

The Interrelationship of Literature, History, and Geography in Western Writing

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When asked what the American West is, a geographer might reply that it is the area lying west of the Mississippi River, or perhaps mostly west of the ninety-eighth meridian. He might add that the area consists chiefly of plains, deserts, and mountains, and that, having but few areas of high precipitation, it is largely an arid or semiarid region. To the same question an American historian might refer to the ninety-eighth meridian and to Walter Prescott Webb's correlation of the environmental and historical fault lines. If he were deeply concerned with changes in human attitudes, however, the historian might view the West in a larger sense, realizing that to the early colonists the West began with the Connecticut Valley, or perhaps the Blue Ridge Mountains, or the Shenandoah Valley. Also, the West once meant wilderness. And the West was "frontier," generally a moving frontier, having moved earlier not through dry lands, such as those beyond the ninety-eighth meridian, but through rolling, forested, and well-watered areas of the present-day East. Finally, though, in the process of the westward movement, the geographical West and the historical West merged as the frontier moved through an area that *was* west and has *remained* west. While the West shrank, the East expanded, and the westward movement gradually reduced the concept of what was west until the West occupied about one-half of the continent.

The hypothetical geographer and the hypothetical historian were probably both right in their first impulses. The ninety-eighth meridian marks the approximate beginning of the "final" West, an area with striking contrasts to the older Wests of, say, the Blue Ridge Mountains or of Kentucky. But these striking contrasts stem more from geographical than historical factors. For instance, the Rocky Mountains have only minor counterparts east of the Mississippi, while the vast arid and semi-

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arid regions of the West have no parallel at all in the East. However, historical counterparts do exist. The major extractive frontier industries, such as farming, fur trading, mining, and even ranching, all had their beginnings in the East. And today, studies of western history sometimes view the West's development as a process of "easternizing," which involves maturing and exchanging the older, simpler life of the frontier for the more complex and sophisticated ways of the East. The geographical differences mark the fundamental distinction between East and West, on which many lesser historical differences are largely based.

Broader and more expansive than the geographer's or the historian's views of the West, yet closely related to them, is the literary concept — the West of the imagination, the West as a "state of mind," an abstraction involving such ideas as innocence, rebirth, and freedom. In this sense, the terms *West* and *frontier* are frequently used synonymously, connoting, as Wilson Clough has written, "a compound of the original drive to found Utopias and Edens in an unspoiled setting, and the equally radical discovery of the emancipation of the average individual."¹ An important aspect of this concept, particularly for literature, is that precisely on the frontier these abstractions are first confronted and challenged by the reality of experience. The frontier is, then, the meeting point between myth and the more concrete reality of the western experience, the point where the Utopias and Edens begin to fade into contemporary social conditions and tensions. Furthermore, like Utopias and Edens, the historical frontier was elusive, continually moving toward its final geographical and historical setting in the West. The final West, having its wild and strange geography and holding the last vanishing traces of the historical frontier, thus secured, more than ever before and to a far greater degree than any other area, the mythology, symbolism, and imagery associated with the frontier. The geographical, historical, and literary concepts of both the frontier and the West find their greatest unity in the area beyond the ninety-eighth meridian.

The image of the West in the American mind is partly revealed in western literature. As in the case of the West itself, a consideration of western literature involves both historical and geographical qualifications. Although the terms are often used interchangeably, western literature and frontier literature are not always identical. Generally, the term *frontier*

¹ Wilson O. Clough, *The Necessary Earth: Nature and Solitude in American Literature* (Austin, 1964), 146.

literature applies only when the characters and plot are involved with the historical frontier, or at most the early postfrontier period. And that frontier literature is not always western in nature is evidenced in such works as Kenneth Roberts's *Arundel*, which does not relate a feeling of the West or of westering while reliving Benedict Arnold's trek north along the Maine frontier toward Quebec.² But, in his *Northwest Passage*, Roberts describes the expedition to Michilimackinac and beyond to the upper Missouri, where it was believed the "Shining Mountains could be reached and crossed; the great River Oregon could be descended to the Western Ocean."³ In this episode the author conveys a strong awareness of actually going to the mysterious West. When treating the frontier, therefore, these two novels differ considerably with respect to the West.

The term *western literature* involves most, but not all, frontier literature. While it does not include works such as *Arundel*, it does include other stories with settings on the early frontiers of the present-day East, such as in James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking series. However, as the frontier approaches the Mississippi and moves far beyond it, the related literature becomes even more western. For example, in A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s trilogy, *The Big Sky*, *The Way West*, and *These Thousand Hills*, the geographical setting enhances the mood, or the state of mind, to make the works thoroughly western, more so than Cooper's novels, which often are of a somewhat similar mood, but are almost always of a geographical setting much farther to the East.⁴

In its association with the frontier, western literature can involve many different parts of the country; yet, when concerned with the period after the frontier had moved into the plains and mountains, western literature then becomes closely associated with the particular western geographical settings. Significantly, though, it is then no longer necessarily confined to stories involving just the frontier period or the early postfrontier period. Once in the West, western literature becomes more and more identified with geographical place and setting and less confined to stories involving frontier history. Western literature then becomes a

² Kenneth Roberts, *Arundel: A Chronicle of the Province of Maine and of the Secret Expedition against Quebec* (Garden City, 1941).

³ Kenneth Roberts, *Northwest Passage* (Garden City, 1938), 595.

⁴ A. B. Guthrie, Jr., *The Big Sky* (New York, 1947); *The Way West* (New York, 1949); *These Thousand Hills* (Boston, 1956). Also see James K. Folsom, *The American Western Novel* (New Haven, 1966), 64-70, for a comparison of attitudes and characters found in Cooper's and Guthrie's works.

valid term for many stories with settings in the mountains, the prairies, or the plains of the trans-Mississippi West, and with time periods anywhere from the frontier period, through the early postfrontier, and up to the present day. This fits the more contemporary tales particularly well, however, when they involve a close association with the landscapes of the West and when the major characters seek their fortunes in such extractive industries as farming or ranching, which do have the added advantage of harkening back into history and to old frontier pursuits. A modern story about suburbanites living in Denver or Seattle would not necessarily be western, but a work such as Arthur Miller's *The Misfits*, about modern-day horse wranglers, does fit into the category of western literature.⁵ The same is true for John Steinbeck's *The Red Pony*, as well as to some extent his *The Grapes of Wrath*.⁶ The latter work, generally considered to be a novel of the depression, involves midwestern farmers of the twentieth century who trek westward seeking a new start in California, the would-be safety valve for depressed Oklahomans of the 1930s. The geographical locale, the agrarian pursuits of the Joad family, the direction of travel, the quest for a new home and a new start in the West — all of these characteristics are commonly found in western literature.

While the geography and the history of the West have received much attention from scholars, the recent scholarship indicates a developing interest in the West of the imagination, quite often with the focus directly on literature. This interest comes far more from literary critics and individuals professionally trained in the field of literature than from professional historians. The most original of all the studies involving western literature is Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land*, which deals specifically with the concept of the West in American thought.⁷ In this work, Smith, a professor of English, effectively uses both major and minor works of literature in substantiating his arguments. *Virgin Land* has been followed by other studies involving the West in the American mind, and western literature has become an important tool in the effort to understand both western history and the national character.⁸

⁵ Arthur Miller, *The Misfits* (New York, 1961).

⁶ John Steinbeck, *The Red Pony* (New York, 1937); *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York, 1939).

⁷ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, 1950).

⁸ Earlier works include Percy H. Boynton, *The Rediscovery of the Frontier* (Chicago, 1931) and Lucy Lockwood Hazard, *The Frontier in American Literature*

Traditionally, professional historians have tended to ignore both the major and minor literary works concerned with the West. This reflects a lack of interest in western literature and the tendency of many professors to stress economic, political, and military aspects of western history. Also some historians consider literature not "true" and thus useless as a tool for historical interpretation. And those historians who want color and romance often feel that they have enough available without resorting to literature. The works of such important writers as Garland, Rolvaag, or Guthrie have received little attention in western history monographs and perhaps then only in a brief comment on their artistic merits or as an occasional illustration to show that some area has produced artistic talent.⁹ Until recently the minor literary works of the West have been of almost no interest at all. Rarely, then, have professional historians used western literature in an integrated and interpretative way for historical analysis. An early exception to this is Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains*, in which he discusses the literature of the area and its relationship to the land and the people.¹⁰ Webb was one of the first professional historians to show a serious interest in using western literature for historical analysis,

(New York, 1927). The best recent work is James K. Folsom, *The American Western Novel* (New Haven, 1966). See also Nicholas J. Karolides, *The Pioneer in the American Novel, 1900-1950* (Norman, 1967); Robert Edson Lee, *From West to East: Studies in the Literature of the American West* (Urbana, 1966); Arthur K. Moore, *The Frontier Mind: A Cultural Analysis of the Kentucky Frontiersman* (Lexington, 1957); and Harold P. Simonson, *The Closed Frontier: Studies in American Literary Tragedy* (New York, 1970). For works which concentrate very little on western literature, but do relate to the impact of the West on the thinking of some of America's leading literary figures, see Clough, *The Necessary Earth*; Edwin Fussell, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (Princeton, 1965); and R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1955).

⁹ For example, writing about a state that has produced important literary figures, James C. Olson, in his *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1955), quotes at length from Willa Cather's essay, "Nebraska," from *American Is West: An Anthology of Middlewestern Life and Literature*, ed. John T. Flanagan (Minneapolis, 1945), 618-25. See Olson, 259, 295, 348. But he discusses Cather's novels and short stories in three brief, matter-of-fact sentences, 356-57; Mari Sandoz's literature receives about equal notice, 357. Two reviews of Sandoz's *Old Jules* (Boston, 1935) provide an interesting comparison for their widely different attitudes. See Roy M. Robbins's review in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XXIII (September 1936), 283-84, and Bernard DeVoto, "A Violent, Fighting Pioneer," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 13 (November 2, 1935), 5-6.

¹⁰ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Boston, 1931). See chapter 10, 453-83.

a significant contribution which has been largely overlooked because of other aspects of *The Great Plains*.

For scholars in either literature or history, it has been the nature of western studies to have close ties to geography. The frontier movement always involved to a large extent a search for the most rudimentary geographical potential of a given area, hopefully resulting in the production of such items as gold, silver, furs, cattle, or farm goods. In a largely subhumid to arid area, such as the West, the frontier economy was often very experimental and risky; thus, the inhabitants were likely to develop an even more intense relationship to the environment. And beyond the frontier period, the West remains in large part an area of extractive industries. For these reasons, frontier and western history have much in common with historical geography. It is then more understandable why many of the leading American historians with a very deep interest in geography have been western historians and, similarly, why many prominent western historians have been attracted to geographical "forces," or environmentalism.

The careers of both Frederick Jackson Turner and Francis Parkman provide examples of the combined interests of geography and western history. Probably the outstanding example is found in the works of Bernard DeVoto, one of the most geographically oriented of all leading American historians. A native westerner and a man of considerable literary ability, DeVoto reveals his concern with the interaction of geography and history in his frontier trilogy, *Across the Wide Missouri*, *The Year of Decision, 1846*, and *The Course of Empire*.¹¹ Particularly in the latter work, geography is of singular importance. The entire book concerns the efforts of four nations—Spain, France, England, and the United States—to push back the "mist" of ignorance hiding the geography and to explore the mysteries of the continental landforms. Throughout the trilogy DeVoto traces the constant movement of men across the face of the continent, thus expressing his continuing interest in the relationship of men and nations to the geography of North America.

Finally, one of the most prominent of all western historians, Walter Prescott Webb, established his reputation with his study of the effects of geography on the early settlers of the plains. Webb's personal experience—his own emotional response to the change in landscape—affected

¹¹ Bernard DeVoto, *Across the Wide Missouri* (Boston, 1947); *The Year of Decision, 1846* (Boston, 1943); *The Course of Empire* (Boston, 1952).

the development of his thought regarding *The Great Plains*. Once, when asked when he had begun preparing to write *The Great Plains*, he replied, "I began at the age of four when my father left the humid East and set his family down in West Texas, in the very edge of the open, arid country which stretched north and west farther than a boy could imagine."¹²

The geographical influence on the writing of western history has resulted in some of the most stimulating ideas in the entire field, while at the same time it has prompted numerous romantic attitudes among historians. During the course of the development of western historiography, some of the most controversial and thought-provoking writings have themselves had strong romantic elements, such as found in the works of Webb or Turner. The association of geography and romantic attitudes is often noted, for instance, in discussions of Turner's ideas. David Noble has written that Turner was a geographic determinist who "believed that the spiritual force of the universe had found fulfillment within the context of America's geography."¹³ In general, the emphasis on geographical factors in western historical writing has raised much criticism, especially regarding romantic attitudes. Earl Pomeroy has said that too frequently historians "tend to concentrate on those aspects of the West where the impact of environment is clearest and sharpest"¹⁴ and that many assume that the "physical environment has dominated western life and has made the West rough and radical."¹⁵ According to Pomeroy, "The trapper, the prospector, and the cowboy, moving picturesquely over a background of clean air and great distances, hold us more than the tycoons and corporations that dominated them and the Rocky Mountain country."¹⁶

Although it has been misused at times, and although there are many other aspects of western history, the western geography has been of unusual importance for historians. The extractive nature of the frontier and western economies and the overriding problem of aridity in the West are central factors throughout western history. And geography has had an important role in western history whether the historians are treat-

¹² Walter Prescott Webb, "History as High Adventure," in *An Honest Preface and Other Essays* (Boston, 1959), 206.

¹³ David Noble, *Historians against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing since 1830* (Minneapolis, 1965), 41.

¹⁴ Earl Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History: Continuity and Environment," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLI (March 1955), 581.

¹⁵ Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History," 579.

¹⁶ Pomeroy, "Toward a Reorientation of Western History," 589.

ing the "real" West or the West of the imagination, with the realities of its psychological impact. Those historians dealing with how the Americans have viewed their West often become involved with the effect of geographical forces on the imagination. These factors indicate why the particular concern with geography exists and that factors of a specifically geographical nature have been of greater and more continuing importance in western history than in the history of any other section of the United States.

Besides its effect on historical thought, geography has had an unusually significant influence on western literature. In a very perceptive article, Thomas Hornsby Ferril discusses the geographical setting of the West, which he sees as a distraction for western writers.¹⁷ Ferril, a Colorado poet, has known the West and contended with its special powers. He claims that, in the immense physical setting of the West, literary artists are tempted to create characters of a proportionate size. Referring to what he calls "landscape mysticism," Ferril says the artists tend to see the country as "so big, only God could have caused it," and thus "only supermen can cope with it."¹⁸ And since the pioneer ancestors successfully coped with it, they themselves become superhuman objects of worship. He believes the landscape mysticism of "God's country" can permanently distract the mediocre writer and handicap even the very best talent.¹⁹

Greater dimension can be given to Ferril's argument by a consideration of a unique combination of geographical and historical factors, which affected the image of the West and which in turn has influenced western writing. There is a subtle paradox in the history of the westward movement. As the Americans moved beyond the Mississippi, they began to encounter a larger and more imposing landscape — the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, the Great Basin, and finally the Sierra Nevada. This geography, with its distances, its aridity, and its wild mountain ranges, appeared to provide a new and more formidable challenge than had the eastern landforms. The very size of the West, plus the topography and the subhumid conditions, presented special challenges. The paradox is that, despite the impressive challenges of the West, the American conquest of this area came spectacularly and rapidly. Demographic factors and improved technology help explain this, but nevertheless the trans-

¹⁷ Thomas Hornsby Ferril, "Writing in the Rockies," in *Rocky Mountain Reader*, ed. Ray B. West, Jr. (New York, 1946), 395–403.

¹⁸ Ferril, "Writing in the Rockies," 396.

¹⁹ Ferril, "Writing in the Rockies," 401.

Mississippi frontier experience produced a very strong image in the American mind. The conquest of the West represented a high point of American expansion. And the geography, as well as the perceived geographical challenges, added significantly to the overall imagery, as America gained a larger identity and a greater self-assurance.

As a result, in the westward movement history paralleled geography. Where America grew greatest in size, the geography was correspondingly more vast and powerful. The plains and the mountains of the West, especially when enshrined in the national parks and monuments, have become geographical symbols of the idea of America's greatness, of its size and power.²⁰ And, significantly, today the frontier myths remain strongest where the landscape is biggest — in the West. These factors, a unique culmination of geography and history in the West, have helped prompt what Ferril calls "ancestor worship" in western literature. Through its western literature, as well as in much of its western history, America continues to applaud itself.

Another important aspect of geography fundamentally affects western literature. Throughout the westward movement, Americans naturally had a deep involvement with, and attachment to, the land. When the "final" West was reached, and for the first time the pioneers encountered the western plains and mountains, man's relationship to both space and time became more evident. In the eastern forests when the pioneer cleared his tract of land, he could feel himself master of the space from one edge of the clearing to the next, and perhaps master of the wooded lands to the tops of the nearby hills or rises on any side. But, in the open western country the distances and the size of the landforms revealed another relationship to time and space, that is to say man's being brief and infinitesimally small.

The writings of the pioneers themselves indicate that such implications of time and space in the western landscape are not wholly a product of the imagination of literary artists. In discussing the relationship of men to landforms in America, ecologist Paul Shepard has stressed the impact of the western topography. He states that "Perhaps there is no better example of the evocative power of natural landscapes than the response of

²⁰ Roderick Nash has related nationalistic sentiment to the wilderness movement in his *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 1967). See especially pages 145–51. The suggestion of geographical symbolism, however, is concerned more with the western landforms of great size and which afford huge perspectives, regardless of the degree of wilderness involved.

westerling pioneers to novel erosional remnants and angular cliffs.”²¹ He observes that to the pioneers on the Oregon Trail, the landscape around Scotts Bluff, Nebraska, often evoked thoughts of time and of ancient architectural ruins of the Old World. A developing knowledge of geology added depth to the awareness of time and change and particularly the brevity of the lives of men and nations. In addition to the influence of the topography, the imagination of the pioneers was affected by the “clean air and absence of trees [which] made perspective exceedingly difficult for men whose visual habits had developed with the size and distance clues of a humid landscape.”²² A complete understanding of the American’s ideas of the West must, according to Shepard, include the importance of the arid western landforms as a “compelling force.”²³

The literary artists have responded to the impressive western landscapes perhaps even more than the pioneers. In much western literature the romantic aspects of geography are quite important, especially in the relationship of landscape to characterization. This indicates both the pervasiveness of, and an important source of, romantic concepts of the West in the American mind. In the most fundamental sense, it is the *intimacy* of the landscape which disappears almost completely in the West, thus affecting the imagination of pioneers, western writers, and the general American public. In his analysis of the popular cowboy-hero, David B. Davis speaks of the effects of the “immensity of the Western environment,” where the “tremendous distances either seclude or elevate the particular and significant,” and the environment “brings out the best in heroes and the worst in villains.”²⁴

Western writers themselves acknowledge the importance of the natural setting in their works. In a recent symposium on the western novel, eight major western novelists answered questions regarding their art.²⁵ Six of the writers responded to the suggestion that “western fiction seems to pay more attention to nature, usually in a somewhat romantic

²¹ Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* (New York, 1967), 238.

²² Shepard, *Man in the Landscape*, 245.

²³ Shepard, *Man in the Landscape*, 246.

²⁴ David B. Davis, “Ten Gallon Hero,” *American Quarterly*, VI (Summer 1954), 115–16.

²⁵ John R. Milton, ed., “The Western Novel: A Symposium,” *South Dakota Review*, II (Autumn 1964), 3–36. The list of authors includes Frederick Manfred, Frank Waters, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, Vardis Fisher, Harvey Fergusson, Forrester Blake, Paul Horgan, and Michael Straight.

way"; and each of them affirmed the suggestion, either directly or indirectly. Frederick Manfred, who at first replied with a blunt "No," later remarked in a cryptic and quite romantic way, "Behind the Old Ones I hear the Land itself [talking to me]." ²⁶ Commenting on the "chief motivating force" of western fiction, Paul Horgan aptly stated in the symposium that ²⁷

If the outer landscape is vast and dramatically lighted, so the mindscape of man in *west* seems to reflect large simplifications, of art and philosophy and self-image. If there is a single pervasive theme in writing about *west*, perhaps, with all its variations, it could be identified as the theme of man, alone, against the grand immensity of nature — the nature of the land, reflected in his own soul.

Similarly, Walter Van Tilburg Clark remarked that the American West "is a vast land with a relatively small population, so that other aspects of nature than man must count for more than they usually do elsewhere. Nature, we might say, must become actor, not backdrop." ²⁸

In the genre of American farm literature, the romantic and the realistic aspects of geography are, of course, common. It is a coincidence of history, literature, and geography that only shortly after the pioneer farmers began to move into the plains area, and while they and their followers were undergoing the difficult process of establishing themselves in a new environment, did the portrayal of farm life in American literature begin to receive truly serious treatment. This serious approach developed along with literary realism in the late nineteenth century and applied to farming in various areas, for instance from rural New York to the Midwest. ²⁹ Significantly, though, out of all farm literature written in America, the most memorable and powerful characters come from novels which have settings on, or at the edge of, the Great Plains; and their character development is related to the western geographical settings, with the typically vast landscapes. And similarly, out of all western fiction there

²⁶ Milton, "The Western Novel," 7-8.

²⁷ Milton, "The Western Novel," 28.

²⁸ Milton, "The Western Novel," 17. Recently Clark made a similar, though more emphatic, statement: "My feeling is that landscape is character, not background. It's not a stage. It's an active agent. It must be." See John R. Milton, ed., "Conversations with Western American Novelists," *South Dakota Review*, IX (Spring 1971), 31.

²⁹ See comments on these literary developments in Roy W. Meyer, *The Middle Western Farm Novel in the Twentieth Century* (Lincoln, 1965), 13-34.

are no greater and more well-known heroines than the two farm women of the Great Plains, Willa Cather's *Ántonia* and Ole Rolvaag's *Beret*. By including Rolvaag's *Per Hansa* with *Beret* and *Ántonia*, it can then be stated that that part of American farm literature also classified as western literature has provided the archetypal literary images of farm men and women.

Although there are many significant aspects other than the environment, the relationship of these individuals to the landscape of the plains is of central importance in the development of their characters. In *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather heightens the awareness of the heroine's physical strength and her strength of character through a close identification with the land. Jim Burden, the narrator in *My Ántonia*, tells in the introduction that *Ántonia*, more than anyone else he knew, "seemed to mean . . . the country, the conditions . . ." ³⁰ Throughout the novel, *Ántonia*, a Bohemian immigrant, surmounts social, cultural, and environmental adjustments. In a highly idealized way, Burden associates *Ántonia*'s strength with the soil. Reflecting on *Ántonia* and her life, he states near the end of the story that ³¹

She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination . . . [and could make one] feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.

The country which *Ántonia* "seemed to mean" possessed a definite western landscape. At the beginning of the novel, Jim Burden comes to Nebraska from Virginia and encounters the new perspectives of the western geography. The first sentence of his narration speaks of what seemed to be "an interminable journey across the great midland plain of North America." ³² He later states that before coming to Nebraska he had never "looked up at the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it" and that in Nebraska there was "nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made." ³³ Through Cather's romantic imagination, the rude, raw plains help to shape *Ántonia*'s character into heroic proportions.

³⁰ Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (Boston, 1918), introduction.

³¹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 353.

³² Cather, *My Ántonia*, 3.

³³ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 7.

In Rolvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, the environment of the plains plays a more forceful role than in Cather's novel. Although the beauty of the landscape is mentioned at times, the darker and more fearful aspects of the plains dominate the story and intensify the mental deterioration of Beret. Already suffering from a sense of guilt over the birth of an illegitimate son by Per Hansa, the man she later married, Beret compounds her guilt feelings by going with Per Hansa to America against her family's wishes. Thus, for Beret the westering experience becomes traumatic. Leaving her home in Norway, she ultimately arrives in the Dakotas. There she encounters the plains, where in her depressed state she finds nothing but "deep silence" and the "infinite surrounding her on every hand." Significantly, it is on the plains that Beret "for the first time" realizes the "full extent of her loneliness, the dreadful nature of the fate that had overtaken her."³⁴ She comes to believe that the life she must face on the plains is retribution for her breaking God's laws.

As winter arrives, the desolation and loneliness drive Beret near to insanity. Fearing death in this strange land, where the ground is frozen and where she believes there is no suitable wood from which to build a coffin, her thoughts turn to Norway and the family churchyard. She remembers that "The churchyard was enclosed by a massive stone wall, broad and heavy; one couldn't imagine anything more reliable than that wall." And "Around the churchyard stood a row of venerable trees, looking silently down on the peace and the stillness within. . . . They gave such good shelter, those old trees!"³⁵ Beret then chooses an old family chest for her coffin. Like the stone wall around the churchyard, "heavy iron bands" gird the old chest, and Beret feels "as if she could sleep safely in that bed." By choosing the chest for her coffin, Beret symbolically turns to home and the protective forests of Norway for ultimate security from the barren plains of the Dakotas.³⁶

Much of the strength of *Giants in the Earth* lies in the opposite responses which Beret and Per Hansa have to life on the plains. The title of the book suggests a heroic, mythic farm folk, prepared to conquer the soil from which they emerge; and Per Hansa, in contrast to his desperately fearful wife, is the archetype of the optimistic, industrious, and conquering farmer. Even in his death, resulting from the fierce environment of the

³⁴ Ole Edvart Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth* (New York, 1927), 38-39.

³⁵ Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth*, 229-30. Ellipses Rolvaag's.

³⁶ Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth*, 230-31.

plains, there is a strangely optimistic note, signifying, perhaps, the triumph of the spirit: Per Hansa is found frozen and dead, but with his eyes "set toward the west."³⁷

Giants in the Earth, considered by many to be the finest of all frontier novels, explores the lives, the work, the fears, and the hopes of immigrant pioneer farmers as they enter onto, and contend with, the North American plains. Throughout the book the geography has an exceptionally powerful presence — in the dark imagination of Beret and in the day-to-day struggle of Beret, Per Hansa, and their neighbors. Certainly the geography deeply affected the creative energies of Rolvaag himself, as it has many other western writers.

A unique blending of literature, history, and geography in the West occurs in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. In a manner suggestive of ecologist Paul Shepard's remarks on the impressions of time and architecture as seen in the western landscape, Cather provides a symbolic union of geography and human history through the construction of the archbishop's cathedral in Santa Fe. Based on the life of a nineteenth-century French missionary to New Mexico, Cather's novel juxtaposes the ancient traditions of the Catholic church with those of the Indians of the Southwest; and near the end of the story, the church and the Indians together construct the cathedral. Significantly, the archbishop chooses to build the cathedral in "Midi Romanesque" architecture, believing it is "the right style for this country."³⁸ Furthermore, built out of the native stone of New Mexico, the cathedral, like the ancient dwellings of the Indians, blends with the natural settings. To the archbishop, "the tawny church seemed to start directly out of [the] rose-coloured hills — with a purpose so strong that it was like action." And when approaching the cathedral, "the backbone of the hills sank gradually, and the towers rose clear into the blue air, while the body of the church still lay against the mountain."³⁹ Thus, a European architectural style is seen as fitting for the New Mexico landscape and blends with the mountain forms and colors; and the ancient traditions of Europe and America are united in the building of a structure in Old World architecture with New World materials. In the novel the historic traditions of the Indians and the Catholics provide a sense of stability and continuity, which helps to

³⁷ Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth*, 465.

³⁸ Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (New York, 1927), 243.

³⁹ Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, 272–73.

ease the feeling of isolation in the vast New Mexico landscape. And the construction of the cathedral represents an artistic quest for spiritual and material permanency, bringing together elements of the cultural traditions and the landscape in a single work of art.

A powerful geographical awareness has influenced western literature as greatly as it has western history. Most fundamentally, it has influenced western writing by two means: first, in a tangible way, as the people experience direct contact with, and reliance upon, the land; and second, in a symbolic and a spiritual and romantic sense, as the actual landscape affects the minds and attitudes of the people, including artists and historians. For western writing, geography has been the central factor, at once a boon and a burden in relating the frontier and western experience.