Carnival and Ceremony At Wright Morris's Lone Tree Hotel

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CARNIVAL AND CEREMONY
AT WRIGHT MORRIS’S LONE TREE HOTEL

REGINALD DYCK

No word in my life is so charged with sentiment as dreams. . . . American dreams, such as mine, concerned with the prevailing fictions of the wakeful mind.

—Wright Morris, A Cloak of Light: Writing My Life

Gordon Boyd, a central character in Morris’s Ceremony in Lone Tree, is a self-fashioning failure at American dreaming. He presents himself this way: “In the middle of life, Morgenstern Boyd had everything to live for, everything worth living for having eluded him. He was that rare thing, a completely self-unmade man.” Failed writer among other failures, Boyd in many ways contrasts with, and is defined by, his friend and nemesis Walter McKee, a man who “like Babbitt, keeps faith; he does not question anything, especially his own life.” Set in the 1950s Midwest culture of respectability, Ceremony in Lone Tree presents Boyd’s strategic failures as attempts to resist that culture’s conformity and repression.

Boyd and McKee’s relationship has been shaped by two key events. Boyd’s attempt to walk on the water of a central Nebraska sandpit establishes a pattern. Outrageousness, determined by the effect it creates, becomes Boyd’s modus operandi. Because McKee’s role is observer rather than participant in the rebellious action, it does not hamper him from achieving considerable success. Similar in its focus on effect is Boyd’s kissing McKee’s girlfriend, Lois, while McKee stands by shocked. Although Lois Scanlon becomes Lois McKee, she is troubled by the repression that choice necessitated. Likewise, Boyd has continued to repress his desire for her and struggled against

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the middle-class respectability she and her husband represent.

In *The Field of Vision*, Morris's earlier related novel, the McKees unexpectedly find Boyd in Mexico, where they are vacationing and Boyd is living in self-exile from Nebraska. McKee invites him to an upcoming family gathering. The bullfight they attend in Mexico (in *Field*) and the gathering at the Lone Tree Hotel (in *Ceremony*) rekindle desires and continue the clowning that everyone has come to expect from Boyd.

The ceremony of the title is an extended-family, ninetieth birthday celebration for Tom Scanlon, the character who embodies the Old West although, ironically, he missed it by a generation. While Scanlon's birthday is the ostensible reason for the gathering (he sleeps through most of it to everyone's relief), each character arrives because of more compelling motivations: seeing two cousins elope, avoiding social embarrassment, asserting a self-identity by attempting to replay the past, impressing others with their wealth, or just instinctively doing what is expected.

As the extended family comes together, characters reveal their various strategies for coping with the pressures inherent in the American dream of family and economic values. Most male characters look West for their model. "The ridiculous figure of McKee's grandson, Calvin, illustrates the predominant impulse.... They want to relive the heroic trials of the cowboy: Lee Roy wields his grease gun...; Jennings writes western stories; Bud stalks animals with bow and arrow; Colonel Ewing claims Cherokee blood and an acquaintance with Will Rogers; Little Gordon packs Scanlon's pistols." In contrast, Boyd goes East, beginning with the prep school that McKee considers his downfall. Unlike these "cowboys," epitomized by the stuttering Calvin, who tries to live out a version of his Grandfather Scanlon's stories, Boyd uses language and gesture—both false constructions in the Western mythology of authenticity—to challenge middle-class expectations.

Although he is invited because McKee considers him family, Boyd does not come to celebrate but to carnivalize the ceremony (in Bakhtin's sense of the term, considered below). As an outsider/insider, he attempts to subvert hierarchies by taking the center of the ceremony away from McKee and by exposing the emptiness of the clichés that sustain McKee's economically comfortable world. However, Boyd is not able, and maybe has never actually wanted, to "seek a newer world." Instead, he attempts to transform by awakening the world that he cannot escape because it is inextricably a part of him.

The climax of the ceremony occurs when Lois, in the one outrageous gesture of her life, fires her father Scanlon's old six-shooter and causes an amazing chain reaction of events. This and the other incidents do not, however, create a page-turning plot. As Gregory S. Jay says of autobiography after Freud, this "is not the tale of things done, but of meanings made and unmade: every action is a symptom, every statement a symbol, every narrative a dream of desire."

The symptoms, symbols, and desires of *Ceremony* are shaped within the fictional representation of a culture that clearly defined success: "In the years following the traumatic experiences of the Depression and World War II, the American dream was to exercise personal freedom not in social and political terms, but rather in economic ones.... [S]ecurity meant finding a good white-collar job... , getting married, having children, and buying a house in the suburbs." In achieving this, McKee represents the official version of middle-class life. Boyd, seeing that life as a form of sleep, chooses instead to exercise his personal freedom in social, although not political, terms by attempting to carnivitalize or disrupt McKee's American dreaming.

Morris's depiction of the conflict between these two characters and social strategies gives the novel its sting, but the relationships are complex. Boyd desperately needs to maintain his difference from McKee as a form of self-
definition, but the differences are not as marked as he wants to believe. And the success of his acts of cultural bravado are always dependent on their gaining recognition from that culture. McKee recognizes in his friend the same desire expressed by Charlie Munger (modeled on the 1958 Nebraska serial killer Charles Starkweather): “he wanted to be somebody” (21). These two marginal characters’ strategy of using outrageous acts takes different turns because of their positions in society. While Munger was apparently excluded, Boyd chooses to reject his privileged, middle-class status. Although Boyd’s carnivalizing exposes the severe limitations of McKee’s and Lois’s lives, it also reveals the pathos of his own self-positioning on the margins of that middle-class life which haunts him with repulsion and desire.

The nature and causes of Boyd’s failure to transform that life is the focus of this essay. To my mind, Ceremony is as important as it is pleasurable because it presents a critique of the fifties that also helps explain why, in the contemporary United States, social change is so difficult to effect. In a nation founded on a Declaration of Independence, why do we find so much conformity? In a country of self-proclaimed rebels, why have we produced so few rebellions?

Ceremony’s model of social interaction provides a useful basis for exploring these questions. This essay first uses Sacvan Bercovitch’s concept of dissensus to show how Boyd’s social critique is coopted and disarmed. Then it considers Morris’s explanation of failure as many American artists’ alternative to the myth of success. This is used to look at the social construction of the self. Bakhtin’s analysis of carnival gives another perspective for understanding why Boyd’s clowning transforms neither characters nor society. Related to this, the American ideology of individualism is explored as another cause of his failure. Finally, the focus shifts from a specific character to the novel as a whole. Does Morris succeed where Boyd fails? One limit to the author’s success is his failure to engage social structures in his fictional critique. Because of that, Morris cannot offer a positive alternative to the dominant middle-class culture.

THE AMERICAN INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF REBELLION

Morris’s novel shares an understanding of American culture with Sacvan Bercovitch’s explanation of how rebellion is controlled and channeled into support for the status quo: “[American dissenters] opposed the system in ways that reaffirmed its ideals. . . . [D]issent was demonstrably an appeal to, and through, the rhetoric and values of the dominant culture.” In condemning the failures of American culture, these dissenters have assumed the existence of an ideal America—the real one—against which present conditions are judged. This form of critique precludes any discussion of alternatives because it assumes that the ideal America is like the present one but without the aberrations. In this way dissent reinscribes rather than subverts American values and social structures.

Ceremony stages this drama of “lament and celebration” on a personal level although the implications are systemic. An important example of this controlled rebellion is Boyd’s decision to challenge the McKees’ sense of propriety by bringing to the ceremony Daughter, a gum-popping, slot-machine-playing, smart-mouthed young woman whom he picks up on his way from Mexico. Seemingly reenacting Lolita in order to shock the McKees, who represent the bland somnambulance of middle-class marriage arrangements, Boyd finds that his rebellious gesture instead reinforces those arrangements. Since Boyd clearly chooses Daughter because she is the opposite of Lois, he engages a reverse image of what is expected rather than someone who represents new possibilities. Boyd’s choice is as circumscribed by social expectations as McKee’s was in marrying Lois and establishing their suburban life. Recognizing this, Lois finds Boyd’s
action merely tiresome. In her mind, Boyd’s antics reaffirm the socially acceptable choices that have defined her life.

However, the transformation of subversive gestures into acts of confirmation is never complete. “[American] culture . . . has indeed found ways of harnessing revolution for its own purposes; but the ways themselves were volatile, even (to a point) open-ended. They tended toward subversion even as they drew such tendencies into persistent, deeply conservative patterns.” As much as other characters try to control Boyd’s disruptive gestures at the ceremony, he still has an effect. The volatility of his clowning, for example, is demonstrated in its emboldening Lois to shoot off Scanlon’s pistol as an act of frustration and rebellion that at least temporarily shakes up her world: “She had never been so wide awake” (267). The life-changing potential of this event is not fulfilled, however. As a shrewd commentary, the narrator notes that Lois explains she was sleepwalking when she fired the pistol (266).

In spite of a certain open-endedness to Boyd’s rebellion, his proclaimed role as “a self-unmade man” who ‘resists his culture’s definition of success tends to confirm the values that shape that culture’s sense of identity. That is, in rebelling against what McKee stands for, Boyd recreates, and thus more openly exposes, the boundary that defines society. Refusing to become an insider but unable to develop the detachment of an outsider, Boyd provides a poignant definition of the dominant culture. Because “Boyd always managed to do what nobody in his right mind would ever do” (47), his “dissenting” behavior is a reverse delineation of what a person in his right mind, a mind attuned to the dominant culture, would do.

A. P. Cohen in *The Symbolic Construction of Community* argues that “the boundary encapsulates the identity of the community” as it distinguishes a particular group from others. Community boundaries, because they are symbolic, “may be perceived in rather different terms, not only by people on opposite sides of it, but also by people on the same side.” In this way Boyd’s clowning has different meanings for various members of the extended family but the same effect. Because key characters define themselves in part through their differences from Boyd, he performs for them the role of reinforcing the symbolic meaning of their community (or class). Boyd reassures the others of their normalcy and helps them define their own success by his failure, their sanity by his craziness. This is one reason McKee cannot resist inviting Boyd to the ceremony.

In shocking other characters, Boyd reinforces the rules necessary for the effect he wants to create. He is continually a master of the gesture but unable to develop a life. That would require him to free himself from the constraints of middle-class American life and then create a self-sustaining alternative. Instead, his continuing rebellion depends on the structures of society at least as much as McKee’s success does, and in that dependence lies Boyd’s failure to unmake himself as society has constructed him, that is, his failure to become “a self-unmade man.” His difficulty is that, as with the opposite myth of the self-made man, this too is an American construct that hides its social construction by claiming to be grounded in individual choice rather than social patterns.

**THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF AN ARTIST**

Boyd’s representative gesture and first major failure was his attempt to walk on water, a seemingly messianic as well as absurd piece of performance art in “God’s Country” (to borrow from the title of a Morris photo-text). This attempt at the impossible has an intertextual connection with *The Territory Ahead*, a work of literary history and social criticism that Morris published one year after *The Field of Vision* (1956) and two years before *Ceremony in Lone Tree* (1959). This connection helps identify another American dimension to Boyd’s failure. Not only does his rebellion inadvertently reaffirm his culture’s values, but his use of failure as an means of
resistance turns out to be just another American cliché rather than a means for establishing an authentic selfhood.

The foreword to The Territory Ahead quotes Joseph Conrad’s negative assessment that Henry James “never attempts the impossible.” This, Morris explains, puts James outside the American tradition in which “[f]ailure, not success, is the measure of an artist’s achievement.” As with so many American artists in Morris’s literary history, his character Boyd starts out well with his impossible gesture and the Broadway play he transforms it into, but “peter[s] out” (xiii) because he cannot sustain the demands of such self-positioning. Through Boyd’s failing at failure, Morris exposes the trap of this construction of identity as well as the concept of self-construction itself.

Morris’s critical aim in Territory, and an important theme in both Field and Ceremony, is to explore the relationship between the “climate of failure” for writers and their tendency to create plots that conclude with an escape from society by taking to the woods. This Morris links with escaping into the past. “[O]ur writers of genius face backward while their countrymen resolutely march forward. It is little wonder, faced with this fact, that we lead such notably schizoid lives.” Because of his less romantic understanding of the relationship between the individual and society, Morris does not provide Boyd the luxury of escape. Although Boyd tries, not by going to the woods but to cultures outside the Midwest, he finds that he cannot separate himself from the society that has shaped him. Because Morris does not allow Boyd an easy escape from society even when he exiles himself from it, his character fails at creating the counter-cultural identity typically available to the heroes—writers and characters—of classical American fiction.

Rather than presenting the artist as an avant-garde visionary alienated from society’s cult of success, Morris creates in Boyd an artist struggling to fulfill that role but failing because it does not provide an alternative identity. He cannot stand aloof from the society that has shaped him.

Not that Boyd doesn’t try desperately to assume that role. In the prologue to an unproduced play, “Boyd advised his public that he hoped to fail, since there was no longer anything of interest to be gained in success” (Field 70). In Paris, on the Riviera, and off New York’s Bleeker Street, Boyd worked this project of being “[a] dedicated no-man, one who had turned to failure as a field that offered real opportunity for success” (Field 71). But by the time he reaches Mexico, he has found that his failure has failed because “[e]very piece of his Fall had been borrowed from the wings, from the costume rack” (Field 69). That Boyd’s analyst recognizes him as a “type[,] [t]he professional soldier of failure, waging the cold war within himself” (Field 68) suggests Morris is addressing a social phenomenon that calls into question one more version, a reverse construction, of the American dream. If attempting the impossible has its own clichéd history, if failure offers just another pose, then Boyd’s failure and McKee’s success are two sides of the same coin (to use a cliché) and Boyd’s song has an ironic accuracy:

Stand up, Walter McKee.
In your youth you shadowed me.
All that I am or hope to be
I owe to Walter J. McKee. (182)

As this suggests, their identities are intertwined. For if McKee lives by and speaks with clichés, Boyd does the same; they use opposite, matching sets because of their opposite positions in society. If our clichés are our ideology, our assumed beliefs and common sense, then McKee and Boyd together embody a significant definition of American society, one given from the double perspective of center and margin.

In Field Boyd has come to think “of culture as a series of acceptable clichés” (70-71), as if that were a regrettable development rather than the inevitable way in which cultures are constructed. Morris’s narrator imagines clichés as something a character like Boyd can take or leave. Therefore the narrator claims
that “[t]he armor of clichés kept him from touching bottom,” where Boyd might find his true self. In this novel, Paula Kahler, a man who has taken the identity of a woman and has touched bottom, provides a troubling model for Boyd. Touching bottom for Paula meant rejecting society’s expectations to the extent that even gender is a choice she made, not an identity imposed. Extending cross-dressing to cross-being, she did not resist when given a medical exam. “Neither mirrors, questions, nor obvious facts seemed to trouble her” (75). Morris has Paula defining and thus creating herself by making a radical choice. She doesn’t rebel against society; she ignores it. Boyd can never attain that level of detachment, but then he isn’t psychotic, as Paula seems to be.

Boyd’s lack of detachment is clear in both of the novels that have him as a central character. However, unlike Field, which presents at least a questionable model of a person who “touches bottom” and creates a new self, Ceremony embodies the understanding that there is no escape, no authentic selfhood (in a romantic or existential sense) that eludes society. Instead, we can only choose from its clichés or constructions, which provide us with possibilities and then shape the subsequent choices we make.

Morris’s changing perception of the individual’s relationship to society is evident in the opening lines he creates. Field begins with an epigraph:

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n.
John Milton, Paradise Lost

In using this, Morris implies that individuals can create their own contexts rather than vice versa; Paula Kahler is an extreme example. The epigraph for his next book, The Territory Ahead, is

Rip the veil of the old vision across,
and walk through the rent.

Here Morris asserts the possibility of starting life afresh, unencumbered by the clichés or visions of the past. This book, dedicated to D. H. Lawrence, concludes with a paean to him. An artist like Lawrence both lives and writes in the present. For writers of the present, the past surrounds but does not define their sense of self: “Since he must live and have his being in the world of clichés, he will know this new world by their absence . . . . The true territory ahead is what he must imagine for himself.”

Significantly, Ceremony offers no guiding epigraph that offers hope to the reader desiring a cliché-free, self-constructed individualism. Instead, it opens with “Come to the window,” an ironic quotation from Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” While this poem claims that being “true / To one another” is still possible if only individuals imaginatively position themselves defiantly against modern, faithless society, the narrator’s irony is made clear in the description of Tom Scanlon’s being true to a false dream of the Old West: “The emptiness of the plains generates illusions that require little moisture . . . . The plain is a metaphysical landscape and the bumper crop is the one Scanlon sees through the flaw in the glass” (5). This hardly encourages the reader to have faith in the possibility that authenticity can be found here.

McKee rescues Boyd from his impasse in Mexico, his inability to construct a more usable self, by inviting him to return to this Nebraska scene. The invitation to the ceremony gives Boyd an opportunity to attempt again his old, failed trick of clowning others awake, even if he can’t make sense of his own waking experience. Although Boyd realizes that Nebraska offers no solution to his dilemma, he makes the effort because in Mexico he is a fool without a court, a clown without a carnival. McKee’s invitation gives Boyd a reason to escape one more failed attempt at failure, to regain his traditional audience, and to carnivalize the ceremony that brings the characters together.
THE MODERN LIGHTNESS OF BEING

M. M. Bakhtin, especially in Rabelais and His World, celebrates the rebellious world of the carnival. The contrast he develops between ceremony and carnival provides another framework for clarifying Boyd’s subversive strategies; also, the contrast between the medieval world of Rabelais and the modern one that Morris models in Ceremony provides another explanation of why Boyd fails to awaken the McKees. According to Bakhtin, official feasts and ceremonies “sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it.” They looked back to the past and “used [it] to consecrate the present. . . . It was the triumph of a truth already established.” The family celebration at Lone Tree works toward these ends. In contrast, the carnival provided “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal.”

Part of his difficulty is that carnivals, in Bakhtin’s sense, can exist only if they have an authoritarian world against which to react. However, as Marx observed about the modern world, “All that is solid melts into air.” Authority in the modern, middle-class hegemony is largely hidden because its power is decentralized and its strictures internalized. Domination is usually experienced more immediately through cultural apparatuses like the mass media than through governmental structures such as the police or army. As a result, the potentially subversive world of the carnival has great difficulty establishing itself. Although contemporary groups like Act-Up and Greenpeace have been able to carnivalize the established order, they have specific causes to support and clear hierarchies to attack. Boyd has neither. Since Morris does not provide his character with a political framework in which to act, Boyd’s attempts fail where more focused and politicized carnivalizing has achieved some success. In this Boyd is like the Beats: “Their protest would have significant political implications, but its content was essentially social and cultural. The politics of the era had little meaning for them . . .”

Another consequence of the modern world’s lightness of being is the romantic sensibility that has created “as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid feeling of isolation. The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective idealistic philosophy.” This new carnival spirit reacts against a world that is “meaningless, dubious and hostile . . . an alien world.” Because Boyd’s individualistic rebellion could not sustain itself, he went into self-exile in Mexico. On Boyd’s return to Nebraska, McKee finds that the worst has happened to his friend: Boyd has McKee’s own look on his face. Rather than the defiant confidence that prompted him to step off the raft and onto (into) the water, Boyd now stands in front of McKee “hop[ing] for the best when the worst was happening, his jaw slack . . . Stymied . . . speechless” (149). Carnivalizing in the modern world has left Boyd deflated. Critic Michael Andre Bernstein elaborates on the negative aspects of carnivals by emphasizing the “negative and bitter strand at [their] core.” What he recognizes is exactly Boyd’s difficulty, that “laughter can become a response to dread, not exuberance” and that breaking down hierarchies can come to mean “being denied any vantage point from which a value can still be affirmed.”

Boyd’s position has become almost too much to bear; as a marginalized character, he fears that, light as the world seems, it may be more solid than he is. He explains, “Daughter, I’m scared they might be real—I mean realer than I am” (43). Boyd here admits that his alienation has not gained him any more authenticity than his cliché-ridden friends have. Later, when Daughter tries to help recover Boyd’s social stature, while also apologizing for his verbal attack against the McKees and the world that excludes him, she explains, “Don’t you people mind him. . . . His friggin
feelings are hurt. He’s the one who has them.” Since Boyd realizes that this attempt at carnivalizing, like all the others, has failed, he admits that “[i]t’s not my feelings [suggesting authenticity], Daughter, it’s my vanity [suggesting image or construction]” (197). He is afraid that his mock-heroic clowning may be only a cover for his sense of powerlessness.

THE IDEOLOGY OF INDIVIDUALISM

Characters both on the margins and near the center of society accept the middle-class ideology of individualism, which results from the modern, romantic sensibility that Bakhtin sees as undermining the carnival spirit. It is also a particularly American phenomenon. The ideology of individualism undermines the possibility of an oppositional celebration of “the gaps and holes in all the mappings of the world laid out in systematic theologies, legal codes, normative poetics, and class hierarchies” because it does not acknowledge these and other social structures as constitutive of our sense of self.

The consequence for Boyd is that, having tried to live in these structural gaps by failing at class expectations, he is trapped in a dilemma: To the extent that he has challenged social structures, he has acted alone on the basis of society’s individualistic values. Because he has never been able to “feel he is an indissoluble part of the collectivity” that true carnivals make possible, Boyd has never been free from the internalized restraints of the middle class. As a result, “He had acted like a fool, but somehow not quite fool enough. Everything called for talent, and that was one more talent he lacked” (25). Boyd’s rebellion never creates an alternative space but instead places him on the boundary of that middle-class world, resisting but still tied to it.

His dinner speech makes this positioning clear. His use of parody creates one of the most powerful scenes in the novel. Attacking McKee as representative of official culture, he exposes the shallowness of the clichés that sustain that world. Boyd’s deftness flatters his vanity by at least seeming to subvert hierarchies. However, the parody remains inextricably tied to the culture it mimics and reads finally as a defensive move to prevent his own powerlessness from being exposed. Dale Peck’s discussion of the politics of marginality in his review of Leo Bersani’s Homos illuminates Boyd’s use of parody. Peck explains that although theorist Judith Butler argues that “parodic appropriation . . . —like drag—is a subversive activity, . . . to Bersani that’s all it is. ‘[R]esignification cannot destroy; it merely presents to the dominant culture spectacles of politically impotent disrespect.’ It would seem to be, at best, a method of coping, at worst a form of mimicry that results in . . . invisibility.” Through his parody Boyd appears to replace economic status with a new hierarchy based on language, his forte. He uses parody to mock Midwest respectability, the coin of a realm in which he has tried to bankrupt himself all his life. His speech opens with clichéd, mocking rhetoric: “It’s a lovely country. Know it well. Game, wild fowl and snotweed abound.” Boyd’s parody dazzles as it presents a “spectacle . . . of disrespect,” but it has the limitations of a drag show. It allows Boyd to create situations that ease his discomfort (by transferring it to others) rather than confront his dilemma. It also does not present an alternative way of being in society for the McKees or himself. Although his language saves him from the explosively violent behavior of other
marginal characters, it does not provide him with a basis for initiating change.

David Halberstam observes that “[i]n that era of general good will and expanding affluence, few Americans doubted the essential goodness of their society.” Boyd represents those few who did. “Some social critics, irritated by the generally quiescent attitude and the boundless appetite for consumerism, described a ‘silent’ generation. Others were made uneasy by the degree of conformity around them, as if the middle-class living standard had been delivered in an obvious trade-off for blind acceptance of the status quo.” Boyd joins these critics and their jeremiads (to use Bercovitch’s term), but his fictional understanding is not grounded in an analysis of the structures shaping this society. Although Boyd clearly doubts society’s goodness, he is unable to see, let alone confront, its problems politically or structurally. His framework remains individualistic.

Boyd’s critique disturbs the McKees but Morris offers no suggestion that his character has changed them or the society they represent. Boyd can only try to carnivalize society through outrageousness and parody, or try to escape it through exile. In a modern, middle-class world where rules and values are internalized, neither strategy succeeds.

**The Author and His Audience**

*Ceremony in Lone Tree* contains not only Boyd’s clowning but the author’s as well. Morris himself makes the connection when, in *A Cloak of Light*, he acknowledges that he is troubled by his character Boyd, troubled by “where he overlapped and where he departed from the character of the writer.” Not only that, just as Boyd’s carnivalizing strategy attempts to disrupt the McKees’ prosperous, acquiescent security, Morris uses the literary form of *Ceremony* to fracture the traditional unifying literary language by focusing on conflicting perceptions. The novel’s nine main characters are developed within a collage of twenty-eight chapters, all except two centered on one figure. These chapters, however, are not monologues. The characters and their languages are developed through interactions with others, and the resultant, intersecting languages reveal the characters’ differing positions.

*Ceremony* fractures the traditional continuous plot which reassures readers that order still reigns and the world makes sense, even though we continue struggling to thread together the narrative pieces. In this way Morris’s strategy of fragmentation implicates the reader as well in its disruptive clowning. Catherine Belsey explains that “classical realism [which *Ceremony* resists] offers the reader a position of knowingsness which is also a position of identification with the narrative voice. To the extent that the story first constructs, and then depends for its intelligibility on, a set of assumptions shared between narrator and reader, it confirms both the transcendent knowingsness of the reader-as-subject and the ‘obviousness’ of the shared truths in question.” Thus, classical realism shares with Bakhtin’s definition of ceremony an emphasis on “the triumph of a truth already established.” In its form and content, *Ceremony* rejects the possibility of a “transcendent knowingsness of ... shared truths.” A contrast with *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1962), which follows the pattern Belsey describes, clarifies this. Like Kesey’s novel, *Ceremony* has characters attempting to subvert the Combine (the structures of power in society) in its “use of marriage and responsibility as pressures molding potential individuals into suburban ciphers, one interchangeable with another.” Unlike *Cuckoo’s Nest*, however, *Ceremony* does not confront the Combine in a clear good-vs.-evil struggle embedded in a traditional narrative that makes it easy for the reader to comfortably take sides and find reassurance through identification with the right one. Instead of this direct assault on the dominant culture’s power, *Ceremony*’s conflicting languages and fragmented form at best partially undermine the totalizing effects of both social and formal conformity. Kesey offers nostalgic, masculine violence as McMurphy
rips the front off Nurse Ratchet's dress to expose the humanness beneath her facade of power. Morris presents power as defuse and violence as the futile attempt to "be somebody" in a society that promises yet threatens almost every character's sense of selfhood.

Because Cuckoo's Nest is grounded in the American mythology of individualistic rebellion, it appears to more closely fulfill the potential of carnival, as Renate Lachman interprets it: "[In the carnival game of inverting official values] Bakhtin sees the anticipation of another, utopian world in which anti-hierarchism, relativity of values, questioning of authority, openness, joyous anarchy, and the ridiculing of all dogmas hold sway, a world in which syncretism and a myriad of differing perspectives are permitted." Since this describes the spirit of the sixties, it helps explain why Cuckoo's Nest was so widely popular while Ceremony remained relatively unknown. Morris is too skeptical to indulge in naive celebrations of utopian possibilities. Looking at the sixties from the present, his outlook seems justified.

What Morris demonstrates is that the umbilical cord to the dominant social world is still always there; in a postmodern sense, there is no outside, no escape from the society that has constructed us. The farthest a character or reader is allowed to stray from the center is to the boundary, for there is no denying the desire either to be a part of society or to look for a unifying story (i.e., to make sense of the fragments) even if (or especially because) that desire is continually deferred. A reformed genre, like the one Morris has created, embodies a new, "historically specific idea of what it means to be human." The social situation that Morris presents through Boyd’s failures helps the reader understand why a new definition of humanness is needed, one based on a social constructionist rather than an individualistic sense of self.

Morris astutely critiques American middle-class life. He sets forth the difficulties of the McKees’ lives along with Boyd’s failure to awaken them or know what to do with his own insomnia. This is no small accomplishment. But unlike the radical novels of the thirties—Agnes Smedley’s Daughter of Earth, for example—Morris offers no systemic analysis or alternative. He is part of the existential zeitgeist of his time. Without a conception of the political, he and his character Boyd have only clowning to offer in the face of the hegemony they want to challenge and the clichéd quality of the life Ceremony describes.

Morris presents a balancing of failures, at the margins through Boyd’s unsuccessful strategy of subversion and near the center of society through McKee’s failure to shake off his troubled sleepwalking. Although the life described in Ceremony in Lone Tree seems mundane, its demands are great. Morris models a world "made comfortable and prosperous, fatuous and tranquil, but filled with . . . terrors of a flaccid modern America that has, somehow, somewhere, misplaced her soul." And that is a world, as Morris demonstrates, not easily escaped, transformed, or carnivalized.

NOTES

I am indebted to Joseph J. Wydevan for helpful comments on drafts of this paper.

4. Wright Morris, Field of Vision (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1956). Further citations appear in parentheses in the text. Leslie Fiedler, with usual flamboyance, claims that through all his novels Morris "has been trying to convince his readers that Nebraska is the absurd hell we all inhabit" (quoted in Madden, Wright Morris [note 3 above], p. 30). Implicit in that claim is the assertion that while Morris writes about a region, he is not a regionalist writer in a pejorative sense. While I strongly agree, I do not accept Fiedler’s assertion that Morris’s use of Nebraska has universal, existential implications.
5. These create plot lines and character development that shape the complexity of the novel. By
focusing mainly on two characters, McKee and Boyd, this paper simplifies—one might say falsifies—Ceremony. But then its intent is not to explain the novel.


10. Ibid., p. 29.

11. Ibid., p. 20.


15. Madden’s analysis uses the paradigm of the hero-witness relationship. Morris himself identifies McKee as having been chosen as friend and husband because Boyd and Lois needed a witness (Field, 57). I find this useful but limiting. The relationship, understood in its social context, is more complex. Madden himself suggests the social significance of their relationship in explaining that “Boyd and McKee, as hero and witness, represent two opposed sides of the American Dream” (Madden, Wright Morris [note 3 above], p. 132), but he does not explore this idea.


