

Riders of the Purple Sage Study Guide

Riders of the Purple Sage by Zane Grey

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Plot Summary

Published in 1912, *Riders of the Purple Sage* is one of the original books in the American Western genre. As a forerunner for such great Western authors as Louis L'Amour, Zane Grey's book includes elements now considered to be classic: a lonely, misunderstood gunfighter and a woman in need of protection. Lassiter is a man whose very name strikes fear into the hearts of men; reputed to be a vile, soulless killer, Lassiter is actually an honorable man who wields his big guns only in the name of personal justice. Lassiter's eighteen-year quest to find his sister, Milly Erne, finally ends at Milly's hidden gravesite on Jane Withersteen's ranch in Utah. Kidnapped by Mormons and brain-washed into becoming a Mormon wife, Milly was forced to leave her real husband behind. Frank Erne is the father of the child which she births while in captivity. When Lassiter meets Jane, he learns Milly had defied her captors, and for this they had stolen her little girl away. Milly died heartbroken in her friend Jane Withersteen's arms.

Jane herself is a Mormon woman. Unmarried, she controls nearly all the wealth in the town of Cottonwoods, which she has inherited from her rich father. Tull, a Mormon Elder, has long sought her for his wife. Good-hearted Jane believes Tull really loves her, although she does not love him, but in truth Tull merely wants to marry her so he can take ownership of her property. Jane's loving heart bids her to repeatedly flout her churchmen's restrictions against befriending Gentiles. Her close friendship with the handsome Gentile rider, Bern Venters, worries Tull. If Jane marries Venters, the Mormon Church will lose control of Jane's riches. Tull uses his power within the church to make Venters an outcast in Cottonwoods. Venters does not fight back because he has promised gentle Jane not to take up arms against her fellow Mormons. Yet the arrival of Lassiter inspires Venters to stand up for himself and fight like a man.

Lassiter and his guns save Venters from the savage beating which Tull had planned for him. In retaliation, Tull calls in Jane's Mormon riders, leaving her cattle unprotected. When the red herd is stolen by the rustler, Oldring, Venters retrieves his guns, says goodbye to Jane, and heads into Deception Pass in search of Oldring's hideout. Here the story diverges along two parallel tracks, as Venters tracks Oldring in Deception Pass and gradually falls in love with Oldring's Masked Rider, Bess. Back at the ranch, Jane uses all her womanly wiles to convince Lassiter to put down his guns and turn his back on violence. She succeeds only in making Lassiter fall in love with her. Lassiter refuses to put down his guns while Tull's men continue to steal from Jane. In the end, Tull's men succeed in taking everything away from Jane - everything except her newfound love for Lassiter. Together, she and Lassiter turn their backs on Withersteen Ranch forever and ride away in a desperate attempt to escape Tull's armed bandits.

The fleeing couple crosses paths with Venters and Bess, who are fleeing Deception Pass and Oldring. When Lassiter and Jane recognize Bess as the long lost daughter of Milly Erne, Jane gives Venters and Bess her horses. Only Jane's fleet horses, Black Star and Night, can possibly outrun the armed men who seek to kill the four fleeing fugitives. Unable to flee without their horses, Lassiter and Jane take refuge in the hideout Venters has been using in Deception Pass. Called Surprise Valley, the hideout



is filled with enough livestock, water, fertile ground, game, and supplies to feed Lassiter and Jane indefinitely. The entrance to Surprise Valley is protected by Balancing Rock, a huge boulder placed at the entrance of the valley by ancient cliff-dwellers; in case of attack, the rock can be pushed off its pedestal to start a landslide and close the entrance. To escape their pursuers, Lassiter and Jane are forced to tip over Balancing Rock, thus trapping themselves together, forever, inside Surprise Valley. From miles away, Bess and Venters are celebrating their newfound freedom when they hear the tell-tale sound of the great boulder destroying the entrance to their former hideout.



Chapters 1 - 3

Chapters 1 - 3 Summary

Chapter 1: Jane Withersteen frowns at the purple, sage-covered slope as she awaits the arrival of the churchmen. A rider has just brought her news that the men of her church are coming to attack her right to befriend a Gentile. She stares out at the land which she owns and loves, thinking of her deep ties to the village of Cottonwoods and the verdant Amber Spring. Jane has inherited all of this wealth and land from her rich father, along with tens of thousands of heads of cattle and the fastest horses in the land. But this year, 1831, has been marked by growing strife between the Mormons and the Gentile settlers in Utah. Jane is Mormon-born, but has befriended many Gentiles in her life and wishes for nothing more than peace between the two factions.

These thoughts of peace are interrupted by the arrival of Tull's riders. Tull is an Elder of Jane's church. He greets Jane curtly and sends his men to fetch Jane's Gentile friend, Venters. Tull intends to arrest Venters for his supposed participation in a shooting the previous evening. Jane protests that Venters is innocent. She insists that Venters was with her at the time of the shooting and that, at her request, he no longer carries guns. She accuses Tull of using the shooting as a pretext to arrest Venters. Tull chides Jane for defending Venters. Indignantly, Jane insists Venters is the best rider she has ever employed, and that she will always be grateful to him for saving little Fay Larkin's life. Tull reminds her that Fay is a Gentile child and tells Jane she is throwing her love away on Gentiles. It occurs to Jane for the first time that maybe she does love Venters. This only angers Tull further. Tull's men arrive with Venters; his arms are bound but he stands defiant. Tull orders him to leave Cottonwoods. Venters laughs and calls Tull a "wiving Mormon" who is only interested in marrying Jane for her wealth (pg. 6). Tull announces he will have Venters whipped. Jane protests, but Tull tells her not to defend a friendship which is offensive to her Bishop. Hoping to spare Venters the whipping, Jane apologizes, but she realizes Tull has no intention of letting Venters go. Jane issues an urgent prayer for help.

Just then, a rider appears on the horizon. Tull and his men shield Venters from view as the man approaches. They see the rider's black leather clothes and black-butted guns and realize he must be a gun-man. The rider greets Jane courteously; Tull and his men, less courteously. She introduces herself and gives him permission to water his horse. The strange man warns Jane if she knew his name she might not let him water the horse, but she insists he is welcome to her hospitality. He spots Venters, bound within the circle of Tull's men, and asks Jane if he's interrupted something. Jane assures him that Venters is an honest boy who has done no harm. The stranger notes that the gun-packing Mormon men have bound an unarmed Gentile. Tull warns him not to interfere, stating that Mormon law allows them to do as they will with Venters. The stranger curses Mormon law. When Venters insists he has done no wrong, the stranger informs Tull there will be no whipping. Tull threatens the stranger, who drops, lightning quick,



into a shooter's crouch. Venters recognizes the stranger as Lassiter. At the mention of the dreaded name, Tull and his men ride away.

Chapter 2: Venters communicates his deep gratitude to Lassiter. Jane takes Lassiter's horse, insisting on watering him herself. She sees that Lassiter's horse has traveled far today. Lassiter confirms he has ridden nearly seventy miles. Jane notices the horse is blind, and Lassiter tells her that a group of Mormon men blinded his horse with hot irons. Jane expresses sorrow at the cruelty of Mormon men. She explains that Mormons have been persecuted to such an extent that the men have developed hatred in their hearts, but she insists that Mormon women pray continually for the softening of their men's hearts. Cynically, Lassiter advises her that this will never happen. Jane asks him if he holds a grudge against Mormon women, too; Lassiter responds that he thinks Mormon women are noble, long-suffering, unhappy, and blinded by their religion.

Both soothed and troubled by his words, Jane invites Venters' rescuer to dine with her. She takes him into her large, stately ranch home and excuses herself while her women set the table. In her room, Jane stares at her reflection in the mirror. Given to natural vanity, she knows she is beautiful. But now she looks at herself critically, wondering if a man like Lassiter could find her attractive. She wonders how Lassiter knows so much about Mormons. She thinks of his grudge against Mormon men and decides to win him over. If, by the power of her beauty she can keep him at Withersteen ranch, she believes she can convince him to soften his heart towards Mormon men. At dinner, Jane radiates charm for the benefit of Lassiter and Venters. She asks Lassiter what brought him to Cottonwoods. Lassiter tells her that he heard that Jane knows the location of Milly Erne's grave. Jane asks him what relation he had to her best friend, Milly. Lassiter is vague, stating the Milly's relatives wish to know where her final resting place lies. Jane agrees to take him, but they must go in secret so that the Mormon men do not find out that Lassiter has seen the grave. Jane invites him to spend the night, but Lassiter insists on sleeping outdoors. Venters, with a bitter laugh, tells Lassiter that he too must make his bed in the sage.

After Lassiter leaves, Venters insists that Jane return his guns. At Jane's accusing look, Venters assures her he will not seek out her churchmen, but warns her he will defend himself. Venters tells Jane she is blind to the evil of these men. He tells Jane he must leave. He has lost everything by clinging to his friendship with Jane: his reputation, good name, and the good-will of the people of Cottonwoods. Venters warns her that the invisible hand of the Mormon men will soon turn against her. She claims not to understand his words and so he speaks plainly. Bishop Dyer, head of her Church, will attempt to compel her into marrying Tull. Jane defends her Bishop and Tull; she claims Tull has loved her for many years and is merely jealous. Venters insists Tull and Dyer just want to get their hands on her wealth. He reminds her of Milly Erne's fate. In silence they watch Jane's riders come in from the sage. Venters mentions seeing her riders on the trail to Deception Pass. Jane warns him that Oldring, the cattle rustler, uses the Pass as a hideout and if Venters is seen there the Mormon men will accuse him of rustling. Venters reminds Jane that Deception Pass contains the only water source in the area besides Jane's Amber Spring and that he must go there to water his horse when out on the trail.



They change the subject to Lassiter, remarking on Lassiter's Texas accent, so similar to Milly Erne's. How could this stranger know Milly? Milly lived in Cottonwoods for ten years and has been dead for two. Venters tells her what he knows about Lassiter. Lassiter's name has been attached to many rumors involving violence against Mormons. Venters cannot be sure how much of the gossip is true, but he knows that Lassiter is a fearless, quick, and accurate gun-man. Just the power of his name was enough to scare off Tull; Venters believes if Tull had reached for his gun, Lassiter would have killed him. Jane laments Venters' outcast status. She suggests if Venters were to do some service to Cottonwoods, such as discovering the hideout of Oldring and his gang, the villagers and even Tull might change their minds about shunning Venters. Venters agrees to look for Oldring's hideout. He promises to see Jane tomorrow, but beyond that he makes no promise. He says goodnight and heads out to the sage. On the way he sees a large body of men and horses, led by Oldring and his legendary Masked Rider.

Chapter 3: Venters is worried about Oldring and his men prowling around after dark. He waits quietly in the sage until he's certain the rustlers are gone, then slips down the path towards the village of Cottonwoods. The townsmen converse in tense clusters rather than lounging around amiably. Venters does not know what the men are discussing, but he sees no disturbance to indicate that Oldring and his men have been to town, therefore Venters concludes that the townsmen are discussing Lassiter's arrival. Venters scopes out the town and notices that there are no lights on in the church, in Bishop Dyer's home, or in Tull's cottage. He hides in the shadows as Tull and his froglike henchman, Jerry, ride down the street. Once they pass, Venters leaves town, worried for Jane. He believes the tensions in Cottonwoods will soon explode and fears Lassiter's arrival may be the catalyst. Back out in the sage, he whistles for his two dogs, Ring and Whitie. The dogs take turns watching over him in the night. At sunrise, Venters finds his horse, which has wandered in the sage. The old, swaybacked horse is proof of Venters' misfortunes. Venters saddles up and waits until he sees Lassiter's black horse rise over the ridge.

Venters appreciates Lassiter's friendly greeting. For too long, Venters has lived as an outcast because of his friendship with Jane. Venters tells Lassiter about seeing Oldring's gang. Lassiter has run into Oldring before, years ago when Oldring rustled cattle at the head of the Rio Virgin. Venters asks Lassiter if he has ever heard of a Gentile man prospering in Mormon country; Lassiter has not. Venters wants to leave Utah and return to Illinois where his mother lives; he tells Lassiter how he left home to seek his fortune mining gold. Venters wound up in Utah, where he worked odd jobs until he finally settled down and prospered working as a rider for Jane Withersteen. His prosperity ended when he and Jane became friends. Lassiter needs to hear no more; he understands the prejudice of Mormons and why they would drive a man like Venters away from a woman like Jane. Lassiter does not understand how Mormon men can marry more than one woman, and experience has taught him that their Church Elders use religion to force the people to their will. Mormons are slow to kill another man, which is the only saving grace Lassiter sees in them. Lassiter asks Venters why he has allowed Tull and the others to ruin him without seeking revenge. Venters explains that Jane took his guns and convinced him to overlook every crime and insult perpetrated



against him. Thus, Venters has lost everything, but now he has his guns back. Venters tells Lassiter if Tull attacks him again Venters will shoot him. Lassiter believes Venters is capable of killing Tull.

Lassiter asks Venters to tell him about Milly Erne. Milly had already been in Cottonwoods for several years by the time Venters arrived. Venters had thought her more Gentile than Mormon, but by all accounts, Milly was passionate about religion. Milly was rumored to be the wife of a Mormon, but no man claimed her openly. After a few years under the Mormon yoke, Milly had begun to resent it. She had quit her job teaching school and stopped attending the Mormon Church. She even refused to raise her young daughter as a Mormon. The Mormons stole the child from Milly, though the official story is that the child was lost. Milly dedicated her life to finding her child, but as time went on and the child remained lost, she gave up all hope and died of a broken heart in the arms of her only friend, Jane. Lassiter demands to know what Mormon man claimed Milly as his wife. Venters does not know. Jane does, but she will not tell anyone.

The day grows hot and the two men walk together down to Amber Spring. "Next to his horse a rider of the sage loved a spring. And this spring was the most beautiful and remarkable known to the upland riders of southern Utah. It was the spring that made old Withersteen a feudal lord and now enabled his daughter to return the toll which her father had exacted from the toilers of the sage." (pg. 29) Amber Spring gushes along a moss-grown channel; lilies dot its banks. Below the spring, three gorgeous artificial lakes are surrounded by leafy poplar trees. Ducks and herons populate the lakes, and birds sing in the trees. This idyllic aquatic environment poses a sharp contrast to the rocky sage of the land beyond. Next to the largest artificial lake stands a set of corrals and a large stone barn. Henhouses surround the barn, and from within the barn, powerful horses peer out from their stalls. Jane owns and loves this spring and these horses.

On the way to her house, they meet Jane in the lane. She reports that Tull has ridden to the nearby town of Glaze. She is relieved to think his absence will grant her some temporary peace. Jane shows off her Arabian horses to Lassiter. Night and Black Star are her favorites; perfectly matched in size, Night's coat is a deep black matte, while Black Star's is a glossy, shiny black. Bells and Wrangle are her two other favorites; Lassiter is duly impressed with the quality horse flesh on display in the Withersteen corral. Jane flirts with Lassiter and refuses to become worried by the fact that her night riders have not yet returned to the ranch. On horseback, Jane leads Venters and Lassiter to Milly Erne's unmarked grave, located on Jane's property. As they return to the corrals, they spot a rider approaching. It is Judkins, a Gentile rider from the night shift. Judkins' desperate pace signals trouble.

Chapters 1 - 3 Analysis

In these first three chapters, the author establishes the back-stories of the two main protagonists, Jane Withersteen and Bern Venters, and introduces all of the other major



characters, including Lassiter, Tull, Oldring, and Oldring's Masked Rider. Jane and Venters are introduced to the reader as an established, if platonic, couple, but in Chapter 2 the author foreshadows their eventual break-up and Jane's forthcoming relationship with Lassiter. As *Riders of the Purple Sage* is one of the older Westerns, the story development and pacing are noticeably slower than that of modern literature. There are two reasons for this slower style. In the nineteenth century, during which the story is set, life, especially in rural areas like Utah's outback, proceeded at a slower, more natural pace in keeping with the seasonal changes of nature. Thus, conflicts and events in the story are slower to develop. Additionally, early twentieth century literature was written prior to the advent of modern media technology which has increased the reader's demand for, and tolerance of, faster communication speeds. Today this gradual beginning would be unusual in an action novel, but at the time it was not at all rare for an author to spend several chapters establishing the ordinary world of his characters before changing this world through an inciting incident. Chapter 3 ends with the promise of such an inciting incident. The arrival of Judkins at a furious, galloping pace telegraphs to the reader that Jane's world is about to change.



Chapters 4 - 6

Chapters 4 - 6 Summary

Chapter 4: When Judkins thunders to a stop in front of Jane, Venters, and Lassiter, Jane can see he's been shot. Judkins assures her it's only a graze, but tells her that rustlers have made off with her red herd. Jane's first thought is for the safety of the other night riders guarding the red herd. Judkins says there were no other riders; everyone except Judkins failed to report to work. At daybreak the rustlers showed up and chased Judkins for miles, trying to kill him. He informs Jane that none of day riders have shown up this morning. Jane worries that the rustlers have killed all her riders, but Venters suggests her riders failed to show for work because of behind-the-scenes pressure from the church Elders. Jane will not believe this, insisting that Venters is merely bitter about Mormons. Venters vows to find the red herd. He is amazed that rustlers could make off with twenty-five hundred head of cattle and cannot imagine how the rustlers will hide and graze them. Judkins suggests Jane give Venters a decent horse to improve his odds of survival. Jane suggests Venters take Black Star or Night, but Venters insists that Wrangle is the fastest horse in the corral. Jane gives him the horse and supplies.

As Venters rides away, he considers the dark implications of Oldring's presence and Tull's absence. He knows that Tull wouldn't set out to ruin Jane unless he can profit from it, and wonders what alliance Tull has made with Oldring. On Wrangle, Venters rides the twenty-five miles to the cason (canyon) at Deception Pass in three hours. He strikes the trail of the red herd, but aside from cattle tracks and a few stray steers, he sees no signs of life. Venters follows the cattle trail to where it enters Deception Pass. Many riders have entered the Pass through this route, never to return. Venters always uses an alternate entrance to get down into the cason. He sees no tracks besides his own here but proceeds carefully. Entering Deception Pass requires traversing down five hundred feet of steep trail to reach the level valley floor below; Venters is pleased to have Wrangle for the descent. Once within the cason, Venters finds his regular camping spot. He recalls how he once loved sleeping beneath the stars, but since he has been forced to live apart from society, he no longer enjoys the dark loneliness. Venters has lived as an outcast for a year and is deeply grateful for the company of his dogs, Ring and Whitie. This trip to Deception Pass was begun in "reckless determination to achieve something at any cost, and now it resolved itself into an adventure worthy of all its reason and cunning, and keenness of eye and ear." (pp. 38-39)

Venters wakes the following day to see the rim of the cason bathed in golden sunlight. He finds a stream and follows it deeper into the cason. After the first ten miles, the cason opens out and becomes vastly wide. Venters continues to follow the water, which keeps him on the main trail through the Pass. He enters a huge natural amphitheatre, surrounded on all sides by entrances to other casons. Venters crosses the amphitheatre and continues along the Pass on the other side, marked by the widening flow of water from the stream; the Pass leads to an incredible vista of purple sage-swept plains, flush with birds, rabbits, antelope, and other game. On Wrangle, with Ring and Whitie



following close behind, Venters follows the stream through this plain. On the other side, he sees the plain enclosed with jagged yellow cliffs of stone. He abandons the stream and begins exploring the nooks and crannies in the stone cliffs. He finds high ground and gazes out over the many cacons searching for the path of the stream, which should indicate which cacons connect to the Pass.

Venters enters an offshoot cason at random and finds an abundance of grass for grazing his horse. He decides to make this his hiding place if he can find water here. He marks the entrance to the offshoot cason mentally so that he will later be able to find his way out, then investigates deeper into the cason looking for water. He passes through a narrow corridor of rock separating his new hiding place from the main body of the cason; here he discovers that this cason, too, is the hub of another wheel of offshoot cacons. In the center of the hub cason, he stumbles across the tracks of Jane Withersteen's red herd. He is surprised that the tracks are wet, as if the cattle have been driven through water. Ring growls, warning Venters of approaching rustlers. He drops low in the sage and watches as eight riders disappear under a cason wall. He watches the direction from which they came and sees three more men enter the cason from that direction. The three riders disappear into the same offshoot cason as the first group, and Venters realizes he's found Oldring's hideout. However, he is puzzled by the fact that the cattle tracks head in a different direction. Oldring must be grazing them elsewhere. Suddenly, Venters sees two horsemen approach. One of them is Oldring's infamous Masked Rider. Venters drops back into the sage, but too late, the riders have seen him. The rustler in the lead grabs for his gun and fires; splinters of wood hit Venters as the bullet whistles through the sage. Venters returns fire and drops the first rider. His second shot causes the Masked Rider to fall from his saddle.

Chapter V: Venters holds his breath as he waits to see if the other rustlers have heard the shots. When no one comes, he realizes he is safe for the moment. Venters examines the body of the first rustler, sickened at having killed for the first time in his life. Despite his nausea, Venters feels elated as he walks towards the body of Oldring's Masked Rider. He imagines telling Lassiter that he has killed the infamous Masked Rider. Yet when he sees the rider's horse, he pauses; there are no gun-sheaths on the saddle. The Masked Rider was unarmed. Venters rushes to the Masked Rider's side; he hears the rider breathe and is distraught to realize he must watch the masked man die and even more distraught to have killed an unarmed man. Venters removes the rider's hat and sees how young the boy is; quickly he rips open the rider's blouse to examine the bullet wound and is stunned to realize the Masked Rider is a girl. The girl stares unseeing. She begs Venters to hold her as the darkness comes. Her final words are a prayer to God for mercy. Venters believes she is dead, but discovers a faint pulse. He presses sage leaves into the bullet wound. Venters knows he must not stay in the open with the bodies, but refuses to let her die alone. Gently, he lifts the girl and takes her back to his hiding place on the other side of the cason. Venters returns to catch the two horses belonging to his victims. When he returns, the girl's eyes are open. He gives her some water and she slips back into unconsciousness.

Venters creates a lean-to to shelter the dying girl and orders his dogs to watch over her. He creeps back through the rock corridor to the main cason and relocates the cattle



tracks. He follows them to another cason which curves around like a snake. He follows the winding cason till he spots the red herd amongst other colors of cattle in an enclosed valley. A wash of swift water flows through the valley and he realizes that Oldring is not only a rustler but a rancher as well. This natural hiding place offers enough grass and water for fifty thousand head of cattle, and since it is fully enclosed, Oldring requires no riders to keep his cattle together. Venters backtracks to his hiding spot. Along the way, he considers Oldring's activities. Prior to the theft of the red herd, Oldring had not stolen more than a few head of cattle over the previous few years - only enough to provide meat for his men. Venters begins to suspect that the Masked Rider and the vicious legends surrounding Oldring's rustlers may in fact be a smoke screen to hide Oldring's real purpose in Deception Pass, whatever that may be.

Venters looks for the tracks of the riders he saw earlier. He believes if he can track them back the direction they came from he will find Oldring's hideout, so he backtracks both the rustler's tracks and the wider tracks of the cattle; soon he discovers a roaring waterfall inside a short box cason. The cattle tracks lead out of the short cason, through the hub cason, and into the snakelike cason where the cattle are housed; Venters cannot figure out how the massive herd got into this short, boxed-in cason to begin with. There appears to be only one entrance and the cattle tracks lead out, not in. As he watches, puzzled, he spots another group of rustlers. Venters watches in surprise as they ride straight through the waterfall. Oldring has devised a clever hideout and its entrance is the waterfall. Venters covers his tracks and hurries back to his hidden camp. He finds the girl's eyes bright with fever. Venters offers her some more water. She asks who he is and he admits he shot her. Seeking to reassure her, tells her he will return her through the waterfall to Oldring's hideout. Terrified, she begs him not to take her back there.

Chapter VI: At the ranch, Jane tends Judkins' gunshot wound. She asks him what he thinks has happened to her riders. Judkins admits he believes as Venters does that Jane's Mormon churchmen have called in her riders. Jane is incensed that he would insult her churchmen. "Would Tull leave my herds at the mercy of rustlers and wolves just because - because--? No, no! It's unbelievable." (pg. 57) Judkins agrees such an action is unheard of, but he also reminds Jane that never before has there been a wealthy Mormon woman who refused to marry as she was ordered. He tells her she has "taken the bit between her teeth." (pg. 57) Jane considers his words. She sees herself as obedient and humble, but knows that deep within her breast lurks a forbidden desire for freedom. Jane finishes dressing his wound and sends him to the village to gather intelligence on her riders. After he leaves, she occupies her mind with the numerous tasks involved in running a large ranch. In addition to this work, Jane has put into place a charitable system for employing poor Gentiles. Gentiles down on their luck in a Mormon community cannot rely on their neighbors to aid them. Therefore, Jane devises unnecessary tasks for which she can hire them. She must make the tasks seem real so that her churchmen will not discover she is charitably aiding the poor Gentiles, and so that the Gentiles will not feel wounded pride over taking charity. By sunset, Jane's peace of mind has been restored by her labors.



Judkins returns the next morning, wearing guns for the first time in Jane's memory. Judkins reports that a masked man showed up at his house last night and warned him not to work for Jane. Judkins came to work anyway. Jane is touched by his faithfulness; only this lone Gentile remains faithful to her when all her Mormon riders have abandoned her. Judkins asks her to "'turn that deaf Mormon ear aside, an' let me talk clear an' plain in the other.'" (pg. 60) He explains that all of Jane's riders have joined a vigilante group called "The Riders" whose supposed purpose is to track rustlers. The group is led by Jerry Card, Tull's right-hand man; Tull and Card did not ride to Glaze as Jane was told. Only Jane's riders have been recruited for Tull's vigilante group; other area ranchers still have their riders. Judkins offers to recruit Gentile boys to help him hold her white herd. She offers him and his boys the pick of all her horses except Black Star and Night. She begs him not to shed blood for her cattle or put themselves at risk. Jane is horrified to realize she now harbors hatred for Tull. Tull is a minister of God's word; he is closely allied with her beloved Bishop Dyer. She prays fervently to be forgiven for her hatred. She rises from her prayers intent on living her life as she sees fit. She vows never to marry Tull and resigns herself to the inevitable loss of cattle and property that will stem from this decision. She hopes that eventually Tull and his men will find they cannot break her will.

She hears iron hoofs on the stone courtyard and rushes out to find Lassiter smiling gently at her. Still hoping to soften his heart towards Mormons, Jane plies her feminine wiles to that end. Lassiter asks if she intends to fight. Jane replies that she cannot put up much of a fight by herself. Lassiter offers his services. Jane asks him not to take revenge on Mormon men for her sake, but she agrees to accept his friendship. Lassiter admits he came to town to kill the man who brought Milly Erne into the Mormon way of life and asks Jane to name the man. Jane refuses. Jane believes Lassiter is evil but hopes to save his soul. She thinks he may be the father of Milly Erne's missing child. Lassiter changes the subject, telling Jane there's something she needs to see. He asks her to bring a field glass and saddle a horse. Jane mounts Black Star and accompanies Lassiter to the top of a ridge. Jane peers over the ridge and sees her white herd, milling restlessly. Judkins and his boys are not there yet. Lassiter tells her the herd has already stampeded once this morning. Jane asks Lassiter what frightened the herd into stampeding. He points to the ridge opposite the cattle. Jane sees a white flash along the ridge. Through the field glass, Jane sees a white sheet being flung up in the air by unseen hands behind the ridge; the sun reflects off the sheet and irritates the herd. Lassiter explains that this sneaky tactic is designed to stampede the herd. Jane realizes with dismay that this must be the work of the Mormon men who are set on breaking her spirit and bringing her head low.

"Lassiter, I'll die before I ever bend my knees. I might be led; I won't be driven." (pg. 67) Jane, hoping to exonerate her Mormon brethren, asks Lassiter if this trick might not be Oldring's work. Lassiter explains that Oldring would not bother to skulk behind ridges; if Oldring wanted to stampede the cattle he and his men would ride straight at the herd with guns blazing. Just then, the nervous cattle begin their stampede. Jane cries out when she sees they are heading straight for the drop-off inside a nearby cason. Lassiter tells her he will mill the herd; he mounts his horse and heads for the cattle. Jane watches anxiously; she has heard of cattle milling and knows it is an impossible feat.



Afraid for Lassiter's life, she watches from the ridge as he rides to meet the cattle. His expert riding drives the head of the stampede back towards the body of the running cattle. Amazingly, Lassiter succeeds in sending the stampeding herd into a circle; they mill at high speed in a wheel, with Lassiter trapped inside. Jane gasps at his courageous act and prays for his safety. On foot, Lassiter somehow escapes the dangerous wheeling cattle. In the center of the wheel, the cattle run head on into each other. After some frightening grinding of horns the stampede ends. A weary Lassiter makes his way up the slope to Jane. Sadly, he reports that his horse was trampled. Jane offers him any of her horses to make up for his loss. Lassiter tells her he will accept a horse, but not one of her favorite blacks. But at the moment, he needs a horse and rides off on Black Star to catch and, against Jane's protests, kill the men who started the stampede.

Chapters 4 - 6 Analysis

Chapters 4 through 6 document the beginnings of Tull's campaign to pressure Jane into marriage. The inciting incident is the theft of Jane's red herd, but despite the egregious nature of this act, Jane has a hard time seeing or believing that Tull could be responsible. The author creates an insidiously evil antagonist in Tull, for Tull never acts directly. Zane Grey introduces the concept of an unseen conspiracy, the "invisible hand," intended to frighten Jane into marrying Tull in order to secure the protection of the churchmen, led by her would-be husband. Tull's profit, if he marries Jane, will consist of everything she owns; her vast empire encompasses nearly all the land, property, livestock, and goods in and around Cottonwoods.

As implied in earlier chapters, Jane's Mormon father obtained this wealth in the first place by charging exorbitant sums for the use of the only local water supply, Amber Springs, which he owned. Since taking over the Withersteen estate, Jane has given much of her wealth back to the townspeople, and for this generosity she is well loved. Because of this, the Mormon riders who betray Jane under Tull's orders are ashamed of their actions. Nonetheless, they submit to their Elder's request. The deep power Tull commands via his manipulation of the religious beliefs of the populace is evidenced by their willingness to follow him against the desires of their own hearts. That grown men would willingly submit to his high-handed tactics makes it clear to the reader that a lone, defenseless woman like Jane would be foolish to resist Tull. Her only defender is Lassiter, and despite his legendary skill with a gun, one man seems hardly capable of defeating this vast conspiracy. By creating such hard odds against Jane, the author is demonstrating the courage of her character, for in reaction to Tull's pressure, she vows never to marry him.



Chapters 7 - 9

Chapters 7 - 9 Summary

Chapter 7: Jane asks Lassiter to ride for her; he agrees, to her vast relief. Jane knows Lassiter is her only hope of defending her cattle, horses, and rangelands. She gives him one of her best horses, Bells, named for the ringing sound his quick hooves make on the stone courtyard. Lassiter instantly falls in love with Bells, and Bells is equally taken with Lassiter. Lassiter quickly adjusts to his new job, spending many long hours in the saddle riding herd on Jane's cattle. Jane's household settles back to normal following Lassiter's arrival, but she fears she is in the eye of the storm. One day, Jane sees Tull in the village. He chides her for hiring a gun-man like Lassiter. Jane insists she is only keeping Lassiter close so that she might stay his hand from violence. Tull bows and leaves, leaving Jane to wonder if he is who he seems. Tull acts as if he has no knowledge of the pressure being brought to bear upon Jane by the Mormons; having been an obedient Mormon woman her entire life, Jane has a hard time believing anything bad about a church Elder.

She visits her friend, one of the four wives of Collier Brandt. Children of all ages play in the yard surrounding the house. "As this house had four mistresses, it likewise had four separate sections, not one of which communicated with another, and all had to be entered from the outside." (pg. 73) On the porch, Jane finds the wives entertaining Bishop Dyer. Dyer is known for his charm, as well as for his ability to scare his flock with the fear of God. On this occasion he is charming the wives of Collier Brandt, and when Jane arrives he flirts with her. When he leaves, Jane confides some of her concerns to her friend, Mary Brandt. Mary warns her that Venters will be hung or shot if Jane does not marry Tull. Jane takes her leave of Mary and visits other Mormon women-friends in the village. All of them give Jane the same advice: Set aside all desire for personal happiness and marry Tull for the sake of obedience. Instead of being swayed by this advice, Jane finds herself even more determined to refuse Tull's advances.

As Jane strolls the streets of Cottonwoods, she is struck anew by the realization that she owns nearly everything. Jane has long cared for and supported the people of Cottonwoods, and they look on her as friend and benefactor. Despite all this, she is not allowed to be her own mistress. She heads down to the impoverished Gentile quarter to visit her Gentile friends. Today she is thrilled to be able to offer them real employment; Jane hopes to hire Gentiles to replace her Mormon riders. However, every man turns her down. They explain they have been warned away. They say Judkins, who has no family, can afford to risk working for Jane; these men, however, have been made to fear for their families' safety if they work for her. She gives them money and tells them her offer remains open. Jane seeks out the poorest house in the Gentile quarter. It belongs to the widow Larkin and her daughter Fay. Fay is upset that Jane has ignored her mother's messages. Mrs. Larkin is very ill and has sent repeatedly for Jane. Jane never received a single message; she discovers that Mrs. Larkin's messages were left with the Mormon women who work in Jane's house. Jane is horrified to think her women may be



working against her. Mrs. Larkin begs Jane, not for the first time, to adopt little Fay when Mrs. Larkin dies. Mrs. Larkin asks Jane not to raise Fay with Mormon teachings, and Jane agrees.

Chapter 8: Back in the cason, Venters considers the wounded girl. He is moved by her dying prayer and by the fear in her eyes when he offered to take her back to Oldring. Had Venters known the Masked Rider was a girl, he would have prejudged her and could not now consider thinking well of her. However, as he discovered her gender in a moment of extremity, sympathy for the girl begins to fill his heart. Her name is Bess; she drops her eyes in silent shame when asked her last name. That she is decent enough to be ashamed of her past lifts his spirits. She begs him not to take her to Cottonwoods, where she will be hung as a rustler. She prefers to be left in the cason to die. Venters insists she fight to live; her wounds are so bad that if she does not fight she will die. He promises to nurse her back to health and discuss her future later.

Venters leaves her to rest and sets out to hunt for food. Unable to fire his rifle with the rustlers nearby, he throws a cedar branch at a rabbit, wounding it. The rabbit flees; Venters is unwilling to relinquish the meat and he doesn't want the crippled rabbit to escape and die a slow, agonizing death. He pursues the rabbit up a slope and finally catches and kills it at the top of the slope. The slope is surrounded by large yellow cliffs which rise into the sky around the cason. Venters notices a pattern of nicks cut into the yellow stone. He recognizes them as steps, cut into the rock by ancient cliff-dwellers; Venters has seen such things before. Realizing he's discovered a potentially safer hiding place, Venters ascends up the cliff steps. He expects to come across the hidden stone houses of the cliff-dwellers, but instead he finds a narrow, uphill passageway through the cliff. The walls and roof of this natural corridor are made of sliding rock, frozen in formation. Venters walks under the perilously balanced rocks, expecting them to slide down upon his head at any moment. He notices no evidence on the ground that the rocks have fallen in recent years. "Venters felt how foolish it was for him to fear these broken walls; to fear that, after they had endured for thousands of years, the moment of his passing should be the one for them to slip. Yet he feared it." (pg. 85)

At the top of the passageway, Venters finds an enormous, carved rock on a pedestal. The bottom half of the rock has been chipped away by stone hatchets to round the rock at its base; its entire weight rests on a tiny point. Venters wonders why the cliff-dwellers would have done such a thing. He pushes on the rock and it tilts, then swings back to its original position. Venters realizes the rock was placed there for defensive purposes. It balances precariously above the passageway of sliding rock. If Venters or anyone were to push the rock off its pedestal, it would roll into the passageway, dislodge the sliding rock, and seal the passageway in a landslide. Venters realizes if he had tipped over the rock he would have trapped himself inside the cliff passageway. Realizing the cliff-dwellers must have lived beyond Balancing Rock, Venters explores a little further. Beyond the rock, the passageway through the cliff slopes downhill; he follows the passageway down to the other side and when he emerges sees an awesome sight: a stone archway leads into a wide, shining valley. The valley floor is at a higher level than Deception Pass and the other casons. Venters can tell by a glance that water is



abundant in this valley, for a variety of trees grow amongst fertile green grass. Venters names it Surprise Valley.

As he retraces his steps to his current hideout, Venters realizes Wrangle will not be able to get up the cliff steps. Venters turns Wrangle loose in his old hideout, hoping to recapture the horse later. The rustler's horses have wandered away. Venters packs up his camp, wraps the girl tightly in blankets, then carries her and his supplies towards the cliff stairs. He moves quickly to take advantage of the gathering darkness. Venters is possessed with an unearthly energy which allows him to carry the girl easily and think more clearly than usual. He is filled with surety and confidence. In this divine state of mind, Venters is able to accomplish the arduous task of hauling the girl up the cliff steps by rope and carrying her into the gorge in the cliff. Here exhaustion overtakes him. He prepares a comfortable bed for her and falls fast asleep. Before he does, he stares through the break in the cliffs at the stars above; Venters realizes he no longer feels lonely.

Chapter 9: The night passes quickly for Venters and at dawn he feeds himself and his hungry dogs. The girl remains asleep as she had been during the previous night's journey. Venters carries her and his supplies up the gorge and past Balancing Rock. The descent downhill through the gorge from there is easier for Venters, but his dogs begin to misbehave by chewing on the rabbit carcass. As the group emerges from the gorge, Venters is stunned by the sudden beauty of Surprise Valley. He passes under the beautiful stone arch entranceway and chooses a shady patch of grass near the cliff wall as his camp. Natural caves are etched into the cliff wall. Venters sees that they are clean and dry and he selects two adjoining caves as rooms for himself and the girl. She wakes up and calls for water. Venters rushes down to the ravine with his canteen and finds a bubbling brook. Returning to the girl, he gives her the drink and asks after her pain. She mentions a dull pain in her stomach, although the bullet wound is high on her torso. With a laugh, Venters realizes that she is experiencing hunger pangs.

He warns her not to eat. His experience with wounds guides him to give her plenty of water but no food. She worries she will starve but he reassures her that people do not starve so easily. The hole in her back has closed. He believes if she lies still for three days the hole in her breast will also close and she will be out of danger. He bids her be quiet to save her strength. In the silence, he broods about the life she has lived. He blames Oldring for ruining the girl. Yet despite this growing resentment, Venters feels more fully alive than he has in a long time. While she sleeps, he makes their new home more comfortable. His first task is to find them more fresh meat; the dilapidated rabbit carcass will not last long. He surveys their new home to assess their situation. On the rock wall facing the stone arch entrance, he sees the remains of ancient cliff-dweller homes. The dogs call his attention to the rabbits and quail amongst the trees on the valley floor. Venters kills a rabbit and gives the old carcass to the dogs. He skins it first, however, wanting to keep a reminder of the beautiful rabbit that first led him to Surprise Valley. Venters builds a willow and aspen fence to ensure the abundant game supply stays in the valley. He enjoys the luxury of preparing supper without fear of being discovered. Before retiring, he checks on the girl, who sleeps peacefully. That night he stays awake with gladness in his heart



When he awakens the next morning, it is to the sound of mocking-birds in full throat. The girl is also awake and enjoying the birdsong. She asks where they are and Venters tells her to rest; he will explain everything once she's recovered. Over the next few days, Venters continues to work in the valley and keep watch over the girl. On the fourth day, her fever breaks and Venters knows she will live. He sets about preparing broths and stews for her from rabbit and quail meat. Despite her apparent victory over death, Venters stays close to camp, not wanting to leave her alone although he has much work to do. She talks to him as much as her strength allows, and always her eyes follow him as he moves about the camp. When she begins to feed herself, he leaves her for the day to hunt rabbits. He returns to find her sitting on the edge of her cave; she asks him to lift her down. Venters sees her differently in that moment; she is no longer Oldring's Masked Rider, but just a girl and he just a man. She tires after walking a short distance and Venters prepares her a comfortable seat by the fire. She asks him to tell her everything. Venters tells her the whole story, from his discovery of Oldring's hideout, to shooting her, to packing her up the cliff to this new hideout in Surprise Valley.

The girl is stunned that the man who shot her would go to such trouble to save her. She asks about his life and he tells her about leaving his home in Illinois, drifting and working for years until finding steady employment as a rider on Jane Withersteen's estate. He tells her of the conflict with the Mormons in Cottonwoods and how he was cast out by the townspeople. Venters asks if she truly is the Masked Rider. With downcast eyes, she admits it. She insists that she never stole, shot, or harmed anybody. Her only job was to ride; she had not even known that Oldring and the other rustlers credited the Masked Rider with a host of infamous feats. Venters asks her if Oldring is a Mormon and if she cares for Oldring. She says he is not Mormon and that she does care for him, although sometimes she feels she hates him. Venters pauses before asking the question most bothering him: "What are - what *were* you to Oldring?" (pg. 104) The girl's head drops and shame flushes her cheeks. Venters considers that sufficient answer and before she can say anything he tells her to forget the question. However, he does ask if she voluntarily chose her relationship with Oldring. The girl tells him she did not. He assures her she'll never go back to Oldring. Venters tells her that helping her has healed something in him. He thinks the best thing for them both will be for her to recover her strength and then he will take her away from the wild country and they will live happily in civilization.

Chapters 7 - 9 Analysis

The first real conversation between Bess and Venters sets the tone for the author's honor theme and will ultimately have dire ramifications for Bess. This conversation, retold in the third person from Venters' point of view, indicates that Venters feels he is within his rights to judge Bess for her involvement with Oldring's gang. This judgment reveals Venters' double standard with regards to feminine "honor," as demonstrated by the varying reactions Venters has to Bess and Lassiter. Venters hears nearly identical rumors about the exploits of both Lassiter and Bess (as the Masked Rider.) Yet Venters likes Lassiter immediately and admires his prowess with horses and guns. Bess, however, being a female, is subject to his scorn for supposedly committing the same



acts. When Venters learns that Bess is an un-armed female, he no longer believes she has committed any of the notorious acts credited to her. However, she is still, in his mind, hopelessly disgraced because of her association with such men. Venters considers her a "bad" woman and has a hard time reconciling that viewpoint with his growing feelings for Bess.

Bess, too, is ashamed of her association with the gang of rustlers, and swears she did not associate with them by choice. This mollifies Venters to an extent, but it does not, in his mind, remove the permanent stain on Bess' character. Because her cheeks flush with shame when he asks her about her relation to Oldring, Venters assumes that she is Oldring's lover. Despite the fact that he believes Bess' assertion that she did not voluntarily associate with Oldring, Venters still holds her accountable for this sexual relationship. The clear undertone communicated by Bess' insistence that she did not voluntarily associate with Oldring is that she was either raped, held sexually captive, or, given her young age, molested by a pedophile. Venters believes it is his moral duty to blame Bess, and will struggle for the remainder of the novel with his growing feelings of love for Bess. He does not note the inherent condescension in his attempts to forgive Bess for the actions of Oldring, and believes himself to be an enlightened, elevated man for his desire to overlook Bess' past and treat her with the respect that no "bad" woman deserves.



Chapters 10 - 12

Chapters 10 - 12 Summary

Chapter X: Now that the girl's strength has been sufficiently restored, Venters gathers up his hunting rifle and calls Ring. The girl is nervous at the thought of his absence, but he promises to return before long. He walks through the trees to a sunny meadow. Venters spots a wide stream at the edge of the meadow and is surprised to find wild beaver damming up the stream. He realizes the beaver must have gotten into the meadow through some other route besides the Balancing Rock entrance. He follows the stream and eventually finds a chasm in the rock wall which allows the water and beaver to enter. Venters is relieved to note that the chasm is too small to allow men to enter the valley; his hideout is safe. He walks upstream to the southern wall of the valley where he comes upon the ancient cliff-dwellings. An enormous cavern opens up in the cliff face; above it are rows upon rows of cave dwellings. As he climbs up the stone steps to the dwellings, Venters realizes how easily the cliff-dwellers could have repelled enemies from this vantage point. The city is remarkably well-preserved. He finds tools and pottery left behind by the long-vanished inhabitants. His pleasure in the discovery is marred by the film of white dust along the floor which he realizes is the dust of human remains. Low along one wall he finds a line of blood-red handprints painted on the stone. In respectful silence, he gathers up unbroken pottery to take back to camp. When he returns to camp, he finds the girl staring out in the distance. Her face animates upon his return as if she had been waiting for him. Venters realizes in that moment that she belongs to him.

The girl exclaims over the pottery as he explains where he found it. He hears her laughter for the first time and is thrilled by the sound. Casually, Venters turns the conversation to her days as the Masked Rider. She explains she spent many months a year shut up in Oldring's cabin; Oldring locked her up so the other rustlers wouldn't approach her. Venters offers sympathy for her imprisonment, but she insists she felt safe in the cabin. She had books, pets, a cliff-top view, and a running spring inside the cabin; the men supplied her with fresh meat. Venters asks if she's always lived in the Pass. Bess has some vague early memories of a place with women and children. He asks about Oldring's activities. She tells him every year Oldring drives cattle up north and is gone for months. Once she heard a man accuse Oldring of living two lives and he killed the man on the spot. Venters uses her name, Bess, for the first time as he asks her what Oldring's real purpose is in Deception Pass. Venters believes Oldring is hiding something. Bess agrees; Oldring has discovered gold in the cañons and has been mining it for quite some time. Nowadays the rustlers only steal cattle to keep up the pretense that this is still Oldring's priority. Venters asks, if this is true, why would Oldring steal twenty-five hundred head of cattle from Jane Withersteen? Bess says Oldring made a deal with Mormons; the Mormons were to call in the riders and Oldring was to drive the cattle and keep it in the pass for a while before returning it to its home range. The deal was a trick the Mormons were playing on the Withersteen woman. The man who struck the deal with Oldring was Jerry Card, Tull's right-hand man.



Venters thinks of Jane Withersteen for the first time in weeks. He realizes he still has great affection for her in his heart, but the quality of the feeling is different now. He asks Bess if she has spent any time in the company of women or young people. Bess says she was never allowed to know the women Oldring's rustlers kept company with, and the only children she has ever seen have been while riding through the villages. Venters is puzzled by Bess. In his mind, Bess has confessed herself to be a bad woman, Oldring's lover and companion to the vilest men. Yet he sees innocence in her; he cannot reconcile his two views of her. Bess seems happy; whatever her relationship with Oldring, it does not haunt her as it does Venters. As the days pass, he watches her face and form fill out. The sun tans her face, eliminating the lines of the mask. Venters refuses to think about her past or uncertain future; he keeps his thoughts to the present.

Venters and Bess are both weary of eating rabbit. Venters sneaks out at night while Bess sleeps, to the grazing grounds of Oldring's ill-gotten cattle. Venters plans to kill a calf and return with the side of beef, but it occurs to him to take the calf back alive. After hauling the calf, by rope, up the stone steps and packing it through the gorge, Venters returns for a second calf. He corrals them in a hidden spot. Bess does not notice his absence in the night, and so the next four nights, he returns for six more calves and a side of beef. Venters is surprised when he realizes all the calves are red. He has stolen Jane Withersteen's calves! The following day he surprises Bess with the beef. When Bess learns Venters risked his life on Oldring's turf to bring her food she begs him not to go back. Venters realizes she fears not for her own safety, but for his. She swoons in his arms; as he briefly holds her, his cruel judgment returns. "Woman's face, woman's eyes, woman's lips - all acutely and blindly and sweetly and terribly truthful in their betrayal!" (pg. 116) He tries to find innocent emotion in her eyes; tries to see her as a woman experiencing love for the first time and fear for her beloved. Venters asks if she realizes that they are a man and woman alone. She acknowledges this. He asks if she would prefer to return to civilization or stay here with him. She tells him she'd rather stay. He realizes what she has only begun to realize; she loves him.

Chapter 11: The ailing Mrs. Larkin and little Fay move in with Jane Withersteen so that Jane can care for them both. The little girl's sunny presence fills the silent ranch house and Jane realizes what a wonderful difference a child makes in a home. Jane begins to see more of Lassiter, thanks to Fay. The little girl quickly charms Lassiter; Jane can tell he would make a good father. She decides to use the child's charms in addition to her own to stay Lassiter's hand from violence. If Lassiter cares about Fay, thinks Jane, he will be loathe to make other children fatherless through his murderous acts. Jane's respect for Lassiter has grown and it's harder to deceive him by being flirtatious but her desire to save his soul overrides her guilt. Fay makes it easier for at Fay's request, Lassiter comes to the house often to visit. Over time, Fay has a marvelous effect on Lassiter. His manner gentles; he is quicker to laugh. Jane enjoys the relationship the three of them develop as Lassiter begins to feel more at home in her house. She does not forget her mission, however. One night, while walking in the moonlight, Jane openly asks him to give her his guns. He asks why, and she truthfully explains she does not want him to be a killer anymore, especially a killer of her own Mormon people. He walks away from her without a word. Left alone, Jane considers more drastic measures. Offering Lassiter her body in exchange for his guns begins to seem reasonable to her.



The next morning Bishop Dyer arrives at Jane's door. He speaks rudely to her about little Fay then informs her it is her Mormon duty to marry Tull. Jane has been raised from the cradle to believe that the Bishop is in direct communication with God and his orders are God's orders. When he asks her about Lassiter, she feels compelled to answer. She tells him Lassiter came to Cottonwoods in search of Milly Erne's grave and that he seeks revenge on the man who stole Milly from her rightful husband. She tells Dyer she is trying to get Lassiter to love her only so that he will stop shooting Mormons. As she speaks these words, she sees Lassiter standing behind the Bishop. The Bishop reaches for his gun; Jane hears a shot and faints at the sight of blood. When she comes to, Lassiter bends over her. Jane is relieved to learn that although Bishop Dyer drew on Lassiter, Lassiter did not kill him. Lassiter shot him in the arm and ordered the Bishop to leave. Lassiter asks if it's true she's been leading him on romantically so that he will put down his guns. When Jane confesses, Lassiter tells her the plan worked too well, for he does love her. Lassiter thought he'd turned his back on love for good until he met Jane. Jane begs his forgiveness for lying. He tells her she is faithful to her religion but unfaithful to her womanhood. He is upset that she used little Fay in her deceit. He tells her that her desire to take his guns shows a kind heart, but that the West is no place for a man to be without guns. He reminds her what happened to Venters after Venters laid down his guns for Jane, and reminds Jane she needs protection. He reassures her that despite her deceit he remains her protector.

Chapter 12: Bishop Dyer sends Jane a written summons to appear in his presence. Jane ignores the Bishop's letter and does not attend church that Sunday. Her feelings are dead-locked and she waits for something to happen which will force her to choose either for or against her churchmen once and for all. Her faith remains strong and she believes she has done nothing to transgress against God, but her churchmen continue to seek to bend her to their will, which they claim is God's will. During this week, Jane notices Lassiter is more watchful and cautious than usual. At week's end, Lassiter informs Jane that she is being watched by men in the sage, and that her Mormon women are spying on her. Jane refuses to believe this, but Lassiter devises a way for Jane to catch them at their eavesdropping. Jane feels betrayed when she finds one of her women, Hester, listening at the door; she fires Hester. Jane can no longer hide from the fact that her people are working their invisible hand against her. The other Mormon women continue to work at the ranch house, but they no longer speak to Jane nor she to them. She realizes they have been as blinded by their religion as she once was. Eventually the women stop coming to work.

In fact, all Jane's remaining Mormon employees disappear, except faithful Jerd. Jane asks Jerd to turn the cattle out into the sage and focus his energies on keeping Black Star and Night in running condition. Jane loves her black horses above all her other riches, and knows that she may soon need to escape on her fleet horses. She wastes little time brooding about her gloomy future, however, because Mrs. Larkin takes a turn for the worse. Jane is busy caring for Fay and Mrs. Larkin, and performing the household duties formerly carried out by her Mormon women. Lassiter pitches in to help Jane with all these tasks. Mrs. Larkin tells Jane that Lassiter is a good man who loves children, but Jane feels Lassiter is beyond redemption due to his murderous acts. One day Judkins appears at the ranch house. Jane feeds him and asks about the white herd



which he and his Gentile boys have been guarding. He proudly reports that he hasn't lost a single steer, but also informs her that the attempts to spook the herd have begun again, with flashing lights on the ridges, strange noises, and puffs of smoke. He has come for supplies in preparation to drive the herd to a safer location. Jane thanks him warmly and gives him a bag of gold to split with his riders. He tries to refuse the substantial gift, but Jane reminds him she has few loyal friends these days and she would rather give the money away before it's forcibly taken from her.

The following morning she gets some good news. Her Mormon rider, Blake, had left with the other Mormon riders when the churchmen forbade them from working for Jane, but now he is back. He begs her forgiveness and explains that his mother had been very ill. His mother has since died and he can ride for Jane without fear that the Mormons will hurt his mother. Jane asks if he knows the risk he is taking, and he assures her he does. Jane rewards him with gold as well. Jane is too innocent to consider the possibility that Blake has returned as a spy, but Blake knows this thought will have crossed Lassiter's mind. He gives Lassiter his word he is loyal to Jane and Lassiter believes him. With that settled, Jane sends Blake to check on the horses in the field. Blake regretfully informs her that her horses disappeared ten days ago; Lassiter hoped to protect Jane from the bad news. Jane is horrified by her mounting losses. They agree that Blake will ride with Jerd every day to ensure that Black Star and Night remain safe.

After Blake rides off, Lassiter tells her that although she favors the blacks, Wrangle is the fastest horse. Lassiter insists if she must flee, she should take Wrangle. They wonder if Venters still has Wrangle and what has become of Venters. Jane admits that sometimes she is so afraid she thinks of asking Lassiter to run away with her. Lassiter takes this as a proposal, for which Jane quickly apologizes; she forgets he has feelings for her and spoke thoughtlessly. Lassiter recovers from the emotional blow and then tells Jane that she could not flee her house anyway. "Jane, you're watched. There's no single move of yours, except when you're hid in your house, that ain't seen by sharp eyes. The cottonwood grove's full of creepin', crawlin' men. Like Indians in the grass. When you rode, which wasn't often lately, the sage was full of sneakin' men. At night they crawl under your windows, into the court, an' I reckon into the house." (pg. 145) Jane is a marked woman. The spies will never let her get away, and Lassiter knows soon they will try to kill him in order to leave Jane totally unprotected. Lassiter offers to call on Tull, but Jane insists he not kill a Mormon man for her sake. Jane refuses to believe the Mormon men would use force against her, but Lassiter insists that the men have tried persuasion and threats, and all that is left now is violence.

Chapters 10 - 12 Analysis

In this section the author continues to develop the story from the viewpoints of Jane and Venters. The pair, originally a couple, has now been separated for some time. Both Jane and Venters are preoccupied with their own survival; in this section, they each think of the other for the first time in weeks. They are not ready to admit their relationship is over, but their priorities have changed and they are now focused on their new partners, Lassiter and Bess. Lassiter has openly declared his love for Jane, and



Bess has made her love for Venters apparent. Yet Jane and Venters are both slow to respond to their new loves, for their thoughts are still stuck in a holding pattern regarding their former relationship, now complicated by a focus on basic survival.

The author uses the beauty and awesome power of nature as his primary form of symbolism. Natural symbolism abounds, particularly in Surprise Valley, where Venters and Bess lead an idyllic existence, waking each morning to the call of mockingbirds and feeding off the bountiful abundance afforded by wild game. Surprise Valley is like the Garden of Eden for Venters and Bess. Bess' innocence keeps her unaware of their impending romantic relationship and its implied sexual connotations, but Venters lacks this innocence and calls her attention to the fact that they are man and woman, alone together. Thus, it is Adam, not Eve, who plucks fruit from the tree of knowledge. Venters' awareness of impending danger is underscored by the symbols he finds in the cliff-dwellers' ancient homes. The cliff-dwellers chose to live in Surprise Valley for the same reason Venters has chosen it; Balancing Rock guards the only entrance to the valley and it affords safety from attackers. Yet the blood red handprints Venters finds in the ruins of the cliff-dwellers' homes implies that death and danger found its way into the valley once before, and foreshadows the danger with which Venters and Bess must soon contend.



Chapters 13 - 15

Chapters 13 - 15 Summary

Chapter 13: Venters watches Bess, now fully recovered, feeding the mockingbirds and quail she has tamed. Good health and happiness have filled out her form. No longer could she be mistaken for a boy in a mask. The day takes on the dream-like quality characteristic of all days in Surprise Valley. With no tools or work to be done, Bess and Venters indulge in a serene and meditative existence. In the stillness, Venters has found an awareness of something greater than himself. He knows he must visit Cottonwoods for supplies, but is loathe to let the real world intrude on his peace of mind. Today they take a wandering walk to explore their gorgeous valley home. At the cliff-dwellings, Bess sees the powdery bones of the ancients and realizes she does not want to live out her life in this secluded valley. Having been sequestered from society her whole life, she longs to see the wide world. Yet that desire conflicts with a fear of losing her serene life with Venters in the hidden valley. A storm approaches on the horizon and they head back to camp. Venters says he should go to Cottonwoods for supplies. Bess pleads with him to stay until the storm passes. She is deathly afraid of storms; Venters agrees to stay by her side. Bess explains that the sound which the wind makes against the mouths of the caves in Deception Pass is referred to by Oldring's riders as Oldring's death knell. The valley is eerily beautiful under the rainswept cacophony of thunder and lightning. Holding Bess' hand in the darkness, Venters realizes the power of his love and desire for her.

Chapter 14: The next morning Venters declares his love for Bess to the valley, although not to her. He recalls Jane Withersteen and realizes the difference in his feelings for the two women. Venters does not wish to "take up the broken threads" (pg. 160) of his former life, but he must bring such supplies as he and Bess will need to farm the land here and raise their cattle. More pressing is the need to decide Bess' future. Marrying her is the simplest and most joyful answer, but poison shrivels his heart when he thinks of her as the Masked Rider and Oldring's lover. He recalls how she confessed this, not with words, but "with scarlet shame and drooping head." (pg. 160) The new gentleness he has found in this valley surfaces to argue with his old jealousy. At war with himself, he decides he cannot marry Bess anywhere in Utah. Others might recognize her as the Masked Rider, and he believes the local women will impugn her reputation. He decides he must tell Jane about his change of heart. He vows to keep Bess safe and kill the man who dishonored her. Further, he vows to quell the beast of jealousy in his heart so that he may never lay a violent hand on Bess in retribution for her past.

Venters returns to Bess and announces his intention of returning to Cottonwoods. She expresses fear for his safety as well as fear that he will leave her for another woman. Surely, she insists, there must have been a woman in Cottonwoods in his former life. Venters looks her right in the eye and lies, insisting there was no other. Angered by her jealousy, he scornfully asks her if she wants to return to Oldring. She refutes his insinuation and apologizes. She is ashamed to have been called "Oldring's girl". Venters



tells her that he has found God in Surprise Valley and that he believes, no matter how much shame Bess feels, that God holds her blameless. He tells her of his desire to take her to Illinois to meet his family. She tells him if this is true then perhaps she can finally hold her head up; Venters tells her to lift her head. Bess cries out joyfully and tells him she has discovered herself in this valley, and she has learned the truth of her womanhood. Venters laughs and admits that he discovered her womanhood before she did. They spend a string of idyllic days together before Venters announces the time for his departure has come. Bess urges him to leave so he can return all the sooner. He leads her for the first time to Balancing Rock and Bess realizes the effort it must have cost Venters to carry her into Surprise Valley when she was wounded. Before he leaves, Bess tells him she loves him.

Chapter 15: During the summer storms, Mrs. Larkin dies and Jane becomes Fay's new mother. One day, Jane hears a rifle shot; it comes from the direction of the corrals. Gunshots have not been unusual lately as Jane has heard many spies take pot-shots at Lassiter from their hiding places in the sage. Lassiter has refrained from firing back due to Jane's morals, but the rifle shot is more serious. Lassiter enters the courtyard wearing a bloody scarf around his head. He unties the scarf and she sees the bullet grazed his temple. Jane begs Lassiter to leave for his own safety but he refuses to abandon her. Jane is amazed when Lassiter admits he has no desire to avenge himself on the man who shot him. She wonders if he will give up his revenge against the man who stole Milly, too, but her question is interrupted by an approaching rider. Delighted, Jane recognizes the sound of Wrangle's hoofbeats.

Venters looks different, and not just because he has long hair and wears rags; the boy who left has returned a man. Venters says he was shot at while approaching the house. Jane fills him in on her situation. Venters asks what prevented Lassiter from attacking the men who have been hounding Jane. Lassiter responds coolly that he didn't wish to give Jane additional heartache. Venters studies them both intently; Jane feels guilty under his scrutiny. Venters informs them he's found Jane's red herd in Oldring's hideout. He tells them of the deal between Tull and Oldring to steal Jane's cattle. Venters insists that for Jane's own good, she must break their friendship forever. Jane surprises herself by not fighting this command; she believes she cares as much for Venters as ever and attributes her numb emotions to the troubles she's experienced. Venters kisses her hand and promises to defend her to Tull when he sees him. Jane protests, but Venters promises that if she says one more word in Tull's defense he will surely kill Tull.

Venters tells them about the hidden valley he's discovered and asks for supplies so he can raise crops and cattle. Jane agrees, but Lassiter warns he'll have a hard time getting the supplies away. Venters insists that he will be a hard man to stop. Jane allows Venters to outfit himself with clothes and offers to pack additional supplies for him. Venters promises to visit Tull and insists that this visit will improve Jane's fortunes. Jane retires to her room and thinks of her losses. She worries most about losing little Fay. Jane wants to be a woman, not a martyr; she is unable to feel gratitude for this "baptism of fire" (pg. 175) but is determined to love her enemies. Her thoughts are interrupted by the return of Lassiter and Venters; Venters has confronted Tull. Lassiter tells her of the spectacle engendered by their appearance in Cottonwoods. They combed the town and



found Tull and Jerry Card in the Mormon meeting room. Venters and Lassiter had stared down the men; not one of them had dared to draw. Venters informed Tull that he and Jane have ended their friendship to appease the Mormons, but that he will always, in his heart, consider Jane a friend. Venters cursed Tull thoroughly and gave Jane a glowing tribute. Venters told about the deal Jerry Card cut with Oldring to steal the red herd and that he knows where the herd is hidden. Venters told Tull he is only alive because Jane begged Venters not to kill him.

Jane is moved by Venters' chivalry. She feels "sheer human glory in the deed of a fearless man. It was hot, primitive instinct to live - to fight." (pg. 178) She is inspired by Venters, but Lassiter mistakes her tears for giving up. He throws his hands up at the mysteries of women and excuses himself to the stable to help Venters prepare for his departure. Jane spends the rest of the day carefully packing a bag for Venters. She knows these are the final gifts she will ever give him, and she chooses them with great care. Venters comes to say goodbye; he kisses her and she weeps as he leaves. As he rides away she hears a gunshot. Lassiter calls to her from outside, reassuring her that Venters got away. Lassiter rides off to track Venters back to his hideout, to ensure Venters gets there safely. Later that day, Judkins arrives to tell Jane the white herd is gone. For weeks unseen saboteurs have been upsetting the herd with a variety of tricks. Jane's riders managed, time and again, to quell stampedes, but the tension was taking its toll on both riders and cattle. The cattle had grown thin despite the abundant grazing. The saboteurs' tricks included setting fire to a coyote's tail and sending the burning animal running through the herd. Finally the cattle had enough and the stampede started in earnest. Judkins had tried to mill the herd as Lassiter did before, but wasn't equal to the task; the cattle were too upset and Judkins doubts any rider could have prevented the stampede. Judkins reports that two of his boys were trampled to death by the cattle. This was yesterday; Judkins thinks the cattle are still running.

Jane closets herself in her house for two days, tormented by the deaths of her riders. Only the sound of Lassiter's jingling footsteps brings her out of her sorrow and she realizes with a shock how much Lassiter has come to mean to her. Now even the guns he wears are a welcome sight. She asks if he found the valley Venters told them about. Lassiter tells her he did and it is a wonderful place, but he worries that if he could track Venters then another experienced tracker could too. Lassiter is uncharacteristically vague about Venters' life in the valley; Jane attributes this to fatigue from his hundred and twenty mile roundtrip to Surprise Valley. Over the next few days, Jane's spirits rebound, but then Lassiter greets her with bad news. Jerd is missing and Blake's body lies on the stable floor. Bells, Black Star, and Night are gone.

Chapters 13 - 15 Analysis

Chapter 13 explores the Garden of Eden scenario in which Venters and Bess find themselves. Not wanting to dishonor Bess by engaging in a sexual relationship, Venters does not declare his love to her. Bess remains as innocent as Eve before the apple and does not understand the gathering storm of Venters' passion. The young couple is torn between a desire to stay in their blissful paradise and a desire to join the real world.



Their future in the real world implies an end to innocence as Venters and Bess will likely marry, transforming Bess from virginal innocent to knowledgeable woman. She is too innocent to understand this, but she is aware that she will lose something precious if they leave their valley. Venters enjoys Bess' innocence and their idyllic life in Surprise Valley. He, too, hesitates to leave that innocence behind. Yet the arrival of the summer storms symbolizes his growing passion for Bess. Venters considers himself an honorable man who will not sully Bess by making love to her out of wedlock; thus the only solution to his passion is to deny it or to leave Surprise Valley and make their relationship official. During the long, night storm, Venters realizes he can no longer deny his passion for Bess, and thus he resolves, the very next morning, to leave the valley behind.

Also in this section, the parallel between Jane Withersteen and Bern Venters is explored. Both Jane and Venters struggle with long-ingrained habits of thought which are detrimental to them. Jane has been raised to obey her Mormon Elders blindly and to believe that disobedience to these men threatens her soul's salvation. Despite the mounting evidence that Tull and Bishop Dyer are willing to lie, kill, and steal to get their hands on Jane's property, she still finds it difficult to believe that they would do anything wrong. Jane's denial is beginning to melt away, but this is a protracted process and she wavers constantly. Venters undergoes a similar internal vacillation with his feelings about Bess. Venters loves Bess and believes she is an innocent victim of circumstance, but his inner demons torment him with thoughts of her past. He feels compelled to judge her, although he has not verified the facts and will soon learn that Bess is as innocent as he could possibly wish. This false, judgmental way of thinking mirrors Jane's false belief system; both protagonists must overcome their own negative mindsets in order to appreciate the people who truly love them.



Chapters 16 - 18

Chapters 16 - 18 Summary

Chapter 16: Venters' return journey to Surprise Valley gives him plenty of time to regret not disclosing his relationship with Bess to Jane. Meanwhile Bess is thrilled by the abundant supplies Venters has brought from Cottonwoods. The supplies are enough to make them self-sufficient in the valley. Venters sorts through the supplies and begins to plan their future. In the planning, he gradually forgets his anger at Tull and his guilt about Jane. Bess goes to the caves to retrieve some supplies and Venters hears her scream. He sees the dark figure of a man and runs for his guns, but then recognizes Lassiter. Lassiter informs him that he trailed Venters to ensure his safety. Venters is shocked to realize he could be tracked to his hidden valley. He introduces Bess with a flush of guilt. Lassiter says nothing about Jane. Venters tells him the story of finding Balancing Rock and Surprise Valley. During dinner, Lassiter studies Bess.

Lassiter is emotional when he bids goodbye to Bess. Venters accompanies him to the gorge in the cliff and tries to explain why he didn't tell Jane about Bess. Lassiter asks if his intentions for Bess are honorable. Venters swears they are and that he loves Bess, but warns Lassiter that Bess is not as innocent as she appears. He tells Lassiter that Bess was Oldring's Masked Rider. Venters tells Lassiter he wants to kill Oldring. Lassiter approves but advises Venters to keep a cool head. Venters asks Lassiter not to tell Jane about Bess. When the men reach Balancing Rock, Venters explains the defensive purpose of the rock. On the way back, Venters realizes that he will never feel secure again in Surprise Valley now that he knows a man can track his whereabouts. Back in the valley, Bess shares his unease.

Bess and Venters try to quell their unease with hard work, but Venters comes to the gradual conclusion that he must take Bess away from Surprise Valley. "It gave him a pang to think of leaving the beautiful valley just when he had the means to establish a permanent and delightful home there." (pg. 191) Venters is tempted to tip over Balancing Rock and close the outlet forever, but he realizes that would be unfair to Bess. As he wonders how he could support her back in civilization, Bess confesses a secret. She runs into the trees and returns with a bundle. She explains that in his absence she washed gold from the river; the bundle is full of gold. Bess tells him she hid the gold because she was afraid he would leave both her and the valley once he had it. Venters tells her he believes they should leave the valley for their own safety, but that they will leave together. Now that he has the gold, he has the means to support her. In a rush of passion, Venters tells Bess that he loves her and wants her to see the world which has been so long denied her. He tells her that she will be his wife.

Chapter 17: Bess and Venters come up with a plan to leave Surprise Valley. Venters will go to Cottonwoods to purchase a horse and a disguise for Bess while she pans for more gold. They intend to travel light as they ride out of Utah, packing only the necessities, including Venters' guns. Bess bids Venters goodbye and he marvels at the



change in her. "The girl who had sadly called herself nameless and nothing had been marvelously transformed in the moment of his avowal of love." (pg. 195) Venters finds Wrangle wilder than ever and has a hard time catching the horse in the darkness. In the morning light he is able to catch the horse. Venters elts the Pass and rides out into the sage. Abruptly, Wrangle halts. Venters sees the riders in the distance and finds cover as they approach. They shoot at Venters, but at three hundred yards out, their bullets fall short. Venters sights through his long-range rifle and shoots one of the men from his saddle. The group of rustlers spreads out to make a harder target; they all shoot in concert at Venters. Wrangle rears, saving Venters from a bullet. Venters shoots and kills the man who fired this shot. Venters curses when he realizes that one rustler is riding Bells, the horse Jane gave to Lassiter. He also recognizes Jerry Card, riding Black Star and leading Night.

Enraged, Venters urges Wrangle to a gallop. The time has come for Wrangle to race the blacks. Three of the rustlers abandon their stolen horses and hide in the sage. Venters assumes the rider on Bells will soon do the same, but he doesn't care. His goal is to catch and kill Jerry Card, and hopefully recover the blacks in the process. Card refuses to abandon his two stolen horses, although Venters believes it's his only chance for survival. Venters sees twenty miles of open sage before him; he knows Wrangle can catch Black Star and Night within ten miles, but if the horses race at top speed the blacks will die. Venters lets Jerry Card set the pace, hoping to spare the blacks. He gains ground on Card. Venters laughs when Card swings around in his saddle to see what manner of man and horse could keep up with Jane Withersteen's prized blacks. When Card and his cohort on Bells recognize their pursuer, they whip their horses to top speed. Venters lets Wrangle run. Wrangle's "savage running fitted the mood of his rider. Venters bent forward, swinging with the horse, and gripped his rifle." (pg. 201) In less than two miles, Bells falls behind the blacks. The man fires at Venters. Venters raises his rifle but hesitates to shoot until he can be assured of not harming Bells. Once he has a clear shot, he takes it. Venters' sixth shot hits the rider; the rustler falls off Bells and drags himself into the safety of the sage.

Wrangle passes Bells and continues on a dead run toward the blacks and Jerry Card. The blacks hit their stride and Wrangle is no longer gaining on them. Venters admires Card's horsemanship when he sees Card switch from Black Star to Night without breaking stride. "Of all the daring horsemen of the uplands, Jerry was the one rider fitted to bring out the greatness of the blacks in that long race. He had them on a dead run, but not yet at the last strained and killing pace." (pg. 204) The riders and horses cannot help but feel the thrill of the race despite its deadly stakes. There are five miles of straightaway left before they reach the rim of Deception Pass. Venters must overtake Card on this straightaway; he spurs Wrangle viciously as Card switches horses one last time. They exchange shots, narrowly missing each other. Card releases Night and rides Black Star for all he's worth. Wrangle gains rapidly on Black Star; only a hundred yards separates them. Suddenly Venters sees Black Star running riderless. Card has taken to the sage. Venters turns back and sees the riderless Night trotting toward him. He dismounts and unsaddles Wrangle as the horse heaves for breath. Black Star falls and Venters realizes that the horse will die. Unable to watch the horse's death, Venters



moves up the trail to get Black, keeping a sharp eye out for Jerry Card. Venters thinks Card will stay near the horses and try to recapture one.

He must find water and allow the horses to rest before making the seventy mile trip to town. Remembering the water in Deception Pass, Venters walks to the edge of the cañon and finds the trail leading down. To his relief, he finds a pool of water. He eats and drinks while waiting until it is safe to give the horses water. He checks on Black Star and is thrilled to find him the horse recovering. Venters fills his hat with water for Black Star, then leads the other horses to the pool to drink. After a time, Black Star joins them at the pool; the horses graze. Venters lets Wrangle wander and graze for a while before trying to catch him, but the half wild horse refuses to be caught. Frustrated, Venters sits with the blacks by the pool. He waits for Jerry Card to make his move. As the sun begins to sink behind the slope, Venters is shocked to hear Wrangle scream. Jerry Card clings to Wrangle's neck, his teeth sunk into Wrangle's nose. Venters has heard of this desperate trick used to control wild horses. The horse runs blindly towards the edge of the cañon which drops off into nothingness below. Card avoids the precipice and turns Wrangle towards the path down to the Pass. Unwilling to let him go, Venters fires after him but misses. With no other option, Venters sets his sights on Wrangle and shoots. As he dies, Wrangle leaps splendidly over the edge of the cliff, carrying Jerry Card over the precipice to his death.

Chapter 18: Venters creates a stir in Cottonwoods when he rides in on Black Star, leading Bells and Night. Venters wants revenge on Tull and Dyer for their rustling. He drives the horses by Dyer's house and Tull's cottage. Tull comes to the door and bars it shut. Venters leads the horses to the center of town and announces that Jerry Card will never return. Before Venters can leave town and return the horses to Jane's ranch, Judkins catches up to him. Venters tells Judkins about the encounter with the rustlers and Wrangle's final race. Judkins warns Venters that the vigilante group formed from Jane's former Mormon riders now serves as Tull and Dyer's bodyguard. Judkins tells Venters that Jane has tamed Lassiter. The whole village talks of how he's lost his nerve and won't pick up a gun. Venters assures Judkins that's not true. "This Lassiter is something more than a gun-man. Jud, he's big - he's great!...I feel that in him. God help Tull and Dyer when Lassiter does go after them." (pg. 213)

Judkins has more news for Venters. This morning, Judkins saw Lassiter having a drink with Oldring in the saloon. Oldring had been shocked by something Lassiter said. When Oldring got over his shock, he talked to Lassiter quietly for a while. Then, says Judkins, it was Lassiter's turn to look shocked by Oldring's words. The two men had parted with a handshake. Venters, white-faced, asks if Oldring is still in town. Judkins tells him he's still in the saloon. Venters excuses himself and heads for the saloon. Judkins mounts Bells and leads the blacks back to Jane's ranch. Venters enters the smoky saloon unnoticed. Venters calls Oldring out, saying he has a word for him from his Masked Rider. As the rustler steps outside, Venters tells him that Bess is alive but she's dead to Oldring and to the life she once led. He tells Oldring he is dead, too, and as Oldring reaches for his gun, Venters shoots him through the heart. Oldring sinks to his knees. With an incredible effort, he says, "Man - why - didn't - you - wait? Bess - was - " The man dies before he can complete his thought. (pg. 217)



Venters flees Cottonwoods and races to Withersteen Ranch. At the corrals, he looks around for a horse but finds only a burro. He takes the burro and rides back towards Surprise Valley. The tireless burro carries him at a steady trot and by nightfall he is back at his old camp inside the Pass. Oldring's final words haunt him; the love in Oldring's eyes when he spoke of Bess torments him. His jealousy returns as he thinks that Bess may have loved Oldring. By dawn, he has decided to honor his promise to Bess even if she did love Oldring, but he must know the truth. It takes him a day on the burro to make his cautious way to the hidden gorge in the cliffs. He spends the night inside the gorge, descending into Surprise Valley the following morning. The dogs and Bess rush joyously to greet him. Venters turns cold when she reaches for him. He demands to know the truth. Did Oldring love her? She says he certainly did. Venters hesitates then asks if she loved him. Bess tells him she did. Venters grabs her roughly and asks her what she was to Oldring. Bess says she is Oldring's daughter. Venters is stunned. Bess is ashamed of being a rustler's daughter. Venters admits that he had gotten the idea the Bess was bad. Bess smiles innocently; she doesn't understand what he means by "bad." Venters realizes that Bess is pure after all. Suddenly realizing he has killed her father, he drops to his knees and begs forgiveness. He refuses to tell her what he has done, but offers her his whole life as repayment.

Chapters 16 - 18 Analysis

The author develops several parallels between protagonist Venters and antagonists Oldring and Tull in this section. A hot-headed young man, Venters has developed a tendency to shoot first and ask questions later. His rush to judgment leads him to shoot Oldring without asking to hear the truth from Bess or Oldring first. At the end of Chapter 18, when Venters realizes he has killed Bess' father, he does not have the strength of character to admit this act. Instead, he hopes to spirit Bess out of the state before she learns of Oldring's death. As her sole protector, her future lies in his hands and he abuses this power over her just as Tull abuses his power over the women in his control. Earlier, Venters stole Oldring's cattle, and now Venters enters Jane's corral with the intention of stealing one of her horses. Venters does not even bother to try and justify stealing from Jane as he is too furious with Bess for her non-existent sexual relationship with Oldring. Later, when Jane learns of Venters' relationship with Bess, she will feel cheated that he took her supplies to feed his new woman. Venters' sneaky behavior and willingness to take advantage of Jane's wealth is similar to the Mormon men's treatment of Jane.



Chapters 19 - 21

Chapters 19 - 21 Summary

Chapter 19: At Withersteen Ranch, little Fay is confused about why Lassiter doesn't marry Jane. For this question Lassiter has no answer, nor does Jane have a ready reply when Fay asks her if she loves Lassiter. Jane sends Fay out to play, admonishing her to stay near. Lassiter laments that Fay is learning about lies because Jane has pretended to love him. Jane admits they should be truthful with Fay, but says she does care for him. She cannot be sure how much she cares because she feels numb; her heart has been broken by the churchmen. Jane has even given up praying. Lassiter sympathizes, knowing that long-held habits, like her obedience to the church, are difficult to break. He asks her if marriage between them is an eventual possibility. Jane insists it is not, for she is Mormon and he is Lassiter. He tells her he's less the Lassiter that he used to be. He takes off his guns and hands them to her. Jane stares at him in shock; he seems smaller without his guns. Unwilling to play Delilah to his Sampson, she resolutely buckles the gunbelt back around his waist. Lassiter asks her to leave Utah with him, somewhere he could lay down his guns without fear of attack. Jane refuses to leave home. Lassiter tells her if she gave him this chance he could prove to her how love has changed him

To illustrate his point, he tells her Milly Erne's story. His sister, Milly, was the belle of the Texas town where they grew up. She had a passion for religion and married a handsome young minister named Frank Erne. Lassiter loved Milly and came to love Frank as a brother. Soon after the wedding, Lassiter left home to seek his fortune. He saw some hard times in his travels but he took pride in his growing ability to track men and animals. After two years, Lassiter returned to Texas. He found Milly gone and Frank Erne a broken man. Lassiter's mother had died of a broken heart and Lassiter's father was a shell of his former self. Lassiter learned that a Mormon, had come to town, targeting his passionate sermons at women; he seemed to have a strange power over women. Frank hadn't objected to Milly's interest in Mormonism for he felt that all roads to God were valid. But one day a rich stranger with ice blue eyes and a golden beard had come to town to visit the Mormon preacher. The man disappeared from town with a young woman who had been attending the Mormon sermons. Frank had called out the preacher for his part in the woman's disappearance and forbade Milly from going to Mormon meetings. The Mormon preacher left town. Shortly after, Milly disappeared. The townspeople believed that Milly left Frank, but Frank never believed it. Milly was pregnant with their child at the time.

Lassiter knew his sister would never have left Frank. Lassiter hit the trail, hoping to find Milly, the preacher, or the stranger with the ice blue eyes. Lassiter found the cabin where Milly gave birth to her baby, but he learned no further details. When he returned home, he found his father had been dead a year. Frank Erne now passed his days brooding on the porch. In Frank's possessions, Lassiter found two letters from Milly. The first was written a few months after her disappearance and in it she told Frank she had



been taken forcibly from her home by three strangers, who she names in the letter. Milly dreamed of reuniting her baby with its father. The letter had ended abruptly in mid-sentence. The second letter was written two years later, from Utah. In this letter, Milly tells Frank she has heard that Lassiter is trying to find her. She says if Lassiter does not stop searching, something terrible will happen to Milly. Milly ends the brief letter by stating that she is leaving Salt Lake City soon with the man she has come to love.

Lassiter pondered the change that came over Milly between the two letters. Either she really had come to love the man or some great fear made her lie and say she did. Lassiter intended to find out. Lassiter has searched Utah ever since, hoping to find her. Through the course of his long search, Lassiter became a gun-man. He located all three men Milly named in her letter as having been her abductors and killed each man after they refused to talk. Finally, after eighteen years, Lassiter was told Jane could show him Milly's grave. Lassiter laments that Jane has been unwilling to tell him the identity of the Mormon man with the ice blue eyes who forced Milly to be his wife. But, Lassiter has divined the identity of the Mormon preacher who arranged Milly's kidnapping. He accuses Bishop Dyer. Jane swears he is wrong. Lassiter accuses her of blind loyalty to her churchmen. Nonetheless, thanks to Jane's love, Lassiter has given up his desire for revenge. When Jane realizes he no longer desires to kill Milly's Mormon husband, Jane believes she will come to love Lassiter when her heart has mended and she tells him so.

Just then, the muffled sound of horses is heard. Jane and Lassiter call out for Fay but the child is gone. Lassiter grabs Jane and follows Fay's trail all the way out into the lane. "The little dimpled imprints of her bare feet showed clean-cut in the dust; they went a little way down the lane; and then, at a point where they stopped, the great tracks of a man led out from the shrubbery and returned." (pg. 235)

Chapter 20: Jane tells Lassiter that she will marry Tull if they give her back Fay. "'Never!' hissed Lassiter." (pg. 236) He marches her back to the house. Black Star, Night, and Bells, are in the great entry hall, where they have been kept since the raid on the corrals. Lassiter loads his guns and tells Jane he is going to see Dyer and Tull. Jane begs him not to kill Dyer; she reminds him he has forsworn vengeance. Lassiter tells her that it's no longer vengeance; it's justice. He means to kill Dyer and Tull to spare her from further torture and from a life of forced marriage and cruel obedience. Jane realizes in that moment that she does love Lassiter. She throws her arms around him and begs him not to commit murder for her sake. Lassiter does not believe her claim of love and rebuffs her advances. Jane tells him the truth about Milly Erne. The Mormon preacher was indeed Dyer, but the man with the ice blue eyes and golden beard, the man who arranged to have Milly spirited away from her family, was none other than Jane's late father. Lassiter tells her the past is done and he does not wish to kill for vengeance. He thanks God for making him a gun-man because he is capable of killing these men and protecting Jane. Jane faints as he leaves.

Jane wakes to see Judkins bending over her. She demands to know where Lassiter is; Judkins tells her he is in the other room tending to his bullet wounds. He tells her that Lassiter has killed Dyer. Jane is surprised by her cold indifference to Dyer's death. Tull



was absent from Cottonwoods when Lassiter stormed the town and so he got away. Lassiter arrived at the Mormon meeting house in the midst of a trial. Dyer had trumped up false charges against the Gentile riders who survived the stampede of the white herd. Lassiter's arrival had ended the proceedings. Dyer's bodyguards had gone for their guns but Lassiter drew so fast Judkins didn't even see the motion. Lassiter shot all three bodyguards and reholstered his weapon. Dyer went for his gun, but Lassiter drew again and shot Dyer in the arm, causing Dyer to drop the gun. Dyer reached to pick up his gun but Lassiter shot him a second time in the arm. Dyer went for the gun with his left hand, and Lassiter shot his left arm. Dyer picked up the gun with a wobbly left hand and fired, killing an innocent bystander. Lassiter pumped nine shots into Dyer, who died on his knees as Lassiter told him he wouldn't see God where he was going.

Judkins had caught up with Lassiter after Lassiter left the meeting house. Lassiter has three bullet wounds. Jane hears Lassiter's jingling step in the hallway and rushes to greet him. She tells him she will ride away with him. She tells him his people will be her people and his God shall be her God. He kisses her hand and tells her Black Star and Night are saddled and ready. Quickly, Jane packs as much as will fit in the saddle-bags. Wasting no time, Lassiter sends Judkins, on Bells, to escort Jane and Black Star to the sage. Lassiter admonishes Jane not to look back. She does not. As they reach the sage, Judkins whispers a somber goodbye and then Bells is gone and Night rides beside her. She reaches for Lassiter's hand and he tells her again not to look back. Even when Jane smells the smoke and realizes Lassiter has set fire to Withersteen House, she refuses to look back. Together, they ride off into the sunset.

Chapter 21: Venters and Bess ready themselves to leave Surprise Valley, packing only what they absolutely need. Bess sees the bag Jane packed for Venters. She can tell it was packed by a woman and accuses Venters of lying. Venters explains about Jane and tells Bess he will be angry if she refuses to understand. He says if she had not spent her life in isolation, her beauty would have attracted many suitors; the compliment does the trick and Bess drops the subject. As they pack, Venters muses that they have stored enough supplies in the valley to live out their entire lives. Both of them admit they want to go and they want to stay. Sadly, Bess frees all the pets she has tamed and she and Venters spend their final night in the valley. In the morning, Bess cries as they pass under the stone arch. With the dogs in the lead, they descend past Balancing Rock, leading their burros. Venters is plagued with fear that on this final journey Balancing Rock will tip over and bury them forever in the landslide, but they make the journey without incident. The trail through Deception Pass takes another day. At first light, Venters rushes them out of the Pass before they are spotted by rustlers. As they scramble up the trail to the Pass, the dogs stop short. Venters turns to see what disaster awaits them.

His relief is palpable upon recognizing Jane and Lassiter on Black Star and Night. Jane smiles and greets Venters. She tells him she's lost everything. Venters feels a loss for words in this awkward situation as Jane sizes up Bess and realizes the situation. Jane calls him a liar. She vents her rage on Venters until it is spent, then she hides her face in Black Star's mane. Venters insists he kept quiet about Bess only to spare Jane's feelings. He tells her he still prizes Jane's friendship but that he loves Bess. Lassiter



defends Bess' innocence. Jane asks who the girl is, and Venters tells her she is Oldring's daughter, the Masked Rider. He explains how he shot her then saved her life. Jane cannot understand how Oldring's daughter could ride away with the man who killed her father. Venters yells at Jane for telling Bess he killed Oldring. Bess cries out that she cannot marry the man who killed her father.

Lassiter intervenes. He hands Bess a gold locket. Inside are pictures of a man and a woman. Jane recognizes the woman in the photo as Milly Erne. Bess says she has dreamt of a woman with those eyes. Lassiter puts his arm around Bess and tells her they are her mother's eyes. She is not Oldring's daughter; she is Elizabeth Erne, Lassiter's niece. Lassiter assures Bess that her parents were good people. He is her Uncle Jim. Bess is moved beyond words. Lassiter tells her that her father made an enemy of a Mormon named Dyer before she was born. In retaliation, Dyer stole Bess' mother away and made her a Mormon wife. When Bess was three, the Mormons stole her from Milly, who died a broken woman. Before Oldring died, Oldring told Lassiter that Dyer took Bess because Milly refused to raise her as a Mormon. Dyer hated Frank Erne so much that he arranged for Bess to be raised by criminals. But Oldring came to love Bess as a daughter. He made sure Bess was kept innocent and protected from the other rustlers; he made sure she had a good education. Oldring swore to Lassiter that if Dyer died, Oldring would be free of the contract he made with Dyer and could then return Bess to her real father.

Jane calls Bess by her true name. The shame vanishes from Bess' expression, replaced by joy and wonder. She hugs Uncle Jim, who says they must all make some quick decisions. Lassiter tells Venters that Dyer is dead but Tull remains a threat. Lassiter and Jane intend to hide out in Deception Pass. Lassiter tells Venters he cannot outrun Tull's men on the burros. He thinks Venters and Bess should stay in the Pass. Venters insists that Bess has been stuck there her whole life and wants to see the world; more importantly, he wants to marry her. Jane solves the dilemma by giving them Black Star and Night. The men are shocked at her generosity. Venters accepts with tears of gratitude. Lassiter tells Venters and Elizabeth that, with the blacks, they will easily outrun Tull's men and make it safely out of Utah. Jane hugs Elizabeth and Lassiter says a pained goodbye to his niece, discovered and lost on the same day. Bess and Venters mount their horses and race off into the purple sage.

Chapters 19 - 21 Analysis

In this section, both Jane and Venters finally resolve their internal conflicts. Jane is pushed to her limit when Fay is stolen, and she finally realizes that her churchmen deserve the justice which Lassiter wants to mete out to them. She also realizes that she truly loves Lassiter. Unfortunately, Lassiter does not believe her, given that Jane has spent weeks pretending to love him. Yet Jane's decision is final; willingly, she abandons her last remaining possessions and her home in order to remain with Lassiter and avoid marrying Tull. Venters, on the other hand, needs a little more help in overcoming his demons. He is still intent on lying to Bess, Jane, and himself to cover his own shortcomings, even while continuing to judge Bess for what he perceives to be her



shortcomings. When Bess discovers the bag packed by Jane, Venters admits to having lied but gets angry with Bess and threatens to return her to the rustlers if she will not drop the subject. Had it not been for Jane, Venters would never have told Bess that he killed her father. Venters is freed from his resentment of Bess by the realization that she doesn't come from bad blood because Oldring is not to her natural father. The author considers this to be a happy ending, which attests to the class-based code of honor prevalent when the novel was written. A more enlightened society would honor Bess' love for Oldring despite their lack of biological relation, and would not condemn Bess because she was born to a "bad" bloodline.



Chapters 22 - 23

Chapters 22 - 23 Summary

Chapter 22: Black Star and Night ride swiftly down the trail. Bess calls Venters' attention to approaching riders. Bess recognizes Tull's white horse amid the band of horses and men. Venters shouts for Bess to ride and she spurs her horse into action. Venters spurs Night and follows her through the sage. Tull's men drive their own mounts at top speed in a desperate race to catch the blacks and their riders. Venters is surprised at how quickly Bess draws away from him. He had forgotten the legendary skill of Oldring's Masked Rider. Tull's men fire at them but it is too late; he and Bess have outdistanced them. Tull's men give up the chase. Venters knows they will follow Lassiter's trail now, into Deception Pass. He and Bess slow their horses to a trot and find their way back to the trail again. Together they ride up the trail. They pass Glaze, and later, when they pass Stone Bridge, Venters knows they are safe and free.

They discuss their future joyfully and Bess spares a thought for their former home. Venters promises her some day, years from now, they will return to visit. Bess asks what if Balancing Rock were to fall before they return? Venters tells her he's figured a way to get in and out of the valley using ropes to climb the cliff face. She asks him to call her Elizabeth, and Venters tells her by this time tomorrow she will be Elizabeth Venters. Elizabeth tells him to look at the sun, setting on the sage; it will be years before they see it again. "Slumbering, fading purple fire burned over the undulating sage ridges. Long streaks and bars and shafts and spears fringed the far western slope. Drifting, golden veils mingled with low, purple shadows. Colors and shades changed in slow, wondrous transformation." (pg. 268) As they stare at the sunset, a distant roar reaches their ears from the direction of Surprise Valley; a low, thundering explosion of sound.

Chapter 23: Through her tears, Jane watches Venters and Elizabeth ride away. Lassiter assures her they will be safe and happy and that they will always remember Jane and Uncle Jim. They ride the burros down the trail to Deception Pass. Jane rides numbly, in shock from the day's events. At length, Lassiter finds them a hiding place where they rest and water their burros. He is alert to every sound. They ride on into the cañon until they reach the wider part of the Pass which opens onto the intersecting cañons. Lassiter scouts ahead on the trail. When he returns, he tells Jane that he's found the men he was looking for and intends to go after them. He insists on knowing what she will do if he does not make it back alive. Jane asks him her options. He tells her she can go back to Tull or stay in the Pass and be taken off by rustlers. Jane tells him she'd rather be taken by rustlers. Lassiter sits with his head in his hands for a long moment. When at last he looks up he tells her he's fairly certain to return. He tells her she is a good woman and he is glad to have saved her from the evil clutches of the churchmen who should, by rights, be making Utah a better place to live, instead of making border life even harder. He tells her that "'some day the border'll be better, cleaner, for the ways of men like Lassiter!'" (pg. 272)



The dogs wait with Jane as he rides away. Jane is too numb to worry about his safety or her own. Bullets whine over her hiding place but Jane just stares at the sky. The shooting stops; she hears a horse and the jangling sound of Lassiter's footsteps as he dismounts. At his direction, she ties off his bloody bullet wounds with a torn scarf. He commends her bravery and owns up to having been shot five times; he is out of ammunition. With no time to waste, he turns loose their burros and puts the saddle bags on two horses which await them in the clearing. Aware of her odd listlessness, he asks if she's strong enough to take a shock. Lassiter tells her he got Fay back; she is injured, but will survive. Jane's numbness disappears instantly. She falls to her knees beside the wounded child in the clearing. To their relief, Fay regains consciousness.

Lassiter calls Jane's attention to the band of riders approaching them; Tull's white horse is in the lead. Jane screams but Lassiter assures her that Tull and his men are riding tired horses; it appears Venters gave them a good chase. Hurriedly, they mount their horses and Jane lifts Fay into Lassiter's arms; Lassiter admonishes Jane that the situation is life or death and she must keep her wits about her and stay close to him. Somehow Jane summons the nerve to ride faster than she's ever ridden before. Time seems to stretch eternally as they race across the hard ground. Jane is weary and blood runs freely down Lassiter's face. They allow the horses to slow from time to time to save their strength as the endless chase stretches on. Jane loses her nerve and begs Lassiter to go on without her and save Fay. Lassiter's horse falls; he hands Fay to Jane and takes his saddle bag off the fallen horse. On foot now, Lassiter leads Jane's horse toward a bare rock face. Jane looks down at Fay and receives a trusting smile. Fay's trust revives Jane's courage, but Tull is less than a mile behind them now and gaining. Lassiter unbuckles his gunbelt, leaving the empty guns behind for good. He instructs Jane to dismount and carry her saddlebag; he carries his and Fay. They climb up a slope toward a cliff wall; when they reach it, Jane sees little steps cut into the stone. Lassiter sends the dogs ahead and ascends the stone steps with Fay in his arms. He returns and helps Jane ascend the stairs; they hear Tull's men shouting behind them. He tells her Fay is waiting and Jane makes the difficult climb without hesitation.

At the top they enter a dark passageway into the cliff and find the dogs and Fay waiting. Lassiter picks up Fay and moves forward up the rocky slide. Jane follows, unable to avoid stepping in his blood, which covers the stone floor. At the top of the passageway, Lassiter stops behind a huge, leaning rock which balances on a small pedestal. He starts to roll the stone but falls to the ground. Lassiter tells Jane that he brought her here with the intention of rolling the stone and sealing them inside; Venters' valley is beyond and they could live there together. Jane looks down and sees Tull beginning to climb up the passageway inside the cliff. Lassiter has lost his nerve. He cannot roll the stone and trap them in the valley forever. Jane watches Tull's relentless climb and begs Lassiter to roll the stone. He stands and puts a bloody hand on Balancing Rock. Jane screams that she loves him, and that gives him the courage at last. With a mighty heave he rolls Balancing Rock off its pedestal. The ancient stone moves slowly at first, but momentum quickly bounces it down the incline toward Tull and his men. Tull is brought to his knees by the torrent of rubble as the outlet to Surprise Valley is closed forever.

Chapters 22 - 23 Analysis

This final section completes the Garden of Eden scenario in Surprise Valley. Earlier in the novel, Bess and Venters find spiritual peace as the only two inhabitants of this lush valley. They cohabitate platonically and innocently just as Adam and Eve. Yet Venters' passion for Bess inspires him to leave that innocence behind and take her into the real world. Now Jane and Lassiter find themselves in the opposite situation. Lassiter is ready to renounce the violent ways he felt compelled to adopt along Utah's harsh frontier, and Jane has chosen to renounce all her worldly possessions rather than marry the greedy Tull. In this way, their arrival in Surprise Valley symbolizes their return to innocence. By rolling the stone, they renounce their worldly ways forever.



Characters

Jane Withersteen

Jane Withersteen is a woman tormented by a deep internal conflict. Born and raised Mormon in a small Mormon-run town located along Utah's frontier, Jane has been taught all her life to respect and revere the church Elders. An important facet of the Mormon teachings she receives is that Mormon Bishops are direct conduits to God. Historically, this is a religious teaching common to many faiths, which teach that salvation can only be found through the grace of a particular religion or church. In Jane's case, she is taught to believe that Bishop Dyer is God's agent on earth and his word is God's word. This makes it very difficult for Jane to disobey direct orders from her Bishop. Given Jane's strong religious feeling and her loving heart, it has always been easy for her to genuinely love and revere her Bishop and she truly dislikes upsetting him by opposing his will. Yet her internal conflict begins when the Bishop's will begins to blatantly conflict with her moral sense of right and wrong. When the church Elders trump up false charges against Bern Venters and intend to punish him by whipping him within an inch of his life, Jane is incensed by this ill-treatment of her friend. She knows that the only reason the churchmen harbor a grudge against Venters is that he is Gentile, not Mormon, and yet Jane cannot see this difference in beliefs as a legitimate reason for violence.

This initial rift between Jane and her churchmen grows wider as she begins to realize that their other reason for persecuting Venters is Elder Tull's desire to marry Jane and get his hands on her vast fortune. According to Lassiter, Jane is blinded by her religion, and thus it takes quite a while for her to accept the evidence of the churchmen's conspiracy against her. Making it even more difficult is the fact that the threat to Jane is carried out in a sneaky manner; the churchmen extend an invisible, controlling hand over Jane's empire, seeking to humble her. Backroom deals are made between Tull and the cattle rustler, Oldring, to steal Jane's cattle. Meanwhile the church Elders intimidate all of Jane's riders so that no one feels it is safe to work for her. Shorn of her riders, Jane's cattle is easily stampeded and stolen, and her few remaining loyal riders are killed in the bargain. Even with the mounting evidence of the churchmen's duplicity, Jane still finds it nearly impossible to defy them. Fear of God and of her Bishop, drilled into her from birth, cause her to consider taking the path of least resistance and marrying Tull even after he has proven his viciousness. Fortunately, Jane's true love, Lassiter, refuses to allow her to give up or give in. With Lassiter as her defender, Jane ultimately triumphs over her fear and escapes Tull.

Lassiter

Lassiter is alternately described as great, terrible, gentle, and loving. Perhaps what truly makes him great is his ability to combine all these traits in one strong personality. Indeed, Lassiter's wrath is terrible to his enemies. Lassiter is capable of killing quickly



and mercilessly when his anger is aroused. Yet Lassiter reserves this wrath for men who commit sufficient injustices to deserve such rough retribution. After meeting Jane, Lassiter learns to stay his hand even in the face of injustice unless he, or Jane, is under direct attack. Jane actually credits herself for inspiring Lassiter to love and gentleness, yet it is obvious from the history of his character that he already possessed these traits in abundance. How strong is a brother's love if it inspires him to devote eighteen long years to the hope of rescuing his sister, Milly Erne? Given that prior to Milly's abduction, Lassiter's best friend had been Milly's husband, the gentle town preacher, Lassiter likely shared some of Frank Erne's fine and gentle traits. Yet his long quest for justice and his anger at his sister's fate has led him to violence in the name of vigilante justice. For this, Jane would condemn Lassiter. However, over time, even the pious Jane sees the truth of Lassiter's soul and realizes her condemnation of him was neither fair nor certain. Additionally, Lassiter proves his capacity for growth by the respectful way he listens to, considers, and learns from Jane's gentle opinions. Both Jane and little Fay inspire Lassiter to reign in his anger, renounce revenge, and thirst to prove himself a changed man in Jane's eyes.

Bern Venters

Bern Venters is in many respects a fine, honorable man. Given the alternative prospects available to Jane Withersteen in the town of Cottonwoods, handsome, young Venters is a fine choice even if he is a Gentile. However, the possibility of Jane marrying a Gentile upsets her Mormon church Elders, who wish to keep Jane's person and property as part of their church coffers. Venters insists on remaining friends with Jane despite the ostracism and forced unemployment he faces as a result; this demonstrates both his rebellious nature and his inner courage to stand up for what is right. Yet Venters is also unwilling to take responsibility for his choices; he allows Jane to convince him to lay down his guns and then spends a year resenting her for making him appear weak. Never does he truly acknowledge that the choice was his. He blames the Mormons for terrorizing him and he blames Jane for domesticating him, but at no point does he accept responsibility for his personal choice to lay down his guns.

Ironically, Venters has no trouble placing blame and responsibility on others, particularly his true love, Bess. When Venters learns she is Oldring's Masked Rider, he blames the teenaged girl for taking part in this scheme, even though he knows she was held captive by Oldring. One can imagine that a teenaged girl who chose to defend herself physically against Oldring and his band of thieves would incur great physical harm and quite possibly such an action on her part would have led to her death. Yet Venters sees her role in Oldring's gang as voluntary despite the realities of the situation and he holds Bess completely accountable for the actions forced upon her by Oldring. Venters' character does not grow beyond these limitations, although he does try to love Bess despite her "badness." In the end, he succeeds only because Bess' innocence is proven, not because he has overcome his judgmental ways.



Bess (Elizabeth Erne)

Bess is considered an enigma by the other main characters in the book. Raised by cattle-thieving rustlers, teenaged Bess nonetheless remains innocent and naive. To outward appearances, Bess should be a hardened criminal based on her upbringing, but as she clearly explains to Venters during their first real conversation, she was raised in strict isolation. Bess has never known a mother or any adult woman, and she has never had a playmate. Her only human contact has been with Oldring, the man who raised her, and one of Oldring's most trusted cohorts. Venters chooses to blame and shame Bess for what he perceives as a sexual relationship with Oldring. It turns out that Oldring raised Bess honorably, and there was never any inappropriate contact between her and Oldring or between her and her only other human companion, Oldring's right-hand man. Yet even if there had been, how could Bess be blamed or considered corrupt for behaving as she was taught to behave? Raised in such isolation, Bess would have no way of knowing right from wrong. Venters' attitude towards Bess verges on the misogynistic. Fortunately for Venters, Bess has no frame of reference and does not realize that Venters is judging her unfairly. One wonders how many years it will take, once Bess is introduced to civilization, for her to realize that Venters, the man she has chosen to love, has treated her unjustly.

Oldring

Oldring is a legendary cattle rustler who has long preyed on the cattle ranchers along Utah's borderlands. His hideout is rumored to be somewhere within Deception Pass, but the Pass branches off into a confusing network of cañons and Oldring has had little trouble staying hidden inside the Pass. In recent years, Oldring has taken a theatrical approach to rustling. He strikes often and employs a Masked Rider to scare the cattlemen. Oldring takes care to spread rumors about his daring feats and the supposedly horrifying escapades of the Masked Rider in order to maintain a frightening reputation. In truth, however, most of this is a smokescreen to cover up the fact that Oldring has discovered gold in Deception Pass. Although he still rustles cattle, he rarely takes more than a few token head, just to maintain his cover. His hideout, located behind a waterfall in an isolated cañon within the pass, leads to a vast grazing area where he maintains a ranch of his own. It is here, in a ranch house overlooking a craggy cliff, where he raises his adopted daughter, Bess.

Oldring has made several deals with the powerful and corrupt Mormon churchmen over the years. Adopting Bess was one of them. To gain vengeance on Bess' father, the Mormons sold the little girl to Oldring in hopes that he would corrupt her. Yet Oldring comes to love the child as a father would, and keeps her isolated from the hard men and women who frequent his hideout. Oldring never tells Bess of her true heritage out of deference to the bargain he made with the Mormons, but he educates her and raises her in a state of complete innocence. Oldring's girl can ride like the wind, and so he makes her his Masked Rider. In this way he spreads his false legend of the evil Masked Rider while at the same time he chaperones Bess as they ride together from town to



town. Oldring may be a legendary cattle thief and killer of men, but his treatment of Bess reveals the hidden kindness in his heart. Had he lived, Oldring had eventually intended to return Bess to her rightful family upon the death of the Mormon preacher with whom he made the bargain.

Tull

As a church Elder, Tull is one of the most powerful men in the Mormon town of Cottonwoods. For years, he has wooed the beautiful Jane Withersteen. Good-hearted Jane assumes that Tull woos her because he cares for her, but in truth Tull only cares about owning the vast Withersteen holdings. Jane's heart is set on marrying for love and she continually refuses Tull's advances, causing Tull to embark on a campaign to pressure Jane into becoming one of his wives. First, Tull uses his position in the church to convince the local Mormons that Jane is being disobedient and disloyal to her faith by refusing to marry him. When Jane refuses to succumb to the resulting peer pressure from her friends, Tull resorts to sneaky scare tactics to try to control her. He calls in Jane's Mormon riders and threatens the Gentile riders in her employ until they are forced to quit, too, thus leaving her cattle unprotected. He arranges a deal with Oldring to steal Jane's red herd and hold it hostage until such time as Jane agrees to marry Tull. Tull also commands the Mormon women who work in Jane's household to spy on her and report to him. Then he orders his men to spook her remaining white herd into stampeding. All of this is done behind the scenes and Jane is never able to prove Tull's role in the conspiracy. Not until Venters catches Tull's men red-handed with Jane's stolen horses is Tull's crime revealed. Even at that point, Jane, who has been taught from birth to respect her church Elders, refuses to believe that Tull is the cause her troubles. Only after her adopted child, Fay, is kidnapped does Jane believe that her churchmen are working against her. Lassiter refers to the conspiracy engineered by Tull as the "invisible hand" of the Mormon religion.

Bishop Dyer

Bishop Dyer is the charming Mormon proselytizer who initially lured Milly Erne into servitude as a Mormon wife. Dyer teaches the young girls and women of his church that it is their duty to God to marry as the church sees fit. He represents the voice and face of God to his people, and teaches them that God speaks to him directly, thus his will is God's will. Dyer abuses this power to snare pretty young women for his male friends in the church; by marrying these women, the men take power over all their assets. The Mormon creed at this time in history allowed men to take multiple wives, and Dyer travels the country proselytizing and luring women into the Mormon way of life to further enrich his greedy friends. Those women whom Dyer cannot convince to marry are kidnapped and forced to become Mormon wives, even if they already have husbands and families of their own. In the end, Lassiter kills Dyer to prevent him from forcing Jane into this same fate.



Judkins

Judkins is the only Gentile rider in Jane Withersteen's employ. Once, Jane had employed several Gentiles as well as Mormon riders, but when the Mormon men took offense over her employing Gentiles, all the other Gentile riders were pressured to leave her employ. Only Judkins defiantly remains and loyally watches over Jane's cattle.

Milly Erne

Milly has been dead two years by the time the story begins, yet she is the catalyst who brings Lassiter into Jane's life. Lassiter, Milly's brother, has devoted eighteen years to finding the man who stole the pregnant Milly away from her beloved husband, Frank Erne. When Lassiter learns that a woman named Jane Withersteen knows where Milly's grave lies, he sets out to find the Withersteen ranch. Here he learns that Jane was Milly's best friend. Milly, a devoutly religious woman, had been ensnared by the preaching of a Mormon man. The Mormon had taken advantage of Milly's faith to arrange her kidnapping and she was given to Jane's father as his Mormon bride. When Milly rebelled from the brainwashing attempts of her captors, her daughter was taken away from her to keep Milly under control. Milly died of a broken heart, and her Mormon "husband," Jane's father, died of natural causes long before Lassiter arrived on the scene to avenge his late sister.

Frank Erne

Frank Erne is a preacher in the small Texas town where Milly and Lassiter grew up. It was no surprise to anyone that handsome, young Frank married town belle, Milly, since Milly was known for her religious fervor. Unfortunately for Frank, when a rival preacher, a Mormon, came to town, Milly was swayed by the competing religion. The Mormon preacher took advantage of Milly's faith to steal her away, against her will, from her beloved husband. Milly was pregnant at the time, and Frank never got over the loss. The last time Lassiter had seen his former friend, Frank had become a shell of a man, spending his listless days on the porch, whittling, while his ranch and farmlands went to weed. There is hope for Frank in the end, however. His daughter, Bess, escapes with Venters and the possibility of a long-delayed union between father and daughter seems likely.



Objects/Places

Deception Pass

So named for the intricate and confusing network of intersecting cañons which it contains, Deception Pass is a wide, natural passageway through the mountainous rock cliffs in the borderlands of Utah. Its fertile fields, ample water supply, and boxed in cañons suitable for penning livestock make Deception Pass an excellent hideout. Both Oldring and Venters are able to find hideouts within the Pass large enough to farm and raise livestock while still remaining hidden.

Surprise Valley

Located behind the protective Balancing Rock, Surprise Valley is the name given to the lush, hidden valley which Venters discovers inside Deception Pass. It is in this beautiful but isolated valley where Jane, Lassiter, and little Fay are ultimately trapped for all eternity.

Balancing Rock

Balancing Rock is the name Venters gives to the huge, ancient boulder used by the long-extinct cliff-dwelling Indians for protection. The cliff-dwellers chipped away at the base of the boulder, rounding it off and leaving it perfectly balanced atop a rocky passageway which served as the entrance to their home valley. If danger threatened, the cliff-dwellers had only to tip over the rock, sending it crashing down the passageway and sealing off their valley from intruders. The cliff-dwellers never had occasion to tip over Balancing Rock, but at the end of the story, Jane and Lassiter, pursued by Tull, must roll the rock to save themselves, sealing themselves inside Surprise Valley forever.

Cottonwoods

Cottonwoods is a small town founded and funded by the Withersteen family. As heir to her father's fortune, Jane is the mistress of Cottonwoods.

Amber Spring

The lush, freshwater spring owned by the Withersteen family provides water for the town of Cottonwoods.



Withersteen Ranch

The ranch which Jane Withersteen inherited from her father contains vast acreage of grazing land and a series of flowing pools called Amber Spring. Also located on the property are corrals for Jane's prized Arabian horses and a beautiful ranch house where Jane makes her home.

The Waterfall

The waterfall, located along the wall of a short box cason in the maze of casons which makes up Deception Pass, is the secret entrance to Oldring's hideout.

Lassiter's Guns

These guns are the subject of great dispute between Lassiter and Jane. Jane wishes him to lay down his guns and save his soul, but Lassiter insists that the times they live in are too dangerous for a man to go around unprotected. Ultimately, Lassiter uses his guns only when necessary and only to save Jane's life.

The Gentile Quarter

The Gentile Quarter is the poorest section of Cottonwoods. Non-Mormons, referred to as Gentiles, are typically refused employment in Cottonwoods; they must live on Jane Withersteen's charity.

The Cliff Dwellings

Thousands of years old, the dwelling places carved into the network of natural stone caves within Surprise Valley have survived the ravages of time nearly intact. Venters is able to find useable pottery and other cooking supplies when he visits this ancient city. Yet the white ash found on the floor contains the physical remains of the cliff-dwellers, and Venters is sobered by his visit.



Social Sensitivity

Riders of the Purple Sage is a romance, and like all romances it is several steps removed from reality. Zane Grey wrote about a time and place that never existed quite as he described it.

Although he described the Western landscape as he had actually seen it and defended his characters as being drawn from reality, he was, at the same time, aware that he was writing romance and providing escape from the realists. In the foreword of *To the Last Man* (1922) he wrote that he was providing ideals for "this materialistic age, this hard, practical, swift, greedy age of realism." These characteristics of the time were especially obvious to him after World War I, which confirmed him in his opinion that the world, especially America, was in a state of degeneration. The West of Grey's imagination was the ideal, and he wanted to provide an ideal at a time when Americans desperately needed one. For Grey the West, even in the 1920s, was a place to which men and women could come from the degenerate East and be cleansed by the landscape and by facing the essentials of life.

A pervading social concern throughout *Riders of the Purple Sage* is the character of the Mormon Church. The Church leaders in the novel, Bishop Dyer and Elder Tull, are vain, crafty, cowardly men who use their position of authority for personal gain. These men automatically hate non-Mormons and are intolerant of anyone in the Church who questions their authority.

In a broader sense Grey is showing the dangers of unlimited authority and religious fanaticism, which is usually inspired by the opposite of what are considered Christian motives.

On a secular level Grey is concerned about law and order, or the right that Americans should have to live their lives without interference from either inside or outside the law. Jane Withersteen, heiress of thousands of acres of ranch land and thousands of cattle, is prevented from hiring and befriending whom she wants by the Mormon Church, and prevented from prospering by cattle rustlers. She needs the services of a gunman, who is outside the law himself but who has a sense of right and wrong and an inclination for the lawful, to protect her property.

Through Jane's struggles Grey shows that the individual has the right to fight against any corrupt authority, fight against any corrupt authority, even if that means going outside the law and using violence to do it. In all of Grey's novels the villains are always punished, often with a terrible vengeance. He never avoided violence, and it is not unusual for the number of dead to exceed a hundred. This violence is clean and appropriate in the sense that those who deserve to die are shot in the act of perpetrating their villainy.

Grey loved nature, especially the nature of the American West, and he made it a principal character in his novels. For those characters responsive to it, nature provides

healing, peace of mind, and strength. Grey felt that Easterners used nature simply as a place on which to build their cities and towns.

Westerners, especially the cowboys, worked with nature every day, recognizing their responsibility to use it properly. In one sense Grey was an early environmentalist, trying to show that man must have a reciprocal relationship with nature. In *Riders of the Purple Sage*, the good characters always notice the beauty of the landscape, finding peace and strength in just being part of it. The villains show no awareness of their surroundings.



Techniques

Even though his characterization is weak, Zane Grey can tell a story. *Riders of the Purple Sage* contains one of his most involved and interesting plots. He accomplishes this by keeping five intriguing situations going simultaneously. The reader knows that by the end of the novel he will discover who caused Milly Erne's death, who the mysterious "Masked Rider" is, and who will win the battle between Jane Withersteen and the Mormon Church.

There are two blossoming love affairs in the novel in which the reader recognizes the attraction before the characters themselves are aware of it. Minor intrigues develop along the way: Which of Jane Withersteen's horses is the fastest and what is the real connection between Bess and Oldring? The resolution of these situations involves rough and tumble action complete with shoot-outs, life-and-death chases across the stretches of sage, escapes up precarious canyon walls, and stampeding cattle. The villains experience a number of early successes which put the potential heroes and sympathetic characters at a temporary disadvantage.

The action moves rapidly from one episode to another with a minimum of tedious emotional scenes, sweeping the involved reader along with the story.

Grey presents this action in cinematic detail, giving the reader a clear picture of each significant step, rock, sage bush and canyon.

The technique that Grey is most often praised for is his descriptive ability, rendering the colors, the varied formations, the expanse and beauty of the desert vividly and accurately. The landscape almost becomes a character in addition to being a prominent backdrop for the action.

Humor is rare in Grey's works and nonexistent in *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

No character ever says anything humorous and no situation is humorous.

Grey treats the story and the issues with complete seriousness. While the reader may chuckle at some of the episodes in *The Code of the West* (1934) and "From Missouri" (1926), the pervading tone of Grey's novels is one of sincere seriousness. The reader may laugh at some of Grey's love scenes, but this is because of his naive and clumsy attempts to depict passion.

Another technique conspicuous for its absence is subtlety. Grey cannot hint at emotion; he must tell all. He tells the thoughts of his characters verbatim, at the same time simplifying their emotions. Physical reactions are also overt: When angered, the men reach for their guns or resort to their fists, and when disturbed, the women swoon or collapse into tears.



Themes

Themes

In *Riders of the Purple Sage* Grey developed four themes, three of which have universal application and one that is peculiar to the American West. The first is that revenge can be justified, the second is that love between a man and a woman is one of the noblest functions of mankind, the third is that moral judgments of character must be relative, and the fourth is that the role of the gunman was a favorable element in the growth of the West.

The theme of revenge is introduced early in the novel, and throughout the story the reader learns the details so that when vengeance is carried out at the end he feels a sense of satisfaction.

Jim Lassiter has spent over fourteen years searching for the Mormon who kidnapped his sister, Milly, from her lawful husband and caused her early death. His only real stumbling block is Jane Withersteen, a beautiful Mormon woman who uses all of her charms to protect her people from Lassiter's wrath. Only briefly dissuaded, Lassiter renews his determination to avenge his sister as the guilty man continues his evil. The evil is exposed, guilt is punished, and Lassiter's years of searching are vindicated. Grey makes it clear that the guilty man deserves to die and that Lassiter's desire for revenge actually provides a service for the Mormon community of Cottonwoods. This revenge is not simply a desire to get back at someone; it is instead an obedience to a higher law to mete out deserved punishment.

When Berne Ventners, who rides for Jane Withersteen, is attacked by Oldring's band of outlaws, he successfully defends himself and shoots the mysterious "Masked Rider." Discovering to his amazement that he has seriously wounded a young woman, he dedicates himself to nursing her back to health.

As expected, they soon come to love one another. The love that Ventners shares with Bess, and the responsibilities that go with it, transform him from a rather weak, passive hired hand into a man of great physical strength and mental resolve. He more than adequately provides for Bess and himself in an isolated valley, and when back in the town of Cottonwoods he boldly confronts those Mormons who had previously tormented him. Both Lassiter and Jane remark the change in Ventners, and he tells Jane that love and relationships are the best of life.

Lassiter and Jane love each other, although Grey never fully develops this romance. Conversely, those characters who show no love for anyone but themselves are the villains.

The real villains are the two most prominent men in the Mormon Church, Bishop Dyer and Elder Tull. Using the authority granted them by the Church, they try to force Jane to



give up her Gentile friends and marry Tull, applying force through guilt, and when that does not work, they try to beat her into submission by stampeding and rustling her cattle. They mask these activities under the guise of concern for her soul and dedication to their calling. On the other hand there is Oldring, known to the world as a vicious outlaw, who raises Milly's daughter as his own, educates her, and fiercely protects her against the advances from members of the outlaw band. At the end of the novel Oldring is treated as a decent, even admirable, human being, while no punishment seems too harsh for Dyer and Tull. Grey clearly shows that a man's occupation and his religion are not valid measures for his humanity.

The theme that is peculiar to the West is that the gunman is responsible in part for the growth of the West into a lawful society. The gunman is a man who has suffered a wrong, usually from the law or a woman, and as a result must work outside the law. He does not like to kill but is forced to do so to protect his reputation from the young "hot shot" cowboys who want to establish their own reputations. The gunman confronts the lawless face-to-face, outdrawing and outshooting them, protecting the ordinary men who have been at their mercy. Even though Lassiter has been known as a "Mormon-hater" and has an impressive number of dead to his credit, he provides a necessary purge in the hierarchy of the Mormon Church in Cottonwoods. The gunman always faces his enemies, while they try to gain an advantage by taking pot shots from concealment.

Religious Hypocrisy

Zane Grey confronts the zealous belief-system used by nineteenth-century Mormon settlers to control their multiple wives in *Riders of the Purple Sage*. Through Lassiter's voice, Grey attacks the brain-washing and intimidation tactics employed against Mormon women of the era, particularly Milly Erne. Milly is not Mormon by birth or inclination; she is kidnapped from her marital home by three Mormon men and coerced into becoming one of the many wives of rancher Withersteen. Milly is able to send a letter to her true husband shortly after her disappearance, and in this first letter Milly is desperate to be rescued and wants, more than anything, to reunite with her husband and the father of her child. Milly gives birth to her only child in captivity, having been stolen from her home while pregnant. Several years pass without further word from Milly before her second and final letter arrives. A great change has come over Milly in these years. The second letter is terse and in it Milly states that she loves her new Mormon husband and yet she also states that she has been threatened with dire consequences if her brother continues to look for her.

Lassiter believes, based on this change in Milly's attitude, that she has suffered a combination of intimidation and brain-washing, and Lassiter is of the opinion that all Mormon women are subject to similar tactics along Utah's rough frontier. Lassiter claims that Mormon women are blinded by their faith, and Jane Withersteen's behavior testifies to the truth of this claim. For Jane refuses to believe that the venerable churchmen she has been raised to revere would ever lift a hand in violence. Yet in order to acquire Jane's wealth and property, her churchmen engage in cattle rustling, horse thieving, murder, and violent intimidation. Worse yet, the churchmen blame Jane for driving them



to these means because of Jane's refusal to obey their orders, become one of Elder Tull's wives, and voluntarily give over her property to the Mormon church. Grey implies that the Mormon practice of marrying multiple women was a thinly disguised attempt to consolidate land, money, and people in service to a totalitarian religious regime. Overall, Zane Grey's theme of Mormon religious hypocrisy adds an intriguing fictional case study to the large body of literature already dedicated to similar hypocrisies committed throughout history by major religions.

Honor

The type of honor celebrated in *Riders of the Purple Sage* is similar in nature to the Taliban's concept of honor. To the Taliban, the only way to restore family honor if a female family member has been raped is to kill the rape victim. These "honor killings" are predicated on the same archaic mindset as Bern Venters embodies in the novel. When Venters begins to fall in love with Bess, he is tormented by her past with Oldring. Even though Venters knows that Bess was raised by Oldring and held captive in Deception Pass all of her life, his ego compels him to judge Bess as a "bad" woman because he presumes she has had a sexual relationship with Oldring. Bess' age is never mentioned, but can be narrowed down to between seventeen and nineteen years from the supporting evidence which Lassiter provides. Bess was captured and sold to Oldring at the age of three. She has spent every year since in captivity; Bess has never known a playmate her own age, or known any adult women to act as mother-figure. Oldring went to great lengths to shield Bess from the rough men and women of the rustler's camp. Venters knows all of this. What he does not know is that Oldring came to love the girl like a daughter and went to great lengths to protect her sexual purity.

Venters believes he is being incredibly magnanimous by loving Bess despite her "bad" past which, in Venters mind, makes her an inherently dishonorable person. Sadly, this was truly the case at the time and the novel reflects the social mores of that era. Yet even if Bess had a sexual relationship with Oldring, in today's world that would make Oldring a pedophile who groomed Bess from the age of three to become his mistress. As Bess aged, it would have been unlikely that she would have sufficient self-esteem to recognize that what Oldring had done to her was not normal, for she had no other frame of reference in her lonely, isolated life. If Bess had realized that she was being taken advantage of, it is even less likely that she would have had the courage or the physical strength to break away from her captors. Yet Venters, after rescuing Bess from this life of presumed sexual captivity, believes that she has been hopelessly dishonored. Venters knows that the townspeople will share his sorry view of Bess and no one will consider her worthy of having a decent life, marriage or children with a husband she loves. Because of what these outlaw men have supposedly done to Bess, the social mores of the times would have treated Bess as an outcast for the rest of her days. Venters only hope of marrying her is to spirit her away to another town in another state where no one knows about her evil past.

Fortunately for Bess, it turns out that she did not have a sexual relationship with Oldring. Oldring had honorably raised her in a father-daughter relationship. This is great news in



the novel for it means Bess is not "bad" after all, and her honor is restored. In today's ostensibly liberated Western society, women are raised to believe that they have sexual choice and may voluntarily engage in sexual relations without being branded for life as dishonorable. As such, most modern women would support Bess' right to have had a lover prior to marrying Venters regardless of whether they would make the same choice for themselves. Yet in truth, even today, most women do pay a high price for such choices. In an article discussing the social and sexual mores with which modern day college women at the University of Massachusetts must contend, the authors state: "While the forced choice between 'virgin' and 'whore' has been around for a long time - at least as far back as the Old Testament - in the contemporary period a new twist has been added: Girls now have to be *both* virgin and whore. Along with the cultural imperative that 'sexuality is everything' is the equally powerful message that 'good girls don't.' [...] While there is no culturally validated figure of 'virgin' - virginity being regarded as geeky by large majorities of both girls and boys - there is the powerful negative icon of the 'slut' which effectively functions in the same way."¹ Thus the old-fashioned concept of "honor" as discussed in the novel is still very much in force in modern society.

¹<http://www.umass.edu/umassmag/archives/2001/winter2001/athens.html>; authors Sut Jhally and Jackson Katz.

Law vs. Justice

In the badlands of Utah in 1831, law and order have not been established with any degree of security. Justice is often at odds with the local lawmen, some of whom are corrupt and abuse their power in order to gain material wealth or preserve their social status. In the town of Cottonwoods, where the story takes place, the law is used to maintain the stranglehold in which the Mormon churchmen hold the populace. Thus, appearances can be deceiving in the on-going struggle between what is legal and what is morally right. Bishop Dyer and Elder Tull command the respect and awe of their Mormon subjects. Given their professed religious beliefs, the like-minded townspeople quite naturally support their authority and right to govern. Meanwhile men like Lassiter, "gun-men" with a reputation for violence, are just as naturally ostracized from the community of law-abiding Mormon citizens.

Yet these surface characterizations do not tell the true story, for Dyer and Tull are, in reality, two greedy and corrupt men who will stop at nothing to steal from their richest citizen, Jane Withersteen. As a woman in a male-dominated religious hierarchy, Jane is particularly vulnerable to attack by the powerful churchmen. They prey on her ingrained sense of religious duty to convince her that she should marry Tull for the good of the community, placing her fortune in his hands to be managed for the sake of bettering the commonweal. Yet this argument lacks veracity, for Tull's only goal is to better his own financial position. When persuasion fails, Dyer and Tull initiate a conspiracy; they manipulate the townspeople into cooperating with their plan to steal Jane's property, and they punish anyone who refuses to help by making up false criminal allegations against them. As the town's judge, Dyer holds court over these trumped up charges and



sentences Jane's loyal friends to jail time. It is up to the renegade, Lassiter, to defend Jane against these unjust lawmen. Lassiter's love for Jane causes him to give up his violent ways and lust for vengeance, but Lassiter will take up his guns in the cause of justice. As he explains to Jane, "some day the border'll be better, cleaner, for the ways of men like Lassiter!" (Chapter 23, pg. 272)

Style

Point of View

The point of view in *Riders of the Purple Sage* is presented in the third person. The major characters consist of two pairs of would-be lovers, Jane Withersteen paired with Lassiter, and Bern Venters paired with Bess. However, at the outset of the novel, prior to the introduction of Lassiter and Bess, Jane and Venters are an established couple with a romantic, albeit platonic, friendship. Although this initial pairing quickly dissolves, the author chooses to follow Jane and Venters throughout the story, and they are his main protagonists. This choice is underscored by the fact that the only two viewpoints presented in the narration are Jane's and Venters'. Never does the narrative intrude into the mind of the great Lassiter, nor is the reader privy to the inner workings of Bess' mind. Yet the reader learns Jane's point of view and shares her inner struggle to cope with the dissolution of her once-strong faith. As a counter-point, Venters' point of view shows how he finds God for the first time in his life as a result of his struggles.

Using these points of view, Jane and Venters' complementary storylines are linked together even after their lives diverge along different paths. Jane's struggle to hold onto her faith and Venters' surprise discovery of his both stem from the fact of their initial friendship. By befriending the Gentile Venters, Jane angers her Mormon brethren. Her church elders seek to punish both Jane and Venters for what they consider to be a blasphemous friendship. Jane responds to their pressure by holding her ground and making a stand at Withersteen Ranch. Venters, on the other hand, flees town but with the intent of taking decisive action to right the wrongs being committed against Jane. In the process of struggling against the biased discrimination of the churchmen, both Jane and Venters find true love, but not with each other. Yet their viewpoints continue to mirror one another's; peace-loving Jane struggles to reconcile her feelings of love for Lassiter, a gun-man with a violent reputation, even as Venters grapples with his growing love for Bess, a woman he believes to be bad and shameful. In the end, their diverging viewpoint and storylines merge in a final meeting. Faith triumphs for both Venters and Jane and through their strengthened faith they are both able to discard their former, judgmental views of Bess and Lassiter. Faith and love win out as they part ways once more.

Setting

The setting of *Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Grey interacts closely with the storyline and is an integral facet of the plot. Life on the frontier in the nineteenth century American West is difficult, at best. The hardy individuals who choose to live on the border of civilization must carve their existence from the dusty sage and barren rock of Utah's badlands. Gold is a primary lure which brings adventurous young men into Utah, and gold-prospecting is featured as the central motive of one of the story's bad guys, Oldring the cattle rustler. Yet for most of the people clustered in small towns along the



frontier, cattle ranching and farming are the primary occupations. As such, familiarity with the physical layout of the land can make all the difference between death and survival. Jane Withersteen's sage riders cannot survive on the vast, open plains without water, thus their prior knowledge of existing water holes and their ability to detect the signs of water's presence are critical survival skills. Additionally, sage riders must be able to locate good grazing land for cattle herds, and here again knowledge of the land is important because certain natural configurations, like box cañons, offer a convenient means of corralling the large herds with only a small number of riders.

The temporal setting of the novel is important to the plotline as well. Law enforcement was rudimentary at best in the early American West, and rough border justice is a central theme of the story. Social conflict plays out in the form of bitter blood feuds as the religious Mormon settlers clash with pioneers from competing religions and as everyone fights off the cattle rustlers who pick on Mormon and Gentile alike. Jane Withersteen's character is largely defined by the time frame in which she lives. A rich and powerful woman born more than a hundred years before the Women's Rights Movement gathered steam in America, she is treated like chattel despite her vast wealth and land holdings. Women's "honor" played a big role in the social mores of the times as well, as demonstrated through Venters' relationship with Bess. Honor was considered so critical to a woman that the mere implication that Bess may have had a prior sexual relationship with Oldring is enough to ruin her forever in the town of Cottonwoods. Venters must overcome his personal distaste for seventeen-year-old Bess' past and spirit her out of the state in order for her to be allowed to marry and lead a respectable life.

Language and Meaning

The writing style of this early Western is surprisingly poetic. Modern readers of the Western genre have become accustomed to hard-boiled, gritty prose as stark as the harsh landscapes of the old West. Yet the beauty in the prose of *Riders of the Purple Sage* takes its shape from the natural beauty of the land. Author Zane Grey demonstrates a great love for the desert landscapes of Utah. His words transform this bare, rocky ground into a gorgeous land of color and light. Grey's appreciation of the stark scenery brings its best qualities into sharp focus for the reader. Where a casual observer might see nothing but desert scrub, Grey's knowledgeable eye sees the vast magnificence of nature and the cycle of life. The barren sageland is transformed into a magnificent purple vista painted by shadows and light as Grey describes the sun setting over the sage: "Slumbering, fading purple fire burned over the undulating sage ridges. Long streaks and bars and shafts and spears fringed the far western slope. Drifting, golden veils mingled with low, purple shadows. Colors and shades changed in slow, wondrous transformation." (Chapter 22, pg. 268)

In the midst of these sparse, desert surroundings, the areas of verdancy seem even more appealing than they might in greener lands, and through Venters' character the author communicates the appreciative awe which a sage rider holds for a bubbling, natural spring. Surprise Valley, which contains such a spring, is an idyllic oasis in the



desert, described to perfection by Grey's poetic prose: "In his hidden valley Venters awakened from sleep, and his ears rang with innumerable melodies from full-throated mockingbirds, and his eyes opened wide upon the glorious golden shaft of sunlight shining through the great stone bridge. The circle of cliffs surrounding Surprise Valley lay shrouded in morning mist, a dim blue low down along the terraces, a creamy, moving cloud along the ramparts. The oak forest in the center was a plumed and tufted oval of gold." (Chapter 13, pg. 147) This Eden hidden within the bowels of Deception Pass seems such a paradise that the reader feel little sorrow over the fate of Lassiter and Jane when they find themselves trapped forever in Surprise Valley.

Structure

Riders of the Purple Sage is structured linearly, along two parallel story lines. The story begins as long-submerged tensions begin to rise to the surface in the town of Cottonwoods. The conflict between the established Mormon settlers and the newcomer Gentiles is brought to a head by the romantic friendship of Jane Withersteen and Bern Venters. The Mormon Church Elders, afraid of losing the vast Withersteen holdings if Jane marries her Gentile friend, are prepared to go to any lengths to end this friendship. Lassiter's arrival on the scene ensures that the Mormons will face powerful opposition in their quest to break Jane's will. Jane and Venters are quickly separated by events and their parallel plotlines evolve over the course of the novel until their brief and final reunion in Chapter 21. In the intervening chapters, Jane's story alternates with Venters' as each of them discovers a new love interest.

Alongside the action, the story focuses on the internal struggle which both Jane and Venters face. Their long held belief systems challenge their ability to accept the love they have found, Jane with Lassiter, and Venters with Bess. Progress is slow as both protagonists vacillate in their feelings. They must learn their lessons repeatedly before finally accepting the changes in themselves. This internal conflict is matched by the accelerating pace of the Mormon attacks against Jane. In Chapter 18, Venters engages his nemesis, Oldring, in a final confrontation. Chapter 20 provides Lassiter with the same opportunity as he shoots down Bishop Dyer, head of the local Mormon Church and Jane's most threatening enemy. After these confrontations, the author turns his attention to resolving the fate of the two pairs of lovers. Chapter 22 resolves Venters' plotline, and Chapter 23 provides the final resolution for Jane and Lassiter.



Quotes

"It had been long since Venters had experienced friendly greeting from a man. Lassiter's warmed in him something that had grown cold from neglect. And when he had returned it, with a strong grip of the iron hand that held his, and met the gray eyes, he knew that Lassiter and he were to be friends." Chapter 3, pg. 26

"As a rider guarding the herd he had never thought of the night's wildness and loneliness; as an outcast, now when the full silence set in, and the deep darkness, and trains of radiant stars shone cold and calm, he lay with an ache in his heart. For a year he had lived as a black fox, driven from his kind." Chapter 4, pg. 39

"Her churchmen might take her cattle and horses, ranges and fields, her corrals and stables, the house of Withersteen and the water that nourished the village of Cottonwoods; but they could not force her to marry Tull, they could not change her decision or break her spirit." Chapter VI, pg. 62

"Marry Tull. It's your duty as a Mormon. You'll feel no rapture as his wife - but think of Heaven! Mormon women don't marry for what they expect on earth. Take up the cross, Jane." Chapter 7, pg. 74

"Fay rewarded his boldness with a smile, and when he had gone to the extreme of closing that great hand over her little brown one, she said, simply, 'I like oo!'

Sight of his face then made Jane oblivious for the time to his character as a hater of Mormons. Out of the mother longing that swelled her breast she divined the child hunger in Lassiter." Chapter 11, pg. 121

"It was not her Bishop who eyed her in curious measurement. It was a man who tramped into her presence without removing his hat, who had no greeting for her, who had no semblance of courtesy. In looks, as in action, he made her think of a bull stamping cross-grained into a corral." Chapter 11, pg. 126

"Yes, I said unfaithful. You're faithful to your Bishop an' unfaithful to yourself. You're false to your womanhood an' true to your religion." Chapter 11, pg. 131

"Jane, you're watched. There's not single move of yours, except when you're hid in your house, that ain't seen by sharp eyes. The cottonwood grove's full of creepin', crawlin' men. Like Indians in the grass. When you rode, which wasn't often lately, the sage was full of sneakin' men. At night they crawl under your windows, into the court, an' I reckon into the house." Chapter 12, pg. 145

"Then he finished, an' by this time he'd almost lost his voice. But his whisper was enough. 'Tull,' he said, '*she* begged me not to draw on you to-day. *She* would pray for you if you burned her at the stake....But listen!...I swear if you and I ever come face to face again, I'll kill you!'" Chapter 15, pg. 178



"Wrangle uttered a horrible strangling sound. In swift death action he whirled, and with one last splendid leap he cleared the cason rim. And he whirled downward with the little frog-like shape clinging to his neck!

There was a pause which seemed never ending, a shock, and an instant's silence.

Then up rolled a heavy crash, a long roar of sliding rocks dying away in distant echo, then silence unbroken.

Wrangle's race was run." Chapter 17, pp. 208-209

"He had killed Bess's father. Then a rushing wind filled his ears like a moan of wind in the cliffs, a knell indeed - Oldring's knell.

He dropped to his knees and hid his face against Bess, and grasped her with the hands of a drowning man." Chapter 18, pg. 223

"But if I roll the stone - we're shut in for always. I don't dare. I'm thinkin' of you!"

'Lassiter! Roll the stone!' she cried." Chapter 23, pg. 280

Adaptations

Hollywood filmed three of Grey's novels in 1918: *Riders of the Purple Sage*, *The Rainbow Trail*, and *The Border Legion*. Since then, a total of 113 movies have been adapted from his books; in some instances, one title has produced four or five movies. Grey's early movies were silent films, and it was on these that he worked closely with the producer and director. He was especially concerned that the movie be shot on the location described in the novel and that the result be true to the spirit of the novel. Grey even moved to Hollywood and headed his own film company for a short time.



Topics for Discussion

In Chapter 11, Lassiter says Jane is true to her church but false to her womanhood. What does he mean by this, and which of Jane's actions inspire him to believe this about her?

Imagine you are one of the ancient cliff-dwellers. Based on the information provided in the story, describe a typical day in your life.

Discuss the economic benefits which having more than one wife afforded the men on Utah's frontier; list and explain at least three benefits.

Discuss the disadvantages to a Mormon woman of having to share her husband with multiple wives. Research and discuss which modern law this practice violates. For what reason(s) might such a law have been passed?

At the end of the story, Lassiter and Jane are trapped "forever" in Surprise Valley. Cite at least one example in which the author foreshadows their ultimate release from the valley.

What dishonorable acts did Venters' jealous judgment of Bess lead him to commit?

What moral dilemma might Jane Withersteen face now that she is trapped in Surprise Valley with Lassiter? How do you think she will respond to this dilemma?

The author makes frequent reference to the great importance of horses to their riders and owners; indeed, in the old West, stealing a horse was punishable by death. Why were horses so prized and why would the theft of a horse be so damaging to the victim of the crime?

Literary Precedents

Zane Grey is a loner in literature, and one will search in vain for signs of influence from among his literary peers. In some ways his novels are descendants of the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, which he enjoyed reading as a boy. Both Cooper and Grey blend history and fiction, with greater emphasis placed upon the fiction. They both had a good eye for the landscape, describing it in accurate, vivid detail and making it an important aspect of their novels. They both depict the people living in the wilderness as more noble than is realistic. Cooper and Grey have a poor ear for dialogue and vernacular, and as a result their characters speak awkwardly and out of character. Grey has a much better sense of plot than Cooper, and his novels contain unified series of events that are full of action.

The dime novels of his day intrigued Grey and probably convinced him that action was essential if his stories were to be popular. He read about the West and cowboys and Indians, seeking out fiction of a historical nature. Not until he was married did Grey read the literary greats, among them Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Darwin, Alfred Tennyson, and Matthew Arnold. Of these, only Darwin seems to have made a significant impression. Throughout Grey's novels only the fittest survive by adapting to their environment.

Although there is no indication of a direct influence or connection, Grey's novels have been placed in the tradition of such epic romances as Beowulf.

They share the same characteristics of improbable action carried out on a grand scale across a sweeping landscape, the characters are larger than life, and the heroes' actions are inspired by noble purposes. This is not to suggest that Grey is the literary equal of the composer of Beowulf. However, the departures from reality in Grey's novels are similar in kind to the departures from reality about which there are no complaints in Beowulf.

Related Titles

Riders of the Purple Sage bears a close relationship with all of Grey's novels.

It is broader in scope and less restricted in plot than his other works, but it shares many of the elements he incorporated in every Western he wrote. Mormonism as a major issue occurs also in *The Heritage of the Desert* (1910) and in *The Rainbow Trail* (1915).

Grey did not like Mormons as a rule because he felt that they mistreated women and were religious fanatics. In these three novels he shows the vicious, intolerant nature of fanatical Mormons, suggesting that the Church needs to change by becoming more tolerant to outsiders and less authoritarian to its own members. Later in 1930, however, Grey wrote a short novel, *Canyon Walls*, in which he pictured young Mormons as honest, sensitive, and friendly.

Grey often let one novel inspire a sequel. His first three novels formed what he called the Ohio River trilogy.

Riders of the Purple Sage inspired *The Rainbow Trail* (1915), which continued the life of a baby girl in the first novel.

The same pattern repeated itself a few years later when *The Light of the Western Stars* (1914) inspired *Majesty's Rancho* (1942), which dealt with the later life of a child from the earlier novel.

In *The Heritage of the Desert*, Grey uses a plot which he repeats, with only slight variation, in many subsequent novels. An Easterner who is sick, discouraged, aimless, or of effete character comes West. Under the influence of the landscape and the trials and tribulations of survival he is rejuvenated and makes the West his home. Women are also subject to the same influences and become strong, resolute, virtuous women. The process is always fraught with blunders, both life-threatening and social, but the character in question eventually views his former life in the East as frivolous and decadent and joyfully embraces Western life.



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