



## THE LEGACY OF IMPERIALISM AND RECOVERY THE MASCULINE: A STUDY OF JAMES WELCH'S *WINTER IN THE BLOOD*

Mr.G.Ravichandiran\* Dr. R. Suresh Kumar\*\*

\*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University.

\*\*Assistant Professor, English Wing DDE, Annamalai University.

James Welch was born on November 18, 1940, to a Blackfoot father and GrosVentre mother. Welch grew up in an Indian environment, and the traditions and religion especially of the Blackfoot inform his writing. He attended the University of Montana, where he received his B. A. Degree. As an adjunct professor he teaches writing and Indian studies at the University of Montana. Much of Welch's fiction pivots on the interaction between the American Indian and white America. In *Winter in the Blood* (1974), Welch presents a nameless protagonist who feels displaced, caught between two worlds, helpless in a world of stalking white men, but unaccepted by Indians – a stranger to both. Similarly, in the *Death of Jim Loney* (1979), Welch portrays a half-blood who is unable to find a place in either world. Different from his first two novels, *Fools Crow* (1986) is a historical novel set in the 1870's which depicts Fools Crow, who attempts live a traditional Blackfoot life in the context of whiter settlement and the U. S. Government's war against Plains Indians. Welch includes episodes from Blackfoot oral narrative and describes traditional ceremonies. *The Indian Lawyer* (1990) tells the story of an Indian who is torn about how best to help his people; law practice and politics or on the reservations themselves, while his own worst enemy is himself. The poetry collection *Riding the Earthboy* (1971) is best for its protest poetry, which often deals with reservation life in Montana.

In *Winter in the Blood*. Set one hundred years after the conclusion of *Fools Crow*, the nameless narrator, apparently the great-grandson of Fools Crow inherits a legacy of tribal impotence. As the title phrase of the novel, *Winter in the Blood*, suggests, this impotence, like a perpetual winter, has been transferred through Blackfoot bloodlines. The relationship between personal masculinity and tribal potency is both affected by and affects personal and political histories on the personal level. *Winter in the Blood* is story of stunted masculinity.

The nameless narrator does not hunt buffalo as his great-grandfather, *Fools Crow*, did. Instead, he is a cowboy who herds cattle. Furthermore, he is a man without honor; he drinks, abandons his loved ones, hits women, and disrespects his elders. Clearly, he is a man who has lost his way; "I felt no hatred, no love, no guilt, no conscience, nothing but a distance that had grown through the years . . . but the distance I felt came not from country or people; it came from within me. I was as distant from myself as a hawk from the moon" (2). Welch implies that this alienation comes from a loss of culture, just as *Fools Crow* had prophesied. The stories, it seems, were not "handed down" (359). Because they were not, the narrator is ignorant of Blackfoot rituals and does not understand his function or role in his community; therefore, he cannot achieve manhood.

On a political level, the stories and the rituals did not "vanish," but were replaced by imperial histories of westward expansion, Catholicism, and myths of white popular culture. The main task of the narrator, then, is to discover his manhood by recovering the potency or masculinity of the tribe. Part of this recovery process involves the narrator's uncovering of a history that is at once personal and political; the story of his maternal grandparents and the winter they survived together.

The narrator observes that "winters were always timeless" (19). As if winter can freeze time itself, it is fitting then, that the protagonist of *Winter in the Blood* remembers finding his father frozen to death as a result of spending a night passed out in a drift of snow; "I had a memory as timeless as the blowing snow that we had found him . . . in the endless skittering whiteness" (19). The narrator, too, seems frozen, numb to the outside world. He too, seems suspended in time, trapped within a ten year period bracketed by the deaths of his two living male relatives; his older brother. Mose and his father, first Raise the narrator tells us that when he was twelve, he lost his brother in a cattle-herding accident. Ten years later, when the narrator was twenty-two, his father wandered out of a bar one night into a snowdrift and froze to death. Now at the age of thirty-two he seems unable to cope with life, or the people in his life: "Coming home to a mother and an old lady who was my grandmother. And the girl who was thought to be my wife. But she didn't really count. For that matter none of them counted; not one meant anything to me. And for no reason" (2).

The narrator's inability to move beyond these traumatic events is due to his ignorance of tribal stories and rituals that would allow him to achieve manhood. In 'Crying for Pity' in "Winter in the Blood," William W. Thackery reads the novel in light of traditional; GrosVentre and Blackfoot coming of age rituals: "At 32 years of age, the crucial tests for mature manhood began," in which the "young man faced the critical tests by which he could attain a mature man's name" (62). Thackery



documents that “this rite of passage to manhood, which was looked on within the culture itself as earning the right to marry or earning the right to a warrior’s name, involved a highly rigorous process of self-evaluation, self-debasement, severe self-discipline, strict sacrifice, and finally, visionary or mystical self-insight” (62). While Thackery presents a convincing argument that the narrator “is on a traditional ‘vision quest,’” his assertion that “his quest has stalled at an early stage because of his inability or unwillingness to come to terms with the horror of the sacrifices which the world is forcing him to accept” (64) explains only part of the narrator’s situation. That is, the reason that the narrator has not accepted his sacrifices is that he does not think of them as such. Thackery’s thesis does not address the issue of the erasure of culture or the fact that the narrator has not been taught the belief system of his ancestors. In other words, it is just as Fools Crow had feared: the stories were not handed down.

In traditional Blackfoot culture, the spiritual leaders of the tribe are men. But the narrator of *Winter in the Blood* lacks a male spiritual guide. His mother, a Catholic convert, has taught him none of the beliefs of his ancestors:

My mother was a Catholic and sprinkled holy water in the comers of her house before lightening storms. She drank with the priest from Harlem, a round man with distant eyes, who refused to set foot on the reservation. He never buried Indians in their family graveyards; instead, he made them come to him, to his church, his saints and holy water, his feuding eyes. (5)

His mother’s adopted religion is of no comfort to the narrator. He is particularly disturbed by her relationship with this priest, “a white man who refused to bury Indians on their own plots” (59). He rejects Catholicism, yet he has no alternative to this religion. His maternal grandmother is (he believes) his only other living relative; she knows about the old ways, but she is not an effective guide for him because she is a woman. The traditional Blackfeet were a paternalistic people. When the Blackfeet were colonized, as we saw in *Fools Crow*, the United States government emasculated the tribe; that is, the U. S. expropriated the power of the tribe’s male members in order to replace it with its own brand of paternalism, one which left the Blackfeet completely dependent upon their new “father” for survival.

In *Winter in the Blood*, the narrator is literally fatherless. The narrator seems to remember his father for making “the white men laugh” and for his absence: “he was always in transit” (21). Furthermore, the man he believes to be his grandfather is a “half-white drifter named Doogie,” whose face the narrator can’t remember (37). He feels that his grandmother degraded herself through her connection with Doogie, “They lived together, this daughter of one chief, wife of another and the half-breed drifter” (37). A grandfather is a highly significant figure in Blackfoot culture and serves as a young man’s spiritual guide (63). Since all of his paternal figures are dead or absent, as Thackery argues, the narrator seeks out a surrogate spiritual guide, the old man Yellow Calf:

Since he has not seen Yellow Calf nor had any contact with him for twenty some years and since no other explanation is provided in the novel for his decision to visit the blind shaman, his sudden unexplained journey to see Yellow Calf makes sense only if it is viewed in the traditional sense; the narrator is seeking out an elder, a “grandmother.” (64)

By the end of this novel, Yellow Calf reveals that he is the narrator’s literal grandfather. Furthermore, the stories and rituals that Yellow Calf shares with the narrator bring him closer to his spiritual core and help him to recover his latent power. After his grandmother’s death, the narrator is able to insist that she be buried in the family gravesite (134). The last line of the novel, “I threw the pouch [of tobacco] into the grave,” (176) indicates that the narrator is in the process of recovering his ancestral belief system with the help of his true grandfather, Yellow Calf.

Even though the cowboy embodies virility and masculinity, the narrator cannot realize his manhood in this occupation. His rejection of the cowboy as an identity is never explained, but may be attributed to his association of his brother’s death with herding cattle. But it may also be a rejection of an entire way of life and the value system attached to that lifestyle. That is, the cowboy has become a symbol of the white American male who conquers the wilderness in the name of “civilization.” As we saw in *Fools Crow*, the cattle industry was one of the reasons that the buffalo and the Blackfeet were exterminated or driven from their habitats. Before the incursion of white cattle ranchers, the Blackfoot man was a hunter, not a herder. The narrator is a cowboy because there are not any buffalo left to hunt. There are only cattle to herd.

The narrator’s grandmother repeatedly tells the story of the winter that her people were driven from their homeland to the Blackfoot reservation: “The old lady ended her story with the image of the people being driven ‘like cows’ to their



reservation” (157). The story that Yellow Calf tells the narrator completes his ancestral history –now he has both the masculine and the feminine version. Furthermore, Thackery writes that “the historic story he tells of the suffering of the ancient people, the Blackfoot of the last century, is the kind of story that would be regarded as most holy” (72). Yellow Calf story reveals that he is the narrator’s grandfather; he was the hunter and warrior who helped the narrator’s grandmother survive the winter the Blackfeet were driven to their reservation:

I began to laugh, at first quietly, with neither bitterness nor humour. It was the laughter of one who understands a moment in his life, of one who has been let in on the secret through luck and circumstance. “You ... you’re the one.” I laughed, as the secret unfold itself. “The only one ... you, her hunter. . .”(158).

Thackery argues that this realization unifies and harmonizes the narrator’s suffering with the suffering of the Blackfoot people, and he becomes one with “countless generations of young Indian vision-questors seeking manhood and a warrior’s name throughout the history of Indian civilization on this continent” (73).

His grandfather, Yellow Calf, provides him with an alternative to the cowboy as a model of masculinity. While the cowboy represents self-reliance, rugged individualism, and arrogance, the model Yellow Calf provides him with is one of inter-dependence, communal ties, and humility. While the cultural construction of white masculinity posits inter-dependence as weakness, the Blackfeet view it as strength. Thus, masculinity is not determined by domination of others but by protection of them. Yellow Calfs tale illustrates that a “real” man stays behind to help those who cannot help themselves. At the end of *Winter in the Blood*, the narrator is able to reconnect with his own basic humanity. His new found compassion allows him to recapture his masculinity; in a self-sacrificial gesture, he rescues a cow from drowning in a mud pit. In the process, he loses his most loved possession, his horse, Bird.

The oral history passed down from Yellow Calf stands contrast with versions of history, such as film Westerns that the narrator has likely been exposed to within the realms of American mainstream culture (WIB 103). The most important contrast is that it demonstrates that representations of Native Americans as emasculated are cultural constructions, not biological imperatives. Yellow Calfs story gets handed down, and the narrator sees the pride and honor that comes with being a man of the Blackfoot nation.

#### Work Cited

1. Thackery, William W. “‘Crying for Pity’ in *Winter in the Blood*.” *MELUS* 7 (1980): 61-76. Print.
2. Welch, James. *Fools Crow*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986. Print.
3. ---. *Winter in the Blood*. New York: Penguin Books, 1974. Print.