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## The White Mustang Of The Prairies

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# THE WHITE MUSTANG OF THE PRAIRIES

ELIZABETH ATWOOD LAWRENCE

One of the most vivid and symbolically expressive legends in the annals of the American West is that of the White Mustang. Inhabiting the vast reaches of the western plains, the Stallion was said to have "paced from the mesas of Mexico to the Badlands of the Dakotas and even beyond, from the Brazos bottoms of eastern Texas to parks in the Rocky Mountains," during an interval extending from about 1825 to 1889.<sup>1</sup> Alternately known as the "White Steed of the Prairies," the "Pacing White Stallion," the "Phantom White Horse," and "Ghost Horse of the Plains," his story occurs again and again in sources dealing with the frontier.

In *A Tour of the Prairies*, a record of his 1832 excursion into the plains of what is now the state of Oklahoma, Washington Irving described the White Steed as he had heard

about him one evening around the campfire. In his journal entry for that day, Irving related that his party had been eagerly anticipating a buffalo hunt. There had been keen excitement among the hunters when a faraway object was sighted and believed to be a buffalo. At closer range, however, the animal was found to be a wild horse.<sup>2</sup> The manner in which this event is described gives the reader the sensation of first visualizing the unidentified object off in the distance and makes one aware of the overwhelming vistas of the western plains as they appeared to an easterner. As the narrative reveals the object to be a horse, there is the sensation of a telescope suddenly bringing the image into close range and sharp focus. In describing how the horse was initially mistaken for something else, the narrator adds a sense of mystery, a feeling of remoteness from his subject, making it seem unapproachable, a thing apart. This sighting of an ordinary wild mustang during the day, Irving wrote, prompted evening campfire stories of the superb White Steed who had been frequenting the area for six or seven years. The basic characteristics of the White Mustang are then set forth: his sex, color, bodily proportions, beauty and grace, his wildness and solitariness, and the pacing gait which

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gives him such great swiftness that he has never been caught.

George Wilkins Kendall's *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fe Expedition*, resulting from his 1841 journey into the Staked Plains of Texas, also contains a description of observing "one day at sundown a drove of mustangs." Again, seeing them dimly at twilight imparts an aura of romance and mystery; they are not seen sharply, clearly, or close at hand. Once more the horses are first mistaken for other objects—in this case, mounted Indians. Thus suspense is introduced, a moment of wonder and a sense of the unexpected. Kendall, like Irving, describes the campfire setting as the backdrop for the stories told "by some of the old hunters, of a large white horse that had often been seen in the vicinity of Cross Timbers and near the Red River." Although he expresses the opinion that some of the stories "told by gossiping campaigners were either apocryphal or marvelously garnished," still he finds "no reason to disbelieve." Kendall notes that the "White Steed of the Prairies" is "well known to trappers and hunters by that name"—a rather poetic title, I think, for such men to have used in common speech, and thus an indication of his evocative power over their imaginations.<sup>3</sup>

A significant aspect of the White Mustang tale is this element of its circulation by mountain men, hunters, and trappers. Of course, these were the men whose occupations took them to the wild country where the horse might be seen. A deeper meaning, however, seems to lie in the fact that such men lived intimately with nature and were often imputed to have a particularly keen understanding of the natural world not possessed by people more removed from wilderness. Such men might have a special feeling of kinship with the White Mustang, making his story peculiarly expressive of their ethos and way of life.

The White Steed is again described in Josiah Gregg's *Commerce of the Prairies*, published in 1844. The author states that he has heard "marvelous tales" of a "medium-sized stallion of perfect symmetry, milk-white, save a pair of black ears—a natural 'pacer', and so

fleet, it has been said, as to leave far behind every horse that had been tried in pursuit of him, without breaking his 'pace.'" Gregg goes on to relate that "the trapper celebrates him in the vicinity of the northern Rocky Mountains; the hunter, on the Arkansas, or in the midst of the Plains."<sup>4</sup>

Many times during the period of his fame on the frontier in the nineteenth century the story of the White Steed of the Prairies was repeated. Robert M. Denhardt asserts that all the early travelers on the plains heard of this fabulous horse, and news of his whereabouts was avidly sought. "For fifty years it was every youth's dream to capture and tame the 'White Steed' for his own." The mustangers, wild horse traders, he writes, tried every way they knew to catch him, including snaring him, creasing him, roping him, running him down, penning him, cornering him in a canyon, and keeping him from water, but all in vain.<sup>5</sup> One particularly impressive story tells of one hundred men on their best mounts trapping him in a circular arroyo. They chased him around the circle by turns until each of the hundred horses was exhausted; then the White Mustang *paced* up an unscalable cliff and went his way.<sup>6</sup>

But even in legend the magnificent Stallion could not live forever; in tales dating from about 1881 to 1889, and in areas ranging from the Rio Grande in Texas to Phoenix, Arizona, the heroic horse meets death at last. J. Frank Dobie, in *Mustangs and Cow Horses*, gives a vivid and detailed account of the death of the White Steed, which was purported to have taken place around 1881. Since it was every frontiersman's dream to subdue him, and because "a small fortune" had been offered for his capture, the Stallion was tracked relentlessly. Still he eluded his pursuers, pacing all the while and heading toward the Rio Grande River. When he reached the sparsely watered country of Texas, between the Nueces and the Rio Grande, he was gaunt from thirst, "evidently jaded," and yet he still maintained "an alertness in ears, eyes, and nostrils." There he was trapped by a vaquero at a "boxed water-hole"—the only source of water for many miles

around. Although the still superb Steed put up a noble struggle, his endurance was worn down, and he was finally subdued by a trio of vaqueros, each roping him at the same time. They staked him out on the grassland with a sawed-off barrel of water within reach, but he never once ate a mouthful of grass or drank a swallow of water, and after ten days the magnificent creature lay down and died, unwilling to live without his freedom.<sup>7</sup>

It is evident that a pattern of repetition of the main thematic details concerning the White Steed of the Prairies has emerged, with remarkable similarities in all versions of the tale. The figure of the Mustang that has been handed down represents the crystallization of certain key traits which have come to distinguish him. He is always a fine Stallion whose color is white or, rarely, some variant of white, such as gray in Irving's description, or white with black ears in Gregg's account.<sup>8</sup> The Steed invariably paces, and his gait makes him the epitome of swiftness. His endurance is legendary; no horse has ever been able to outdistance him. He is intelligent and wary, his ingenuity often being a factor in eluding his pursuers. He is noble in spirit and a paragon of equine beauty and grace, with a long and flowing mane and tail. The Stallion is often seen in lonely splendor without the company of other horses. Above all, he is wild and free, never having been caught and subdued by man until his capture in the final cycle of tales. In all versions of those stories he dies of his own volition, preferring death to a life of subjugation.

These striking characteristics have created a powerful image of the Steed which is an appropriate and compelling subject for the lore of the American western plains, and one that is in many ways peculiarly expressive of the frontier ethos. I would like to explore the dilemma posed by the figure of the White Mustang as to its underlying significance and timeless appeal. By analyzing the symbolic messages conveyed by each of his key characteristics I will develop some of the meanings that are articulated through the Mustang's story. Within such an interpretive analysis several meanings exist at

various levels simultaneously; thus no single explanation has to stand as the one final answer. Different and even contradictory meanings may be evoked by the same image, and these are not necessarily reconcilable on a logically consistent level. Certainly symbolic connotations, because they are products of human thought, may reflect the ambivalence that is so often characteristic of that thought.

#### THE MUSTANG AS HERO AND THE HORSE AS SYMBOL

At the outset it is most appropriate for a horse to be a heroic figure within the context of the frontier West, as it can be said that the prairies once truly belonged to the horseman. The horse was the essential instrument by which penetration into the wilderness and settlement there were made possible. The frontiersman's livelihood, as well as his very life and safety, depended upon his mount. And beyond the utilitarian ends that it served, the horse was a responsive living creature. Particularly under the often solitary conditions of frontier life, it was natural that the horse would become more than a man's servant. Often it was a trusted partner and friend, his closest companion. Horses possessed beauty and power, but to make them useful for human purposes they had to be tamed—first subdued and then trained to do man's bidding. This meant that they had to leave the realm of the wild and enter the sphere of the domesticated. Although the process was necessary, it could be tinged with empathetic regret.

A well-trained horse became a source of great pride to a rider, for by transference he could make the power of the animal his own. A man could take unto himself the strength and swiftness that he harnessed with the mastery of the horse. A process of identification with the animal often took place, making each person yearn to own the strongest and fastest. The White Steed was the embodiment of all that was desirable in a mount; to use one writer's expression, the Stallion represented a "cowboy's wishful thinking."<sup>9</sup>

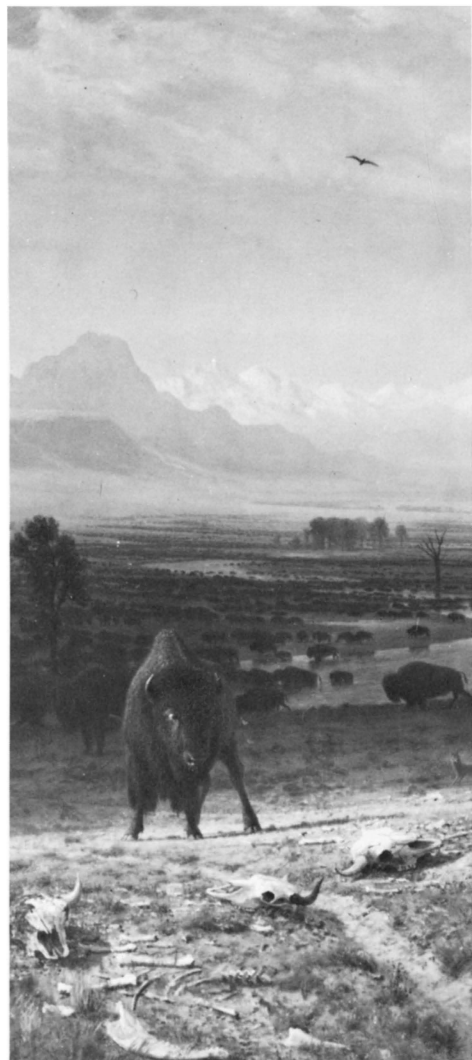
Another apparent impetus for the creation and perpetuation of the stories about the White Mustang is related to the idea of the horse as a powerful symbol for man's conquering force. Conquering was a central theme in the American westward movement: overcoming all types of hardships and obstacles—the harsh climate, the Indians, the vast distances—and above all, conquering the land, coming to grips with nature itself and forcing it to yield, transforming the wilderness into civilization by the imposition of human will. I propose that this may be conceptualized as an embodiment of the culture-nature dichotomy, a pervasive theme in the ordering of human thought that may also be expressed as the oppositions of tame-wild or human-animal.<sup>10</sup> The frontier is often defined as the place where civilization (culture) confronts savagery (nature); “taming the raw land” is a phrase frequently quoted to describe the winning of the West. What better way to symbolize this process and the ambivalence and conflicting images it evokes than by a beautiful wild horse who is so resistant to taming? The White Steed is a particularly appropriate representation of nature in this context, for, riderless, he is the product of the free, open rangeland, a creature far superior in every way to the domesticated horses that have been produced by selective breeding. He is of the land, he belongs to it, and no man is his master.

Two of the earliest writers who gave accounts of the White Steed of the Prairies included in their journals some perceptive observations about the transformations of the taming process. Gregg noted that

The wild horses are generally well formed, with trim and clean limbs; still their elegance has been much exaggerated by travellers, because they have seen them at large, abandoned to their wild and natural gaiety. Then, it is true, they appear superb indeed; but when caught and tamed, they generally dwindle down to ordinary ponies.<sup>11</sup>

The author then goes on to describe the reverse process—that is, the change from tame to wild: “It is a singular fact, that the gentlest wagon

horse (even though quite fagged with travel), once among a drove of mustangs, will often acquire in a few hours all the intractable wildness of his untamed companions.”<sup>12</sup> Anthony Amaral, writing on the natural history of the wild stallion, agrees, stating that “animals capable of domestication are known to be





*LAST OF THE BUFFALO (1888) by Albert Bierstadt. In this spectacular scene an Indian riding a magnificent white horse is the momentary conqueror of an animal of a species soon to be doomed by civilization. The rearing white horse appears to endow the hunter with special power that enables him to be triumphant. In the collection of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, gift of Mrs. Albert Bierstadt.*

wilder . . . when they have gone wild." He quotes a stockman who observed that in a roundup "the hardest one to 'cut out', the leader of them all in a mad race across the prairie, is the old, gentle, well-broken saddle or work horse, once he gets a taste of freedom."<sup>13</sup>

Rufus Steele expressed the same concept,

adding the man-horse identification theme to his colorful comment on the range-born mustang that reverts to the wild after a period of captivity:

You can talk about your Patrick Henrys and your George Washingtons; you can warble



about your country "'tis of thee," the Star Spangled Banner and our own red, white and blue; but the upright tail of a mustang that wore cinches for years and then got back to the great unfenced will continue to fan the atmosphere as the true banner of freedom that never does come down.<sup>14</sup>

According to such evidence, then, a feral animal (a formerly domesticated species now gone wild, such as a mustang like the White Steed) would appear to be a more precise symbol of freedom and intractability than a true native wild animal of the plains. Although the horse had once evolved in the American grasslands, the native species became extinct here sometime after the last Ice Age. The mustangs are considered to be the descendants of domesticated stock, reintroduced by the Spanish, which had escaped and reverted to the wild. Thus the Steed, though he himself has never been vanquished, is descended from those who have been and bears within him the inherent capacity of his kind for both extremes in the duality of wild and tame. The paradox of his belonging to the species most typically in bondage to man, yet being entirely free himself, lends emphasis to these oppositions.

Irving, like Gregg, also found himself drawn into contemplation involving this wild-tame duality, and gives evidence of the human tendency toward identification with a mustang just captured:

I could not but look with compassion upon this fine young animal, whose whole course of existence had been so suddenly reversed. From being a denizen of these vast pastures, ranging at will from plain to plain and mead to mead, cropping of every herb and flower, and drinking of every stream, he was suddenly reduced to perpetual and painful servitude, to pass his life under the harness and the curb, amid, perhaps, the din and dust and drudgery of cities. The transition in his lot was such as sometimes takes place in human affairs, and in the fortunes of towering individuals;—one day, a prince of the prairies—the next day, a pack horse!<sup>15</sup>

Here the free mustang is depicted as a privileged dweller in the western wilds, untainted by the ills of civilization, which include industrialization. The writer is giving voice to a view that would become a persistent and romantic conception of the American West as a primeval paradise—a notion later referred to as "the Myth of the Garden."<sup>16</sup>

The story of the White Mustang expresses the freedom-captivity or savagery-civilization dichotomy that is intimately tied to the western frontier mystique and seems to take on the universality of the nature-culture dilemma in a wider sense. For at the same time that the White Steed was greatly admired, and no doubt envied, for his freedom and wild spirit, the very people who extolled these traits wished to deprive him of them. Countless attempts were made, time after time, to capture him, and in the several versions of the tale in which he prefers death by starvation to loss of liberty, there is no record of any thought of setting him free to save his life. His captors, like the one in the Will James version, simply let him die "of a broken heart"; it is clear they wanted him to live only under their conditions.<sup>17</sup> They are never motivated by sheer aesthetic joy in the Stallion's beauty and grace, but rather are willing to destroy what they cannot subdue and possess. The White Steed, as an object of beauty, a thing apart, unsuited to a pragmatic world, must inevitably be sacrificed, and in this attains universal significance.

Thus the Mustang seems to embody the duality intrinsic to the westward movement. Emigrants were attracted to the new land's wild splendor and vastness, yet at the same time these qualities frightened and repelled them. They wanted to settle it, tame it, and civilize it. Often they strived to create something that resembled their place of origin, even though they were destroying in the process those very qualities that had appealed to them in the new land.

The sense of mastery that was paramount in the conquering of the West found expression in the tale of the White Mustang, and in this respect it conforms to a pattern in which



horses are commonly associated with conquest. The Steed of the Prairies, never vanquished in spirit, can represent the frontiersman's ambivalence about conquering—he wants to dominate, yet he admires indomitability, freedom, and wildness. This dilemma is partly resolved in the tale by the manner in which the Stallion ultimately wills his own end rather than having death inflicted directly by man.

Traditional stories of historical mounted conquerors make explicit the close relationship that existed between their horses and their accomplishment of military feats. According to Plutarch, for example, the famed war-horse Bucephalus was completely intractable until tamed by Alexander the Great.<sup>18</sup> Then horse and rider agreed that “together we’ll conquer the world,” and, true to their pact, they were partners in conquest until the horse’s death.<sup>19</sup> This classic tale illustrates the point that the figure of a horseman implies that a rider is already the conqueror of his mount, and his dominance symbolically sets the stage for further conquest. Power and might have traditionally accrued to the mounted man, whether he be among the plundering hordes of Genghis Khan or the feared Comanche raiders of the New World plains. In the American western frontier culture, one’s status and manhood came to depend upon being mounted; a common adage declared that a man afoot was no man at all.

The eventual capture of the White Steed was accompanied in the tales by explicit violence—more than would be the case with an ordinary wild mustang, because of his great power and endurance and his spirit of determined resistance. After the first vaquero had roped him, it required the strength and skill of not one, but three men, to subdue and throw him. Working together, the trio tied ropes on him, “fixed a clog on one of his forefeet, and staked him.”<sup>20</sup> Such details seem to be the expression of what Richard Slotkin has termed “regeneration through violence,” a concept he applies to events on the American frontier.<sup>21</sup> The explanation offered by Slotkin’s theory helps to elucidate the central dilemma posed by the story of the White Steed: Why, if something is

valued for its beauty and freedom, does man set out to conquer and destroy it? The proposed answer is that a process of regeneration takes place in the conquering through the absorption of energy from the conquered. Thus one gains more power and energy by taming the fiercest spirit, through controlling something that was once the epitome of freedom. The greater the struggle, the greater is the resultant invigoration from the process. This idea may be somewhat akin to the motivation underlying blood sacrifice, possibly having the same conceptual roots. Such a practice, as described by anthropologist Marcel Griaule among the Dogon, for example, is based upon the notion that in ritually killing the animal, an individual could share his victim’s “life force.”<sup>22</sup>

Though he is sometimes called the Deathless White Stallion, it is a paradox that in the tales death is inevitable for the heroic horse. He becomes a kind of sacrifice to liberty itself, to the values of individual freedom and mobility that he personifies. It is his thirst, in the setting of an arid land, that ultimately brings him toward his doom, and even the wind is in his captor’s favor.<sup>23</sup> I find a striking parallel in the recent western film *Tom Horn*, in which the hero, who does not refute the charges against him at his trial, also symbolically dies for his freedom. When Tom is hanged, no one is willing to take the responsibility of executioner, so a special gallows is designed in which water is used to spring the trap. Thus, as with the White Mustang, it is apparent that the very forces of nature conspired with man in the killing. It is clear that the Stallion wills his own death by thirst and starvation in order to avoid enslavement. His sacrificial act heightens the power of the opposition between the tame and the wild—or the new order and the old, civilization versus savagery—and he is cast in the role of a victim who is trapped between the incompatible forces of culture and nature as they clashed on the frontier.

#### THE MUSTANG’S MASCULINITY

By choosing death over a life of captivity,

the legendary White Stallion has enacted the "code of the West," which, reflecting the chivalric ideal, places honor above life. This, of course, is a masculine code, and the Mustang's identity is always male. His sexuality is expressed in the muscular power of his body and symbolized by his long flowing mane and tail, which are emphasized in every version of the story. The Stallion is usually described as being alone, as befits a creature superior to his own kind, or, less commonly, in the company of the band of mares that he protects. His aloneness and aloofness may represent not only his status as the paragon of all horses but also the high valuation placed upon the quality of individualism that is so deeply entrenched as part of the western frontier complex. Ultimately, the lone White Steed must pit himself against a human force, and it is appropriate that as a classic animal antagonist he should be the strongest and fittest male of his species. Just as the westward experience was a masculine conquering, so the Stallion will be vanquished by males. The human struggle against nature is often symbolized by a man-stallion battle that becomes a test of manhood. The American West provides a fitting backdrop for such a contest, as illustrated, for example, by Arthur Miller's film *The Misfits*. Here the hero is more than a cowboy roping a wild horse, for his defeat of the stallion takes on the wider dimension of man's conquest of nature.

#### THE MUSTANG'S STRENGTH, INTELLIGENCE, AND NOBILITY

Until men can vanquish him, the White Mustang appears to reign unchallenged as lord of the western plains. Admired for his unsurpassed endurance and extraordinary intelligence, he is also depicted as generous and gallant, the noble steed. His anthropomorphization reaches its epitome in the "Little Gretchen" story as recounted by J. Frank Dobie in *On the Open Range*. The event was said to have taken place around 1848, when some German colonists were settling Texas. A little girl, riding an old mare to whose back

she had been tied for safety, became lost when the mare strayed away from the wagon train in search of grass. The White Mustang suddenly appeared and led the old mare, with the girl, back to his own band of mares. The Stallion, now as a tender and chivalrous patriarch, responded to Gretchen's cries by biting the ropes that bound her and lifting her up by the collar of her dress in the manner of a mother cat. The first time he picked her up and removed her from her mare, and the second time, after she had rested, he put her back on her mount and told the mare to take her back to her family's camp. So the child was rescued by the marvelous White Stallion, which she described as "arching his neck and pacing with all the fire of a mustang emperor" and as having "something about him" that prevented her from being "in the least frightened."<sup>24</sup>

Similar stories center on horses who perform heroic deeds on behalf of humans, and often the horse, like the White Steed in the Gretchen tale, assumes a protective role involving supernatural power. One such legend relates that Saint Anthony, an Egyptian Christian who later became the patron saint of horses, was saved from a martyr's death at the hands of the Egyptian king by the actions of the monarch's own mount. As the story goes, this noble beast, who in the past had always been remarkably quiet, suddenly threw his rider and then fatally bit him, in order to prevent him from killing Anthony.<sup>25</sup> This legend and the Gretchen story share the dramatic theme of nature's intervention in human affairs through the agency of a horse. The impact of these two tales stems from a reversal of the usual order of the human-dominant-over-the-animal or culture-dominant-over-nature theme. For here, by means of actions that produce tangible results, an animal is able to extend itself into the human or cultural sphere through its own special wisdom and power.

#### THE MUSTANG'S GAIT

The White Steed of the Prairies invariably paces, and to me this is the most intriguing of

his characteristics for symbolic analysis. This gait is quite different from that of an ordinary wild mustang. With some exceptions, a pace is an unnatural gait that a horse may acquire through training. In a true pace the horse uses the legs on the same side of his body in unison, rather than those on opposite sides, as in the normal trot. Though there are some natural pacers, most animals must be schooled for this gait. It is relevant that Washington Irving wrote of the White Steed: "They say he can pace and rack (or amble) faster than the fleetest horse can run," thus mentioning two other unusual gaits for a range horse.<sup>26</sup> Five-gaited American Saddle Horses are trained to perform two unnatural gaits that somewhat resemble the pace—the slow-gait and the rack, in which only one foot is said to touch the ground at a time. Both are exceedingly smooth for the rider. In these gaits the exaggerated leg action of the mount coupled with the lack of movement in the rest of the animal's body produces a spectacular aesthetic effect: it almost seems that the horse is floating. Tennessee Walking Horses, another American breed, must also be trained to use the "walking" gait, or amble, for which they are known, though breeders say they are born with a propensity to it. Ordinarily, all these unnatural gaits must be taught, and often such horses need to be continually reconditioned to execute them.

Descriptions of the White Steed always emphasize his unusual pacing gait with its great smoothness and speed, a grace of motion that is awe-inspiring to the beholder. Indeed, he seems to glide over the earth, and his pace sets him apart from all other creatures. I suggest that implicit in this trait is the idea that something of "culture" may in a certain mysterious way be part of the extraordinary makeup of the Pacing Mustang, setting him apart from other wild horses. Also, I see the pace as a device to attribute to him a unique power of movement, making him the swiftest and most graceful of all horses, and giving him the nearest earthly substitute for the wings of Pegasus. Thus, not only through the "cultural" association of his special gait might he span the worlds of man

and nature, but with the inherent power of his pace to carry him beyond all worldly horses, he also seems to traverse a path that links the natural with the supernatural.

The only horse I have found to rival the White Steed for symbolic expressiveness with regard to its gait is the mount of Sitting Bull. Again, this horse's unusual pace is imbued with meaning. It was a gray, a trained circus horse that had been presented to the celebrated Sioux leader as a token of esteem by his friend Buffalo Bill Cody at the conclusion of Sitting Bull's season of participation in Cody's Wild West Show. According to the tragically ironic story, the rifle shots that killed his master were heard by the nearby horse and taken as cues, causing him to go through his paces once more as he had in the show.<sup>27</sup> The same theme appears in the satiric 1976 Robert Altman film *Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson*. Regarding Sitting Bull's role in his Wild West Show, Buffalo Bill is informed that "Sitting Bull has decided that he will do the only thing that he had seen here that he would want to show his people." When Cody asks, "What's that?" he is told that "Sitting Bull will make the gray horse dance." Later, when presenting the horse to the Indian, Buffalo Bill tells him, "Chief, I'm gonna make you a gift of that dancin' gray. You two deserve each other. Shoot a gun and you . . . dance." Still later, when news comes of Sitting Bull's death back on the reservation, the Wild West performers are told, "They say the horse danced when they shot the chief."<sup>28</sup>

As Sitting Bull's biographer described this event, the Indian police who had shot the Sioux leader were frightened by the horse's "putting on his stunts" at his master's death, and they viewed this strange phenomenon as "worse than the guns of their enemies." They thought that the spirit of the dead chief had entered into the performing horse. Here again is the concept of a human influence or "cultural" quality represented by the animal's gait. Also like the Mustang, the circus horse appeared invulnerable, for he was unaffected by the flying bullets and "came through without

a scratch." Those who were present said that "he sat down gravely in the middle of all that carnage, and raised his hoof."<sup>29</sup> Or, as the poet John Neihardt describes it, "Haughtily he raised / A hoof, saluting, as a horse should do."<sup>30</sup>

In this story I see not only the bond that linked an animal to its dead master but an equine figure whose special gait, like that of the Pacing White Steed, symbolizes his role as an intermediary between nature and man. The artificiality of the learned "circus tricks," or dance steps, exhibited by this horse is part of the human "cultural" world, part of the taming process that had been imposed upon the beast as "nature," linked with the same complex of domination that had conquered land, Indian, and animal alike.

#### THE MUSTANG'S COLOR

Whiteness is the most prominent attribute of the Steed in almost all versions of the tale. In a few accounts he is gray. Some gray horses are white at certain stages of their lives; the Lippizan stallions, for example, are gray throughout their early years and only attain creamy whiteness at about age ten.<sup>31</sup> Grays, then, are almost as close to white animals in the world of nature as they seem to be in symbolism. The Mustang's whiteness is the most complex and mysterious of his qualities and is subject to many interpretations, not all of which are consistent with each other.

Whiteness may represent the essence of the Stallion's wildness; in my own professional experience with stockmen I have frequently encountered their firm belief that the whiter an animal is the wilder it will be. Whiteness could also represent the Steed's universality, his composite nature, since white is technically the reflection of all colors. Or it may symbolize his spirituality, the supernatural aura with which many of the tales endow him—for gods are often clothed in white. Whiteness may be the expression of his goodness, his purity in the face of evil that surrounds him and always threatens to snare him. In this in-

terpretation whiteness sets him apart as nature undefiled, primeval. White color may stand for coldness, the antithesis of the passionate element of life; but a contradiction is inherent in that image, for "white heat" is the opposite extreme. Herman Melville expressed this duality when he wrote of the White Steed galloping "with warm nostrils reddening through his cool milkiness."<sup>32</sup>

On a more mundane level, his color may be thought to stand for the white race. Such a meaning is imputed to the Saxon Horse, a British emblem of the conquering people.<sup>33</sup> The frontier experience of the American West has been conceptualized largely as a white Anglo-Saxon male endeavor, and only recently has there been appreciable interest in the part played by blacks, Mexicans, and other (dark) minority groups.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the concept of the Anglo-Saxon as the one people ideally suited to carry out the conquest of the American West has been set forth with conviction by Owen Wister.<sup>35</sup> It was not only the Anglo-Saxon's special traits, Wister asserts, but also the destiny that brought the man of this stock into partnership with a particular kind of horse, the mustang, as "foster-brother" and "ally," which resulted in the development of the New World cavalier who determined the course of history on the American continent.<sup>36</sup> It is possible, then, that some frontiersmen could have seen a reflection of themselves in the proud and superior white creature who appeared as lord of the plains. I find it significant that it is vaqueros who are ultimately responsible for the Mustang's capture. Symbolically, this has the effect of removing guilt from Anglo-Americans and placing it instead on persons of Mexican or mestizo descent. From this point of view, the idea of the dark foreigner as villain, not "one of us," assumes importance in identifying the destroyer of the freedom of the beautiful White Steed.

White animals have often been regarded as essentially different from those of other colors, in many cases as embodying the supernatural. The Plains Indians, for example, considered the rare white buffalo sacred and had many



*THE DEATH STRUGGLE (1845) by Charles Deas. Here the artist has made use of the symbolic qualities of light and dark imagery. The contrast between the predominantly white horse of the trapper and the darkness of his Indian adversary's mount suggests the clashing of incompatible forces upon the frontier. Courtesy of the Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.*

taboos about its use, particularly the hide, which was given to the Great Spirit.<sup>37</sup> White elephants are said to be sacred in India, as white asses are in Persia.<sup>38</sup> Though many white animals occur in literature, I have encountered no more memorable creatures than the two spotless and specially blessed white mules, Contento and Angelica, ridden by the padres in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. "They are as good as their names," their owner noted. "It seems God has given them intelligence. When I talk to them they look up at me like Christians; they are very companionable. They are always ridden together and have a great affection for each other."<sup>39</sup>

Nor can one forget that the mythical unicorn

was pure white. Melville's *Moby Dick*, with all its complex symbolism, however, is no doubt the best known of all white animals. In his discussion of the quality of whiteness Melville includes a glowing account of the White Mustang:

Most famous in our Western annals and Indian traditions is that of the White Steed of the Prairies; a magnificent milk-white charger. . . . Nor can it be questioned from what stands on legendary record of this noble horse, that it was his spiritual whiteness chiefly, which so clothed him with divineness; and that this divineness had that in it which, though commanding worship, at the same time enforced a certain nameless terror.<sup>40</sup>

Here reflected is the ambivalence and mystery represented by whiteness, simultaneously inspiring both fear and a sense of holiness.

In the same passage Melville indicates that "always to the bravest Indians he was the object of trembling reverence and awe." Some tribes of Indians had their own legends about the Phantom White Mustang that probably antedated those of the white settlers. The Kiowas, for example, believed that this horse could not be harmed by arrows or rifle balls and could run unscathed through a prairie fire. The Blackfeet considered him as possessing the potency to sire war horses that made their riders invulnerable in battle.<sup>41</sup> Navajos have a high regard for white horses, and their mythology describes the sun and moon deities riding on elegant milk-white steeds. White is the color that Navajos associate with dawn, since the early morning light banishes the shadows and mysteries of the night. Because of this association, a Navajo who owns a white horse considers himself fortunate and believes that no bad luck will befall him when he rides it.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the world there has been a preference for white horses as the mounts of the gods. Vishnu, the Hindu deity, is said to have ridden a white (and winged) horse.<sup>43</sup> In Saint John's vision of Christ in heaven as warrior and King of Kings he was seated upon a



white horse.<sup>44</sup> Joan of Arc, later a saint, rode a spotless white steed on her holy mission. Correlated with their role as mounts for sacred heroes is the strong tradition identifying white horses as steeds of conquest. Of the Four Horses of the Apocalypse, each one a different color, the white steed is so designated, for "he that sat upon him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him; and he went forth conquering, and to conquer."<sup>45</sup> Each of the Four Horses, according to the Book of Revelations, will bring a source of destruction to the earth, but it is notably the white horse who represents the force of conquest itself.

Worldly conquerors also have a strong predilection for white mounts, and many famous military leaders have chosen them as war horses. The pure-white steed Marengo carried Napoleon Bonaparte, Tor was Charlemagne's huge white stallion, and Old Whitey bore Zachary Taylor to battle under four different flags. Portraits of George Washington as a military hero usually show him astride a white charger, and it is difficult to separate the warrior image of Robert E. Lee from that of his gray horse, Traveler. Stephen Vincent Binet describes them both as "iron gray"; "He and his horse are matches for the strong / Grace of proportion that inhabits both."<sup>46</sup>

More recently, General George Patton was instrumental in saving the famed Lippizan horses of Vienna from destruction by the Nazis during World War II. Thus he preserved for posterity the world's most highly schooled horses, trained to execute almost incredible feats of precision—all pure white stallions.

Buffalo Bill, whose popular image is that of conqueror and despoiler of the West, is always pictured riding a magnificent white horse in his Wild West Show. A poster once used in advertising the performance depicted two men on white chargers, one Cody and the other Napoleon.<sup>47</sup> Rosa Bonheur's widely reproduced portrait of the triumphant showman astride his white stallion contributed greatly to his fame, and the poet e. e. cummings, has celebrated Buffalo Bill as the one "who used to / ride a watersmooth-silver / stallion."<sup>48</sup>



COLONEL WILLIAM F. CODY (1889) by Rosa Bonheur. In his public appearances William "Buffalo Bill" Cody frequently rode a splendid white horse. This painting by Rosa Bonheur contributed to his image in the popular mind as a heroic conqueror and despoiler of the West. Courtesy of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.

Buffalo Bill's favorite mount, Brigham, plays an important symbolic role in the Altman film *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, in which he is referred to as "a magnificent white stallion," who has clearly contributed to Cody's "heroic image." As pointed out in the script, "When Bill's dressed for a ride and mounted on that high-steppin' stallion o' his, any doubts concernin' his legends are soon forgot." Buffalo Bill's haughty figure on his white charger contrasts ironically with that of the humble Sitting Bull portrayed as a small man riding a small pinto. Later, when Sitting Bull finally acquires the tall circus horse from Cody, the Indian's status has been somewhat improved, yet the animal turns out to be a mare. When Sitting Bull rides into the show arena on this gray mare

and is pointed out as "just a little old man," the response is "well, maybe the horse is too large."<sup>49</sup>

Black Elk, the famed holy man of the Oglala Sioux, though not destined to become a warrior, was granted in his early youth a supernatural vision to show him how to lead his people. In this vision many splendid horses appeared, and of these, twelve were white, with "manes flowing like a blizzard wind." White color in Sioux sacred ceremony stood for the north, "whence comes the great white cleansing wind." Thus, like the White Steed of the Prairies, these horses could symbolize strength and endurance, the ability to survive in the face of adversity, as well as purity and beauty. Describing the white horses of his dream, Black Elk revealed that "all about them white geese soared and circled."<sup>50</sup> These birds might represent winged spirits that attend the white horses; they also suggest an analogy between Black Elk's visionary steeds and the god-horse Pegasus, with his wings and white color, as well as his general depiction as riderless. True to a common thematic pattern, the white horses are specially set apart in the narrative by unusual characteristics.

Unlike Pegasus, however, the Pacing White Stallion was mortal. Though he lived in legend on the plains for many years, it was inevitable that he would die. For the kind of unbounded freedom that he represented ended when the frontier was closed, making his uncompromising spirit of liberty an anachronism. The new pragmatic order of the civilized world that was closing in on him demanded that he be usefully subjugated or else destroyed. Like the bison and others who would follow, he could not be left to exist for his own sake. But, as people still yearn with nostalgia for the lost wilderness, so they remember the White Mustang who once paced across its limitless expanses in freedom, an image expressing the very essence of the untamed frontier.

#### NOTES

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4. Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, 2 vols. (1944; reprint, New York: Readex, 1966), 2:207-208.

5. Robert M. Denhardt, *The Horse of the Americas* (1947; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), p. 117.

6. Phil Strong, *Horses and Americans* (1939; reprint, New York: Garden City, 1946), p. 195.

7. J. Frank Dobie, Mody C. Boatright, and Harry H. Ransom, eds., *Mustangs and Cow Horses* (Austin: Texas Folk-Lore Society, 1940), pp. 175-79.

8. Irving, *A Tour on the Prairies*, p. 116; Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, p. 207.

9. Strong, *Horses and Americans*, p. 195.

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12. Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, p. 208.

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31. Morris Weeks, Jr., "Home Turf of Those Great White Horses," *New York Times*, April 2, 1978, p. 1.

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44. Revelations 19:11-16.

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