Comanche Moon Short Guide

Comanche Moon by Larry McMurtry

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Contents

Characters

Inish Scull, the commander of the Rangers, is the most complex character in the novel. A Yankee Bostonian by birth, married to the extremely volatile and lustful Southerner Inez, he is Harvardeducated and, when captured by Ahumado, scratches remembered Greek literature into the walls of the canyon. He is a self-admitted adventurer, a seemingly farsighted one who anticipated the coming War Between the States. He is unpredictable, to the dismay of the uneducated Rangers and especially to the preternaturally logical Call; when his enormous warhorse, Hector, is stolen, he abandons the Rangers and goes on a personal, semi-Arthurian quest to recover the horse.

His wife, Inez, is just as unpredictable, but much more volatile—she makes even Inish look meek in comparison. Inez, the daughter of an Alabama plantation family, seems to live for her angers and her lusts.

She seems perpetually in a rage at Inish, ostensibly because of his frequent absences (but we learn that she is no less violent when he is at home). In his absence, she takes on a succession of lovers ranging from a stableboy, to Jake Spoon, a young and inept Ranger, to Gus, to an Army major (she makes an unsuccessful attempt at Call as well).

Augustus (Gus) McRae is in full bloom in this novel, a talkative and emotional, yet adaptable, Texas Ranger. We see him and Call promoted to Captains after the disappearance of Inish Scull. To Gus, this is a good reason for impressing Clara Forsythe, a shopkeeper's daughter with whom he falls in love the day they meet.

He is truly despondent when Clara marries another, falling for a time into the arms of the lusty Inez Scull; his innate sense, though, returns him to duty and a realization of the manipulation Inez is working on him.

Woodrow Call is seen clearly in this novel as a duty-obsessed Ranger. In Dead Man's Walk, which introduces him and Gus as very young men, he seems taciturn and humorless; in Comanche Moon he becomes the character the reader will see again in Lonesome Dove—nonplused when his sense of rightness and morality are questioned (he is at sea when propositioned by Inez Scull).

Ahumado, also known as the Black Vaquero (ahumado in Spanish translates as "smoked," possibly referring to his habit of sitting in the sun to make himself darker) is the "mystery character" in the novel, just as Blue Duck is in Lonesome Dove and Buffalo Hump is in Dead Man's Walk. It is hard for the characters, or the reader, to really know Ahumado because his behavior and mind set are utterly foreign to them or us. Ahumado seemingly lives to torture—he likes to have people skinned, either whole or partially; he impales persons on small, sharpened trees; or he hangs them in a cage from a cliff and leaves them there to die. This calculated physical cruelty shocks the reader, giving a bitter keenness to the overall indifferent cruelty of the environment, of which Ahumado is an instrument. We are told that Ahumado is said to have come from the jungle, and that

he worships the ancient gods Jaguar and Parrot. This knowledge reinforces the omnipresent darkness lurking everywhere in this still-unconquered West.

Buffalo Hump is portrayed as a character who is alternately hateful and respectable by a reader and, for that mater, by the characters themselves. Patterned after an actual Comanche Indian of the 1850s Texas frontier, he is the leader of a large Comanche band. He is a fierce fighter; an implacable enemy, and the cause of worry for all the inhabitants of Texas. His great raid on the capital, Austin, reminds the readers and the characters that civilization has not yet completely conquered the native heritage of Texas, though Buffalo Hump is sure in his heart that it eventually will. The raid, then, is one last assurance for the Comanche leader of his own prowess and the ability and prowess of his people.

Buffalo Hump's greatest disappointment may be in his son, Blue Duck, a Comanchero, half-Comanche-half Mexican. Buffalo had another son years earlier who was killed by Call in a Comanche attack on the Rangers. Blue Duck, however, is nowhere close to the son Buffalo Hump would have him be. He is the antithesis of a Comanche—rude, insolent, disrespectful, and violent and vicious for its own sake. Where Ahumado is seen as a part of nature, and the Comanche are seen as a part of the original culture of the land, Blue Duck is an aberration of both nature and culture. The character of Blue Duck is a necessary one in the novel, if for no other reason that it explains more of the character's personality as seen in Lonesome Dove. In Lonesome Dove we see Blue Duck as a finished person without the history that the novel gives many of the other characters. He is, largely, malevolent, ready to kill at a moment's notice, and happy in his cruelty.

Comanche Moon shows him as a young man. Buffalo Hump seems an honorable man compared to Blue Duck: a loudmouth, a braggart, and not a little foolish compared to the serene adeptness of Kicking Wolf, another Comanche raider who steals the fabled Big Horse of Inish Scull, and of his father.

Social Concerns

Many of the social concerns of Lonesome Dove (1985; see separate entry) reoccur in Comanche Moon. There is the sometimes nagging, sometimes explosive clashes between people of different cultures, and the terror occasioned by the Indian attacks on white settlements and vice versa; the great Comanche raid on Austin is a striking example. Indian culture is revealed much more in Comanche Moon (and Dead Man's Walk, 1995) than in Lonesome Dove. Here we see the Indian culture in its own terms, and we see the growing fear of the Indians that their culture will soon be gone. It is also more apparent that what at first seems wanton cruelty— torture, for example—is actually a part of the Comanche way of life.

Relationships between men and women are far different; there are no independent Indian women in the novel, as opposed to Inez Scull; independence in a woman can lead to death. Where men in the novel's Anglo culture value achievements, adventure, sometimes personal safety, and, frequently, sex, Indian culture in the book values a man's bravery, spirituality, endurance, strength, and tradition.

The Indians seem far more Stoic, even Spartan, compared to most of the whites.

(Interestingly, many, though not all, of these traits are shared by the white man Woodrow Call.)

The white women in Comanche Moon are, again, cast in the role of supporters, of sufferers, and of waiters. Clara Forsythe (later Clara Allen) is independentminded, and chooses what she believes is a safer destiny with Bob Allen, but it is a destiny that plays it safe, and ultimately saddens her. Maggie Tilton waits on everyone—on her clients, on Woodrow Call, on respectable citizens. This comes to naught, as she dies without winning either Call or respectability. Only Inez Scull is so independent and odd that she stands out; she seems constitutionally unable to wait on anyone—the governor, her husband, her young lovers. Constantly in search of interest and excitement, she creates her own character category.

There are also the growing pains of a white society re-fitting itself into a new place, trying, and failing utterly, to comprehend this Indian culture. This is a still-pioneer Austin, fifteen years after Texas's independence from Mexico. The land is peopled with governors and whores, plantation beauties and illiterates, storekeepers and adventurers, the goodhearted and the completely venal—all protected by a few dozen Rangers to keep the peace. The social lines are gradually cementing themselves into a Texas approximation of Eastern social mores: Maggie Tilton knows not to associate with "decent" women; a raped wife occasions a husband's suicide; a Southern belle takes tea with (and seduces) prominent men. But the white society is finding what it considers its place, and is definitely there to stay; to them, Indians are hardly people, but more like dangerous animals.

Techniques

The dialogue in Comanche Moon reflects the language of a developing land and thus a developing, amalgamated mixture of East and West, Spanish and English, grammar and wit. "Your Mongol Hun cooked his meat by horse heat," the Harvard-educated Scull announces while watching Comanche in the distance. At another time he announces, "Now boys, look there! . . .See that? There's your Alps. . .if you find yourself in Switzerland or France you have to cross them before you can get to Italy and eat the tasty noodle. That was Hannibal's challenge.

He had all those elephants, but the Alpine passes were deep in snow. What was he to do?" Gus's humor and talkativeness is evident; trying to cheer up a fellow Ranger fearing for his wife, he jokes "Now Billy, don't worry... Pearl's too bossy to steal. She'd argue those Comanches to a frazzle. I expect she'll be there ready to boss you, when we get back."

The setting, is even more forbidding, if possible, than that of Lonesome Dove. That the humans are part of the harsh land is seen in the horrific tortures—skinning, impalement, among others—perpetrated by Ahumado. That Scull and Kicking Bird, the Indian who stole his horse, survive is a real testament to their hardiness against inhuman conditions. Kicking Bird walks from Mexico to the plains with double vision after being dragged by a horse; Scull, thrown into a pit of dead bodies, snakes, and scorpions, must bury the bodies to cover the terrible smell, avoid the poisonous creatures, and escape, all with no eyelids and a badly injured ankle.

Themes

The themes of Comanche Moon often mirror (or presage, depending on one's viewpoint) those of Lonesome Dove. We see the theme of honesty brought up with Woodrow Call, yet this time we see him with Maggie, Newt's mother. Maggie loves him, yet he cannot admit—we do not even know if he has—any affection for her. He stays with her when she is afraid, after the Indian raid on Austin; he spends time with her when she is pregnant with Newt, whom she knows is Call's son, a fact that he suspects, though unwilling to admit it. The beginning of unrequited love—between Maggie and Call, between Gus and Clara Forsythe (the married Clara Allen in Lonesome Dove)—is shown: Gus proposes to Clara the day he meets her; he is unmanned and driven to drunkenness when she announces to him that she will marry Bob Allen, a more dependable person with a much safer livelihood. The desire for a stable relationship on the part of both women indicates a gender-based difference in outlook; men consider themselves relatively free, whereas women crave solidity and security—hardly surprising in such a violent land. That the safety of the state capital is destroyed by the Indian raid on Austin rocks the foundation of the nascent society, but in the end only makes them more determined to exterminate the threat.

Another theme worth noting is that of government and organization. Both cultures seem to have their moments of anarchy and disorganization (Blue Duck ultimately kills his father, the chief). But the white society seems less organized than the Indian. Buffalo Hump's people know their place, as do Ahumado's. Austin, on the other hand, has a politically impotent governor and a town alleging civilization but, to the reader's eyes, poorly protected, dirty, and ramshackle. The Rangers are no less poorly led; Inish Scull abandons them and leaves them leaderless except for Gus and Call. Buffalo Hump, on the other hand, leads a successful raid; when he calls for warriors to follow him, hundreds answer his call.

This is of course extremely ironic, for most readers with a sense of U.S. and Western history will know that it is the white society that will eventually prevail in the world of the novel. The whites, as Buffalo Hump and other Indians suspect, will prevail because of their numbers.

Seemingly, it is not a town and the trappings of civilization that make a society organized, but rather the degree to which, its citizens are cohesive and unified. The Austin society is idiosyncratic, its citizens working individually; the Indian society (with the exception of Blue Duck) seems to be of one purpose.

Key Questions

Perhaps the most distinctive element of the novel is its characterization. Characters such as Gus, Clara, Call, Ahumado, and Blue Duck may generate discussion as to their motivations, the way the author creates their characters, and the way they react to each other and their environments. As in Lonesome Dove, also, the environment has a large role in determining character, particularly in determining relative attitudes between whites and Indians.

1. Inish Scull is a complex character.

What parts of the novel reveal the elements of his character? How would you categorize the different, perhaps contrasting sides of his personality? You may want to make a list of character traits and then organize them into categories.

2. Blue Duck appears to be completely unsympathetic to his father's way of life; often he is characterized as rude, disrespectful, and cruel. Why do you think he is that way? What parts of the novel support your conclusion? Are there any redeeming qualities in Blue Duck at all?

3. Buffalo Hump, Comanche leader, is sad at what he sees as the fate of his people. What does he do about it? What does the author provide about Buffalo Hump's background that may help explain his outlook?

4. Is Buffalo Hump a sympathetic character? Explain what makes him more, or less, sympathetic than his son, Blue Duck, or some of the whites.

5. The novel provides a look at two very different cultures, white and Indian.

How do the two cultures view each other? Which of the two cultures in Comanche Moon seems best able to adapt to its environment? What are the things that make it difficult for each culture to continue its current way of life?

6. Examine the character of Maggie Tilton. What kind of person is she? What events have driven her to do what she does? How does she view her relationship with Woodrow Call? What, in her view, is the advantage of such a relationship? Is she, overall, a good person or a bad one?

Point to evidence from the novel to support your conclusion.

Robert Whipple, Jr.

Literary Precedents

While McMurtry may seem to have created a late-twentieth-century "reality Western" genre with his four Western novels in this series (to which one might add Buffalo Girls, 1990 and Anything for Billy, 1988), he draws on many older elements of American Western fiction as well. Perhaps his oldest literary ancestor is James Fenimore Cooper, whose Leatherstocking tales contained requisite violent Indians, stern and dutiful heroes (Natty Bumppo), and women needing protection. McMurtry also draws on the long tradition of Western novels by writers such as Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour. For further discussion of literary precedents of McMurtry's Westerns, see the Literary Precedents section in the analysis of Lonesome Dove.

Related Titles

Comanche Moon is, according to the dust jacket of the hardcover edition, "the final volume of the Lonesome Dove saga." Mark Horowitz notes that where Lonesome Dove is "heroic and sweeping," the other three novels in the series are bleak and austere." Chronologically, the novels in the "saga" are as follows: Dead Man's Walk finds Call and Gus joining the Rangers as very young men, following (as in Comanche Moon) an erratic commander into a dangerous situation; they are captured by Mexican forces, and literally walk across Texas and New Mexico into Mexico and captivity. Comanche Moon follows, covering several years in the lives of Gus, Call, and the Rangers, and introducing the town of Lonesome Dove; Lonesome Dove finds them after the War Between the States, no longer Rangers, going on one last grand adventure, a cattle drive to Montana. In Streets of Laredo (1993), in which Call alone is the central character, he takes one a last adventure before "retiring."

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Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994