Dualities In The Death Of Jim Loney

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CARROLL COLLEGE

DUALITIES IN THE DEATH OF JIM LONEY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
TO GRADUATE WITH HONORS

BY
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HELENA, MONTANA
MARCH, 1994
This thesis for honors has been approved for the English Department.

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March 28, 1994  
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank all of the people who have made it possible for me to complete this thesis.

I would first like to thank my parents and my family for all their support and understanding over the last four years and especially with regard to my thesis. None of this would have been possible without them.

I would also like to thank all the staff at Carroll College who have contributed to my education. I would especially like to thank my thesis readers, Dr. Ann Bertagnolli and Dr. Robert Swartout, and my thesis director, Dr. Valerie Gager, who has spent much time and energy keeping me focused on my thesis and helping me work to my full potential.

Finally, I would like to thank all of my friends who have been great support in my work.
When I first began considering a topic for my honors thesis, I decided I wanted to write about some aspect of Montana literature, but I had difficulty choosing an area of research. I went to Professor Hank Burgess for help in picking my topic. He suggested writing about James Welch.

Having already read Welch’s novels, I knew that because I liked his writing I would be able to spend the time necessary for writing a thesis without growing tired of my topic and I would enjoy the research and find the project worthwhile.

What I first intended to do with Welch’s novels was to compare his protagonists with Romantic heros. However, after some thought, I narrowed the subject to comparing only Jim Loney, the protagonist in The Death of Jim Loney, with Romantic heros. After much research on Romantic heros and their characteristics, I began writing. However, the process did not accomplish what I intended. Instead of comparing Loney to Romantic heros, I seemed to be attempting to fit him in the category of a Romantic hero, a place he did not completely belong.
After several meetings, my director, my readers, and I concluded that the focus of my thesis had to change to something that was representative of what I was not thinking about Welch's hero. After freewriting about *The Death of Jim Loney*, I decided to focus upon several recurring issues in the novel that struck me as being important. These issues included such areas as Native American life, searching for identity, and the differences between whit culture and Native American culture. With these issues in mind, I began writing my thesis once more, with much greater success than the first time. Although my time was extremely limited, I managed to produce what I hope to be a much better thesis because the issues are important to me and are ones about which I have strong feelings and in which I am extremely interested.

My experience in writing my thesis has definitely been one in which I learned a great deal. Although I spent a lot of time researching Romantic heros which turned out be peripheral to my new focus, the effort was not a complete waste of time because I did use some of the background information from my first draft in my second attempt at writing. Perhaps what I learned is that nothing is ever a complete waste of time. Probably the most important concept I has nothing to do with the actual writing process. What I learned that will remain with me for the rest of my life is never to be afraid to try a new idea because it might turn out better than any previous attempts. Had I continued trying to
compare Jim Loney with Romantic heros, I would only have become frustrated and would have written a thesis in which I did not exert my full effort. Although totally starting over with only about a month left before my thesis was due was scary, it was immensely more productive than anything I had written up to that point.

Although I am much happier with the second draft of my thesis than I was with the first, I still would like to change and improve upon it. If I had the process to do over, I would like to spend more time researching other sources that deal with the issues in my thesis and perhaps even interview Welch. I also found other issues in the novel that caught my attention as I was writing this draft, and I would have liked to research those issues, too, but I simply did not have enough time. Perhaps at some other point in my life I will pick up this paper and begin working on it once more.
James Welch’s novel, The Death of Jim Loney, presents a protagonist who inspires conflicting reactions from the reader. Loney, a half-breed Native American living in Harlem, Montana, struggles to find his identity amid a society that has almost erased his roots as a Native American. The problems Loney faces as a half-breed symbolize the complications of larger issues Welch raises in his portrayal of Loney’s life. The reader journeys with Loney while he searches for himself, at times longing to help Loney through his crisis and at other times wishing Loney would disappear because of his pathetic lifestyle. In addition to the response each page evokes in the reader, The Death of Jim Loney as a complete novel raises critical issues involving Native Americans, including developing an identity, fighting a sense of helplessness, living the reality of reservation life compared to life as it is known to other people, and feeling isolated.

Welch conveys the complexities of these issues by alternately presenting Loney as a sympathetic and unsympathetic character. The differing portrayals of Loney fit traditional literary categories, but Loney cannot be placed in any one mold. At times, Loney possesses qualities befitting a Romantic hero. At other times, Welch’s portrayal of Loney is completely realistic. Loney’s not fitting any one established literary genre contributes to the reader’s conflicting response. The reader never knows where to place Loney to understand his personality and his struggles. In many other cases, literary characters conveniently fit in one category, making reading pleasant for the reader. However, Loney’s character makes the reader uncomfortable because she does not know where to place Loney and what to expect from him. In addition to the
presentations of Loney which challenge the reader, the complex issues Welch discusses leave the reader without simple answers to the many questions raised by Welch’s novel. Loney is a character in crisis, and his crises leave the reader struggling to understand him.

The first and perhaps most important of Loney’s many crises is his search for an identity. Loney’s lack of an identity stems from his youth. Abandoned by both his Native American mother and his white father, Loney spends his childhood in boarding schools and ministers’ houses. Shunted from place to place, Loney never lives in any one household long enough to develop a sense of belonging. Loney lives his childhood as someone on the periphery of a family. He looks in at the way others around him live, but he never fully enters their ways of life. Loney lives half in and half out of the family, just as his half-breed status causes him to live half in and half out of two different cultures. Although he lives with a minister and his wife in Harlem for four years, the situation resembles dormitory life more than it exemplifies a cohesive family unit. Immediately after graduation from high school, Loney packs his few belongings and leaves the minister’s house without feeling any sense of loss or homesickness.

Loney’s childhood lifestyle did not allow him to develop the sense of identity that comes from associating with family members. Loney, who knows little about his mother and father, knows nothing about his ancestors and his family history. Such a loss is drastic for anyone, but for a Native American, the loss is even deeper. Coming from a culture that has a deep historical consciousness, Loney is at a definite
disadvantage from the beginning of his life. Native Americans place a strong emphasis on traditional folklore and oral presentation of their history and culture. With little Native American influence in his childhood, Loney lacks the knowledge of his heritage that might help him understand who he is. Perhaps if Loney’s childhood had contained more Native American influence, Loney would have developed a more concrete sense of his identity and would have been better able to understand who he is.

In addition to his lack of information regarding his Native American heritage, Loney also has little sense of his white heritage. As an adult, Loney meets his father, essentially for the first time. Loney’s father is his only chance to discover anything about himself. “His father was still here. He was the last one left to Loney” (Welch 108). Readily apparent, the gap in the relationship between Loney and his father becomes even more obvious when Welch describes Loney’s visit to his father. “He had come as a stranger to a stranger for information, he hadn’t come as a son” (146). Loney’s trip to his father’s trailer is not a reunion of two close relatives who have not seen each other in years. The visit is more like a visit to a museum where one collects facts and looks at old pictures on the wall, or in Loney’s case, where he finally hears the stories of his history and attempts to discover who he is.

Although Loney’s visit to his father does not occur until late in the novel, his identity crisis is a recurring theme throughout the whole story. From the beginning of the book, Loney appears to be searching for something, namely himself, and how the pieces of his life fit together or how he is disconnected from the human race.
He had been thinking of his life for a month. He had tried to think of all the little things that added up to a man sitting at a table drinking wine. But he couldn't connect the different parts of his life, or the various people who had entered and left it. Sometimes he felt like an amnesiac searching for the one event, the one person or moment, that would bring everything back and he would see order in his life (Welch 20-21).

At this point, the reader feels some sympathy for Loney. He is trying to discover who he is by remembering one specific incident that would connect everything and give order to his life. Although he is not successful, Loney is at least attempting to organize his life. However, like an amnesiac, Loney has no idea who he is. He has a name, but he does not have an identity. A name is an important part of an identity, but a true identity requires an awareness of family and of history.

Loney has no knowledge of his background from which to form a sense of self. He attempts to discern who he is by thinking about his life, but the attempts fail because his life contains too many isolated events and not enough coherence to help him in his search for identity. Loney realizes that without an awareness of his past, his future is unstable.

Okay, from this very moment I will start back—I will think of yesterday, last week, last year, until all my years are accounted for. Then I will look ahead and know where I'm going. But the days piled up faster than the years receded and he grew restless and despondent. But he
would not concede that his life had added up to nothing more than the simple reality of a man sitting and drinking in a small house in the world (Welch 21).

In an effort to find out where he is going with his life, Loney looks to the past. However, his past does not offer any clues to who he is or to what path his life will take. In his present situation, Loney seems helpless to discover who he is, while the future appears hopeless without a knowledge of his past and an understanding of his present.

As Loney searches for an identity, he attempts to understand the other people who are part of his life. One person who had a deep influence on Loney was his "aunt" with whom Loney lived after his parents abandoned him. Although he cannot remember her name, the woman made a large impression on Loney, and her memory haunts him even as an adult. In her presence, Loney felt loved. "Sometimes he liked to think that if she hadn't died, he would have lived with her forever. She liked midnight mass and she liked many men in those two years. But he remembered most that she liked him" (Welch 19). Perhaps for the only time in his life, Loney felt accepted by another human. Possibly Loney viewed the aunt as the mother he did not have, someone to take care of him. She is a connection to his childhood in a life that is almost totally devoid of connecting elements, and even as an adult, Loney clings to her as a grounding point for his identity.

Identity and relationships to others are closely connected. Without a sense of identity, forming relationships is difficult; yet part a person's identity stems from the
relationships he has with other people. Loney's inability to form an identity and choose a direction for his life influences his relationships with other people. Rhea, his lover, attempts to help Loney by giving him love and support. However, Loney does not have enough knowledge of who he is to return her love. "His own life was not complicated but his mind became confused when he tried to understand what all these people meant to each other and to himself" (133). Trying to understand how Rhea fits in his life only worsens Loney's already desperate situation to discover his identity. Loney feels that other people make his quest for an identity more complicated, but Loney is so far removed from even beginning to understand who he is that other people probably do not complicate the situation as much as he believes. By himself, Loney has no success finding out who he is. If Loney accepted the help others had to offer, he might move through his identity crisis. If Loney were to let Rhea, Kate, his sister, and his father play significant roles in his life, he might be able to learn about himself through his interaction with them. Instead, he lets himself become a "nonperson," wallowing in wine and cigarettes (Welch 41). People who might be able to help Loney surround him, but he will not reach out to them. Thus, Loney's inability to accept help from others creates an unsympathetic response in the reader. Someone who does not examine all avenues of possible assistance to a problem does not readily play on a reader's sympathy.

The one glimmer of hope for Loney's discovering an identity is the one area that seems to be most difficult for him to explore. Loney, a half-breed of white and Gros Ventre origin, seems reluctant to investigate his Indian heritage. Rhea opens the
subject when they drive to the Little Rockies. As she examines the landscape she says, "We'll build a log cabin and you can hunt. Just like your ancestors. . . Just think, you can be Indian one day and white the next. Whichever suits you" (Welch 14). Rhea's view of the situation is Romantic because such a way of life is no longer possible, but her view of Loney's situation is positive. Loney views the situation differently. While Rhea focuses on the uniqueness of his situation, Loney focuses on the negative aspects of being a half-breed: "it would be nicer to be one or the other all the time, to have only one set of ancestors. It would be nice to think that one was one or the other, Indian or white. Whichever, it would be nicer than being a half-breed" (Welch 14). Loney pities himself, never thinking that he is no different than most other people. Almost everyone comes from several different ethnic backgrounds, but instead of taking pride in his origins, Loney laments the fact that he has two heritages. Rather than blending his Indian and white heritages or choosing one or the other, Loney wanders in a no-man's land of confusion about his identity. "He had no family and he wasn't Indian or white. . . . She had said he was lucky to have two sets of ancestors. In truth he had none" (Welch 102). He has ancestors; he chooses not to investigate who they are and how their lives affect his. Although Loney tries to think back on his life to discover who he is, in some senses his actions give the feeling that he clings to his lack of identity as an excuse for not accomplishing more in his life. He does not have to reach any major goals or impress anyone with his actions; he merely has to survive. He does not have to love Rhea because he cannot give her what she deserves without understanding himself; he does not have to go to Washington with
Kate because he does not know who he is and would not belong in the big city; he does not have to have friends because he does not know himself well enough to need companionship from others.

Loney's sporadic search for his identity results in a feeling of hopelessness about his future. In his book, Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel, Louis Owens states, "Loney cannot put the pieces of his past and present, and therefore his identity, together, with the result that he cannot project a future" (150). Loney remains stuck in the world familiar to him. Loney is aware that his life is confusing, but he does not know what to do about the situation. "'I don't know what I want to happen'" (Welch 106). Deciding on a course for his life requires more than Loney has to offer. Part of his difficulty in deciding what to do with his life might stem from the fact that people do not expect Loney to accomplish anything monumental. Kate "considered her brother incapable of steering his own course" (26). The one person who should have the most faith in Loney does not even believe he can choose his lifestyle. Because of their conversations when they were both children, Kate knows that Loney is intelligent. However, sometime during adulthood, she abandoned her hopes in Loney and now wants him to move to Washington so she can be near Loney to help him. During a visit to Harlem, Kate says to Rhea, "'He'll still be here, in this house, drinking at that kitchen table and looking forward to nothing'" (Welch 85). Kate appears to believe that Loney will accomplish nothing with life except to drink himself into oblivion.

Kate is not the only person who regards Loney as a pathetic creature. Russell,
the bartender, also views Loney negatively. "Russell could almost pity the poor bedraggled bastard trying to light a cigarette with a book of wet matches" (Welch 6). Pity is the key word in Russell's thoughts concerning Loney. Everyone pities Loney so much that he, too, pities himself. He is completely helpless to save any part of his relationship with Rhea. When Rhea reveals that she is considering leaving Harlem, Loney says, "I don't want you to go, but I don't have enough in me to make you want to stay" (Welch 107). Rather than trying to convince Rhea to stay and see if their relationship has a future, Loney easily lets her go because he does not believe enough in himself to think he has anything she wants. His acceptance that his life is worthless and his pitiful outlook become apparent again later in the story. "I do love you,' she said, her voice drifting. And he almost said it too, but there was no place to take it" (Welch 154). Loney seems to think that the relationship should just happen without any work on his part. He has no place to take Rhea's love, so he does not respond. Rather than exert the necessary effort to develop his relationship with Rhea, Loney lets her slip away from him. Again, the reader does not feel sympathy for Loney. He has a relationship with a woman who is willing to help him if only he would reach out to her, but Loney will not exert the energy necessary to hold on to Rhea.

Loney's pitiful, helpless outlook on life extends from his relationships with other people to his belief in himself as a capable human. Several times throughout the story, Loney laments the fact that he is no longer as smart as he used to be. He says, "That was before I realized I didn't know anything. Not one damn thing that was
worth knowing" (Welch 18). In the same scene he says, "I just wish I was as smart as you. I used to be. I was as smart as anybody... That was before I realized I didn't know anything. Not one damn thing that was worth knowing. Do you understand that? Do I understand that?" (Welch 18). Later in the bar, Loney tells a drunk woman, "I have no reason to be smart anymore" (Welch 35). When talking to Kate, Loney says, "I guess I'm not very smart... I'm not as smart as some people" (Welch 75). Loney seems as if he is trying to convince himself and those around him that he is not smart. Therefore, he has an excuse for not leading a more physically and emotionally productive life according to the standards that society, including Kate and Rhea, has set. For many people, especially people living in a predominately white society, a productive life includes a high-paying job, social status, and meaningful relationships. For Loney, a productive life might be nothing more than struggling to stay alive.

Loney has so thoroughly accepted the idea that he is not capable of accomplishing anything that he has entirely given up. "Somewhere along the line he had started questioning his life and he had lost forever the secret of survival" (Welch 155). Once he lost that "secret of survival" Loney gave up all hope. He had nothing to draw him into life. Loney's scheduled hunting trip with Myron Pretty Weasel gives him one slight glimmer of brightness, but Loney knows that once the day is over, his life will be even more mediocre than before. "After tomorrow's slim purpose, I will simply exist" (Welch 108). Welch is not clear about why Loney enjoys hunting. Perhaps hunting gives Loney a sense of his heritage and a connection to his ancestors
who hunted to survive. Perhaps going hunting merely provides Loney with something to anticipate, something to do in a small, quiet town. Loney expects to go hunting with Pretty Weasel and then return to his life of drinking and smoking cigarettes.

Ironically, what Loney expects to be a momentary change in his daily routine turns his life around. When Loney kills Pretty Weasel, his sense of helplessness leaves him. Loney realizes that eventually someone will find Pretty Weasel’s body and he will be linked to the killing. These thoughts spur Loney into action. For the first time since his father’s return to Harlem, Loney visits him, shares his secret about killing Pretty Weasel, and tells his father where he is going to hide. Loney’s revealing his destination is not a slip. He knows that his father will tell the authorities, who in turn will hunt him down. By telling his father of his plans, Loney makes his father responsible for Loney’s death. In a crazed manner, Loney is getting revenge on his father for his lack of involvement in Loney’s life. His father, who is responsible for Loney’s life, will now also be responsible for Loney’s death if he tells the authorities what Loney has done. For the first time, Loney is taking his life in his own hands by planning his death. "In the end, Loney is able to assert control over his life only by adopting a warrior’s stance, by selecting and controlling the time, place, and manner of his death" (Owens 154). The sense of helplessness that permeates the rest of the novel disappears as Loney flees to the mountains to die. Perhaps in his death he forms his identity and chooses a culture. Rather than turn himself in to the police, go on trial, and rot in prison, Loney chooses to die in the manner of his Indian ancestors. He turns to nature and relies only on himself either to win or lose the battle against
the reservation police, although he never doubts that they will hunt him down and kill him. Finally, Loney's actions produce sympathy, or perhaps respect, from the reader. In planning his own death, Loney shows strength and a belief in his ability to accomplish something when he focuses his energy. The pitiful, unsympathetic character has disappeared, and in his place is a man with a purpose, dying as he chooses.

Loney's fleeing to the reservation to die raises the question of differences between reservation life and life outside the reservation. Although Harlem contains a large Indian population, Harlem itself is not on the reservation. By fleeing to the reservation, Loney knows who will be responsible for his death. Once he sets foot on reservation land, the Harlem police and the Montana Highway Patrol have no jurisdiction over what happens to him. Loney knows that the reservation police will be his killers. Not only does he know this fact, he appears to want them to be responsible for his death. The white men have controlled most parts of Loney's life. He will not let them control his death, too.

Loney's death, while the most profound example of his choice to be a Native American, is not the only instance in which Loney's Native American heritage appears. Try as white people might to "Americanize" Native Americans, some parts of their native cultures still exist. Like many reservation Indians, Loney does not maintain a steady job. Instead, he works when he needs to earn money to survive. Once he makes enough money, he quits working until his supply of money diminishes and the cycle repeats. For white people looking at reservation life from the outside, this idea
of sporadically working is not only strange, it is often seen as a sign of laziness. Living in a society that values high-paying, high-tech jobs, white people have a difficult time accepting Loney's lifestyle. The idea that part of the reason Loney lives as he does is his Native American culture does not usually enter their minds. Historically, Native Americans lived tribally, working when they needed to gather food or defend themselves. Such a way of life has become ingrained as part of their traditions. While some Indians have adopted the ways of white men, some still prefer to live as close to old ways as possible. In his choice of work habits, Loney appears to accept the Indian half of his heritage. He is content to live near the reservation and work when he needs to rather than return to the white world he inhabited briefly.

Loney's life near the reservation allows him to foster a certain sense of isolation. Loney is left alone to spend quality time with his wine and cigarettes. In opposition to white people, who frequently meddle in each other's lives, Welch portrays Native Americans as keeping distances between each other. White people would expect Loney to socialize. Native Americans allow Loney to live quietly. People respect his privacy which in turn allows him to turn inward and remove himself almost completely from any contact with other people. Loney's lack of social interaction is apparent at the beginning of the story. When Loney enters the bar, Russell refers to him as "The Lone Ranger" (Welch 4). This comment alone reveals that Loney does not spend much time in the company of other people. Even at the bar, one of the few social gathering places in a small town, Loney is not a familiar face.

Loney's isolation does not go unnoticed by Rhea. "And she had written Kate
that she was becoming concerned about his drinking and even more about his desire to isolate himself. . . . He hardly ever left his house except when he needed things, mostly wine and cigarettes" (Welch 25). Loney relies on wine and cigarettes instead of humans to provide companionship. His isolation is not a recent occurrence, however it does seem to have increased. "He never really had friends but he had cronies, and a couple of women he saw every once in a while, whenever he needed to" (154-155). The distinction between friends and cronies is quite important. Unlike friends, cronies are merely people occasionally to socialize with such as drinking buddies. If Loney had friends, he would have to reveal himself to them and, in turn, be willing to accept parts of them in his life. He does not want to get involved that much with other people, not even Rhea. Loney isolates himself so much that he and Rhea sometimes go for days without seeing each other, which is quite an accomplishment in a town the size of Harlem.

Over his life, Loney has developed the art of isolation to a point that he does not feel comfortable even around people who care about him. When Kate visits Loney, they go to Rhea's house. The two women, having just met, manage to carry on a conversation. Loney, however, remains quiet: "but as he looked at them he felt like a third party" (Welch 67). Both Kate and Rhea love Loney and are concerned about his isolation. Loney could not ask for a more concerned audience with whom to share himself, yet he does not open up. Instead, he lets the uncomfortable feelings of being at Rhea's house override any sense of belonging he might have. Perhaps Loney feels pulled in opposite directions by Kate and Rhea, just as he is pulled in opposite
directions by Indian and white cultures. Both women want to help Loney, but they want to help in different ways. Kate wants to take Loney to Washington D.C. where she can watch him. Rhea wants to take Loney to Seattle because she is convinced Loney will be better if he is away from Harlem. Neither woman bothers to ask Loney what he wants or how he feels about moving. They automatically assume that their ideas are best and that Loney should blindly follow them wherever they take him. Loney, however, does not want to go anywhere. He simply wants to be left alone.

Loney's desire for isolation is strong right up to the very end of his life. When he finally faces his death, Loney does it by himself. "I'm going to the Little Rockies.' Then he added again, 'Up Mission Canyon. I'm going to think'" (Welch 148). Knowing his father will tell the authorities of his crime, Loney chooses an isolated point for his final stand against society. Whether through Loney's own fault or through the insensitivity of society, Loney never truly belongs, and he proves his difference in his death. While most people would turn to friends or family to help them in such a troubled time, Loney relies only on himself.

Loney's strong desire for isolation is probably closely related to his identity crisis. Not knowing exactly who he is, Loney fears getting close to others. Like many people, Loney has a difficult time revealing himself. Since he is so confused about who he is and where he comes from, he is even less willing to become close to other people. Even on a one-on-one basis, Loney does not let much of himself show. His relationship with Rhea feels more than anything like a physical relationship without a large amount of emotional involvement on either side, but especially not by Loney.
Even with Kate, someone Loney idolizes in a sense because she, too, is a half-breed but has managed to form an identity, Loney is distant. Their relationship during her visit is extremely superficial. Although Loney and Kate have not had much contact in recent years, at one time in their childhood, they were close. Loney will not open up enough to allow their relationship to return to what they had as children, perhaps because he has no more of a sense of identity than he did when he and Kate were little. Perhaps as an adult, Loney realizes that he should know more about himself, and he hesitates to show his own confusion.

Loney’s identity crisis and his isolation appear to be intimately related. As Loney tries to discover his identity, he isolates himself from everyone else. Unfortunately, in his isolation, Loney becomes even more unsure about who he is. By opening up and letting others get close to him, Loney might be able to begin to see how he belongs as a member of society, or even to see if he does not belong at all. In either case, he would at least have an idea of his place in the grand scheme of things. Unfortunately, Loney is unable to open up to others, and the cycle of isolation and identity confusion continues as long as he is alive. Loney’s problems with isolation and a lack of identity are so self-perpetuated, however, that he almost loses the reader’s sense of sympathy. At some point, feelings of sympathy turn to feelings of irritation with Loney for refusing to try to help himself. No one can find Loney’s identity for him, and no one can end his isolation if he is not willing to end it himself. He has to be willing to help himself. Other people can and do attempt to help him, but he simply will not accept their help. He seems intent on slowly destroying himself.
Loney's path of self-destruction is related to the bird he sees in visions late at night. The bird is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the novel, both for Loney and for the reader. From its first appearance, the bird is mystifying:

It was as though there were no connection between his eyes and his brain. And he saw the smoke ring go out away from his face and he saw the bird in flight. Like the trembling, the bird was not new. It came every night now. It was a large bird and dark. It was neither graceful nor clumsy, and yet it was both. Sometimes the powerful wings beat the air with the monotony of grace; at other times, it seemed that the strokes were out of tune, as though the bird had lost its one natural ability and was destined to eventually lose the air. But it stayed up and Loney watched it until it reached into the darkness beyond the small candlelight (Welch 20).

Not knowing what else to do, Loney toasts the bird with his glass of wine. The bird apparently symbolizes something ominous, but what it symbolizes is not made clear. Loney tries to understand the bird, but his efforts are in vain. "And so he drank to the bird which came every night and he tried to attach some significance to it, but the bird remained as real and as elusive as the wine and cigarettes and his own life" (Welch 21). Interestingly enough, both Loney's life and the bird are described as real and elusive, two terms which hardly seem compatible for describing the two concepts. Loney's life, which is real, is elusive in the sense that he cannot form an identity. Both his white heritage and his Native American heritage are real, but, for Loney, understanding them is as elusive as understanding the bird. For the reader, Loney's life is real and elusive,
sympathetic and unsympathetic. When Loney's thoughts and actions make sense to the reader, Loney is real. However, when Loney appears to have no direction, sympathy for him is as elusive as the bird. Unlike Loney and the feelings he evokes in the reader, the bird is not real. It is merely an image in Loney's mind which no one else can see. It is, however, elusive, for Loney can not determine its meaning in his life.

The bird, which seems to be related directly to the problems Loney has with his identity and isolation, is the one thing he wants to share with Rhea but does not have the ability to do so:

In the quiet of the darkening room, Loney looked into the fire and he saw his dark bird. Its long dark wings moved slowly up and down just above the flames. Tonight it was graceful and he was grateful. And he wanted her to see it too, but he knew she didn't. She had her own thoughts. And Loney felt like a beggar standing beside her because her mind was rich, and he envied her (Welch 30).

Loney senses that if he could share the vision of the bird with Rhea, they would be closer to each other. However, he also knows that the bird is something that Rhea can never see because Rhea does not fully understand his situation. Rhea only sees the romantic side of Loney's life and Loney is her Romantic hero. Rhea's idea of moving to Seattle is as unrealistic as her view of Loney. Moving to Seattle will not solve any of Loney's problems because the problems are within Loney, and they will move with him in the form of the bird. The bird is something that no one else but Loney can ever see.
Loney does eventually tell Rhea about the vision of the bird, trying to get her to relate to him:

"It comes when I'm awake, but late at night when I'm tired—or drunk." Loney was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I don't know what this has to do with anything, certainly it has nothing to do with my aunt. It just comes every night, and every night I think, This must have some meaning. Sometimes I think it is a vision sent by my mother's people. I must interpret it, but I don't know how" (Welch 104-105).

Rhea, however, understands the bird even less than Loney does and only tries to convince him that the vision of the bird will leave if he leaves Harlem. Rather than drawing them together, Loney's sharing of the vision probably drives them even farther apart. Rhea now realizes that Loney is beyond her help. She pulls away from him at the time when he reaches out to her the most. Loney says, "I want to make a little sense out of my life and all I get are crazy visions and Bible phrases. They're like puzzles" (Welch 105). Loney is obviously confused and in need of someone who can understand his situation or at least be willing to listen to him. Rhea, who has never fully understood Loney, no longer is willing to listen to him, either.

Because Loney does not understand the bird, it is not necessarily a thing of comfort for him. Upon returning to Harlem after shooting Pretty Weasel, Loney cannot even look at a road sign. "But he was afraid to look up, for he was afraid that he would see his imaginary bird among the stars" (Welch 122). Already in a bad situation, Loney fears seeing his bird because that would only make matters worse.
The significance of the bird remains a puzzle, both to Loney and to the reader. Loney thinks the bird may be a sign from his mother’s people, but he does not know enough about his heritage to understand what such a sign means. How Loney feels about the bird is never clearly stated, either. He seems comfortable with the bird at times, accepting its presence in his life. At other times, such as when he is returning from shooting Pretty Weasel, Loney tries his best to avoid seeing the bird. Like other aspects of Loney’s life, the bird raises questions to which he cannot find answers and inspires conflicting responses in the reader while pulling Loney in two different directions.

Loney’s bird is with him right up to his death. "And he fell, and as he was falling he felt a harsh wind where there was none and the last thing he saw were the beating wings of a dark bird as it climbed to a distant place" (Welch 179). The bird, which haunted Loney in life, haunts him in death, too.

From a reader’s perspective, the bird is perpetually frustrating and confusing. Helpless to understand what the bird means, the reader struggles to try to make the bird fit somehow but without much success. Welch leaves all references to the bird rather vague. The bird’s physical characteristics are known, but beyond that information Welch reveals nothing. One theory Owens has regarding the bird is that it is Loney’s animal spirit:

The totemic bird, which seems to hover about Loney throughout his decline, may well be Loney’s animal power, or spirit, sent according to traditional Indian belief in dreams and visions to provide a profound identification with the
animal world and thus a special strength or power. Loney's lack of training, of knowledge necessary to interpret the vision, creates an unfathomable void between him and the bird, a barrier which he cannot cross. In the end, the spirit retreats into the distance, leaving Loney still more alone in death (154-155).

Owens' explanation is logical. However, a certain fatalism is implied. An animal spirit was to provide a sense of identification with the animal world. Loney, who is lacking in all sense of identification with the human world, does not have the knowledge of his heritage to interpret his animal spirit. Therefore, he is denied the identification with his spirit, an identification he desperately needs to survive.

Another interesting point Owens makes regarding the bird is the contrast it provides between Loney's Indian heritage and Christianity, which surrounds him. "Because he has no tradition and no teachers . . . Loney lacks the necessary awareness and ability to believe in either world" (148). Perhaps the bird's purpose is to point out the conflicts Loney faces in trying to combine two distinct heritages that have differing spiritual beliefs. The novel opens with a Biblical passage that haunts Loney for the rest of the book. Considering Loney has not read the Bible for many years and apparently is not tied to Christianity, the Bible passage strongly affects him. The passage, "Turn away from man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?", is taken from Isaiah 2:22. The passage expounds on how the Lord will judge idols. The passage might cause Loney to think of himself and his life. Perhaps Loney feels the Lord is judging him and his punishment is the bird. With the appearance of the bird, Loney's
struggle between Christianity and his Native American heritage begins.

Even in his dreams, Loney’s struggle continues. At one point, Loney dreams of an Indian woman and a Catholic church. The woman, who is looking for her son, says, "'He is somewhere—out there. But I will never find him because he will not allow himself to be found'" (Welch 34). The woman’s statement describes Loney. He, too, is there but will not find himself or allow himself to be found. The Indian woman, in a desperate search for her son, goes to a Catholic cemetery. Loney, in a desperate search for his identity, is haunted by Bible passages.

The woman appears again while Loney waits for his executioners to find him hiding in the mountains.

Then Loney remembered his dream, the dream about the young woman who had lost her son. Again he saw her face beneath the makeup and the black shawl and it was easy this time. He did recognize her and he knew who the lost son was. She was not crazy—not now, not ever. She was a mother who was no longer a mother. She had given up her son to be free and that freedom haunted her. All the drinks, all the men in the world, could never make her free. And so she had come back to him in his dream and told him that her son would not allow himself to be found. He was not in that churchyard grave—he was out here in these mountains, waiting (Welch 175).

The woman in Loney’s dream is his mother, and Loney is the lost son. His mother has finally returned to Loney, knowing that he is lost. She looks for him in a
churchyard grave, but she cannot find him because Loney has not accepted Christianity. Her son, Loney, is in the mountains with his bird and his Native American heritage.

In opposition to the beginning of the novel, the story closes with an image of Loney's bird, a symbol of his Native American heritage. The struggle between Christianity and Native American spirituality divides Loney through the entire story, but in the end, Loney's Native American heritage triumphs over Christianity. These differing spiritual beliefs extend to a variety of different cultural beliefs, all of which Loney needs to examine in order to find his identity. The bird, then, might be a symbol of the difference between Indian culture and white culture.

In direct contrast to the mysterious nature of the bird, Loney is a startlingly realistic character. Upon reading Welch's novel, one realizes that Welch is familiar with Native American culture and lifestyles and has the ability to portray a character who could come to life at any moment. In addition to Loney's realistic characteristics, he shares some qualities of other protagonists which help to explain him by relating him to other protagonists. He is reminiscent of Heathcliff from Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. Both characters are compelling while at the same time distasteful. Like Loney, Heathcliff is probably of mixed blood. He was also abandoned by his family and grew up as a foster child. Heathcliff never totally fit in with the Earnshaw family, as Loney never totally fit in with the minister's family with whom he lived. Heathcliff and Loney are both dark characters who keep to themselves the majority of the time. Heathcliff, however, has a cruelty about him that Loney is missing. While
Heathcliff hurts other people, Loney hurts only himself. However, in their isolation from other people, the two characters bear a striking resemblance to each other.

Loney also is similar to Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick*. Both characters are preoccupied with elusive animals. Ahab chases the elusive white whale, while Loney is chased by the elusive dark bird. Both characters want to understand their respective animals, and both characters die with their animals. However, unlike Ahab, who actively pursues the whale, Loney passively waits, knowing the bird will come to him every night.

Although Loney has certain characteristics that relate him to Romantic heroes, he does not entirely fit their mold. Loney is too realistic to be a Romantic hero. Welch has created more than a character, he has created, or recreated, a real person. The reader reacts to Loney much as she would react to any real person. Loney at times has the reader's sympathy. He struggles with his identity. Most people at some point have an identity crisis of some kind. However, Loney's crisis is unique because of the vast differences between the two cultures he attempts to combine. The reader relates to Loney in his struggle. Loney feels isolated from society. Again, most people at some time feel that they do not quite belong in whatever society of which they are a member. Loney struggles to understand the two cultures from which he stems. Most people have some interest in their ethnic heritage and question it at some time.

For all the identifying the reader does with Loney and the sympathy she feels for him, at times Loney is one of the most despicable characters ever created. Loney does not try to better himself; he does not actively try to learn about his heritages; he
does not get close to people. Since Loney has apparently given up, to attempt to better himself, to learn about his heritages, and to develop relationships probably seem pointless to him. He has no hope and no sense of a future. Again, in these instances, he resembles real people who give up hope of bettering themselves and are content to live with the status quo. Perhaps the reader's frustration comes from not having the chance to change Loney. If Loney were a real person, the reader would have the opportunity to work with Loney and perhaps help him, but since Loney is a character, that opportunity does not exist. The reader's reaction and desire to help Loney is one of the ways in which Welch manages to create sympathy for the hero. As realistic as Loney is, he is still just a character in a book, and no amount of indignation will change that fact.

Exactly how Welch manages to create such a character is not a clear issue. Welch knows his subject, which allows him to create a character that is intensely realistic. Coming from an Indian background himself, Welch knows the struggles and the triumphs an Indian man encounters. Welch does not attempt to beautify the Indian situation. He portrays Loney in a less-than-attractive light much of the time. As someone from the inside who knows reservation life, Welch describes what someone from the outside looking at reservation life sees. This portrayal lends Welch's characters credibility in the eyes of both whites and Indians. Almost everyone who is familiar with Indian lifestyles can recognize the truth of what Welch writes. Welch's familiarity with his subject is what enables him to create a character who is sympathetic to the reader. Everyone recognizes Loney's struggles and sympathizes with him.
Welch’s familiarity, which allows him to create a sympathetic character, also allows him to create an unsympathetic character. Welch knows how much is too much. Instead of allowing the reader gradually to begin to feel sympathy for Loney and then making Loney pull his life together, Welch leaves Loney in his pathetic situation. The reader eventually tires of Loney and some of the sympathies turn to irritation. Welch knows how to put in just enough irritation to make Loney even more real. No real person is always sympathetic to those around him. Similarly, while Loney at times draws the reader’s sympathy, he at times repels it. Welch's novel presents a hauntingly lifelike situation with a devastating end. The book and its characters both draw and distance readers. Loney himself is probably the biggest factor in the mixed emotions felt by the reader. At a glance, he appears to be wasting his life by drinking and smoking alone in his house. Upon closer inspection, he is looking for something that he does not have the ability or knowledge to find; he is looking for himself. His death, a suicide of sorts, is incomprehensible to the reader, but to Loney, it is his only way out of a hopeless situation. Loney’s slow path to self-destruction, which he has been following for years, finally leads him to a definite place, death. From this place, Loney has no desire to return. For Loney, death is preferable to living without a true sense of identity, and the questions his life raises are left floating in the air as he falls to his end.
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