

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SISTERS BROTHERS PACK HEAT: OR HOW THE SISTERS FARED IN THE WEST

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Abstract

The article analyzes Patrick deWitt's Governor General's Award-winning novel *The Sisters Brothers* (2011) with respect to its adherence and deviation from the cowboy western genre. The article explores the context of the novel: it starts with the juxtaposition of the real historical spaces of the western North American continent and the Wild West myth which was created as the open spaces of wilderness started to decline and the North American continent was colonized from the east coast to the west. The Wild West myth is generally taken to emerge with F. J. Turner's "frontier thesis" which observes the American West as frontier and no-man's land but also as a process that created the American civilization as separate and independent from the imperial European civilization. The attractiveness of the Wild West myth is explored and its role in fulfilling the need for a national myth or a creation story of the US. The tropes of the Wild West are briefly discussed, such as typical landscapes, climate and typical characters, among which presides the figure of the cowboy, observed again from the perspective of the function and importance of the Wild West myth in the popular imaginary of the North Americans. In the main part of the article the novel's place within the cowboy western genre is analyzed, its stereotypical traits and its idiosyncrasies which stretch the generic confinements but do not break them, such as the paradoxical title; the novel's self-reflexivity where the first person narrator creates his own legend; protagonists who are villains but also sensitive cowboys; unexpected ending; introspective narrator; ironic and humorous style of narration sympathetic to the brothers, as well as the only possible exceptions to the genre, uncanny elements such as visions and witches.

The article concludes that the novel is a contemporary reinvention of the cowboy western.

Keywords: Wild West, frontier thesis, Western genre, cowboy, deWitt.

The Wild West has always enticed the readers' imagination, has always represented that other space as opposed to the "real", historical space of the western North American continent. It is a space safely ensconced within a past time – the second half of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth – and a past geography. Strictly speaking, the Wild West is limited to the space of the US: to the north it is bounded by the 49th parallel, and to the south by the 42nd parallel or the Rio Grande. The northern boundary was historically determined by the different perceptions of the US as the free land and Canada as the ordered land: while in the States there was freedom from law and gun was the rule, above the 49th parallel the law was enforced by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police thereby undercutting the individual freedom of its inhabitants.¹ In the same way and due to various reasons, some of which may be the "imperialist aspirations, or the quality of the prairie soil, or even more immediate resonances of the cattle trade" (Mitchell 498), the lands lying south of the 42nd parallel were never subsumed into the Wild West, and only rarely and episodically would the imagery of the Wild West and its storyworld spread that far south. To the east the Wild West was in the latter half of the nineteenth century bound by the river Mississippi and to the west it was limited by the Pacific Ocean. Thus defined temporally and spatially, this space of the North American West includes the territory of the prairies and the Rockies all the way to the Pacific coast. In the myth it is stereotypically characterized by rugged terrains, slightly sloping hillside, desert or semi-desert landscape, jagged mountains, but primarily by its vastness, roughness and emptiness. In the midst of this void there exist places such as small frontier towns with

¹ The Canadian mounted police known first as the North West Mounted Police was established after the Cypress Hills massacre in southern Alberta in 1873, when a group of American whiskey traders and wolf hunters attacked an Assiniboine camp and killed at least 20 men, women and children, claiming the Assiniboine had stolen some horses. The theft was never proven. Gradually, as the NWMP covered more and more of the Canadian territories, it came to be known as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The North West Mounted Police in the late 1800's became "a visible symbol of Canadian sovereignty in the newly acquired North-West territories (including present-day Alberta and Saskatchewan)" (*Canadian Encyclopedia*).

false-front houses and boardwalks on the Main Street (the town's only street), small farms or ranches in the middle of nowhere, abandoned or functioning mines and gold-rush prospectors' settlements around rivers or on the foothills. This is how the Wild West predominantly appears in the American and global collective imagination.

The Wild West also represents the space of the frontier which is defined as "the extreme limit of settled land beyond which lies wilderness" (OED), but also a space "where 'free land', at the border between civilization and savagery, encouraged independence" (New 1208). In other words, the concept of the frontier means a border line, but it also denotes an in-between space, a lacuna, an interstice where individualism can exist unrestrained by civilization. Interestingly enough, this space of the Western frontier started out in the East, as far east as the Atlantic territories of the US. In fact, in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) James Fennimore Cooper, who is frequently cited as the founder of the Western genre, sets the plot in the year 1757 during the French and Indian War, in the wilderness territories that would become the New York state.² With time the frontier retreated farther and farther west as the slow but inexorable grinding wheel of civilization engulfed the open land and, as the Wild West receded farther to the west, it reached that geographical location which it holds today in the collective imagination. Speaking from the point of view of official history, the Western frontier ceased to exist in 1890 when the U.S. Census Bureau announced the disappearance of a contiguous frontier line. That is, civilization had reached the Pacific coast. This announcement prompted Frederick Jackson Turner, historian of the American West, to coin his famous "frontier thesis" in 1893 which marked the beginning of the transformation of the Western frontier into a Wild West myth.³ Turner was the one who most notably described the frontier as the meeting point between savagery and civilization, claiming that the Americans who lived on the frontier constantly relived the progress from savagery to civilization. For Turner the frontier represented the line of most rapid Americanization, forcing the frontier peoples to learn self-sufficiency and hone their capabilities to survive and develop. The qualities Turner emphasized were:

² F. J. Turner dates the inception of the frontier line on the Atlantic coast before mid-18th century; he dates it as early as the 17th century and describes its gradual westward advance in the course of the next three hundred years (Turner 4-9).

³ Turner read the paper titled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" at a meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago during the World's Columbian Exposition, better known as the Chicago World's Fair.

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical and inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom – these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (Turner 37)

In this much quoted paragraph Turner primarily describes the spirit of the American nation. In his opinion, the frontier represented the social recapitulation of the American character, and when the frontier officially ceased to exist, the frontier spirit was infused into America, becoming the essential part of Americanness. Its most prominent quality was individualistic democracy.

In the course of time there emerged numerous criticisms against Turner's concept of the frontier as "free land", the most obvious one being that Turner, true to the spirit of his times, observed the "free land" of the Northern American continent as *terra nullius* despite the presence of the First Nations and American Indians who had lived there for centuries before the white settlers/invaders arrived. It was also attacked by the revisionist theories which argue that it was in fact cooperation and communities, and not individuals, which made possible the settlement of the West and led to its eventual inclusion into the United States of America. Despite these shortcomings of his frontier thesis, however, the concept of "free land" and "the frontier", as Turner proposed and expounded them, became a very attractive concept which soon gained prominence in the American imaginary.

The Great West thus became for Turner and his followers that 'mythical region' that was more 'real' than the 'real West', the physical area west of the Mississippi Valley, because it had become 'a region of the mind' and part of a national mythology. (Francis 475)

However, Mitchell rightly notes that in his frontier thesis Turner never defined the West as a space but as a process, developing it into a project/projection and opening it up to mythologization. With time the projection of the West somehow grew in the collective imagination, solidifying the myth of the West into what it is today. No matter that the available historical evidence and eyewitness accounts told different tales, the allure of the Western myth was so strong that even the people living in the West found themselves under the pressure of such imagery. Speaking of historical reality as opposed to the mythical West, Hobsbawm mentions

that the total number of deaths caused by gun wounds in the major cattle towns in the 15-year period between 1870 and 1885 amounted only to 45, and the local newspapers were not brimming with duels in the main street and barroom fights but with property values and business opportunities (“The Myth of the Cowboy”).

Historical facts notwithstanding, the myth of the Wild West proved to be very contagious. And why not? There was an empty space to be filled in the *mythos* of the US: that of its creation. Having at his disposal no ancient Gods, myths, heroes and folklore to compete with the ancient European mythology, and at the same time wishing to sever all the ties with various theses which emphasized the European origins of America, Turner used his frontier thesis to extol what will become the great American values not only of free land, individual spirit and entrepreneurship, but also of newness and a fresh start, to mention only a few. In doing so, Turner was answering the need of the new American nation to have their own heroic past, their own national myth. The West, in a space of the frontier that geographically no longer was, and in a time that no longer was, seemed like the perfect place.⁴

Apart from answering the need for a national myth, the Wild West also functioned as an Arcadia for a non-Westerner, a fantasy to which the dissatisfied Eastern man burdened by the life in the industrialized city could turn to. The Eastern man gazed with longing upon the un-fenced prairies and free-ranging cattle where he would be the master of his own destiny and accountable to no one, where the rules were clear-cut, and freedom and individualism guaranteed. Through this vision the West became a place “where people go to escape the burdens of the civilized world” (Katerberg 545), while at the same time it offered the critique of industrialist society. Thus, it turns out that the West was created not in the West but through the Eastern gaze. The East constructed its sense of self through a binary opposition to the West, and it did so in the nineteenth century when it created the myth of the American West.⁵ The Wild West

⁴ Compare Sonnichsen 16-18. Turner answered a different need with his frontier thesis: the need to separate America once and for all from Europe. Until his thesis historians of America were developing origins theories which in one way or another traced the origins of America to Europe. With his evolutionary theory of the frontier Turner convincingly showed that through a regression to a “primitive” Indian state the European settler discarded everything European and started anew, was reborn and reinvented as a new man. The further westward the frontier progressed, the less European American society became.

⁵ This hypothesis was posited by Henry Nash Smith, famous historian of the West, who in 1950 further solidified the Western myth. Smith discusses the rise and decline of the Western myth as an agrarian utopia dominant in the 19th-century

functioned and still functions well as a utopia because the binary structuring tensions are made transparent as tensions between “the individual and the community, between nature and culture, freedom and restriction, agrarianism and industrialism. All are physically separated by the frontier between the West and the East” (Yezbick “The Western”).

By offering a respite from everyday life, the genre of the Western – whether in literature, film or graphic art – is frequently classified as escapist, and the critics discuss the allure of the mythic West. Sisk notes that the attraction towards Westerns and the Western hero lies in the fact that it somehow belongs to the past. The Western hero, Sisk says, “might live on fast horses in a milieu of violent action, but culturally he lives in a slow world and his character tends to keep it slow” (403). In modern times where time is the most valued commodity the attractiveness of such an imagined, slow world is undeniable.

This Western hero, a free, adventurous, roaming individual is most notably represented in the figure of the cowboy.⁶ The myth of the Wild

American worldview, and how it affected the Western myth. He observes the Western myth from the three aspects, so to speak. The first image of America and consequently of the West stemmed from the accidental discovery and early exploration of North America in search for the passage to India; the second image/projection of America was due to the focalizers such as the actual frontiersmen and pioneers, while in the third part he speaks of the vision of America as a Garden of Eden. Compare with Mitchell 501.

⁶ As far as the etymology of the term is concerned, it is pretty straight-forward, a cow-boy is a boy looking after cows in the pasture. Slatta claims that the origins of the term are at least three thousand years old and can first be found in Ireland (“The Cowboy Encyclopedia”: 85). More recently Jonathan Swift used the term in 1735 in a letter to Dr. Sheridan to designate a boy looking after cows (“Works” 1801: 284) and from then on it appears sporadically in literature. (Slatta here quotes the year as 1704 but the evidence suggests that the year in question was 1734. See in bibliography under *Works of Rev. Jonathan Swift*). Slatta dates the modern usage of the word cow-boy into 1830s, to denote Texan border raiders who stole Mexican cattle. And here already “the term carried a tinge of wildness, of life at the fringes of law and civilization” (Slatta “The Cowboy Encyclopedia”: 85) but was overall a positive term. After the American Civil War apparently the term cowboy acquired not so rosy meaning. The *Rio Grande Republican* from Las Cruces in New Mexico, dated 13th December 1884 offers the following description of a cowboy:

Out in the Territories there are only two classes—the “cowboys” and the “tenderfeet.” Such of the “cowboys” as are not professional thieves, murderers and miscellaneous blacklegs who fled to the frontier for reasons that require no explanation, are men who totally disregard all of the amenities of Eastern civilization, brook no restraint, and—fearing neither

West in fact revolves around this icon, symbol of individualist democracy, of a man who is the master of his own destiny. He is the descendant of American frontiersmen, a man who has abandoned civilization to roam free across the prairie. Within the discourse of escapist literature, to the Eastern eye the cowboy symbolizes

an independent labourer posed against the industrial working stiff, ever a stranger to the factory floor, unsupervised during the day, free to roam on horseback with a six-gun at his hip (the only worker actually allowed to do so). (Mitchell 498)

In popular culture he has become an icon of freedom and individual agency. But the image of the cowboy has always been a double-sided coin: while on the one hand he was perceived as a “tough, virtuous, straight-talking hero of the American West” (Slatta, “The Illustrated History” 8), a lone fighter for justice in the lawless West, on the other hand he could also be a hired gun, a bandit, a “lawless, wild, shoot-‘em-up villain that spread mayhem and chaos along the frontier” (8). The metamorphosis of a real-life cowboy – a seasonal laborer who herded and drove cattle, working as a ranch hand – into an all-American icon has followed the same path as the transformation of the Western frontier into the Wild West myth. What is more, one aided the transformation of the other: as the myth of the West started to expand and conversely as the Western frontier shrank and was slowly obliterated, there was increasing demand for the Wild West shows in which cowboys starred. Thus the myth of the Wild West and of the cowboy persisted and spread through its many manifestations such as the Wild West shows (e.g. the Calgary Stampede, “The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth” founded in 1912 and still popular today), silent movies followed by the talkies especially in the 1930s. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s the cinema was the dominant medium for Westerns, followed by a veritable flood of TV and radio shows which in the US lasted until the beginning of the 1970s, and ran parallel to Western paperback stories and comic books. The TV and radio brought the Western into every American household. Between 1952 and 1970 generations of children were provided with almost daily doses of Western idealism (Yezbick “The Western”).

God, nor man or the devil—yielding allegiance to no law save their own untamed passions. He is the best man who can draw the quickest and kill the surest. A “cowboy” who has not killed his man—or to put it more correctly his score of “tenderfeet”—is without character, standing, or respect. The “tenderfoot” who goes among them should first double his life insurance and then be sure he is “well-heeled”. (Slatta “The Cowboy Encyclopedia”: 86)

In an interview about historical fiction Guy Vanderhaeghe, a well-known Canadian author and historian, author of highbrow cowboy western trilogy *The Englishman's Boy* (1996), *The Last Crossing* (2002) and *A Good Man* (2011), discussed the continuous presence of the cowboy myth in the popular imaginary. In his opinion the Western myth “provided a kind of chivalric code” (Wylie 29) which was historically incorrect but stayed in the cultural consciousness of the North America well into the twentieth and even the twenty-first century. Unlike the Wild West myth, historical records of the Wild West show that the gunmen tended to be rather cowardly fighters who tried to kill their opponents by any means rather than engaging in a duel in the real sense of the word (29). Nevertheless, Vanderhaeghe continues, “the Western, at least in North America, is also an incredibly potent cultural icon for both those who dismiss it and those who were in love with it” (30). So, he concludes, the Western is central for North American culture and it will continue to be discussed whether people uphold it or renounce it. The arguments may not continue “in terms of a logical, constructed argument, but it’s going to be argued about in film and books, and, likely, academia, forever” (30).⁷

And indeed the Western genre never goes out of fashion. The latest example is a new rendering of the Western, a combination of a traditional Western with a twist. Patrick deWitt’s novel *The Sisters Brothers* (2011)⁸ has been defined as homage to the classic Western, and it contains all the

⁷ *The Englishman's Boy*, for which Vanderhaeghe won his second Governor General’s Award for Literature, the highest Canadian literary prize, intertwines two narratives, one of the Cypress Hills massacre told from the perspective of the Englishman’s boy, witness of the massacre, and the other of the 1920s-1930s Hollywood where a young Canadian title writer tries to obtain the history of the West from the last “true” cowboy so that a charismatic director can make his great myth-making film of the US nation. In Vanderhaeghe’s second novel in his western trilogy, *The Last Crossing*, two brothers, one a disillusioned artist the other a disgraced military captain are given the mission by their father to go in search of their brother who has disappeared somewhere in the great American West. They hire a Métis guide Jerry Potts, based on a real historical figure; as the posse gradually grows, each character reveals their own painful past. Vanderhaeghe’s third “literary western” novel, *A Good Man*, also explores the themes of the Wild West but this time the Wild West is portrayed as gradually overtaken by social order. The plot revolves around an Easterner who goes to the West to escape the complications from his past, only to find out that there are new entanglements there. This Vanderhaeghe’s novel in fact chronicles the end of the Wild West.

⁸ For this novel deWitt won several literary awards, the most prominent of those the Governor General’s Award for literature in 2011 and was the finalist for Man Booker and Giller Prizes.

topoi of a good, old typical Western. It follows the traditional generic schematic of a cowboy Western genre, with certain innovations of its own. It is hardly necessary to enumerate the tropes of the traditional cowboy Western such as the Western frontier landscape, a male cowboy and/or gunslinger who rides into town or to a ranch and reveals himself as the hero or a villain. He is usually alone or rides in a small group but is a loner by conviction, has a trusted steed, and in the end rides off into the sunset. He inhabits a morally simple and clear-cut world in which good and bad are easily demarcated, and as such offers a refreshing respite from reality. The Western tropes also include numerous stock characters, very expressive and/or eccentric personages who would never find their place in a more civilized society but the space of the frontier provides enough freedom for their existence: bank or stagecoach robbers, thugs and bullies, powerful landlords and criminals, sheriffs, cowboys and gunslingers, saloon-keepers and saloon “ladies”, gold rush prospectors, an occasional teacher (male or more frequently female), a small rancher/farmer usually in need of protection, a farmer’s daughter, as well as Mexicans and/or Indians,⁹ to add zest to the predominantly white coloring of the mythical Wild West. In keeping with the generic expectations, deWitt’s novel is firmly situated in the mythical Wild West: the action takes place in the year 1851 in Oregon and California during the gold rush, thus hitting the bull’s-eye of the Western frontier in mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ It boasts horses, cowboy hats, guns, big bosses, hired gunmen, gold rush and crazed prospectors, small towns, duels on the main street, marginal female characters, trappers, Indians (not the good kind), secret money stashes, and an ending where the protagonists ride off into the sunset.

The storyline follows that of a classic Western and of a quest: the two protagonists, Eli and Charlie Sisters are two hired gunslingers who work for a ruthless Oregon criminal called the Commodore; they are given the task finding one Hermann Kermit Warm to retrieve something that Warm allegedly stole from the Commodore. After the successful extraction of the stolen goods they are to kill Warm. In order to fulfill their mission the Sisters brothers travel from Oregon City along the Oregon–California Trail – a well-used route for gold rush prospectors and settlers on their

⁹ In Westerns Indians and Mexicans are portrayed as either good or bad. Indians in the earlier westerns were inevitably bad, a threat to the white settler. The leitmotif was that of Indians surrounding standing on a cliff overlooking a circle of settlers’ wagons (and from there stems the origin of the term circle the wagons, the wagons pull up in a circle for better protection). Indians and Mexicans could also be cast as sidekicks to the main character.

¹⁰ According to Turner: 8.

way to the West¹¹ – to San Francisco and then to Warm’s claim just north of Sacramento. During the quest, the Sisters brothers start wondering about Warm’s guilt. Finding out that Warm is not only innocent, but has in fact discovered a chemical formula that reveals gold on riverbeds (the real reason why the Commodore wants him robbed and killed), the brothers decide not to kill Warm, but join him in partnership and quit the Commodore’s service. The new partners indeed find gold with the help of the formula, but everything goes downhill from there: Warm dies poisoned by his own caustic chemical and Charlie loses his shooting arm to it; then Indians rob the Sisters brothers of their gold. But this is not the end and calamities continue to befall the brothers: they return to Oregon City only to find out that they have been robbed: their secret stash of money is also gone, stolen. Charlie, who used to be the better gunslinger and the leader of the Sisters pair, is now incapacitated and drugged with morphine to dull the pain so Eli takes over the lead, kills the Commodore to prevent retaliation for a job not completed. The brothers can now retire from their murderous careers.

So much for the tropes of the Western genre in *The Sisters Brothers*; its eccentricities are much more interesting. The first one can be found as early as the title – *The Sisters Brothers* – which sounds unusual, to say the least. The family name seems to be a paradox because the Sisters brothers turn out to be anything but sissy, weak or girly; quite the opposite, they are revered as the meanest gunfighters in the area, and no one in the novel ever dares to bring their names up as a joke. However, the ambiguity of the name does not lose its curiousness as the novel progresses: it rather points to the fact that their gendered role of very masculine, ruthless aggressive outlaws is ironically undercut by their well-hidden sensibility (in fact, deWitt calls them “sensitive cowboys” (“The TV Book Club”)), but also points, ultimately, to the difference in the gender/ed roles and personalities between the two brothers, which will be explained in a moment.

¹¹ “The California Trail carried over 250,000 gold-seekers and farmers to the gold fields and rich farmlands of the Golden State during the 1840s and 1850s, the greatest mass migration in American history. The general route began at various jumping off points along the Missouri River and stretched to various points in California, Oregon, and the Sierra Nevada. The specific route that emigrants and forty-niners used depended on their starting point in Missouri, their final destination in California, the condition of their wagons and livestock, and yearly changes in water and forage along the different routes. The trail passes through the states of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Oregon, and California” (“California Trail”).

The novel's eccentricities grow out of the Western genre's topoi, that is, the estrangement lies in the mode of tropical representation rather than in the introduction of new and/or unexpected elements to the plot. For example, this Western is narrated in the 1st person by Eli Sisters, the younger of the two brothers. The plot begins typically for a Western, with him and his brother being given a new shoot-'em-up mission by their boss the Commodore. In appearance Eli fits the profile of a mean guy: he is tall, bulky and rough-looking. However, Eli's delicacy and elegance of phrase as well as his thought processes immediately strike the reader as discordant with his vocation of a gunslinger. There is a sensibility at odds with the typical Western character, and he is instead revealed as a thinking man, a man of sorrow, a man who empathizes with animals and people and who is not fond of their mission. This can best be seen by the opening lines of the novel which, true to the Western genre, discuss horses. While he waits for his brother to receive the details of their new mission for the infamous Commodore, Eli narrates:

for want of something to do I studied Charlie's new horse, Nimble. My new horse was called Tub. We did not believe in naming horses but they were given to us as partial payment for the last job with the names intact, so that was that. Our unnamed previous horses had been immolated, so it was not as though we did not need these new ones but I felt we should have been given money to purchase horses of our own choosing, horses without histories and habits and names they expected to be addressed by. ... Tub was healthy enough animal but would have been better suited to some other, less ambitious owner. He was portly and low-backed and could not travel more than fifty miles in a day. I was often forced to whip him, which some men do not mind doing and which in fact some enjoy doing, but which I did not like to do; and afterward he, Tub, believed me cruel and thought to himself, Sad life, sad life. ... Charlie had no complaints with Nimble, who was as good or better than his previous horse, unnamed, but then he had had first pick of the two while I lay in bed recovering from a leg wound received on the job. I did not like Tub but my brother was satisfied with Nimble. That was the trouble with the horses. (deWitt, "The Sisters Brothers" 5-6)

This opening paragraph sets the tone of the whole novel: it is an ironic, darkly humorous and warm account of the Wild West. Also, already in the first few lines a conundrum that is Eli Sisters immediately surfaces: if it is a well-known fact in Westerns that only the good guys care for their horses (their trusted steeds) while villains do not, why does Eli, a hired assassin, care? Furthermore, during the course of the novel it is revealed that Eli is tired of his profession and wants to retire and settle down as the

owner of a trading post. And while at first sight this retirement plan seems at odds with outright villainy, this particular trait is in keeping with the generic schematics of a villain with a heart. Yezbick notes:

the gunfighter and the outlaw face a moral war between killing as a vocation and settling down on the frontier. Such [films] detail a world of lonely, desperate mercenaries and criminals whose worst enemy is the double-edged sword of their own profession. (“The Western”)

Eli Sisters is painfully aware of this sword. His thoughts frequently reveal his loneliness and his persistent search for love in every woman he meets. Since the genre already prescribes that the women in the West are scarce and those that can be had are either teachers or women of the trade, and since in *The Sisters Brothers* there appear no teachers, Eli does not have much of a choice. Nevertheless, he believes that each woman he encounters could be “the one”, and plots a romance around her. For example, when he is rejected by a hotel manageress because of his weight, he looks at himself in the mirror and muses, “When will that man there find himself to be loved?” (deWitt, “The Sisters Brothers” 56); he even goes on a diet resolving to lose 25 pounds and to write her “a letter of love and praises, that I might improve her time on the earth with the devotion of another human being” (75). He is bitterly disappointed when he finds out his brother Charlie had slept with her for money, and consequently stops dieting. Being obviously more sensible but also more effeminate of the brothers, Eli is afraid of spiders; he is easily sad, “the best songs are the sad ones” he claims (17). After an argument with Charlie he thinks, “We can all of us be hurt, and no one is exclusively safe from worry and sadness” (50). Moreover, quite a portion of the novel is devoted to Eli’s tooth-brushing habits, to the tooth powders he buys; he even shares a moment of intimacy with the hotel manageress when they brush teeth together. And finally, Eli is upset by bullying of any kind: it is only when he is bullied that he loses control of himself and becomes really violent, and is after always embarrassed by the loss of control. Thus he makes up quite a layered character, not something one would expect from a typical Wild West hired gun.

Charlie Sisters, on the other hand, is a hardened gunman. Eli explains that Charlie knew violence from an early age and whenever he was insulted he could never engage in an average fight with fists or even knives, but had to see each episode through to death. There were always consequences and someone wishing to avenge the death so sometimes Charlie found himself outnumbered and this was where Eli came in. Eli says he was young but his temper was high and the thought of someone

causing harm to his brother was enough to make him insane. It turned out that they had an aptitude for killing, so they were approached by the Commodore. Charlie loves the violence of his job, and eventually he wants to become a new Commodore. In fact, when the Sisters come across another criminal, Mayfield, who owns the whole town of Mayfield, Eli says:

I realized that by looking at this boss man I was witnessing the earthly personification of Charlie's future, or proposed future, for ours was so often in jeopardy ... But yes, just as I longed for the organized solitude of the shopkeeper, so did Charlie wish for the days of continued excitement and violence, except he would no longer engage personally but dictate from behind a wall of well-armed soldiers, while he remained in perfumed rooms where fleshy women poured his drinks and crawled on the ground like hysterical infants. (122)

Charlie is not the thoughtful, intellectual one; he has never questioned why a man as powerful as the Commodore would have so many enemies, and has qualms only about the last job because he can no longer delude himself into believing that Hermann Kermit Warm is a thief who has wronged the Commodore. Eli, on the other hand, functions as the conscience for both of them, and he is in this job only to protect his brother, or, more precisely, because Charlie knows exactly which buttons to push to get him into a murderous rage which Charlie then directs against the enemies. In his own way, Eli dispenses justice, not dwelling too much when he kills bad people, but showing remorse when he kills apparently innocent ones. So Eli possesses a certain moral code and, in the course of time, Charlie displays it as well. For example, having finally met Herman Kermit Warm, both brothers agree that killing him would be like killing children or women (224). Thus this western story has quirks of its own.

To return to the novel's eccentricities on a more structural level, the style is elevated rhetorically and the novel is frequently self-referential: Eli is aware that he is telling a story, and that he and his brother will be remembered because of it. Not only does Eli frequently muse on how things might have turned out differently, but on a meta-level there are several instances in the novel where Eli shows his narratorial awareness. One of them occurs in the first part of the novel when the brothers are on their way to California to find Warm. After they camp down for the night, Eli comments: "You will often see this scenario in serialized adventure novels: two grisly riders before the fire telling their bawdy stories and singing harrowing songs of death and lace" (19). This stereotypical

scenario he immediately opposes by stating that after riding hard the whole day, the riders will just fall asleep. With this remark Eli the narrator attempts to add a note of realism to his story, show how things “really” are in the West, thereby underlining the truthfulness of his story. According to Slagle this strategy is typical of a Western which represents itself as an art form while it simultaneously rejects artfulness “by claiming historical fidelity and lack of invention” (122). Slagle then paraphrases Michel Foucault’s assessment of René Magritte’s famous painting of a pipe by claiming that the Western asserts that “this is not a text”. Moreover, in yet another episode Eli and Charlie are again sleeping outdoors and a riderless horse wanders into the cave away from the rain. Eli covers it with his blanket but comments: “I could not sleep without proper covering and instead spent the rest of the night rewriting lost arguments from my past, altering history so that I emerged victorious” (deWitt, “The Sisters Brothers” 77). Eli is definitely aware that history can be rewritten and re-represented in a new light; consequently the reader cannot but wonder whether Eli is altering the Sisters’ history as well, all the more so since throughout the novel are interspersed phrases such as “thinking of it now”, which indicate that the story is already concluded and open to reinterpretation when Eli decides to tell it.

During their quest to find Hermann Kermit Warm, the Sisters brothers meet a parade of episodic characters, again a typical trait of a generic Western. Nonetheless, the characters of *The Sisters Brothers* display an original flair: there is a dr. Watts, jack-of-all-trades now a dentist who has tried every imaginable enterprise and failed in all of them (“I wonder what I will fail at next”, Watts wonders forlornly (27)); a weeping man (it is never explained why he wanders the frontier “in a state of catatonic devastation” (304)); numerous prospectors, none of them sane (one drinking dirt convinced it is coffee, another walking around San Francisco with a chicken under his arm); an idiotic boy whose head invites hitting and who rides a horse as retarded as he is; a tuberculotic woman bookkeeper whom Eli fancies; an old woman who the brothers are convinced is a witch. These are but a few of the colorful personages who march through the novel. deWitt’s frontier is heavily populated, but not one character could be said to be “normal”, able to fit into a society that is not frontier society. This is a picaresque novel where various eccentric characters wander in and out of the novel, making up episodes through the sheer vividness of their personalities.¹² The characters are slightly hyperbolic, exaggerated, slightly grotesque, and yet portrayed within the

¹² deWitt said in an interview that he was more interested in people than places. See deWitt “Profile”.

realm of the possible (if not probable) but certainly impressive and believable. The novel is in equal measure plot-centered (this kind of popular, generically bound literature usually concentrates on the action) as it is character-centered, with a focus not only on Eli who is the central unifying principle of the novel, but also, more broadly, on all episodic people in the novel as well.

Speaking of elements atypical for the Western genre, definitely worth mentioning are the two intermissions and a dream state that Eli has. Whether the two intermissions are Eli's visions or whether they are hallucinations, it remains unclear. They both occur when Eli is of diminished consciousness, be he passed out or in a dream-like state. The dream occurs very early in the novel when Charlie, after riding the whole day, decides he does not want to sleep out in the open. The brothers come across a shack with an old woman in it; she gives Eli the creeps and he doesn't want to stay but Charlie is insistent. The setting (the shack) and the woman introduce a horrific element, as the woman reminds of the three witches from *Macbeth*, or perhaps one of the three Moirae who spun, measured and cut the thread of life:

her face is obscured in the folds of her rags. Before her lay a mound of dull red and black beads or stones; her hands emerged from her layers and nimbly took these up one by one, stringing them onto a piece of thin wire to fashion a long necklace or some other manner of elaborate jewelry. (29-30)

What is more, the woman adds to the brothers' conviction of witchcraft by telling them she knows who they are by the line of dead men following behind them. As the Sisters fall asleep, Eli falls "into a dream state" and has an extracorporeal experience in which he sees himself sleeping but also the old woman leaning over Charlie "opening his mouth with her hands. From the dark space in her folds there flowed a slow and heavy black liquid" (31) and the watching Eli starts screaming that she should leave Charlie alone. Eli abruptly wakes up and sees the old woman sitting behind Charlie at the table, "her head turned all the way around, looking in the far dark corner" (32), as if in a trance. On the following morning the Sisters find her string of beads hanging from the door jamb and remember her remark from the previous evening: "In the morning I will be mostly gone" (31), whereupon they dare not exit through the door and an episode of their extrication from the shack ensues.

In the first Intermission it is unclear whether Eli is awake or not, the intermission represents a graphically separate piece of text which is,

nonetheless, syntactically and semantically connected with the surrounding main text. As Eli walks to a row of houses in Mayfield, in a yard he spies a girl with a dog. The episode begins realistically but slowly it grows more and more improbable, fantastic. It involves a girl and her dream in which she saw a man she claims is a protected man. Eli assumes she means him, but she refuses to tell him anything more. The eeriness of the intermission stems from the fact that Eli seems to be seeing one thing, a dog chewing a bone, but when the girl points out that the dog is chewing on his own amputated leg, that image becomes real, that is what Eli sees. After the girl tells of her dream in which she poisons the dog, Eli takes a closer look and sees the dog is dead, poisoned. The uncanny of this intermission is further emphasized by the fact that Eli comments on the episode as if it were a perfectly realistic event, occurring in the state of wakefulness. His last sentence in the intermission is that it is time to leave Mayfield and this is precisely what the brothers do in the immediately following main text. In the larger context of the novel this first intermission functions as an evil foreboding. Unlike the dream in the shack, it is presented as a separate chapter, as is the second intermission which happens close to the end of the novel, when the Sisters, after the unsuccessful gold-rush adventure, return to the town of Mayfield to take the money they stole from Mayfield the man. There is no money there, and Mayfield is gone. As the brothers are beaten by the prostitutes for forcing Mayfield to leave the town and leaving them without a job, the intermission begins with Eli passing out “in the dirt and sun in the half-dead town of Mayfield” (308). The girl reappears and this time addresses Charlie, trying to poison him. Eli saves him and again asks the girl how and to what extent he is protected but the girl again refuses to answer him, at which point the second intermission ends. Thus both intermissions have a realistic context but the appearance of the girl and her actions are uncanny.

Returning to the idiosyncrasies of the novel, the last unexpected twist in the novel is its ending. Again in keeping with the Western genre, the Sisters brothers ride off into the sunset. However, the sunset represented here is none other than the stern embrace of their mother. Thinking about the novel retrospectively, the reader discovers that the mother figure has been present in the novel from its very beginning (more precisely, when Eli remarks that all the best songs are sad ones, Charlie answers “That’s what Mother used to say” (17)). She is the strong presence to which Eli measures most of his actions, and the person he misses. But the importance of the mother figure does not end there: the Oedipal relationship between the brothers and the mother in the novel is literalized

and, true to the ironic and humorous tone of the novel, the introduction into the grizzly story of family violence begins innocently enough with Charlie asking Eli whether he remembers how he got his freckles. Charlie remembers the day father died. Namely, father became insane and was about to kill mother, but Charlie, still a boy, came in with his rifle and killed father. Then he dragged father's body into the stable and took mother to town to have her broken arm splintered. Eli, who was much younger, was left behind in the sun, forgotten in the chaos. When Charlie came back, he found Eli still out there, blind from the sun and his skin "peeling away in swaths like the skin of an onion" (167). Charlie finishes telling the story as if it were an innocent bedtime story, and not a story of gruesome murder: "And that, Eli, is how you got your freckles" (167). In a darkly ironic twist of fate, Eli carries outward sign of the decisive Oedipal event on his face.

It is perhaps due to this first murder that Charlie owes his quick temper and an inclination to resolve all of his altercations with an outright kill. Be that how it may, when Charlie loses his "good arm" and can no longer be a gunfighter, Eli takes over the leading role in the Sisters pair. He executes the Commodore masking it as a death of natural causes and together with Charlie goes back to their mother. In the front yard there is a scarecrow dressed in their father's clothes, the paternal figure once again ridiculed as the maternal figure takes over the dominant position in the family hierarchy. The mother had hitherto refused to see the brothers until they left off their profession, but now that Charlie is incapacitated and Eli realizes he never really wanted that kind of itinerant and murderous life for himself, they can return home. The novel aptly ends with Eli's final words:

I could not recall a time when I was precisely where I wanted to be, and this was a very satisfying feeling. ... [I] decided that my brother and I were, for the present at least, removed from all earthly dangers and horrors. And might I say what a pleasing conclusion this was for me. (324)

This resolution of the hardened gunmen's lives is even more humorous when one remembers that deWitt dedicates the novel to his own mother! In this way the Sisters brothers finish their last adventure, returning to their home and having to reconceptualize themselves as new persons. The mother will help them with that, the rules of her house are strict and clear-cut. The genre of the Western, as has been said, offers this same kind of clarity, and therein lies its attraction. In the words of Weston, "in our dark times, the Westerns that imitate the old ones are obviously nostalgic, sentimental, and a bit lovingly comic" (54). This Western is a revisitiation of the old mythic West, with an undercoating of irony and humor which is

at all times sympathetic to the brothers, the sensitive cowboys and their attempts to find their place in the world of the frontier.

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