Singing Guns Short Guide

Singing Guns by Max Brand

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Techniques/Literary Precedents

Faust's earlier westerns about outlaws and adventurers on the edge of the law are the main precedents for Singing Guns. To a certain degree, Faust created his own conventions for the genre. The outline of the Max Brand hero was established in archetypal form in The Untamed, and except for the addition of guile and a conscience, the pattern is repeated with variations for the next fifteen or twenty years. Indeed, Silvertip, roaming the West in 1933, is remarkably similar in important ways to Dan Barry in 1919. Some variations on the pattern include heroes who use ropes instead of guns, like Reata, or kung fu, like Speedy the tramp, or simply rely on their bare fists, like Harry Gloster in Dan Barry's Daughter (1924). (The major exception is a character like Eddie Clewes, in The Iron Trail [1926], a tramp who uses glibness and guile to manipulate and control others.)

Nevertheless, there are some precedents for Singing Guns both within the genre of the western and outside of it.

Although numerous earlier Max Brand heroes managed to win a pardon for their transgressions as Rhiannon does, the classic pattern for the redemption of the lone wolf outlaw is established in Zane Grey's The Lone Star Ranger (1915), where Buck Duane is given a second chance by the stern but kindly Captain McNelly of the Texas Rangers.

It is well known, of course, that Faust was encouraged to read Grey's published works by Bob Davis, the Munsey editor who urged him to concentrate his career on producing westerns.

Another important source is Welsh mythology, and specifically the Mabinogion, the collection of classic tales which Faust probably read in the famous Charlotte Guest translation. In the opening of Singing Guns, Faust alludes to the Welsh goddess Rhiannon, whose songs could bring death to men, as a way of establishing his hero's legendary and heroic stature. It should also be noted that the names of nearly all the principal characters are Welsh, or at least Celtic. Faust often reminded his friends and confidants that his mother was Irish in descent, and he showed an abiding interest in Celtic mythology for most of his professional life. Finally, Nancy Morgan's name suggests Morgan le Fay as a source.

Themes/Characters

Two of the most memorable characters in popular western fiction appear in Singing Guns — the courageous but guileless outlaw giant, Annan Rhiannon, and his canny Welsh friend, Sheriff Owen Caradac. Although masculine friendship or "bonding" is an ancient theme of the frontier story — as old as Hawkeye and Chingachgook in James Fenimore Cooper — and some versions of this theme may be found in Faust's predecessors, like Grey and Clarence Mulford, the intense comradeship that develops between an outlaw and sheriff is an original contribution of this story. The friendship between Caradac and Rhiannon springs up after an opening confrontation in the mountains where Caradac, trying to track down the legendary outlaw Rhiannon, is wounded and then nursed back to health by the bearded and half-savage Rhiannon. Rhiannon, a brave and skillful warrior who lives alone in the mountains, has a kind heart and suffers from loneliness. The reason for his becoming an outlaw is never clearly explained, but it is obvious that Rhiannon is a Max Brand hero in the manner of the archetypal outsider, Whistlin' Dan Barry, in Faust's first western, The 3876 Untamed (1919). Rhiannon is clearly too independent to adjust to civilization easily, and he lacks the guile that enables a man like Caradac (a fighter of the same mettle) to accommodate himself successfully to a life in society.

Both Rhiannon and Caradac recognize that there is a curious kinship between them, which goes beyond the circumstances of their meeting: the outlaw and the manhunter are alike in their love of danger and their willingness to take life threatening risks, and this quality, or this need to test one's courage and prowess regularly, sets them apart from the commonplace middle class citizens whom Rhiannon robs and Caradac tries to protect. The similarities between Caradac and Rhiannon are symbolically emphasized by Faust's giving them the names of Welsh heroes.

Caradac's guile and essential humanity are demonstrated in his plan to help Rhiannon find a new life as a small rancher, while his cleverness and wisdom are also expressed in his effort to keep a fatherly eye on Rhiannon during his probationary period. Even more admirably, Caradac proves himself a master of intrigue in his ability to outwit the cunning Nancy Morgan, the female trickster who plays damsel in distress in order to manipulate Rhiannon into leading her to the cavern where a fortune lies hidden. As a wise and tutelary older figure, Caradac becomes the archetype of experienced and pragmatic characters who aid Faust's heroes in the later westerns, like Lanky, who guides the naive Nelson Gray through perils in Dead or Alive (1938) and, of course, Jim Silver or Silvertip, the mythic figure who helps younger characters in the Silvertip series. Caradac is also a prototype of the wise but disenchanted Dr. Gillespie in the Dr. Kildare novels and films.

Rhiannon represents the hero of Max Brand westerns learning to come to terms with society, or at least making a negotiated truce with it. In many earlier Max Brand westerns, the hero is not only an "untamed" figure like Dan Barry — who never learns to accept society and is finally killed by his pursuers in the final Dan Barry novel, The Seventh Man (1921) — but the hero's acceptance of civilization, and the concomitant

marriage that often goes with such acceptance, is an extremely tenuous act, often entered reluctantly. Sometimes, in fact, the endings of earlier Max Brand westerns are clearly cynical concessions to the audience's expectations of a happy ending in the manner of Zane Grey (marriage and monetary success for the hero) — as in The Border Bandit (1926), where the hero's enjoyment of the freedom he finds in outlawry does not seem likely to prepare him to accept a tame, domestic life with his sweetheart.

In Rhiannon, however, Faust created an "untamed" Dan Barry type, who, despite his independence and energy, manages to avoid Barry's fate. Rhiannon may have learned to live on acceptable terms with society, despite the longing for adventure that allows him to succumb to Nancy Morgan's wiles.

For all his courage and skills with guns, the loneliness Rhiannon has endured in the mountains drives him to a conventional life when Caradac offers it. It is Caradac's friendship, as much as Rhiannon's need for Isabella Dee, that brings him to a life of honest toil.

The secondary characters, though less memorable, are fairly well drawn.

Nancy Morgan, the cunning minx from the East who is finally unmasked as a villainess, is a convincing confidence woman, perhaps suggested by Morgan le Fay, in Arthurian stories. Her temptress role is played convincingly, and almost leads Rhiannon to his death.

Indeed, Faust may have been the first popular western writer to portray women as major villains. In this regard, Faust's characterization of women proves to be similar to that of his celebrated contemporary and fellow pulp writer, Dashiell Hammett in The Maltese Falcon (1930).

Equally successful is Faust's depiction of the wealthy but unpretentious Dee family, who operate the largest ranching operation in the Laurel Mountain country. Oliver Dee, the patriarch, is a credible millionaire of the Rocky Mountain West, a weather-beaten old man who wears down-at-the-heels clothes and talks like his ranch hands.

Charlie Dee, the male scion of the family, is one of the irresponsible scapegraces who people numerous Faust westerns. The best character in this family, however, is Isabella Dee, the heroine, whose candor and charm are both winning and durable. In this regard, Faust's westerns tend to break with the conventional stereotype of the heroine of westerns as a calico-clad innocent or as a foolish and pretentious ingenue from the East. Isabella, like the best of Faust's heroines, is neither a reform-minded schoolmarm nor a saloon girl, but a young lady of spirit with some traits of the tomboy.

Adaptations

In the late 1940s, when, after his death, Faust had become a Hollywood legend, several of the Max Brand westerns were adapted for film. Republic did a version of Singing Guns which was released in 1950 with a popular singer of that era, Vaughan Monroe, as Rhiannon and the lovely Ella Raines as the female lead. A bearded Monroe did a passable job as a western hero, and the script showed some fidelity to its original, but the production is undeniably second rate and of little importance in the tradition of the western film. Ironically, a 1943 film western, The Desperadoes, based on an original story by Faust, comes closer to the spirit of Singing Guns. This big budget technicolor film, with Glenn Ford and Randolph Scott as an outlaw and sheriff who share a lasting friendship, is a spirited action film which has worn fairly well. Curiously, The Desperadoes uses the plot of Singing Guns in reverse, by making Cheyenne Rogers, the outlaw played by a youthful Ford, into a clever trickster, while his honest friend, a sheriff played by Randolph Scott, is somewhat too trusting and naive. The climactic sequence in which Ford uses a wild horse stampede to rescue Scott is very exciting.

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