

*The Emporia State Research Studies*

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
EMPORIA, KANSAS

**Moral and Social Dimensions of  
William Allen White's Fiction:  
Two Studies**

**William R. Elkins**

Vol. XXXVI

Summer, 1987

Number 1

THE EMPORIA STATE RESEARCH STUDIES is published quarterly by The School of Graduate and Professional Studies of the Emporia State University, 1200 Commercial St., Emporia, Kansas, 66801-5087. Entered as second-class matter September 16, 1952, at the post office at Emporia, Kansas, under the act of August 24, 1912. Postage paid at Emporia, Kansas.

ISSN: 0424-9399

---

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
EMPORIA, KANSAS

ROBERT E. GLENNEN  
*President of the University*

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE  
AND PROFESSIONAL STUDIES

JAMES F. LOVELL, *Dean*

EDITORIAL BOARD

JOSEPH V. HICKEY, *Associate Professor of Anthropology*

CARL W. PROPHET, *Professor of Biological Sciences*

THOMAS D. ISERN, *Associate Professor of History*

MELVIN STORM, *Professor of English*

CHARLES E. WALTON, *Professor of English*

*Editor of This Issue:* MELVIN STORM

Papers published in this periodical are written by faculty members of the Emporia State University and by either undergraduate or graduate students whose studies are conducted in residence under the supervision of a faculty member of the University.

## William Allen White's Novels: Forming a Moral Vision

by  
William R. Elkins

Early on the afternoon of August 13, 1896, William Allen White, the twenty-eight year old editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, was accosted on the streets of Emporia, Kansas, by a group of Populists who hooted, jeered and generally belittled him for some editorials he had written. "Finally," White writes in his *Autobiography*, "I broke through the cordon and stalked . . . down the street to the office . . . and sat down to write for Monday's paper an editorial, and I headed it, 'What's the Matter with Kansas?'" (280). Shortly before the incident, White had received proofs for his first book of fiction, a collection of short stories entitled *The Real Issue*. He admits to being "inordinately proud" of his literary accomplishment (279). These events, seemingly unrelated except in time, are the first indications of the two directions, editorial and literary, that were to lead the small-town newspaperman to the national prominence that eventually found his name followed by the designation, "the Sage of Emporia."

Although White's editorial career, his influential position with the political leaders of his time and his influence on the social and political thinking of the first quarter of the twentieth century have engrossed his biographers and political historians, his surprisingly large body of fiction, written between 1891 and 1918, has received only limited examination that, for the most part, attempts to relate the fiction to his interest in the progressive movement in politics. All such investigations are valuable in giving us a figure through whom we can examine an age, but, perhaps paradoxically, the fic-

---

\*William R. Elkins is Professor of English at Emporia State University. He wishes to express his gratitude to the Emporia State University Research and Creativity Committee for awarding a summer fellowship which assisted in part the research for these articles.

tion seems to stand apart from the figure. It is, one might say, that his fiction is merely the "something else" that interested William Allen White. Truly, we recognize that White is "The Man from Emporia" as Everett Rich subtitles his excellent biography, and we also recognize the "Maverick on Main Street" of John DeWitt McKee's subtitle. In the same sense, the first decades of the twentieth century take form in Walter Johnson's *William Allen White's America*. But such descriptions somehow obscure the novelist. Even E. Jay Jernigan's chapter title, "A Victorian Sentimentalist: Fiction," seems to separate the creative artist from the man as writer. The problem is not alleviated by reading his two novels in terms of his economic theory of the West (Diane Dufva Quantic's "William Allen White's Theory of the West") or by considering his novel, *In the Heart of a Fool*, as the creation of a new American Adam in search of Eden (Joe L. Dubbart's "William Allen White's American Adam"). For all the considerable information these viewpoints and interpretations offer, William Allen White's fiction seems to emerge as a curiosity of time and place rather than as an integral part of White's life and writings. Jernigan states that White's short fiction "is symptomatic of his time and place. Some of his stories are simply magazine kitsch, but many transcend that category to stand forth as interesting regional fiction on subjects somewhat out of the ordinary" (75). Jernigan's assessment of White's short fiction is consistent with those writers already noted and with my article, "William Allen White's Early Fiction." In the same general category, however, Jernigan "includes his two novels too; though trite in structure, in them are the history and attitudes of an era" (75).

While I grant that White's short stories, by nature of the genre, offer little beyond local color and interesting views of regional mores, I believe that his two novels, *A Certain Rich Man* and *In the Heart of a Fool*, identify the moral basis that underlies not only the novels but is an inseparable part of his writings and his life. To be more precise, White's *Autobiography*, his Phi Beta Kappa address, "A Theory of Spiritual Progress," his collection, *The Old Order Changeth*, and his first novel, *A Certain Rich Man* provide insights to the period in White's life when he formed the moral philosophy which consistently shaped his life and writings. Moreover, his second novel, *In the Heart of a Fool*, and two later articles about novels and novel-writing indicate that, even though he virtually abandoned fiction shortly after the publication of his second novel, his attitudes remained unchanged.

## I

In his *Autobiography*, White tells us that the "years at the turn of the century were vintage years if ever I had any. In those five years from 1898 to 1903 I stepped out into the big wide world" (325). These were the years in which he met two presidents, two ex-presidents, and in which he became an important member of the Kansas Republican central committee. He writes: "And I had definitely become a member of the governing, if not the ruling, classes of my country" (325). More important, however, to this study is his affirmation of the spiritual teachings of the Bible. To make sure that we clearly understand his new-found interest, White explains:

Its theology did not interest me, but the wisdom of the ages there moved me deeply. I discovered the New Testament about this time. I had been buying for several years separately bound books of the Old Testament, with notes and commentaries. I loved its English. I was moved by its mystic wisdom. . . . But it was not until the turn of the century that I began to understand the New Testament. (325)

Within the New Testament, White saw Jesus as a "statesman and philosopher who dramatized his creed by giving his life for it" (325). White believed that a similar newly discovered faith was also being embraced by young leaders in politics and public affairs throughout the states. They were "attacking things as they were in that day — notably Mark Hanna's plutocracy and the political machinery that kept it moving" (326). White saw not only the impact of this new awareness in politics but as he states:

And literature was rising. Novelists were making fictional exposes of plutocratic inequity. Magazines were full of what later was to be called muckraking, uncovering cesspools in the cities and the states, denouncing the centralization of power in the United States Senate which assembled there through the dominance in the states of the great commodity industries — railroads, copper, oil, textiles and the like. So I, opening my New Testament and reading wide-eyed the new truths that I found revealed there, began to relate my reading to my life. Dickens, Emerson, Whitman came alive, and I saw things as they were. (326)

White's autobiographical recollection is accurate. His letters written during the first years of the twentieth century give ample documentation to the zeal with which he pursued moral and ethical dimensions of life and politics (Johnson, *Selected Letters* 32-70). These letters indicate his growing admiration for Theodore

Roosevelt and his impatience with and refusal to support corrupt political figures. Several letters help underscore his developing moral stand. In one, he speaks about his admiration for Roosevelt and delineates the reason for it: "It has seemed to me that if I could perform some service for you that would land you in the presidency, I would perform as great a service for my country as I could perform upon the battlefield . . . . You don't know how eager I am for opportunities to help you. I believe honestly and earnestly, that if I could feel in some way that I had been a truly serious factor in making so good and honest a man president of these United States, I would have all the pride a soldier has . . . ." (41-2). He wrote a number of articles for *McClure's Magazine*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, and *Cosmopolitan* attacking influence peddling and politically corrupt bosses. A particularly strong attack on Boss Platt of New York brought a threatened suit for libel. Secure in the rightness of his attack on Platt, White wrote John S. Phillips, editor of *McClure's* that he had

. . . received a telegram today from the Kansas City World, which says that Platt is going to sue me for libel. It also says that Platt told Roosevelt, "I will get that fellow's scalp if it's the last thing I ever do." However, I shall sleep well tonight and have no fear that if he does get my scalp, LePages's liquid glue, which is advertised in *McClure's Magazine*, will stick my scalp on again. (47)

In a letter written in 1903 in response to a request for some details about his editorial career, White sums up the importance of his moral and ethical belief. He writes:

I have been in the newspaper business nearly twenty years now as printer and as reporter and as proprietor, and it seems to me that the essence of success in a newspaper is wisely directed courage. All the struggles I have had have been due to mistakes I made in temporizing with evil . . . . Character is the one essential to running a successful newspaper . . . . (58)

We can, I believe, accept White's recollection of his emerging faith as genuine and permanent. Both his early articles and letters show the degree to which he practiced his creed. We can also quite readily characterize its design. From his reference to reading Emerson, noted earlier, we can identify a principal facet as emphasis on individual moral insight. White makes it quite clear that he isn't interested in theology but that he is interested in the way in which each man directs his life in relation to the lives of others.

Bolstered by the success of his volumes of short stories, White decided "rather formally, walking one day through the Garden of the Gods in Colorado, in February, 1905, to tackle a novel—a full length, man-sized novel" (373). Undoubtedly influenced by his recent assaults on moral corruption, his reading in the New Testament, and his emerging sense of the necessity for individual moral insight, White also decided that his novel will become "the story of the prodigal son," and to add to its appeal, his hero will be the son of "a pioneer Kansas mother; and her faith in some kind of moral law of gravitation toward righteousness took the place of 'his father's house' of the parable" (374). He named his hero John Barclay and eventually titled his novel *A Certain Rich Man*.

*A Certain Rich Man*, published in 1909, chronicles the life of John Barclay from his early childhood until late middle-age. John and his mother, Mary, settle in Sycamore Ridge, Kansas after John's father is killed for preaching an abolitionist sermon at Westport Landing, Missouri. The year is 1857, and the free state/slave state controversies and raids are part of Kansas life. The fictional Sycamore Ridge has its brush with the border raids, becomes an incorporated town, endures a year of drouth, and, by the spring of 1861 is ready to send its men off to the Union Army. In establishing his historical framework in the first two chapters, White also introduces the rest of his major characters. We meet the Hendricks family, banker father and son, Bob, whose lives will be inextricably connected to the fortunes of John Barclay. We initially admire the Southern aristocrat, Martin Culpepper, who for the love of his townsmen becomes a Colonel in the Union Army, and we meet his daughters, Ellen and Molly who, with the Colonel's fortunes, will become inseparably bound to the story of John Barclay.

In addition to his major characters, White manages to introduce all except one who will play a part in the major plot configuration. Most important among these is Lige Bemis, a redleg renegade who becomes a powerful judge and political ally of John Barclay. Important in another sense is Philemon Ward who leads the Sycamore Ridge army contingent and who rises to the rank of general. Ward, by his lifelong advocacy of human rights and disdain for material goods, stands as the consistent antithesis to all that John Barclay comes to represent. Only Adrian Pericles Brownwell, who figures prominently in the novel's resolution, does not appear until a later chapter.

What White does with his characters is to create a story that mixes two parts Victorian methodology (undisguisably lifted from Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*) with one part old-fashioned melodrama; a melodrama somewhat complicated by an unclear delineation of who wears the black and who the white hat. H. L. Mencken, in his 1909 review, "The Last of the Victorians," says of White,

... he has all of Thackeray's fondness for stopping to harangue his audience; he has taken over, as a matter of legitimate inheritance, all of Thackeray's showman's kit of dolls, puppets, wires, footlights and drop curtains; and in more than one place his style is a miraculously exact imitation of Thackeray at his worst. (153)

Mencken further condemns White because he knows nothing of the "gorgeous drama that lies in the ruthless struggle for existence" (153). Mencken, however, does not dismiss the novel completely. He commends White for his depiction of the "evangelical passion" that preceded the Civil War and for his ability to create a battle scene; but "when Mr. White comes to deal with his characters as individuals, his sentimentality overcomes him and they cease to be human" (154). Mencken's review was not typical but comes close to modern assessment and to seeing the curious mixture produced by White's overwhelming desire to promulgate his moral conception of the evils created when man forgets his responsibility to other men; forgets because he is caught in the emerging industrialization and attendant political demagoguery of the Middle West.

Here, White's novel seems to say, we have John Barclay, a good little boy from brave pioneer stock, who runs off to fight in the Civil War. As a mere child he is lamed for life by a stray rifle ball but returns home to help his courageous washerwoman mother earn a living. John almost immediately develops a keen business sense and earns enough to attend the university at Lawrence, eventually becoming a lawyer and partner with Philemon Ward. After his first love, Ellen Culpepper, suddenly dies, Barclay directs all his energy to his business interests. In the process of becoming a milling, manufacturing, and railroad tycoon, John Barclay undermines the integrity of Banker Hendricks and taints the "honor" of Colonel Culpepper. To maintain his emerging empire, he even destroys the relationship between his best friend, Bob Hendricks, and Molly Culpepper, sister of Ellen. He "forces" Molly to forsake Bob and marry Adrian Brownwell because only Brownwell has the money to loan to Colonel Culpepper so that the Colonel can cover a

debt that will keep the bank solvent enough to delay detection of Barclay's earlier tampering with bank records. These actions contribute early and late to the dissolution of Barclay's partnership with Ward, to the death of Banker Hendricks, to Molly's years in a miserable marriage, and to Brownwell's killing of Bob Hendricks. This last action is instigated by Lige Bemis, now a corrupt ex-judge, whose bid to own the Sycamore Ridge waterworks is being opposed by Bob Hendricks. Eventually, Barclay's actions in one way or another have an adverse effect on all those close to him: his wife dies (typhoid from impure water), his daughter does not share his love of profit (indeed is in love with the son of his adversary, Philemon Ward), and new, reforming, governmental decrees bring an end to his ruthless, monopolistic business practices.

Slowly but finally, John Barclay sees the error of his ways, disposes of his business empire and most of his fortune and, in a final act of self-sacrifice, gives his life to save that of a drowning woman, a woman of suspect reputation at that.

Even so brief a summary indicates the melodramatic nature of *A Certain Rich Man* and suggests that such a plot may provide ample opportunity to moralize. It does and White does. Mary Barclay, Philemon Ward and John's memory are the major vehicles for the novel's moral philosophy. When, for instance, Mary senses that John has reached the end of boyhood, she admonishes,

But oh, my boy, my little tender-hearted boy—be a good man—just be a good man, John." And then she sobbed for an unrestrained minute: "O God, when you take my boy away, keep him clean, and brave, and kind, and—O God, make him— make him a good man." (57)

While Barclay and Ward are still law partners, John displays his first indication that business holds precedence over human relationships. Ward lectures,

"Johnnie—I wish I could get to your heart, boy. I want to make you hear what I have to say with your soul and not with your ears, and I know youth is so deaf. Your grandfather was angry when your father entered the ministry and came out here. He thought it was folly. The old man offered to give fifty thousand dollars to the Kansas-Nebraska cause, and that would have sent a good many men out here. But your father said no. He said money wouldn't win this cause. He said personal sacrifice was all that would win it. He said men must give up themselves, not their money, to make this cause win—and so he came; and there was a terrible quarrel, and that is why your mother has stayed. (67)

We note, in particular, Ward's emphasis on personal sacrifice and personal service. Ward continues to elaborate his moral creed, and it becomes apparent that he is the voice for White's Emersonian leanings:

And she, not your father, made the final decision to give up everything for human freedom. She has endured poverty, Johnnie—"the man's voice was growing tense, and his eyes were ablaze; "you know how she worked, and if you fail her, if you do not live a consecrated life, John, your mother's life has failed. I don't mean a pious life; God knows I hate sanctimony. But I mean a life consecrated to some practical service, to an ideal—to some actual service to your fellows—not money service, but personal service. Do you understand?" Ward leaned forward and looked into the boy's face. (67)

In these early pages of the novel, we are led to believe that Mary Barclay and Philemon Ward's influence may prevail, but, then, John's first-love, Ellen Culpepper dies, and, when John looked to his faith, "there was silence."

So his heart curdled, and you kind gentlemen of the jury who are to pass on the case of John Barclay in this story, remember that he was only twenty years old, and that in all his life there was nothing to symbolize the joy of sacrifice except this young girl. All his boyish life she had nurtured the other self in his soul,—the self that might have learned to give and be glad in the giving. And when she went, he closed his Emerson and opened his Trigonometry, and put money in his purse. (71)

Then it is, as White tells us, that having closed his Emerson, Barclay went his way and Philemon Ward is left to perpetuate Emerson's principles. Ward makes the fact quite clear when he admits that he is a "'kind of transcendentalist!'" (119). He explains to Martin Culpepper that,

"My world, Mart Culpepper, is a world in which the ideal is real—a world in a state of flux with thoughts of to-day the matter of to-morrow; my world is a world of faith that God will crystallize to-day's aspirations into to-morrow's justice . . . ." (120)

For awhile John Barclay struggles with his lost Emersonian idealism; for example, "Every time his hand reached out to steal a mill or crush an opponent with the weapon of his secret railroad rebates, something caught his hand and held it for a moment, and he had to fight his way free" (222). By the time, however, that he is forty, a portrait of Barclay shows all compassion gone and in his face is "the menace of civilization—the danger to the race from the domination of sheer intellect without moral restraint" (277). The conflict between moral restraint and sheer intellect, symbolized by Ward and Barclay, passes into the next generation. Ward's son, Neal, becomes, over the objection of Ward, Barclay's private secretary. Neal, though, does not abandon the faith of his father and, ironically, proves to be the instrument of Barclay's downfall. White's moral fable actually ends some forty pages before the book ends when John Barclay rejects the "proud Mr. Barclay, the powerful man-hating, God-defying Mr. Barclay of Sycamore Ridge" and becomes "one sinner that repenteth" (404).

In 1910, the year following the publication of *A Certain Rich Man*, White delivered the Phi Beta Kappa Address at Columbia University. His address, "A Theory of Spiritual Progress," also was published that Fall in the *Columbia University Quarterly* and in pamphlet form by "The Gazette Press". In May, 1910, Macmillan published *The Old Order Changeth*, a collection of articles that purports to be "A View of American Democracy." Both works support the moral stance that is so evident in his novel. Although he deals with both only briefly in conjunction with *A Certain Rich Man*, E. Jay Jernigan sees in discussing "A Theory of Spiritual Progress" that White was "an Emersonian Christian who believed that humanity advances only insofar as each of us upholds the spiritual purpose of the universe" (124). About *The Old Order Changeth*, Jernigan comments again briefly that the articles were written "as he was finishing *A Certain Rich Man*" and that the book "presents the same message . . . as he does in the novel, but in the devices of expository prose . . ." (68). White's "message" gains in clarity if we look closely at passages from both works in light of John Barclay's story.

John Barclay knew but forgot White's point in the Phi Beta Kappa address that "only as brotherhood and good will are in the foundation of modern civilization will it endure . . . if there is a golden thread of faith shot through the maze of life, it is faith that the 'determinate or purposive' change moving in men,—'the way of the Lord,'—is moving toward a social order wherein men may ex-

press their good will toward one another at less material sacrifice than they expend in expressing good will as things are now" (410-411). Barclay and his cohorts failed to accept White's first proposition that "in public activities men are largely impelled by motives of good will" and his second proposition that "man as an individual is happy only as he is kind" (413). That White's "message" in *A Certain Rich Man* is still uppermost in his mind as he addresses the Phi Beta Kappa Society is evident when he says:

That means only that the spiritual is dominant in a material world. The man who is ever looking for the main chance is the final loser of the game. Greed poisons itself and dies. The plutocrat is pulling against the current. Great wealth in and of itself today often is regarded by society as a handicap to a man or an institution. The good that money will do is limited.  
(414)

John Barclay, of course, looked for the main chance and was the loser; his greed poisoned itself, and he found himself handicapped by his wealth and finally realized that the good that money will do was truly limited. White appears to connect to the novel when he says, "It is all the same. The pleasures that come as rewards for material success—the pleasures that come for cash—are apples of Sodom. The poor selfish man is as well paid without them as the rich selfish man is paid with them" (415).

In his *Autobiography*, White specifically makes a connection between *A Certain Rich Man* and *The Old Order Changeth*. Writing about the motivation for the collection being the new movement in politics—the reform that eventually directed itself against monopolies and political corruption—White writes that the book, "'The Old Order Changeth,' was a sort of standard text and sold along for ten years after it was published in 1910. It was used in colleges, and along with 'A Certain Rich Man.' 'The Old Order Changeth' had its place and did its work in its time" (424). At least part of the work that the book does is to reaffirm White's theory of human progress as one of moral and spiritual progress. One passage stands out:

We face a new fact in the world; fear it; let it establish our moral relation to it, as a thing apart from our common daily run of life; the new fact becomes a fetish, capturing us with its new creed; we struggle and battle and fret ourselves to little avail; and lo! we see some fine morning that the new fact is to be handled according to no new creed, but according to the old law of kindness and that common sense of simple justice between man

and man known as righteousness. Thus men have captured and made part of society fires and wheels and levers and printing presses and gunpowder and Christ's creed; and thus we shall capture steam, control capital, and establish democracy, not by intricate laws and elaborate government machinery, but by the fundamental kindness of men to men, the basic unselfishness of man widened and applied to men, in their new relations. (235)

We see, therefore, that in the first decade of the twentieth century, *A Certain Rich Man* gives the fullest delineation of William Allen White's emerging moral viewpoint—commerce, politics, and governmental systems are only worthwhile, White makes clear in the above passage, if fashioned by "the old law of kindness and that common sense of simple justice between man and man known as righteousness."

## II

William Allen White's second and last novel, *In the Heart of a Fool*, was the result of seven years work begun shortly after the publication of *A Certain Rich Man* and culminating in the novel's publication in 1918. Understandably, considering the novel's mixed critical reception, White has little to say about it in his *Autobiography*. Other than a passing reference to the book's progress, White offers only one substantive comment:

The theme of the novel which afterwards appeared under the title of "In the Heart of a Fool" was that there are no material rewards for spiritual excellence, and no material punishment for spiritual dereliction. So I had two characters: one, a most prosperous sinner, and the other a suffering saint. All that summer I wrestled with those two figures to make them human; to give the saint his peccadillos; to give the villain his decent moments. The plot of the book was intended to be not a struggle between black and white but between different shades of gray. (446)

Of the novel's less than enthusiastic reception, Everett Rich sees the major cause as its being out of step with its time. Rich writes that the novel was a "belated problem novel, appearing after the American people had lost their taste for political and economic reform" (200). Walter Johnson sees essentially the same problem: "The American people had turned away from the progressive movement and were concentrating on the problems of war" (284). Although both Rich and Johnson present plausible and no doubt contributing factors, John DeWitt McKee and E. Jay Jernigan offer more critically incisive reasons for the novel's limited success. McKee believes that, in spite of White's professed intentions to give human dimension to his characters, "in this novel just as much as in the fiction that preceded it, William Allen White was using the novel as a pulpit, and his sermon was showing" (148). Jernigan also sees that "the reason he failed to persuade was his didactic theory of fiction: he had come to consider the novel chiefly a vehicle for presenting philosophies of life" (101). In other words, those moral creeds that grew from his early embracing of the ideas of the New Testament and from his Emersonian leanings had become fixed into a critical aesthetic not only apparent in the novel, *In the Heart of a Fool*, but equally evident in his later commentary about novels and novel writing.

Yet another melodrama but without many of the redeeming qualities of *A Certain Rich Man*, *In the Heart of a Fool* is set in the town of Harvey, vaguely located north of Kansas City. Harvey is an industrial city and the conflict is between labor and big business,

exemplified by the two major adversaries, Grant Adams, a carpenter and labor leader, and Thomas Van Dorn, a corporation lawyer. Like Philemon Ward and John Barclay, Adams and Van Dorn form the "same thematic conflict of transcendentalism and materialism" (Jernigan 101) seen in his first novel. Other similarities between the two novels are abundant. Grant Adams is the son of a pioneer newspaperman who is an idealist much in the mold of Mary Barclay. An ideal love match between Grant Adams and Laura Nesbit is never fulfilled because greed and evil interfere in the form of Margaret Muller, who seduces Grant and secretly bears his child. Grant and Margaret's child, Kenyon, is reared by Grant's parents as their own. Laura Nesbit marries Tom Van Dorn, bears him a daughter, Lila, but eventually loses Van Dorn to the evil Margaret Muller. Lila and Kenyon, like Barclay's daughter and Ward's son, marry, bringing all opposing forces into union. Unlike Barclay, Van Dorn remains unregenerate but, nevertheless, Lila and Kenyon hold the promise for a new generation. Naturally, Grant Adams sacrifices his life for his beliefs, and, naturally, Laura Nesbit, having been in a sense reunited with Grant, carries on by working with the poor laboring class in South Harvey. In addition to plot and character similarities, White uses an intrusive narrator who is also aided by the voice of the elderly Amos Grant, sometimes as Mr. Left and sometimes as the Peachblow Philosopher. Under whatever guise, the narrator is once again White's major sermonizer, and his preachments have much the same message as those in the earlier novel. White states his theme early in the novel:

About all there is in life is one's fundamental choice between the spiritual and the material. After that choice is made, the die of life is cast. Events play upon that choice their curious pattern, bringing such griefs and joys, such calamities and winnings as every life must have. For that choice makes character, and character makes happiness. (95)

A bit later, Mr. Left tells us:

"The vice of the poor is crass and palpable. It carries a quick and deadly corrective poison. But the vices of the well-to-do are none the less deadly . . . And so it shall come to pass that when the day of reckoning appears it shall be a day of wrath . . . Then will the vicious poor and the vicious well-to-do, each crippled by his own vices, the blind leading the blind, fall to in a merciless conflict, mad and meaningless, born of a sad, unnecessary hate that shall terrorize the earth, unless God sends us another miracle of love like Christ or some vast chastening scourge of war, to turn aside the fateful blow." (124-5)

White concludes his novel by making certain that he tells us its intended moral lesson.

If the fable of Grant Adams's triumphant failure does not dramatize in some way the victory of the American spirit—the Puritan conscience—in our generation, then, alas, this parable has fallen short of its aim. But most of all, if the story has not shown how sad a thing it is to sit in the seat of the scornful, and to deny the reality of God's purpose in this world, even though it is denied in pomp and power and pride, then indeed this narrative has failed. For in all this world one finds no other place so dreary and desolate as it is in the heart of a fool. (615)

The seven years that White spent in writing *In the Heart of a Fool* emphasize his continued dedication to his moral ethic, and, certainly, the work itself is an obvious continuation of his "theory of spiritual progress." Although the novel drew praise from some reviewers, its overall reception was not enthusiastic. H. L. Mencken once again proved to be among White's harshest critics. Even though Mencken found some of White's moralizing "absolutely American" (Nolte 265), he found little that he considered artistically worthwhile. Very much aware of the novel's shortcomings and certainly stung by its mixed reception, White, nevertheless, persisted in his belief that "art" did not exclude the kind of novel that he had written. In an article for the *New Republic*, written in 1922, White addresses the issue directly: "Any attempt to place the novel inside of definitions, setting its meets and bounds brings us up sharply against the insistent question asked of old and never answered 'What is art?'" (22). This article, "Splitting Fiction Three Ways," allows White to argue "that every man has his own scheme of creation" and to contend that "If he sets down some account of his dream, some definition of his universe in terms of love or fear or hate or joy or any emotional medium in which his conviction comes to him about life, what he makes, for him is art" (22). White qualifies his defense by professing to offer a kind of democratic theory of criticism:

Now, here we come to the doctrine of a democratic theory in criticism. And we must come to it when we admit a variety of different worlds surrounding the consciousness of human beings. Now, this democratic theory of criticism like all democratic theories and doctrines is based upon a principle of tolerance, of mutual respect, of neighborly kinship in the cosmos. And if we follow a democratic theory of criticism art must not develop a snobbery, in its lower levels, in, say, the level of criticism. To set up rigid standards, to make inexorable rules, to apply static tests, to accept or reject any man's account of the world in which he lives as false and foolish is dangerous. Also democratically it is unfair. (24)

Consistent with his title, White believes that the novel can provide broadly for three "views of modern American life" which can be "personified by these three estimable young women, Sister Carrie, Pollyanna and Alice Adams" (24). Furthermore, White insists that the reader is the ultimate critic because the "novel he buys tells him what he wishes to know; and something more. Good or bad it fills him with the spiritual pabulum that he needs" (24).

White's article, "This Business of Writing," published in *The Saturday Review of Literature* in 1926, combines a strong attack against the rising realistic movement in literature with a defense of the wholesomeness of the works of Booth Tarkington. White makes it quite clear that he does not subscribe to what he terms the "Goddam School of Expressionism" and that he still strongly believes that the purpose of fiction is to elevate the spiritual and moral. First, he describes this new school of expression:

In the fictional and dramatical alcove of art we have the rise of the Goddam School of Expression. Now the Goddam School of Literature was bitten by a terrible inferiority complex sometime during the War. During the War and after the Goddam lost faith, gave over hope, and spat upon love; they said in their hearts "man is a beast. In picturing him we shall forget all of the organs of his body, his brain, his bowels, his circulatory system, and devote ourselves to considering the caprices of his reproductive intestines." (355)

Before reviewing Tarkington's latest two books (obviously the primary purpose of the article though occupying less space than the total of his above directed tirade), White eulogizes Tarkington for those qualities which formed the framework of his own novels. He writes:

But one man has gone straight ahead through all the orgy of sex-expressionism, through the cachinnations of Goddamism, and the gibberish of impressionism, gaily and wisely describing the American scene in his plays and novels. He has glorified man as the child of God—a wayward child perhaps, weak of course, petty, peevish, dirty, often abominable, but always carrying in his heart that nobility which marks him from the beast. That man is Booth Tarkington. (356)

White wrote only one short piece of fiction after *In the Heart of a Fool*. A short story, "Teaching Perkins to Play," appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* (August 6, 1921 issue). It is best to characterize the story as "fluff," signifying nothing. The once productive writer of fiction appears also to have abandoned shortly thereafter his critical interest in fiction.

Viewing William Allen White's novels as major statements of his moral and aesthetic creed gives credibility to the sweeping accolades that both his contemporary and later admirers seem compelled to make. We are better able to agree with Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's view that he "goes everywhere with the mission of a moralist, and the zest for fearless spontaneous action which is one of his essential traits" (308). Then, too, Richard W. Resh's assessment of White's fiction gains focus and we can agree that at least in part "the theme of corruption was an integral part of White's fiction. The problem lay in correcting this affliction: to become regenerate, men needed a moral vision; they required a shift from material to spiritual considerations" (22). Perhaps, finally, it is not too speculative to conclude that White's moral and artistic beliefs and the emerging modern movement in literature were too far apart: White chose not to change his attitudes in either respect but was wise enough not to continue writing fiction in the face of a changing artistic world.

WORKS CITED

- Dubbert, Joe L. "William Allen White's American Adam." *Western American Literature* 7 (Winter, 1973): 271-78.
- Elkins, William R. "William Allen White's Early Fiction." *Heritage of Kansas* 8 (1975): 5-17.
- Jernigan, E. Jay. *William Allen White*. Boston: Twayne, 1983.
- Johnson, Walter. *Selected Letters of William Allen White*. New York: Henry Holt, 1947.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *William Allen White's America*. New York: Henry Holt, 1947.
- McKee, John DeWitt. *William Allen White: Maverick on Main Street*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975.
- Mencken, H. L. "The Last of the Victorians." *Smart Set* 29 (October 1909): 153-60.
- Nolte, William H., ed. *H. L. Mencken's Smart Set Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1968.
- Quantic, Diane Dufva. "William Allen White's Theory of the West." *Heritage of the Great Plains* 15 (Summer, 1982): 27-36.
- Resh, Richard W. "A Vision in Emporia: William Allen White's Search for Community." *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 10 (Fall, 1969): 19-35.
- Rich, Everett. *William Allen White: The Man from Emporia*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941.
- Sergeant, Elizabeth S. "The Citizen of Emporia." *Century Magazine* 113 (January 1927): 308-16.
- White, William Allen. *The Autobiography of William Allen White*. New York: Macmillan, 1946.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Certain Rich Man*. New York: Macmillan, 1909.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In the Heart of a Fool*. New York: Macmillan, 1918.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Old Order Changeth: A View of American Democracy*. New York: Macmillan, 1910.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Splitting Fiction Three Ways." *The New Republic* 30 (April 12, 1922): 22-26.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'This Business of Writing.'" *The Saturday Review of Literature* 3 (Dec. 4, 1926): 355-6.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A Theory of Spiritual Progress." *Columbia University Quarterly* 12 (Sept. 1910): 408-20.

**William Allen White's**  
***The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me:***  
**The Way We Were**

by  
 William R. Elkins

"In the summer of 1917 I went to war"  
*(The Autobiography of William Allen White)*

When he came home from France, William Allen White sat down and made a book of his adventures. He did so, he states, at the insistence of his wife to whom he had written a series of letters for her and for his children's eyes only with "no thought of publishing the letters. But they were impressions hot off the literary griddle with no attempt at literary flavor" (*Autobiography* 535). What kind of a book did White *think* that he was writing? In his *Autobiography*, he tells us that the "theme of it was in the first paragraph: the story of two fat middle aged men who went to war without their wives" (535). According, however, to E. Jay Jernigan, White's autobiographical statements are "disingenuous." Citing several letters White wrote in August 1917, Jernigan states, "The book occurred to him on shipboard outward bound; he wrote it not only to boost the war effort but also to draw attention to Henry Allen, for whom he planned a successful 1918 campaign for governor . . ." (99).<sup>1</sup> Walter Johnson concurs that the book "was written partly to build up Henry J. Allen for the governorship" (286). Johnson's overall assessment however, is that the book is "an interesting although necessarily superficial view of Europe from a three months' visit" (278). Everett Rich presents it as "a blithe and guileless story, characteristic of the surface light-heartedness in which America sent her soldiers abroad to hang the Kaiser" (184). John DeWitt McKee dismisses the book with the comment that it was "understandably, a thin book. . . . White himself had little faith in it" (144).

---

1. A reading of the letters (William Allen White Collection File, Emporia State University library) shows only that White wrote to George Brett that he was interested in a book about salvage; to August F. Jaccucci, he also mentions salvage, "saving from the wreck and waste of war." Obviously, White had a book in mind, but whether or not it was *Henry and Me* is not clear.

What kind of a book is *The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me*? To be sure, it may be, as his biographers have noted, superficial, thin, blithe, and guileless, and it may be as White saw it, "a trivial book" (535). But it also becomes, for many of the same characteristics, these nearly seventy years later, both a compendium and celebration of early twentieth-century, American virtues. It is, these nearly seventy years later, a look at the way we were; and, perhaps, it is a eulogy for the way we'll never be again.

*Henry and Me* (I shall henceforth abbreviate the title) is, of course, a travel book. Since travel books fit admirably into the literary archetypal "journey" motif in which the hero most often journeys symbolically into new understanding, one would like to credit White with a similar vision and outcome. But it doesn't really work. The journey is there — Chapter I, "In Which We Begin Our Sentimental Journey," to Chapter IX, "In Which We Return to the Land of the Free" —, but the first chapter title negates the possibility of new understanding. As White aptly calls it, the journey is sentimental, one of affirmation not acquisition. Moreover, the plot motivation, the "heroes" themselves, and the fictional components give it all away. Briefly, here is what takes place.

Two relatively prominent Kansans are commissioned by the American Red Cross as inspectors to journey to the front in France. The two are the book's narrator, William Allen White, and his companion, Henry J. Allen; in White's words, "Henry J. Allen for short, as we say in Kansas — Henry J. Allen, editor and owner of the *Wichita Beacon*. And to make the *dramatis personae* complete, we may consider me as the editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, and the two of us as short, fat, bald, middle-aged, inland Americans" (1). The two travel to New York, become involved in the economics of purchasing uniforms and, subsequently, board ship for France. At this point, White creates three characters: a Red Cross nurse, "... a certain Miss Ingersoll, or perhaps her name only sounded like that; for we called her the Eager Soul. And she was a pretty girl, too — American pretty: Red hair—lots of blowy, crinkly red hair..." (18); a "young doctor of the Johns Hopkins unit..." and a certain Gilded Youth—every boat-load has its Gilded Youth — whose father was president of so many industrial concerns, and the vice-president of so many banks and trust companies that it was hard to look at the boy without blinking at his gilding" (19). Naturally, the three form a love triangle of sorts with White and Allen choosing different men as the eventual recipient of Miss Ingersoll's approval.

White also creates a French woman, whom he and Allen refer to as the "Princess." Her foreign ways lead the two men to "strong resolutions of respect for the Wichita and Emporia type, the American type that carries its own books and burdens and does not require of its men a silly and superficial chivalry and does not stimulate it by the everlasting lure of sex!" (27). This comment early on in the book is White's clue that the forthcoming events are to be only the means for his reaffirmation of true American virtues.

White and Allen spend some time in Paris; an interlude that allows White to exercise his wit in a style somewhat like that of Mark Twain in *Innocents Abroad*. The pair travel to the front, come briefly under fire, are properly frightened, and White reintroduces the fictional love triangle as he and Allen travel to join Pershing's American troops. As the time approaches for them to return home, they meet Medill McCormick, a congressman from Illinois, and travel with him to Italy. When they return to France, White interjects a chapter, "Wherein We Consider the Woman Proposition," and thereby returns once again to his fictional love triangle. Shortly thereafter, they journey to London where it is obvious that White is captivated by British society and becomes an Anglophile.<sup>2</sup> Finally, they return to "The Land of the Free," and as they prepare to leave the ship, White reveals the fictional nature of his Eager Soul, Gilded Youth, and Young Doctor. White writes:

"Who was this Gilded Youth?" asked Henry.

"He was the dream we dreamed when we were boys, Henry . . . The Gilded Youth was all we would fain have been!"

"And the Eager Soul?" quoth he.

"She, dearly beloved, was the ideal of our boyish hearts. Did you ever have a red-headed sweetheart in those olden golden days, Henry?" . . . I took her off the Red Cross Posters and breathed the breath of life into her. And isn't she a peach; and doesn't she kind of warm your heart and make up for the hardship of your youth?" He smiled assent and asked: "But the young Doctor, Bill, surely he —"

"He is the American spirit in France, Henry —badly scared, full of hope and dying to serve!" (336-7)<sup>3</sup>

2. Walter Johnson in his *William Allen White's America* (noted above) recounts an incident many years later in which White was attacked on the "floor of the United States Senate for being chairman of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies . . ." (281). The attack by Senator Rush Holt was based on *Henry and Me*; Holt concluded that White "was perhaps 'seeking to return to those delightful fields as the hero who shoved the United States for a second time into war as Britain's ally'" (282).

3. White enhanced the reader appeal of *Henry and Me* not only by his fictional love triangle but by twenty-four excellent drawings by Tony Sarg (Anthony Frederick Sarg), noted artist and puppeteer whose puppet shows were shown throughout America.

When Henry asks, in continuing the discussion that concludes *Henry and me*, "And it never happened — any of it?", we know that White had to make it happen for only then can we hear the voices that exemplify America's virtues.

The Gilded Youth, for instance, who, though son of a successful exemplar of the American Dream, puts aside his affluence, becomes a mud-splattered field service man in the ambulance Corps, and philosophizes:

*And courage — that thing which the Germans thought was their special gift from Heaven, bred of militar discipline, rising out of German kulture[sic] — we know now is the commonest heritage of men. It is the divine fire burning in the souls of us that proves the case for democracy. (78-9)*

White chose his characters carefully. Not only must the Gilded Youth exhibit the highest egalitarianism, American women as well must be special. When, for instance, the despicable Germans bomb a hospital, the Eager Soul is one of the American nurses who courageously tend the wounded while the bombing goes on. She is, however, no longer the light-hearted, red-headed flirt of the ship-board triangle.

There at Landrecourt we found the Eager Soul, a badly scared young person — but tremendously plucky! . . . There was no laugh in her face, no joy in her heart, and we scarcely knew the sombre effective, business-like, young person who greeted us. And then across the court we saw something else that interested us. For there walking with his patrician aunt, we saw the Gilded Youth. (130)

White uses the love story to present Auntie who was, of course, "genuine American" (135) and the efficient, generous benefactor of that particular field hospital. Later that night, Henry overhears Auntie's nephew, the Gilded Youth, "courting" the Eager Soul:

I heard him telling her a minute ago that the war isn't for boundaries and geography; but for a restatement of human creeds. . . . Then he said that he and his class will go in the fires burning out there — melted like wax. And she told him that they both had a lot of stolen goods on them — bodies and minds, and hearts cultivated at the expense of their fellow creatures whose lives had been narrowed that theirs might be broadened. And you should have heard her talk about the Young Doctor — a self-made man, who earned his way through medical school, and made his own place professionally. (138)

Wanting to prepare us further for his mixing war, love, and social philosophy, White had begun the Landrecourt episode with the statement, "Was there ever a martial adventure without a love story in it?" (129) and has Henry remark at its conclusion, "Queer, queer business, this love-making under the rustle of the wings of death" (139).

Although White never leaves his love-triangle characters for long, he does find other ways to elevate all that is America. As he and Henry travel through the French countryside,—of course, they find it all very "foreign"—they near Pershing's forces and then as they "switched around a bend on the road we came upon America full-sized and blood raw—a farmer boy—bronzed, milk-eyed, good-natured, with the Middle West written all over him . . . and then we knew that 'our flag was still there' . . ." (159). After visiting Pershing's headquarters, White remarks, "It is all so orderly, so organized, so American, this thing we are doing in France. It is like the effective manipulation of a great trust" (168). He concludes the chapter with "a story, an American story which has in it the makings of a hero tale" (170). His story concerns a "major god of finance" (170) who, like the Gilded Youth, volunteered himself and his two cars to serve in the war effort.

On yet another occasion, the two encounter a town crier in a French city of about 25,000. White is astonished to learn that the place doesn't have a newspaper. White makes it clear that such an omission is positively un-American. He writes:

That stumped us both. In America every town of five thousand has its daily newspaper, and frequently two dailies, and in the West every town of five hundred people has its weekly newspaper. With us the newspaper crystallizes public sentiment, promotes local pride, and tries to be the social and intellectual centre of the community. (176)

White also finds the love affairs of the French contrary to American ideals. After encountering the "French idea of separating love from marriage" (214), he and Henry are "genuinely glad when a day or two later we came back to the sprightly little American love affair. . . . That love affair we could understand" (214).

One other observation deserves noting. In Italy, The two men have an audience with the King. In addition to using the incident to deprecate all the trappings associated with royalty, White has Henry Allen say, "Bill, what this place needs is a boss buster movement. How the Kansas legislature would wallop this splendour in the appropriation bill! How the Sixth District outfit would strip the blue plush off our upholstered friend by the elevator and send him shinning home in a barrel" (238-41). To which the present-day reader may remark, "Some things change little in nearly seventy years."

Returning again to his final discussion of revelation with Henry Allen, White has Allen ask, "And the ending — will you have a happy ending?" (338) To which White responds,

"Aren't the visions of the young men, and the dreams of the old always happy? It is in passing through life from one to the other that our courage fails and our hearts sadden. And these phantoms are of such stuff as dreams are made of and they may not falter or grow weary, or grow old. Youth always has a happy ending — even in death. It is when youth ends in life that we may question its happiness."

And so we left our fancies and walked to the big guns far forward and gazed into the sunset, where home lay, home, and the things that were real, and dear, and worthwhile. (338)

And so the journey, both real and fictional comes to an end, and we see that the real depended on the fictional. Without it, *Henry And Me* would have been just another correspondent's view of the war in France. Certainly, it would not have enjoyed the popularity that kept it in print until the beginning of World War II when, according to White, its plates were melted down to make bullets (*Autobiography* 536). And just as certainly, it would not become, these nearly seventy years later, a look at the way we were.

## WORKS CITED

- Jernigan, E. Jay. *William Allen White*. Boston: Twayne, 1983.
- Johnson, Walter. *William Allen White's America*. New York: Henry Holt, 1947.
- McKee, John DeWitt. *William Allen White: Maverick on Main Street*. Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1975.
- Rich, Everett. *William Allen White: The Man from Emporia*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1941.
- White, William Allen. *The Autobiography of William Allen White*. New York: Macmillan, 1946.
- White, William Allen. *The Martial Adventures of Henry and Me*. New York: Macmillan, 1918.