

Living and dying by the code of the west – personality counts



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Most novelists do not kill off half of the characters in their book to prove a point, but this one does. The tragic, bloody deaths in the novel only enforce the fact that the West was wild and could not be conquered by any one human, no matter how much experience or knowledge that person had. Larry McMurry wrote the western *Lonesome Dove* to show (contrary to some romantic myths) how harsh and bloody the untamed West was. The bravest and most moral person could die just as tragically as the ignorant coward. This novel displays how people conduct themselves in different situations according to their personality traits. The best-developed characters in *Lonesome Dove* display distinct personalities. Jake Spoon, Augustus “Gus” McCrae, and Woodrow Call used to be Texas Rangers, fighting together for the common good of making the West safer to populate. They separated over time, but the novel begins when they reunite later in their lives. At Jake’s suggestion, the three round up some friends and decide to go on a three-thousand-mile cattle drive from Lonesome Dove, Texas, to the highlands of Montana. Jake persuades his friends to go on the drive by telling them of the paradise to be found on the rich and unsettled frontier. The description of the scenery might be accurate, but the death and suffering that occur over the course of the journey are anything but paradise for the cowboys. The ways the characters deal with the deaths are shaped by their personalities. After young Sean O’Brien, the first casualty during the journey to Montana, is killed by snakes, Gus pronounces over the grave, “Dust to dust [. . .] Lets the rest of us go on to Montana” (McMurry 307). To him, “death is a legitimate, tolerable, and rational part of the Western landscape” (Shadrui). It is something from which Gus can quickly recover, but a character such as Call may mull over it for days, the thought of death

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nagging at his brain. Though they have differing ways of dealing with stresses, the ex-Rangers share a common trait: restlessness. They all have a reluctance to settle down and make a solid home. The three feel a need to maintain interest and meaning in life. One major character in *Lonesome Dove* is Woodrow Call. Call has a more dominating nature than any of the other main characters. He is “practical yet aloof” (Bakker 221). Call is a leader, but he cannot express or discuss deep feelings with other men. His way of coping with an emotional situation is to spend the night alone, away from the campfire. “Call fears his emotions, wishes to forget that he sired a son through the young prostitute Maggie, and refuses to acknowledge his ties to other humans” (Etulain 144). The secret of Call’s leadership ability is that he never hesitates. “He understands that most men doubt their abilities, so they follow those who have no doubts. He also has no sympathy for this doubt, or for any other human weakness” (Bakker 225). Call cannot even imagine what it is like to be scared, “an inability Gus attributes to the one thing Call seems to lack: imagination” (Bakker 225). He administers law and rules, upholds the Code of the West, and, if necessary, executes those who threaten the safety and peace of the frontier. Yet he claims he is not a lawman. “Anyhow, I ain’t going there to law. I’m going there to run cattle. Jake said it was a cattleman’s paradise” (McMurtry 84). Though Call may not know it, he is paving the way for all other people who come north. He believes he is only leading a herd of cattle, but what he really is doing is opening the frontier for new inhabitants. “Call has a traditional view toward the untamed West — extension of white man’s mission to conquer and cultivate” (Bakker 236). Call does not see the great injustice done to the Indians as Gus does. Still, “Call is fair to Indians,” even when one kills his

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friend Deets. He killed the Indian that killed Deets, but “ he does not take revenge on the starving, confused Indian tribe. Realizing that they stole the horses to ward off impending starvation, he leaves them four of the animals”(Bakker 237). He kills only violent Indians to protect others. Call’s domineering nature ensures frontier peace, but causes death. He will kill as many people as he has to in order to protect other people — the pioneers whom he believes have more right to the area than the Indians do. Call seems to think that the end justifiesthe means. A second important character in Lonesome Dove is Augustus McCrae. He is the romantic, the comedian, the humane and accommodating cowboy. When the novel has humor, it usually comes from Gus, who loves to hear himself talk. “ McMurry has made him a man who is generous, cheerful, humorous, and, although not without some vanity, totally devoid of any form of pettiness” (Bakker 223). In contrast to Call’s stoicism and fear of women, Gus’s gift for accommodation and ability to connect with others in a positive way makes him a paradigm of the power of demonstrative love. Nowhere is this more evident than in the manner in which he saves Lorena and nurses her back to emotional and physical health following her capture by Blue Duck (Jones 42). His reason, he says, for going on the journey is “ to help establish a few more banks” and to open the West to “ Sunday school teachers and bankers”(McMurry 83). The perpetually talkative egotist really goes on the cattle drive to fight his greatest enemy: boredom. He knew the drive was folly — that is what attracted him. Gus was meant to cross dangerous rivers, survive stampedes, blizzards, and deserts, and fight outlaws. Gus admits that he enjoys a traveling lifestyle: “ I can’t think of nothing better than riding a fine horse into a new country. It’s exactly what I was meant for”
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(McMurtry 744). When he finally reaches Montana, he says he would not have missed any of it. After enforcing the Code of the West and making the West more hospitable for white settlers and business people, he realizes that the West will get boring again. By killing all the bandits and Indians, by conquering the romantic myth of the West, he and his friends took away “ what made this country interesting to begin with” (McMurtry 349). The more fights they win, the more boring their lives will become after the excitement of such battles is gone. Gus believes (contrary to Call’s belief of domination) that the West is one of the last unspoiled and unpolluted regions on earth, ruined by the arrival of whites. Gus also contradicts his partner’s opinion in that he thinks the land belongs to the Indians, and that accommodations should be made for the native people. “ Augustus is keenly aware of the great injustice done to the Indians by the whites” (Bakker 236). When Call asks a dying Gus what should be done with the Indians who gave him his death wound, Gus replies, “ They didn’t invite us — don’t be vengeful” (McMurtry 785). Gus sympathizes with the plight of others — be it the helplessness of women or newcomers to the country or area, like Lorena, or the Irish immigrants who go on the cattle drive with Gus. He feels compassion for the Indians who are being pushed out of their homeland, and for the settlers who are being easily picked off by bandits. Gus’s peaceful allowances toward different groups and their ways of life maintain peace in a less bloody way than Call’s oxymoronic “ kill for peace” method. Jake Spoon is another main character in McMurtry’s novel. Jake is a dashing ladies’ man; life almost always goes his way. “ All Jake asked for in life was a clean saloon to gamble in, a pretty whore to sleep with, and whiskey to drink” (Bakker 222). Though Jake seems like a young, dauntless hero, he really was the

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weakest morally of the three. “ Jake’s strongest point is imitativeness” (Bakker 222). Around Gus and Call, he became as good a Ranger as either of them had been. But Jake dies a horse thief and murderer because he was too indulgent, lazy and weak to stick to the moral behavior he knows he should have maintained. Major problems arise when Jake starts drifting from the herd, when he decides not to join his Ranger friends at the campsite. “ Jake, whose idea the drive was in the first place, refuses to work the herd as it heads north, but in a move to continue to enjoy protection from his old Ranger comrades, he follows along at a distance with Lorena, who he promised to take to San Francisco but for whom he has no real affection for at all” (Jones 144). Jake’s negligence of his cattle drive duties and his failure to protect Lorena mark the beginning of his downfall. Jake begins to gamble and drink more heavily than before. Without the other Rangers around to keep him on the right path, he drifts away from the moral standards he once followed. While Jake is partying in the towns, Lorena is abducted and Gus must rescue her from a dangerous situation that leaves her scarred for life. Jake’s uncaring and weak nature contrasts drastically with Gus’s steadfast loyalty, patience, and strength. Gus is the one who nurses Lorena back to health after he risks his life to save her. Jake lacks the will to break free of the sinful natures of those he chose to follow. This makes Jake an accomplice to a number of senseless thefts and murders he neither approved of nor wanted to participate in. “ Ironically, Jake’s death is issued from the Ranger code of justice — which the three Rangers together used to fight to uphold” (Jones 41). “ McMurtry makes his characters human — not the exaggerated heroes in romance or myth, but neither are reduced to a level that seems ordinary” (Reilly 99). The characters suffer and die like any human would.

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They make mistakes, even fatal ones, that lead to their deaths or the deaths of their friends. Even Call, the cowboy ideal, shows mortal flaws: giving in to lust, getting lost, or reacting too slowly during an attack on his men.

McMurtry shows how seasoned men can fall prey to situations beyond their control. “ Even an experienced man, riding into such a mess of snakes, wouldn’t have survived. It only went to show what he already knew, which was that there were more dangers in life than even the sharpest training could anticipate” (McMurtry 306). McMurtry contrasts the morality of Call with the weakness of Jake, who cannot even disapprove of or try to stop the most blatant of sins. None of the three Rangers can be placed on a pedestal of heroism and valor; each shows his mortal nature in his sins, mistakes, and even in death. The men, like any other humans, are trying to get as much satisfaction out of life as they can. “ The American West was to them a place a man could live without constantly submitting to systems. The West represented man’s tireless effort to fill the void of existence with meaning, a meaning that became problematic again the moment the geographical void he entered was filled” (Bakker 239). The characters in *Lonesome Dove* conduct themselves differently in situations according to their personality traits. The West provided them the freedom to act however they wanted. One could be a moral enforcer of the Codes of the West — exterminating anything that threatened freedom and peace. One could lead others in overcoming the West and making it more accessible for others and their way of life. Bandits and outlaws could pillage and get rich easily — until the Code of the West was executed upon them. Personality and personal characteristics can lead one person to become a strong soldier or another to become a weak coward. The effects that one’s character have on one’s life

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are evident in Lonesome Dove. Many different types of people are needed for building a strong society; not everyone can have the same strengths. People used their different characteristics to conquer the West. " Our Forefathers had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers"(Whipple - Lonesome Dove 1). Works Cited Bakker, J. The Role of the Mythic West in some Representative Examples of Classic and Modern American Literature. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991. 219-239 Etulain, Richard W. Telling Western Stories. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999. 142-148 Jones, Roger Walton. Larry McMurtry and the Victorian Novel. College Station; Texas A&M University Press, 1994. 29-43 McMurtry, Larry. Lonesome Dove. New York: Pocket Books, 1985. 1-945 Reilly, John Marsden. Larry McMurtry: A Critical Companion. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000. 87-114 Shadrui, George. " Larry McMurtry and the Death of Storytelling." 18 Feb 2002. 14 April 2002. http://www.weeklywire.com/ww/02-21-00/ww_books.html