from her own savings from schoolteaching, as stated by Peattie and Dobson), James goes to England and succeeds in getting his bird studies published. (This time, according to Peattie and Dobson, Audubon is absent from his family for two years, enjoying the pleasures of being feted and lionized.)

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From the time that Audubon's rare gifts are publicly recognized, the drama declines in interest. Its folk content diminishes, and the hand of documentation fall upon it heavily. What remains is a pageant-like record of meetings and conferences, of contracts and agreements, as one after another honor is settled upon James, and he is rewarded not only with fame for his achievement but with prosperity also. He and Lucy purchase an estate on the banks of the Hudson River, where they spend out their old age. The play ends on a sour musical note, as compared with some of the earlier lyrical sequences. Lucy sings:

> I had a bright sword I trusted,
> It tarnished, it rusted.
>
> I bought a bold ring, a wonder,
> It wore thin, fell asunder.
>
> Beautiful beyond gold or buying,
> Is true love and a bird flying.[5]

This gentle, homely lyric is answered by a chorus of voices:

> John James Audubon painted the pictures:
> The quail in the grass, the hawk in the sky.
> Hungry, disheartened, untiring . . . he painted,
> He is ours . . . He will never die.[6]

The characterization Miss West has given to Audubon as being a dashingly courageous and romantic figure, the colorful American frontiersman, is, according to the authors Peattie

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[5] Jessamyn West, A Mirror for the Sky (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 154.

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[5] Jessamyn West, A Mirror for the Sky (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 13[illegible].

[6] Ibid., p. 155.

and Dobson, a legend created largely by the fact of Audubon's slight acquaintance with Daniel Boone. Miss West, for reason's entirely feasible to her purpose, pictures him as a charming vagabond, a talented troubadour, a brave woodsman, and a man of firm loyalty and integrity--in short, the stereotype Hollywood hero of the Western film. This is the characterization that is the popular one, Peattie and Dobson claim, but it is probably inaccurate. According to these biographers, Audubon was something of a poseur and a swaggerer, crotchety and old-womanish--jealous of other members of his profession with whom in later life he engaged in legal battles on various charges of plagiarism or misrepresentation. His reputation as a naturalist was impaired by careless documentation, and his reputation as an artist discounted because of a number of instances where, as a self-professing naturalist painter, he misrepresented the facts. These biographers tell of an occasion when he tricked the famous ornithologist Alexander Wilson by providing him with pictures of rare birds and fishes he claimed to have sketched from life, when actually they were nonexistent except in Audubon's fancy, but nevertheless fraudulently annotated--to the embarrassment of Mr. Wilson and the confoundment of later zoologists! Facts of this kind, if they are facts, Miss West saw fit to ignore.

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The text of the play is about equally composed of

stage directions, dialogue, and songs. The high quality of Miss West's prose, and her fine eye for descriptiveness and detail, do not fail her in her writing of the stage directions. The dialogue I found to be stiff and choppy. I know no reason for this, since her handling of dialogue in her short stories and novels is exceptionally graceful, lyrical, and apt. There seems to be an attempt in the drama to give a musical lilt to the spoken prose to be in harmony, I presume, with the passages to be sung, and the effect is flat and weak.

Some of the lyrics are delightful. The ones spontaneously spotted throughout the play, like simple folk songs--some of them witty and others sweetly sentimental, give color to the action. The songs that are meant to advance the narration, such as the one honoring Audubon which I have quoted above, are awkward, unmusical, and dispirited. As an example of the better ones, there is the song sung by the wagon train chorus in Scene II of Act I, as the procession sets off for the West:

> We've said farewell to everything that's little,
> Going to cook big meals in an oversize kittle,
> Going to rock the baby in a pine-tree cradle,
> Spoon up gravy with a ten-foot ladle.
> We're headed for the west where everything is better,
> Where the land isn't marked 'Mr. Jones' Little Acre,'
> But the whole great earth is for him who can take her.[7]

And another one from Scene III, which begins with a foot-

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[7] Ibid., p. 19.

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And another one from Scene III, which begins with a jocu-

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tapping rhythm:

> Big Chickey, Little Chickey, Bear Grass Crick
> Going to ride the waters to the Great Salt Lick.
> Kenewah, Trademaker, Muskingum,
> Going to ride the rivers into kingdom come.
>
> Going to float the rivers, going to wave my hand
> Going to ride the waters to Ohio land.[8]

In the same scene Audubon sings an amusing song that begins:

> Alligators, lightning, earthquake, flood,
> Burning brimstone instead of blood,
> A flatboater's made of hell and whiskey
> One-half bad, the other half risky.[9]

One of the minor characters in the play, a happy, spirited boy by the name of Kemper Tandy, sings the most entertaining songs. They are so much in tone with Kemper's general good humor and clownish energy that they come off with better success than do most of the ditties in the drama. In Scene IV of Act I Kemper trudges through the forest with a heavy pack on his back. He sings:

> I walked along a forest path,
> Partly whistling--mostly humming,
> There were no words but what I meant
> Was, 'Morning--I am coming.'
> Then morning said, 'I'll wait for you
> With my golden arrow,
> I'll spit you on its fiery point
> And cook you to the marrow.'[10]

Another song Kemper sings is "Wooden Punkin Seeds," from which he gets his nickname, "Punkin Seeds." The jingle goes:

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[8] Ibid., p. 29.

[9] Ibid., p. 33.

[10] Ibid., p. 39.

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[8] Ibid., p. 29.

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[10] Ibid., p. 39.

A little acorn makes a tree,
A little lead a bullet.
A little chicken soon will be
A great big pullet.

But wooden punkin seeds, wooden punkin seeds
They won't grow, you can't sow wooden punkin
seeds.

. . . . . .

A little gun will fire a shot,
A little bee makes honey
But all I've got is what is not
Worth a cent of money.

Wooden punkin seeds, wooden punkin seeds,
Though I try, I can't buy anything with wooden
punkin seeds.[11]

One of the songs in Scene IV, Act II, was reprinted from the New Yorker where it had appeared in the September 6, 1947, issue under the title "Song of the Settlers."

Freedom is a hard-bought thing--
A gift no man can give,
For some a way of dying,
For most a way to live.

. . . . . .

Freedom is a way of living,
A song, a mighty cry.
Freedom is the bread we eat;
Let it be the way we die.[12]

I have given enough examples of these slight bits of verse to show, I think, that although they may be adequate as verse lyrics for an entertaining musical drama, they do not show Miss West to be a poet. Neither is her stature as

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[11] Ibid., p. 47.

[12] Ibid., p. 131.

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Though I try, I can't buy anything with wooden
punkin seeds.[11]

One of the songs in Scene IV, Act II, was reprinted from the New Yorker where it had appeared in the September 6, 1942, issue under the title "Song of the Settlers."

Freedom is a hard-bought thing--
A gift no man can give,
For some a way of dying,
For most a way to live.

. . . . . .

Freedom is a way of living,
A song, a mighty cry.
Freedom is the bread we eat;
Let it be the way we die.[12]

I have given enough examples of these slight bits of verse to show, I think, that although they may be adequate as verse lyrics for an entertaining musical drama, they do not show Miss West to be a poet. Neither is her stature as

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11 Ibid., p. 47.

12 Ibid., p. 121.

a writer heightened by other poems, written presumably in a serious vein, that have been published from time to time in various magazines. While the best of these are a bit higher in quality than the poorest of the verses that appear in the play, they do not qualify even as good minor verse and add nothing to Miss West's writing achievement. I wonder if one of the poems that was published in the New Yorker (September 20, 1947), may not have been originally intended for the play and for some reason was not used. The title "Birds" would suggest that it might have been.

Birds are a pure
  democracy.
No delegate
  a bird can be.

He sings no anthem
  but his own.
No craft but bird
  by his is flown.

And for his home
  there's but one test--
Has it a curve
  to fit his breast?

No zones to him
  restricted are;
He stamps his foot
  and leaves a star.

It is his sign
  that he goes free,
Is citizen
  of melody.[13]

The accommodations of nature sentimentally projected, as shown

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[13] Jessamyn West, "Birds," The New Yorker, XXIII (September, 20, 1947), 76.

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in the third stanza of this poem, provide the theme for another poem, "Cat's Skull," published in the New Yorker (November 20, 1948). What the poem says chiefly is that the furry skull of the cat was created exactly to fit the size and shape of the human hand. ". . . And who in watching has not seen / a child's hand curve in that curved fur / and listening heard the sheathed skull purr."[14] (Was not a similar idea propounded by the French writer Bernardin d'Saint-Pierre of the eighteenth century, popularly taken up by writers of the Romantic period, and satirized in high ridicule by Voltaire?--Miss West is peculiarly old-fashioned in her verse-writing.)

The interesting thing about Miss West's poems is that they show a consistent cleavage to objects of nature and symbols of religion for both theme and imagery. Notice in the short poem "Bee" (quoted to illustrate this comment, and not offered for any merit of its own):

> Ubiquitous, the bee
> is holy ghost to flowers,
> the furry, glided dove
> of transcendental hours.
>
> Annunciation's heard
> where he bores deep;
> pollen the grace he sows,
> and bloom the flesh we reap.[15]

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[14] Ibid. "Cat's Skull," The New Yorker, XXIV (November 20, 1948), 92.

[15] Ibid. "Bee," The New Yorker, XXIV (July 3, 1948), 25.

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[14] Ibid. "Cat's Skull," The New Yorker, XXIV (November 20, 1948), 32.

[15] Ibid. "Bee," The New Yorker, XXIV (July 3, 1948), 25.

And again in one titled "Lament":

> Loving, the god was mine
> and I did eat;
> blood warm from his great heart
> in mine did beat.
>
> Beloved, I was the god
> the bread, the bride:
> and daily was devoured
> and daily died.
>
> O let me love again
> and no god be:
> unloved, but nourished by
> divinity.[16]

The lyrics written for A Mirror for the Sky, in consideration of their purpose, are as good as any of the above examples and some of them are better. The conditions under which the play was written would suggest it to be an unserious effort as compared with her other books, The Friendly Persuasion and The Witch Diggers.

It does not necessarily follow that the play, if produced, would not be successfully entertaining. I believe it would be. Miss West says:

> The play is perhaps more understandable when it is known that it was written with the intent to use 'projected' scenery--that is, 'animations' of boats would move across the screen at the back of the stage in the river boat scene--flights of birds, clouds--Conestoga Wagons--all these to be managed in part by 'movies' for which special projection equipment was being devised so that the live actors would not get in the way of the animations.
>
> The play was never produced except in part at a recital or two. To what the breakdown was due, exactly,

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[16] Ibid. "Lament," The New Mexico Quarterly Review, XVII (Winter, 1947), 496.

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> Loving, the god was mine
> and I did rest;
> blood warm from his great heart
> in mine did rest.
>
> Beloved, I was the god
> the bread, the bride;
> and daily was devoured
> and daily died.
>
> O let me love again
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> I never knew. Kubik, the composer, was threatening suit because of certain illegalities in his contract. I understood that there were misunderstandings between the two partners. And money, or lack of it, may have been the determinig factor.
>
> I still have hopes for it--and it seems to me to be a perfect vehicle for the movies. Why the movies go searching for heroes when men like Audubon need not be searched for I don't know.[17]

The New York reviews were not complimentary, however. This fact would be the quickest discouragement to any plans for stage production. Mr. James MacBride, who reviewed the play for the New York Times, denounced it with ridicule:

> Mirror for the Sky cannot even be dismissed as competent. Striving to recreate the career of Audubon in strange, valentine prose (and lyrics that belong on a sampler rather than on music-staves), Miss West reveals no knowledge of the theater whatsoever. Mr. duBois's sketches for costumes, by the way, are of a piece with the mincing dialogue. Daniel Boone's get-up, to name just one, is outlandish enough to send that honest trail-blazer spinning in his grave.[18]

The faint praise of Mr. W. P. Eaton, given in the New York Herald Tribune a week later, was also damning:

> So much of the play has the air of a pageant that in spite of the charm of many of its lyrics and the charm of Audubon himself and his patient wife, one fears that the reader will have to imagine what a stage performance would be like.[19]

Against these summary dismissals, the book, as rewiewed

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[17] Jessamyn West, from a letter to Ada Rutledge, December 26, 1951.

[18] James MacBride, "Titles on the Broadway Rack," The New York Times Book Review, XCVIII (June 6, 1948), 30.

[19] Walter Prichard Eaton, "Broadway Fashions," New York Hearld Tribune Book Review, XXIV (June 13, 1948), 6.

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by Mr. M. W. Stoer in the Christian Science Monitor, is praised for the excellence of its characterization, dialogue, lyrics, and stage directions. Miss West is complimented upon her "intuitive conceptions of the traditions of American custom and folklore."[20] This reviewer says: "With tenderness and vigor and good salty humor, she has composed a colorful dramatic script, which has definite theatrical possibilities. . . ."[21] The San Francisco Chronicle is even more extravagant in its praise. Joseph Henry Jackson, who reviewed the work three months before reviews appeared in the Times and Herald-Tribune, describes the drama in a glowing manner:

> . . . The songs, simple and naturally poetic, are extraordinarily fine. Along with the drama of Audubon's effort to paint the birds he loved--an effort engaged in with the direct single-mindedness of the artist in any period--goes the drama of his wife, Lucy, and her faithful support of the husband she loved. Miss West has made of this something both true and touching. Best of all, she has managed to avoid the oversimplifications this form seems too often to bring about. Her interpretation is singularly rich and full, though she stays rigidly within the framework set by the nature of the work. Privately, that's the thing I most admire about this beautifully executed play--the strict control over the chosen form that Miss West is able to exercise. It's as though she'd been doing it for years; her virtuosity is something to observe wide-eyed.[22]

My judgment of A Mirror for the Sky would fall between

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[20] Book Review Digest, XLIV (1949), 908.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

the extremes of condemnation and praise cited here. The play was entertaining to read, and I believe it would be even more entertaining on the stage. This does not say that the work has any literary value, for I don't think that it has. But entertainment is not without value of other kinds.

CHAPTER V

THE WITCH DIGGERS: A NOVEL

Other critics have been more generous in appraisal of Jessamyn West's novel The Witch Diggers than I am inclined to be. After having pointed out the excellence of this author's talents and abilities, I am disappointed not to see them better realized in her first book designed in the novel form. Variety is one of Miss West's strong points. Variousness in mood, style, and theme, as she has ably demonstrated it in her separate short stories, becomes unmanageable for her when she attempts to control it all within a single design of greater scope.

In spite of the originality of Miss West's talent (I believe this quality has been amply granted in what I have already said about her work), it would be false to suppose that she has not been attracted and perhaps influenced by the modes of other writers. While this has not resulted in imitativeness of any single author's work that I can discover, it appears to have encouraged her to experiment widely. There seems to be a great deal of experimentation in The Witch Diggers. What Miss West admires in the writings of other authors she admits without apology she would be happy to emulate in her own. Early in her writing career she remarked as follows:

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I wish I could write stories that combined the merits of H. E. Bates, Elizabeth Bowen, Sylvia Townsend Warner,

> Eudora Welty, Coppard. What a satirical, mystical, realistic, surrealistic, symbolic jolly hodge-podge that would be.[1]

In some respect The Witch Diggers is just such a hodge-podge, though not a jolly one; on the whole itis not a successful one either. Apparently Miss West has no qualms about making declarations like the one above. After The Witch Diggers was published, she made a public statement indicating the nature of her literary leanings. She says:

> I read poetry, criticism, diaries, journals, autobiographies, fiction, books by naturalists. If I could have written only one book by a female author, it would be Undset's Kristin Lavransdatter. If I could have the whole shelf, it would be Virginia Woolf's. I admire, by and large, Chekhov more than Maupassant, Welty and Faulkner more than O'Hara and Shaw (Irwin). But I admire Maupassant, O'Hara, Shaw, too. I am speaking of taste for 'kind' now, rather than assessment of quality. . . . Eudora Welty is the most talented writer (female) of whom I have any knowledge now writing in America.
>
> I have read Thoreau, including the notebooks, more often than any other writer, and can read any good or unpretentious writer about nature with deep pleasure. . . . V. S. Pritchett has more to say to me than Henry Green, and Joyce Cary (though I love to read of sin in high places) than Evelyn Waugh.[2]

Some of these writers I do not know at all except by reputation. Of the ones with whose work I am accuainted, I can find no common binding link that would reveal anything about Miss West's reading interests except versatility. From such a variety of appreciations it is not surprising

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that she says, "I believe that life is inextricably mixed and I would like to write it that way."[3] She tried to in The Witch Diggers. The task she assessed her frail genius demanded powers that are lacking, or as yet latent, among her natural abilities.

In his essay "Tolstoy: the Green Twig and the Black Trunk," Philip Rahv tells about Tolstoy's having sentimentally, and perhaps superstitiously, kept a mana-object in the form of a little green twig in the bottom of his trunk. The twig had been given to him by his brother Nicholas when they were children. Nicholas had told him that the twig had been buried by the roadside near a certain ravine and that a magic secret was inscribed on it--a secret by which means "all men would cease suffering misfortunes, leave off quarreling and being angry, and become continuously happy."[4] When Tolstoy was an old man he wrote:

> As I then believed that there existed a little green twig whereon was written the message which would destroy all evil in men and give them universal welfare, so I now believe that such truth exists and will be revealed to men and will give them all it promises.[5]

A similar idea in caricature supplies the title and the controlling symbol for Jessamyn West's novel The Witch

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[3] Ibid.

[4] Philip Rahv, Image and Idea (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1949), quoted, p. 74.

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[4] Philip Rahv, *Image and Idea* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1949), quoted, p. 7[illegible].

[5] *Ibid.*

Diggers. The "witch diggers," a brother and sister named James and Mary Abel, are minor characters in the novel. They are inmates of the poor farm superintended by Link Conboy and his wife Lib. James and Mary are ignorantly fanatical in their belief that the "truth" that will relieve mankind of suffering and poverty is buried somewhere under the ground--in the form of a message literally inscribed upon a scrap of paper. Link Conboy regards them as harmless in their obscure cultism, if a little simple-minded, and permits them to dig as industriously as they wish on the poor farm acreage after their institutional chores have been performed. The people of the surrounding countryside amusedly refer to them as "witch diggers."

As the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that the Abels are not alone in their witch digging. Almost every character in the novel is as fanatically bent upon digging for magic truth--some talisman of personal assurance--to gratify some egoistic need. Link, whose personality dooms him to failure as superintendent of the poor farm, digs away futilely at his self-appointed task because, he feels, he has in some inexplainable way failed at life--as a lawyer and as a husband and as a father. The burden of his personal inadequacy (Link is the one character of true nobility in the novel, by the way), his inability to express the love and warmth he feels for others, or to accept it when it is offered

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to him, drives him to act out the deed of charity and helpfulness to a degree of extreme sacrifice to himself and his family. Instead of the love and approbation he seeks, he gains only a cool respect from those he tries to benefit. His children mistake for coldness what is a suffering shyness. Link finds only in his daughter's fiance, Christian Fraser, the easy, friendly companionship that he longs for in his relations with his own children.

Lib Conboy is the most complex character Jessamyn West has ever created. Lib is vain, haughty, and proud; she is slovenly, disorderly, and coarse; she is a Victorian prude on the one hand and an Elizabethan bawd on the other; she is impulsively generous and lovable--but she is also fiercely jealous, spiteful, and mean. Such a person in real life would be quickly recognized as a psychological mess. Critics in reviewing The Witch Diggers have in the main admired Lib extravagantly. Edwin L. Peterson says of her:

> . . . Lib, to whom 'even the clay in a coffin had not . . . shed its sex,' Lib, who could slap her daughter's mouth and then stroll down the street and make the whittlers forget their knives and pine wood, Lib, who could torment her husband with accusations of imagined infidelity but who wordlessly forgave him the April nights he spent with Mrs. Dukes. Lib Conboy is not an easy person to comprehend, but Miss West sees deeply into her contradictory character, sees with understanding and compassion.[6]

Lib is the unwitting villian of the book, and also

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the unproclaimed heroine. Her goading criticism of Link and particularly of his relatives, her suspicious jealousy, and her selfish possessiveness of him (even to the exclusion of his children) drive him even more blindly and desperately into himself. Lib's loyal defense of Link's infidelity is a defense, really, of herself, as of an animal trapped by fear. In her forgiveness she is able to forgive herself all the years of nagging suspiciousness, which without basis made her guilty; but with proof her guilt is absolved. Lib's relations with her children are as carelessly wrong-headed. She instills in Cate principles of prudishness that are hypocritically contrary to her own flamboyant nature, though unconsciously so; but in so doing she paralyzes in Cate her natural impulses to love or to allow herself to be loved. By the transfer to her daughter of her own unrecognized guilt feelings, she relieves herself the burden of them. (Cate, in turn, transfers the "guilt" of her natural passion to her fiance, Christie, and willfully denounces him in as striking an example of the castration motive as one will find outside the Freudian clinical records.) Lib is no wiser in her relations with her son, Dandie. When he marries Nory, the lovely waif that "sin" (scarlet) and misfortune had driven to the Poor Farm, Lib behaves with fanatical hauteur towards Nory, Dandie, and particularly towards Link, who is, of course, basically responsible for having brought the family

the unproclaimed heroine. Her goading criticism of Lily and particularly of his relatives, her suspicious jealousy, and her selfish possessiveness of him (even to the exclusion of his children) drive him even more blindly and desperately into himself. Lily's loyal defense of Link's infidelity is a defense, really, of herself, as of an animal trapped by fear. In her forgivenness she is able to forgive herself all the years of nagging suspicionness, which without basis made her guilty; but with proof her guilt is absolved. Lily's relations with her children are as serpentinely wrong-headed. She instills in Gats principles of prudishness that are hypocritically contrary to her own flamboyant nature, though unconsciously so; but in so doing she paralyzes in Gats her natural impulses to love or to allow herself to be loved. By the transfer to her daughter of her own unrecognized guilt feelings, she relieves herself the burden of them. (Gats, in turn, transfers the "guilt" of her natural passion to her fiance, Charlie, and willfully denounces him in as striking an example of the castration motive as one will find outside the Freudian clinical records.) Lily is no winner in her relations with her son, Dandie. When he marries Mary, the lovely wait that "sin" (secret) and misfortune had driven to the poor farm, Lily behaves with fanatical hatred towards Mary, Dandie, and particularly towards Link, who is, of course, basically responsible for having brought the family

into contact with such miserable human associations. By failing to recognize in eleven-year-old Em a childish hunger for sentimental affection, Lib thrusts her into dangerous pursuits that result indirectly in tragedy for all.

Lib is the force that stirs all the action of the novel into being, and gives it its directions. Since every direction turns out to be a blind alley and every choice a misguided one, everyone suffers at her hands--and no one realizes this is so. Lib's proportions are so heroic she cannot emerge other than heroically. Her joy in living and her pure lust for life--and her selfish grasping for as much as she can get of it--make her in some curious way monstrously beautiful. Lib's beauty overwhelms Link's lonely idealism, Cate's and Christie's unhappy love affair, and Cate's miserable marriage to a foolish weakling to escape her "guilty" love for Christie. It overwhelms even the final denoument when all that might have been gained is irrevocably lost.

Yet there is something in Miss West's characterization of Lib that is faulty, if not false. She was cut for the stage, or designed for a Dostoevsky novel. She is more complicated than a novel the strength of <u>The Witch Diggers</u> can comfortably bear. Against the play of comedy enacted by the various poor-farm inmates, and against the slim tragedy of the plot, Lib appears a great deal more than life size. Miss

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Yet there is something in Miss West's characterization of Lib that is faulty, if not false. She was not for the stage, or designed for a Dostoevsky novel. She is more sophisticated than a novel the strength of The Mixed Marriage comfortably bear. Against the play of comedy created by the various poor-farm inmates, and against the slim vehicle of the plot, Lib appears a great deal more than life size. Miss

West uses various techniques to try to build the book to Lib's proportions, but most of them fail--or succeed only partially. The grotesque scene that shows one of the characters dashing wildly into a funeral service clad only in his underwear and screaming frantically with pain inflicted by a practical jokester is not the kind of relief such a novel demands. Caldwellian humor has its place in a Caldwell novel where source, setting, and seasoning are all proper to it. The violence of a near-lynching scene is not the pitch, either, that a novel like The Witch Diggers requires for affecting its artistic contrasts. Faulkner has a profound sense of the sinister and the profane that is as foreign to Miss West's talents as night is to day. The pathetic comedy of young Em's stripping bare and parading her childish nudity before the eyes of one of the inmates (whose history of peeping-tom criminality had preceded that of his pauperism), in the belief that to cure him of his curiosity concerning the human form would cure him of his annoying habits, is nearer the kind of accents a book like The Witch Diggers calls for.

In her characterization of Em, Miss West hits her own natural stride at its surest and best. It would be hard sometimes to recognize The Witch Diggers as Jessamyn West's creation except for the unmistakable portrait of this delightfully willful youngster. Em has a firmness in her outlines that isn't found in Miss West's portrayal of the other

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In her characterization of Ed, Miss West bits her own natural style at its surest and best. It would be hard sometimes to recognize The Witch Diverse as Jonathan West's creation except for the unmistakable portrait of this delightfully willful youngster. Ed has a firmness in her outlines that isn't found in Miss West's portrayal of the other

Conboy children. Cate might be almost any emotionally confused young woman, and Dandie might be almost any headstrong young man of independent ideas. Christie, Cate's fiance, has charm, sweetness of character, and common sense, and yet there is not enough personal effectuality in Miss West's characterization of him to cause his painful, self-crucificial death at the end of the book to wring the reader's emotions with the necessary strength of tragic irony that must have been intended. But the characterization of Em is a different matter. As William E. Wilson says in his review, "In Em Conboy she [Miss West] has brought to life a character as memorable as Jess and Eliza Birdwell."[7]

The summary of The Witch Diggers given in Mr. Wilson's review hits the important high spots with about the right accents. To quote from it liberally is all that is needed to supply the narrative thread of the novel:

> The scene of the novel is the Poor Farm of an unproductive county near Madison [Indiana]. The principal characters--Link Conboy, superintendent of the farm, Lib, his wife, and their two daughters, Cate and Em--are an ingrown, self-tortured family whose tragedies arise from . . . Hoosier anxiety. The background and chorus for their drama are supplied by the paupers in their care, among whom are a schizophrene whose salvation is wrought by his paternal love for a pig, a former jockey engaged in a losing battle with alcoholism, an aged nymphomaniac, several assorted simpletons, and a brother and sister who dig holes all over the farm's 300 acres in search of mankind's lost happiness.

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[7] William E. Wilson, "Indiana Tragedy," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIV (February 3, 1951), 42.

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The summary of The Witch Doctor given in Mr. Wilson's review has the important high spots with about the right emphasis. To quote from it liberally is all that is needed to supply the narrative thread of the novel:

> The scene of the novel is the Poor Farm of an unproductive county near Madison [Indiana]. The principal characters—Dick Conboy, superintendent of the farm, Lib, his wife, and their two daughters, Date and Jean—are an impoverished, self-tortured family whose tragedies arise from . . . Hoosier anxiety. The backgrounds for their dramas are supplied by the omnipresent in their bars, among whom are a sodomphrene whose salvation is wrought by his paternal love for a pig, a former jockey engaged in a losing battle with alcoholism, an aged nymphomaniac, several amorous simpletons, a brother and sister who dig holes all over the 300 acres in search of mankind's lost nothings.

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[7] William E. Wilson, "Indiana Treasury," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXXIV (February 3, 1951), 32.

Christian Fraser, a young insurance salesman from Indianapolis, first encounters Cate Conboy at a 'sociable' in the home of his cousin during the Christmas holidays of 1899. He is charmed at once by the numerous morbid complexes that give her an air of elusiveness, and in a short while he is visiting the farm and giving her a locket that symbolizes betrothal. After Christian's return to Indianapolis, however, Cate has misgivings about her own virtue and becomes convinced that she has 'bad blood.'

Indeed, enough happens in the next few weeks to unbalance a more normal girl than Cate: her sister in as excess of misguided altruism exposes herself before one of the inmates whose passion is window-peeping; her brother castrates the former lover of his bride; and her father is proved to be unfaithful to her mother. These events combined with her discovery that she likes Christian's kisses persuade her to break her engagement to him and to marry the mama's boy from a neighboring farm. Thereafter, tragedy multiplies itself quickly into catastrophe.[8]

The catastrophe occurs when Christie (who has meantime married his old-maid cousin with whom he once engaged in a disinterested sex affair) returns for a visit to the Poor Farm at Cate's entreaty, and rushes in to save the livestock when he discovers the barn is burning down. He dies in the flames. One critic points out that this ending is unsuccessfully contrived:

> She [Miss West] is so well aware of the interdependence of human life that her characters become involved in a web from which there is no escape except, as here, through a violent and not altogether satisfactory deus ex machina.[9]

This criticism is not quite accurate. There is irony in the

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[8] Ibid., 17, 42.

[9] Florence Haxton Bullock, "Jessamyn West Tells a Strikingly Original, Turn-of-the-Century Tale," New York Herald-Tribune Book Review, XXVII (January 14, 1951), 5.

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knowledge that the physical tragedy might so easily have been prevented. Em had known that the barn was to be set on fire--by James and Mary Abel, to destroy the pigs whose care required so much of the precious time they needed for digging in search of the truth that would bring salvation to the world. Em had known, but her confidences to the members of her family had been so often betrayed that she misguidedly kept the Abels' secret in return for their trust. By exactly the same token, the emotional tragedies might have been prevented. As Cate said, love would have saved Christie. "We planned. The trouble was we all schemed and planned."[10] Thus, Miss West returns to the "love theme" she has utilized in so much of her writing.

If one is disposed to "trust the tale" without regard for what the author may or may not have intended, as advised in the critical doctrine of D. H. Lawrence, the ending of the novel--far from being brought about by a deus ex machina--could be shown to be a conscious derivative of the Osiris myth. The Poor Farm pigs have been a prominent feature throughout the novel. The fine herd of Poland China hogs represent in Link Conboy's hopes a solution to the financial difficulties of the institution. Again, as a symbol of regeneration, it is the "paternal love for a pig" (as Mr. Wilson points out above) that enables one of the inmates

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[10] West, The Witch Diggers, op. cit., p. 439.

to regain psychological health. The destruction of this regenerative symbol in which the pig becomes the object--the "sacrificial beast"--is found in a number of ancient myths, particularly in the myths connected with the Egyptian corn rites, where Osiris, fallen from high estate, is symbolically sacrificed in the form of a pig, with which in later mythology he became identified.

> The view which identifies the pig with Osiris derives not a little support from the sacrifice of pigs to him on the very day on which, according to tradition, Osiris himself was killed; for thus the killing of the pig was the annual representation of the killing of Osiris, just as the throwing of the pigs into the caverns at the Thesmophoria was an annual representation of the descent of Persephone into the lower world; and both customs are parallel to the European practice of killing a goat, cock, and so forth, at harvest as a representative of the corn-spirit.[11]

In order to relate the ending of the novel with these antiquated vegetation rites, one needs only to consider what Christie's role in the novel symbolizes in relation to the other characters, the nature of his rejection and the cause for it, and finally his sacrificial destruction, and he may readily be identified with Osiris the god, and also Osiris as symbolized by the pig. If Miss West had any such pattern in mind, it is wholly without precedent in what I have been able to deduce from her writings. She appears to place some reliance upon fundamental Freudian concepts, but I discover no Jungian influence. I doubt that she is

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[11] James George Fraser, The Golden Bough (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), p. 475.

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[11] James George Frazer, The Golden Bough (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), p. 372.

either so conscious or so unconscious an artist that materials from the vast store of universal myth and primordial imagery would be utilized deliberately in her fiction, except by the same necessity that they are, of course, utilized in all fictions.

An examination of characterization and plot development does not exhaust the virtues or the faults of The Witch Diggers. The greatest virtue is in Miss West's incomparable style, which is poetic, dramatic, and picturesque. The greatest fault is in a certain awkwardness toward the handling of some of the melodramatic sequences. The castration scene comes off with stumbling unsuccess mainly, one feels, because of the author's natural revulsion towards such violence, and an inability to accept the fact that Cate and Nory are witness to it. This would explain why Cate's "shock" is not quite the convincing experience it should be to produce the psychological effects resulting from it. The experience should be shattering enough that when Cate symbolically castrates her own lover--a psychological act that is undeniably forced by the horrors she has just experienced--the scene is recalled with positive recognition in all its virulence. If this parallelism has been observed by any other critic, it was not regarded effective enough to merit commenting upon.

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delicate nuances of descriptive beauty and leisurely dialogue, is jerkily accelerated from point to point to accommodate a succession of incidents that are extravagantly gruesome or hysterically funny--at about equal degree. The total effect is not rewarding. One is reminded of a ridiculous child's toy called a "goofy ball," which because of its lopsidedness rolls along for a moment, twists back with a bounce and a jolt, and rolls on. Anthony West, in his review in the New Yorker, notes this tendency toward crowded action with more derision than praise. He says:

> Always something going on up to the Poor Farm. When Gate Conboy, the heroine, has safely married the wrong man, the hero is burned to death in a fire that razes the Poor Farm barn. As he runs in to rescue the animals, the roof falls in. The last image in the book is of two screaming horses, one of them with its mane on fire, bolting into the Indiana night.[12]

If Mr. West's specific mention of the image of the fleeing horses was to indicate a symbolic note, he does not elaborate. As a corn diety and as a symbol of the unleashed passions, the horse is characterized as the fructifying spirit in both Greek and Roman mythology. Like the role of the pig in the Osiris myth, the horse is similarly cast in the story of Hippolytus, who, killed by horses, was thereafter honored in the annual corn rites by the offering of a horse as sacrificial beast.[13] This is, as I consider it, merely a superficial

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[12] Anthony West, "Books," The New Yorker, XXVII (January 27, 1951), 78.

[13] Fraser, op. cit., pp. 476-479.

note which may or may not contribute to the interest of the novel and which I, in any case, doubt being a conscious device of the author's. Mr. West's closing statement about the novel is not in my opinion due praise--or even accurate judgment, but it is not wholly damning, either.

> It's single track winds off into Bronte country, quite a distance from the Middle West, and ends up at the Castle of Otranto. This is, in short, a Gothic novel, an affair of night terrors, wild, spooky poetry, and overblown emotions. As such, it is very good fun, in its macabre way.[14]

Time Magazine's book commentator also sets his gauge of the novel somewhat to the minus side. His comment concerning Gate's irrational action is an example: "Author West seems as confused as Gate herself in trying to explain this erratic behavior, and as determined as a Hollywood screenwriter in making melodrama out of it."[15] And in summing up, he says: "By the end of it all, despite the fertile pastures of authentic Hoosier talk and scenery she finds to work in, Author West seems to have been digging with fruitless energy."[16]

Mr. William E. Wilson's review, from which so much has already been quoted, concludes with a statement of the novel's (and the novelist's) limitations rather than virtues:

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[14] Anthony West, op. cit., 78.

[15] Anonymous, "Hoosier Melodrama," Time Magazine, LVII (January 22, 1951), 100.

[16] Ibid.

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[16] Ibid.

> . . . In the wide sweep of a full-length novel Miss West does not have the grace and ease that she has exhibited in her short stories; and in the darker regions of the soul she is not so much at home as she is where there is light. Indiana. . . needs a little Faulknerian dissonance, but Miss West is not equipped to strike that note.[17]

It seems proper here to report what Miss West herself has to say about the novel, and what she had in mind when showing this darker side of Indiana life.

> Witch Diggers is far nearer the reality of which I heard reports than is The Friendly Persuasion. . . . I believe that life is inextricably mixed and I would like to write it that way. I run foul in attempting of people who want labels, 'tragic scenes,' 'comic scenes.' If something pitiful and ludicrous happens at a funeral (as it does in Witch Diggers) these people are shocked, or dismayed, and cry 'the big comic scene at a funeral.' Alas! It was a comic scene for some of the inmates of the poorhouse, but that was a part of the pity (to me) of the over-all scene. . . . But one can never tell. And I intend to keep on trying to avoid labels; to write of life as it appears to me. What else can one do?
>
> I wrote Witch Diggers in an effort to become an 'honest woman.' The Friendly Persuasion was a truthful book, but it was the truth about a very small segment. It was not typical of southern Indiana or the majority of people in southern Indiana. Most people never had it so good--in their hearts, or at their hearthsides. I did not feel that I had told the truth either about people or myself until that account was balanced with another about people less fortunate in their personal heritages and in the way events fell out. Now I feel pen-wise, an honest woman, and can just 'write a book' next time, and not be bothered with past accounts.[18]

To balance, or perhaps to overbalance, the adverse criticism that has been offered about The Witch Diggers,

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[17] Wilson, op. cit., 42.

[18] West, op. cit., 2.

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there are reviews that praise the novel without the slightest qualification. Except for the objection offered by Florence Haxton Bullock concerning the deus ex machina ending, all else is praise.

> Miss West's delicately exciting power--product in equal part of poetic insight, fresh imagination and good craftsmanship--triumphs in spite of, often because of, the obvious difficulties of her materials. . . . The hungry freshness of Miss West's interest in life and her utter incapacity to departmentalize it turn everything she touches into gold. And it is no fool's gold, either. For every line of The Witch Diggers carries implicit in it a mature acknowledgment that though life is difficult, often unmanageable and disappointing, it is worth living.[19]

This critic has been able to appreciate exactly what Miss West herself states as being her fictional aims and natural creative inclinations.

No criticism of The Witch Diggers is so glowingly full of praise, however, as the review written by Eudora Welty, which came out in the New York Times on the same date as that of Miss Bullock's in the Herald-Tribune. (It is significant that The Witch Diggers was given space in the two major newspaper review sections of this country at the earliest date possible after the publication of the book--an attention that is generally accorded only to books by writers of top importance.) If Miss West feels, as she has stated, that Eudora Welty is the "most talented writer (female)" in America, Miss Welty's praise of The Witch Diggers would

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indicate an exchange of high esteem. What Miss Welty says about the novel, added to what has already been said, broadens its meaning and reveals it in its kindest light. She dissects the book from the standpoint of its moral tissue.

> The characters are alive and vividly struggling, explained fully and yet remaining, I thought, opaque to a degree, as real-life people do, but this gains them a curious wholeness in the context. We see that the characters are sometimes ignorant, sometimes innocent but never simple; they have the makings of complexity without the tools for its expression. . . .
>
> All are charged with the business of living, strongly opinionated, strongly sexed, acting for the most part in good faith toward one another and sometimes (as they are able) toward themselves. Their conflicts are, hence, simply their differences as individuals. Placed in the uncontroversial times, in the simple setting, within the order of the seasons, the novel is left free for its characters to move under their own stars. Some of these--the Poor Farm inmates--have been relieved even further of worldly impediments; and these are the characters who run to the greatest extreme of all in variety of personality and in action--from the catatonic to the frenzied. Stripped to the utterly physical, . . . the book reaches here its moral bone--which is Miss West's triumph.
>
> How responsible for each disaster to another human being do our separate sins make us, how so they combine? What is the limit of the harm we inflict on other people--all too often 'for their own good'? How far is ignorance to blame? Could these people, indeed, have escaped their doom? . . .
>
> If The Witch Diggers is a novel of distinction it is because in dealing with the passions, Miss West is dealing also with passion itself. . . . In a sense all the action in the novel is a charade, the characters moving on the scene in sides or teams or alone, to present their allotted syllable the best they can. It is calculation which futilely and frantically turns over the earth in a vanity of witch digging, ignoring, fatally ignorant of, the simple and revelatory power of love.[20]

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[20] Eudora Welty, "A Search, Maddening and Infectious," The New York Times Book Review, CI (January 14, 1951), 5.

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The characters are alive and vividly stimulating, explained fully and yet remaining, I think, opaque to a degree, as real-life people do, but this gives them a curious wholeness in the context. We see that the characters are sometimes ignorant, sometimes innocent but never simple; they have the making of complexity without the tools for the correction. . . .

All are charged with the business of living, strongly opinionated, strongly racked, acting for the most part in good faith toward one another and sometimes (as they are able) toward themselves. Their conflicts are, hence, simply their differences as individuals. Placed in the unconditioned time, in the simple setting, within the order of the seasons, the novel is left free for its characters to move under their own stars. Some of these--the poor farm inmates--have been relieved even further of worldly impedimenta; and these are the characters who run to the greatest extremes of all in variety of personality and in action--from the bestiality to the friendly. Stripped to the utterly physical, . . . the book reaches here its moral bone--which is Miss Mary's theme.

How responsible for each disaster to another human being do our separate aims make us, how so they combine? What is the limit of the harm we inflict on other people--all too often 'for their own good'? How far is ignorance to blame? Could these people, indeed, have escaped their doom? . . .

If The Witch Diviner is a novel of distinction it is because in dealing with the passions, Miss Mary is dealing also with passion itself. . . . In a sense all the action in the novel is a charade, the characters moving on the scene in sides or pairs, or alone, to present their allotted myths like the Tarot cards. It is calculation which finally and fractionally turns over the earth in a vanity of sides dividing, ignoring, fatally ignorant of, the single and paralyzing power of love.[20]

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[20] Hudora Welty, "A Search, Wandering and Lyrical," The New York Times Book Review, 01 (January 14, 1973) 3.

Enough has been said about The Witch Diggers, I believe, to give adequate justice to its fullness and to its limitations. It is not a book to be by-passed, but it is not in my opinion deserving of long literary life as is The Friendly Persuasion. If, as Miss West says, each of these books had to be written to balance her account with personal honesty, now that she is "pen-wise" and clear of debt, novels of more distinction should result.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The measure of Jessamyn West's ability when compared with what it has produced is not equated. There is no fiction writer of her age and experience in America whose talents, in my opinion, token greater possibilities than hers. She knows the land and the people, is native to the same roots and traditions, and she has a natural awareness to their significances. She is able to probe and to articulate, to mold and to symbolize. She has the "feel" of the born artist, and the expressiveness of the practiced artisan. She is sound of heart and intellect--morally and mentally speaking. She has good taste and critical judgment, and a clever, penetrating imagination. Furthermore, she is industrious.

Yet, with all these excellent qualities, much of her total production in the form of a flood of trivial stories, slight poetry, and glib articles would have demanded the exercise of far less talent. It would not require the aloofness of Katherine Anne Porter (whose last book, The Leaning Tower, came out in 1944 and whose fascinating studies of Cotton Mather remain, as they have for almost two decades, a "work in progress") for Miss West to restrain her writing energies and concentrate them all on what could be

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lastingly significant--a truly important literary contribution.

For obvious reasons I do not know the work of any other contemporary American writer as thoroughly as I know Jessamyn West's. Eudora Welty surpasses her, I believe, in passion-empowered imagination, although I find her often difficult to read and sometimes impossible to understand. Jean Stafford reveals a talent for humorous narration similar to Miss West's, although she exhibits greater cynicism. Shirley Jackson's stories are vastly interesting in their psychological content, if her social ferociousness is acceptable to the reader, but the content, unlike Miss West's, appears to have derived from studied texts rather than from observations of life. Mary McCarthy is so much the essayist that her fictional ironies, tending towards bitterness, become abstractions of ideas--intensely brilliant to a fault. As depicters of emotional attitudes, all of these writers are expert. None of them, it seems to me, has Miss West's sensitivity to the poetry of the simple manifestations of nature, nor her quiet religiosity, nor her subtle adeptness with humorous matter, although there is no doubt that they have other qualities that overreach the stride with which Miss West marks off her boundaries.

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I have limited my comments to female authors deliberately, since this is what Miss West tends to do in

reference to the writings of her peers. Like her, these writers have risen in their careers through the channels of the little magazines from the various regions of the country they represent. Generally speaking, they have one or two novels, maybe more, to their credit, and scores of short stories. They publish widely now in the "quality" magazines and in the "slicks," and are reprinted with frequency in the annual anthologies of what profess to be America's best short fiction selections. They receive respectable notices when their books are published and are often awarded coveted honors, prizes, and fellowships. These writers, and many others in the same category, are all testing their talents and strengths against the work of more seasoned writers like Hemingway, Faulkner and O'Hara. Lately, Robert Penn Warren, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Wallace Stegner, Ray B. West, Jr., and other relative newcomers, whose writing histories, aside from closer academic connections, have followed a course similar to that of the women writers I have mentioned, are commanding the most prominent attention in the field of the short story and the novel.

The breaking down of national lines since World War II has thrown the field of literature and art into such a communicable relationship that a writer as British as Elizabeth Bowen or as international as Kay Boyle or Anais Nin has

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The breaking down of national lines since World War II has thrown the field of literature and art into much a commendable relationship that a writer as British as Elizabeth Bowen or as international as Kay Boyle or Anais Nin has

become a part of the American reading experience, if not of its writing traditions. This period since the war has also introduced to American readers a greater fund of translated materials than ever before in the course of the literary history of this country--and there is an international urgency that these materials be given recognition and respect. Against all these a writer's work must be measured also.

An article of minor interest and value entitled "Fiction of the 'Forties," by Robie Macauley, appeared in the Autumn, 1951, issue of Western Review. Mr. Macauley surveys the scope and the trend of American fiction during the past decade, taking into his accounting only those figures who appeared on the writing scene during the period to which he limited his study. He concludes:

> I have limited this discussion to those writers whose work comes entirely within my rather arbitrary time-span. For this reason there are some notable omissions. . . .
> This is the place for the generalization which I refuse to try to make. All that can be honestly said at this time, I believe, is that this was neither the best nor the worst period in American fiction. There was no sudden birth of genius, but there was a great variety of talent. The real history of this generation's writers has just begun.[1]

It is to this generation of writers that Jessamyn West belongs and with whom she shares the obligation for making the literary history of its period notable. Although Eudora Welty, Jean Stafford, and Mary McCarthy are all accorded

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[1] Robie Macauley, "Fiction of the 'Forties," Western Review, XV (Autumn, 1951), 69.

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It is to this generation of writers that Tennessee West belongs and with whom she shares the obligation for making the literary history of its period notable. Although Eudora Welty, Jean Stafford, and Mary McCarthy are all accorded

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[1] Robie Macauley, "Fiction of the 'Forties," Western Review, XV (Autumn, 1951), 69.

some passing mention in Mr. Macauley's article, Jessamyn West's name does not appear, despite the fact that she should naturally fit into a group thus limited. If the article showed more care and a well-considered selectiveness otherwise, there would be some cause for concern that Miss West was overlooked. I did not feel, though, that the criticism revealed a great amount of authority resulting either from extensive reading or thorough critical acumen.

Jessamyn West is ensconced in a conservative American writing tradition which, in our age of atomic physics, may shortly become obsolete. Her writing reflects the religious and philosophic beliefs of the English Romantic period and of New England Transcendentalism, to which overtones of latterday Freudian psychology have been added. As was stated by Elizabeth Bowen in a lecture given at the University of New Mexico[2] on the subject "The Writer's Role in the Atomic Age," today's writers have new obligations to perform and later evidence to record--social, ethical, and aesthetic--and a writer working in an outmoded tradition, however excellent its ideal values, may find himself inexpressibly speaking into a void of the untimely and impertinent. This is a danger that Miss West should now steel her awareness to. As her literary agent Henry Volkening said, she has "a quality which is the one we need today for actual survival,

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[2] October 30, 1951.

a vitality built not upon anger, but upon love."[3] If she applies this quality now to subjects and themes that suit the urgent anxieties of the present times, I believe she has yet a great deal more of lasting importance to say than she has said up to now. Without forgetting her firm roots--her human and literary heritage--she should grow strong in her own abundance.

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[3] Henry Volkening, from a letter to Ada Rutledge, September 30, 1950.

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