

"a man called horse"
as transgression of
the western genre



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Dorothy M. Johnson's short story "A Man Called Horse" transgresses some of the conventions of the classical Western genre. In this sense, Johnson's text can be read as a "revisionist Western", in so far as Johnson does not merely adhere to the dominant norms and tropes of the Western genre, but instead tries to subvert them so as to create a new perspective within the genre. Accordingly, the tale begins with what could be understood as a classical Western theme: an aristocrat, who is nevertheless somewhat isolated from society, is captured by an Indian tribe. The process by which the young aristocrat comes to belong to the tribe, accepting their world-view and thus acknowledging the value of the Native American culture, thereby opposes dominant narratives whereby the Native American is either some type of noble savage or an embodiment of primitive evil. By accepting the Native American norms, the protagonist as such recognizes Native American culture as a civilization in its own right, thus providing a new indigenous perspective, although through the eyes of the white man, of the encounter between Europeans and Natives that is so characteristic of the Western genre. The outset of "A Man Called Horse" represents a classical approach to the Western genre. From the very first lines of the story, Johnson establishes that the narrative will be carried out from a white or European perspective. Johnson does this in two ways which underscore the classical Western archetype: firstly, by making the lead character an aristocrat, she establishes the clear white/European perspective of the story. At the same time, however, she emphasizes the "outsider" status of the protagonist, thus satisfying another convention. Accordingly, Johnson begins the text as follows: "He was a young man of good family, as the phrase went in the New England of a hundred-odd years ago, and the reasons for his bitter content

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were unclear, even to himself" (1). On the one hand, the protagonist is established as an archetypical "white" American, with solid familial roots, thus highlighting the white perspective Johnson wishes to ground the story. On the other hand, the protagonist is simultaneously somehow "discontent" with his life, with his standing in society. This device immediately establishes the protagonist as a form of "outsider", despite his solid social status: Johnson arguably here is gradually moving away from the "white" perspective of the story by introducing this discontent into the solid familial background of the protagonist, a device that can be said to foreshadow the protagonist's eventual "re-birth" in the form of his acceptance of the Native American culture. It is precisely such a movement away from standard tropes of the Western genre that therefore will establish the story, despite its opening, as part of the revisionist Western genre. These conventional passages in the narrative set the stage for the transition in the story, which will separate it from classical Western motifs and render it entirely revisionist in approach. The aristocrat protagonist is not slaughtered by his Native American captives, but instead begins to accept and take on their world-view. What is occurring here is a metamorphosis within the story: the reader is firstly presented with a wholly white/American/European perspective that gradually changes to a Native American perspective. Johnson accomplishes this by firstly emphasizing the nobility of the Native American life, which recalls the aristocratic origins of the protagonist. Accordingly, "the Indian who had captured him lived like a lord, as he had a right to do.... He had only two responsibilities: to kill buffalo and to gain glory. The white man was so far beneath him in status that the Indian did not even think of envy" (6). This passage is the protagonist's reflection on his Indian captors: they use terms <https://assignbuster.com/a-man-called-horse-as-transgression-of-the-western-genre/>

that could easily be associated with a European aristocrat. What is occurring in this passage is thus the realization, from the perspective of the protagonist, that the Native American can also be considered in his own context a type of aristocrat. There are specific hierarchies reflected in the Native American life, reflected in the "responsibilities" of the Native American: from the perspective of the Native American, the white man is "beneath him", much in the same manner that the white man considers the Native American to be "beneath him" (6). This is a revisionist gesture by Johnson, in so far as she is not relying on some motif of the "noble savage": savagery is excluded from this portrayal of the Native American, leaving the Native American on the same level as the European aristocrat who is the protagonist of the story: Johnson presents the Native American as a noble. This transition by Johnson sets the grounds for the rest of the narrative's revisionist character. She wants to present the Native American culture as bearing value in its own right: she does not want to present it obviously, as a form of evil savagery; at the same time, she does not fall into the clichés of the "noble" savage. The reader is forced to accept the worth of the Native American culture itself, giving this culture a value that makes it a complete peer to the "civilizations" of European origin. This of course is a gradual process within the story itself, but it is anticipated throughout the narrative until it is finally completed. Arguably, this consummation of the story is finalized in the words of the protagonist at the end of the story, accepting an elder female figure in the following manner: "he gave her the answer. 'Eegya,' he said. 'Mother'" (24). The symbolism of mother is arguably here crucial. The utterance of the term for mother in the Native American language potentially signals themes of re-birth, closely related therefore the <https://assignbuster.com/a-man-called-horse-as-transgression-of-the-western-genre/>

archetype of mother and son. By acknowledging the mother as "Eegya", that is, in her own terms and in her own language, the protagonist understands that he has undergone a metamorphosis and been re-born within the Native American civilization. Feeling "discontent", as an "outsider", at the outset of the story, the protagonist here has found meaning in the Native American culture: to the extent that the Native way of life has given him a sense of meaning which his own culture never could, Johnson here establishes the value of the Native American civilization, capable of granting purpose and direction to the protagonist. Accordingly, Johnson establishes the deep meaning and significance of this culture, against its Classical Western convention as an evil savage culture whose disappearance is celebrated. It is in this sense that Johnson's work is a revisionist Western. She does maintain theme of the disgruntled white outsider: this is a classical convention. Furthermore, she grants the protagonist an "aristocratic" background, further emphasizing the white European viewpoint that informs conventional Westerns. However, Johnson only uses these initial tropes so as to ultimately overturn them. By breaking the Classical conventions of Native Americans as "noble savages" or "evil savages", Johnson essentially presents "A Man Called Horse" as a Revisionist Western. To elaborate, the protagonist's gradual movement away from his European world-view is juxtaposed with a growing understanding of the Native American culture. Yet this understanding does not come from the role of an "outsider", but rather from the perspective of someone now immanent to this culture, who has accepted its norms. Johnson accordingly composes a revisionist Western by showing the value of the Native American culture: against the conventional Western, the entire narrative of a "Man Called Horse" is an attempt to

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establish a Native American horizon of looking at the Western. In doing so, Johnson acknowledges the cultural and civilizational value of the indigenous population of America. This is not the population that is to be opposed and displaced, but rather one that must be respected in terms of its own cultural merits, its own social structures, and its own outlook on life. Johnson's text thus breaks through conventional Western themes by first employing them, only to thereafter deconstruct them. In this sense, there is a conventional Western within "A Man Called Horse", namely through the employment of the marginalized hero. Yet Johnson's innovative approach transforms this conventional aspect into a revisionist Western by challenging the conventions of Native Americans as either noble or evil savages: a revisionism that is achieved through a transposition of viewpoints undergone by the main protagonist. Johnson's short story is a paradigmatic example of how genre literature can nevertheless transgress its own horizons and clichés to create a new perspective on a standard thematic.