

Mythologisation of the Frontier Man in Western Dime Novels

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Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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Humanističke znanosti, filologija, teorija i povijest književnosti

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Abstract

The dime novel is a literary form that originated in the United States of America and became very popular since its inception in 1860 onwards. Its inexpensive price meant that the dime novel was one of the favorite pastimes for people all around America. The main characters of dime novels are people who perform daring feats no matter the danger or the consequences. Two such characters are the outlaw Jesse James and the famous hunter and adventurer Buffalo Bill. The dime novel takes those real life characters and builds upon them, taking away their character flaws and giving them romantic virtues such as the thirst for adventure or vengeance. It follows a certain number of events in their life that are deemed interesting or inspirational or even their entire lifespan. The dime novel does not intend to rewrite history by presenting the characters as flawless but merely put an emphasis on their deeds of valor and courage as to influence and inspire future generations.

Key words: dime novel, Jesse James, Buffalo Bill, adventure, courage

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Introduction

If the term “dime novel” was to be put in front of a person who did not know what it was and the person was then asked to make their best guess about it, it is extremely probable that the answer would have to do something with low value and the tenth-of-a-dollar, commonly referred to as “one dime.” Both aspects of that answer would be correct or at least extremely close to the problem at hand. *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia* states that the dime novel began selling “in 1860 for 10 cents” and the earliest was *Malaeska: The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* by Anne Stephens “which is said to have sold 300,000 copies in the first year” while “similar novels sold by the thousands throughout the country and especially in the Civil War camps.” According to Megan Smith, another factor which compliments the idea of dime novels being quick but fulfilling entertainment is the fact that they “often cost less than a dime” so “dime novels became popular and inexpensive forms of entertainment for working-class Americans.” Smith continues:

In the late 1800s, dime novels captured the imaginations of children and adults with melodramatic tall tales. Not only did the stories describe vivid scenes, but dramatic artwork on the covers also grabbed the reader’s attention. They transported readers to places unknown to them. For 10 cents or less, readers throughout the world read about outrageous adventures and exploits.

Its popularity at the time of the Civil War tells of the novel being the favorite pastime in the lives of soldiers who obviously wanted to read of deeds of valor, maybe in order to convince themselves that the war they were in was not just about death but potential fame as well. Additionally, the fact that, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, 20 percent of total USA population were illiterate, means that dime novels indeed had to rely on quick pace, shortness and action as well as pictures to give at least some literary respite to the soldiers.

This paper will cover two dime novels focusing on proving that inside the action-focused narrative the character development does not suffer all that much and that the novels have literary worth, even if judged without the historical context. The main characters of the two novels are Buffalo Bill and Jesse James respectively. Bill, as the paper will show, is a person who does all the right things and someone the reader is expected to cheer for and look up to as he seems to be faultless. On the other hand, keeping in mind the example of Buffalo Bill as a person all should aspire to, perhaps the most important question to pose when confronting the idea of an outlaw being the main character of the novel, is to ask what quality would strike him as a particularly loveable or hated character in the minds of the readers. The paper will make a lengthy comparison

between the narrator's character and the character of Jesse James. In this particular novel, Jesse has a lot of redeemable qualities which the paper will shed light on. This statement is supported by the writer James Reston Junior who, having grown up on listening to the deeds and legends of Jesse, states that "Jesse James was America's Robin Hood; Theodore Roosevelt himself had proclaimed him such" and claims to have "read comic books that had Jesse riding out of town, pistols blazing, as he rescued some damsel in distress." It is not specifically stated if Reston Junior's comics were his parents' old dime novels, but it is safe to presume they did draw inspiration from the first serious literary form to openly talk about the frontiersmen in a positive light.

Unfortunately for the dime novel writers, the new form proved to be a fad, as "their popularity lasted until the 1890s, when they began to be replaced by pulp magazines [and] comic strips" ("Dime Novels"), although according to Eric Willey, they "thrilled audiences from 1860 to 1926 when the pulp serials replaced them" which is a respectable number of years in circulation for a seemingly unimportant literary form.

1. *Jesse James, the Outlaw: A Narrative of the James Boys*

When the term “American outlaw” comes to mind, one of the first names that springs up is the name of Jesse James. He was “among the most dangerous and feared badmen on the Western frontier” and “frightened folks even in states where he had never set foot” (Muehlberger 50). Known for his daring and successful bank robberies, he met his end at the hands of a former gang-mate, Robert Ford “who had shot James in the back to collect a \$10,000 reward” (Reston Jr.). Even then, “to many in Missouri, the killing of Jesse James was a dastardly act” (Reston Jr.). Oscar Wilde offers his reasoning behind this phenomenon by stating that “Americans always take their heroes from criminal classes” (qtd in Reston Jr.). However, Jesse’s feats still remained (in)famous and were the subject of a dime novel plainly called *Jesse James, the Outlaw: A Narrative of the James Boys*, written by an unknown author under a commonly used pseudonym W. B. Lawson, as the real name of the writer is left to speculation.

It is important to state that while it is certain that the novel does not put enough emphasis on the context of the deeds of Jesse James and therefore portrays him in a much more positive light than he should be, as “Jesse James was a forerunner of the modern terrorist” (Stiles), this is not important as the novel only takes biographical elements in order to further the story and immerse the reader. The novel follows the pursuit of the titular character Jesse James and his gang by a certain detective in disguise named William Lawson.¹ The detective also serves as a first-person narrator, and while not fully objective due to being on the opposite side of the gun when Jesse James was concerned, he does give the reader a faithful recollection of the events that transpired. This is perhaps not as much in line with what is to be expected of the dime novel, that being the general notion of embellishment and exaggeration in the description of the situations that happen. However, this does not mean that elements of dime novels are scarce or even not present. As the narrator, the detective describes his personal thoughts and motives strictly through his dealings with other characters in order to avoid his character development taking away from the action which is the focal point of dime novels in general. Following the events of the story, he quickly finds himself telling Jesse lies about himself and introducing himself as a doctor and, more importantly, an emissary carrying an important message in order to infiltrate Jesse’s gang. However, the following passage, which happens when the two are getting to know each other while talking behind a shed, speaks volumes about him and his viewpoints:

¹ From this point on, the narrator William Lawson will simply be referred to as “the detective” in order to avoid confusion with the author’s pseudonym.

I at that moment had him at such a disadvantage as probably no man ever before had had the dreaded Jesse James. I could easily have shot him dead then and there, and thus have rid the world of perhaps the most successful, murderous and desperate bandit who has ever luridly illuminated the pages of American criminality. But I have never been an assassin, even in dealing with assassins. Moreover, my object was to devise means for the capture of him and his brother alive, and on this I was staking my all. (W. B. Lawson I)

The passage implies three things about the detective. He is, first and foremost, smart and capable, as he was able to fool and lull into a false sense of security the most notorious outlaw of the West mere hours after meeting him. Secondly, he is a man of morale and principles. He did not want to take the shot and risk killing him dishonorably, even if the authorities would not care, as he prides himself on being “better than the outlaw” who is presumed to be using such lowly tactics such as shooting someone from behind. Thirdly, it is inferred that he does, in spite of the morale he boasts about, have some ulterior motives. His desire to capture the outlaw’s brother as well as the outlaw himself may seem like a determination to bring both criminals to justice, but this notion will be dispelled when the amount of money involved is revealed. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the aim of the paper, although in a position of power, he seems awe-struck by James’ mere presence and gives him due respect. The following section of the paper will dissect and inspect each of these characteristics in Jesse James in the same way as it has been done with the detective, as they are both examples of frontiersmen even if they are working on the opposite sides of the law. Several more examples of the detective abiding to the same principles of the frontiersman and the dime novel hero will also be mentioned.

1.1. Frontiersman’s Road to Success

Both Jesse and the detective are extremely proficient in what they do. As previously mentioned, the detective successfully infiltrates Jesse’s gang, whereas at one point Jesse walks up to a carnival booth and takes more than twenty thousand dollars in mere seconds. Jesse is a great tactician as well and he was able to use guerilla tactics to surprise and take advantage of various institutions that simply were not ready for his band due to the impossibility of predicting where and when he would strike. The detective tells of a train robbery which was done with ease, precision and speed: “We were ordered to make a great noise as soon as the train should be brought to a standstill, and to fire eighteen or twenty shots, but not to shoot any one unless compelled to, and not to use up all our ammunition” (W. B. Lawson IV). It is obvious that Jesse does not want to lose any men he

does not have to nor spill any innocent blood as he has no feud with these people. However, it is left to the reader's interpretation whether the motive for this type of behavior is safety of his men, the kindness of his heart or rather the pragmatism of simple bullet conservation. Furthermore, after being wounded in a gunfight with a member of the gang gone rogue, James seems to vanish for a while, possibly to his deathbed. However, he outsmarts the detective and his companions by telling his gang to disguise themselves as cowboys who were torturing a Chinaman and simply strolling into a bank under the guise of constraining a bull and stealing the money:

“Cowboys! Bah! They were the James boys and their gang, in disguise – that's what they were! And they're off now, with ten thousand dollars out of that vault in their saddlebags, leavin' the old cashier shot through the heart, and the bookkeeper with a fractured skull.”

(W.B. Lawson VI)

It would seem Jesse let nothing stand in his way of having his way. The detective is, admittedly, very intelligent and crafty as his ability to befriend and turn certain members of the gang against Jesse was the outlaw's downfall, but Jesse is the one who will be regarded as a capable man, using limited resources to wreak havoc on much richer and better equipped but also much more complacent targets. Even if his deeds were unlawful, Jesse James' mettle is by all standards one to be admired.

1.2. Principles upon Which the Frontiersman Stands

As was mentioned previously, Jesse did not prefer to kill people if there was no need for such an act. His mild reaction to Bob's robbery failure gives credibility to the theory that he was not an inherently evil man:

“Poor enough, Jess,” was Bob Younger's response. “There wasn't more'n a dozen men in the car, and I didn't feel like makin' the women shell out.”

“Good enough,” said Jesse. “We've never yet been so hard up as to rob the dear creatures.”

(W. B. Lawson IV)

He obviously respects the women enough to show them a kind of relationship which could be even compared to some sort of twisted, ironic chivalry. This is in stark contrast with what the detective witnesses and even says at two occasions, one being the already mentioned Chinaman torture, and the other one being him getting chased by the other detectives who did not recognize his true identity. In the Chinaman scene where Craig, his fellow companion in the hunt for the outlaws, comments that “Cruel or not cruel, it's a jolly row [the cowboys a]re kicking up” (W.B. Lawson

VI), the detective does not speak against the racism and the reason why is present at the very beginning of the novel. He is a firm believer in the system that was functioning at the time, and when asked by the lawmen why he did not stop when prompted to, he answers: "I didn't rein up because I'm neither a darky nor a Chinaman, to be ordered about by you or any one else" (W.B. Lawson I). Even though the detective keeps two black men as helpers in the matters of law, functioning as spies and informants, he still sees himself as more worthy. Contrasting the two, Jesse James once again seems like a logical choice for someone whose values and principles could be argued to belong in a modern age. For all of the detective's talk about not shooting Jesse from behind, he had no problem later on when Dick Little's wife put fake bullets in Jesse's guns so he would be defenseless. Jesse even offers insight into his past to the doctor after the latter asks him about the possibility to reform and become a law-abiding citizen. He tells a chilling tale of serving under Bill Anderson who captured a train containing invalid men and shot every single one of them including the surrendering soldiers who came shortly after that. Jesse then tells the doctor that he can be the judge himself "if there can be any reformation, any redemption, for such as me!" (W.B. Lawson IV). Therefore, it can be argued Jesse James is a damned man who has experienced too much hatred and evil in his life to go back to lawful behavior, especially after his love relationship also broke down. All of this furthers the notion of Jesse James as more of an anti-hero than a villain. He is damned and broken, finding his only solace in raiding and robbing the rich in an almost of a Robin Hood-esque fashion, but obviously differing since he does it for the thrill instead of idealistic motives.

1.3. Hidden Motivations

At the first glance, the dime novel seems not very complex. It is intended to be a quick read owing to its fast-paced action and seemingly plain characters. However, this novel shows the characters to be quite intricate, even though their backstory is introduced in pieces of dialogue that are few and far between. Still, the mere presence of the backstory is instrumental to the story because it allows the reader to gain insight into the characters which are supposed to be the "good guys" and the "bad guys." In the *Jesse James, the Outlaw* novel, the first suspicion the reader can have about Jesse having a reason for becoming an outlaw is given almost at the start of the novel, as he, presumed by the reader to be a hardened and emotion-deprived man, has an emotional moment when presented with the packet that a certain person by the name of Blanche Rideau has sent to

him via the detective in disguise, Lawson. Almost no time is wasted in explaining this, as Jesse pours his heart out to the detective:

Though married now to a woman whom I have learned to adore, there's no disloyalty to her in my speaking them. Six years ago Blanche Rideau and I were engaged. We loved each other madly. Had the course of that love been uninterrupted, the world would today behold me a reformed man -- perhaps, also, a useful citizen, instead of the red scourge that I am, tracked everywhere by the bloody footprints of my career. It was interrupted. I am -- what the world has made me. (W.B. Lawson I)

In this and the following paragraph, the reader can conclude that Jesse feels robbed and wants to exact his revenge:

“It was the fault of [Judge Rideau’s] brother, Blanche's uncle -- Henry Rideau -- a million curses on his head!” growled the outlaw between his clenched teeth. “He was the marplot! 'Twas he that ruined all by reporting my accursed antecedents to Blanche and her old father. He's a rich bank president somewhere up in Minnesota now, but I'll get even with him yet -- curse, curse, curse him!” (W.B. Lawson I)

While Jesse himself clearly states that in the end it was his past that was ultimately responsible for the romance’s ending, he does express how sad he is that he did not have a chance to leave it all behind and start a new life. He would have owed everything to that woman, but the chance for a normal life was ripped out of his hands. Because of this, Jesse’s story is a tragic one, as his road to redemption is without an end and shaped like a circle, bringing him all the way to the start again. The worst thing is that Henry Rideau is not to be blamed but Jesse himself, a fact that he does not acknowledge due to his emotions clouding his judgement in the matter. He does not see a way out of his situation barring the constant struggle against the rich bankers and railroad owners as he has projected his hatred onto them. The fact that “the president of the bank at Northfield was none other than Blanche Rideau's uncle, Henry Rideau, who had been mainly instrumental in separating him from his first love, and against whom he had sworn implacable revenge” is hardly a coincidence. He does, however, give a glimmer of hope to his new wife:

Don't worry, sis. Just wait till I make one more big tenstrike, either on a passenger train or with a rich bank, that's all. Then hey for the Panhandle of Texas, and for peace and quiet with my darling. Run into the house now, and I will soon join you. (W.B. Lawson II)

However, this is more of him trying to rationalize his behavior, as his goal was never the money or the gold. Jesse even buried most of his money, and even though it can be argued he did it for safety so nobody from his gang could backstab him and run off with the money, it also shows how unattached he is to it. From the moment he states that he wants to pull off a big heist to his wife to

the moment of his gang's downfall he struck more than twenty thousand dollars, and it should have been more than enough for him to retire. But it was not to be, as he is a man who is driven by adrenaline and vengeance.

Nonetheless, the man whose motivations are fueled by money is, perhaps unexpectedly, the detective Lawson. It was previously stated that the detective's principles are not really sturdy themselves since he did resort to dirty tricks when fighting Jesse at the end of the novel, and his greed for money reiterates how much of a grey area the characters in the novel are. At the very beginning he makes his motivation pretty clear: "Ten thousand dollars reward was the stake" (W.B. Lawson I). This does not apply only to the detective himself, but his companions and other lawmen as well: "It's the general desire to earn individually the rattling big rewards offered by the Government the railroads and the express companies, instead of working all together and making a fair division in case of success" (W. B. Lawson V). It would seem the lawmen do not serve for the sake of law, but for the sake of money. Because of this, it is not surprising that they are ready to do things which are on the verge of immorality. This is further exacerbated when he learns of Jesse's habit of burying gold and where it could possibly be found:

I said, with sudden opening visions of wealth in comparison with which all theretofore offered rewards in a solid lump melted into insignificance. I now had an added string to my bow, of which I had never dreamed before. The restoration of Judge Rideau's grandchild; the lumped rewards for the capture of the Jameses, dead or alive; the buried treasure of the freebooter chief, doubtless amounting to a princely fortune in itself! Could any mortal detective ask for any greater incentive to professional exertion than was furnished by these? (W. B. Lawson IX)

The problem with the detective's reasoning, although the money is hard to ignore, is that he should be in the law business not because of the money, but because he wants to make the world a better place. However, he does not conform to this idealistic notion and therefore is exposed to moral criticism from the reader.

1.4. The Fame Comes with the Position

As was already mentioned, the dime novel is modelled after the exploits of a character in real life. The main character is usually the titular one and the story revolves around him, even if he is not the narrator, like in *Jesse James, the Outlaw*. Jesse James fulfills all of these conditions, as he is a person most people have heard about at least once in their life. He is the titular character but also

the main driving force for the plot. This part of the paper will focus on the part fame plays in how the characters interact with him, whether it be the ones in service of law or people who belong to his gang. Embellishment being an important part of dime novel narration since it is usually told from a first-person perspective by an unreliable narrator, it is important to state that not all of the descriptions in the novel are to be believed word-for-word, but rather serve a completely different purpose. They are a portrayal of how the society of that time perceived these people and why people would find short stories about them fun to read.

The description of Jesse is given by the narrator, who tells of “a man of magnificent proportions, with close clipped, reddish beard, handsome, stern features, and a steely blue eye, whose penetrating glance might have pierced a three-inch plank” (W.B. Lawson I). This description conforms to the depiction of the dime novel hero as almost a godlike creature, with seemingly no physical imperfections, whilst giving insight into his mental capabilities. The reader knows Jesse is not to be trifled with even before a proper, action-packed shootout happens. This is further emphasized when Jesse gives his speech about his motives, where the detective notes that “his words were no more desperate and ferocious than his manner, as he spoke. Being a disguised detective myself, I could not refrain from an inward shudder, but I preserved my outward calm” (W.B. Lawson I). A seasoned veteran in apprehending criminals could not remain calm in the face of the most famous outlaw in America, which tells us how important confidence stemming from his quest for vengeance is. This serves him when dealing with his gang which is also observed by the detective: “Jesse James was the natural leader of the wild crew, to whom the most implicit obedience was paid” (W.B. Lawson I). Jesse is a good leader because he knows what these people want, and that is money and fame, both of which he can provide. His gang is mostly made of farmhands, people who are easily impressed by those who consider them important, and they are surely appreciated more by an outlaw who depends on them to make up the bulk of his gang rather than a farm owner who can replace them easily. Even Jesse himself admits that “my reputation alone carries me through more than half my adventures” (W.B. Lawson II). This is the reason why Jesse and his brother leave a big sign saying “LET DETECTIVES TAKE WARNING! The James Brothers” (W.B. Lawson I) after they shoot a detective who was trying to catch them and turn them in for a reward. They know that instilling fear into those who want to chase them will give them an advantage they sorely need since they do not have the permanent manpower the side of the law has. It also helps him to retain his gang’s loyalty, as at one point he and his brother, seemingly out of the blue, decide to share fifty percent of the loot from a robbery they did on their own with the rest of the gang. The detective, who was still in disguise at that point, has an interesting reaction but an astute observation as well: “I could not but smile at the increased

enthusiasm that greeted this apparently spontaneous and generous offer, so really calculating and selfish at foundation, inasmuch as it merely redoubled the devotion of the crew in the furtherance of other and more dangerous undertakings” (W.B. Lawson III). Those undertakings would prove to be the end of his gang, as not everyone was as determined to help him due to the detective actively seeking moles who were willing to betray him. However, Jesse earned enough respect to be on the lips of everyone in the area for at least a little while, and it can be argued that this is all he wanted for his adrenaline fueled life. Even while riding away from the carnival robbery, he had to yell: “Score down one more red mark for Jesse James, the outlaw!” while “waving his hat triumphantly” (W.B. Lawson II) because if he did not, people might have not known it was him, depriving his legend of a successful robbery. Tales told of Jesse did not take a hit even when the detective discovered that he was wearing a disguise which was not in line with the picture of Jesse’s reckless bravery. The line the detective utters even sounds a little disappointed, which is extremely unexpected considering the circumstances: “Jesse James' boast to me of never under any circumstances wearing a disguise [has] been a piece of empty braggadocia entirely devoid of truth” (W.B. Lawson VI). This is further exacerbated later on, when another rumor is dispelled by both the detective: “Then I made sure of something that had theretofore been but vaguely rumored -- that Jesse James wore defensive armor under his clothing -- that, in fact, he was as much coward as he was assassin and robber” (W.B. Lawson XIII), and his mole Dick Little: “when I was in the gang, there used to be some sidewhisperin' about Jess' bearin' a charmed life, but I never expected then to find out how it was. Charmed, indeed!” (W.B. Lawson XIII). These statements do something that has not been done to the legend of Jesse James up to that point, and that is to throw dirt on it and devalue it, especially because Jesse was known to have “survived at least nine gunfights” (Muehlberger 50). However, both the detective and his accomplice do agree on one thing, and that is that they “fancy he merely takes to concealed armor occasionally, when he thinks there's danger of his being tackled by odds, with none of his gang at his back” (W.B. Lawson XIII), which gives him back some credibility, as the legend is too strong for such a strong contrast to be introduced in Jesse’s natural fear of death.

1.5. Jesse James, the Chaotic Frontiersman

In conclusion, while Jesse James is not a prototypical frontiersman, he is, nonetheless, an example of it. He is physically and mentally strong. He is exploring new territories by living a wild and unpredictable life and fighting enemies he encounters, although in a less literal way than his

predecessors did. His motives are based on his being dispossessed of a normal life, so he has to rebel against everything the humankind has built in order to find his true self. This novel goes against the notion of the hero being free of material gains and do good things for the sake of good. This is also what is expected of a novel which is not supposed to be serious or have the deep character development and the dime novel should fall under that category. However, neither of these claims proves to be true, as the main character's primary want is money and the novel does indeed have more character buildup than its genre is usually credited for. Not only this, but the antagonist proves to have redeemable qualities, which puts him on par with the detective, and the reader has to decide for himself for whom to root for and who the real main character is. The whole novel offers a big gray area for the reader to explore as its nooks and crannies are plentiful and deep enough but they do not take away from the action which is the primary reason people bought dime novels. The action gives rise to the rumors about the participants in the robberies and chases, fueling people's imagination and putting the frontiersmen of those times, whether on the side of law or not, in legends whose stories will be told in years and even centuries to come, regardless of the amount of truth involved.

2. Adventures of Buffalo Bill from Boyhood to Manhood

Whereas Jesse James is more of a fringe-case frontiersman, the same cannot be said about Buffalo Bill, whose story is much more of a prototypical one and served as an inspiration to all adventure-hungry youths: “For Americans and Europeans, he was the icon of the frontier American West, embodying all the realism, romanticism, and mythology that went with it. He brought West’s savagery to civilization and civilization to savagery” (Kreyche). In addition to satisfying the craving for adventure, they would also, by a lucky coincidence, be in service to the government. That service rarely consisted of being anything else than a meat-shield for the money or gold transported from one location to the other, but the promise of fame, adventure and money was hard to resist. This part of the paper will focus on the growth of Buffalo Bill’s legend depicted in the dime novel *Adventures of Buffalo Bill from Boyhood to Manhood*², written by Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.

Even the full title of the novel contributes to the significance of Buffalo Bill in American history, as it contains the unofficial title of “*the Monarch of Bordermen*.” This is mentioned again in the prologue: “Glancing back over the past, we recall a few names that have stood out in the boldest relief in frontier history, and they are Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson and W. F. Cody the last named being Buffalo Bill, the King of Bordermen” (Ingraham I). Not only is this sentence the only proof needed for the acknowledgement of Cody being a frontiersman, he seems to be the best of them, even having the title of king which is frowned upon by Americans considering their history with the English. The writer of the novel seems to be intent on making sure the reader is aware that the contents of the novel are truthful, so he establishes himself as a reliable narrator. This is confirmed several times, in his own words: “It is beyond the pale of civilization I find the hero of these pages which tell of thrilling adventures, fierce combats, deadly feuds and wild rides that, one and all, are true to the letter, as hundreds now living can testify” (Ingraham I). Not only can his words apparently be confirmed by other people, the writer reaffirms his testimony by stating he: “knowing the man well, having seen him amid the greatest dangers, shared with him his blanket and his camp-fire’s warmth, feel[s] entitled to write of him as a hero of heroes” (Ingraham I). However, the element of exaggeration cannot be avoided, so the narrator is not to be fully believed, as is the case with the detective in the story of Jesse James. Telling of how dime novels have elements of fiction, Megan Smith even names precisely Buffalo Bill as someone who was clearly a real person, but “certain events in Cody’s life remain less clearly true”.

² The full title of the novel is *Adventures of Buffalo Bill from Boyhood to Manhood. Deeds of Daring, Scenes of Thrilling, Peril, and Romantic Incidents in the Early Life of W. F. Cody, the Monarch of Bordermen*.

2.1. The Rise of Buffalo Bill

As the title suggests, the novel has a chronological narrative and follows Billy from his youth to his senior years, which makes the narrative biographical in its nature as well. The titles of the chapters are also named after crucial events in his life, such as “Billy’s first duel” or “Killing his first Indian”. He, as the narrator states, has shown courage and potential from early years: Billy’s father died from a stabbing wound when the boy was eleven years old, making him the head of the household at a young age (Johnston), and in the novel he does not shy away from going into a supposedly haunted house to get away from rain, although it is stated that “Billy proposed that they should go there, more out of sheer bravado to show he was not afraid than to escape a ducking” (Ingraham II). It can be inferred that Billy needs to have approval from his peers and has an adrenaline rush, much like Jesse James had. He proves this when a band of outlaws come in the same house, and he refuses to flee but rather holds them at gunpoint even shooting and killing one, until the help arrived. He is, nonetheless, filled with morality even from the young years, as he philosophises about the wrongness of killing a rival named Hugh Hall for a girl’s hand, even “when he is such a villain” (Ingraham III). When he does kill him, prompted by Hugh Hall shooting first, he expresses sorrow but determination that Hugh made him do it, even though Billy “had hoped he would not die” (Ingraham III). Billy seems to be an extremely ambitious person as well, projecting through his want to capture a stallion aptly named “Stable Satan,” which he then captured using both his wit and strength. It is a strange but fitting contrast, as Billy, according to the narrator’s statements in the novel, never did anything even remotely close to evil, but the horse’s name rather represents Billy’s inner fire fueling him as he is impossible to control. This is shown several times throughout the novel, as he jumps to every opportunity to leave home because “Billy’s restless nature would not allow him to remain idle at home” (Ingraham XII). Although he went away often, he came back every time he had earned enough money. It is mentioned several times that his family was the most important thing in his life because after returning home he was “welcomed by his mother and sisters, to whom he gave all of his earnings” (Ingraham XII). Billy is shown to care for his friends and compatriots as well. He cried “don’t let us leave these wounded boys” (Ingraham VIII) when they were facing Indians and some of his friends got shot, as well as sacrificing his prized horse to form a bunker of carcasses in order to have a chance to save his friends instead of taking the option of fleeing, which was looked upon as a brave act, as even “the fort came in for general praise, although one and all deeply regretted Sable Satan’s sad end, though his death had served a good purpose” (Ingraham XI). It was not just the soldiers who sang praises of him, but also “the neighborhood, hearing from members of the train of Billy’s exploits, for he

was very close-mouthed about what he had done, made a hero of him” (Ingraham XII). While “his handsome face, fearlessness and manly nature made him a great favorite with both officers and men” (Ingraham IV), or in other words his physique and attitude were the source of the respect he received, it is important to mention how his strong mentality was shaped. This, as the narrator states, happened when he was trapped and left for a month waiting for help all the while having a broken leg:

Buffalo Billy was made of stern stuff, and knew not what fear was; but who can picture the thoughts that were constantly in his young brain, when the winds were sweeping through the pines at night, the wolves were howling about his door, and the sleet and snow was almost continually falling. It were enough to drive a strong man mad, let alone a boy. But he stood it bravely, each day however counting with longing heart the hours that went so slowly by and hoping for his comrade's return. (Ingraham XII)

Arguably, it is at this point Billy is finally refined into a man as this is the closest to solitude and death he has ever been. He faces both an Indian chief and a pack of wolves and survives owing to his wit and calm. Later on, he sells the pelts he has earned on the journey and gets two hundred and fifty dollars which he used selflessly “for it paid off a mortgage on his mother's farm” (Ingraham XII).

2.2. The Unbreakable Spirit of the West

Even after surviving an ordeal against all odds, Billy seems to have his priorities in order and the whole experience seems to have changed him only for the better. He had also, in line with his mother's wishes, “carried his books, and often in camp he had whiled away the time in studying” (Ingraham XV), but his spirit was not tamed by the books and “when well away from civilization his books were cast aside for his rifle, and he was, constantly in the saddle supplying the train with game” (Ingraham XV). Therefore, Buffalo Bill is both a scholar and a manly man, a somewhat twisted take on the Renaissance Man, who is able to do anything and is apt in all fields of life. Although the narrator swears he is telling the truth and nothing but the truth, it is hard to believe that Billy was able to run “a distance of eighty-five miles, and arrived at the station even ahead of time. Without rest he turned back and reached Red Buttes on time, making the extraordinary run of three hundred and twenty-two miles without rest, and at an average speed of fifteen miles an hour” (Ingraham XV). His success is again aptly rewarded with both money and fame, as he was placed as “the chief of the Pony Riders” (Ingraham XV) even though in reality, it is doubtful if

he even worked for the Pony Express (Kreyche). Neither money nor fame seemed to be his primary motivation as he “seemed to even take pleasure in taking the fearful chances against death which he was forced to do on every ride out and in” (Ingraham XVII), which is in line with the usual perception of a frontiersman. To further the point of mythologization of the frontiersman, some of the villains of the story such as the Cavalier get redeemable qualities. He, as was the case with Jesse James, makes a point of not robbing ladies or poor people but rather only taking the money from the government as well as the well-to do travelers (Ingraham XVIII).

Even Billy’s thoughts that could be looked down upon, such as him “not relish[ing] military duty” (Ingraham XXII) are dismissed in the same sentence as he “had become too well accustomed to the free life of the plains” (Ingraham XXII), which is believable and understandable. It is interesting that Ingraham does not mention what Cody actually did before he joined the army, and that was joining a band of bandits who preyed upon the very Missourians who once upon a time stabbed his father, inflicting a wound that would later prove to be fatal (Hutton). Cody himself did, however, state that he “entered upon a dissolute and reckless life” which was “to his shame” (qtd. in Hutton). During his service, he is shown to have been able to make people look past the color of his uniform when he saved a woman and her daughter from bandits. Moments after dispatching the bandits, the room was filled by three Confederate soldiers who were the women’s family, and Billy successfully pleaded with them:

“I am a Union soldier, sir, I admit, and I was going by your home, heard a cry for help, and found your wife and daughter, as I suppose them to be, at the mercy of five ruffians, and I was fortunate enough to serve them. But I will not be made prisoner, gentlemen.”

Billy's hands were on his revolvers and he looked squarely in the faces of those in his front, and they could see that he was a man who meant what he said.

“My dear sir, I am a Confederate, I admit, and this is my home; but I am not the one to do a mean action toward a Union soldier, and especially one who has just served me so well in killing these men, whom I recognize as jayhawkers who prey on either side, and own no allegiance to North or South.” (Ingraham XXII)

2.3. Bill – A Man of Accomplishments but no Substance

Billy is shown to even fall in love with the Confederate soldier's daughter Lucille and marry her later on promising to settle down, but "at last, finding he could make more money on the plains, and that being to his liking he left his wife with his sisters and once more started for the far West" (Ingraham XXIII). This sudden progression of Billy's character is interesting because it seems he has reached the final step in his journey as he undertook all the steps to stave off his adventurous spirit, but he rapidly changes his mind and goes back to the wild. This change is very questionable from both the literary and the character perspective, as suddenly Billy does not care too much about his family to whom he gave all his money in the past. From a moral standpoint, such an action would be looked down upon, with Ingraham not even trying to offer an explanation, unlike Billy's dislike of being constrained by military life. The character of Buffalo Bill seems to lose some of its depth, very much in line with how dime novels are believed to present their characters.

This trend continues toward the end of the novel as Billy's character is stripped of deep thoughts which are replaced with a bunch of accomplishments presented with little to no context, serving only to further emphasize the fame surrounding Billy. Some of these are the origin of Billy's name, "as in one season he killed the enormous number of four thousand eight hundred and twenty buffaloes, a feat never before, or since equaled" (Ingraham XXVI) and his victory over Billy Comstock, "another famous buffalo hunter" by a score of sixty nine to forty six (Ingraham XXVII). Ingraham finishes the novel with the statement about Billy which perfectly summarizes the novel, as it "has been one long series of perilous adventures which, though tinged with romance, and seeming fiction, will go down to posterity as true border history of this most remarkable man, the truly called King of Prariemen" (Ingraham XXXI). Hutton describes Cody's death in 1917 "as the last link between the modern America of automobiles, airplanes and world wars and the old frontier America of the Pony Express, the stagecoach and Indian wars has been severed", stating that "William F. Cody both created and physically embodied the essential American myth of Westward expansion." Kreyche states that the "life of this hero and showman embodies the desire for history to become myth and myth to become history."

Conclusion

The dime novel was evidently a short-lived but beloved style of literature. It served its purpose as a time-filler as well as being a source of inspiration for further stories about the American frontier. The heroes of dime novels were often picked for their fame and accomplishments but stripped of context, making the portrayal positive whether the main character is an outlaw like Jesse James or a “golden boy” of sorts like William F. Cody, known as Buffalo Bill. However, owing to its non-serious nature, the dime novel dodges the literary criticism for unfaithful representation of its characters while still being able to immerse the reader in the adventures the characters are going through. This is even more impressive considering the writers of both of the novels swore in the truthfulness of the events that transpired in each novel, but, as was already stated, the biographical nature of the novel is used just to give plausibility to the incredible accomplishments of the characters. Such accomplishments include Bill’s own version of the American Dream, where he met his every move with success concerning both money and fame, as he was able to make a name for himself, cheered by everyone American and feared by everyone who was his enemy. It just so happened that the major profiteers during his exploits were the major companies as well as the government. The exact opposite of the example that Bill sets is the example of Jesse James, whose story is reminiscent of Robin Hood. He is a man fueled by vengeance toward an unfair system which took away his normal life and made him into a person who is poised to take away from the rich but does not give to the poor barring those that make it into his gang. He is in conflict with the detective who is also the narrator, and even though the law wins in the end, the detective is exposed to the reader as corrupt, further pushing the reader in the direction of rooting for Jesse. Similar outlaw persona appears in Buffalo Bill as well as the mysterious Cavalier who, not unlike Jesse, takes care only to rob people who either deserve it due to corruption or simply would not feel the hit on their pockets too much.

All things considered, the dime novel is a spectacular piece of literature which has both the action-packed narrative but makes enough room for the character development so it does not feel empty or shallow. However, its strongest weapon, the ability to maneuver between criticisms about its historical inaccuracy is also the downfall of the dime novel, as it can never be looked on as anything more than a pastime and a short list of impressive feats intended to inspire the people to do things to stand out from the rest.

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