ETHOS IN COWBOY POETRY

By

Lauren Kent Henderson

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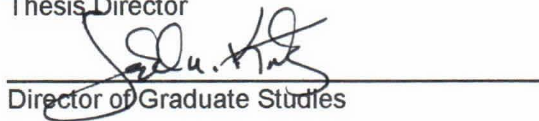
APPROVED

Prof. Alan Gribben
Thesis Director

Prof. Jeff Melton
Second Reader



Director of Graduate Studies

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INTRODUCTION

Picture yourself on a horse eight to ten hours a day under a blazing sun, as thick dust hangs heavy in the air, forever whipped up by the hard hooves of 2,500 Longhorn steers. Capricious weather threatens. In a matter of an hour, the crew can encounter hail, thunder, or dust storms. No shelter offers harbor. You are marooned in the middle of thousands of acres of semi-desert terrain. You dine every morning and night on biscuits, gravy, beef, and coffee. Seldom do you see any other humans save the ten to twelve drovers riding with you. Most of the day you ride alone, your best friend a four-legger that bears you across a terrestrial sea.

Finally, the herd stops for the night, but you do not. Chores await you. First, the herd must be watered. Next, over a hundred saddle horses must be watered and pastured. Any ailing animals must be tended. Equipment repairs are made. At last, you gather with your coworkers around a campfire where the cook dishes out the usual fare. It tastes good, and you settle back with your companions, enjoying the brief space of relaxation before turning in for the night or taking your turn at night watch.

How do you occupy yourself during this interlude between dinner and bedtime, with the latter coming early, as the cowboy must rise with the dawn? You discard ideas of wandering away from the campfire. Darkness surrounds you; remember, you are in the middle of the plains. No nearby town's kerosene lamps' yellow glow spills forth to beckon you. Only the light of the stars and the moon illumines your way. Since you carry all of your gear on your horse, you lack books to read. The food and cooking utensils fill the cook's wagon; therefore, you have only your innate resourcefulness with which to entertain yourself. If you are lucky, maybe a fiddle accompanies this drive, stowed during the day in the cook's wagon. Most likely, you and your companions entertain yourselves solely with songs, stories, and poems.

Ample evidence of the early cowboys' songs and poems survives, suggesting the obvious. That is, since cowboys created verse, most likely they recited poems and sang songs on the trail drives. Generally, people think of the cowboy as a singer. However, not all agree that cowboys sang a lot around campfires. N. Howard Thorp, himself a cowboy in some of the great nineteenth-century cattle drives, refutes the notion that cowboys sang around campfires. However, he said that usually one heard the night guard faintly singing and humming a recognizable ballad or church hymn. This practice accomplished two objectives. First, it soothed the cows, and second, the cowboy entertained himself. Nevertheless, Thorp's published collection of cowboy ballads, *Songs of the Cowboys,* seems to belie his contention that little campfire singing occurred. To be motivated to the point of mounting a horse and traveling several states in order to collect songs suggests that he had heard quite a few. Thorp receives credit as being the first person to recognize that cowboy songs possess cultural value.

Evidence insinuates that the cowboys' predisposition to song and poem can be explained in part by their ethnic heritage. Folk researcher Josiah Henry Combs disagrees with Thorp that cowboys sang little. Combs makes a case for the white cowboys' musical inclinations relative to their origins. He reports that many of the cowboys were former Southerners from the Deep South who migrated west. Editor Sarah Brash's research yields supporting evidence that many of the Texans were "rough-hewn Southerners, many of whom fought on the wrong side in the Civil War" (71). Combs documents the fact that these Southerners had previously lived in the Appalachian Mountains before moving to the Southern states. The mountaineers in turn brought with them many folk songs from Ireland and Scotland. Take for example the cowboy ballad "Streets of Laredo"; the anonymous author or authors borrowed the tune from a Scottish ballad "The Unfortunate Rake" (Schick). Assimilating a Scottish ballad's tune to cowboy lyrics may have been the notion of a displaced Southerner, or it may have been the work of a Scottish adventurer. Brash reports that the cowboys were a diverse lot. In addition to white Americans, she identifies their races and nationalities as Mexican, former black slaves from the American South, and adventurers from the British Isles and Europe (52).

Another shared feature with folk ballads of the British Isles, American South, and the American Highlands reflects in their composition. The German philologist Jakob Grimm countered the previously held belief that "folk songs were assumed to be the productions of individual authors (unknown) as were the poems of artistic composition. Such an assumption has been accepted with little questioning. Grimm's theory, epitomized in the phrase, *das Volk dichtet*, is that the people as a whole compose poetry" (Combs 22). Combs goes on to say that the folk song expresses not the individual's voice but the sentiments of the community. Certainly this phenomenon can be seen in cowboy poetry. While much of cowboy poetry is personal, it typically represents the feelings of the group as a whole, an analysis explored in this study.

Other commonality can be found in the method of composing. Cowboys around the campfire sometimes forged poems incrementally. That is, one man spoke a line or two of poetry, followed by the next man's contribution, and so until an entire poem emerged. Incremental composition dates back to the "Middle Ages when European peasants improvised ballads in song and dance, thus establishing a type of balladry superior to and having more vitality than anything of the kind that had its origin in individual ownership" (Combs 28). Sometimes a cowboy sang or told a poem straight through that he had written or had previously heard on another drive or in a dance hall; however, many poems jelled through incremental composition. Further support of this method of composition comes from Rudy Gonzalez, also known as "Cowboy Rudy." Gonzalez, a former working cowboy and farrier-turned-entertainer, reports that after a hard day's work the men gathered around the wagon (in the old days) or the bunkhouse or line shack nowadays, and enjoyed "the liars' hour." The taller and windier the tale, the better. "Tale" relates not only to the telling of a story in the usual sense; narrative poems tell stories, too.

Other evidence of incremental composition exists in Brash's recounting of the ambush of cowboy Nate Champion and his friends at the KC Ranch during the range wars. According to Brash, Champion and his friend Nick Ray, while wintering over at the KC, offered hospitality to two old trail pals, Bill Walker, a cowboy-turned-trapper, and Ben Jones, an elderly out-of-work trail

cook. Champion and Ray welcomed the company especially because Walker was a good fiddle player. Her research found that the four men "stayed up late, taking turns singing old songs and making up dirty verses to a cowboy favorite, 'The Old Chisholm Trail' "(157). Here is yet another example underscoring the theory that cowboy poems illustrate a people's art.

The subject matter of cowboy poems and songs shares common ground with that of the mountain man. The mountain man lives close to nature in isolation; therefore, his verse's nomenclature focuses on elemental and simple subjects: "His long and unequal struggle with the elements of nature places the Highlander under the necessity of dealing with conditions as he finds them, and he formulates his nomenclature in strict accordance with the maxim, 'Necessity is the mother of invention' "(Combs 5). He names places and animals after the abundant natural phenomena all around him (7). Even a brief perusal of cowboy poetry yields evidence of simple and elemental subjects named after naturally occurring phenomena.

Finally, Combs cites the Highlanders' penchant for personal combat and vendettas. He says Highlanders were as quick to let loose their guns as were the cowboys, and that cowboys were used to carrying guns because they had been former Civil War soldiers. This behavior indeed seems to be unique to the white cowboys and not the Mexican cowboys, who more often resorted to their wit and lariat to get them out of trouble.

In sum, American cowboy ballads and poems relate to European ancestors in subject matter and method of composition, yet there are differences. American folk songs, like their European antecedents, are the property of the folk and speak for the folk's culture, heritage, beliefs, and ideals. Combs's analysis describes a great deal of cowboy poetry; however, it is also intensely personal. Combs concludes that cowboys living on the remote, vast, and sparsely populated plains, physically severed from their heritage, draft poems that voice their very personal concerns versus those of the community at large. Cowboy poetry complies with that description; its subjects specifically involve a man's everyday life. He writes of his solitary existence, his hardships and troubles, his routine, his sister, or his sweetheart, his animals, and his thoughts of

death. Cowboy poetry, nonetheless, also keeps its foot in the folk tradition by memorializing special community events.

Because of varied methods of composition, cowboy poems would often mutate into other forms. A poem's worth existed partly in the number of parodies it spawned. Another property common to folk song and cowboy poetry resides in its orality. Given the nature of cattle ranching and trail drives, the man passed most of his time on horseback and around campfires, environs less conducive to hauling around paper. Usually he composed lines on horseback during the day to share with his brethren at night. Therefore, the composer had already memorized it; naturally, it was in turn spoken aloud as a source for entertainment.

Transient cowboys took their verse into towns where it was sung or recited for others. The hearers in turn took it to other towns. In this way news traveled around the West. Combs theorizes that folk songs pass out of usage and existence because the people's beliefs, values, and ideals change and that the folk songs no longer serve the community. This is not true with cowboy poetry. It continues unabated, amid pickups and satellite dishes today, in its "mission" as it did over a hundred years ago. Early cowboy poetry aided the pioneer Western communities in feeling a sense of solidarity. The Westerners' important beliefs, ideals, and values in far-flung communities partly held together because of this poetical glue. What started as merely entertainment for an occupational group expanded to include the work ethos of the cowboy and an ethos in general for the Westerner. In a sense, the cowboy speaking through his poetry became a composite character for the American West.

After the great trail drives ended in 1890, cowhands working on ranches continued to learn and recite cowboy poetry. Reigning present-day cowboy poetry king Waddie Mitchell states in his video, "Buckaroo Bard," that he became interested in cowboy poetry as a boy. Mitchell learned cattle handling skills from his father, who was his first and best teacher. On their ranch worked an old hand, Cooky, who had mentally warehoused a library of cowboy verse. Regardless of the situation that arose during the course of a workday, Cooky could rattle off a poem as facilely as if he were merely conversing. From within the homely verse, sage wisdom

spoke ("Buckaroo Bard").

The Cowboy in America

No discussion of cowboy poetry can be complete without first discussing how this occupation came into being. Before the middle of the nineteenth century, the American cowboy as such did not exist. The mountain man's creed, "Need is the mother of invention," aptly applies to the men who created this new industry, cattle ranching.

The cowboy and his ranching industry rose out of the bountiful, resourceful, immutable American spirit, which secures to this day our position as the richest nation on earth. When men found themselves destitute at the end of the Civil War, they drew on this wellspring of spirit. Many looked to the vast lands stretching west for economic opportunity or adventure. Already, men called pockets of the West home where they staked a government claim and kept "batch," as they called it, in hope of striking the mother lode. But the weary war veterans, many of whom still wore their tattered military coats, gazed at a new lode of potential wealth. What they saw were four million Longhorn steers swarming the Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona plains (Choate and Frantz 16). These rawboned and mammoth bovine had called the West home largely undisturbed for two hundred years. Their original European masters had driven about two hundred head from below the Rio Grande to the eastern Texas missions sometime around the mid 1600s. Arid plains suited their constitutional makeup just fine. The Moors had herded their ancestors for a thousand years on the plains of northern Africa and Andalusia before Columbus delivered a few to Santo Domingo on his second voyage to the New World. In 1521 the Longhorn set sail again, this time to the mainland of what was then called "New Spain" (20). Already known for good horsemanship and a familiarity with cows, the men wrangling these brutes soon found this breed of cow unlike any that they had known before.

They found the cattle-handling techniques they needed in the possession of their Mexican neighbors, the Vaqueros. Much of the American cowboy's techniques and equipment derives from the Vaqueros' tried and true methods. For example, the cowboy's hat mimicks the

sombrero's broad, shade-providing brim; the scarf to keep the plains' dust out of the nose, high heeled boots to prevent the foot from slipping through the stirrup, chaps for protection of the thighs, a saddle with pronounced pommel for tying off the rope or lariat, all were borrowed from their southern neighbors. Spanish loanwords came to make up a large part of the herder's vocabulary. "Buckaroo" evolved from the Mexican word "vaquero." Eventually, however, the label "cowboy" stuck, and according to Rudy Gonzalez, son of an old-time cowboy, the name "cowboy" migrated with the men from their home areas back east. Rudy says that boys not old enough to fight in the Civil War stayed home to tend the cows and therefore were called "cow boys." Rudy's explanation receives indirect support from William W. Savage, Jr.'s statement that the majority of "homegrown" cowboys were the sons of small farmers (11).

Herding big critters up the important cattle artery, the Chisholm Trail, to Abilene, Kansas, in 1866 became big business for the next thirty-two years. During those years six million Longhorn pummeled the ground to their eventual destination with the meat packer. They left their mark not only in a poetic legacy, but literally they left their physical mark, which remains until this day. In 1995 businessmen and the Texas Trail Driver's Association organized the first real trail drive in a hundred years. Their goal was to drive 250 steer 1500 miles from Fort Worth, Texas to Montana. Their proposed route traced over several historic trails including the famous Chisholm Trail. Steve Schick, cowboy songwriter/singer, traveled with the 1995 Great American Trail Drive as the official songwriter for the event. While traversing Kansas, the cowboys' path came close to the Chisholm Trail. City officials took Schick to a place outside of town and showed him a six-foot-deep trough wider than two football fields. This depression, they said, was made by the Longhorns' hooves during the time of the great cattle drives (Nov 11). At the time those cows crushed the earth under their hooves, their drovers' minds thought of more immediate matters, such as keeping the herd together, watching for dangers along the way, and avoiding personal injury. Leaving a legacy of poetry, song, and the composite character--the cowboy, the drovers had the American folk-hero as the last thing on their minds.

The cowboys of the 1800s, however, drove herds eight to sixteen times larger than the 1995 herd. Modern sources set the average size of trail herds at 2,000 to 2,500 head, tended by a trail crew of eight to ten cowboys (qtd. in Savage 11). Driving a herd of 250 head of steers would have been a picnic for the old drovers of yesterday. They were known to have driven even larger herds than the usual 2,500, a testament to the skill of the American cowboy. The largest single herd ever driven tallied 10,652. Lysius Gough worked that drive and recorded the event in a report entitled, "The Big Herd":

> On the twenty fourth day of August 1882, [. . .] we left the old T Anchor Ranch with two chuckwagons, 125 saddle horses and sixteen men to round up the stock cattle on Tule Canyon and bring them back to the pasture at the gate on Canyon Cita and on to the Tule dugout. . . .But after the round up a council was held and decided to drive them all in one herd [. . .] The leaders of the herd started through the gate at 2 o'clock PM and the tail end of the herd had not yet left the lake. This gave us a herd four miles long and so wide that the best baseball player of today could not knock his ball the distance across the herd [. . .]. The last of the herd went through the gate at sundown and they counted 10,652 head. So far as the writer knows this was the largest single herd any bunch of cowboys ever drove. The question is often asked, "How did you keep the count?" On the strings on the front part of the saddle were a number of leather buttons. On one side for the hundreds and the other for the thousands. When you counted a hundred a button was slipped down. When ten buttons were slipped down you slipped down one button on the thousands side. In some cases when we did not have leather buttons we tied knots in rope. (90)

It seems impossible that 2,500 cows, much less a herd of 10,652, could be kept together and sent in a single direction. Longhorn breeder and "trainer" Tommy Worrell offers some insight into

how the nature of cows in general or Longhorns in particular allows so small a number of men to manage so many animals. Worrell explains that Longhorns, compared to their bovine kin, are intelligent animals. They remember from day to day their place in the herd. Once the herd is assembled, steers that are the "community's" leaders take positions at the head of the assembly. The next day the leaders gravitate to the head and followers take up their positions. He said a Longhorn remembers the steer he traveled beside the day before and assumes his position next to his traveling companion. Generally, if nothing untoward such as bad weather or coyotes spooked the animals, they trailed in a ribbon headed north.

Indeed, Worrell's statements regarding the Longhorn's intelligence find support every time Worrell and Sundance, Worrell's show-quality steer, take the stage. Worrell has trained Sundance to do tricks. This one-ton animal takes a bow, shakes hands, and kisses his owner. Worrell even went so far as to train Sundance to respond to hand signals. Small wonder Sundance is known as the world's smartest Longhorn.

But in the late 1800s the cowboys had no inclination for training steers for tricks. They pointed them north, leaders out front, and commenced some hard driving. A herd composed of 2,500 steer multiplied times 2000 pounds per steer (top weight) equals five million pounds of steer power on the move. An angry Longhorn has been known, according to Worrell, to gore a horse clean through with the rider on it and lift horse and rider in the air. Observing Sundance's long horns, spanning a horizontal diameter of nine feet tip to tip, it is easy to imagine that the beast possesses such strength. While observing Sundance, I noticed he sometimes, when aggravated because humans encroached upon his territory, leaned his head sideways and purposefully thrust one of those long horns through the pen's rails threatening to gore onlookers. No wonder, then, that skill was vital, not only for the economic outcome of the drive, but for the preservation of the cowboys' lives and limbs.

In addition to skill, certain codes of work conduct and behavior in general developed within the occupational group. A cowboy learned fast what he needed to do the job and how the job could

best be done. The mustangs introduced to the New World by the Spaniards proved invaluable. They had "cow sense" naturally. A man loved his horse and soon realized that a good horse helped him do his job and kept him safe, too. Taking care of his horse became a tenet of the cowboy culture. Standing by one's partner and other cowboys likewise earned a place on the list. These men traveled together for months at a time with only each other for company. Cooperation was a must. Among the cowboys, skill and personal courage won the admiration of peers.

Often tensions were eased with poetry and song. In a day when there were no concepts of "support groups," the cowboy's verse helped him and those hearing it feel less adrift, less bereft of friends. It encouraged the weary. He felt he belonged to a brotherhood. The poetry of the cowboys and ranching community, then and now, channels emotions insisting on ventilation. True, the cowboys' poetry and song began for entertainment's sake. From that initial objective has grown a body of literature that captures a rich and often complex culture. Their verse exhorts, comforts, and documents the beliefs, losses, and loves of not only the cowboys but the whole Western community. In the following poetical selections can be discussed the enduring themes that invigorate cowboy poetry. Readers who enter the cowboy world through its poetry will find a varied, energetic form of literary expression not so removed from other poetry. Only the names and places sound unfamiliar to our ears. Their themes are universal themes: love, vanity, age, mutability, and death. The same timeless concerns of men that inspired bards of all ages speak to us again in cowboy poetry.

HORSES

The West was won on the back of the Spanish Mustang, the cow pony's forebear. The great cattle drives of the nineteenth century began on his back. Stamina, speed, and agility are just a few of his trademark characteristics. Braking while running full tilt followed by a clean ninety-degree turn in either direction halts the wayward path of a steer. Such abilities endeared him to the cattlemen. Cattle herding could never have reached its zenith if not for this equine staple. Now as in the past, the cow pony continues to survive in the face of a changing ranching industry. Cows are now shipped to market by train and counted by helicopter. Despite the changes, some constants remain, namely the cowmen's loyalty and identity with the cow ponies. Truly, of the few "tools" the cowboy uses to ply his craft none is more valuable than his pony.

But not everyday was one of bliss between the cowboy and his coworker. Mustangs are not only smart; moreover, they are also spirited and independent. You could say many cowboys have a love-hate relationship with their indispensable colleagues. The cowboy loves his horse and the horse hates him, a symbiotic relationship E.A. Brininstool had in mind when he wrote "To His Cow Horse." Just as two people find they are stuck in a marriage because they cannot live with or without each other, we sense such is the speaker's dilemma in "To His Cow Horse:"

> You are homlier than sin!
> Wouldn't take no beauty prize!
> You are scrubby and you're thin,
> And the devil's in yore eyes!
> But, ol' pal, I'd bank on you 5
> Over any thoroughbred,
> 'Cuz, I know what you kin do
> When you take it in yore head.

When I tackled you at first,

You was somethin' on the pitch! 10

Fer awhile I got the worst,

And I landed in the ditch!

How you blatted and you bawled,

Buckin' 'round the ol' corral,

When astride your frame I crawled 15

And let out a cowboy yell!

There is ginger in you yet,

Though you stand with droopin' ears!

Oh, you ain't no slouch, you bet,

When it comes to partin' steers! 20

'Course you ain't so much on style,

'Cuz yore rode and larruped hard,

But I'd hunt a derned long while

'For I found a better pard!

Though yore ugly as the deuce 25

When a mean streak strikes yore skin,

And you sometimes jar me loose

When that pitchin' you begin;

Though yore looks don't cut much ice,

You kin put this in yore pipe: 30

Ain't nobody got yore price,

'Cuz you ain't fer sale, by cripe! (Brininstool 150-151)

"To His Cow Horse" parodies the relationship between the cow horse and his boss. The humorous title sets the tone. "To His Cow Horse" resounds of a salutation, the sort one reads in a letter to a lover or the greeting on the front of a Hallmark card. The first four lines of the first stanza obliquely resemble an angry, callous lover berating his beloved, "You are homlier than sin!/ Wouldn't take no beauty prize! / You are scrubby and you're thin, / And the devil's in yore eyes!" Abruptly in line five the mood switches. Just like a Spanish mustang turning on a dime, line five reveals the cowboy's true feelings. The tone softens as he compliments his horse, "But, ol' pal, I'd bank on you."

Reliving their early pith and vinegar days, the tension in stanza two reaches a crescendo before plummeting into a consoling tone in line seventeen, the turning point or volta, a poetical term applied to sonnets indicating the point at which the argument shifts. However, other structural components disqualify "To His Cow Horse" as a sonnet. It consists of thirty-two lines segmented into four stanzas, containing eight lines. On the other hand, fourteen lines comprise a sonnet. Nevertheless, "To His Cow Horse" offers an argument, a rather absurd argument—between a cowboy and his horse. Therein resides much of the poem's humor. It is not a far reach to imagine a windy codger, hot under the collar, railing against his hapless beast. He rails, then praises. His contrasting emotions war within until he finally persuades himself that his horse's merits outweigh its faults.

Poets throughout history used sonnets to address love. Most notable of the bards, William Shakespeare, wrote exhaustively in this format. However, Brininstool's comical treatment of a classic theme, love, loosely structured in a classical argumentative form burlesques the Elizabethan art form. Such a twist on a traditional poetical device enhances the absurdity of a grown man debating with or expressing his underlying devotion to a horse. The more the man chides the beast, the more he remembers his partner's value until at last he reminds himself that no amount of money can part him from his horse.

"To His Cow Horse" refutes the misconception that cowboy poetry is doggerel. David Stanley explains in his essay, "Orderly Disorder: Form and Tension in Cowboy Poetry," that such verse

tends to be of regular rhythm and predictable rhyme (107). Nothing in that definition applies to Brininstool's orderly disorder. He amputates meter to facilitate speed. Occasionally he interjects the unexpected irregular rhythm that serves as a brake on the poem's runaway speed, all of which nicely parallels the internal tempest the speaker is experiencing.

The overall governing meter of "To His Cow Horse" alternates between iambic and anapestic, or iambic with anacrusis. Consider this line:

1 1 3 1 3 1 3

Though / you stand / with droop / in' ears!

If we place the meter division after *though, stand*, and *droop,* we have an iambic trimeter line with anacrusis. Now, consider the same line scanned this way:

1 1 3 1 3 1 3

Though you / stand with / droop in / ears!

We have a line containing a pyrrhic, two trochaic feet, and trochaic truncation. This configuration comes close to breaking the general caveat in prosody according to Alfred Corn: "The general rule is that the substituted feet in a line will never out number feet of the reigning meter: in iambic pentameter you may make as many as two substitutions, but not three because then there would be more substitutes than iambs in the line" (36). The first scansion is most likely correct if we consider the fact that the majority of cowboy poets write in iambic trimeter up to iambic heptameter. However, the first example with iambic anacrusis opposes the tendency of most cowboy poetry written in iambic meter. Almost without exception, opening feet contain two weak stresses. Brininstool's' choice of the dialectal *though* over the weaker yet grammatically correct *although* exemplifies this tendency.

There is one more way "To His Cow Horse" could be scanned. The possibility of trochaic meter as the governing meter sounds reasonable because we have a poem angry in tone. Trochaic, "to run," is the second most popular meter in which poems are written. One possible reason to choose trochaic is to match the metrical intensity to the speaker's emotions. We know the speaker is excited in that the first two lines end in exclamation points. Line three carries over

and finishes the thought in line four followed by yet another exclamation point. A trochee has two stresses, a stronger stress followed by a weaker stress. Placing a stronger stress first conveys force. For example,

3 2 3 1 3 1 3

Though you / stand with / droop in' / ears!

2 1 3 2 3 2 3

Would n't / take no / beau ty / prize!

A three signals the strongest stress, two, less strong, and one, the weakest. The majority of the lines are trimeter throughout the poem. Short metrical lines read fast just as angry people talk fast. The final foot, *prize*, is not counted as a foot; in this metrical version Brininstool would have truncated the final foot. If we choose this pattern as the correct scansion, it is reasonable to consider that Brininstool opted to end his lines on a masculine note versus allowing a weaker second stress to remain which would convey a falling off or feminine touch. If we choose this foot, the metrical notation can be accurately described as trochaic trimeter with final truncation. If we were to hear "To His Cow Horse" read aloud, for example, at a cowboy poetry gathering, the performer's interpretation and delivery of the verse could change the strong stresses to first place. Metrical substitution shapes a line so it will support the conceptual content of that line. Brininstool takes advantage of substitution in line one, a non-normative meter. The reader moves sprightly across the line. The poet achieves this effect by positioning a dactyl after a trochee and before an iamb. Dactylic meter is known as the "waltz meter." Two weak stresses lightly dance the reader through the line's middle only to dip slightly before meeting the blast of force awaiting him in the final foot:

2 1 3 1 1 2 3

You are / hom li er / than sin!

In line thirteen, the poet uses the same pattern. Here the waltz time meter provides comic relief. He describes his pony as:

3 1 3 1 1 2 3

Buck in' / 'round the ol' / cor ral,

The imagery produced of a waltzing cow horse is not only funny, but it also relates to the humanizing of the horse that we will see throughout the poem.

In stanza three the speaker emphatically praises his pony. The volta mentioned earlier occurs here. After listing all the fine qualities of the pony, the speaker begins to view him as a competent coworker and friend. The speaker resolves his conflict in the final three lines. Before he does so, Brininstool reinforces the cowboy's consternation by opening line twenty-six with a pyrrhus-spondee combination:

1 1 3 3 3 2 3

When a / mean streak / strikes yore / skin,

The two light, quick stresses throw the stronger stresses in sharp relief. Because the tendency in English is to place more stress on one word than another, some readers might assign a level two stress to *mean.* The reader gives all three one-syllable words—*mean*, *streak*, and *strikes*—equal emphasis, because the energy required to produce a nasal followed by two sibilants introduces a pause in and of itself.

"To His Cow Horse" presents some question of ambiguity. Reading the poem we can see that some readers would tend to put more emphasis on the second stress in the first line of the meters that I designated trochaic. Perhaps the equivocal meter nonetheless underscores the speaker's inner conflict.

Other characteristics of "To His Cow Horse" indicate the poem's orality. Poetry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often was performed. It follows that the author's metrical intent deferred in some part to the performer's interpretation of the lines. It is safe to assume, given the poem's mood and tone, that the first lines are predominantly trochaic with the exceptions noted earlier in this discourse.

Another poem by E.A. Brininstool, "The Ol' Cow Hawss," runs thematically parallel to "To His Cow Horse" because the speaker exhaustively extols all the virtues of the cow horse, omitting the

negatives. This ballad continues in this mood for thirty-two lines sectioned into octaves. Each line contains seven feet with iambic feet governing. Monotony is skirted with the help of lilting anapests:

1 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 2 1 3 1 2

When it comes / to sad / dle haws / ses, there's / a dif / fer ence /

1 3

in steeds,

1 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 1 3 2 3 2

There is fan / cy gait / ed crit / ters that / 'll suit / some fel / lers'

3

needs.

Merrily the octave skips along in a folk-like quality until the last line. Brininstool not only launches a refrain, but additionally he emphasizes the final three words by depositing one word per line:

That will allus stand the racket----'tis the

Ol'

Cow

Hawss! (44-45)

Situating each word on a separate line emphasizes it; thus the subject of the poem receives further celebration.

Refrains, common in folk poetry and folk music, offer the audience opportunities to join the soloist. Refrains have the benefit of pulling us through the material adding a comforting quality. Children delight in knowing what comes next. Consider the small child that laughs with glee each time he finds you hiding in the same place. There is no mystery where you are hiding; somehow, the same place brings squeals of pleasure from the very young. Why? Constancy, familiarity, and consistency comfort us. Combine the refrain with the tight rhyming scheme of heroic couplets, and the verse has the makings of lighthearted, yet sincere praise and devotion.

Brininstool in all likelihood meant for "The Ol' Cow Hawss" to be enjoyed by young and old alike. "The Ol' Cow Hawss" compositionally resembles the children's poem, "Little Orphant Annie" by James Whitcomb Riley, Brininstool's contemporary. Other evidence that Brininstool emulated the Hoosier poet can be discerned from the introduction in his first publication, entitled *Trail Dust of a Maverick*. In it James Burdette alleges that Brininstool does the same for the Southwestern cowboy dialect as Riley did for the dialect of Indiana. Burdette claims Brininstool accurately captures in cowboy dialect the cowpuncher's "long winding trail, the sweep of the prairies [...] [glorifies] the desert [...] lend[s] splendor to the sunrise and beauty to the sunset—the matchless sunsets of the arid skies and the wilderness" because he is "of their blood and knows their 'master words' "(xv).

In the second edition, George Wharton James notes in his introduction that Brininstool never calls his rhymes anything but verses. Riley referred to his poetry as verses. Just as Riley spoke in standard American English and performed his verse in dialect, so too did Brininstool speak non-cowboy dialect. Why? He was not a cowboy, ranch hand, rodeo performer, or large animal veterinarian. He learned the dialect, according to James, by knowing the cowboys "through and through." He goes on to explain in his introduction to *Trail Dust of a Maverick* that Brininstool associated with cowboys on the range and at the rodeo, carefully noting their moods, changes, and speech (xx). In *Cowboy Poetry: Then and Now*, David Stanley identifies Brininstool as a New York native who moved to Los Angeles at age twenty-five. He then became a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times*. He went on to write extensively of the American West, composing approximately five thousand cowboy poems, earning immense popularity (8).

In sum, it is feasible to conclude that Brininstool, a literate man handy with words, could and would use metrical variety in his poetry. Writers of "classic" cowboy poetry sought to introduce metrical variety into their works as cowboy poets do today. The poets who are read and admired are those who seek to express their subjects by using the best format for the job. Brininstool recorded the cowboy, his landscape, and his changing times much as Twain did for the Mississippi River Valley and Riley for his beloved Indiana. Today the cowboy poet's goals find

common ground with poets of the last two centuries. Whether he has firsthand knowledge or vicarious cowpunching experience, the cowboy poet seeks the right word and form to create for readers a way of life.

A few cowboy poets try their hand at free verse. Shadd Piehl's free verse effort, "My Grandfather's and Father's Horses," offers quiet reflection on the loyalty cowboys feel for their horses. The previous two poems exalt the cow horse for his stalwart herding abilities. "My Grandfather's and Father's Horses" commemorates the special relationship every cowman has with his horse. Their ponies' value far outweighs their utilitarian functions:

> The two old-timers stand out west of town
> With maybe a few cows to share
> A bale and ground feed each morning.
> King, over thirty, is swaybacked, slow
> And still impossible to catch 5
> (except by tricks, women and oats).
> Cheese, once a terror in the corral,
> Now no longer rules the roost.
> In their old age they shy,
> Meeting themselves in shadows 10
> At the water trough.
> Both needing their teeth floated,
> Dun horses out to pasture.
> Every cowboy has a horse that's not for sale (Piehl 98).

The poem refuses to conform to any recognizable metrical pattern, yet the torpid progression unifies the work. Thirteen lines saunter along slowed by five commas and four periods. We feel the lethargy of the horses saddled now with old age. Line four alone is interrupted by three commas—"King, over thirty, is swaybacked, slow." The line practically falters under its torpor. The consonance of the s's adds a romantic and feminine touch. This brief imagistic poem

speaks to us not only of old horses, but also of old men and old people. It reminds us of us. Old people are not so unlike old horses. They, too, have fears. Shadows at nightfall frighten the elderly. They feel less sure of themselves in the dark. In healthcare circles this phenomenon is called Sundown Syndrome. So, too, Cheese and King, oddly mismatched names of once sprightly creatures, fine specimens of their breed, now, shy at their shadows. Alliteration, the *s* in *shy* and the *s* in *shadow* underscores melancholy and languor. The numerical parallel, two old horses and two old men, Grandfather and Father getting up in years too, cannot be missed. Next, in the line thirteen Piehl plays on the word, *Dun.* A Dun horse is defined as a buckskin horse. The double meaning is not lost on the reader. To say someone is *done* in twentieth century slang is to imply "they're finished."

There exists circularity in the poem. The old horses share food and a corral with cows, the very creatures they once parted, herded, and drove to their eventual deaths at market. No matter how far King and Cheese roamed, they have now come home, home to a corral. The horse knows not why he shies from the sight of his shadow. He never ruminates over his loss of strength. Knowing our inevitable fate is unique to man. Old age, infirmity, and death respect no one. Why not sell horses that no longer provide any worthwhile function? Could it be that Grandfather and Father, by now two old-timers, feel solidarity with their horses? Anne Heath Widmark, editor of *Poets of the Cowboy West*, chose a quote to introduce Piehl's poem that nicely captures the idea: "Whether drifting through life on a boat or climbing toward old age leading a horse, each day is a journey and the journey itself is home" (Basho, qtd. in Widmark 98).

If Basho's insight fails to illuminate the mystery why Father and Grandfather keep spent horses, Piehl responds in his final line with a resounding reply: "Every cowboy has a horse that's not for sale." His declaration wakes us out of our reflection induced by the meditative tone of the preceding lines. Yet he never explains. This contemplation he leaves to the reader. We are not told what to think about the cowboys' relationships to their horses. He leaves us to ponder how an animal can weave its way so very deeply into our hearts.

The cowboys' ethics extend to include their horses. The caveat, "If a man saves your life you owe him the same in return," might explain some cowboys' unswerving devotion to their animals even when the horses are old. Throughout cowboy poetry examples exist of cowponies credited with saving their masters from death or a whipping. "Message in the Wind" by Jesse Smith credits his cowpony with saving him, if not from death, from a bloody battle with a bear. Bears, as the saying goes, are afraid of humans. They have small eyes and poor eyesight. Wilderness guides today teach hikers that if they happen upon a bear to stand side by side and make as much racket as they can. The idea is that the bear will perceive them as a bigger creature than he. If the tactic works, the bear will turn and sprint down the trail. There is an exception to this general rule of encounter and that is to encounter a bear with a calf. Bears with calves are some of the most vicious creatures on earth.

"Message in the Wind" is one example of a short narrative retelling a cowboy's near encounter with a sow and her calf. Cow ponies, it seems, have acute hearing and smell. Whether it is more than in other breeds of horses is unclear; however, extensive reading of cowboy poetry reveals several examples of acute smelling and hearing saving the day. The cowboy mounted on horseback sits atop a ridge. Below is a beautiful valley of green. Cool winds caress his face. The tranquil mood abruptly shifts:

That hoss's a reading a message,
  That's been sent to him in the breeze.
You feel yer gut start to tighten,
  And a shakin' come to yer knees.
But you know yer old hoss ain't a-lying,
  He's as good 'ne as you'll ever find.
And you know that old pony's tryin'
  To warn ya 'bout somethin' in time.
The trail you'd a took went between them,
  That old mama bear'd a got tough.

That old pony like as not saved yer hide,

Or a life shortenin' scare, shor-a-nuff.

Yer old pony's eyes are a-lookin',

His ears working forward and back.

All of a sudden you feel his hide tighten,

And a little hump come into his back.

Well, ya look real hard where he's lookin',

His eyes are plumb fixed in a stare,

Then ya see what he's seein',

A cub and an old mama bear.

You watch 'em go 'cross the meadow,

And ya ride on yer way once again,

And ya shor thank the Lord for the message

He sent to yer hoss on the wind. (Smith 12)

The first few lines reveal a slightly iambic meter. Many extra unstressed syllables, especially in the first line, convey a folksy lilt paralleling the wind floating across the valley. Typical of cowboy poetry the meter is trimeter. The quick undulating pace lends itself to storytelling. The poem stays afloat of an otherwise serious story using these metrical techniques combined with rhyming. The folksy rhythm is deceiving. It hums over a perilous moment in a man's life. "Message in the Wind" compares emotionally to haiku, a Japanese form that counts syllables as the basis for its meters. In English poetry, syllabic stress determines the foot. So by this definition we see that "Message in the Wind" fails the haiku test. Second, haiku verse consists of three lines. The first line contains five syllables, the second, seven, and the third, five syllables. Again, "Message in the Wind" exceeds the Japanese requirements. For example, the following haiku demonstrates the form:

The shell of a cicada;

It sang itself

Utterly away. (Basho 116)

"Message in the Wind" and haiku compare in this way—they both paint a mental snapshot of a scene that nurtures contemplation. Corn in his book, "The Poem's Heartbeat," explains it this way, "Haiku itself is rather like a photographic slide projected on a screen, an instantaneous 'take' on reality that allows for a kind of contemplation associated with Buddhism: the moment is eternal and the moment is also an illusion. It is transitory but filled with timeless awe" (116).

"Message in the Wind" compares philosophically with haiku in the sense that man should live in harmony with all living things. Haiku celebrates the intrinsic value of all life forms—the maternal instinct of the sow, the acute sensory apparatus of the horse, and the man's respect for these intellectually inferior yet instinctually superior creatures. Haiku paints the picture, causes us to think, allowing emotion to naturally follow. In the same visual, intellectual, and emotional way that haiku affects us, "Message in the Wind" allows us to ponder our relationship with nature, intellectual chores presented through an undulating, rustic rhythm. Let it not deceive; the melody hums over a dangerous moment in a man's life. Because the cowboys' work places them in close contact with the earth and its animals, they learn to appreciate nature's treasures. Among these jewels shines the cowmen's horses that deservedly receive praise long after their sensorial acumen fails.

"Message in the Wind" also contains elements of Realism. Realistic writing emerged secondary to cultural changes resulting from industrialization. Recall that man's relationship to his environment came under scrutiny in the late nineteenth and very early twentieth century in America. Economic changes occurred, which caused writers to rethink their presentation of characters. The industrial revolution that took place at the end of the nineteenth century shifted American society from agrarian to industrial. With new ways to support their families other than agriculture, people began to migrate towards industrial centers. The hope of newfound urban advantages fell short of expectations as workers succumbed to exploitation, low wages, and crowded living conditions. Out of this sifting milieu rose the impetus for writers to present characters in realistic relationships to their worlds. The new trend was termed Realism.

How is "Message in the Wind" realistic? The speaker appears inextricable in relation to nature, he controls his destiny, he acts on his environment, and the events are plausible. Recall Jack London's "To Build a Fire," a naturalistic short story? The story's hero refused to respect nature, resulting in the dog's survival and the man's demise. The dog senses it is too cold to travel. The human ignores the fact his spit freezes before it hits the ground, a sign indicating sub-zero temperatures. Later, when the outlook worsens for the man, the dog's keen senses and primal intuition prevent his becoming a fur coat for the man. Likewise, in "Message in the Wind," the cow pony demonstrates his keen senses. Yet the pony's physical responses would have been for naught without his partner's sensitivity.

Cowboys spent hours upon horseback. Days turned into weeks and weeks into months. Anybody with a scintilla of sensitivity observing animals recognizes that animals possess heightened sensory apparatus. Arrogance and pride, uniquely human traits, can cause man to live out of harmony with his environment. Cowboys tended to "tune in" to nature. For example, twitching of the ears and tightening of the hide are common to horses, yet there remains a slight variation amongst the animals. The outcome of "Message in the Wind" reveals that the cowboy learns and listens to his animal's signals. In the poem "That Little Blue Roan," Bruce Kiskaddon, himself a working cowboy for many years, describes a similar situation in which his horse saves his life:

> One day in the foothills he give me a break,
> He saved me from makin' a awful mistake.
> I was ridin' along at a slow easy pace,
> Takin' stock of the critters that used that place,
> When I spied a big heifer without any brand.
> How the boys ever missed her I don't understand.
> Fer none of that stock in that country was wild,
> It was like takin' candy away from a child.

She never knowed jest what I had on my mind

Till I bedded her down on the end of my twine.

I had wropped her toes up in an old hoggin' string

And was buildin' a fire to heat up my ring.

I figgered, you see, I was there all alone

Till I happened to notice that little blue roan.

That hoss he was usin' his eyes and his ears,

And I figgered right now there was somebody near.

He seemed to be watchin' a bunch of pinion,

And I shore took a hint from that little blue roan.

Instead of my brand, well, I run on another.

I used the same brand that was on the calf's mother.

I branded her right, pulled her up by the tail

With a kick in the rump fer to make the brute sail.

I had branded her proper and marked both her ears,

When out of the pinions two cow men appears.

They both turned the critter and got a good look

While I wrote the brand down in my old tally book.

There was nothin to do so they rode up and spoke

And we all three sat down fer a sociable smoke.

The one owned the critter I'd happened to brand,

He thanked me of course and we grinned and shook hands,

Which he mightn't have done if he only had known

The warnin' I got from that little blue roan. (Kiskaddon 32-33)

Was the speaker's life in danger? Would the cow men have beaten him or turned him into the authorities for rustling? Kiskaddon does not tell us. He allows that the speaker was on the verge of making a mistake. His troubles fortunately averted by his sensitivity to his cow pony's behavior. An unwritten code of behavior exists amongst the cowboys—look after your 'pard.' This ethic extends to the man's horse. Recall in Brininstool's verse, "To His Cow Horse," he writes, "But I'd hunt a derned long while / 'For I found a better pard!" In return the horse looks after him.

The previous poems display aspects of Realism. In contrast, some horse poems have a fanciful flair. The line between the pony depicted as animal or human becomes blurred. When the cow ponies wear human characteristics, we say they are anthropomorphized. Sometimes poets affectionately dub horses, "outlaws." Curly Fletcher charts such a horse's physicality in the "The Strawberry Roan":

> His legs is all spavined an' he's got pigeon toes,
>
> Little pig eyes an' uh big Roman nose,
>
> Little pin ears that touch at the tip
>
> 'An uh double square iron stamped on his hip. (57)

While Fletcher's outlaw is ugly, the horse sometimes appears in poetry as an equine "god." In "Open Range" Melvin L. Whipple's speaker describes a beautiful outlaw:

> Hundreds of wild horses grazed that enchanted land,
>
> Sometimes in the evening you could hear so sharp and shrill
>
> The whistle of a wild stallion as he watched you from a hill.
>
> Then if you could watch him as he stood with head held high
>
> You could see those nostrils flarin', pride burned those wicked eyes.
>
> Then, again you heard him whistle and the echo
>
> from the sound
>
> Would roll over the prairie, from the mountains
>
> would rebound.

> Then, he would whirl and leave there, with his mane
> and tail a-flow,
> With his ears pinned back for freedom, 'twas a thrill to
> watch him go. (Whipple 128-129)

Spirited, evident in the phrase, "head held high"; watching the man below as if with intent; purposefully calling to him; "flarin'" nostrils; and pride in his "wicked eyes" are attributes, especially wicked eyes, attributed to humans. Why does the cowboy transfer human characteristics to a horse?

The cowboys, like the outlaws, share a common goal and attitude. They are alike in spirit—independent and self-reliant. The cowboys themselves are something of an "outlaw" to folk often referred to in their poetry as "nesters." The person who lives alone, has long periods of solitude with a horse for a friend, avoids marriage, requires few creature comforts, and communes with nature is on the one hand slightly feared and misunderstood, yet admired by those of us who lead more traditional lives. Usually, he is misunderstood. Indifference to women is not the reason cowboys fail to settle down. Plenty of poetry testifies to their weakness for a pretty face. Rather, the cowboy grows to like his way of life. Lifestyle and habits people acquire in youth stay with them, or some aspect of it remains with them until old age. So the cowboy, while lonely, does at the same time acquire a taste for the independent and outdoor life, resulting in his conflicted state and serving as the inspiration for many cowboy love poems.

Red Steagall terms this phenomenon as "The Maverick Way." Steagall, in his poem of the same name, refers to a horse that travels where he will, does not wear a brand, and chooses his own trail. He declares, "The mavericks make a difference. They / know where to find the feed. / They don't cry out, 'Take care of me, / The grass has gone to seed'" (Steagall 29). The horse in Steagall's poem symbolizes qualities valued by cowboys. If the mavericks are synonymous with the cowboys, then the cowboy make the difference. He too knows where to find the feed. Evidence of men "finding the feed" took place when the first men espied four million Longhorn prowling the Southwest. These men created the cattle industry. Probably they did not ponder

that they were pioneering an industry. Their thoughts centered on immediate needs, such as post-war economical and social rehabilitation. There was no time to "cry out, 'Take care of me, / The grass has gone to seed.'"

Waddie Mitchell, a popular cowboy poet who has appeared on national late night talk shows, calls such a man a "throw-back." Buck Wilkerson labels him "saddle tramp." Using vivid, descriptive words, Wilkerson in a poem of the same name illuminates the nature of the dying breed:

He had set in his saddle since sunup,
Pushing strays back toward the herd.
His horse was trained for that purpose
And he'd scarcely spoken a word.

He was an old cowpuncher
Who wore the hair of a goat
To cover his legs from western storms,
And he wore a cowhide coat.

He wore Levis, boots and a Stetson,
That describes his attire (just about),
In the front of his shirt was a pocket
With a Bull Durham tag hangin' out.

From one outfit to another
He drifted with six in his string.
He lived the life of a loner
Just doin his own thing.

He rode the unfenced ranges
In the wind and the rain and the sleet.
Twas a toss-up which was more cruel,
That or the summer's heat.

Fifty a month was his wages,
That wasn't much he'd confess,
But that bought his clothes and his makin's
And that's all he needed, I guess.

There was always a little left over
He'd save to spend in the joints,
To cut the dust from his tonsils
When he'd trail into shipping points.

This ode is set down to his memory.
He was one hell of a man in his day.
He has vanished—he's no longer needed,
His breed has just faded away. (98)

Wilkerson's use of iambic trimeter divided into four-line stanzas beautifully matches the simplicity of his subject. The saddle tramp epitomizes the individual the nesters admired and hated. They wonder about the man who lives outside the "camp," the man who requires few material possessions. How does he do it? They envy his freedom, yet shy from embracing such a lifestyle. Why? Most people fear loneliness. If one overcomes that fear, weathers the feelings so to speak, the loneliness passes. What follows is a sense of freedom that word cannot describe.

The cowman and the outlaw cowpony stand outside the boundaries of societal convention. This thread weaves itself into cowboy poetry from the earliest tunes sung during the great cattle drives of the 1800s up to our present day. The cowpuncher today may spend more time in his truck than on horseback. The cattle drives have come and gone. But the cowboy of today, like the man of yesterday, still exists every day alone with his thoughts, his pony, and the great outdoors. It is no wonder then that the cowboy's code—be true to your horse—remains alive and well.

WOMEN

Native American women traversed the Southwestern plains of present-day Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona thousands of years prior to the arrival of the European females in the 1800s. Their contributions to the development of the American West are unquestionably significant. The indigenous women's presence coupled with that of women of European descent ignited the poetic imagination of the multiracial cowmen working the vast Western plains. Cowboy love poetry comprises a substantial body of love poems that developed as an offshoot of Cowboy Poetry. According to the editors of *Cowboy Love Poetry,* the romantic musings of the authors usually remained sequestered among the cowboy's personal effects. The editors voiced their astonishment at the vast numbers of poems out there when they considered works for their anthology (xv).

Cowboy love poems reveal the complexities of the cowboys' relationships (or lack of them) with women. Sarah Brash cites several reasons contributing to the lack of permanent connection with women. One, the cowboys subsisted on low wages. They left in early spring to round up the cattle, then spent the summer driving the herd northeast for shipping by rail car to Chicago (52,69). Few relationships could survive, much less flourish, with prolonged absence. Second, many men were enthralled by the vast open spaces of the plains and the rough and ready life with the boys. Elijah Cox understood the lure of the West all too well. Cox, a black man, was the son of emancipated slaves. Cox himself had always been free. He migrated west from Michigan in 1873 to throw in his luck with other natives and foreigners seeking fortune and adventure. He worked for Uncle Sam as an Indian scout and buffalo hunter before trying his hand at saloon keeping. At one point, Cox received words that his ailing, elderly, widowed mother wanted him home. She had lost several sons to the war, so the Army gave Cox an honorable discharge. Cox, despite his reputation for "honesty and sturdy habits," succumbed to the hypnotic spell of the West. He never returned to Michigan to care for the mother that he loved (Powers 3).

Wherever and whenever opportunity exists, you find hardworking, entrepreneurial folks looking for a new and better life. The American West opened the door for many disenfranchised groups. The West was home to men of many ethnic origins, for example, Dutch, English, French, Spanish, Mexican, Welsh, Irish, African-American, and German. Together these hardy souls built lives in a hostile environment. They worked at occupations such as United States scouts and soldiers, cowboys, miners, and farmers. Alongside the solid community, the perennial outlaw and other various colorful characters came to throw in their luck (Brash 13). The only thing missing in their lives was women. Women tended to shy away from the formidable, hot, and barren plains.

The white female in particular was as scarce as water in the desert. William Newbury Lewis states in his book, *Between Sun and Sod*, that the cowboys in 1878 at Doan's store in Texas had ridden over upon hearing that there were some women folks in the neighborhood. The cowboys said they rode over to "take a look" since they had not seen any in "quite a spell" (59). Women and children were equally scarce north of Texas. Brash writes, "Miners were so lonely, it was said, so indulgent of and protective toward the young that in large camps they might wait hours just to see a white child play" (30). It should come as no surprise that the cowboys were smitten whenever an eligible female appeared on the scene.

The cowboys kept their senses and maintained their good reputations. One panhandle father said this when his wife asked if their daughters could travel to a party in the company of the cowboys, "Wal, the boys maybe gentlemen, and maybe not, but they usually are. If the gals want to go, why let 'em" (Thompson 30). Lewis notes in his book, *Between Sun and Sod*, that cowboys are profane with each other at times; nevertheless, they never cursed in a woman's presence. To do so indicated poor character (515). Bulah Rush Kirkland, the daughter of a Texas trail driver, explained the "secret" to the cowboys' restraint in the presence of women this way:

> I believe I could walk along the streets of any town or city
> and pick out the real cowboy, not by his clothes especially,

> but because one can nearly always notice that he has a
> very open countenance and almost innocent eyes and
> mouth. He is not innocent of course; but living in the open,
> next to nature, the cleaner life is stamped on his face.
> His vices leave no scars, or few, because old mother nature
> has him with her most of the time. (qtd. in Brash 52)

In addition to being with nature and perhaps because of it, it seems reasonable that many cowboys sought solace pouring out their hearts in verse.

When editors Paddy Calistro, Jack Lamb, and Jean Penn further analyzed the works, they generally found them inspired by one of three major themes—the girl that got away (heartbreak), avoidance of marriage (conflict), and third, marriage (submission). True, these themes compose the bulk of the subject matter in cowboy love poetry. The editors declare, "You'll find no hidden code, no obscure imagery, references or buried meanings that require an English degree" (xv). Within the plethora of love poems, however, shine a few nuggets of verse that defy stereotyping or simplistic reading. One also finds quality craftsmanship. The poems may appear simple on the surface, but discerning readers, with or without a literature degree, will find them resonating with interpretations.

The first poem, "Juanita," by E.A. Brininstool, sets the standard as an example of "the one that got away." Brininstool, assuming the persona of a cowboy, plies us with emotion. "Juanita" is not so much a poem that tells a story as it is a shared emotional experience with the reader. First, it fails the "test" of a narrative because it does not tell a story; "Juanita" leaves us with many unanswered questions. Where did Juanita go? Did she die? Did she find a new love? Or simply are Juanita and her love separated because of prolonged absence made necessary by his work? Did her parents interfere with the relationship? As readers we can only speculate. Filling in the story line lends appeal to "Juanita." Brininstool leaves the answers up to us. Why Juanita is absent takes second place to the something that remains, which is sorrow.

The poet adopts a character to convey experiences that are not his own. Brininstool, a Los Angeles reporter, lived among the cowboys in the late nineteenth century in order to "study" them (James xx). Therefore, the poet, having no first-hand experience of heartbreak on the plains, adopts the persona of heartbroken cowboy to convey vicarious experience.

The persona laments the loss of a loved one in a soliloquy. A soliloquy occurs when a character, or persona, in our example, alone or as if he is alone, discloses his innermost thoughts. The work of punching cows was a solitary one. Sitting astride a horse for hours, the cowboy had little conversation with the other men until the end of the workday. It seems likely that the speaker was alone when he called his lover's name. Perhaps when he rode away to pursue an errant steer the sight of surrounding vistas fueled his pain. Haunted by the memory of her, it is not a far leap of our imaginations to envision the speaker in his wretched state of despair visually roving the scenery. He waxes all the more despondent as he scans the horizon for something that will not remind him of Juanita. The expanse of his pervasive, sad mood parallels the physical expanse of the Western scenery:

Drear are the prairies, the ranges are silent
Mournfully whispers each soft, passing breeze.
Down in the canyon an eddying murmur
Echoes the sigh through the swaying pine trees.
Lone are the trails on the brown, dusty mesa 5
Up where the gems of the star-world peep through;
Sadly the nightbird is plaintively calling—
'Nita, Juanita, I'm longing for you!

Out where the herds dot the range in the Springtime,
Out where the flowers you loved nod and sway, 10
Memory brings me a vision of sadness,
Brings me a vision of a once-happy day.

Over the trails you are riding beside me,
Under the canopied heavens of blue;
Smiling the love that your lips have repeated-- 15
'Nita, Juanita, I'm longing for you!

When steals the night with its grim dusky shadows,
As 'round the herd I am jogging along,
Your gentle face seems to lighten the darkness,
Each vagrant breeze seems to whisper a song. 20
Whispers a melody sweetly entrancing,
Telling me dear, of your love ever true;
Whispers an echo that sets my heart dancing—
'Nita, Juanita, I'm longing for you. (Brininstool 2)

Brininstool measures and draws the boundaries of the cowboy's boundless misery using prepositions. For example, lines three, six, nine, ten, thirteen, fourteen, and eighteen begin with prepositions—*Down*, *Up*, *Out*, *Out*, *Over*, and *Under*—ending up with the abbreviated *'round* for *around.* The physical parameters established, he next convinces us that there is no place or object on which his eyes alight that escapes connection with Juanita.

Brininstool next turns to imagery to paint a picture of melancholy. He appeals to our senses to evoke empathy. Link a sensory experience with an emotionally powerful event, and the presence of the first, the sensory experience, minus the second, the event, summons forth the original strong emotion. Said another way, hear your favorite love song and you emotionally revisit the sensations you experienced when you were together. How? Why? He or she may have departed from your life long ago or only have left yesterday. Yet a song, a bird's melody, the sight of jonquils, a garden seat at the park, or the crisp feel of fall air transport you emotionally back to a place and to someone now gone, sometimes a person or event long forgotten.

In the 1930s Maurice Chevalier popularized a tune entitled "Louise" that embodies a lover's torture. "Every little breeze seems to whisper Louise. The birds in the trees they all call out Louise" (Robin). Sensory experience coupled with powerful emotion, for example, love, imprints the emotion upon the psyche. Views once beheld by the speaker and his lover when seen alone occasion this sort of resurgent feeling. Brininstool knows we will relate to the speaker's experience. Why? Because the association of emotion and event are not unique to one man, but common to all. Poetry touches us this way, or it does not touch us at all. How does the poet accomplish this?

Brininstool loads the poem with imagistic words and phrases. To our ears the lines seem to flow courtesy of the poetic devices. Let us consider this line for consonance plus meter:

3 2 1 3 2 1 2 2 1 2

Mourn ful ly / whis pers each / soft, pas sing / breeze.

We readily determine that only two syllables receive a *3*. Even *soft* receives a *2* owing to the gentle sound of the word.

Poets traffic in sound. The *s* and *z* sounds smooth away any tendency to harshness. They join with dactylic trimeter to escort the breeze gently across the line. Truncation of the fourth foot, *breeze*, frees the foot from any masculine and harsh sounds. That is not always the case with final truncation that isolates monosyllabic words. However, the word *breeze* sounds like the thing it represents, soft, gentle, and invisible. A voiced bilabial, *breeze* escapes between our lips almost effortlessly and gives the effect of the line being carried away on the wind.

"Juanita" may seem in one sense to be a static poem; however, close inspection reveals it to be unmistakably dynamic. Early in the poem a circular pattern emerges. This image is important because it fills in the void identified when the physical parameters were drawn. The sounds spiraling in the physical world represent the repetitious thoughts of the speaker's inner world, his thought life. A "soft, passing breeze" moves downward into the canyon. The speaker states that he hears, "Down in the canyon an eddying murmur." Eddies are currents

of air or water in variation with the main current, producing a rotary or whirling motion. We also know that echoes are repetitions of sounds made by the reflections of sound waves. Over and over the speaker hears in the external world the echoes symbolizing the cognitive revolutions in his mind. After the sound swirls in the canyon, we track its path to the next aural imagery, "Echoes the sigh through the swaying pine trees" (4). Up from the canyon and now up into the tree the sound travels. The image of swaying pines represents the speaker's thoughts as they toss back and forth, back and forth.

Further enhancement of the circular pattern results by having each stanza end in the refrain, "'Nita, Juanita, I'm longing for you!" Reiteration within the line underscores the speaker's obsessed state. The repetition of her name rings plaintively in our ears. We feel the speaker's pain cresting each time he utters his lament. He contends the birds and wind speak the refrain, "'Nita, Juanita, I'm longing for you!" In reality the wind and birds do not speak the refrain, the speaker does. In poetry speaking to an absent person is termed an "apostrophe." In life or in poetry speaking to someone in her absence usually denotes disturbance of the human spirit.

Brininstool engages symbols in an ironic way to support the speaker's anguished state. Flowers, a natural symbol, herald life. In line six, "Up where the gems of the star-world peep through," stars represent hope, guidance, and constancy. The loss of Juanita reverses the symbols' usual, historical associations. The flowers and stars, objects once romantic and emblematic of his love for Juanita, now under the cloud of a darker day mock his sadness.

Brininstool's poems written in vernacular far outnumber those written in standard American diction. So why did he write "Juanita" in standard diction? Most likely his choice supports the tone and theme of the poem. Vernacular generally is associated with humor Writing it in Standard English assists in establishing the desired tone, a respectful, somber. one. Too, if Brininstool wrote "Juanita" in vernacular and dactylic meter, the outcome would be unmistakably childlike, definitely not bedeviling, sensual, and mesmerizing. And last, classic themes such as death and vanity appeal to all men because these are timeless issues

relevant to all men. He dignifies "Juanita" by composing it in Standard English. His choice opens the poem up to a broader audience.

Meter, tone, diction, subject matter, and the use of refrain in "Juanita" obliquely remind us of Edgar Allan Poe's poem, "Annabel Lee." It is reasonable to conclude that Poe might have inspired Brininstool, who was born in 1870, only thirty years after Poe's demise. He was originally from the northeastern United States close to Poe's home area of Baltimore and Richmond.

The two poems are similar in subject matter. The speaker of "Annabel Lee" mourns his loss, as does Brininstool's. Second, "Annabel Lee" like "Juanita" is written almost entirely in triple meter (anapestic) and Poe frequently repeats her name.

1 1 3 1 1 3 1 1 3 1 1 3

But our love / it was strong / er by far / than the love (27)

The two poetic techniques combine to produce in "Annabel Lee" a trance-like state. Furthermore, Poe composed his verse in Standard English. Unlike "Juanita," the speaker in Poe's narrative clearly explains the events leading up to Annabel Lee's demise. Not only do we know how she died, the speaker alleges angelic jealousy motivated supernatural beings to conspire to kill Annabel Lee. Because Poe's verse tells a story, it can be accurately labeled a narrative. Brininstool chose not to reveal Juanita's fate, an omission that serves to heighten the poem's allure. As discussed earlier, Brininstool's goal is not to tell a story but rather to provide a shared emotional experience with the reader. Poe's aim is a little different. Given the fact that Poe's speaker now sleeps by Annabel Lee's sepulcher, we sense his mental state is problematic. And while most of us can feel pity for such a person, we are unable to relate personally to someone who has succumbed to grief to that extent. We do not draw the same conclusion about the speaker in "Juanita"; he is not mad, yet we can assume his state of mind is one obsessed with the loss of her. Imagism, refrain, alliteration, rhyme, and meter combine with standard American diction producing a

remarkably emotional and powerful poem that remains to this day an outstanding example of cowboy love poetry.

"'Cupid on a Cow Ranch" emphasizes the excitement that follows the arrival of a pretty girl to a cattle ranch and shows Brininstool at his comic best:

A Boston gal, the foreman's niece,
Is here to spend a month or two,
An' sence she come, there ain't no peace—
The boys is locoed clean plumb through!
They buy b'iled shirts an' fancy socks, 5
An' try to sling on loads o' style,
An' go to town an' blow their rocks
Fer presents every little while!

I never seen such monkey biz
On this here cattle ranch afore! 10
The foreman says that niece o' his
Has set the bunkhouse in a roar!
The boys they try to comb their hair,
An' slick it up with ile an' dope!
An' jes' fer plain cow hands, I swear 15
They're using a raft o' soap!

Pink Bates is shavin' ev'ry night!
An' Shorty goes down to the crick
An' scrubs hisself till he's as white
As any dood! It makes me sick! 20
An' gosh! The dog they're slingin' on

When they strut out to the corral!

An' all becuz they're jes' dead-gone

On that swell-lookin' Boston gal!

I don't know how it's comin out! 25

She ain't give anyone a hunch!

But you would think, to hear 'em spout,

That she's dead-struck on all the bunch!

I don't know how she'll end the race,

But here is what I hope, by jing: 30

That she won't hang around his place

Until the roundup starts next Spring! (3-4)

Poets frequently allude to mythological characters or important events in their works. These references serve as a type of shorthand. The poet expects most readers will make the connection. So when Curly Fletcher alludes to Pegasus in "The Flyin Outlaw" he anticipates that we will think of the mythological winged horse, of his elusiveness and fearlessness (59). Fletcher's allusion is one of few found in cowboy poetry. Brininstool blames the love-crazed behavior of the cowhands on Cupid. Automatically, we recall the beautiful, blonde, winged boy who shoots his arrows where he wills. The fortunate or unfortunate recipients of his barbed messengers of love behave inanely. It seems that Cupid unloaded a quiver of arrows at this particular ranch, much to the chagrin of the narrator.

In "'Cupid on a Cow Ranch" the story unfolds through the eyes of the narrator, and not an impartial narrator. First, what do we know about him? It appears he may or may not be a cowhand. He states in the first line "A Boston gal, the foreman's niece"; from this statement, we might think that he is labor, not management. Speaking of the men as the "boys" (4) and "plain cow hands" (15) implies familiarity with the men. Second, other than the foreman, he as far as we know is the only other man to escape the girl's entrancing beauty. The narrator

might possibly be the cook. Cowhands too old to bear the physical demands of the job often assumed the job of cook. During a cattle drive the cook was second in command only to the trail boss. Whatever his rank, the events as related through the eyes of this curmudgeon serve to strengthen the humor.

Tension soon surfaces in the poem. The narrator's use of vernacular, "sling on loads o' style," and his poor grammar, "The boys is locoed" (4) and "An' scrubs hisself…" (19) contrast greatly with "Boston" gal. Boston in the nineteenth century wore the mantle of the intellectual and cultural center of the United States. The author might have chosen a girl from another part of the country, yet Boston reinforces the image of a polished and educated young lady. Teaming the words "Boston" and "gal" generates tension, because "Boston" is a proper noun and "gal" slang.

Observing the boys making fools of themselves stretches the limits of his patience. To emphasize the narrator's consternation, Brininstool at times alters his otherwise predictable iambic pattern:

1 3 1 3 1 3 3 3

An' sence / she come, / there ain't / no peace (3)

1 3 1 3 1 3 3 3

As an / y dood! // It makes / me sick! (20)

Lines three and twenty end with a spondaic foot. Alfred Corn states that it is hard to accomplish a spondaic foot in English because the tendency is to place more stress on one word than the other (32). However, with the use of punctuation and knowing the speaker's state of mind, it is quite possible for a reader reading this verse aloud to speak each monosyllabic word, *no* and *peace*, *me* and *sick*, with equal strong emphasis. Read the words aloud in line twenty. The caesura or the natural line's break falls between *dood* and *It*, a pause exacerbated with the placement of an exclamation mark after *dood.* "It makes me sick" picks up and finishes the line with three strong stresses, "makes me sick." Pronouncing

"makes me sick" requires equal vocal effort to speak each word; thus, each word receives equal emphasis.

Lines twenty-three and twenty-eight support Brininstool's use of spondees to slow and accentuate certain words. For example,

1 2 1 3 2 3 3 3

An' all / be cuz / they 're jes' / dead-gone [...](23)

It is impossible to say the hyphenated word, *dead-gone,* without giving equal stress to each word. He repeats a hyphenated word in line twenty-eight, again with the same effect of slowing the line and highlighting the speaker's perturbation:

1 2 3 3 1 2 1 3

That she's / dead-struck / on all / the bunch!

The first foot is iambic. The strong stress of the first foot, *she's* is still comparatively weaker than the final strong stress of the last foot, *bunch.* This weakly stressed iamb juxtaposed against a spondee causes the spondee to snap.

The last three lines are revealing. The narrator concludes "'Cupid' on a Cow Ranch" with this personally revealing outcry:

But here is what I hope, by jing:

That she won't hang around this place

Until the round up starts next Spring! (30-32)

The narrator unveils another motivation for his wanting the Boston gal to leave. He considers the tragic results her continued presence can have on the productivity and safety of the cowhands. Those who tried their luck at cow punching sometimes ran out of luck, as Bruce Kiskaddon recalls during his quiet moments. He writes in "When They've Finished Shipping Cattle in the Fall "Bout that boy by the name of Reid / That was killed in a stampede, / 'Twas away up north you helped dig his grave. / And your old friend Jim the boss / That got tangled with a hoss, / And the fellers couldn't reach in time to save" (34-37). In the comic poem the

narrator's anger, a composite emotion, springs from the fundamental emotions of love and fear. Why else should he be worked up over the guys vying for a girl's love? He speaks from the wisdom filtered through a fatherly concern. He most likely is an older man who realizes that this "swell-lookin' Boston gal" will return to the Northeast where there are beaus better suited to her tastes. Cupid sometimes shot his arrows into lovers' hearts just to watch them lose their senses to love. Irrational behavior describes the boys. They refuse to take cues from reality. The speaker tells that the girl, "She aint' give anyone a hunch / But you would think, to hear 'em spout, / That she's dead-struck on all the bunch!" (26-28). Love is blind and sometimes deadly.

The next poem was written and published sometime in the late nineteenth century according to editors Calistro, Penn, and Lamb. They report that little is known of Carr other than he lived around the turn of the twentieth century. He is credited with numerous delightful romantic verses, many of which were published in magazines before Carr self-published *Black Hills Ballads* (1902). In 1908 Carr privately published *Cowboy Lyrics,* a book the editors say has become a sought-after collector's item (Afterword 161).

Poetic and factual accounts unfailingly report the cowboy to be a gentleman. Recall the father who felt comfortable enough to allow his daughters to travel with the cowboys to a distant party? And in "The Flyin' Outlaw," Curly Fletcher alleges "Cowboys was knights then, yuh see" (20). Red Steagall in "Hats Off to the Cowboy" reminds us that "His trade is a fair one, he fights for what's right, / And his ethics aren't subject to change. / He still tips his hat to the ladies / Let's you water first at the pond. / He believes a day's pay is worth a day's work, / And his handshake and word are his bond" (7-12). No doubt the majority of cowboys adhered to these behaviors. Their manliness combined with chivalry sealed their places in the hearts of people everywhere. Organizers of the San Antonio Hemisfair that occurred in the 1960s stated that people coming from around the world would ask first, "Where're the cowboys?" The American cowboy became an icon, the picture and image of strength and virtue. If we look in the dictionary we see, only a few lines below the word *icon,* the word

iconoclast, which means a breaker or destroyer of images. E.V. Carr's poem, "The Man You Couldn't Get" is iconoclastic because it explodes the image of the cowboy as a gentleman.

As diverse as the flora and fauna of the West are, likewise are the personalities of the men drawn there. Many were no doubt gentlemen, but not all. Did every cowboy fall in love with every girl he saw on the plains? No is the logical answer. As long as men and women have been attracted to one another, there has existed the age-old problem of unrequited love, a most painful predicament for anyone who has ever experienced it. So it follows that some women living in the West loved cowboys who failed to return their love.

From among the reams of clean, homogenized and romanticized cowboy poetry steps this gem of psychological realism, "The Man You Couldn't Get." Not only does "The Man You Couldn't Get" tell the story of unrequited love, but also it reveals the stark ugliness that sometimes occurs in relationships:

> You can cry and you can try,
> To the very day you die,
> Turnin' up a haughty nose—
> Sort o' scornful, I suppose,
> But you're still a-dreamin' yet
> Of the man you couldn't get.
>
> Most likely some day you
> Will get married – hope you do –
> An' your proud neck bend to rub
> Little dresses in a tub;
>
> But somehow I place this bet:
> Him you never will ferget.
> Course you knows time's comin' that

You'll be homely, old an' fat;

Then your man will wonder why

Once a great while that you sigh;

Well you knows what makes you fret,

Even then you can't ferget.

Husband, yes, he'll wonder why

That you turn a-drift a sigh,

Tho' he'll feel it sort o' dim,

That the said sigh hain't fer him—

It's fer one you love some yet;

Fer the man you couldn't get.

He don't care, fer 'tis true,

He jes' sort o' thinks o' you,

As a girl he uster know—

One o' many, sure, that's so.

But you're longin', sighin' yet,

Fer the man you couldn't get.

Can't ferget that night you

Loved him long an' sweet an' true,

Can't ferget his voice an' style,

Reckless, careless all the while,

Can't ferget that dark old day,

When he laffed and walked away. (Carr 75-76)

The anatomy of "The Man You Couldn't Get" consists of six six-lined stanzas, normatively couplets, all supporting a masculine tone. Most of the words are monosyllabic that thud heavily in our ears. With the exception of the first two lines, orally the majority of the poem has the sound of clop, clop, clopping along, not the clickety-clack of horse hooves or the sound of the train on the tracks. The first two lines have a nursery rhyme bounce that endows them with a mocking tone when spoken by a vindictive adult:

1 1 3 1 1 1 3

You can cry / and you / can try (1)

1 1 3 1 3 2 3

To the ver / y day / you die (2)

Lines nine and ten phonetically convey oppression or maybe depression; note the use of the words *proud*, *neck* and *bend*:

1 1 3 3 3 1 3

An' your proud / neck bend / to rub

3 1 3 1 1 1 3

Lit tle / dres ses / in a tub [...].

They seem to accumulate weight. The sounds of the words enable the reader to envision a woman tired, bending over a tub washing children's clothes. The "little dresses in a tub" line contrasts sharply with the preceding line because unstressed syllables outnumber stressed. This flip flop in tone imbues the poem with a schismatic feel.

The division gets underway in the first line, "You can cry and you can try" are three feet tenuously joined mid-line by a foot consisting of two light stresses. Add to that the rhyme scheme of *aabbcc*, couplets that fail to unite a stanza in the same manner as an *abab* or *abba* rhyme scheme. Ending a quatrain with a word that rhymes with the last word of the first line, *abba*, is like doubling back to tie the loop. To the ear there is an audible cohesiveness.

Carr further substantiates masculine dominance using masculine rhymes, which are rhymes ending on a stressed syllable. All thirty-six lines are masculine. The following four lines demonstrate:

3

Sort o' scornful, I suppose, (4)

3

Him you never will ferget (12)

3

Even then you can't ferget (18)

3

When he laffed and walked away. (36)

Lines twelve and eighteen end with *ferget,* a word which gives the lines a brittle sound.

Numerically the structure underscores the masculine theme. It is of passing interest that the number six or products of six repeat. Six in the Bible represents the number of man, created on the sixth day. The poem consists of sestets, six-lined stanzas, of which there are six stanzas, totaling thirty-six lines. Whether Carr intended numerology in "The Man you Couldn't Get" we will probably never know. But if we assume that Carr did mean to infuse the poem with man's eminence versus attributes of man associated with the Spirit (i.e., love, patience, kindness, long-suffering, meekness, and joy), it is not a far stretch to assert that this poem is naturalistic. The verse reveals man as he is, the goal of psychological realism.

What other method does the poet use to convey realism? Poetry uses minimal language to tell a story, evoke emotion, or offer praise. Therefore, word choice is extremely important. Poets can better establish the tone of the poem when they are sensitive to the denotations and connotations of words. Notice Carr's word choices, "Homely, old an' fat" (14). If we speak of the same woman as plain, mature, and stout, we are in essence describing an unattractive, older, and overweight woman. Our version, however, sounds nicer, kinder. The words we chose have a more pleasant connotation. Likewise, in the line "Little dresses in a

tub" the intention seems to be towards demeaning the woman and her work. What if the speaker said "Washing the clothes"? Same activity, yes, but the connotation would change, and that would affect the tone of the poem; the poem would lose its surly, cruel, and vindictive timbre.

Until the final stanza the reader may have wondered what, if anything, the woman did to deserve this treatment. Is she an arrogant woman who takes pride in the fact she thinks she can have any man she wants? Is she a woman who has earned a reputation as a heartbreaker? Then this particular cowboy comes along and elects himself to be the one to put her in her place? The final stanza seems to elucidate the cowboy's mind:

> Can't ferget that night that you
> Loved him long an' sweet an' true [...]
> Can't ferget that old dark day,
> When he laffed and walked away. (31-32, 35-36)

That she loved him "sweet an' true" seems to suggest that she did love him. What do we have here, a Pechorin, the character in Mikhail Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time*? Ultimately the reader decides what spin to put on "The Man You Couldn't Get." Readers' interpretations are as varied and numerous as the experiences they bring with them to the reading. Each of us acts and reacts every day, sometimes knowingly and unknowingly, on past experiences. Whatever one's personal analysis may be of "The Man You Couldn't Get," this poem distinguishes itself from the herd of cowboy poems in showing us the darker side of love on the range.

LOVE

We sometimes forget the ephemeral, special moments that punctuate our lives. Pressing daily demands compete with memories for front and center stage of our consciousness. Time flows, gray matter atrophies, and one day we discover the special occasions we thought we would never forget dimmed and slightly out of focus.

Time deceives us. When we are young, we think not of old age. Youth seems as if it will go on forever. Our bodies are strong, and it seems that our vitality will never flag. The future seems an eternity stretching out before us. Then, one day we have the first sensation that we are growing old. This realization can be abrupt or insidious. Disconcerting can be the knowledge that some of our best years have come and gone. Sadly, many of us fail to recognize the best times of our lives while we live them. It is not until they have already past and we view them through time's tunnel that we say, if only to ourselves, "those were the best days of my life."

Linda Hussa, a contemporary poet, captures in "Love Letters" two timeless, classic themes, age and love, and the problems associated with them. She expresses her thoughts on the difficulties encountered in aging through writing about intimacy, sexuality, and emotion between a husband and wife. "Love Letters" appeals to a broad audience addressing concerns relevant to all people.

Although "Love Letters" petitions a broad audience concerning classic themes, Hussa elects not to universalize the poem. If she had universalized it she would have written in second person *you* or composed in third person, *he*, *she*, or *it*. The poet does not take herself out of the poem. We can reasonably assume that the poet and speaker are one, because Hussa, herself, is married and a working cowboy with her husband on their ranch. The use of the first-person pronoun supports the hypothesis, too, that the speaker and author are one.

I is used four times, which presents us with another question. Since "Love Letters" is intensely personal, how can we relate to it?

As Hussa essays her life, she transforms the natural into the poetic; otherwise, we might feel like voyeurs peering into a private moment not intended for us, akin to sneaking a look at prose written in a diary. What poetic methodology does she pick to convert prose to poetry? First, she opts to compose her poem in free verse. Free verse indicates the lines are "free" of rhyme, fixed accents, and syllable count. Yet free verse must have a unifying underlying structure to distinguish it from prose. Read "Love Letters" as five sentences written in prose:

1. "Wow!" was written in the dust on the bedside table.
2. The dawn and I blushed together as your spurs ching chinged around the kitchen and you started the fire.
3. I stretched full length on the cool smoothness of the sheets, a kept woman a moment longer.
4. Within an hour's time we'll be ahorseback in a long trot to some distant blue mountain hunting cows.
5. I'll carry your message close knowing there will come a day I would give a year of my life for that. . ."Wow!"

An interesting passage in prose, yet rendered more interesting and thought-provoking with line breaks between grammatical units. Now read "Love Letters" as Hussa splits the lines and organizes them into stanzas:

"Wow!" was written in the dust
    on the bedside table.

The dawn and I blushed together
    as your spurs
    ching
    chinged

around the kitchen
and you started the fire.

I stretched full length
on the cool smoothness
of the sheets,

a kept woman
a moment longer.

Within an hour's time
we'll be ahorseback
in a long trot
to some distant blue mountain
hunting cows.

I'll carry your message
close
knowing there will come a day
I would give a year of my life
for that. . .

"Wow!" (96)

Hussa's choice of line breaks "controls" the time within a line and stanza, thus emphasizing the poem's main idea—the struggle of the corporeal versus temporal. The first enjambment occurs in line one. The essence of sentence one is the subject and verb, "Wow!" and "was written," stated in the passive voice, and they coexist peacefully together. A prepositional phrase

immediately follows. Sentence one contains not one prepositional phrase but two. Why does the poet decide to split one prepositional phrase from the first line and assign it to line two? One possible answer is this—maintaining phrase one, "in the dust," on the same line with the subject and verb emphasizes it as an adverbial modifier. Where is "Wow!" written? "In the dust." Highlighting this phrase supports the flesh versus time thesis.

She wastes no time supporting her theme either. The love letters are not spoken or found on an LCD screen; no, they are composed in organic material, as are our human frames. The couple has engaged in coitus, a physical union capable of producing new life and the impetus for the "Wow!" We have but a short time to contemplate "Wow!" when immediately we are confronted with "in the dust" and all that that message entails: "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Gen. 3:19).

Temporally, how do lines one and two measure up? The interjection, "Wow!" can be construed to signify a brief and fleeting unit of time, as brief, fleeting, and intense as an orgasm. The consonantal *w's* extricate us after the initial shock of "Wow!" They act as agents pulling us past "Wow!", beyond the past tense verb, "was written," finally depositing us at the end of the line where we reflect momentarily on the phrase, "in the dust" (1).

The next unit of time commences with a stanza devoted to mundane activities. This choppy, complex sentence produces an enjambment strung out over six lines. Chronologically, the time line begins with "The dawn and I blushed together," a simple sentence with a compound subject, occupying a line followed by the adverbial clause, "as your spurs / ching / chinged / around the kitchen / and you started the fire" (4-8). Hussa anthropomorphizes "dawn," linking it to the woman and having them blush together. Next, she sequesters the onomatopoeic "ching" and "chinged" on individual lines, buying time for the reader to hear the sounds emanating from the kitchen as he busies himself with mundane daily activities. "Around the kitchen" and "and you started the fire" complete the travel of the second stanza. Dragging one sentence over six lines calls attention to the seemingly innumerable, plodding days of our lives filled with routine work.

Spatially we return to the bedroom; temporally, we stay in the present. Stanza two glides into the third. Our attention focuses on the bedroom again, and we read an objective passage. Again, as in stanza one, the subject and verb "I stretched full length," serve as the stanzaic flagship with two, silky prepositional units in tow, "on the cool smoothness / of the sheets" (10-11). Earthy pleasure permeates the lines—the *oo* of *cool* and the hissing *s*'s combine to lend an aural sensuality to the text. Not only do we intellectually perceive that the woman luxuriates on the sheets; we feel it. Segregating the two phrases from "a kept woman / a moment longer" frames another unit of time. Within the measure the play between carnality and time resurfaces. The abstract noun, *moment,* bespeaks the temporal nature of the poem, while its syntactical antecedent, "a kept woman," titillates. Hussa fractures one sentence to compose stanzas three and four. The moment is fleeting, yet we have reprieve from time to linger and enjoy.

Reality invades in stanza five. Five is the volta, and the warmth, objectivity, and sensuality felt in the preceding lines recede. "Blushed" and "lighted the fire" fade to blue. Now, in stanza five, the woman considers their imminent embarkation from the nest to the outside world "in a long trot" (16). Observe that "in a long trot," itself a prepositional phrase, occupies a single line. "Love Letters" is composed in free verse; nevertheless by syntactically dividing the sentence, "Within an hour's time / we'll be ahorseback / in a long trot / to some distant blue mountain / hunting cows," stress patterns emerge. Hussa is hunting cows, not iambs and trochees, yet the syllabic accents combine in such as way as to emphasize the line. Line sixteen scans,

1 1 3 3

in a / long trot [. . .].

This phrase, when severed from the rest of the sentence, scans pyrrhus and spondee. The combination of two unstressed syllables followed by two stressed ones forces our attention on the two stressed monosyllables, "long trot." Metaphorically, "long trot" alludes to life's journey. No matter how long one's life's journey may be, every journey ends. Line seventeen points the way,

1 2 3 1 2 3 1

to some / distant / blue moun / tain [...].

The relevance of this line resides not in its rhythmic designation, as it does in metaphorical value. However, the one trochaic foot thematically participates. A trochaic foot has a falling off sound. And if we infer that the "distant blue mountain" is a metaphor for old age or even the death of one of the partners, then a falling off sound complements nicely the decline of physical abilities. Moreover, choosing to describe the mountain as "blue," a color that is serene in some contexts and cold in others, contrasts with the warm "blush" that "dawn" and the woman experienced *together.* And if we interpret "dawn" in its historically symbolic sense—new life, a new day—then, "distant blue mountain" offers appropriately the opposite—the end of life, the last day. It follows then that "mountain" refers to old age looming ahead in the future, old age the obstacle, the incomprehensible circumstance that can be as daunting and mammoth as a mountain.

Finally, we move into the last, subjective stanza that offers closure and resolution. The poet reiterates her temporal theme once more, "knowing there will come a day / I would give a year of my life" (21-22). We are not threatened by Hussa's acknowledgment. She states that she will carry the message "close." An ellipsis concludes line twenty-three and precedes the final "Wow," bearing silent witness to our understanding; Hussa's didacticism is not in vain. This stanza functions as a reminder of the fleeting nature of life and its inherent memories. We enter upon time's eternal continuum and live out the short space of our lives. Time, age, and death, the great constants over which we have no control, alter us. We can, however, cling tightly to "Wow," man's sustenance, moments of emotional and physical love that sustain us over the long trot. Our corporeal beings succumb to corruption as time goes by, but not "Wow"; it has the power not only to give life but to make it worthwhile.

TOP HAND

Cowboy poetry has undergone many structural changes in recent years. Putting formalism aside, poets began wrangling free verse, and they expanded their thematic territory as the West's free range contracted. Cowboy poems of the 1990s include subjects previously seldom written about, such as "economic pressures on independent ranchers and cowboys and political tensions throughout the region" (Stanley "Cowboy Poetry" 13). The lament has sounded before that the cowboys' days were over, yet they never faded away. Neither did their poetry. The heart of their poetry remains constant, recording their day-to-day work lives. More important than a recitation of events, memorials, and anecdotes, however, is the essence of what makes the Western community strong and enduring—its code of ethics.

Alive and well among traditional themes is the eternal ranching ethos. Cowboy poetry has at its core, first, entertainment, and, second, instruction. To this day the ranching culture's pedagogy continues to be communicated via their enduring art form, cowboy poetry and song. The tenets of the culture are spoken and sung at chuck wagon gatherings, heritage festivals, cowboy poetry festivals, family gatherings, as well as in trucks, and anywhere after a hard day's work.

Although not organized in any formal manner, the "Code of the West" reveals itself as a clearly codified work ethic within the lines of cowboy poetry. Familiar scenes and situations encase much of the code. Frequently, one will encounter, if he or she reads enough cowboy poetry, a perennial character or objective termed the Top Hand debuting in a cowboy song prior to the twentieth century; the concept of the Top Hand develops throughout twentieth-century cowboy poetry, and he continues to be a missionary for "Quality" visible to this day in contemporary verse.

The reason the bards reincarnate Top Hand, occasionally dusting him off and updating him to fit modern and postmodern changes in the ranching culture, resides in the notion that poetry serves the community from which it emanates. Top Hand accomplishes this feat through

reinforcing the cowboy's code. Ironically, Top Hand launched his career speaking to all that is anathema to a "real" cowboy. This effect was achieved when the poet satirized a serious subject, the cowboy's work ethic. Later, verse with the Top Hand theme did so in a direct, lyrical manner. Regardless of the stylistic methodology the poet elects, the core value remains the same—as long as there is a cow to punch and a bard to write about it, the enduring Top Hand work ethic will continue to be conveyed by poetry to the community it serves.

The Top Hand theme strengthens the work ethic of the community by defining the characteristics desirable in ranch hands and those not desirable. How did a boy or man living in a vast and sparsely populated area of the country learn to be a cowboy? No "cowboy schools" existed. The West of the nineteenth century taught cow-herding skills through apprenticeship. Learning to be a good hand continues to the present as on-the-job training. Therefore, repetition in verse of the occupation's objectives for cowpunchers guided an apprentice during his novitiate. Actually, long before a boy reached the age to begin apprenticeship, he would have been exposed to the standards established by the cowmen. The boy could know the job description because of the oral and communal transmission of cowboy poetry.

In November 2000 at a chuck wagon festival, poet Larry McWhorter delivered a poem called "Gate Session," substantiating the notion that Western boys were exposed to occupational standards. The subject of the piece centers on a real life experience when McWhorter was a boy learning to punch cows. His father was his teacher. One day McWhorter left the gate on horseback instead of waiting for his partner to mount his horse. The young McWhorter did so because he was cold and impatient, explaining his actions this way: "A cold and hungry, angry boy / had had enough of this [...] / I'd drifted off into a sort of trance. [...] / I headed home without a backward glance"(13,14,39,42). The poem proceeds to relate his father's correction. First, the boy receives the ethic underpinning the correct behavior in such a scenario. The elder McWhorter admonishes his son, "'Discomfort doesn't give a man / The right to leave a friend. / It's when it's tough is when you need to stick. / He needs to know that when you start / You'll be there in the end. / That trust should stick like mortar to a brick'" (61-66). Second, his father analyzes

the near mishap when he asks his son if he knows how difficult it is to mount a horse that is trying to break and run. Horses are social creatures, explained McWhorter to this writer. When he left the gate on his horse, instinctually his father's pony tried to follow. An insider of the occupation might better understand the behavior of horses, but most people should comprehend the moral of the story. The older McWhorter chastens the boy about putting self ahead of the welfare of his partner. Furthermore, he enlarges the discussion, telling his son that this rule applies not only to them, but to all cowboys. He declares, "'You could have caused a wreck back there / By leaving me behind. / That's durned poor manners in the cowboy clan'" (67-69; McWhorter 60-63). Now the younger McWhorter should understand that one day when he works as a cowboy his coworkers are going to expect the same courtesy.

Several notable researchers' work supports Top Hand's didactic role. Austin E. and Alta S. Fife edited and commented about the songs collected by N. Howard Thorp in a book entitled *Songs of the Cowboys with commentary by Austin E. Fife.* (1966). At the time of its publication, Austin Fife was the Department Head of Languages and Philosophy at Utah State University. Prior to his tenure at Utah State, dating back to the 1930s, Fife and his wife, also a Harvard University graduate, traveled extensively about the American West. They traversed the wide terrain from Arizona to Montana and Wyoming to California. The Fifes interviewed old-timers in an effort to collect cowboy ballads and songs (Fife, preface i).

It was during their travels that they discovered *Songs of the Cowboys* (1908) edited by Nathaniel Howard (Jack) Thorp. Thorp, himself a working cowboy of fifty years, had gathered the cowboy songs popular in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Thorp's little volume of twenty-three songs assembled in fifty pages included a song called "Top Hand." Although our discussion focuses on cowboy poetry, we cannot discuss cowboy poetry without addressing to some degree cowboy songs. Many cowboy poems began as songs and sometimes vice versa. Fife comments that numerous lyrical creations enjoyed a dual life. He goes on to explain that cases exist where the original author wrote his poem in that easily adapted to song. The ease with which

the minstrel switches from song to poetical recitation this writer observed first-hand in the performance of cowboy poet and songwriter Allen Damron at the George West, TX festival.

Damron held true to Western verse's tendency to place content over form. The tendency is to tell a story, moreover a story with a moral. Form, whether it is a story or a poem set to a droll cowboy tune, exists only to aid in the telling of the story. Damron commenced his performance with a song commemorating his deceased father. A spoken line or two set the action in temporal and geographic context. As Damron sang he moved in and out of sung lyrics to spoken lyrics without the slightest jolt, the satisfying shift made all the more possible because he chose the ballad, a form that has at its heart a line of seven metric feet with a caesura after the fourth.

The implied idea underpinning the performance is that a man's life testifies while he lives and long after he is dead; furthermore, the transmission of the message remains consistent with the medium that has communicated the Westerner's story for over a hundred years—the narrative ballad. Damron sang and recited that he had heard his father tell stories all of his life. He shared segments of stories, and then he went silent and gently strummed his guitar for a half minute, which allowed time for reflection. He proceeded to indicate that the stories did not cease when his father died. At the senior Damron's funeral, Damron said men and women came up to him and told stories about his father.

A man related the following to the grieving Damron. He remembered a time when Damron's father gave him a lift. The man was then a boy in the 4H club who had worked mightily to raise a fine hog for an upcoming show. The hog had escaped from its pen, and the boy, downcast, walked the roads looking for his hog, knowing that if he could not find him, his work would be in vain and he would not get to show. The older Damron, driving by, discerned the boy's consternation by his drooping shoulders and stumbling gait. He stopped and inquired if something was the matter. The boy readily relieved himself of the story to the man. Damron's father immediately asked the boy to get in the car, and they went looking for the runaway pig. When they found it, Damron put the four hundred-pound hog in his new Lincoln Continental and drove boy and hog back to their homestead. An incident that occurred a long time ago retains the

power to testify its moral to the hearts of hearers through song and verse. Damron's performance underscores Fife's assessment that Western verse enjoys a dual life as poem and song. Damron's performance further supports Fife's assertion that, "It is both difficult and meaningless to separate poems from the ballads and songs" (Foreward12).

Returning to the concept of poetry as teacher, we again look at "Top Hand." More interesting than speculation about "Top Hand's" original medium, song or poem, as previously mentioned, is the fact that the piece did not begin as a public revelation extolling the virtues of quality workmanship and character. The original title may have been "Top Screw." Nathaniel Howard (Jack) Thorp, who committed the lines to paper, admits to changing the poem's title. Thorp felt obliged to change the title and a few words because he is recorded to have said, "[it] would have burned up the paper on which it was written" (24). Dane Coolidge's collection of cowboy ballads, *Cowboy Songs*, published four years after Thorp's 1908 book, offers a substantively similar poem entitled "Top Screw." Coolidge's poem reads word for word with the Thorp version except for the last two stanzas, which, although in variance, nevertheless retain their sarcasm.

Fife's definition of Top Hand in *Ballads of the Great West* is "(man, rider, roper, cutter, screw, shot, etc.) n. The best; the man who excels in and is, hence, in charge of a particular punching activity" (261). Given this definition, it seems that "Top Screw" is a legitimate and complimentary title for the best man at his job. In sum, "Top Screw," like "Top Hand," satirizes folly. Whatever the case, Thorp justifies how he came to get the poem, and why he changed it:

> Cowboy songs, as I have said were full of the venacular [sic] of the range, and it wasn't always parlor talk. I vividly remember sitting in the ranch house on Crow Flat with old Jim Brownfield during the latter stages of my trip, and hearing him give the entire range version of "The Top Hand." The theme—ridicule of a cowboy too big for his boots—was a scorcher in itself, and the words of the song would have burned the reader's eyeballs if printed as Jim sang it. I expurgated it and had to change even the title, and the song has appeared exactly as I rendered it in all books of cowboy songs since published. (24)

Thorp alleges that all subsequent published renderings of "Top Hand" conformed to the changes he had made. However, Coolidge's collection including "Top Screw" was published four years after Thorp's, and Coolidge's lyrics differ. The variance in lyrics can be reasonably assumed to have occurred because the two versions were circulating at the same time, mutations from an earlier form. Probably Thorp and Coolidge were unaware two versions existed. Obviously book distribution mechanisms in place in 1908 were quite different than they are today. It is possible that no copy of Thorp's self-published collection totaling two thousand found its way into Coolidge's hands. The Fifes's research in the 1930s supports this contention. Their investigation led them to conclude that "Top Hand" had not received widespread distribution in print (Fife 61).

More germane to our discussion is Thorp's comment about the song's "ridicule of a cowboy too big for his boots—was a scorcher itself." By today's standards, the idea of satire in song being a "scorcher" may seem silly. In the United States anybody is fair game for ridicule. Overexposure to satire has diminished its effect. Ridicule today fails to sting as it did in 1908. During Thorp's hey-day having one's behavior censured in song and then passed about in the community was a rebuke of the highest order, a sort of oral billboard warning and educating folks about this behavior. The poet cautions, "Wherever he goes, catch on to his game" (40). At the same time, a sarcastic tone warns a cowboy prone to hyperbole. "Top Hand" accomplishes its two-fold mission for the community—regulation and protection.

Cowboys deplored a braggart. A general rule circulating at the time exhorted: "When among the cowboys, don't claim more than you can deliver." The man who ignored this adage often found himself the victim of serious pranks. A treatment of this character can be found in "The Dude Wrangler" and other thematically comparable verses. The poet wastes no time getting about the business of denunciation. In the first two stanzas of "Top Hand," he visually establishes the scene in which we find our "hero":

While you're all so frisky I'll sing a little song
Think a horn of whisky will help the thing along
It's all about the Top Hand when he's busted flat

Bumming round town, in his Mexican hat

He'd laid up all winter and his pocket book is flat

His clothes are all tatters but he don't mind that. (1-6)

The ballad opens with a minstrel-like invitation to gather around and listen. The "Top Hand" does not deserve a serious discussion among sober folks, and the bodacious cowboy has earned ridicule in an atmosphere of drinking and revelry. The message is clear—behave like the Top Hand and you, too, risk being the subject of a barroom ditty sung for "frisky" others imbibing whiskey. Plainly, the song scoffs at behavior demeaning for the cowhand on and off the job. Descriptive words such as *bumming*, *laid-up*, *tatters*, and *flat* portray his slovenly manner of living. That Top Hand's indifference to his status appears to gall the speaker more than his actual state is seen in this line, "but he don't mind that" (6). Cowboys forbade sloth. It was truly unthinkable.

Personification indicates that Top Hand is an abstract character, the embodiment of deplorable behavior. Take, for example, the season, spring; if we capitalize it, "Spring," and attribute human characteristics to it, we are said to have personified spring: "Spring reached forth her bountiful hand." In similar fashion, the poet incorporates undesirable qualities under a single designation, Top Hand, as if the traits are human, and because people's names are capitalized, the poet capitalizes the personification's name. In the remaining stanzas the poet proceeds to delineate Top Hand's foibles:

See him in town with a crowd that he knows

Rolling cigarettes an' a smoking through his nose.

First thing he tells you, he owns a certain brand

Leads you to think he is a daisy hand

Next thing he tells you 'bout his trip up the trail

All the way to Kansas to finish out his tale. (7-12)

Stanza two reveals Top Hand's desire to be in the limelight. He performs the glamorous work and shrinks from the smell of sizzling hair and burning meat. Stanza three spotlights his inability to deliver:

Put him on a horse, he's a handy hand to work

Put him on the branding pen he's sure to shirk. (13-14)

Put him on a herd, he's a cussin all day

Anything tries, its sure to get away [...]

If anything goes wrong he lays it on the screws

Say's the lazy devils were trying to take a snooze (19-20, 23-24).

Top Hand violates two more caveats of the cowboy code when, first, he complains, and, second, he blames his shortcomings on others, the screws. The song continues compiling his peccadilloes until it winds up in the typical fashion of many cowboy songs and poems, with a terse restatement of the theme.

From the top to the bottom he's a bold Jackass. (43)

Waddie Cow boy. (Rooney 62-63)

Capitalization of Jackass correlates with the personification of Top Hand, except this time there is no play on words. Top Hand is revealed for who he is. The concluding line not only substantiates the theme; it also maintains and artistically balances the verse. The poem opens with a personification and closes with one, Jackass; moreover, Jackass metaphorically identifies the character. Jackass symbolizes an obstinate and fractious temperament. The hearer of the song is left with no doubt that a popinjay is repugnant to the cowboy culture.

Written below the final lyric of the 1908 version is a signature, "Waddie Cow boy." Austin E. Fife writes that the appearance of a signature, "Waddie Cow boy," leaves him "intrigued and perplexed" (61). Considering the personification of Top Hand and Jackass, it seems reasonable to conclude that the signature, "Waddie Cow boy," is itself a personification. In cowboy nomenclature a "waddie" is a cowboy who moves from ranch to ranch for seasonal work. In the twenty-first century business world he is comparable to a contract or per diem worker. Fife and others note the name *waddie* derives from *wad,* which is something that is placed temporarily to stop up a leak or a draft until it can be properly fixed (262). Within the ranching community, a

flexible labor pool is desirable. The number of laborers needed to work with cattle waxed in the spring and summer and waned in the fall.

We have no reason to believe that "Waddie Cow boy" is an incompetent worker. First, it would be unreasonable that an incompetent interloper would sign a verse excoriating himself. Seasonal waddies were good workers. The notion of a contract worker as a qualified herder found acceptance in the West. H.L. Davis, a writer of Western fiction, casts a contract worker in the role of the wise man aiding the initiate. An intermittent worker normally floats from job to job not because he is a man of substandard skill, thus hindering him from riding continuously for one ranching outfit. Quite the opposite, in this case he can freelance because he possesses extraordinary skill. The waddie in Davis' story comes to the aid of a boy with six hundred head of sheep destined for disaster. The wise man's statement to the boy attests to the fact that waddies were usually quality workers. He states, "You ought to learn your trade and travel around with it, and then you wouldn't have to bother about what people of thought of you" (326). Keeping this statement in mind, then, the waddie signing off on the "Top Hand" ballad most likely is a personification, the embodiment of the cowboy's work ethic and the polar opposite of the satirized Top Hand.

We also know from Thorp's prefatory essay to *Songs of the Cowboys* that the true author's name was not "Waddie Cow boy." Thorp explains the song's "abstract." As previously mentioned, he reports obtaining the song from Jim Brownfield at Crow Flat, New Mexico, in 1899. Thorp states that Brownfield said he got the song from a man who attributed authorship to Frank Rooney about 1877 (24), all of which only goes to prove that poems and songs spread throughout the West initially thanks to their orality. In turn the verses provided a cultural cohesiveness otherwise lacking in a community flung from one end of the West to the other.

That the authorship of poems and songs became dubious over the years is nobody's fault. This phenomenon can be attributed to the mindset of the cowboys, their culture, and the medium's orality. Thorp contends that the authors, if they were from the range, did not care or

bother to acknowledge ownership. As we have already seen, a song or poem's name may change when it is passed around or written down. Thorp adds this enlightenment concerning the change in the title of one of his songs. He writes in his essay, "Banjo in Cow Camp," "songs have their adventures after they get into print" (24), meaning after they are published. Thorp states that he closed his little paperback book of cowboy songs with a ballad he himself wrote and titled "Speckles." Thorp asserts that he wrote eight verses, but the printer lost part of the copy and printed only six. Thorp goes on to explain that sometime later, "a very learned professor brought out a big book of cowboy songs which he claimed to have collected with great labor, and he printed my abbreviated "Speckles" (without credit), but changed the name to "Freckles" and called it a fragment he had picked up" (24). The Fifes add a footnote to a later edition of Thorp's *Songs of the Cowboys* and elaborate on Thorp's comments. The "very learned professor" of whom he speaks was, of course, John A. Lomax, who, according to Fife, has done more than any other one person to "fix cowboy songs in the ethos of America." Fife further reports that Lomax did make "liberal use" of Thorp's booklet in his 1910 edition of *Cowboy Songs and Ballads* without giving credit. Also, it appears that the "very learned professor" impressed Thorp because in Thorp's 1921 edition of *Songs of the Cowboys*, Thorp abandoned some of his genuine 1908 texts in favor of the professor's "synthetic specimens" (25).

However, usually it was not academic researchers changing the words of cowboy poems and songs. The change came about more naturally as the verses passed from one singer to the next. One such example is the ballad, "The Tenderfoot," which also exists under other titles: "The Tenderfoot Cowboy," "A Tenderfoot's Experience," "The City Cowboy," "The Greenhorn," "The Greenhorn's Cowboy," "The Greenhorn's Experience," "The Horse Wrangler," and "The D-2 Wrangler" (Fife 44).

Regardless of word and title changes or new lines added, the verse remains constant in its purposes, usually didacticism and entertainment. Take, for example, the last ballad, "The D-2 Wrangler." This ballad goes by the name "The D-2 Horse Wrangler" in *Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering*, the Bible of cowboy poetry. The editor of the book notes, "The poem has often taken

on a melody and has been abbreviated in the oral tradition" (Cannon 28). The poem and the song both tell of the initiation rites of the greenhorn, the tenderfoot, and the apprentice in the ranks of the cowboy occupation. The result? The greenhorn understood beforehand that he would receive the most tedious job in the camp and on the trail, one tedious job being that of handling the cavard, from the Spanish word, *cavallad,* a group of saddle horses often numbering well over one hundred. Top Hand's life teaches would-be cowboys in poem and song, too. The only thing different about Top Hand here is that he changed the genre form, metamorphosing from his appearance in the original narrative satire to a straightforward lyrical pronouncement of the good hand's skills and character.

Kent Stockton's poem, "Top Hand," written approximately twenty years ago, realistically paints the picture of Top Hand's skills. In the first stanza, he outlines these talents:

> The West has spawned some punchers
> Who'd shine in any group,
> From those who'll fork the rankest bronc
> An' fan his shaggy croup,
> To those whose loop can snag a star
> Or take the wind in tow,
> Or stake the whole damn outfit
> On a single flat-out throw.

Next Stockton delves a fraction deeper to elucidate the man's nature, which rounds out Stockton's "Top Hand," making him seem less two-dimensional than Thorp's specimen:

> A puncher's judged by what he does
> From the back o' one of his cavvy,
> How he handles horses an' cows
> Is how ya figgers his savvy.
> How he rides 'an how he ropes
> Figgers highly in this equation,

But that ain't all the facts it takes

To rate a man o' his persuasion.

In the next stanza Stockton illumines intrinsic characteristics, which enable him to acquire good work skills:

Have you noticed how the best ol' hand

Seems to have less trouble than others?

His horses are calmer, yet know their jobs

Bettern' most o' their equine brothers.

He don't say much, just does the job

With the least extraneous motion;

Seems like he knows that a steer's gonna break

'Fore it ever takes the notion.

He can ride rough string if he has to

An' rope with the best, if he must

But the best damn hand on the outfit

Is the one don't raise no dust. (118-119)

Many cowboy poems use double entendre throughout. The last two lines, "But the best damn hand on the outfit / Is the one don't raise no dust," can be construed as having both an occupational and nonoccupational reference; that is, a good man lives in peace and harmony, not making trouble, but not running from it either. Stockton helps us to see not merely the description of the job, but the man behind the job. Such a man concerns himself with his fellow cowboys' well-being, as previously noted when McWhorter's father stated, in "Gate Session," "that's durned poor manners in the cowboy clan." Manners related to an occupation or those displayed in everyday life have at the basis of their existence a concern for the welfare of others.

Gene Randels's contemporary effort to explain who the Top Hand is underscores and expands previous interpretations of the Top Hand. Randels seems to say in the first two lines

that the Top Hand is not so much made as born, "I've rode the high side / Since the day I was born." He further indicates that the Top Hand exists outside of the West, supporting his notion of innate versus learned behaviors:

I've rode the high side
Since the day I was born.
If you crowd the bull,
You're gonna take the horn.

I got a scrap-iron face 5
On a cast-iron frame;
Bullets bounce off me
And I rust when it rains.

You half-bad dudes
Walk wide around me, 10
Unless you just can't wait
To see eternity.

I'm a wheelhorse — Wheelhorse, the horse in a team that controls all the movements of the team
And a workin' fool;
In the oil fields 15
I push the tool.

In the mines I'm known
As the walkin' dog;
In Dixie they call me
The old tusk hawg. — tusk hawg a javelina—wild boar with tusks 20

I ain't no bad man;

Don't push no man around;

I'm not bad to know—

I just don't give no ground.

I can be found 25

All across this land,

Where men hit life hard

And gotta be top hand. (Randels121)

The man's nature receives discussion in stanzas three and four, "You half-bad dudes / Walk wide around me, / Unless you just can't wait / To see eternity" (9-12), and this half-apologetic and at the same time explanatory stanza, "I ain't no bad man; / Don't push no man around; / I'm not bad to know-- / I just don't give no ground," which further elucidates his rules for the tribe (21-24). The verse strains against the ropes of regionalism, a label often assigned to cowboy poetry. Randels's "Top Hand" traces the character's family tree. Decidedly masculine in nature, the author pushes hyperbole to the limit—"I got a scrap iron face / On a cast-iron frame; / Bullets bounce off me / And I rust when it rains (5-8). It has the folksy feet of the tenacious "Old Dan Tucker" who "washed his face in a frying pan / combed his hair with a wagon wheel / and died with a toothache in his heel."

While not quite a literary equal on the tall order of a legendary Paul Bunyan, Top Hand remains a giant in his field, edifying, instructing, and admonishing. He embodies more than the work ethic of the ranching industry; he incorporates the great spirit of our nation. Top Hand becomes more alive when we envision the stamina of the men and women who fired muskets, drove wagons, rode horses, and rope cows. Our twenty-first-century sensibilities may cloud our contemplation; after all, few of us have found it necessary to summon the strength, mentally or physically, to create literally something out of nothing. Yet that is exactly the task that faced the settlers to America, as did the Westerner when he created the ranching industry. We can begin

to see that in such an environment actions speak louder than words. Top Hand, then, becomes the mouthpiece for the West, teaching the work standards and the personality traits of successful people.

Aside from being a skilled worker and a good man, the cowboy showing courage despite the odds earns for the cowboy honor that lives long after he is gone. Cowboys of yesteryear had for their Coliseum hundreds of miles under a dome of Aegean blue. There, unruly horses and fractious steers daily tested their mettle. Years later, the Westerner created another forum in which a man's nerve might be measured, the rodeo ring. Verse celebrating the best man in the rodeo ring focuses not so much on his skills as it does on his bravado. The Greek bard, Homer, had his fight scenes; likewise, the cowboy poet brings to life the defining moment in the ring---man against beast. A commemorative piece, "Tribute to Freckles and Tornado" by John Bowerman, retells the story of an over-the-hill rodeo champion, the dark horse in that competition, who in spite of age and disfavor summoned the tenacity to go the distance. The Greek male lived for honor; so does the rodeo rider. The winner's prize is honor, the public acknowledgement of his superiority. In the next selection, "Tribute to Freckles and Tornado," a bardic narrator opens with this chorus:

> There's a lot of tales in history about the American West,
> Of the critters and the cowboys, the worst and the very best.
> Broncs like Steamboat and Midnight, Descent and Prison Bars.
> Cowboys like Mahan and Shoulders, just a few of the
> many stars. 5
> But maybe never such a match-up as at that
> National Finals show
> When Freckles Brown drew up on the bull they called Tornado. (1-8)

The loose ballad meter serves well the author's purpose to inveigle us into the action. It slowly sets the stage. Then, in the second stanza, the pace quickens and we are out of the chute with Freckles and Tornado.

The pace at which the lines move quickens aided by enjambment, to stride over. When a cowboy mounts a bull or a horse, one leg remains stationary on the wooden side rail of the chute. He steps across or steps over the animal's back, a movement cowboys call "stepping across" or "stepping over." Listening to the narrator, we step over Tornado's back with Freckles. From that point forward we step over from line to line:

Now two hundred and twenty cowboys had drawed
that bull before,
But every one heard the whistle from the dirt of the
arena floor.
And for all the many riders that had straddled that
twistin' hide,
It was a short walk back to the chutes, 'cause they
hadn't gone far in the ride.
Like an Oklahoma twister, he had the strength to
move a barn,
And many felt that the cowboy that could ride him had
not been born.

Now Freckles Brown was no youngster at the age of forty-six.
He'd been battered and bruised and broken and taken some
awful licks.
But he'd also been the champion and as he warmed his
rosin up,
He leaned on his years of experience, and maybe a little luck.
He took his final wrap and didn't hesitate,
Slid up on his rope and headed for the gate. (9-28)

Stanza four details the ride itself, while stanza five addresses Freckles's tenacity:

With each new jump it looked as though the bull

had surely won,

But the cowboy kept on hustlin' and somehow hangin' on.

'Cause Freckles Brown had never learned the meaning of "quit."

Do or die was his way of life and he had a ride to fit.

Though slipping deeper into the well he still refused to fall,

And that screamin' crowd went wild as bull and cowboy gave

their all. (39-46)

Stanza five's longer lines of six and seven feet heighten the intensity of the moment by slowing the line's pace. Their length keeps the reader hanging on with Freckles in what seems an interminable moment. The listener has time to contemplate the words, "had never learned the meaning of 'quit.'" Line forty-three's commitment to monosyllabic words halts the pace even more, thereby calling attention to each word. This device aids in emphasizing the seriousness and respect that the cowboy culture awards temerity:

3 2 3 1 2 3 1 3 1 3 2 1 3 1 3

Do or / die was / his way / of life // and he / had a / ride to / fit.

The caesura occurs at the point of the conjunction, *and*; such positioning of *and* cements it in the middle of the sentence like a fulcrum upon which balances on one end this man's philosophy of life and on the other end a defining moment. The line has the feel of a teeter-totter. Which way will Freckles's fortune go? The heavily accented *Do* and *fit* begin and end the line. Like thundering hooves, wham, we receive the auricular impact paralleling the raw fury of a one-ton bull jumping and landing in the ring. The poet switches to three iambic feet in the middle of the line, "his way", "of life," and "and he" float at the fulcrum, lending a feathery feel for a second, perhaps at a moment when Freckles and Tornado are poised in the air. We ask ourselves, "What is to be the fate of Freckles so precariously suspended midair upon the back of a raging bull?"

In the final stanza the poet sidesteps his individuality as an artist, preferring to call attention to Freckles and his unbelievable feat when he writes, "But somewhere in the pages of history where

they write / such tales down" (65-66). The pages of history to which Bowerman alludes are cowboy poetry and song. Preserving these events and the men and women achieving them has and always will be at the heart of cowboy poetry's calling.

Freckles's accomplishment works as an example of a great feat preserved in song and poetry. Bowerman closes his final stanza with Freckles playing the laconic cowboy's role:

> For five more minutes that finals crowd screamed and cheered
> and roared.
> Cause someone had finally rode the bull that couldn't
> be rode before.
> And though he may have cracked a grin as he walked back to
> the chutes,
> Freckles' only comment was, "The bull was overdue."
> But somewhere in the pages of history where they write
> such tales down,
> There's the story of the bull Tornado, and the cowboy,
> Freckles Brown. (58-68; Bowerman 81-83)

In this commemorative poem, Bowerman shows what it takes to be the rodeo circuit's version of Top Hand. We may conclude it is impossible for any man or woman to achieve such a high level of excellence. The character's degree of courage and intuitiveness exceeds anything that we could ever do. Remember that the composite character Top Hand would never have been if it were not for average men and women who set the standards that sustained the Western community. Although we do not know their individual names and deeds in most cases, Top Hand is their legacy. On the other hand, within the canon of cowboy verse, we find recorded the actual feat of one man, in this case Freckles Brown. He is not a composite character but a contemporary of the recent past. Brown modeled more than just determination and courage in the rodeo ring. As is the case with Alan Damron's father, stories about a man's life testify long after he dies. Lest one might think that Freckles was something of a hard nose, Red Steagall

explained the nature of the man who at forty-six ignored the odds to become the oldest and only man ever to ride Tornado. He said during his November 11, 2000 performance that the man who went the limit in 1967 with the toughest bull was also a man of whom he had never heard an unkind word spoken.

Reviewing poems from the late nineteenth century to the late twentieth, we have tracked Top Hand's incarnations, concluding that to be a Top Hand comes from more than acquiring cattle handling skills. First, Top Hand arrives on the scene as a personification defying the ethos accepted by the majority. Later, Stockton probes deeper, when his verse enumerates more than just the skills of a good hand. He delves into the nature of such a man, thus hinting at the notion that the Top Hand is also a man who feels secure. McWhorter's father prescribes trustworthiness as the substance that "sticks like mortar to a brick." Randels's verse seems to indicate that Top Hands hail from every region of America, born with steel in their backbones. Yet he is quick to remind us that "I ain't no bad man." Finally Steagall commemorates his friend's extraordinary accomplishment in song, peppering the performance with musings of his and Freckles's friendship. Freckles's character receives just as much mention as does his accomplishment. Thus, we can conclude that within the Top Hand poems and the stories of the lives of Westerners exists a formula, a life plan, which, should one choose to follow it, results in one becoming the best man that he can be.

VANITY

In Plato's *The Republic*, Cephalus, an old man, and middle-aged Socrates discuss the inevitable changes accompanying old age. Socrates explains to Cephalus his reason for inquiring, stating that he enjoys conversing with the aged because he views them as "travellers" a long way down the road of their journey, one which "he too may have to go"; furthermore, the aged can tell him whether "the way is smooth and easy, or rugged and difficult" (5). "A man's nature predicates his ability to cope with old age," lectures Cephalus, and "he who is of a calm and happy nature will hardly feel the pressure of age" (6). Cephalus's explanation rings true although it was written over two thousand five hundred years ago. The persona in Bruce Kiskaddon's poem, "The Old Night Hawk," understands well the import of Cephalus's message. The Old Night Hawk feels the pressure of age resulting from a misspent youth.

He commited many mistakes owing to a volatile nature. Old Night Hawk recognizes the same temperament in a young man working the drive with him. He verbalizes concern for the young man, while stoically accepting his own fate. "Old Night Hawk" emphasizes two important themes consistent in the majority of cowboy poetry. First, accept the consequences of your actions and do not complain. Second, the poem exemplifies cowboy poetry's role as a moral guide for younger people. Just as Plato and his colleagues discuss issues of importance to find truth relating to man's senior years, likewise "Old Night Hawk" reveals the psychological dynamic that casts a pall over a man's life.

Jack Lamb, editor of *Cowboy Love Poetry*, outlines Kiskaddon's life, which stretched from 1878 until 1950. Kiskaddon worked as a cowboy in America and Australia, resulting in his little jingles being published in *Rhymes of the Ranges* (1924). He then traveled to Hollywood "on a whim," hoping to ride horses in movies. His tinsel town career included driving a chariot in the silent version of *Ben Hur* and a few stuntman gigs. Unable to support his family as a cowboy, he spent his later life working as a bellhop in Los Angeles, California. He continued to write poetry

about the cowboy life he loved "between tips," and he published them in *Western Livestock* (Lamb 162-163).

In the poem "The Old Night Hawk," we meet a man of the same name who invites us into his lonely world. No longer young, his brief remaining years stretch forth in solitary drudgery. He wants to forget, but hindsight's keen vision examines his failings and perpetually tutors his conscience. He comes to understand his nature and those of other men. Dispassionately Old Night Hawk relives his folly. We meet him, not in a saloon swilling liquor, but on the job where he confides to us his anguish.

Kiskaddon begins the poem by providing the atmosphere in which we find the Old Night Hawk. The poet achieves this textured effect by providing particular details. But he does not provide a mere physical description of the setting. He explains Old Night Hawk's affinity for the mesa by using metaphorical imagery. In so doing, he assists the reader experiencing the poem through the eyes of the persona. This in turn prepares us for Old Night Hawk's "confessional." When we think of confessionals, usually a church building comes to mind. For the cowboy the great outdoors is his church, as E.A. Brininstool records in "A Voice from the Open." Brininstool's persona defends his revelation of God in nature: "But I—I see Him where soft winds blow, / In the open places I love so dear; / Where the pine trees murmur His praises low, / And His guiding presence seems always near" (34-35). In similar fashion, the outdoors provides sanctuary for Old Night Hawk. What little peace he finds not in velvet-covered pews and stained glass windows; rather, he discovers peace on a rocky mesa overlooking the valley. Rock rims the edges of the mesa, shielding him and the horses. "Bold pinnacles" of rock compare architecturally to spires unique to Gothic architecture. The rocky pinnacles become as steeples reaching up to the heavens. Descriptive language, for example "Rim towers high," completes the cathedral-like aesthetic. Old Night Hawk confides in stanza seven that "I'd far rather be alone," for this natural aerie secludes him. He willingly takes the tedious night duty of tending the cavvy so he can sing his song of himself.

To execute the ecclesiastical theme, stanza one strives to incorporate language, rhyme, meter, and imagery in such a way that the lines call attention to themselves. Unlike the remaining thirteen stanzas, this one shuns vernacular. Forceful yet graceful language infuses the lines with vigor, for example, "I am

up tonight in the pinnacles bold." With one exception in line four, stanza one minds its grammar. In this line, "And there's only the horses and I," the compound subject, "horses" and "I," disagrees with the singular linking verb *is*. Line four inverts subjects and the auxiliary verb, *is,* further producing an unnatural sound. Subjects and verbs do sometimes invert in the English language; however, that is not the typical word order. The inversion produces a lofty rhetorical tone desirable in formal oratory. In similar fashion, Kiskaddon creates an elevated or lofty feeling with his choice of diction and the syntactical arrangement. Thus, the mood complements the metaphor of sanctuary.

The choice of short lines at first glance might seem incongruous to the desired ecclesiastical tone. Longer lines slow the pace and in some instances seem to move in stately procession. Yet stanza one's lines are trimeter and tetrameter, short lines that can suggest irritation or excitement. Kiskaddon offsets this effect with his choice of consonants. The abruptness of the consonants, *b*, *d*, *k*, *p*, *q*, *t*, *c*, and *g*, brakes the celerity of the short lines. Two *t*'s in *tonight*, especially the final *t*, fractures the sound of the line. Next, the two words, *in* and *the*, roll easily off the palate. *Pinnacles* requires extra vocal effort and issues forth from the palate with a burst. The sentence terminates in a brittle explosion of *b* and *d* in *bold*, which, in addition to slowing the line's speed, assists the reader in visualizing the beauty of the natural, rugged geological formation. Lines two and three have a primitive incantation due to the repetition of *w*'s in "Where the rim," "Where the air," and "wind," plus the in-line assonance, "the wind blows cold." Harsh aural edges are smoothed in line five. The liquid consonants—of which there are four *l*'s, four *s*'s, and an *m*—pour off the tongue. "The valley swims like a silver sea," imagery taken from the natural world, perhaps stale by today's poetical sensibilities, is nonetheless effective in contrasting the valley with Old Night Hawk's cold, rocky abode.

Incantatory sounding language, syntactical inversion, formal diction, and alternating trimeter and tetrameter produce a sense of ritual. Combining those effects with true masculine rhymes, *bold* and *cold*, *high* and *I*, *sea* and *me*, and *moon* and *tune*, Kiskaddon creates an environment suitable for worship. There is the sense of an impending authoritative pronouncement:

I am up tonight in the pinnacles bold

Where the rim towers high,

Where the air is clear and the wind blows cold

And there's only the horses and I.

The valley swims like a silver sea 5

In the light of the big full moon,

And strong and clear there comes to me

The lilt of the first guard's tune.

Stanza two's diction resembles speech similar in aural quality to that of conversation. The result is that Old Night Hawk's natural monologue reminds us of two people sitting together, one pointing out scenes and commenting about them. This relaxed effect relates to the line's composition, all iambic feet. Iambs, feet composed of one weak stress followed by a stronger one, most resemble natural speech. The preceding stanza more or less resembles anapestic feet, that is, two lighter stresses –1s or –2s followed by a heavy stress –3. In contrast, line nine corresponds perfectly to iambic tetrameter –1, 3,-- and lines ten through fourteen more or less scan as iambic. An ethereal tone suits stanza one's religious leanings. On the other hand, the use of natural-sounding iambs returns the listener to the material world:

The fire at camp is burning bright,

Cook's got more wood than he needs 10

They'll be telling some windy tales tonight

Of races and big stampedes.

I'm getting' too old fer that line of talk:

The desperaders they've knowed,

Their wonderful methods of handling stock, 15

And the fellers they've seen get throwed.

This stanza is the first of several stanzas that juxtapose feet, people, or objects to shed light on Old Night Hawk's attitudes. The first glimpse we have of his opinion of the cow hands slips out when lines fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen change meter. The preceding natural-sounding foot is an appropriate

choice to describe a mundane scene such as the fire "burning bright" in the valley. Because iambic feet resemble conversation, they feel comfortable. Line fifteen in particular, comprised of iambs and anapests, reminds one of the sing-song rhythm of childhood nursery rhymes. Their "wonderful methods of handling stock," nudges the reader to doubt that Old Night Hawk respects the cow hands' skills. The line when spoken takes on a mocking tone.

The poet overtly establishes an emotional connection between "Cook" and Old Night Hawk. After telling the reader that he is "getting too old fer that line of talk," he goes on in stanza three to have Old Night Hawk characterize himself this way, "I guess I'm a dog that's had his day." He proceeds to say that none of the men know him except that "old cook, Ed, / And never a word he'll say. / My story will stick in his old gray head / Till the break of the Judgment Day" (21-24). Line forty-eight further establishes solidarity between Old Night Hawk and Ed, "the tough old cusses like me and Ed / Must stay till the last dog's hung" (48). It appears that Ed has known Old Night Hawk through the good times and the bad. They are men cut from the same fabric, tough men who can go the distance. Ed's ability to be true to his friend obeys one tenet of the Code of the West—don't kick a man when he's down. Being true to your pard ranks high in the cowboy's "ten commandments."

Next, the poet juxtaposes Old Night Hawk's inner world against his outer world. Although the man is sad and old, he can still rise to the occasion. Like his old friend Ed, what vitality he possesses comes from his fountain of pride. This tenacity evident in Old Night Hawk causes us to respect him despite his checkered past. For example, his declaration, "Though I'm still quick and strong," quickly follows his deprecating statement, "I guess I'm a dog that's had his day" (18). Something happens to test his determination. Movement interrupts his monologue. The persona pauses in his narrative to tend to worldly business. When action breaks into his narrative, somehow it makes Old Night Hawk seem more three dimensional:

> What's that I see a walkin' fast?
>
> It's a hoss slippin' through.
>
> He was tryin' to make it out through the pass;

Come mighty near doin' it too. 20

Git back there! What are you tryin' to do?

You hadn't a chance to bolt.

Old boy, I was wranglin' a bunch like you

Before you was even a colt.

An ordinary routine such as averting a would-be escapee tranforms and ennobles the old man. In spite of melancholy and age, and as we will soon read, a dubious past, quality work elevates his self-esteem.

The stanzas tug at time in a melancholy sort of way. From the high energy, focused, and literal stanza about a "hoss slippin' through," Kiskaddon slows the pace. Stanza four's languor prepares us to walk down memory lane with Old Night Hawk. How? Line twenty-five contains two sentences. Notice the three-word sentence: "It's later now." Subdued in tone, factual, and even a little somber, it becomes all the more poignant when we recall the energy the old man summoned to issue the exclamatory three-word sentence: "Get back there!" Also, periods slow the reader's pace. A period in the middle of the line brings it to a halt. Use of punctuation in this manner decreases the energy level in the poem. Old Night Hawk settles down and becomes reflective. If we could hear Old Night Hawk speaking the words, or if we were to hear a cowboy poet recite this poem, he would deliver these lines softly and slowly:

It's later now. The guard has changed. 25

One voice is clear and strong.

He's singin' a tune of the old time range

I always did like that song.

It takes me back to when I was young

And the memories came through my head 30

Of the times I have heard that old song sung

By voices now long since dead.

As usual, the stanza alternates tetrameter and trimeter lines. A soothing cadence emerges, capable of mesmerizing restive cattle and, of disengaging Old Night Hawk's conscious mind. The popular Hoosier

poet, James Whitcomb Riley, wrote a similar transitional stanza that establishes a meditative mood before his persona walks memory's streets in "A Backward Glance":

> As I sat smoking, alone, yesterday,
> And lazily leaning back in my
> chair,
> Enjoying myself in a general way--
> Allowing my thoughts a holiday
> From weariness, toil and care,--
> My fancies—doubtless, for ventilation--
> Left ajar the gates of my mind,--
> And Memory, seeing the situation,
> Slipped out in the street of "Auld
> Lang Syne." (Riley1-2)

Similarly, Old Night Hawk seemingly walks streets filled with sad memories:

> I have traveled better than half my trail,
> I am well down the further slope.
> I have seen my dreams and ambitions fail, 35
> And memory replaces hope.
>
> It must be true fer I've heard it said,
> That only the good die young.
> The tough old cusses like me and Ed
> Must stay till the last dog's hung. 40
>
> I used to shrink when I thought of the past
> And some of the things I have known.

I took to drink, but now at last,
I'd far rather be alone.

It's strange how quick a night goes by, 45
Fer I live in the days of old.
Up here where there's only the hosses and I;
Up in the pinnacles bold.

The reference to being alone only with the horses reminds one of a passage from Whitman's *Song of Myself* in which the persona speaks of being more comfortable with the animals. He states, "I think I could turn, and live with animals, / they are so placid and self-contain'd, / I stand and look at them long and long" (32.1). Old Night Hawk's preference for the horses' company is reiterated with hints about mysterious deeds in the past:

The two short years that I ceased to roam,
And I led a contented life. 50
Then trouble came and I left my home,
And I never heard of my wife.

The years that I spent in a prison cell
When I went by another name;
For life is a mixture of Heaven and Hell 55
To a feller that plays the game.

A theme of duality becomes evident here. With the knowledge of Old Night Hawk's years spent in a prison cell, the correlation of the enclosed mesa to that of a man-made cell becomes apparent. Now Old Night Hawk's exile appears self-imposed. "For life is a mixture of Heaven and Hell" summarizes the dual theme. The wild, open, free plains were for many men heaven on earth. Unfortunately, it is not so for Old

Night Hawk. Majestic beauty, wide-open ranges, and camaraderie with the boys provide no relief. Anguish captivates his soul.

Some insight into the pathology of Old Night Hawk's agony surfaces in the next stanza. Kiskaddon introduces Old Night Hawk's interest in the young wrangler. For several stanzas, the old man reminisces about his difficult younger years. The transition between the stanzas of cryptic revelation jumps from the days of old to the present. Quickly, the man becomes outwardly focused. What causes the brusque switch? While walking the streets of auld lang syne, did he encounter a memory that woke him from the reverie? Did he hear something in the external world? Did the men back at the camp rouse Old Night Hawk from his ruminating? Most likely, while revisiting a scene from his earlier life, something connects mentally to the young man nearby. Quite possibly, especially in view of Old Night Hawk's misspent youth, he sees himself in the wrangler kid:

> They'd better lay off of that wrangler kid;
> They've give him about enough.
> He looks like a pardner of mine once did,
> He's the kind that a man can't bluff. 60
>
> They'll find that they are making a big mistake
> If they once git him overhet;
> And they'll give him as good as an even break
> Or I'm takin' a hand, you bet.

The next stanza helps us to stitch together the pieces missing in his confession. That Old Night Hawk committed some crime that landed him in prison we will accept as truth based on his testimony. What ignited Old Night Hawk to violence? More importantly, why? Kiskaddon suggests a few answers in the following stanzas. He introduces his additional character, the wrangler kid, and establishes an emotional connection between the old man and the young man. The wrangler kid is an apprentice learning "cowboying" in the tried and true method prescribed by the cowboy ethos. He receives more than his

share of rebukes. "They better lay off that wrangler kid" seems to indicate the men are going too far. People do that sometimes, victimize the one they believe is the most vulnerable, behavior akin to animals picking on the runt of the litter until they test it or kill it. Whatever the reasons for their conduct, Old Night Hawk recognizes danger. He speaks as one who has had experience in such matters when he says of the boy: "He looks like a pardner of mine once did." In keeping with Old Night Hawk's habit of oblique references, we wonder if he refers to an actual "pardner," or is this his method of vicariously revealing a truth? Transferring his statements onto a former "pardner" distances the act from himself. Simply said, the former "pardner" may be Old Night Hawk. He sees his younger self in the boy. Thus, this identification leads him to feel supportive towards the youngster. He senses the boy may lack control if he is pushed too far. The zealous cowhands will ruin this talented young man's career and life. The following stanza leaves little to no doubt about Old Night Hawk's true feelings regarding his fellow cowhands:

> Look, there in the East is the Mornin' Star, 65
> It shines with a fiery glow
> Till it looks like the end of a big cigar,
> But it hasn't got far to go.
> Just like the people that make a flash,
> They don't stand much of a run, 70
> Come bustin' in with a sweep and dash
> When most of the work is done.

The stanza connects people with the brilliance of the Morning Star. Using the star as a concrete comparison gives opinions about an abstraction using a far away but familiar object to make the connection. In turn, the likening to the Morning Star illuminates the nature of certain people, maybe the cowboys who harass the kid wrangler. Here the linking of some people's natures to the Morning Star reveals negative impulses. Typically, stars symbolize hope and guidance. Paradoxically the metaphor works in this example to show that the obvious is not always the truth; men who appear bright and

talented may not be. Instead, those men are like chaff that blows away with the first puff of wind, while others less flamboyant embody the qualities vital to negotiating life over the long haul. Those men who tell stories of their "wonderful methods of handling stock" may not have the young wrangler's best interest at heart. Base emotions motivate their abuse cloaked in the "acceptable" raiment of initiating a young wrangler.

Closer analysis indicates Kiskaddon's choice of symbol, Morning Star, extends the theme of duality. In the Bible the Morning Star refers to Jesus the Christ and to Satan. Isaiah refers to Satan as the morning star in chapter 14, verse 12, "How you have fallen from heaven, O morning Star, son of the dawn!" Satan fell from Grace according to the Bible. He was an angel named Lucifer. The name *Lucifer* has ancient origins in classical mythology for the planet Venus, which is also known as *day star.* In Latin the name Lucifer means *light bearer* (Cross 841). His eminent position in the heavens was short-lived, as he became proud and dared to exalt himself above the knowledge of God. In view of this definition of morning star and its application to Satan, a glorious being who fell, it seems logical to conclude that Kiskaddon's application of the word fits the people described in the previous stanza. It also alludes in some measure to Old Night Hawk's nature, that is to say, the morning star functioning as a symbol of Satan's vanity and pride. Old Night Hawk's downfall comes, too, by way of his vanity.

We should explore the positive application of morning star further to illuminate the duality in the poem and the character. Jesus described himself in John 8:12 as the "light of the world." In Revelation 22:16 Jesus speaks of himself as "the Root and Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star." In 2 Peter 1:19, Peter exhorts the body of believers to pay attention to the word of the prophets. He says they should think of their words as a "light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts." Obviously, the "morning star" Peter speaks of here is not Satan, but the Trinity that lives within a believer's soul. Kiskaddon uses this ancient name, morning star, as a symbol to emphasize the duality, good and evil, which resides within the human heart. Too well Old Night Hawk understands succumbing to evil.

Another interpretation of morning star involves potential. A person referred to as a star denotes one who is talented. What a man does with his potential largely depends upon the nature of the man. In spite of his sins, the old timer has endured, while the rash young ones burn out rather than fade away. Youth dies, yielding to the afternoon sun.

The concluding stanzas offer obvious analogies using an extended simile: "Yes, life is like the night herd's song / As the long years come and go. / You start with a swing that is free and strong, / And finish up tired and slow." Old Night Hawk implicitly compares "rough old trails" to life's rough trails. The horses, which are trying to make their way along the hazardous trails, may have to "coast along on their tails," which can be construed as the fate of many. This passage admonishes people that no matter how rough life's trail becomes, persevere. Finish your course even if you have to cross the finish line on your tail:

I can see the East is gettin' gray,
I'll gather the hosses soon,
And faint from the valley far away 75
Comes the drone of the last guard's tune.
Yes, life is just like the night-herd's song
As the long years come and go.
You start with a swing that is free and strong,
And finish up tired and slow. 80

I reckon the hosses all are here.
I can see that T-bar blue,
And the buckskin hoss with the one split ear;
I've got'em all. Ninety two.
Just listen to how they roll the rocks 85
These sure are rough old trails.
But then, if they can't slide down on their hocks

They can coast along on their tails.

Implied in the next stanza is the theme of ascendant and descendant power. A previously established emotional connection between Old Night Hawk and the wrangler kid works to contrast the waxing and waning abilities of the two characters. "He seldom misses a throw" shows the youth is talented. In contrast, Old Night Hawk almost let a hoss slip away. Significant too is the fact that the boy is up at dawn, while the old man concludes that he will "swaller breakfast down / and try to furgit." In *Timon of Athens*, Shakespeare writes that people turn their faces from the setting sun. Said another way, people shun others whose prominence dwindles, while one who is ascending receives more recognition. This is the reason why the men care little about the old man up in the pinnacles bold, but harass the young man:

The wrangler kid is out with his rope,
He seldom misses a throw. 90
Will he make a cow hand? Well I hope so,
If they give him half a show.
They are throwin' the rope corral around,
The hosses crowd in like sheep.
I reckon I'll swaller my breakfast down 95
And try to furgit and sleep.

A young person with energy, passion, but a lack of self-control can easily succumb to evil and thus fall from Grace. He or she has not the experience and foresight to understand how one can ruin a life. Old Night Hawk knows this all too well; he was tempted by the Devil and succumbed.

The concluding stanza refers to an old theme, making a deal with the devil. Christopher Marlowe's play, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus,* tells the story of Faustus's desire for knowledge greater than that of the universities. He circumvents the orthodox route of learning and begins to dabble in the magical arts. When he does, he taps into dark powers that are very willing and able to grant his request. The devil requires as tender Faustus's soul, payable upon demand. They make a deal. Thereafter, Faustus delights himself in many amusements, including sacrilege. Finally, the time

arrives when he must deliver his soul to Lucifer. Faustus, like the old timer, recognizes his folly too late. Faustus laments: "Where are thou, Faustus? Wretch, what hast thou done? / Damned art thou, Faustus, damned! Despair and die" (V.1,54-5). In essence, this is what Old Night Hawk did. In his youthful vanity, he chose to live outside of society's standards. He states: "Yes, I've lived my life and I've took my chance, / Regardless of law or vow." A devil does not visit Old Night Hawk and whisk him away to hell. Old Night Hawk pays with his peace of mind. He tells us in stanza seven, line fifty-five: "For life is a mixture of Heaven and Hell / To a feller that plays that game." Bereft of companionship and peace of mind, the old timer's hell is here on earth. He pays the "fiddler," the devil, now:

> Yes, I've lived my life and I've took my chance,
> Regardless of law or vow.
> I've played the game and I've had my dance,
> And I'm payin' the fiddler now. (Kiskaddon 42-46) 100

Kiskaddon admonishes readers, as does old Cephalus: "a man's nature predicts his ability to cope with old age." Old Night Hawk was a rash, impulsive young man. Living his life regardless of law or vow resulted in his present condition. He chose to live outside life's "camp." Now, he is emotionally and literally outside of the camp.

Cowboy poetry offers guidance, even for one who vainly exalts himself above the custom of society. Accordingly, the cowboy ethos seems to direct a man to face reality and to do so with dignity. Unlike Faustus, the persona here maintains his composure. He recounts the events of his life and then accounts for his actions. When the books are balanced, he accepts the bottom line. Old Night Hawk does not whine, complain, or justify his actions. He admits his shortcomings and accepts the consequences which he succinctly sums up in the final two lines: ". . .I've had my dance, / And I'm payin' the fiddler now."

CONCLUSION

Cowboy poets have produced a body of literature that has universal appeal and theme. The genre offers not only a valuable forum of self-expression for the cowboy but also an opportunity for modern readers to gain access to a vital part of our American literary heritage that has been too long ignored. This present study is an attempt to begin redressing this oversight. As we have seen, cowboy poetry examines topics of interest to all men from its birth in the 1860s until our present day. Issues of character we explored in "Old Night Hawk," a story of a cowboy who commits one of the most vain acts known to man. He sums it up in this line, "I've lived my life regardless of law or vow." In contrast, Linda Hussa's "Love Letters" reveals a love that seldom exists without regard for vows. Commitment to vows promotes an environment where love can flourish. Without respect for covenant, one embarks upon a treacherous path destined to exclude him from life's mainstream, thus resulting in an existence endured in a meaningless procession of days. The family, the smallest social unit in our society, maintained the center of the West; in turn the population of the West grew and prospered because of familial unity. Many people were present in the West without biological family. The sense of brotherhood aided those individuals to feel a part of something larger. Moreover, a man's obligation stretched beyond the perimeter of family to include community, which greatly aided supplanted loners to gain a sense of rootedness, a condition necessary to the human psyche.

Togetherness was accomplished in part by a commandment that surfaces more often than any other: stick by your partner. Cowboys stuck by their horses, horses to their owners, and neighbors helped neighbors. Such dynamic is at work when Damron's friends said the cowman's concern for the boy overshadowed dirtying up his new Lincoln Continental with a four-hundred-pound hog. The older generation cares for the young, nurturing them in the customs of their region. One such example given is McWhorter's father chastising his son in "Gate Session," "that trust should stick like mortar to a brick." He cares for their immediate well-being yet to a greater

degree his concern seems to focus on the boy's future, successful integration into the Western lifestyle.

Even a cursory examination of cowboy poetry reveals that cowboy poetry flourishes alive and well today, unlike verse from other occupational groups. As Combs explained, the cowboys were a diverse lot and many of them, owing to their Scotch and English ancestry, retained a propensity for setting stories to droll melodies. While we may agree with his assessment, we could ask the question, "Why did the rhymes of loggers and sailors fade away?" They too shared bloodlines with the cowboys. Their verse amused coworkers and perhaps had as its subject matter those occupational groups. Yet to the best of this author's knowledge, no verse emanates from those occupational groups. Artistically silent heirs ply their trades. This study uncovered some reasons for this phenomenon, chief among which is the presence of the enduring "American" spirit evident in the cowboy poetry.

Even so, could our shared heritage, universal themes, the community's ethic, and the cowboy occupational ethos alone contribute to cowboy poetry's longevity? If the rhymes of the Western poets were static in artistic composition, as is often alleged, the art form would not have continued for over a hundred years. The answer to its durability speaks from the intricacies of the pieces themselves. Although cowboy poetry has long been viewed as doggerel, this study helps dispels that notion. We reviewed poems written in rhyme and meter, poems in free verse, and verse written by men and women. True, the majority of the poems were and many still are formal compositions. However, within formal compositions germinate numerous interpretations. Consider "Old Night Hawk," understood for having as for its subject matter the eternal theme of vanity. Yet dormant within those verses exist diverse interpretations. Contemplate the mastery employed by Brininstool to manipulate words in order to elicit for the reader the mood that the lone cowman experienced on the plains over a hundred years ago. What of Shadd Piehl's old horses? Short of descriptive words, yet vivid images of the swayback roans materialize in our cerebral cortices. His choice of syllables and punctuation produce palatal stumbling, mimicking the lethargy of the old horses' leaden, faltering steps. All the while this sensory stimuli works its magic, subliminal messages issue forth—be true to your pards, be true to your pards.

What then is the future of cowboy poetry? It has seen a heyday over the past twenty years beginning with the first Elko, Nevada poetry meet that introduced to the rest of the nation a life the Westerner has known for years. Even if the interest in cowboy poetry subsides, most likely there will still be men and women telling their stories of the land and life they love so much. For this reason cowboy poetry should continue to be studied and recorded. Hal Cannon and his team went out and gathered it, as did John Lomax, Austin and Alta Fife, Dane Coolidge, going back to the ground zero anthologizer, Jack Thorp. These compilers recognized literature's role as a means through which a society documents and passes on its beliefs.

Cowboy poetry accomplishes this objective: it documents the social, political, cultural, and economical history of the West. It contains elements of interest to researchers of other disciplines. For example, cowboys of all races in the eighteen hundreds, while working trails drives, lived, ate, rode, bathed, slept, and worked side by side. There was no division of labor or resources based on society's class constructions. This fact alone should be of interest to sociologists or anthropologists. Psychologists and theologians may find interesting the comments made by recent festival attendees. Frequently, visitors will remark that they feel encouraged, uplifted because of the good-hearted message evident in so much of the poetry. Educators can assess the impact on the public of hearing not only cowboy poetry, but also "mainstream" poetry at the festivals, for in addition to their own verse, some poets read that of other artists, for example, Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost.

A continuing study of cowboy poetry stands to illumine our culture's continuing interest in it. Finding these answers can reveal to us more about ourselves as a people. Scholarly research will leave for future generations a record concerning the history not only of the Western American, but moreover, of society in general, a legacy worthy of note.

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