

DEFINING THE CULTURE OF MANHOOD
IN THE UNTAMED WEST OF LARRY MCMURTRY'S
LONESOME DOVE

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By Scott Hays

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Approval	02
Acknowledgements	03
Table of Contents	04
Introduction	05
Chapter One	07
The Great Epic Novel of the American West	
Chapter Two	09
Archetypes and the Western American Myth	
Chapter Three	12
Young Newt and the Hat Creek Cattle Company	
Chapter Four	15
The Nature of Manhood in the Untamed West	
Chapter Five	16
The Hanging of Jake Spoon	
Chapter Six	19
The Last Frontiersman of 'Lonesome Dove'	
Conclusion	23
Bibliography	24
About the Author	28

Introduction

Nothing prepared me for the experience of reading for the first time Larry McMurtry's masterwork *Lonesome Dove*, for which he won the 1986 Pulitzer Prize for Literature. I had never before read a "western" novel, and nothing sounded more boring than a story about two aging Texas Rangers undertaking a cattle drive from the Rio Grande to the Canadian border. But there I sat, hour after hour, savoring every moment with Augustus "Gus" McCrae, Woodrow Call, and the other men and boys of the Hat Creek Cattle Company.

These were men unlike the mythic cowboy heroes I had emulated, via television, as a young boy—Roy Rogers, The Lone Ranger, Daniel Boone, Rowdy Yates, Marshall Matt Dillon, the Rifleman, Hoss and Little Joe. The men in *Lonesome Dove* were *real* men, with *real* problems. That Gus and Call were aging Texas Rangers was really beside the point. For there, in the subtext of the story, was what I understood to be the problem of manhood in the American West. Here were frontiersmen who were physically strong, loyal, creative, self-reliant, resourceful, and courageous¹, who were also occasionally weak, lazy, unethical, and slow to embrace love.² If I could somehow make sense of it all, fuse together the best of Gus and Call, I too might lead my life with dignity and purpose, with no confusion about what it means to be a man in contemporary American society.

It seemed clear to me that Larry McMurtry had created the secondary character of Newt, Call's unacknowledged son with the prostitute Maggie, as the embodiment of a

¹ Busby, Mark. *Larry McMurtry and the West: An Ambivalent Relationship*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1995, pg. 182.

² *Ibid*, pg. 182-183.

young man's rite of passage. This teenage boy is initiated into manhood through the harsh and violent realities of life on the American frontier. Newt chases horse thieves, socializes with whores, and wears a gun for the first time. He comes face-to-face with hostile Indians, death, and devastation, and confronts the moral ambiguities of life out on the plains. He learns about men and their naturally aggressive impulses, about how to love women, about how to feel comfortable and productive in a world of men and savages. He learns about himself, and about what it means to be a man among men; although, by the end of the novel, young Newt's formal transition from adolescence to adulthood turns into more of a failed coming-of-age story.

What can living men take away from *Lonesome Dove*, to help us better understand ourselves and our nature as men? My intention here is to help illuminate the subtext in *Lonesome Dove* that helps define the nature of manhood in Western American myth, at least from the perspective of author Larry McMurtry. This analysis is particularly relevant in that in modern America, it has often been the absence of a strong male role model that has confused many teenage boys about their own masculinity, or so argues child psychologist Michael Thompson, Ph.D., co-author of *Raising Cain*, a book that explores the emotional development of modern American boys³.

Richard Slotkin, author of *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, states that myths of the frontier are "arguably the longest-lived of American myths" with a "powerful continuing presence in contemporary culture."⁴ And James Oliver Robertson writes that American myths should be examined

³ Thompson, Michael, Ph.D. And Dan Kindlon, *Raising Cain*. New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999, pg. 89.

⁴ Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Atheneum: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1992. pg. 15.

by all Americans because “only those who participate in them can comprehend their power and their imagery.”⁵ My hope is that by studying the rite of passage of young Newt within the power and imagery of the American West, I might be able to identify that specific thread that continues to engage me—and many other Larry McMurtry fans, I suspect—with *Lonesome Dove*.

Chapter One: The Great Epic Novel of the American West

Lonesome Dove has been acclaimed by many critics as the great epic novel of the West. At more than 900 paperback pages, it is not light reading material. Although author Larry McMurtry had written about the West throughout his earlier career, he became known to a larger readership only after the publication of *Lonesome Dove*.

Noel Perrin in the *New York Times Book Review* summed up the novel this way: “All is fresh and new in *Lonesome Dove*, as if no one ever had written a western before. So far as I know, no one ever had written a western with so many brilliantly articulate characters, and the dialogue has much to do with the book’s greatness.”⁶ Ernestine Sewell thinks the book’s success is mostly due to “the awesomeness of the myth of the cowboy.”⁷ And Mark Busby contends that, ultimately, the strength of *Lonesome Dove* lies in the “complex way that it intertwines myth and anti-myth into an intricate whole, for it is not simply an attack on the myth, nor is it simply a formula novel serving up larger-than-life heroes without real human traits.”⁸

⁵ Robertson, James Oliver. *American Myth, American Reality*. New York: Hill & Wang, 1980, pg. 19.

⁶ Perrin, Noel. “Woodrow Call Rides Again”, *New York Times Review*, July 25, 1993.

⁷ Sewell, Ernestine. “McMurtry’s Cowboy—God in *Lonesome Dove*.” *Taking Stock: A Larry McMurtry Casebook*. Ed. Clay Reynolds. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989, pg. 322.

⁸ Busby, Mark. *Larry McMurtry and the West: An Ambivalent Relationship*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1995, pg. 184.

McMurtry offers a novel that exemplifies the untamed American west, in that the bravest and most moral man could die at any given moment. The story takes place in the late 19th century, and follows the lives of two aging Texas Rangers, Augustus “Gus” McCrae and Woodrow Call, with legendary reputations as fearless lawmen. But times have changed for Gus and Call: most of their fellow Rangers have died or gone on to other pursuits, and for the past decade both men have lived quiet, semi-retired lives in Lonesome Dove, a small town near the Texas/Mexico border.

Their stretch of southern Texas is dry and hot, and there’s not much to see or do. Gus spends his long days in the shadow of the porch drinking whiskey, and his nights in the Dry Bean Saloon, playing cards or extracting a “poke” from the prostitute Lorena Wood. Call spends *his* long days digging wells and breaking horses, and his nights alone by the river, wishing he still had someone to outwit. Life moves slowly for these two men—and for their hands in the Hat Creek Cattle Company: Joshua Deets, Pea Eye Parker, and young Newt, whose late mother had been a whore in love with Call.

All this changes the day a fellow former Ranger, Jake Spoon, rides into town. Spoon is on the run after accidentally shooting a dentist in Arkansas, a man whose brother happens to be the town’s sheriff, and who is presumed to be looking for Jake with hanging on his mind.

Spoon regales Gus and Call with his experiences of traveling to Montana, a territory Spoon extols as a cattleman’s paradise, one of the last remaining great frontiers. The restless Call sets his sights on Montana, while Gus considers such a venture crazy. Most of the ranch hands tend to side, silently, with Gus, but this doesn’t stop Call from coercing them into gathering a herd of cattle, and a handful of additional cowboys, for a

journey of thousands of miles—one last adventure. Unexpectedly, the drive also includes the equally restless Lorena, traveling with Jake Spoon, much to Call's chagrin, and Gus's amusement.

The trail presents uncertainty, danger, fear, wonder, and joy. The men (and Lorena) must live off the land and sleep under the stars, battle deadly snakes and remain wary of hostile Indians, endure sandstorms and blizzards, cross dangerous rivers and waterless wastes, and wind their way from Texas through the Oklahoma Territory, Kansas, and Nebraska, and ultimately on to Montana.

Through it all, Gus and Call maintain the law, punish the lawless (even friends), and attend old emotional wounds. And the Hat Creek Cattle Company continues northward in search of the cattleman's paradise where fortunes can be made. Gus meanwhile dreams of encountering in Nebraska his lost love, Clara. Newt dreams of proving himself a good cowboy in the eyes of his lifelong standards for manhood, Augustus “Gus” McCrae and Woodrow Call. The journey both builds and destroys men, and leaves young Newt a life he had not imagined.

Chapter Two: Archetypes and the Western American Myth

In his semi-autobiographical work, *Walter Benjamin and the Diary Queen*, Larry McMurtry discusses his youth on the family's ranch, and how this experience helped him write *Lonesome Dove*. He was the son and grandson of cattle people, and a voracious reader and moviegoer who “knew both the literature and movies that had exalted the

frontier myth.”⁹ McMurtry was uniquely prepared to retell a story that both “laments and dramatizes the contradictory stories of those now mythic figures”—the Texas Rangers.¹⁰

McMurtry’s heroes, Gus and Call, are in many ways different from those “mythical” heroes I experienced as a young child. These two characters often vacillate between anti-hero and mythic super-hero status. Gus in particular is often lazy, as is so wonderfully demonstrated in the first hundred pages or so of *Lonesome Dove*. They struggle with everyday problems, like the rest of us. And they are not immune to death. Jake Spoon is hung by his two closest friends, and Gus is felled by infection from an Indian arrow lodged too long in his leg. James H. Maguire notes in *Columbia History of the American Novel* that “it seems as if McMurtry was trying to drive a stake through the heart of the Hollywood myth that the good guys always rode off unharmed into the sunset.”¹¹

All of McMurtry’s anti-mythic groundwork and his refusal to glorify the West, work to reinforce the strength of the traditionally mythic parts of *Lonesome Dove* by making it far more credible than the “old familiar horse operas.”¹² In the end, McMurtry presents “well-rounded archetypes who represent an enormous cross section of the Western American myth.”¹³

His brilliance as a writer has been almost unanimously recognized by critics. The novel quickly became a *New York Times* bestseller, and then a hugely successful television mini-series that won seven Emmy Awards. The novel’s language is clear and

⁹ Ibid, pg. 181.

¹⁰ Ibid, pg. 181.

¹¹ Maguire, James H. “Fiction of the West.” *The Columbia History of the American Novel*. Gen. Ed. Emory Elliot. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, pg. 461.

¹² Reynolds, Clay, ed. *Taking Stock: A Larry McMurtry Casebook*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1989, pg. 327.

¹³ Ibid, pg. 332.

compelling, bristling with humor, compassion, and witty dialogue. And although it employs many conventional Western myths, most readers never feel that the storyline is derivative or unreal. To the contrary. After reading the novel so many times, I feel as if these characters—Gus, Call, Jake, Deets, Pea Eye, and Newt—may have really existed in a time and place other than the imagination of Larry McMurtry. His descriptions alone of everyday life on the plains are compelling just in the telling of how tedious, grimy, and unromantic life could really be. All of the characterizations occur through the voice of the third-person narrator, who also manages the “appearance and disappearance of characters, arranges the parallels of their lives and the chronology of their experienced, and by the insinuations of descriptive language directs readers toward a predetermined interpretation of the characters and their stories.”¹⁴

Even the action in *Lonesome Dove* seems quite real, thanks to McMurtry’s unique prose style. Tragedies are never sugar-coated, and heroic actions are rarely glorified. McMurtry uses these character-driven moments to both write a novel of enormous depth and complexity, and exemplify the untamed American west.

Richard Erdoes believes that myths are “indications of a people’s soul and character,” and that “legends become a nation’s fate.”¹⁵ It could even be argued that the Western myth has become America’s fate.

In his study *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Richard Slotkin defines myth more specifically: “Myths are stories drawn from a society’s history that have acquired through persistent usage the power of symbolizing that society’s ideology and of dramatizing its moral consciousness—with all the

¹⁴ Reilly, John. *Larry McMurtry: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000, pg. 110.

¹⁵ Erdoes, Richard, ed. *Tales from the American Frontier*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1991, pg. xv.

complexities and contradictions that consciousness may contain.”¹⁶ The myth of the frontier is the longest-lived of American myths, with a “powerful continuing presence in contemporary culture.”¹⁷ Thomas J. Lyon in *The Oxford History of the American West* writes: “Instantly and internationally recognizable, the cowboy is now a national symbol for America, and not just for its western states.”¹⁸

Clearly, the American cowboy myth continues to serve the American imagination—in books and films, music and politics. Myths that millions of American men, like myself, have grown up with, identified with, and accepted as truth. In a sense, these frontiersmen from the novel *Lonesome Dove* represent all that we men in contemporary society consider to be proper masculine behavior: Strength, courage, loyalty, resourcefulness, a moral conscience. The trail drive becomes, in effect, a way of examining at least one fundamental question: is it the way we men live that matters?

Chapter Three: Newt and the Hat Creek Cattle Company

In the book *Across the Great Divide*, the editors and writers make an attempt to examine the construction of manhood in the American West. “The western expanse represented not a temporary respite but a permanent place where men shaped or were molded by the daily rounds of work, family life, and community,”¹⁹ writes Laura McCall in her introduction. McCall further explains that the American West emerged as a

¹⁶ Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Atheneum, Maxwell MacMillan International, 1992, pg. ??

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 15.

¹⁸ Lyon, Thomas J. “The Literary West.” *The Oxford History of the American West*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, pg. 790.

¹⁹ Brasso, Matthew and Laura McCall/Dee Garceau. *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*. New York? Routledge, 2001, pg. 6.

pluralistic region where “competing notions of manhood played out in encounters among ethnic and racial cultures, classes, and genders.”²⁰

These so-called competing notions of manhood in the novel *Lonesome Dove* clearly point to a certain flexibility in the concept of manhood. Each male character handles the perils and promises of the frontier in his own way, according to his own paradigm of manhood—whether it’s the aging Texas Rangers or some sheriff and his deputy, a renegade Indian and his war pups or a surly bartender. Many of these men stand for discipline, self-control, and physical courage, as “lightning rods of manhood and masculinity, surrounded by morality, justices, and virtue, manly values advanced by the community.”²¹

We’re first introduced to young Newt at the Hat Creek Cattle Company in *Lonesome Dove*, where he lives with retired Texas rangers Augusts “Gus” McCrae and Woodrow Call, and two other ranch hands, Josh Deets and Pea Eye. Although we don’t know it just yet (and neither does Newt), he is the child of Call and the prostitute Maggie, a woman who died years earlier. Newt’s fondest hope is to become old enough to be taken along by the older men on raids into the darkness of Mexico, to return at sunup with thirty or forty horses or perhaps hundreds of cattle. “You can go when you’re grown,”²² is all Call ever promises the boy.

Newt is the physical embodiment of these flexible concepts of manhood. Having lost his mother early in life, Newt is raised by two thoroughly masculine men, albeit with their own set of unconventional behaviors. The long-absent Jake Spoon is more a father-figure to Newt than anyone else. Mr. Gus is more the fun-uncle; although strong-willed,

²⁰ Ibid, pg. 7.

²¹ Ibid, “Cool to the End: Public Hangings and Western Manhood” by Durwood Ball, pg. 103.

²² McMurtry, Larry. *Lonesome Dove*. New York: Pocket Books, 1985, pg. 13.

courageous and loyal, Mr. Gus, unlike Call, is philosophical, compassionate and emotional. It is Captain Call, though, that Newt most admires and feared, all in the same breath. Call is the leader, the captain—strong-willed, stubborn, courageous and loyal. His biggest flaw, though, is his refusal to admit to himself (and later his son Newt) that he once exhibited “human weakness through his attraction to the whore, Maggie, a union that ultimately produced Newt.”²³ In describing these two individuals, Gus and Call, McMurtry plumbs the significance of their male bonding and describes them as exerting the biggest influence over young Newt’s developing years.

Of course, not all the young men on the trail drive prove to be the “fearless heroes” we know from television and the movie screen.²⁴ For many of them, the first trail drive is an initiation ritual, of sorts, a test of their moxie and personal drive, just as it is for Newt.

Gus and Call are well aware that they’re leaving Lonesome Dove with a camp full of scared, young men. Naturally, these young men face many dangers on the drive. They’re scared of crossing rivers, scared of Indians, scared of dust storms and lightning. They cry over their fallen comrades. They are, in fact, entirely anti-mythic, at least as compared to Hollywood cowboys. McMurtry’s honest descriptions of young men in fear of the many dangers confronting them makes James H. Maguire believe that “paradoxically, *Lonesome Dove* resuscitates interest in the Old West by making it more believable. And ultimately includes passages of “metaphysical questioning and angst.”²⁵

²³ Busby, Mark, *Ibid*, pg. 190-191.

²⁴ Robertson, James Oliver, *Ibid*, pgs. 80-81.

²⁵ Maguire, James H., *Ibid*, pg. 460.

Chapter Four: The Nature of Manhood in the Untamed West

These moments of “metaphysical questions and angst” are certainly not lost on young Newt, who from the opening chapter of *Lonesome Dove* wants nothing more than to be old enough to start wearing a gun, old enough to be taken along on the raids into the darkness, old enough to fall in love with Lorena Wood (“the very summit of his life hopes”²⁶), old enough to become a top hand, old enough to see a buffalo. But “it was all romance to him.”²⁷ That is, until the day Jake Spoon rides into town, and blathers about traveling through Montana—a cattleman’s paradise. And thus begins the cattle drive, the path by which young Newt finds himself. And like most mythic heroes, Newt must also leave home and venture into unknown territory to prove himself and acquire his adult, heroic identity.

Newt has no blood family, as far as he knows. I make this preliminary point because it seems to me that all young men need families, or at least strong role models. And it’s Captain Call who treats Newt with fatherly concern, constantly looking out for his welfare, observes Mark Busby in *Larry McMurtry and the West: An Ambivalent Relationship*. On the other hand, Call’s “macho and perverted” system of values, will not allow him to “acknowledge his own humanity or to embrace his son and give him his name.”²⁸ In the end, it’s this “macho” attitude and “perverted” system of values that leaves Newt alone and embittered about his journey into manhood.

Newt’s mind constantly dwells on the drive north. Once he had been to a “city,” to Matagorda, where he had seen the great gray ocean. “But even that had not stirred him so much as the thought of the north. All his life he had heard talk of the plains that had no

²⁶ McMurtry, Larry. *Lonesome Dove*. New York: Pocket Books, 1985, pg. 23.

²⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 16.

²⁸ Busby, Mark, *Ibid*, pgs. 190-191.

end, and of Indians and buffalo and snow and great bears and deer-like creatures called elk. He imagined himself and his horse out in a sea of grass, chasing buffalo. He could scare himself to the point where his breath came short, just imaging the great thick bears.”²⁹ The trail, of course, becomes the cause of much uncertainty, danger, and fear for Newt and the other cowboys: water moccasins kill Newt’s best friend Sean, sand and lightning storms wreak havoc with the herd, Indians steal their horses, Lorena is kidnapped by the half-breed bandit Blue Duck, and Jake Spoon is hung by his friends.

As early as 1979, McMurtry spoke of working on a trail-drive novel, telling Patrick Bennett, author of *Talking with Texas Writers*: “It seems to me that the trail drives were an extremely crucial experience, odd in that the whole period of the trail drives was so extremely brief, and yet out of it grew such an extraordinary potent myth.”

Mark Busby makes the argument in his book, *Larry McMurtry and the West: An Ambivalent Relationship*, that McMurtry emphasizes that the “end of the line is less important than the journey itself, and each character having a different reason for the exercise.”³⁰ For Newt, it is to become a man who can survive in the untamed west, who can carry himself with the same self-assurance as his boyhood heroes—Captain Call, Gus McCrae, and Jake Spoon.

Chapter Five: The Hanging of Jake Spoon

As mentioned earlier, Jake Spoon is more a father-figure to Newt than anyone else in the novel. When Newt was just a spud, it was Jake who had give him candy, pennies, and his first pair of boots; and had given him his first ride on a pacing horse, and

²⁹ McMurtry, Larry. Ibid, pgs. 199-200.

³⁰ Busby, Mark. Ibid, pg. 195.

once, when Jake won a lady's saddle in a card game, he gave the saddle to Newt and had the stirrups cut down to his size. Midway through the novel, though, Jake Spoon drifts away from the Hat Creek crew and falls in with a squalid crew known as "the Suggs brothers," whom he continued to accompany even as they engaged in wanton thievery and cold-blooded murder. McMurtry arranges matters so that ultimately Gus and Call, their tracker Deets, and Newt must embark on a manhunt that leads them to the Suggs brothers—and to Spoon.

"Initially, Spoon's spirits rise when he hears the voices of his old *companeros*. "

"'I ain't done nothing.' Spoon tells his old crew 'I just fell in with these boys to get through the territory. I was aiming to leave them first chance I got.'"

"'You should have made a chance a little sooner, Jake,' Gus says. 'A man that will go along with six killings is making his escape a little slow.'"³¹

Spoon definitely is an accomplice to a number of senseless thefts and murders, though he neither approved of, nor wished to participate in them. But Spoon's death is foretold "by the Rangers code of justice—which the three Rangers together used to fight to uphold."³² When Spoon protests that it is Dan Suggs who did all the killing, Gus replies: "'We'll hang him for the killings and the rest of you for horse thievery. Out in these parts the punishment's the same, as you well know. Ride with an outlaw, die with him. I admit it's a harsh code. But you rode on the other side long enough to know how it works. I'm sorry you crossed the line, though.'"

³¹ McMurtry, Larry. *Ibid*, pg. 636.

³² Jones, Roger Walter. *Larry McMurtry and the Victorian Novel*. Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1994, pg. 41.

“‘I didn’t see no line, Gus.’ Spoon replies. ‘I was just trying to get to Kansas without getting scalped.’”³³

Newt always looked up to Jake Spoon and, in fact, liked to think of him as his father. Jake had given him his first hard candy, his first pacing horse and saddle with the stirrups cut down to his size. Jake is also the only one who could make Newt’s mother smile, as far as he could remember. Yet Newt is the one who saddles the men’s horses for the hanging. He feels numb from all that he has seen.

“‘Have we got to hang Jake too?’ he asked. ‘He was my ma’s friend.’

“‘Yes, he’s guilty with the rest of them,’ Call said. Any judge would hang him.’”³⁴

It is this experience in Newt’s life that caused him to question everything he had ever thought about the type of man Jake had become. It made him want to cry. And then Jake offered to give Newt the pacer after he’s hanged. “Before he got the thanks out, Jake Spoon had quickly spurred his pacing horse high back in the flanks with both spurs. The rope squeaked against the bark of the limb. Augustus stepped over and caught the swinging body and held it still.”³⁵ It took several days before Newt felt comfortable enough to ride Jake’s horse, but no one seemed to have anything to say about the hanging. Call said less and less to him, or to anyone. It had become like a “terrible dream, of the kind you can only remember parts of.”³⁶

It pained Newt to think of Jake as an outlaw, this man who once he held to the highest position a young man can bestow upon another man—father. It isn’t a thing Newt

³³ McMurtry, Larry. Ibid, pg. 637

³⁴ Ibid, pgs. 637-638.

³⁵ Ibid, pg. 641.

³⁶ Ibid, pgs. 637-638.

could easily forget. “Pea Eye mentioned it as he would mention the weather, something natural that just happened and was over. Only for Newt it wasn’t over. Every day it would rise in his mind and stay there until something distracted him.”³⁷ It could be argued that there’s no greater betrayal in a young man’s passage into manhood than to be betrayed by one’s own concept of a father-figure. But Jake was really never much of a father-figure to young Newt, although he did bestow upon the boy a minimal amount of paternal gifts (candy, pennies, boots, etc.). Newt had mostly built up in his mind this image of Jake as his “real” father. Jake was always more of a person who swayed with the wind. When Newt was younger, he never observed this side of Jake’s personality. Now that Newt is older, and learning about the so-called laws of the West, his concept of how a man should conduct himself in life sways with the wind, as well, as one of the most important male role models in his life comes to a disgraceful ending.

Chapter Six: The Last Frontiersman of ‘Lonesome Dove’

The final chapter in Newt’s passage into manhood comes toward the end of the novel, after the hanging of Jake Spoon, and after the wounding and eventual death of Mr. Gus. Here again, Newt must deal with the death of a second male role model in his life. And although Gus was more of an uncle to Newt than father, his passing left Newt crying all afternoon, and wishing the Indians had killed them all—having it happen one at a time was “too much to bear,”³⁸ and it was happening to the those few men in his life who had always served as his male role models.

³⁷ Ibid, pg. 694.

³⁸ Ibid, pgs. 886-887.

The Hat Creek outfit finally makes it past the Yellowstone River to upper Montana, where they began to build houses and corrals, water wells and smokehouses. It is at this point, in Montana, that Newt really begins to wonder about the so-called male role-models in his life. Throughout the novel, McMurtry leads readers to wonder first about the identity of Newt's father, and then, after making it clear that Newt's father is Call, when Call will accept Newt as his son.³⁹

Call's ambivalent behavior causes Newt a lot of heartache and confusion. On the one hand, "Call treats Newt with fatherly concern, constantly looking out for his welfare and reacting with uncontrolled violence when an Army scout in Ogallala quirts Newt across the face. On the other hand, his macho and, McMurtry suggests, perverted system of values, will now allow him to acknowledge his own humanity or to embrace his son and give him his name."⁴⁰

Newt has some inclination that Captain Call is his father. Mr. Gus once had a sit-down with Newt about it, after the tracker Deets is suddenly and violently killed. For the first time Newt feels it might be true that Captain Call is his father, although he is somewhat puzzled by it. "If the Captain is his father, then he must have known his mother, but he had never mentioned that either. He could remember times when he had daydreamed that the Captain is his father and would take him on long trips. Now, in a way, the daydream had come true. The Captain had taken him on a long trip. But instead of feeling proud and happy, he felt let down and confused."⁴¹ Doubtless, this conflation of the "imagined" father and the "constructed" father leaves Newt questioning why no one, not even his mother, had mentioned it before. "The information just seemed to make

³⁹ Busby, Mark. Pg. 194.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pgs. 190-191.

⁴¹ McMurtry, Larry. Pgs. 833-834.

his whole life more puzzling. It spoiled every good thing he had felt, for most of his life - not only about his mother, but about the Captain, and about the Hat Creek outfit as a whole.”⁴² The news actually left him feeling more sad and alone than he had ever felt in his life.

And yet there comes a time in the novel when it appears as though Captain Call will finally acknowledge his bastard son. Newt becomes a top hand on the Montana ranch—wrangling horses, working without complaint. And he had “filled out physically during the year and could work all day energetically and accomplish more than more of the men.”⁴³ Captain Call enjoyed watching the boy work, and knew it would be chancy to leave a seventeen-year-old in charge of a group of grown men, but he grew increasingly proud of Newt, who is puzzled at first by the attention he receives from Captain Call, but eventually feels proud that the Captain likes to watch him work.

Here, perhaps, for the first time in Newt’s young life, he feels the presence of that father-figure he had always dreamed about. The Captain seems to be giving him more and more of the responsibility for the work. Newt even starts to feel as though Mr. Gus must have been right—the Captain just might be his father. On some afternoons, he feels almost sure of it and begins to expect that the Captain will tell him soon, and this thought makes him very happy.

But the cold and windy day comes when Captain Call decides to take Gus’ dead body back to Texas. The Captain approaches, riding the “Hell Bitch,” his horse, his prize possession. He hands Newt the reins, asks him to saddle her, then removes the boy’s Winchester from the saddle scabbard and replaces it with his own Henry rifle. Ultimately,

⁴² Ibid, pg. 834.

⁴³ Ibid, pg. 914.

though, Call can't bring himself to verbally acknowledge Newt as his son, and this leaves Newt feeling sadder than he had ever felt in his life. "Just go on, he wanted to say. Go on, if it's that hard. He didn't want the Captain to go on, of course. He felt too young; he didn't want to be left with it all. He felt he couldn't bear what was happening, it was so surprising. Five minutes before, he had been pulling a yearling out of a bog. Now the Captain had given him his horse and his gun, and stood with a look of suffering on his face."⁴⁴

Here is a seventeen-year-old male in the American West who ends up disappointed not once, but twice, by the two father figures in life he admired most: Jake Spoon and Woodrow Call. Call looked at Newt one last time, then handed him an old pocket watch his own father had given him. "It was my pa's," is all he says, and then he turns and leaves.

"Dern, Newt," Pea Eye said, more astonished than he had ever been in his life. "He gave you his horse, and his gun and that watch. He acts like you're his kin."

"No, I ain't kin to nobody in this world," Newt said bitterly. "I don't want to be." Captain Call is gone, and life will never be as Newt hoped.⁴⁵

Call cannot bring himself to speak the word of acknowledgment that will pass authority on to his son and bring a new order into Newt's life; his pride seems to get in the way. He can't admit to himself that once in his life he made a mistake with a woman who loved him. There's a sense here that Call has done all that he's physically capable of doing to acknowledge Newt as his son, but Newt wants more: he wants to know that he was fathered by the one man in his life he most admired. And with despair in his heart, "he mounted the Hell Bitch as if he had ridden her for years, and turned downstream. He felt he

⁴⁴ Ibid, pg. 918-923.

⁴⁵ Ibid, pgs. 918-923.

never wanted to hope for anything again, and yet no more than a minute later the strange hope struck him that the Captain might have turned back. He might have forgotten something—perhaps an order he had meant to give. Even that he would have welcomed. It felt so lonely to think of the Captain being gone. But when he turned back, the Captain was merely a speck on the long plain. He was gone, and things would never be as Newt hoped - never. Somehow it had been too hard for the Captain, and he had left.”⁴⁶

Conclusion

Uva Unam Vivendo Varia Fit is a Latin phrase that appears on the Hat Creek Cattle Company sign that travels from the Rio Grande to the Montana Highlands, and back. Although I’m not entirely sure this phrase has ever been properly translated (or that it can be; Gus’ command of Latin is suspect, at best), in the context of the novel it is meant to denote the changing vine becoming the living vine: men initiate change so that they might all grow as, well, men.

Newt is the physical embodiment of these flexible concepts of manhood, only his *change* is fraught mostly with loss: the loss of his mother; the loss of Jake Spoon, his idealized version of a father-figure; the loss of Mr. Gus; and the loss of Captain Call, who in the end refuses to acknowledge Newt as his son. When Newt claims he *ain’t* kin to nobody in this world, he’s not just speaking literally but also metaphorically.

Despite all of McMurtry’s anti-mythic groundwork and his refusal to glorify the West, in the end, Newt ends up personifying the mythic Western pioneer—riding the range, hungry and alone. And it is through the legacy of young Newt that the vine continues to grow, although, sadly, the transition from adolescence to adulthood turns

⁴⁶ Ibid, pg. 922-923.

into more of a failed coming-of-age story, as he is left alone and embittered by the two men he most admired, and by the painful lessons he learned on becoming a man.

In effect, Newt's purpose in life as an adult becomes our purpose in life as men—to survive the everyday struggles of living in a world that's not always kind and considerate, fair and forgiving. We men in contemporary society may not have to live off the land or battle hostile Indians or endure sandstorms and blizzards, but these are just metaphors for the other kinds of suffering we all go through, such as being left alone to find our own purpose in life. Newt was left alone to find his own purpose, and ultimately, this could be the one shared experience among men that makes us, well, men—finding our purpose. In the end, it's how we live that matters.

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