Little Big Man Study Guide

Little Big Man by Thomas Berger

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Jack begins his story as his family is heading west with a wagon train. Out of ignorance, they offer a group of Native Americans whiskey. The Native Americans kill and rape several members of the wagon train, then return the next day to offer ponies in recompense for their bad behavior. Because they cannot speak to each other, the pioneers believe the Native Americans have come for 10-year-old Jack Crabb and his older sister Caroline. When Caroline figures out the error, she leaves the Native American village, but Jack stays and learns the ways of the Cheyenne. He eventually earns the name Little Big Man, granted by the village chief, Old Lodge Skins.

Several years later, the Cheyenne have a big get-together where they talk about the problem of the encroaching whites pushing into their territory. They break up and head home, but encounter soldiers on the way. They face off, but the Cheyenne break and run. Jack is caught up in the charge, but convinces a cavalryman he is a white man.

Jack ends up being adopted by a family in western Missouri. He goes to school for a couple of years, eventually leaving when his heart is broken. He earns his living as a guide from St. Louis to Santa Fe, then as a mule driver from Denver to Kansas City. His mule train is ambushed by Cheyenne. He convinces the Cheyenne he is Little Big Man, and he advises Old Lodge Skins to go north to the Powder River, away from the whites. Old Lodge Skins agrees, and Jack returns to Denver.

Jack marries and has a child. He is somewhat successful in business, but his partners cheat him and he is forced to leave town in a hurry. The stage to Kansas City is ambushed by Cheyenne. Jack rides to get help, but returns to find his wife and son missing. He is angered—but perhaps more depressed, and spends some months drunk, until his sister pulls him out of the gutter.

Jack straightens up and joins his sister, hauling freight for the Union Pacific construction of the transcontinental railroad. When he hears that a group of scouts are headed to find the Cheyenne who are harassing the construction, he joins in. A Cheyenne warrior is killed in an isolated grove, where he is protecting a woman giving birth in the woods. Jack assumes responsibility for her, following her back to the village—Old Lodge Skins' village. He has another child with the woman he discovered, but when soldiers track the Cheyenne down and attack, Jack takes the uniform of a fallen soldier and looks for his Cheyenne wife and child. He is unsuccessful, and heads back to Kansas City.

In Kansas City he meets Wild Bill Hickok, who teaches him how to shoot. He also discovers a niece, a young woman working in a whorehouse. He removes her, sets her up for fine living, and works as a buffalo hunter to make money to send her to school. She succeeds so well, she ends up marrying the son of a senator. Jack ends up on an army ship, headed upriver to supply General Custer as he attempts to root out the Sioux who are on their own land, but messing with the new influx of whites, headed for gold in the Black Hills.

Jack ends up scouting for General Custer, who (as is his habit) is ignoring the advice of his scouts and officers. He ends up on a bluff above the Little Bighorn River, and he is surrounded by Cheyenne. Jack is with them as they are overwhelmed. He is shot, then hit in the head.

He awakens in the Cheyenne village. He has been saved by a Cheyenne whose life he had saved long ago — now they are even.

Old Lodge Skins is very old and blind, and he is now ready to die. Little Big Man walks with Old Lodge Skins to the top of a hill. Old Lodge Skins sings his death song and asks the Everywhere Spirit to watch over his son, Little Big Man. He lies down and dies.

Ralph Snell tells the readers that Jack Crabb died at that point in the story. Ralph has checked Jack's story, and verified much of it; but he cannot find Jack Crabb's name anywhere in the records.

Foreword

Summary

Ralph Fielding Snell is the son of a well-to-do man. Ralph is fascinated by the Old West, and has a collection of Western memorabilia that includes a headdress reputedly worn by Crazy Horse himself.

Ralph seems to be a bit of a softie — susceptible to a variety of ailments such as migraine headaches and nightmares. While recovering from surgery to repair a deviated septum, Ralph's wealthy father pays for a nurse to care for him. Ralph does not find the nurse's rough speech and disrespectful manner to be pleasing. She does, however, bring him word of a feisty old man she met seven years ago, while working as a nurse at an old folks' home. The old man she met claimed to be a 104-year-old survivor of Custer's Last Stand and various other cowboy and Native American goings-on.

Ralph is excited by the possibility of meeting someone who was actually there; but the nurse dies in an accident just a few weeks later. When Ralph's nose heals, he heads to the old folks' home the nurse mentioned, but they have not heard of the man she had discussed with Ralph. So, Ralph begins making the rounds of old folks' homes, searching for the mysterious man, who would now be 111 years old.

Ralph's almost-80-year-old father is more than a little annoyed to hear about his son's goal: to chase down a survivor of the Battle of Little Bighorn. Ralph continues his search, but with little reward, until he gets a poorly-written letter from a man claiming to know General Custer, Sitting Bull, Wild Bill, and more. Ralph drives a hundred miles to the Marville Old Folks' Home, where the letter has come from.

The staff apologizes, saying sometimes a letter sneaks out from the patients in their psychiatric ward. The director remembers the "nurse" who Ralph tells him about, but she wasn't a nurse at all., She had been an irascible janitor. With the promise that Ralph would do what he could to influence his father to support more funding for the Marville facility, the director lets him in to see old Jack Crabb.

Ralph is struck by the frail, birdlike appearance of Jack, but that is counterbalanced by Jack's twanging, vulgar speech. Ralph wants to confirm a few points to be sure Jack has really been where he says he has been, but Jack falls asleep.

Ralph talks with Marville's director, who warns him against being taken in by the ramblings of a paranoid old man. Ralph is convinced of Jack's authenticity, though, so he arranges to visit with Jack. Over the next five months, he records fifty-seven rolls of tape, until one day he arrives to find the old man has died—precisely on the seventy-seventh anniversary of the Battle of Little Bighorn. A decade has passed since then, and Ralph has spent that time transcribing and cleaning up the language in the tapes. He

says that the storytelling was Jack Crabb's alone, though, even with apparent contradictions in style—from rough and uneducated to sophisticated.

Ralph then steps aside and lets Jack Crabb's story begin.

Analysis

The foreword introduces Ralph Snell, the man responsible for collecting the story to be presented in the following pages. Ralph is introduced as a frail creature — if not a hypochondriac. His gullibility is established through the fact that he's been taken in by the "nurse" who turns out to have been a cleaning woman. On the other hand, he demonstrates persistence and ingenuity in managing to track down and get access to Jack Crabb.

All those characteristics set up the tension regarding one of the questions raised by the story: is it true? The follow-up question is "does it matter?" The questions about Ralph's character make it easy to establish doubts about the veracity of the story that is to follow — questions that will be revisited in the epilogue.

Vocabulary

redaction, quietus, weskit, quondam, catalytic, codger, obsequies, raconteur, trollop, relinquish

Chapters 1-4

Summary

Ten-year-old Jack Crabb's father, who Jack himself describes as a lunatic, is leading his family to the western prairie. Jack's father is a self-taught preacher and convert to Mormonism, believing that the western tribes are the remains of the lost tribe of Israel. Since he cannot speak Hebrew, however, his attempts to communicate with the Native Americans they meet are not successful.

The end of his meetings with the Native Americans demonstrates how poorly he understands them. Being out of coffee, the folks in the wagon train offer whiskey to a group of Cheyenne who visit. Moments after drinking, the Cheyenne lose control, kill the men, fight each other over the remaining whiskey, and rape most of the women. Jack's older sister, the six-foot-tall Caroline, is not molested, and she wraps her bullwhip around the neck of the Cheyenne who's trying to assault her mother, knocking him unconscious. The next day, as the women and children are burying their menfolk, four Cheyenne return, leading a handful of horses. The leader, Old Lodge Skins, speaks for fifteen minutes in a language that no one can understand. Caroline convinces the others that the Native Americans have returned to take her away, in exchange for the ponies. She also convinces everyone that the Cheyenne want Jack to come with her.

After a roundabout trip, they arrive at the Cheyenne village, a place that Jack finds almost unbearably stinky and noisy. They follow Old Lodge Skins into a lodge, and eat some antelope stew. All this time, Old Lodge Skins was hoping they would go away. He had not intended to take them away at all, but had hoped to pay the ponies to the folks of the wagon train to compensate and apologize for the drunken rampage of the day before. In fact, Old Lodge Skins was not even aware that Caroline was a female. Caroline cannot handle the strangeness of the Native Americans, so a few hours after they arrive, she takes a horse and leaves Jack to his own devices. The next morning Jack joins a Cheyenne boy named Little Horse and they, along with the other boys, move the horses to water, then to new pasture for the day. The boys wash, and Jack gives away all his clothes, taking a buckskin breechclout in return, and Jack finds himself among "the human beings," as the Cheyenne call themselves.

Jack earns himself an enemy in another boy, Younger Bear, by giving him a bloody nose, but then tries to apologize for it. The Native American boys do not let Jack join in on their war games until he shows how tough he is by faking that he has an arrow right through his belly. Jack begins to learn the Cheyenne ways — being quiet except when sound is necessary, laughing only when the time is right, talking with his pony, learning to ride, learning to shoot the bow and arrow.

Old Lodge Skins dreams of antelope, and the next day he leads the whole tribe three miles away from the village, and sends two lines of riders out. The riders soon encounter a pronghorn antelope, the scout set to warn of danger. The scout sees a line

of riders on each side, and gets nervous. Rather than turning left or right, it walks forward, toward Old Lodge Skins and the rest of the tribe. The antelope begins to rush right into the living corral formed by the rest of the Cheyenne, drawn by Old Lodge Skins's magic. The Cheyenne club the antelope as they rush into the trap. Jack tries to help, swinging a rock with the little strength he has.

Analysis

Jack Crabb begins speaking to the reader. His voice is direct and generally uncomplicated—not that he does not speak of sophisticated subjects; just that he comes right out and says what he means.

In that direct manner, Jack introduces one of the themes of the book: the difference in nature between the white man and the Native American. Jack is born white, and claims that he never forgets he is a white man; but he becomes part of the Cheyenne almost immediately upon his arrival in the village. Symbolically, this is demonstrated as he abandons his clothing and dons Cheyenne garb.

Although the story begins with events from 1852 when Jack is 10 years old, it is told by the 111-year-old Jack Crabb. Jack offers observations and conclusions he has developed over more than a century. Jack observes that Native Americans are altogether different from anybody -- that they will make a profession of revenge, and that they are always ready for a miracle. Jack claims white folks are better because they use their wits, although he rues the fact that he knew too much, even as a boy, to be able to talk to his horse. So the central question of the book is introduced: what does it mean to be a white man,a Native American man, or Jack Crabb?

Jack considers himself to be a white man, but quickly finds himself admiring and adopting the ways of the Cheyenne. This introduces the central internal conflict of the book: the clash between the characteristics of the white and the Native American.

Vocabulary

travois, extravagant, fourflusher, stockade, taboo, barbaric, misapprehension, extortion, breechclout, recumbent, perturbations, pasturage, consolidate, flange, gesticulating

Chapters 5-7

Summary

Three years pass while Jack lives and learns in the Cheyenne village. There is no formal schooling, but Old Lodge Skins tells the boys stories now and then, stories from which they are expected to learn. Jack recounts a couple of those stories.

The first story is of a raiding party that had gone to capture ponies from the Snake People, the Comanches. They steal many horses but are tracked down the next day, and set upon by far superior numbers. One by one the Cheyenne are killed, until the last of their party, Little Man, fights so bravely and so successfully that the numerically superior Comanche offer to let him go. He refuses and fights off a couple other waves of attackers. He rides after the Snake People warriors and they scatter — but one shoots him in the back with a musket and they cut off his head. Little Man's body gets up and chases after the Snake warriors, and they run.

Old Lodge Skins' second story is of the first meeting of their people with the whites a couple of generations prior. They quickly discovered that whites are crazy — killing themselves and others in strange and dishonorable ways. They determine that the best decision is to stay far away. Old Lodge Skins resolves that he will defend himself if attacked by white people, but he will avoid them until then. This is the reason the tribe leaves the Platte River region where white outposts are being established, and moves north to the Powder River.

They are close to a Crow village that has many fine-looking ponies. They decide to raid the Crows and take some horses. Younger Bear and Jack go along on the raid. The Cheyenne do not have a formal rite of passage to manhood, but each boy choses when to do "manly" things.

Once near the Crow village, the older warriors head off to steal some horses. Younger Bear and Jack are surprised by a Crow warrior, who happens upon them as they hold the horses of their raiding party. Younger Bear is clubbed unconscious, and Jack leaps upon the back of the warrior. As they struggle, the Crow slices Jack's scalp, which begins to bleed. Some of Jack's disguise is rubbed clean and he is exposed as a white. The Crow is confused and apologetic because the Crow are friends with whites. Jack takes advantage of his confusion to kill him with three arrows shot from his bow. He loses consciousness.

He awakens in the medicine man's lodge in the Cheyenne village, with the whole village intent on his recovery. The chief rewards his bravery by giving him a name: Little Big Man. During the feast to celebrate the successful raid, Jack — Little Big Man — sneaks off to a hillside and reflects on all the Native American things he has done, more with shame than with pride. Younger Bear happens by just then and accuses Jack of being a white man. Perhaps because he was just thinking that himself, Jack takes offense and

reminds Younger Bear that he saved his life, and tells him that only another life will be payment enough.

Now that Little Big Man has been proven in battle, he finds it difficult to avoid other opportunities to fight. Those opportunities are somewhat plentiful, as the Cheyenne fight the Crow, the Ute, the Shoshone with disgusting barbarity to Jack's sensibility; but he figures they have their reasons. He himself collects a few scalps along the way, although he prefers to count coups instead, ride among the enemy armed with only a light stick and strike them then dash away. Jack also hears of fighting between whites and Native Americans, clashes which are difficult to understand because the Native American fights for the good it does him, while the white fights to impose his will on another, to get his way.

Old Lodge Skins's group is more an extended family than a tribe. Old Lodge Skins and his father before him were kind of exiled from the rest of the Cheyenne because each of them kidnapped wives of other chiefs at previous get-togethers. The wrongs have been more or less forgiven at this point; and it is a good thing because the Cheyenne marry outside their extended family, and with deaths among their warriors and the maturing of their youths, Old Lodge Skins's group needs to find eligible mates. The tribe at large begins to discuss what to do about the increasing problem of the whites encroaching on their territory. There is talk of fighting to rid the plains of the whites, but they decide there is no need to do anything about it, so the Cheyenne disperse.

On the way home, the northern group learns of a column of soldiers in the vicinity and they decide to fight. The first order of business is to prepare some magic, so they make themselves invulnerable to bullets. Little Big Man disguises himself, darkening his skin and wearing Old Lodge Skins's plug hat. They array themselves for battle, and the soldiers seem frozen at the sound of the Cheyenne's chant; then the soldiers start to charge and it is the Cheyenne who are frozen. As the soldiers get closer, the Cheyenne break and run. All their magic had been prepared against bullets, and the soldiers are charging with swords.

Little Big Man does not run. He throws his hat to the ground and wipes the camouflage from his face. He shouts a blessing for George Washington, then for his mother; but a soldier ignores his pleas and swings his saber, trying to separate Jack's head from his shoulders. Jack's superior horsemanship allows him to ride circles around his attacker, then knock him to the ground. He pins his shoulders, and swears at the guy to stop trying to kill him because he is a white man, and he will explain why he is there, but it is a long story.

Analysis

Jack grows up among the Cheyenne. He is perfectly placed to bridge the two worlds, the Native American and the white. As the whites move into the plains, the two worlds are brought directly into conflict, but the greatest part of that conflict is due to an inability to understand each other. Jack represents the best hope for overcoming that inability,

and he certainly has insight into the ways in which the Native Americans and whites are different from each other. Even with that insight, though, there are unbridgeable gaps, maybe even chasms that remain.

The conflict within Jack reflects and prepares the reader for the external conflict between the Native Americans and whites. The fact that Jack cannot reconcile the two worlds he straddles indicates that there may be no reconciliation possible between people who live in each of those worlds.

Vocabulary

oratory, strangulation, emigrant, solidarity, inhabitants, mutilated, souvenirs, emanated, parfleches, pemmican, provender, amiable

Chapters 8-11

Summary

Jack is taken to Fort Leavenworth, then Fort Laramie. He tells the soldiers he had been kidnapped and tortured by the Native Americans, so much so that he can't even remember where their village is and where they habitually travel. He finds the soldiers willing to believe almost anything about the Native Americans — such as that they are cannibals or the parents lie with their own children. At the same time, the soldiers are entirely disinterested about how the Native Americans live. No one, from the foot soldier to the general, asks him a thing about the life of the Native Americans.

The soldiers arrange a home for Jack with a family in western Missouri. Silas Pendrake is a preacher with a large black beard to top his large body. His wife, about twenty years his junior, is a blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty — perhaps not Jack's idea of beauty, but certainly admired by all the menfolk with which they come in contact.

Of more importance to Jack, she actually seems to listen to him and to take interest in him — tutoring him and helping him rapidly progress in the schooling he has started. Silas takes very little interest in Jack; but aside from his sermons he shows very little interest in anything other than eating, which he does in prodigious quantities. Also in the household are Lucy and Lavender, a couple of freed slaves who are now servants to the Pendrakes.

One of the larger boys at school picks a fight with Jack, and he fights back, pinning the boy and holding the knife at his scalp before leaving him gasping on the floor. Mrs. Pendrake artfully defends him, earning his admiration, his allegiance, and his love. Mr. Pendrake also pays attention to him, taking him on a fishing trip.

On the fishing trip it rains like mad, and Mr. Pendrake and Jack crawl under the wagon. Mr. Pendrake assumes that Jack was fighting with another boy over a woman. He uses the opportunity to lecture Jack on sin, a concept that is foreign to him. Not only generally foreign, but each of the characteristics of sin that Pendrake lists could be used to describe Old Lodge Skins.

The fishing trip leaves Jack with pneumonia. For the first few days of the illness, they think Jack might die; but he gets over the hump and spends weeks confined to his bed. Lavender spends time visiting with Jack. In his delirium, Jack takes Lavender for a Cheyenne. Lavender's interest is piqued, and they spend time talking of life on the prairie away from civilization, an idea they both find attractive.

Jack is growing increasingly dissatisfied with his life. He was out in the rain — the most natural environment he can imagine — and it made him sick. He takes that as a sign that he is not living right.

Once he recovers, he strolls through the town with Mrs. Pendrake while she shops. She leaves him at a soda shope while she finishes up her shopping. He gets tired of waiting and walks out on the street, then follows her footprints (which he finds easy to do). He sees her with the soda store proprietor nibbling on her neck, then staggers home. Jack had been torn between thinking of Mrs. Pendrake as mother and sweetheart, but now he knows she is neither. His confusion clears up and he becomes a regular at the town whorehouse. He takes to wearing dandy clothes. His new manners make him the toast of the town — at least among the other 16-year-olds — even though he thinks he is being insufferably rude.

When the soda store proprietor is beaten and run out of town by the father of a girl he has impregnated, Jack rekindles his hopes for making Mrs. Pendrake his sweetheart. When he sees her beginning an attachment to an Italian shoemaker, he has had enough. He leaves the Pendrakes a note and heads out.

Analysis

Jack leaves life with the barbaric Native Americans and finds himself in civilization: attending school, sitting in parlors, learning about sin. Although he cannot see the purpose in Mrs. Pendrake's life — being that she does no cleaning or cooking or gardening — he sees that her uselessness is her perfection; that civilization itself exists to create the Mrs. Pendrakes of the world.

Still, he finds life to be unnatural in town, with more focus on appearance than reality. Although in some sense he feels as if he is returning to where he should be, doing things he should be interested in, he is frustrated with feeling at odds with the natural world. He has now been exposed to both the white and Native American ways, and has been frustrated and unfulfilled in both.

Vocabulary

obduracy, keened, guidon, belligerent, formative, idiocy, keened, victual, crystalline, illiterate, supercilious, jerkin

Chapters 12-14

Summary

Jack leaves the Pendrakes with the intention of becoming a Cheyenne once again; but the idea of sleeping on buffalo hides and eating well only at rare intervals just is not that appealing any more. He makes his way to St. Louis, but lives a beggar's life there until he convinces some folks to let him guide their wagon train to Santa Fe.

The wagon train is attacked by Comanche. Everyone is killed, except Jack, who tries to fool them by walking toward them disguised as an invincible giant. Although they are not fooled enough to let him walk away, they do take him captive instead of killing him. He steals a horse and escapes. The horse dies and he ends up walking to Santa Fe.

Jack takes up with a Mexican woman who cares for him while he lazes around drinking. He is saved from that idleness after a few months by meeting a crazy prospector, Crazy Charley. He ends up around Denver (then called Auraria), prospecting gold for a while. When he realizes prospecting costs more than it earns, he joins a couple partners in a general store, taking the role of wagon master for the trips between Auraria and Santa Fe.

The Arapaho come trading now and then, along with their allies, the Cheyenne, but Jack makes no particular effort to track down any of his acquaintances from the tribe. With his newfound sensibilities, he sees that even the fanciest Native American is dressed virtually in rags, compared with the folks in St. Louis. He now finds them nasty and smelly, and is not proud of his earlier association with them. Still, he does not have the irrational hatred of the Native Americans that so many failed prospectors appear to have.

On a trip to Missouri to get cheaper trade goods, Jack's mule train is ambushed by Cheyenne —including several who knew him well. They do not believe he is who he says he is because they know that Little Big Man killed many bluecoats in the battle, then turned into a sparrow and flew away. On the other hand, this person who claims to be Little Big Man knows many things from the past that Little Big Man would know; so they take him back to their camp. Even more than upon his first arrival in the Cheyenne village when he was 10, the 17-year-old Jack finds the village rude, poor, and stinky.

When he is brought before Old Lodge Skins, the old man remembers him and welcomes him. The Cheyenne are on their way to a big peace treaty, where the whites want them to put their names to a piece of paper saying they will become farmers. Little Big Man tells them of a dream he had, a dream in which the Cheyenne do not go to the meeting, but instead head back north to the Powder River far from the white folk. Old Lodge Skins agrees that is a good idea, and Hump, the war chief, also agrees.The Cheyenne decide to accept the wisdom of these leaders and head north.

It turns out to be wisdom indeed, for the Arapaho and Southern Cheyenne who signed the treaty accepting farming life on a reservation were slaughtered a few years later by a cavalry division.

For now, however, Jack tells Old Lodge Skins that (although the Native American camp is more attractive to him after a day there) he cannot travel with them. Jack returns to Denver, and decides to take a little more active interest in the business side of the store, at least partly because he thinks his partners are cheating him. His suspicions are borne out when his profit immediately goes up when he takes a more active role in the business.

With his new income, he gets married to a good-natured Swedish-born woman named Olga and they have a son. A few years pass, and he nags his partners about making a business relationship more formal than the handshake they have worked with. Finally, they make a written agreement, but his partners skip out on the business, leaving it drowning in debt from their personal purchases.

Jack does not wait around to get in trouble. He takes his wife and young son and they hop on an eastbound stage. The year is now 1864, the year the Arapaho and Cheyenne who had signed the treaty and abided by it were massacred on their reservation. The massacre precipitates war with the remaining Southern Cheyenne.

A band of Cheyenne warriors ambushes the stage on which Jack and his family are riding. The group from the stage manages to hide in a little dip in the terrain, holding off a couple charges. It is clear they will not be able to hold out for very long. Jack makes a mad ride for help, heading to a fort forty miles away. He makes it back with a troop of soldiers about an hour before sundown the next day. He finds the dead bodies of the driver and the guard and a couple passengers. His wife and son are gone.

Analysis

Jack has now “graduated.” His youthful training took place in two different worlds: that of the Cheyenne and the whites. Now his training is over and he tries to find his way in the world. His start is not too auspicious, as he finds himself a beggar on the streets.

When he moves to the frontier, he is a little more successful applying traits he has developed from his training in both worlds. He appears at home in neither, though. He turns down an opportunity to rejoin the Cheyenne, and he fails when trying to operate in the white world of business. He exists at the intersection of the two worlds, and it turns out to be a dangerous place to live. His struggles parallel the conflict between the Native Americans and the encroaching whites, reflecting philosophical and practical differences in their approach to life.

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

emigrant, rousted, ramrod, immemorial, wallow, pulque, rheumy, grandiose, victual, revelation, mooched, assemblage, pinion, obdurate, vermilion, harangue, benighted, furbelows, chafe

Chapters 15-17

Summary

Jack is enraged. He joins up with the cavalry as a scout, but the Cheyenne have kind of faded away, and there are no major incidents for the cavalry to follow. Jack channels his rage into drunken ramblings, swigging bottles of whiskey and shouting that the Native Americans should be exterminated.

With no job and no money, he begs whiskey in exchange for entertainment. He drinks and sings (by his own admission sounding more like a hoarse crow than a human singer) and drinks and cavorts. One day someone gives him whiskey in exchange for his wearing a saddle and getting whipped. A stranger takes pity on him, however, and knocks the front teeth from the head of his tormenter.

The stranger turns out to be a woman who has taken a shine to him — not just any woman, but his sister Caroline. Caroline has done quite a bit of traveling in the intervening years, including a stint as a nurse with the Union Army near Washington, D.C. Now she is a mule driver for an outfit supplying the Union Pacific Railroad, building track across the United States.

Caroline tries to straighten Jack out—keeping him away from drink—until she hears of his story and becomes jealous of his wife. At that point, she tells him his wife and kid have probably been killed, so he might as well just go ahead and drink.

Ornery Jack refuses to return to drink. Instead, he takes up Caroline's line of work, driving mules to supply the railroad workers. Jack and Caroline decide to go into the hauling business together, taking a partner to help finance their endeavor.

The railroad is cutting the West in half — dividing the buffalo that will not cross the tracks. As the end-of-track approaches the northeast corner of the Colorado Territory, the Cheyenne and Sioux begin to raid—stealing animals at night and harassing the workers by day. This is what Jack has been waiting for, for the Cheyenne to come to him.

Frank North and the Pawnee scouts have been hired by the railroad to provide protection, and when Jack hears they are headed to meet a group of raiding Cheyenne, he tags along. The group finds and engages with a Cheyenne raiding party, and Jack finds himself separated from the group, in hand-to-hand combat with a Cheyenne. It is a warrior he recognizes, Shadow That Comes in Sight. Jack is not recognized in return.

Shadow and Jack battle, and as Jack is about to be killed, one of the Pawnees shoots Shadow, kills him, takes his scalp, and leaves. Jack digs a grave with his knife blade, and buries Shadow That Comes in Sight. When he is done, he hears a slight sound in the brush—it is a Cheyenne woman giving birth.

He tells her he is Little Big Man, and that the Cheyenne have taken his wife and son. He says he will take her and trade her to get his own family back. She makes him a counteroffer: they will return to her people and she and her child will be his new family to replace the one he has lost. That was not his plan, but that is what he does.

He meets Old Lodge Skins once again, who describes how they did not follow Jack's advice when last they spoke. They ended up going to the treaty conference, touching pen to paper, then going to the reservation. That was the Sand Creek Reservation, the one where the army came and slaughtered the Native Americans. During the fighting, Old Lodge Skins was struck with a bullet that damaged his nerves and rendered him blind.

Times are tough for the Cheyenne. Many of the buffalo have gone, and they are being pursued and harassed by the army. In turn, they harass the white pioneers when they have the opportunity. Little Big Man is in danger from all sides, but he manages to assimilate. He settles in with Sunshine (the woman who has taken the place of his missing wife) and even gets her pregnant.

Without decent arms, the Cheyenne always find themselves outgunned in their confrontations. They try to work charms against being harmed by bullets, but those are only partially effective. Old Lodge Skins decides it will be best to join with a larger band of Cheyenne.

They make their way to reservation land in the Nations, where Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, and some Apache camp with more Cheyenne along the banks of the Washita River. One day another village of Cheyenne move in, and Jack swings by to look for his missing wife and child.

He finds two of his childhood acquaintances: Younger Bear and Little Horse. Younger Bear has spent time as a Contrary, a small but fierce group whose members do everything backwards. Little Horse has become a heemanah, a man who prefers to live life as if he were a woman. In fact, Little Horse is living as a wife of Younger Bear. Younger Bear has another wife, also: Jack's wife Olga.

Jack is enraged, but then he hears Olga haul off and berate her husband in terms as rough as any other Cheyenne wife. Her whole personality has changed. His son, Gus, also seems to have settled into the tribe. As Jack, he is outraged; but as Little Big Man, he sees that a balance has been established, and feels no need to disturb it.

His wife and her sisters — all members of his household — are apprehensive when he comes home, until he makes clear that he will not be fighting Younger Bear and will not be bringing another woman and child into the household. Although the Cheyenne expect that a husband will sexually service his wife's sisters, Little Big Man has never done that — until this night, when he visits the beds of all three sisters.

That was the final step in his acceptance of the Cheyenne within him. He walks out in the pre-dawn chill, feeling at peace with the world; and Sunshine comes to him carrying

his newborn son. They name the son Morning Star in honor of a bright and multicolored star that ascends into the heavens.

On the other side of the hill is a soldier the Crow will name Son of the Morning Star, although he calls himself George Armstrong Custer.

Analysis

Jack is a victim of his dual nature. The world of the Cheyenne has stripped him of his last vestiges of belonging in the world of the whites. He is unable to wreak vengeance upon the Cheyenne, descending into a drunken stupor that represents his complete failure to fit in.

He is then drawn in to the world of the Cheyenne once again, but not by any act of will. Like the Cheyenne and the white pioneers, his entry into conflict is not by design, but is the result of misunderstanding.

When he comes into contact with his wife and child, his two halves are at war. He knows that Olga's white husband would seek revenge no matter the cost, but Sunshine's Cheyenne husband would accept the trade he had been offered. He does accept the trade, and —by sleeping with Sunshine's sisters — becomes as much a Cheyenne as it is possible for him to be.

With the final words of the chapter, the reader learns that Little Big Man's hard-won acceptance will end very soon.

Vocabulary

portent, concentric, uncongenial, euchred, ardent, deficiency, cognizance, revile, forbore, mayhem, rout, magnitude, larruping

Chapters 18-20

Summary

Little Big Man is standing outside his lodge as dawn begins to break. He talks with his pony, who warns him that there will be a big fight soon. He argues with his horse, but then a band begins to play and cavalry horses suddenly fly along the flatland on the side of the riverbed. Shots are being fired.

Although the Cheyenne are peacefully camped on reservation land, General George Armstrong Custer's men attack, shooting everyone they see. Little Big Man rushes back to his lodge and has his wife and child lie flat under a buffalo hide. He runs to find Old Lodge Skins and get him to safety. After collecting his medicine bag, his war bonnet, his special blanket and more, Old Lodge Skins walks with Little Big Man into the Washita River, meeting up with other Cheyenne who have escaped the soldiers' attack.

A small group of soldiers heads in that direction, but are outnumbered by the Cheyenne, who kill them all. Little Big Man takes the uniform off a dead soldier and sneaks into the camp to find his wife. He cannot find her among the living or the dead. He has had many hardships in his life, but this is the first time he is able to blame his troubles on one person: General Custer.

Later that night, Jack sneaks himself into a spot where he is alone with Custer, but he does not like the image he imagines will be publicized: the glorious general killed by a scruffy ragamuffin assassin. He walks away, resolving to earn some money, become a dandy-dressed gentleman, then track the general down and kill him in a duel.

Jack walks away from the general, and out of the army camp, and wanders into the wilderness. He ends up spending several months with a Creek family in the eastern part of the Nations. It is a dangerous place to live,a lawless place that is refuge for fugitives from justice of every stripe and persuasion.

When Jack leaves the family he's stayed with, he bums his way onto a stage north to Kansas. The stage is robbed and the driver and guard are killed. Jack bluffs his way into a gang, but he leaves them as soon as he can, taking horses and goods enough to get up to Kansas.

He searches for his sister and their partner in business, hoping to get money from them to obtain the accoutrements of a gentleman. He rides the rails all the way to San Francisco, and searches for them among the saloons of the city, until his money runs out. He gets a job driving mules in southern California, saves some money, and returns to San Francisco. In the city, he buys himself a fine suit of clothes, a Smith & Wesson revolver, and a ticket to Omaha, where he plans to kill George Armstrong Custer.

Jack gets to Kansas City in the spring of 1871, just a few days after Custer has left for the east. Jack has no desire or will to go east of the Missouri again, so he stays in Kansas City, where he meets Wild Bill Hickok.

Hickok and Jack spend a day together. After Hickok determines Jack is no threat to him, he kills a man who tries to shoot him in the back. Hickok then discusses firearms and shooting with Jack. Before they get very far into their discussion, Hickok determines that Jack could use the services of a woman, services offered by the best place in town.

Jack is not feeling the need, so he selects a thin, young girl who does not excite thoughts of lust. He talks with her and realizes she bears a strong resemblance to his sister Sue Ann, whom he last saw when he was 10 and she was 13. Her name is Amelia, and when she tells her story, Jack realizes that she is the 16-year-old daughter of his sister, and he is her Uncle Jack.

Analysis

Jack is a small man. He has survived not through his physical strength, but through his cleverness. He has avoided drawing attention to himself, and he has very little patience for those who are full of talk and short on action—or, more generally, those whose reputation does not match their actions or abilities.

The theme of reputation vs. reality has been present in earlier sections of the book, but in these chapters it comes to the forefront. Custer has a reputation as a heroic figure, but the reality is that he is a stiff-necked leader more concerned with regulation and appearance than with listening to his advisers. Wild Bill Hickok has a reputation that exceeds his abilities; but his abilities are impressive, and he himself does not brag of his talents. Jack admires and respects Wild Bill, while has only contempt for Custer.

Vocabulary

reverberating, consternation, filaments, haversacks, bivouac, simpering, traipsed, palaver, despondent, lithe, consternation, impudent, iniquity, incessantly, adulation

Chapters 21-23

Summary

Jack removes Amelia from the whorehouse and sets her up in the finest hotel in Kansas City. It is very expensive and his roll of cash is dramatically thinning. He needs more money, and he figures the only way to quickly get what he needs is to play poker.

Jack has learned some tricks of the poker player — most of which he doesn't have the dexterity to apply. He does make himself a mirror ring with which he can surreptitiously view the cards of the other players. When he gets to the saloon, Wild Bill invites him to play. Jack needs the money, but has no desire to be shot, so he does not use his ring. Then he gets down to his last five dollars, and has no choice. He wins Wild Bill's money —about a hundred dollars—as dawn breaks, and Wild Bill exits.

But Hickok is waiting on the street outside, and he has killed men for lesser offenses than cheating at poker. Jack faces up to him, though, and Hickok decides that if Jack is going to play poker that well, he is going to need to learn to handle a gun.

He continues to play poker every night, winning enough to keep Amelia supplied in style, but not so much and so consistently as to arouse undue suspicion. Every morning after playing, Wild Bill and Jack eat breakfast then have a shooting lesson. After some time, Wild Bill believes he has trained Jack to be nearly his equivalent in accuracy and speed; and instead of going to breakfast, he challenges Jack to a gunfight. Jack reflects sunlight into Bill's eyes, and Jack rolls so Bill misses him. Jack lies on the ground, so when Bill's vision clears, he walks up to Jack, thinking he has killed him. When he leans over, Jack puts his pistol in Bill's face, showing that he could have killed him several times over. Bill laughs, and heads off to become sheriff in Abilene.

Amelia's spending grows, but Jack's poker income drops because he is not able to get a game with those who suspect he is cheating and the buffalo hunters are leaving for hunting season. Just in time, Jack meets Allardyce T. Meriweather, a con man who tries to fleece Jack. Instead, they end up as partners in a scheme to get a couple thousand dollars from a jeweler. The scheme works, and Jack pays some money to his creditors, signs Amelia up for school, and gets himself a buffalo hunting rig. He leaves Kansas City (and a significant percentage of his bills) behind.

Jack spends the next six months hunting buffalo, killing and skinning over twenty-five hundred and splitting six thousand dollars for the work. While on the prairie, he runs into his brother Bill, who is selling whiskey, spiced up with the addition of several items, including rattlesnake heads. Bill is run off, to little care from Jack.

When he returns to Amelia's school, he learns she is getting married to the son of a senator. Amelia admits she is really no blood relative of his, but he professes to having more of a family feeling toward her than to his true blood relatives, such as his brother.

Jack sets her up with wardrobe and dowry, and even hires someone to play the role of her elegant father at the wedding ceremony.

Jack spends a couple more years as a buffalo hunter, but the herds are shrinking. By 1874-75, he clears only about $350, and he begins to think of himself as a relic of a bygone era, even though he's only in his thirties.

He wanders the plains a bit, but there is very little game. He often depends on the kindness of homesteaders, sodbusters who are trying to eke a living out of farming in an inhospitable land. Then he hears of gold in the Black Hills. This is the land that had been promised to the Sioux, but when the discovery of gold is announced, nothing can stop the rush of white men to the region, Jack among them.

Analysis

Who you say you are, and who you are — what is the difference between the two and what does it matter? When Jack accepts Amelia as his niece, he treats her in that fashion. When he provides her with the money to clothe herself and live the high life — even to have private tutors in piano playing or singing — she accepts and fills the role. Eventually, she plays the role so well that she finds herself a husband who believes she is exactly who she claims to be. For all practical purposes, she is.

The same is true for Wild Bill Hickok. People treat him with the respect his reputation is due, which makes the reputation true completely independent of his actual capabilities. Wyatt Earp, in his brief appearance, is a beneficiary of the same effect. So these chapters serve to strengthen the theme that has been developed earlier: the tension between reputation and reality.

Vocabulary

revelation, primping, reclamation, deportment, supercilious, crux, extermination, teetotal, lariats, antagonist, doily, erroneous, detestation

Chapters 24-26

Summary

Jack finds himself in Cheyenne, and his first sight is a fistfight between two fellows in the street. He soon realizes that one of the “fellows” is his sister Caroline and learns the other is Calamity Jane. They are fighting (more or less) over Wild Bill Hickok, who is getting married to neither of them. Wild Bill and Jack make plans to go into the gold mining business together, after each takes care of bits of business.

Wild Bill has his wedding and a honeymoon in Ohio. Jack has to take his sister (who has been ruined by too many disappointments when the world failed to fulfill her romantic notions) to a loony bin down in Omaha. Wild Bill returns and heads up to mining country and plays some poker, where — when holding a pair of eights and a pair of aces — he is shot in the back and killed.

Meanwhile, the army has decided to switch their job from keeping white folks out of the Sioux reservation to rounding up the Sioux and keeping them away from the folks searching for gold. Jack gets himself on the Far West, a riverboat headed up the Missouri then down the Yellowstone to supply the troops rounding up the Native Americans along the Powder River. Jack is worried about Old Lodge Skins and his people, so he gets himself passage on the boat, claiming to be a scout for General Custer.

The Far West finds its way to the army camp where General Terry is in charge, but General Custer seems to be making most of the operational decisions. There, Jack finds his old friend Lavender, who left the Pendrake household after Mr. Pendrake coked to death on one of his prodigious meals. Lavender lived for several years among the Sioux, taking one for a wife, but he now finds himself working as a translator for the army.

Jack tries to hire on as translator as well, but Custer is certain there are no more Cheyenne to worry about. Jack is annoyed at Custer’s attitude, self-important as ever, and he lets that irritation show, but Custer takes it as a sign of pluck or just ignores what he does not want to hear. Jack ends up as a civilian helper to the army.

The army wanders the Powder River region, searching for sign of the Sioux who are around somewhere. They find signs — just small things at first — but enough to show they are in the right area. Lavender and Jack each are suffering bouts of conscience: what are they doing with the army that is planning to destroying their friends, the Sioux and Cheyenne, respectively? The signs get clearer. Although Jack is not in the forefront, it is clear to him that the trail they come across was made by four or five thousand Sioux. When he tries to confirm that with the general’s aides, they claim the trail shows only a few hundred Sioux are on the march.

Jack races to the front to try to correct that misapprehension, and perhaps talk the general out of attacking. His chief scout, however, has given General Custer an accurate report, but Custer has no desire to hear it. It is clear to all that Custer will not wait for the other divisions to arrive; he is going to press the attack.

Jack and Sergeant Botts, one of his acquaintances, get drunk, leaving Jack in bad shape the next morning on what will be the longest day of his life.

Analysis

The internal conflict Jack has struggled with for nearly his entire life is now playing itself out on a grander scale. Jack is trying to reconcile his Cheyenne and white personalities, and it has led him to this spot where the Native Americans and whites will fight. It has also led him into a moral dilemma. He has nothing against Custer (having given up his earlier yearning for revenge), but he does not want to see the Cheyenne killed.

The characteristics of the two sides, particularly the nature of their leadership, are symbolic of the wider differences that make the showdown between Native American and white inevitable. In particular, the whites despise their leader and follow because they feel they must, while the Native Americans admire their leader and follow because of that admiration.

Vocabulary

recumbent, prowess, liniment, coherent, confounded, assemblage, albeit, transpire, victual, prevaricate, strenuous, capstans, sutler, grousing, coulees

Chapters 27-28

Summary

With Jack alongside, the scouts discover the remnants of a large Sioux camp, with drawings left in the sand. The drawings show white men falling headfirst (dying) into the Sioux camp. Jack is frustrated by the scout's unwillingness to interpret that sign, so he tells Custer that the Native Americans are giving notice that they will stand and fight. Custer is amused, and Jack becomes an appointed kind of jester to the General, tasked with saying whatever comes to his mind.

They march all day, spend a sleepless night, then the word comes that the Native American village is about fifteen miles up the Little Bighorn River, which the Native Americans call the Greasy Grass. Although the scouts report that the Sioux are aware of the army's presence, Custer refuses to believe it and even refuses to believe there is a large village nearby.

Finally, about noon on June 25, 1876, Custer accepts the Sioux are near and tells his officers to prepare to attack, so as to keep the advantage of surprise. Custer splits up his troops to attack the village from above and below at the same time. Lavender goes with a group under Major Reno while Jack stays with Custer. After the groups split, Custer seems to be in no particular hurry.

Then they hear the sounds of battle and ascend a ridge to look at the village below. Reno's force of a hundred men is defending itself against a Native American force of five or six hundred men. All-in-all, however, the Native American camp stretches for miles — the largest assemblage ever in North America — with about five thousand warriors. Custer's force of a couple hundred does not yet see any Native Americans in opposition.

As is his habit, Custer ignores the advice of his scouts and staff and plans to descend into the village and attack. He sends one final dispatch, asking that the supplies be delivered quickly, and then takes his cavalry down through a narrow passage where their mobility is restricted. He sends his column into a charge, made disorderly by the terrain. Jack hears the Cheyenne war cry as Native American warriors swarm across the Greasy Grass River.

In the face of that opposition, Custer directs his troops up another ravine to a summit on the ridge. Custer's troops are quickly surrounded, and they kill their horses to use them as a defensive wall. Arrows rain in from above, bullets fly across, and when the soldiers hide alongside their horses they allow the enemy to creep ever closer. Ammunition low, relief not coming, their numbers dwindling, the remaining handful stills their weapons when Custer is shot in the heart and falls dead. Finally, they are overrun. Jack blows the brains out of an attacking Native American with the last shot in his pistol, then his head is thumped by an attack from behind, and he senses death arriving from behind.

Analysis

Several of the themes established during earlier sections are exposed in further depth in these chapters.

First: the disparity between reputation and reality. Custer is the paragon of white virtue: he leads, he takes action, he is his own man. Jack is not alone in disliking many things about Custer, predominantly his unwillingness to listen to those around him. At the same time, he admires Custer for the energetic way in which he takes action. Is Custer truly worth the admiration the American public heaped upon him? Jack would undoubtedly answer no; yet there is much within Custer to admire, such as his single-minded commitment to his goal. So reputation and reality clash in the Custer who arrives at the Little Bighorn.

Second: the conflict between Native American and white. A conflict in worldview and philosophy, as much as a struggle for economic and political control now erupts in its fullest realization. Each side has been changed by interaction with the other. Custer seems to be fighting for the glory of battle, while the Native Americans fight with the goal of eliminating the enemy. The symbolism makes this clear: the Native Americans come in to battle unadorned, purposefully; while Custer stands in the face of bullets and arrows, letting the strength of his spirit protect him.

Third: the theme of the insurmountable gap between the Native American and white worlds reaches its peak. The whites do not know how to interpret the clear message the Native Americans leave, the warning and the prophecy that the white soldiers will be killed. The worlds are so far apart that Custer literally cannot see the Native American village in front of his eyes. Because the Native Americans and the pioneers are driven into contact with each other, the differences in their philosophies cannot be ignored. It erupts into conflict that must end in destruction.

Vocabulary

adjutant, impudent, plaintive, perplexed, dawdling, infiltrate, envelop, repulsed, besieged, countenance, appellation, predilection, extremity

Chapters 29-30

Summary

Jack awakens to the smell of spicy food, the sight of flames, and the sound of drumbeats. He thinks he is in Hell, but he is in the Cheyenne village on the Greasy Grass. Yellow Bear has saved him — striking him on the head, wrapping him in a blanket, and bringing him to the village through swarms of Native Americans drunk on victory and hungry for killing.

Yellow Bear also tended his wounds. When Jack awakens, Yellow Bear runs off in triumph, knowing that the next time he and Jack meet in battle, Yellow Bear can kill him without becoming an evil person.

Old Lodge Skins talks with Little Big Man, who is the last of his sons still alive. He tells of their travels up from the Washita, eight hundred miles on foot with no buffalo to hunt, very little game, and nonexistent charity from the white settlers. He says Olga died on the trip, and Gus was taken by some soldiers they fought with. Morning Star, Little Big Man's child with Sunshine, was fine the last that Old Lodge Skins knew, living with the Southern Cheyenne.

Old Lodge Skins wants to see the site of the battle, so Little Big Man takes him up the hillside. They see the body of Custer, lying unmolested. Little Big Man believes that Custer was not mutilated because the Native Americans respected him, but Old Lodge Skins corrects him. The body was left alone because Custer was going bald.

Although the victory of the tribes is complete, Old Lodge Skins claims the battle marks the end, not the beginning, of the Native American resistance to the white man's encroachment. Without war — for glory, for manhood — the Native Americans cannot continue their way of life. But the whites make war to win an objective, and will win that objective with papers, with speeches, with whatever means. According to Old Lodge Skins, the fighting itself has solved nothing and cannot solve anything. Over the years, Jack says he was aware of others who would claim to have been there at the battle at Little Bighorn, but he has kept silent because in the early years any friend of the Native Americans was suspicious, and because no one would believe him. Now he is too old to care.

After the battle at Little Bighorn, Sitting Bull heads into Canada for a while, then travels with Buffalo Bill's show. Yellow Bear heads east, fights with a group of Cheyenne who lose and are sent to an Native American Territory reservation where they were sick and starving. They broke out, and finally the government established a Cheyenne reservation along the Tongue River.

Jack went with Old Lodge Skins and a small band of other Cheyenne toward the Bighorn mountains. One day in July, Old Lodge Skins asks Little Big Man to accompany

him to a high spot, where he has something to do. Although Jack struggles on the way up, Old Lodge Skins just keeps trudging upward. At the top of the hill, Old Lodge Skins sings the Cheyenne battle cry as a challenge to death, and then prays to the Everywhere Spirit. The Spirit answers by sending a thundercloud across the sky, rain falling on Old Lodge Skins's upturned face. Old Lodge Skins asks the Spirit to look after his son, Little Big Man. He lies down and dies. Little Big Man builds a scaffold and lays Old Lodge Skins upon it.

Analysis

Over the decades, from the time Jack's family encountered a group of Cheyenne on their way west, to the battle at Little Bighorn, misunderstandings have led to the deaths of untold numbers of people, from Jack's father to General Custer. Now the battle is over and nothing has been settled. The fundamental question has never been, "Who is the stronger?" Instead, it was, "Can these two different approaches to life be reconciled?" Old Lodge Skins believes it is impossible and history bears him out.

Jack, however, survives. This raises the possibility of another answer to the question. Perhaps the two approaches to life cannot be reconciled in groups living separately, but they can co-exist within one person. Jack claims to be a white man, but he asks the reader to believe that he has spoken to his horse, that a blind man sees (sometimes for many miles), and that he has seen a man call the clouds to celebrate his own death. Those events, and other elements of Jack's character, lead to the conclusion that Jack is as much Native American as white.

Vocabulary

exultation, ghoul, panorama, surfeit, derisive, imbued, slandering, eminences, stentorian, reverberating, crag, insolent, remnants, slag

Editor’s Epilogue

Summary

Ralph Fielding Snell leaves the reader with a short epilogue. Jack dies when finished with the story of Old Lodge Skins’s death. Snell is sorry, because there are hints that Jack’s later years are no less interesting than his first thirty-four.

Yet Snell is nagged by doubts about the truth of Jack’s story. Snell has checked facts against other records, and found them to be frighteningly accurate—where they can be checked. Jack Crabb himself, however, appears in no record, and when one looks at his claims — to be raised by Cheyenne, survive the battle at the Washita, learn gunmanship from Wild Bill Hickok, and scout for Custer’s army — it is hard to believe that any one person could do all that.

Snell also points out that Jack is not always correct. He claims that Crazy Horse never wears war paint or feathers, while Snell himself has a war bonnet once worn by Crazy Horse. So Snell believes there are some elements of Jack’s story that are untrue. On the whole, Snell presents the story and leaves the evaluation up to the reader.

Analysis

The story is complete. Jack’s story holds together pretty well. As Snell observes, where it can be verified, it is. It is also internally consistent. Jack’s character also tends to support the reader’s belief, because he does not like or appear to participate in self-praise. That is, it wouldn’t really fit with what we know of Jack to have him make up a story in which he appears important, because he doesn’t appear to be seeking that kind of attention.

On the other hand, Snell has uncovered one gaping hole in the story: Jack claims that Crazy Horse never wore feathers, while Snell has his war bonnet. Berger, the author, has cleverly presented the reader with the question: who to believe, Jack or Ralph? This device serves to head off the reader’s skepticism, because Berger himself poses the question.

Vocabulary

allusions, devoid, deplorable, agnostic, lien, credulity, idiom, uncouth, overimpressionable, mythomaniac

Characters

Jack Crabb

At a minimum, Jack Crabb is a gifted storyteller who has some knowledge of the American West during the pioneer era. Perhaps his knowledge goes much deeper, and he really participated in some historically important events and activities of that era. One way or another, he claims no special ability, just that he tried to make his way through life, coping as anyone would with the challenges he faced. That unpretentious attitude makes him an engaging and accessible narrator.

Ralph Fielding Snell

Ralph Fielding Snell is the spoiled adult child of a wealthy man. He is fascinated by the rough and tumble history of the Old West, but he is just about as far from rough and tumble as one can imagine. He is frail, self-important, and perhaps even gullible. His reliability -- or lack thereof -- frames the whole book, making it either stand on its own, or not stand at all.

Old Lodge Skins

Old Lodge Skins is the leader of a group of Cheyenne. It is a relatively small band, because every time Old Lodge Skins gets together with a larger group, he (as his father before him) ends up seducing someone else's wife and becoming persona non grata. He becomes mentor and father figure for Jack, whom he names Little Big Man.

Silas Pendrake

Silas Pendrake's appetite is even larger than his body. Silas has not slept with his wife, perhaps because he sees women as temptresses, if not devil-sent slop buckets designed to bring men to hell. He appears to be trying to do right, but he often seems lost and uncertain of the path to take.

Lavender

Lavender is a freed slave, working as gardener and handyman for the Pendrakes. He chafes under the restrictions of his wife, finding it ironic that he has been freed from the slavery of men only to find himself the slave of a woman.

Wild Bill Hickok

Wild Bill Hickok is a bit of a flamboyant character given to extravagant demonstrations of his skills at gunplay. He also likes to play poker, which is where he meets Jack Crabb. He trains Jack in the use of the handgun, for shooting at both inanimate targets and those who shoot back.

Caroline Crabb

Caroline is Jack's sister. She is no classic beauty, but not entirely unattractive. On the other hand, she has no idea how to make herself attractive to the opposite sex, and her idealistic notions of how romance should work get her in plenty of trouble.

Younger Bear

Younger Bear is a Cheyenne boy of about Jack's age. When Jack first lives with the Cheyenne, he makes a few gaffes that make an enemy of Younger Bear. Jack saves Younger Bear's life—which will pay off in later years. Younger Bear joins the "Contraries," among the bravest Cheyenne.

Amelia

Amelia is working as a young prostitute when Jack first meets her. He figures out he is her uncle, grabs her out of the whorehouse, and pays for her education. She rapidly becomes used to life as a gentlewoman.

George Armstrong Custer

General Custer is a headstrong, self-important peacock of a man, but he is also a man who clearly focusses on his goals and ignores all obstacles. Jack gets annoyed with his arrogance, but he admires Custer's energy and determination.

Objects/Places

Clothing

Jack transitions from the world of the Native Americans to the world of the Whites and back. Each time, he finds his identity with the help of a wardrobe change.

Guns

Firearms figure in Jack's story in several ways. He uses them himself and becomes quite an expert at certain types of shooting. The guns are even more important because the white folks have them and the Native Americans have very few.

Liquor

Liquor precipitates the initial incident that ends with Jack being raised by the Cheyenne. Jack sinks into a liquor-fed depression when his wife and child are taken. Jack's brother makes his living selling liquor of dubious origin (and dubious quality) to white settlers and Native Americans.

The Platte River

The Platte River separates the Northern and Southern Great Plains. It is a path for pioneers, and a guide for the transcontinental railroad. Because of that it becomes a focal point for conflict.

Buffalo

The Buffalo are the source of sustenance for the Plains Native Americans. The gigantic herd is split by the railroad, and then virtually destroyed by buffalo hunters.

Poker

Poker sustains Jack through a section of his life although he sometimes depends on a little assistance from a mirrored ring. Wild Bill Hickok dies with his back to the door while playing poker.

Mule Trains

Jack and his sister Caroline make a living as mule skinners driving teams of mules across inhospitable terrain. Jack is a small man, but he proves himself tough enough for the job.

Food

Food (and the lack thereof) is a driving force through much of the book. The Native Americans often go through periods of privation, followed by periods of plenty. The foods they depend on and the way they are prepared require a bit of adjustment when Jack moves from life among the whites to life among the Native Americans.

The Little Bighorn

The Little Bighorn River is in the hilly country where the Sioux and Cheyenne retreat as the pioneers advance. It is an undesirable region for the pioneers until gold is discovered in the black hills.

Frontier Towns

Jack spends time in Westport (which becomes Kansas City), Auraria (which becomes Denver), Cheyenne, Fort Lincoln, Leavenworth, and other towns throughout the frontier. Although these towns would be primitive by Eastern standards, they are still a bit too civilized for Jack. His town ventures never go very well.

The Wilderness

Even as a young man, Jack is able to get work as a guide. He has learned to read signs, learned to hunt, and learned to survive.

Themes

Native American and White Philosophy and Conflict

Jack travels between two worlds: the world of the Cheyenne and the world of the white pioneers. He is uniquely positioned to observe and understand both philosophies. The difference in philosophy extends through every phase of life.

For example, the Whites send their children to school for formal education, while the Native Americans teach through play, through action, and through story. Morality is the same way: when Pendrake lists the sins Jack should try to avoid, he could just as easily be describing Old Lodge Skins's personal traits.The Native Americans believe in a circle of life, where the Earth and sun, life and death, predator and prey are all part of a mystical circle. Warfare is a different thing to white and Native American as well. The whites fight to achieve an aim, while the Native Americans fight for the joy and the challenge.

The whites believe the hierarchy of society gives one person authority over another—and also makes one person responsible for another. The Native Americans believe each person has authority and responsibility only for themselves.This catalog of differences could go on, but the effect is more important than the list.

Westward expansion is driving more and more white settlers toward the Plains tribes, and everywhere they met, the gap in communication causes misunderstanding and conflict. The physical conflict is the result, not the cause of the poor communication.The Native American and white philosophies appear incompatible. Where the two groups come into contact, they inevitably come into conflict.This does not mean the philosophies themselves are incompatible. Jack has characteristics he learned from Native American society and from white society. Together in one person the characteristics are compatible, and Jack is the personification of that fact.

Reputation and Reality

The book is full of examples of the disparity between reputation and reality, and the power of reputation. For example, Wild Bill Hickok faces a bouncer who singlehandedly throws three burly guys out of a cathouse. The bouncer is confident and aggressive until he learns the man he is facing is Wild Bill; then he loses his confidence and shrinks from confrontation.

General Custer leads a charge through a peaceful village and builds that questionable accomplishment into a reputation as a fierce and clever fighter. Custer appears to believe his own reputation in the way in which he ignores all offers of advice. Of course, that ends up getting him killed (along with a few hundred of his soldiers). Still, when Custer believes his own story, he is almost invincible during the battle at Little Bighorn. Eventually, reality trumps reputation.

In another example, however, reputation trumps reality.. Amelia is a skinny, poor prostitute until she acts as if she is a wealthy woman of fine breeding. She ends up married to a senator’s son. So the question remains open: what is more important, who you are, or who people think you are? Or do they end up being the same thing?

Style

Point of View

Little Big Man is written in first person, although there is one first person story within another. First, Ralph Fielding Snell tells his story about finding the story of Jack Crabb; then Jack Crabb tells his story. Because the two stories are told in first person, there are questions about their veracity. The reader naturally evaluates the reliability of each of the narrators, and the point of view increases the tension.

Setting

Little Big Man takes place throughout the Great Plains during a period of rapid expansion of settlement. The setting is absolutely critical to every aspect of the story. Ralph Snell tells the reader not to judge Jack too harshly because he is representative of the men of the era.

The central conflicts of the story are completely dependent on the setting as well. Without a rush of pioneers, there is no need for the Native Americans and whites to share the same space. If they were not in the same space, their world views would not come into direct conflict, and the physical conflict would not be necessary either.

Language and Meaning

The language is very direct and straightforward. In fact, Snell says the language is rougher and more direct before he edited the tapes.

Although there are many examples of places where Jack demonstrates the sparseness of his education, there is some inconsistency in the language. Jack says things like, “I never had rode horse much before,” but he also uses words like “supercilious,” “assemblage,” and “vermilion.”

Structure

Little Big Man is a story within a story, with the frame being the narrative of the search for a survivor of Custer’s Last Stand, and the main story being the narrative of the survivor, Jack Crabb. The unique structure forces the reader to evaluate the reliability of each narrator and explicitly consider which one is telling the truth. Jack’s narrative is fairly linear, going directly from the earliest events to the latest. Strewn into that framework, however, are tidbits from a future perspective—from the present perspective of Jack Crabb as he narrates the events from 80 years earlier.

Quotes

[L]ike everybody who gives up everything for the sake of one big idea, they periodically lost all of their hopes. (Chapter 1)

[L]ike anything else, living in it made it your reality, and when next I entered a white settlement, I missed the odor of what seemed to me life itself and felt I would suffocate. (Chapter 2)

You recall Old Lodge Skins's attitude towards the whites: their ways were nonsensical to him but he figured they had reasons. I wasn't going to let no Indian outdo me in tolerance. (Chapter 7)

I wasn't long in discovering that it is a rare person in the white world who wants to hear what the other fellow says, all the more so when the other fellow really knows what he is talking about. (Chapter 8)

Now I know that every living thing is neither more nor less of Nature than the next, but I was young then and them distinctions bothered me, what with the conflicting claims: Indians believing they was more 'natural' than white men, and the latter insisting they themselves was more 'human'. (Chapter 13)

The Cheyenne would have been depressed to see a fellow tribesman gone to rot; they would have believed it reflected discredit upon all Human Beings. On the contrary, an American just loves to see another who ain't worth a damn. (Chapter 15)

It is always harder on a man to watch trouble than to be in it. (Chapter 20)

He would rather I had killed him than take pains to show I was basically indifferent to the fact of his existence so long as I could protect my own hide. (Chapter 22)

Caroline was one of them people who utter three failures of judgment for every two words they speak, and by trying to correct them, you only succeed in presenting further occasion on which to exercise their vice, so I kept my remarks to a minimum. (Chapter 24)

That just goes to show you there ain't no race that has a monopoly on truth. (Chapter 26)

So while as a Caucasian you could call him a man of principle, from the Indian point of view you might say he had no principles at all. Especially since soldiers, unlike savages, did not fight for fun. (Chapter 29)

Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Author Thomas Berger places Jack Crabb's narrative in a framework established by Ralph Snell, who is not introduced in a flattering fashion. Discuss whether Fielding's reliability (or unreliability) helps or hinders the believability of Jack Crabb's story.

Topic 2

Jack says that Silas Pendrake "never seemed to know how to act natural except when eating." Why is eating the only thing he does naturally?

Topic 3

According to this book, Native Americans and whites do not understand each other. They do not understand how each other hunt, how each other fight, how each other organize their societies. Those misunderstandings drive them into what seems to be inevitable conflict. On the other hand, Jack lives in both worlds—the Native American and the white. What is Berger trying to say about the possibility for coexistence of traits historically associated with each people?

Topic 4

Jack Crabb admits several things he does not need to own up to: cheating at poker, shooting someone in the back, spending a year as a dissipated drunk. Do those admissions undermine his trustworthiness as a narrator, or do they prove his reliability?

Topic 5

Ralph Snell tries to confirm Jack's story. He is successful with many specifics, but not all. Jack's story is also packed with coincidences, having him present at many historically significant events. Ultimately, the only way to evaluate Jack's story is by its believability. Does the story unroll in such a way as to seem believable?