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ABSTRACT

Although attention should be drawn to the fact that girls in children's and adolescent fiction are stereotyped, it seems more serious that boys in such literature are far too often stereotyped as attaining manhood by a violent act against an animal--whether a pet or wild--or against other aspects of the natural world. Of greater impact are those books in which both evil, symbolized by animals, and nature, represented as alien to man, are forces against which a young man must pit himself. In contrast, few books portray the acceptance by a young boy that to become a man, he must face the trouble within himself rather than externalizing it. Teachers should emphasize this point, affirming that violence and destruction are not necessary steps to manhood. (JM)

The Cult of the Kill in Adolescent Fiction

Jean McClure Kelty

(15 pp. plus notes)

The Cult of the Kill in Adolescent Fiction

Critical attention has recently been directed toward the stereotyping of girls in children's and adolescent fiction. As Diane Gersoni-Stavn points out in "Feminist Criticism: An Overview," "studies show that many more stories have been written about boys than girls. The boys do many more interesting and certainly more physical and fun thing and do them in a broader range of geographical settings than do the girls...."[1] But, despite the concentrated research which has been done on this problem, little or no attention is being given to the parallel stereotyping of boys within those "fun things," nor to how boys are conditioned via books to the cult of violence and killing as a part of their initiation into the adult world. Such stereotyping is, to my mind, far more dangerous than the relegation of the female to passive activity (though indeed the two may be philosophically linked and undoubtedly are). I am, however, most concerned about the stereotype initiation of the male character who persistently becomes a man when he performs an act of violence against an animal and/or the natural world. Such a pattern is hardly consistent with the ecological revolution of our age. If we are ever to live in harmony with nature, rather than

attempt to conquer it as we have done in the past, we must reshape our attitudes toward nature. And an excellent place to begin may be by examining just how boys in fiction are encouraged to regard nature as hostile and alien, something to be overcome and denied. I am not suggesting censorship. I am suggesting rather an awareness so that we, as teachers, can help students to judge attitudes for what they are. We need to stop mouthing the platitudes of the past in regard to books that have either outlived their usefulness or, if used at all, in formal classroom situations, should be taught as an example of a civilization that had temporarily lost its way. To that end, I would like to examine with you some typical fiction which is read by adolescents, in most cases, fiction that has been highly praised and which appears on reading lists for young people all over the country.

I remember reading Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' The Yearling first as a teenager and I remember distinctly that I despised it. Many years later, I discovered why I had reacted to the book as I did and why I believe that we can use The Yearling as a base from which to discuss literature which incorporates the cult of the kill. Near the end of the book, Jody, the young boy, is ordered to shoot his pet deer who is destroying the crops by which the family lives.

Unable to do it, Jody's mother tries and only wounds the deer. Desperately, the boy pursues the wounded deer and kills it. At the book's end, he accepts his parents' decision and, thereby, we are told becomes a man. Let us examine the premise contained therein. A boy becomes a man when he reconciles himself to the killing of the thing which he loves most. "He found himself listening for something. It was the sound of the yearling for which he listened.... He did not believe he should ever again love anything, man or woman or his own child, as he had loved the yearling. He would be lonely all his life. But a man took it for his share and went on. [underlining mine]"[2] Here then is more than an active denial of reverence for life. Here is a violation of love and feeling and sentiment. A man is not supposed to love.

I am not contending that such a situation is unrealistic, nor am I saying even that the deer need not have been killed. I am simply saying that any author who uses such a situation as a base for her character's growing up into manhood is not deserving of the name which we have given to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings. To say that we grow by killing something - and that is just what The Yearling and other books like it say - is absurd. We probably grow by knowing pain ourselves - in that part she is right. But we do not grow by inflicting pain on any living thing - in doing so we become a little less human. Such acts may be inevitable and inescapable. Jody, being forced by life to accept the killing of

the fawn did what he had to do, but he did not grow thereby. And, by stating that he does, The Yearling fails. But then the world of The Yearling has little respect for life and nature, despite its fine trappings of natural setting and the distinction which we are told exists between the Baxters and the Forresters, the latter whom we are told kill for the sake of killing while the Baxters kill only for need. The distinction never really comes off. For not even the Baxters consider themselves a part of nature, but alien to it. "The Baxters went into the scrub for flesh of deer and hide of wild-cat. And the predatory animals and the hungry varmints came into the clearing when they could. The clearing was ringed around with hunger. It was a fortress in the scrub. Baxter's Island was an island of plenty in a hungry sea."[3] For a boy to declare himself a man in such a world, the boy must enjoy killing and in the end he must kill the thing he loves most and declare it an act of manhood.

Nor does The Yearling stand alone in the values which it states. Old Yeller by Fred Gipson, another extremely popular book on reading lists, advances the same curious twisted values. Old Yeller, the boy's beloved dog, has saved two of the family from the attack of a wolf. Then, because the family is afraid that the wolf was rabid and passed it on to the dog, Old Yeller must be shot. The boy pleads with the family to tie the dog or shut him up until they

can know for sure. "We just can't take the chance," his mother tells him.

> Quickly...I left Mama and went to stand in the light of the burning bear grass. I reloaded my gun and called Old Yeller back from the house. I stuck the muzzle of the gun against his head and pulled the trigger.[4]

Later he father tells him: "'Now the thing to do is to try to forget it and go on being a man. [underlining mine]'"

> "How?" I asked. "How can you forget a thing like that?" He studied me for a moment, then shook his head. " I guess I don't quite mean that," he said. "It's not a thing you can forget. I don't guess it's a thing that you ought to forget. What I mean is, things like that happen. They may seem mighty cruel and unfair, but that's how life is a part of the time."[5]

And the boy agrees with him. He has become a man now. His solution is to take Arliss (his brother) and the new pup "out for a squirrel hunt."[6] And so again that's just the way the world is and a boy grows up when he faces the fact - that he must kill his loyal dog who has saved mother and brother, because the dog might have rabies and they "just can't take the chance."

A variation on this theme occurs in James Street's Good-bye, My Lady. Here the boy is not asked to kill his pet but rather to surrender her for $100.00 reward money to the rightful owner. To the boy, Lady is a companion, a friend. To the owner (whom she will not allow to touch her) she is breeding stock; he wants her back because she is valuable. And because the boy does not fight the return of Lady, because he stoutly leads her to the crate

in the man's truck, at the end of the book when asked about coffee for him, Uncle Jesse can say: "'Drinks his black, too. Claude does. Black and stout.'"[7] The boy has become a man.

An even more vicious example of the theme is the 1972 Robert Newton Peck's A Day No Pigs Would Die. The pattern is familiar: the boy becomes a man the day he helps his father kill Pinky, the boy's pet pig, because she is barren. As the boy kisses his father's bloody hands, his father tells him: "'That's what being a man is all about, boy. It's just doing what's got to be done.'"[8] From the opening of the book (which is annoyingly bad English: "I should of been in school that April day."[9]) to its conclusion, the book is filled with a cute folksy humor which makes wry asides at the pitiful picture of a young pig being bred for the first time and expects the reader to see humor in the boy helping a calf to be born: "I never hit anybody, boy or beast, as I hit that cow....I kicked her. And stoned her. I kicked her again one last time, so hard in the udder that I thought I heard her grunt."[10] We presume the reader is also supposed to be amused (the characters are) at the weazeling of the dog, until the weazel is dead and the poor dog so brutally injured that it is necessary to shoot him. All this time the men enjoy the activity with the delight of a bear-baiting contest. One wonders

what blindness prompted the New York Times to observe that this is a "superbly rich and moving novel about boyhood, becoming a man, and love...,"[11] and what further insensitivity prompts teachers to recommend this book to their students as a lesson in growing up.

Perhaps even more popular than the killing of a pet as initiation is the killing of a wild animal as a sign of growing from boyhood to manhood. Books of this type are so familiar that only a few random examples need be chosen to prove the point. Andy in Paul Annixter's Windigo comes of age when he kills the bear, Old Boniface Black. "Standing above his quarry, Andy felt no triumph, only wonder and gratitude that this enemy of all the region, hunted so long and so disastrously, was finally dead."[12]

The boy in Ester Wier's The Loner is a boy who has devoted himself, by necessity, to taking care of no one but himself. Very little is made of the incident where he takes care of the sheepdog, Jup, by admiting that he, and not the dog, is to blame for stampeding the sheep. Rather, he is accepted as grownup when he kills the bear.

> "You hit his brain, David!" she cried. "One shot and you hit him right in a vital spot!"
>
> ..."I had to do it. I had to kill him--for you, and Tex and Angie. I had to do it myself." [13]..She rocked him in her arms and he felt she was crying.

David, the killer, was a man.

A major initiation for the boy in Armstrong Sperry's Call It Courage is the killing of the wild boar. "Mafatu was struck dumb. He had killed a wild pig! For a second he could not grasp the wonderful truth of it. Then he leaped wildly into the air, shouting: '...Do you hear me, Tavana Nui? I, your son, have killed a boar!'"[14]

Similarly, the killing of whales - mothers and babies alike - constitutes Paul Joplin's education in Christopher Webb's Quest of the Otter. He leaves his home a boy and comes home from the whaling expedition a man. At the end of the book he shouts "out to the ocean, 'Aye aye, sir! Coming with all hands. All hands and lively.' For the ocean cannot conquer whaling men, nor ever will. And that was what Tom had meant when he had first shouted those words and I had stood beside him, a wondering boy afraid of reality. [underlining mine]"[15] And part of the great reality is the wanton slaughter of whales, which Paul never questions, indeed, thoroughly enjoys.

Less direct, yet perhaps more powerful in their impact, are those books which set up an animal as a symbol of evil or of nature-to-be-conquered and then pit a young man against that force, to win or lose. A classic example is Moby Dick:

> I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and

> stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul. A wild, mystical, sympathetical feeling was in me; Ahab's quenchless feud seemed mine. With greedy ears I learned the history of that murderous monster /the White Whale/ against whom I and all the others had taken our oaths of violence and revenge." [16]

The fact that the crew of the Pequod goes down with the White Whale at the end and "the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago"[17] may uphold the irony and perhaps suggest that nature cannot be conquered after all, but it merely reinforces the image of nature, and nature's creatures, as outside of, and alien to, man. Man, like Ahab, can only pit "himself, all mutilated, against it."[18]

In the same vein is Hemingway's The Old Man and The Sea. Here the boy is initiated by the old man into the symbolic doing of the impossible - that is, killing the enormous fish. All the boy's sympathy goes to the Old Man and he identifies himself with the killing. The man, having caught the fish, may now dream about lions in peace and the boy, understanding, may now be a man. Both have looked into the heart of life itself: man must pit himself against the forces of nature. Even in the losing at the end, he will none the less have tried to do the impossible. He will have killed the fish. As the boy says: "It is what a man must do." [19]

Of the same type, too, is Paul Annixter's Swiftwater. Here the animal to be killed is the wolverine, which , according to Dwight L.

Burton, "is the symbol of the rendezvous with evil which is the legacy of every adolescent who faces life squarely...."[20] Here again, then is the tiresome and dangerous repetition of a creature of nature being set up as the foil to man, a thing to be conquered in order to be a man.

Nor can adolescent literature apparently escape the ritual slaying, presented vividly in the much acclaimed Shadow of a Bull by Maia Wojciechowska. All the details of the bull fight are there, including the sympathy of the author, who apparently agrees with one of the characters who says: "Bullfighting is dying. And it needs someone to make it come alive again."[21] True, the boy, Manolo, who has been chosen to step into his father's shoes and become a great bullfighter, chooses at the end of the book to become a doctor instead. But his choice is conditioned by his desire to be a doctor, not by his condemnation of bullfighting. He leaves bullfighting to his friend, Juan, and at the end of the book he "watched Juan Garcia, fourteen, and the bull 'Castalon the Second,' make bullfighting history. As he watched them, there was a sadness in Manolo, but no jealousy."

> Sadness, for there was much beauty in the sight on the yellow sand and he was not part of that beauty. But there was no jealousy because he was sure what it was he wanted to do with his life. And his father's life, bullfighting, would stay a part of him, as it always had been, but in a different way than anyone had planned.[22]

The initiation of Manolo is complete; he has become his own man. But there is no condemnation of brutality. Apparently Wojciechowska is saying: "Do your own thing. If that be healing, fine. If your own thing be killing, then fine, too. It is all the same."

Not essentially different is the conclusion of Erik in Bryce Walton's Harpoon Gunner. Erik, admirably, has begun to question the killing of the whales. "The blue finally gave up and died, but Erik couldn't stop thinking about the baby whale. It had been found still clutched under the mother's dorsal fin. It had been dead from suffocation a long time."[23] Unlike other whaling books, the reader knows that the sympathy of the author is often with the whales, not the men who kill them, and Erik is sickened by the slaughter. He doubts that he will ever go whaling again. But Erik's real chance to be a man passes him by. He is faced with a difficult decision, whether or not to tell the truth which only he knows:

> But should he tell Bornak the truth? If he did, Bornak would take his crew out of the Enderby Sea to safety all right, before it was too late. But Bornak would also know the secret of the hidden sea. If he knew that, he would leave now for safe waters. But he would come back....He would still have his big hunt. It would still mean the final extinction of the blue whales. It was a sad decision to have to make. But Erik hesitated only a moment. If it comes to that, he thought--if it's a choice between our survival or the whales'--it has to be ours.[24]

And Erik has the author's sympathy. By a deus ex machine Bornak is killed and, therefore, will not be able to go back. But

nonetheless, Erik, when faced with a choice between nobleness and expediency, chooses the latter. Because the author, like Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, and the others which we have discussed, would have us believe that such a decision is clearly what makes the difference between a man and a boy. The man will choose expediency. "That's what being a man is all about...."

A review in The Boston Globe said of A Day No Pigs Would Die that "...It isn't trying to move mountains and it has no quarrel with life...."[26] So it can be said of all these books: They have no quarrel with life, no desire to make the world a more compassionate, gentler place. Expediency and practicality are the only yardsticks by which they measure existence, and man's role in the system is all that matters. Because nature and creatures other than man seem often to get in the way of man's desires, then they are enemies to be fought and conquered, or abused and ignored. By way of contrast, let us consider in closing a much different kind of book: Hal Borland's When The Legends Die. Corrupted by the very forces which these other books praise, a young Indian boy has abandoned the legends and the ways of his people to involve himself in the blood sport of rodeo. There, presumably to find himself, he takes it out on the rodeo horses and becomes known as The Killer. He finds neither peace nor himself. It is only when he returns to the place of his past, that he begins to

discover what he has been searching all along. Like the other characters we have considered, he too decides to kill the giant bear, which just may be the pet bear of his childhood.

> He closed his eyes, fighting with himself. I came to kill the bear! His throbbing pulse asked, Why? He answered, I must! And again his pulse beat, Why? He answered, To be myself! And the pulse kept beating the question at him. Angrily he said, This bear has made trouble! The question beat back, To...whom? And his own bitter answer, To me! Then the question, as before, Who...are...you? And he, having no answer he could face, said, whispering the words aloud, 'This bear did not make trouble. The trouble is in me.' And he lowered the rifle."[27]

For, unlike the other books, When Legends Die does have a quarrel with life. It says that for a boy to find himself, to become a man, he must accept that the trouble is in himself, to externalize that trouble and to foist it on nature or any of nature's creatures - to make them the scapegoat, is to remain a boy forever.

I would contend that the books which condition boys to the cult of violence and killing as their initiation into the adult world are untrue to the very deepest meaning of the nature of life itself. It is up to us as teachers to make students aware of that fact, to show them that the true initiation is a recognition that violence and brutality and death, though sometimes necessary, are never praiseworthy, nor do they constitute a man's way. To persist in teaching that books like The Yearling are a lesson in becoming a man

is only to continue in the way of violence for which this century is justifiably famous. The wonderfully profane Norman Mailer would take it all one step further in Why Are We In Vietnam?. He tells the story of boys conditioned to the glories of sport hunting. They are taught that such is the way of the man. The boys accept their conditioning without questioning because that's the way things are. At the end of the book, the boys are grown; a farewell party is being held for them. We come to know that they are going away. Where, we do not know, until the very end when the one speaks: "Vietnam, hot damn!"[28]

The analogy is an interesting, and, I think, a valid one. So long as we condition young men to violence and killing as the initiation into manhood, so long as we teach them that the enemy is outside themselves, always there to be vanquished, so long as we continue to tell them that "that's the way it is to be a man - we will go on fighting senseless wars in which everyone loses. Furthermore, we will continue to destroy what little is left of the natural world and to anihilate the myriad creatures with whom we share this fragile planet. It is absurd to preach ecology and reverence for life in the same breath with which we praise The Yearling and books like it. For these books are a contradiction

of the very foundations of ecology which, if it is to have any meaning for our world, must accept as its base: "Be tolerant, love, understand. The whole universe is but yourself. When you laugh at me, you are laughing at yourself. When you break the stem of a flower, you break your own leg."[29]

The way girls are stereotyped in fiction? Important, yes. But probably not as detrimental to our meaningful survival as the way boys are stereotyped to regard the cult of the kill as a necessary step to manhood and the world of adult reality.

Footnotes

[1]"Feminist Criticism: An Overview," Library Journal, January 15, 1974, p. 182.

[2]Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, The Yearling (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), p. 400.

[3]Ibid., p. 131.

[4](New York: Harper & Row, 1956), p. 153.

[5]Ibid., p. 156.

[6]Ibid., p. 158.

[7](Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1941), p. 222.

[8](New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1972), p. 129.

[9]Ibid., p. 1.

[10]Ibid., p. 10.

[11]Ibid., cover.

[12](New York: Holiday House,1963), p. 195.

[13](New York: David McKay Company, 1963), p. 147.

[14](New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1963), pp. 63-4.

[15](New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, Inc., 1963), p. 180.

[16]Herman Melville, (New York: Modern Library,1950),pp. 176-77.

[17]Ibid., p. 565.

[18]Ibid., p. 183.

[19](New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,1952), p. 23.

[20]"The Novel for the Adolescent," in Literature for Adolescents, Richard A. Meade, Robert C. Small, Jr., (eds.), (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1973), p. 83.

[21](New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 28.

[22]Ibid., p. 155.

[23](New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), p. 187.

[24]Ibid., p. 193.

[25]Peck, A Day No Pigs Would Die, p. 129.

[26]Ibid., cover.

[27](Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1963), p. 277.

[28] (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), p. 208.

[21](New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 28.

[22]Ibid., p. 155.

[23](New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), p. 187.

[24]Ibid., p. 193.

[25]Peck, A Day No Pigs Would Die, p. 129.

[26]Ibid., cover.

[27](Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1963), p. 277.

[28] (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), p. 208.

[29]John Blofeld, The Wheel of Life (Berkeley, California: Shambala Publications, Inc.), p. p. 48.