

Western, Anti-Western, or Something In-Between?

Analyzing the Adherence to the Western Fiction Genre in John Williams' *Butcher's Crossing*

Marleen Hiltrop

5536030

BA Thesis English Language and Culture

Utrecht University

Supervisor: Dr. Cathelein Aaftink

Second Reader: Dr. Johanna Hoorenman

3 April 2020

## Abstract

This study analyzes whether *Butcher's Crossing* by John Williams fits within the Western fiction genre or in some respects could better be called an anti-Western. As the novel is set in the American West and deals with aspects of Western life, an adherence to the Western fiction genre seems likely, but arguments for it being an anti-Western are numerous. By analyzing several of the novel's focal points—the protagonist's development in connection to his environment, the adherence to reality, and the opposition between man and nature—this study shows the measure to which the novel adheres to the Western fiction genre. When it comes to the protagonist's development in connection to his environment, the novel subverts the notion that the Western hero must always conform to civilization as constructed by western understandings. Additionally, the novel's adherence to reality is not in line with the Western fiction genre's tendency to romanticize its stories. Lastly, the depiction of the opposition between man and nature in the novel shows that man's overtaking of nature is destructive, which fits with the Western fiction genre, but the depiction of the inhumanity of nature challenges the paradise myth of the Old West, which is a subversion of the genre. In light of these focal points, this study reaches the conclusion that *Butcher's Crossing* is an anti-Western.

Table of Contents

Introduction ..... 4

Chapter One: Defining the Western Fiction Genre ..... 7

Chapter Two: The Hero’s Journey West..... 12

Chapter Three: The Real West ..... 19

Chapter Four: Man and Nature in Binary Opposition..... 24

Conclusion..... 29

Works Cited..... 31

## Introduction

Cowboys, colonists, and outlaws exploring and taming the Wild West from the late eighteenth century up until the late nineteenth century (MasterClass). That is the general image of the Western genre. Emerging in the late 1800s, Western novels were read increasingly, peaking in the 1960s only to fade to the background in the 1970s due to the constant presence of the Western genre on the screen (MasterClass). Nevertheless, many of the genre's characteristics are still common knowledge to contemporary audiences, such as its use of protagonists like cowboys and sheriffs that have to deal with the conflict between good and evil. Other characteristics of the genre include an emphasis on the American character, on changing times, on a romanticization of events, and on the theme of escapism.

Published in 1960, *Butcher's Crossing* by John Williams appeared just when the Western fiction genre was at its most popular. The novel's protagonist is William Andrews, a young man from Boston who has dropped out of Harvard in order to travel West. The American West of 1873 is the novel's setting, with a focus on the fictional frontier town of Butcher's Crossing in Kansas, and a remote Colorado valley. The West was industrializing during the 1870s, but the Western Frontier—the line that separated the settled East of the continent from the land to the West, which was deemed uncivilized and available for settlement by Anglo-American colonists—would not close until 1890. Westward expansion had thus not yet reached its limit. The end of a way of life facilitated by the freedom and opportunity found in the West's "virgin land," however, had already begun during the 1870s. In the novel, this decline of the Western way of life is marked, among other things, by the failure of the buffalo hunt and the coming of the railroad. Combined with its setting in the West, the novel has therefore often been labeled a Western. Nevertheless, it was not Williams' intention for the novel to be labeled as such: "[H]e was deeply skeptical ... about

the traditional Western, a cliché that he was so insistent on subverting that he refused to sanction the book's reissue in 1960 because the publishers wanted to put the label 'A Western' on the cover" (Bland). This skepticism of Williams' towards the Western, and his apparent wish to subvert the genre, has been picked up by critics, some of which have labeled the novel an "anti-Western" in response: "*Butcher's Crossing* is a novel that turns upside down the expectations of the genre—and goes to war with a century of American triumphalism, a century of regeneration through violence, a century of senseless slaughter" (Plotz). Research by John Stark regards the novel as "a parable of the frontier experience, a tale of frontier vigor and heroism, albeit of a mindless variety, being transformed into boredom, economic inutility and violence," addressing its lack of romanticization when it comes to the events described. Moreover, while dealing with characteristics of the Western genre to varying degrees, *Butcher's Crossing* features no cowboy or sheriff as its protagonist, and there is no simple conflict between good and evil.

If anything, it could be argued that the novel's genre is not set in stone. Previous research, while addressing the genre the novel may fit into, does not provide arguments based on an analysis of the novel's adherence to both the Western and the anti-Western genre. In analyzing aspects of the novel's story and setting, possible arguments for the novel's adherence to either of the genres arise. These story-telling and environmental aspects include, but are not limited to, the development of the protagonist in connection to his setting, the level of realism, the presence of Native American people, the relationship between man and nature, the focus on a way of life associated with the American West, and the portrayal of the struggle between good and evil. These aspects are all present in *Butcher's Crossing*, serving as focal points within the story that shed light on the question this thesis aims to answer: Does *Butcher's Crossing* fit into the Western fiction genre or could it in some respects better be called an anti-Western? In order to answer this question, three of the novel's focal points will

be analyzed: The portrayal of the protagonist's development in connection to his setting, the adherence to reality, and the opposition between man and nature. These three focal points often relate to the protagonist, Will Andrews. They are therefore the most noticeable focal points, and play a large role in determining what genre the novel fits into. Most of the other focal points are much less prominent: Native Americans, for instance, are only mentioned explicitly three times in the novel (Williams 91, 96, 228). Analyzing the reason for this lack of representation would steer the discussion away from the question this study aims to answer. Important to note, therefore, is that by dismissing the other focal points, the present study's findings cannot be viewed as definitive in determining what genre the novel belongs to.

## Chapter One

### Defining the Western Fiction Genre

In order to determine in what ways *Butcher's Crossing* may be viewed as a Western or an anti-Western, the Western fiction genre's most important characteristics need to be established. These characteristics will show the level of adherence to the genre in the discussion of the novel's chosen focal points in later chapters.

For starters, the genre features the influence of the Frontier “upon the American character and its subsequent refinement” (Milton 93). Within this theme, there is a focus on what the Frontier can offer, ranging from freedom to opportunities. The themes of self-reliance and starting anew are also emphasized, as well as the American Dream—the possibility of leading a successful life no matter your background (Crimmel 367). The genre's historical background is based in the geographical location of the American West during the second half of the nineteenth century. The American West can be seen as either a place that is recognizable on a map, or as an idea that has changed over time and that deals with concepts such as “frontier, opportunity, honor, individualism, and justice” (Witschi 4). Additionally, James K. Folsom notes that Western fiction often deals with history not being static, but constantly changing (204), forcing its characters to adapt to change or else face the consequences. This change was brought about by, among other things, the industrialization of the continent which caused “civilization”—a term constructed by western understandings, which disregards the fact that civilization already existed west of the Frontier—to expand westwards, making it impossible for the West to maintain its old ways. In the Western novel, this is depicted through the disappearance of elements associated with Western life, such as the lawlessness of the West and the close connection to nature, due to the influence of the emerging Anglo-American civilization and its laws and restrictions.

Adapting to the changing environment is most explicitly depicted in the protagonist of the Western novel. Throughout his story, this “Western hero” goes through a coming of age process. What makes this process unique within the genre is the “opportunity to combine the theme of personal maturing with a statement of the nature of the course of history” (Folsom 93). Put differently, the genre connects the development of its protagonist to the development, for good or bad, of his environment and place in time. During the second half of the nineteenth century, this would mean that as the American West was being subjected to industrialization and was subsequently restricted by society emerging from the East, the Western hero would similarly be restricted by this society due to mirroring the direction of the development of his environment.

The level of idealization in Western fiction is worth noting as well. Westerns did not often portray the actual facts of Western life and “the landscape of the Western has only a nodding acquaintance with the landscape of the West” (16). Due to this dissimilarity to reality, the term “romance” is often attributed to the genre (19): Rather than describing reality, Westerns idealize events to represent a romanticized American West instead of actual history (Marsden 204). In terms of historical facts, the Western is thus not often true to reality. Its romanticization of actuality is evident in, among other things, the depiction of the journey through the West as being a great adventure with no significant hardships, the portrayal of the Western hero as being on the good side in the conflict with evil, and the inclusion of the myth of the Old West, i.e. of the West being a paradise. In all these instances, historical facts are altered and perhaps even disregarded to the benefit of the West’s image. Additionally, in its romanticization, the genre bears some resemblance to escapism: The idealized West was seen as a place to escape to, with the “increasingly urbanized and industrialized East” of the continent being the place to escape from (Wrobel 460).



Lastly, the relationship between man and nature is often prominent in the Western genre. This relationship presents itself in the Western novel in its focus on the ways in which man can use nature for the benefit of himself (Erisman 15), and in the way man and nature are interdependent, needing each other in order to exist. The self-reliance and opportunity associated with the American West play a part in the relationship as well. Together, these aspects of the West—wilderness, self-reliance, and opportunity—are then placed in opposition to the more luxurious way of living that is related to the East. Folsom describes this as follows: “The American mental hesitation between the values of urban and rural life is mirrored in the Western novel; whether the coming of civilization is good or ill is the burden of Western fiction” (31). In this interpretation, the genre relies on the opposition between urban and rural, man and nature, and on the question whether the emergence of Anglo-American civilization at the expense of nature is a good or a bad thing. Furthermore, “[t]he Western is a story of human contact with the landscape. From the outset it juxtaposes mankind and nature ... record[ing] the ways in which [mankind] ‘experience[s] direct contact with, and reliance upon, the land’” (Erisman 21). Man and nature are thus seen in binary opposition, while being intimately connected at the same time. Related to this opposition and interdependence are the human-made decisions involving nature and their destructive effects, not just on nature, but also on human beings. As stated by Fred Erisman: “If the Western environment leaves its mark upon man, man also leaves his mark upon it—and Western fiction records that effect” (15).

The Frontier divided this nature and its wilderness from Eastern civilization as constructed by the Anglo-Americans. Due to westward expansion, this dividing line was pushed further and further west, and as a consequence—despite making it seem they were moving onto virgin land—the colonists were claiming land that was already occupied by Native American people. As early as the eighteenth century, Native Americans appeared in

writing, characterized as noble savages with a strong emphasis on what differentiated them from Anglo-Americans (Folsom 171). There is thus a division between Native Americans and Anglo-Americans, in which recurring themes within the Western fiction genre are the “Indianizing” of Anglo-Americans (162), and the portrayal of the Native American as “an almost supernatural being” through his “uncanny (at least to the whites) qualities” such as “his stoical reserve, his apparent lack of feeling, [and] his woodmanship” (171). This opposition between Native Americans and Anglo-Americans plays a large role in the genre, and the resulting conflict would often serve to legitimize westward expansion by portraying the Anglo-American colonists as heroes that were bringing their own concept of civilization and order to the remote areas of the West. The interpretation of “The West” as an idea rather than a place is important here as well, as the invention of this concept is an imposition on the land west of the Frontier, including its nature and its people, in a manner similar to westward expansion as both forced western understandings of civilization on these areas beyond the Frontier. Nevertheless, the resulting conflict is one of the reasons for the previous popularity of the Western: The public—in this case Anglo-Americans—wanted to read about and watch the Indian Wars in a way that portrayed the colonists as heroes vanquishing the “savages,” so they could justify to themselves that these wars were necessary to “allow Civilization ... to conquer lands closed to [the Anglo-Americans] by the savage and nonproductive Indians” (Rieupeyrou 124).

In summary, the Western fiction genre includes the following characteristics:

1. Features the American character, which is influenced by the Frontier.
2. Portrays a way of life associated with the historical background of the American West, dealing with concepts such as “opportunity” and “honor.”
3. Deals with changing times, wherein the environment described is not static but subject to change.

4. Features a “Western hero” who is connected to the development of his environment and historical background, as both move from wilderness to the Anglo-American perception of civilization.
5. Does not adhere to reality, but romanticizes the events and stories it describes.
6. Features escapism, wherein the West is depicted as a place to escape to.
7. Deals with the relationship between man and nature, placing them in binary opposition and interdependence.
8. Features Native Americans and their relation to Anglo-Americans.

As mentioned in the introduction, the discussion on whether *Butcher's Crossing* fits within the Western fiction genre or could in some respects better be called an anti-Western will revolve around three of the novel's focal points: The portrayal of the protagonist's development in connection to his setting, the adherence to reality, and the opposition between man and nature. The characteristics summarized above will show the level of adherence to the Western fiction genre in the discussion of the focal points.

The next chapter will examine the first of these focal points, looking into the development of *Butcher's Crossing's* protagonist, Will Andrews, in connection to the environment and historical setting he is placed in.

## Chapter Two

## The Hero's Journey West

Due to the industrialization of the continent during the second half of the nineteenth century, the American West was moving from wilderness towards a civilization as constructed by the Anglo-American colonists. As mentioned when defining the Western fiction genre, this move is often mirrored by the protagonist, who develops himself in relation to his environment and place in time (Folsom 93). To explore how this connection is portrayed in *Butcher's Crossing*, this chapter looks into the development of Will Andrews and how this development relates to the landscape of the American West. The aim is then to understand how the connection between Andrews and his environment fits the Western fiction genre.

Initially, Andrews is drawn to the West in search of his true self, leaving his life as a student in Boston behind. According to Williams, many of those who went west “had ‘no precise ideological motive for [their] exploitation’ of the land except to change their lives somehow” (Shields 105). Andrews adheres to this description, and in failing to acknowledge what lies ahead but persisting in his confidence that he will not find the change he is looking for in the East, he displays a naivety:

He tried to shape in his mind what he had to say to McDonald. It was a feeling; it was an urge that he had to speak. But whatever he spoke he knew would be but another name for the wildness that he sought. (Williams 18)

Andrews seeks change from his life in Boston. Although he does not yet have a clear understanding of the “wildness” that he seeks in the West, he is convinced that this “wildness” will be good for him, helping him to break free from his former self and all things familiar to him in Boston by creating a new self as formed in the West. The connection between Andrews' search for his new self and the West is established early in the novel, when

Andrews is still in Butcher's Crossing and reflecting on his time at Harvard. He recalls how he would sometimes escape the confines of the classroom and seek out the fields and woods, where he would look towards the west and equate its beauty with his own undiscovered self:

Through the trees and across the rolling landscape, he had been able to see a hint of the distant horizon to the west; and there, for an instant, he had beheld somewhat as beautiful as his own undiscovered nature. (48)

Both his own nature and the West are not yet known to Andrews, and in his inexperience with them, he romanticizes both. As he is still unacquainted with the hardships of the West, he believes it will only contain beautiful things, including "his own undiscovered nature."

The connection between Andrews and his historical background is further cemented through the link between the emptiness of the western plains and the emptiness of Andrews' sense of self. As his self has not yet taken on the form he wishes it to have, Andrews feels invisible and of no consequence:

He felt himself to be like the land, without identity or shape; sometimes one of the men would look at him, look through him, as if he did not exist; and he had to shake his head sharply and move an arm or a leg and glance at it to assure himself that he was visible. (87)

The land, "without identity or shape," relates to the Anglo-American colonists' perception of the land beyond the frontier as "virgin land." They saw it as "an uncharted and uninhabited wilderness" that was put there for them to conquer by right of their Manifest Destiny (Grant 187), which is the idea that the Anglo-Americans were destined to settle North America—regardless of the Native American people already living there. This perception of the land being empty and without identity is similar to how Andrews perceives his own self to be, as he too feels he is not inhabited by an identity yet, at least not the one he desires. The invented emptiness of the American West would be filled by the Anglo-American colonists' perception

of civilization over the coming years due to industrialization. Andrews' emptiness, in contrast, would be filled by the "wildness" that he seeks in his expedition westward. Furthermore, as stated by John Plotz, "[t]here is no way for westward-moving white men to encounter 'virgin land' without roughing or using it up," which is evident in the fact that although Andrews means well by funding Miller's hunting expedition, he enables the slaughter of the buffalo at the same time. It thus seems that regardless of man's intentions, the supposed emptiness of the American West will not be filled by anything positive. Yet Andrews views the "wildness" he seeks in the wilderness of the West, that will fill his emptiness and help him break away from his life in Boston, as something positive.

This contrast between Andrews' development towards wilderness and the American West's development towards Anglo-American civilization is clearly depicted when the men are on their way to the mountain valley. At first, Andrews is described to feel as though he is being absorbed by the mountains:

As they came nearer [to the mountains] he had again the feeling that he was being absorbed, included in something with which he had had no relation before; but unlike the feeling of absorption he had experienced on the anonymous prairie, this feeling was one which promised, however vaguely, a richness and a fulfillment for which he had no name. (Williams 121)

Andrews begins to realize that the thing he is searching for and which he cannot put into words, is found in these mountains he is approaching. At the same time, however, the following is written: "'My God!' Miller said. 'A railroad!'" (121). Where Andrews is thus growing closer to wilderness while coming from Anglo-American civilization, the landscape around him is being forced closer to that same civilization while previously representing wilderness: It is a West "on the brink of change" that is heralded by the coming of the

railroads and the decrease in buffalo (Lezard), both of which are brought on by the interference of Anglo-American civilization.

Despite Andrews' growing connection to the landscape, he cannot let go of his former self associated with the East until he experiences the slaughter of the buffalo. The buffalo represent an ideal to Andrews: He equates the search for the "wildness" in himself with aspects of the buffalo, such as their "wild dignity and power" (Williams 150) and their possession of the "dignity of life" (176), both of which contrast with Andrews' perception of Boston, which is "crowded," its people "toil[ing] sluggishly," and its river "carrying the refuse of man and city" (18-19). In Andrews' view, his former self has been formed under those detrimental circumstances, whereas his new self will be unburdened, possessing that same dignity the buffalo possess. By being the main purpose of the hunting expedition West, the buffalo embody the finish line in Andrews' search for his true self and take on a mythical aspect. The moment they reach the buffalo should then provide him with the "wildness" he wishes to apply to his new self. However, when Andrews reflects on his reaction to the slaughtered buffalo, the following occurs:

In the moment before sleep came upon him ... [i]t came to him that he had turned away from the buffalo not because of a womanish nausea at blood and stench and spilling gut; it came to him that he had sickened and turned away because of his shock at seeing the buffalo, a few moments before proud and noble and full of the dignity of life, now stark and helpless, a length of inert meat, divested of itself, or his notion of its self, swinging grotesquely, mockingly, before him. It was not itself; or it was not that self that he had imagined it to be. That self was murdered; and in that murder he had felt the destruction of something within him, and he had not been able to face it. So he had turned away. (175-76)

Nothing is sacred in the West, Andrews now realizes, as the majestic buffalo are senselessly slaughtered through the hunt. They then prove to be as “stark” and “helpless” as everything else that can be killed. The dignified self Andrews associated with the buffalo has been taken from the animals, erasing Andrews’ former perception of them. He had regarded the buffalo, specifically the pureness they stand for, as a way for him to distance himself from his old life in Boston. However, the buffalo prove to be too firmly based in harsh reality for Andrews to cope with, and in the murdering of the buffalo’s self, Andrews’ naïve picture of them is destroyed, causing a murdering within himself as well. As a consequence, the “romantic vision of the West and [Andrews’] hopeful sense of self,” meaning the innocence and naivety that had still been lingering in Andrews, “have been reduced to nullity, corruption, and shame” (Minus 89), erasing his old self. Andrews realizes he has regarded the West in a naïve, childlike manner, and now that he is faced with the facts—and with the destructiveness of the buffalo hunt—he is filled with shame for being wrong.

Following this acknowledgement of the true form of the buffalo and the loss of his former, naïve self, Andrews’ connection to the landscape grows even stronger than before. The landscape had already started to absorb him during his approach of the mountains, but now, he cannot see himself apart from the landscape anymore:

[I]t seemed to him that the contours of the place flowed beneath his eyes, that his very gaze shaped what he saw, and in turn gave his own existence form and place. He could not think of himself outside of where he was. (Williams 187)

Andrews gives meaning to the landscape around him through his gaze, but at the same time the landscape gives form to Andrews’ self. This increase in Andrews’ connection to the landscape emphasizes his movement from civilization as constructed in the East to wilderness. The usual Western hero, however, would move from wilderness to civilization, as forced by his circumstances in an industrializing West: After the Civil War (1861-1865), the



market revolution occurred, leading to “the transformation of the nation ... from an essentially local, rural, and mainly agrarian society to a centralized, urban, and mainly industrial one” (Grant 184). The usual Western hero’s movement from wilderness to civilization occurs parallel to the movement of his environment and historical background towards the civilization of the East after the Civil War. Andrews, on the other hand, moves in the opposite direction from his environment: He feels himself “leaving the city more and more, withdrawing into the wilderness” (Williams 52). He therefore deviates from the usual depiction of the Western hero mirroring the direction of the development of his environment.

The connection between Andrews and the West is emphasized once more at the end of the novel, when he has returned to Butcher’s Crossing. The murdering of Andrews’ former self is related to the disappearance of the Old West:

He looked on either side of him at what remained of Butcher’s Crossing. Soon there would be nothing here; the timbered buildings would be torn down for what material could be salvaged, the sod huts would wash away in the weather, and the prairie grass would slowly creep upon the roadway. ... [T]he town was like a small ruin. (325)

Where Andrews’ old self was formed in the East and made way for a self more at home in the wilderness, Butcher’s Crossing’s former self was tied to the wilderness of the West—to its hunting practices and freedom—and must now make way for the emerging civilization of the East, giving its material to the new world order. As a result, Andrews and the West have developed themselves into new versions, though in opposite directions.

*Butcher’s Crossing* is thus not in line with the usual depiction of the protagonist in the Western fiction genre: Andrews’ movement towards wilderness sets him apart from usual depictions of Western heroes that move along with their environments towards Anglo-American civilization. The novel therefore shows that it is not always the case that the

protagonist must adapt to changing times or else face the consequences, as Andrews regards his further movement towards the West and its wilderness at the end of the novel optimistically, subverting the notion that the Western hero has no choice but to conform to western understandings of civilization.

## Chapter Three

## The Real West

Westerns idealize their stories, representing a romanticized version of the American West rather than actual history (Marsden 204). Andrews' initial naïve view of the West, as exemplified in the previous chapter, reveals a similar romantic outlook: Through his innocence, he regards the West as an idealistic place prior to truly experiencing it. Apart from this initial view of Andrews', however, the novel does not deviate from reality in its description of events. Instead, events are described in detail, with no attempt to make them seem more appealing. This chapter examines in what ways *Butcher's Crossing* depicts its events in a realistic manner to further understand its relation to the Western fiction genre.

The novel's realism is enhanced through the slow-paced and factual description of settings and events. Williams' writing style, which he derived from the genuineness he saw in the "plain style, practiced by many of the greater English poets of the Golden Age," has been criticized "for being tedious and overwrought" (Shields 95). *Butcher's Crossing* was first published in 1960, which is when Louis L'Amour "ruled the western novel" (Plotz). For the purpose of this study, L'Amour's writing style will be taken as the standard for the Western fiction writing style around the 1960s due to his prominent place as a writer within the genre at the time. His style is fast-paced, with an emphasis on action which is often jumped into at the beginning of his stories to capture readers' attention (Champlin 131). Williams' writing style, by contrast, is slow-paced in its attention to detail and usually consistent in its adherence to this pace. It is also factual, staying close to reality and not idealizing the events it describes.

This factual way of describing events is evident in the novel when the skinning of the buffalo is described as truthfully as possible without leaving out the gore:

With still another knife, Schneider cut around the neck of the animal, beginning at that point where he had made the belly slit and lifting the huge head up and supporting it on one knee so that he could cut completely around the throat. Then he slit around each of the ankles, and ripped down the inside of each leg until his knife met the first cut down the belly. ... The hide peeled off the buffalo as the horse backed; the heavy muscles of the bull quivered and jerked as the hide was shucked off. (Williams 162)

At the age of ten, Williams' grandfather introduced him to the process of killing an animal and butchering it (Shields 12). Williams observed the butchering of a hog "with a writer's eye, not[ing] a procedure that had a beginning, middle, and end. ... [H]ow slaughtering an animal was done rapidly and clinically" (13). His knowledge on what killing and skinning an animal is like provided him with the means to depict the buffalo slaughter and skinning as based on experience. The novel therefore deviates from the Western's tendency to idealize events in order to romanticize the West (Marsden 204), and from its dissimilarity to reality (Folsom 19).

The preference for a realistic depiction of events in the novel is further emphasized by Charles J. Shields when discussing *Stoner*, another novel by Williams: "Williams believed in the *Stoner* book because it expressed his conviction that novels should 'imitate in form the natural world'; or, as he put it another way, 'This happens, and then this happens, and then this happens'" (160). In *Butcher's Crossing* this is the case as well, as the events described follow each other closely and without much embellishment. Moreover, Williams' choice of words makes scenes more tangible and thus realistic by relating them to the senses:

Where they crossed, the river was shallow; its trickling around the flat rocks that had been laid in the *soft* mud as a bed for crossing had a *murmurous sound* that was intensified by the *darkness*; the *dim light* from the filling moon caught

irregularly upon the water as it flowed, and there was *visible* upon the stream a constant glitter that made it *appear* wider and deeper than it was. (Williams 75, emphases added)

The adjective “soft” conveys how the mud must feel to the touch, and the “murmurous sound” combined with the “darkness” from which it emanates draws up a setting both audible and visible. The image of the water is then enhanced by the “dim light” shining on it, and the words “visible” and “appear” emphasize that the character perceives the river to be wider and deeper than it really is, much like light and shadows in the real world can often cause the same perception.

In describing practices related to the American West or scenes of nature, the novel thus stays close to reality through its realistic descriptions and the writing style that is used. However, when describing Andrews’ inner perspective on what is happening around him, the novel’s style turns more contemplative: “Upon the surface of this sea, among the slow hollows and crests, Will Andrews found himself less and less conscious of any movement forward” (86). This description of the land is metaphorical. The prairie is compared to a sea, meaning that qualities of the sea are ascribed to the prairie: It is seemingly without end, and there is a danger of being swallowed up by it. Andrews thus regards the prairie as something he might lose himself in, and it robs him of his own agency to move. In reality, however, the men are moving forward. It is Andrews’ inner perspective which makes it seem as though they are not. Therefore, in this instance, the novel turns away from the objective description of realism in the outer world, focusing on Andrews’ inner, subjective perception instead. Therefore, while *Butcher’s Crossing* does not romanticize its events and Williams’ writing style does not do so either as it is to-the-point and mainly factual, there are still moments in which the novel’s realism becomes more subjective when Andrews’ inner thoughts are

depicted. These instances are then reflected by Williams' writing style becoming more metaphorical and contemplative.

As the writing style is mostly consistent throughout the novel, the occasional contemplative style causes an irregularity in the pace of the novel: In his review, Christopher Tayler argues that the "transitions into the heightened language of [Andrews]'s inner world aren't completely smooth." However, it is this contrast between the factual style when describing labor and travel, and the more contemplative style when it comes to Andrews' inner perspective on events, that makes these moments wherein Andrews' perception is revealed stand out due to the irregularity of the otherwise consistent writing style. This irregularity also exists in the novel's descriptions of nature: It describes nature beautifully, making the harshness of nature when things go wrong seem all the more horrifying and real:

In the last light of the sun, which threw the snow-wrapped land into a glittering cold blue and a brilliant orange, Andrews looked at the shelter of log and buffalo hide that they had spent the day constructing. He thought: this will be my home for the next six or eight months. (Williams 230)

This land, with its "glittering cold blue and brilliant orange," is the same land that is keeping Andrews and the others captive due to the heavy snowfall. By juxtaposing the beautiful description of the colors of the land with Andrews looking at their man-made shelter and realizing he is going to have to stay there for so many months, the horrible circumstances are made more realistic: By causing the heavy snowfall, this beautiful landscape is the reason why the shelter had to be made in the first place, betraying the harshness and reality of nature beneath the appealing description.

*Butcher's Crossing* thus stays true to realism, meaning it does not adhere to the Western fiction genre's tendency to romanticize events. The novel deviates from its consistent factual style when Andrews' inner perspective is depicted, diverging from the more frequent

objectively realistic passages—as does the depiction of nature. However, this occasional contemplative style Williams then adopts is still realistic, though in a more subjective way.

Apart from the novel's realism, the interaction between man and nature in the novel as shown before, in which nature seems appealing but can actually not be trusted, is a prominent theme as well. The following chapter explores this interaction in more detail, analyzing the opposition and interdependence between man and nature as depicted in the novel.

## Chapter Four

## Man and Nature in Binary Opposition

Man and nature are often opposed to one another in the Western fiction genre, leading to a binary opposition between them. Among other things, this implies that while opposites, the two are “bound together as each other’s condition of possibility,” (Buchanan) meaning they cannot exist without each other. Additionally, the genre deals with the either positive or negative effect of the emergence of Anglo-American civilization on nature (Folsom 31). In many Westerns, the destructive effect of human-made decisions on nature is explored, such as the effect of hunting practices and the industrialization of the land. The consequence of that destructiveness on humans is then often addressed. The previous chapter has briefly looked into the relationship between man and nature with a focus on the evocation of realism. This chapter focuses on the binary opposition between man and nature as depicted in *Butcher’s Crossing* to explore to what extent the novel’s portrayal of this opposition relates to the traditional depiction of the relationship between nature and human beings in the Western fiction genre.

In case of the nature / human dichotomy, the binary opposition holds that human beings and nature exist separately from each other, but are still connected: In research by Ed Minus, it is stated that the theme of the novel is “man against nature” (88). The opposition between man and nature as depicted in the novel is not constantly antagonistic, however. In some cases, nature serves as a refuge to man. This relates to the Western fiction genre’s characteristic of escapism, which regards the West as a place where Anglo-Americans could escape the restrictions of society in the East (Wrobel 460) and become anonymous. In the novel, this escapism is noticeable in how little evidence remains of the men’s journey West:



Andrews looked behind him. It was true. The wheels of the wagon in the short stiff grass, on the baked earth, left hardly an impression; even now the grass over which they had driven was springing erect to hide the evidence of their passage. (Williams 113-14)

The novel initially depicts nature as being friendly in its interaction with humans, “hid[ing] the evidence” of the men’s passage west by covering up all traces of their presence and allowing them passage into nature. Here nature appears unburdened by humans, as the wheels of the wagon have no impact on the grass. The novel thus initially regards the relationship between human beings and nature as one of coexistence, where neither puts a strain on the other.

Apart from being a refuge, nature is also depicted as being a basic need for humans, much like food and water. When the men first lay eyes on the mountains to the west, the following is described:

And [Andrews] found that he hungered after [the mountains] much as he had thirsted after the water; but he knew the mountains were there, he could see them; and he did not know precisely what hunger or thirst they would assuage. (120)

Despite not being sure what need they would fulfill, Andrews hungers after the mountains in a manner related to how he had needed water to drink from. The mountains thus fulfill a basic need of Andrews’, as if he cannot exist without them. In regarding nature as a basic need, however, the passage above also implies that Andrews sees nature as something he wants to possess. He hungers after the mountains, and he intends to find out what hunger they will still: He cannot explain why he is drawn to nature, but it is, like water, something he requires to survive. This relates to the binary opposition, as by being opposites on the binary spectrum, man and nature are defined against each other and therefore cannot survive separately.

The immersion of human beings into nature is evident when the men find the railroad while approaching the mountains, which is a marker of man's presence in nature influencing the landscape:

Late in the afternoon, just before dark, Andrews saw in the distance the long thin parallel lines of a railroad, which found a level course by winding among the gentle hillocks that were beginning to swell upon the land. (121)

Shortly afterwards, they also come across a light in the distance, which "might have come from the open door of a house" (122). These instances in the novel wherein the emergence of western understandings of civilization is evident in the natural landscape then result in a change in how nature is experienced by the men. As Miller states: "'It seems like the country has changed.' His voice was quietly puzzled. 'It seems like everything is different from what it was'" (124). The landscape of the West is industrializing, causing a change in its appearance which shifts the relationship between human beings and nature. The old dynamic between man and nature is gone, causing confusion in the people who had previously relied on this dynamic as is visible in Miller's struggle to determine which route to take.

After the novel addresses the Anglo-American colonists' emerging civilization in the West, nature is no longer depicted as a refuge or a basic need to humans, but is described as leading to destructiveness instead. For example, it has no mercy on Andrews, who passes out by climbing the mountain too fast (130-31), and it traps the men in the mountain valley, forcing them to stay there during the winter under horrible circumstances (227-28). Additionally, this destructiveness is present in the novel's depiction of the consequence of man merging with nature too much:

He saw only a deep green mat of needle and bough ... upon which he might walk for a moment or so, only to sink as he moved upon it, slowly sink into its

green mass, until he was in the very heart of the airless forest, a part of it,  
darkly alone. (124)

Nature is overwhelming, and when man gets too close to it, they will sink “into its green mass,” succumbing to it. In this instance, the merging is not equal, but results in nature overtaking man. Man is then left in darkness and solitude. It could thus be argued that when the dichotomy of human being and nature dissolves and they exist in the same place at the same time, the result—in this case for humans—is not beneficial.

This inability of living close to nature is part of what Shields terms Williams’ “challenge [to] the paradise myth of the Old West in [the novel]” (10). Rather than depicting the American West as paradise, Williams challenges this image by emphasizing the darker side of nature in the West, specifically how nature overtakes and isolates humans, leading to a sense of uneasiness. When Miller is seen merging with nature in the novel, such as when he returns to camp with a bear he has butchered, this uneasiness is present. The merging of Miller and nature is described as “grotesque,” showing the unnaturalness of two ends of the binary opposition intertwining:

Once [Miller] killed a bear and butchered it where it fell. When he appeared with the huge hindquarters of the bear balanced on each shoulder, staggering beneath their weight, it seemed to Andrews for an instant that Miller himself was some great animal, grotesquely shaped, its small head hunched between tremendous shoulders, bearing down upon them. (Williams 234-35)

Miller’s merging with the bear exemplifies that in the novel, the merging of man and nature is unnatural when taken too far: It then leads to destruction as both parties must leave their positions on the binary spectrum to achieve this merging, taking on unnatural forms by letting go of what they originally are.

In the end, the novel thus shows that when humans exert their influence on nature or disrupt the balance of the binary opposition between themselves and nature, the end result is destructive and unnatural. In that sense, the novel argues that civilization's overtaking of nature is something negative, and on that level, *Butcher's Crossing* adheres to the Western fiction genre. However, when considering Williams' depiction of the inhumanity of nature as a challenge to the paradise myth of the Old West (Shields 10), the novel can be argued to subvert the genre at the same time. By rejecting the paradise myth of the Old West and showing that the overtaking of nature by civilization is something negative, *Butcher's Crossing* argues that, as discussed in the previous chapter, the American West was not as idealistic as it seemed due to the harshness of nature, but that at the same time, the overtaking of this nature by western understandings of civilization will not lead to "paradise" either.

## Conclusion

Following the discussion of the focal points, it has been established that the depiction of *Butcher's Crossing's* protagonist in connection to his environment subverts the notion that the Western hero must always conform to the Anglo-American idea of civilization. Secondly, the use of realism shows that the novel does not adhere to the Western fiction genre's tendency to romanticize events. The writing style is mainly realistic, only occasionally turning more contemplative to convey a more subjective version of realism through Andrews' inner perspective. Lastly, the depiction of the opposition between man and nature reveals the novel's suggestion that civilization's overtaking of nature is unnatural and destructive, meaning the novel adheres to the Western fiction genre on that level. Nevertheless, the depiction of the inhumanity of nature in the novel challenges the paradise myth of the Old West. Therefore, it can be argued that the novel fits both within the Western and the anti-Western genre when it comes to the opposition between man and nature.

On the whole, it is thus not hard to understand why the novel has been labeled a Western, given the many allusions to the genre that exist at first glance. However, when looking closer, it is clear that many of these allusions point to a subversion of the genre, as is exemplified in Andrews' development in opposite direction from his environment rather than parallel to it, and in the novel's rejection of the paradise myth of the Old West. *Butcher's Crossing* therefore initially seems to fit within the Western fiction genre in its frequent use of the genre's characteristics, but ultimately, due to its subversion of most of these characteristics, the novel could better be called an anti-Western.

In the discussion of the novel, this thesis has made use of only three focal points. This has allowed for a focused study with a greater attention to detail than a discussion of all aspects would have afforded. At the same time, due to this project's particular focus, the

conclusion reached cannot be viewed as a definitive answer to the question whether the novel is a Western or an anti-Western. Further research could reach different outcomes, for example by analyzing the shift in the binary opposition between man and nature when including Native American people: The novel makes clear that the Native Americans' treatment of the buffalo, and thus nature, is very different from the Anglo-Americans' approach (Williams 91). Furthermore, apart from being mentioned explicitly only three times in the novel, more implicit references to Native Americans exist in the descriptions of the buffalo. Examining these allusions could shed more light on the relationship between man and nature when adopting an understanding of "man" that is not exclusively Anglo-American-centric. Additionally, as mentioned in chapter 1, the development of the Western hero is often depicted in Westerns as a coming of age process. Further research could analyze Andrews' coming of age process as depicted in the novel and compare it to coming of age processes of other Western heroes to determine how the novel fits within the Western fiction genre from that point of view.

For now, however, it can be concluded that John Williams was right to refuse the label "A Western," not just because of his own skepticism towards the genre, but more importantly because the focal points discussed point almost unanimously to *Butcher's Crossing* subverting the Western fiction genre and thus being an anti-Western.

## Works Cited

- Bland, Archie. "Butcher's Crossing, by John Williams: Book Review." Review of *Butcher's Crossing*, by John Williams. *The Independent*, 6 Dec. 2013, independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/butchers-crossing-by-john-williams-book-review-8985628.html.
- Buchanan, Ian. "Binary Opposition." *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Oxford UP, 2010. *Oxford Reference*.
- Champlin, Tim. "Chapter 9. Writing Style and Lingo." *The Wild West of Louis L'Amour: An Illustrated Companion to the Frontier Fiction of an American Icon*. Voyageur Press, 2015, pp. 127-40. *ProQuest*, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/reader.action?docID=4396452.
- Crimmel, Hal. "The Apple Doesn't Fall Far from the Tree: Western American Literature and Environmental Literary Criticism." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West*, edited by Nicolas S. Witschi, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 367-79.
- Erisman, Fred. "Western Fiction as an Ecological Parable." *Environmental Review*, vol. 2, no. 6, 1977, pp. 14-23.
- Folsom, James K. "Afterword: Westward the Course of Empire." *The American Western Novel*. College & UP, 1966, pp. 204-6.
- . "Introduction." *The American Western Novel*. College & UP, 1966, pp. 13-35.
- . "The Sea of Grass." *The American Western Novel*. College & UP, 1966, pp. 60-98.
- . "The Vanishing American." *The American Western Novel*. College & UP, 1966, pp. 141-76.
- Grant, Susan-Mary. "Westward the Course of Empire: From Union to Nation." *A Concise History of the United States of America*. Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 172-204.

- Lezard, Nicholas. "Butcher's Crossing by John Williams – Review." Review of *Butcher's Crossing*, by John Williams. *The Guardian*, 7 Jan. 2014, [theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/07/butchers-crossing-john-williams-review](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jan/07/butchers-crossing-john-williams-review).
- Marsden, Michael T. "The Popular Western Novel as a Cultural Artifact." *Arizona and the West*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1978, pp. 203-14.
- MasterClass. "What Is a Western Novel? Definition of the Western Genre and Tips for Writing a Great Western Book." *MasterClass*, 2 Jul. 2019, [masterclass.com/articles/what-is-a-western-novel-definition-of-the-western-genre-and-tips-for-writing-a-great-western-book](https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-a-western-novel-definition-of-the-western-genre-and-tips-for-writing-a-great-western-book).
- Milton, John R. "The Western Novel: Sources and Forms." *Chicago Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1963, pp. 74-100.
- Minus, Ed. "Westerns." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 118, no. 1, 2010, pp. 82-90.
- Plotz, John. "Butcher's Crossing: An Appreciation of John Williams's Perfect Anti-Western." *The Guardian*, 3 Aug. 2016, [theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/03/butchers-crossing-an-appreciation-of-john-williamss-perfect-anti-western](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/aug/03/butchers-crossing-an-appreciation-of-john-williamss-perfect-anti-western).
- Rieupeyrou, Jean-Louis. "The Western: A Historical Genre." *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1952, pp. 116-28.
- Shields, Charles J. "Chapter Eight. 'Natural Liars Are the Best Writers.'" *The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel: John Williams, Stoner, and the Writing Life*. U of Texas P, 2018, pp. 85-99.
- . "Chapter Nine. *Butcher's Crossing*." *The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel: John Williams, Stoner, and the Writing Life*. U of Texas P, 2018, pp. 100-11.
- . "Chapter One. He Comes from Texas." *The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel: John Williams, Stoner, and the Writing Life*. U of Texas P, 2018, pp. 3-14.



---. "Chapter Twelve. 'The Williams Affair.'" *The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel: John Williams, Stoner, and the Writing Life*. U of Texas P, 2018, pp. 153-62.

Stark, John. "The Novels of John Williams." *Hollins Critic*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1980.

Taylor, Christopher. "I Just Let Him Have His Beer." *London Review of Books*, vol. 41, no. 24, 2019.

Williams, John. *Butcher's Crossing*. 1960. Vintage, 2014.

Witschi, Nicolas S. "Imagining the West." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American West*, edited by Nicolas S. Witschi, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, pp. 3-10.

Wrobel, David M. "The Literary West and the Twentieth Century." *A Companion to the American West*, edited by William Deverell, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 460-80.