Reading Louis L’Amour’s Hondo

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*I don’t give a damn what anyone else thinks, I know it’s literature and I know it will be read 100 years from now.*

—Louis L’Amour on his work (Jackson 168)

In 1946, publisher and editor Leo Margulies invited Louis L’Amour to a party in New York. Each of them had a problem. L’Amour, having served in the Army during World War II, had recently returned to the States to discover the pulp fiction markets in which he had established himself as a writer were changing. In the 1930s, he had sold numerous adventure, sports, and detective stories to magazines such as *Thrilling Adventures* and *Lands of Romance*. Now, because of television, cheap paperbacks, and other cultural forces, these markets were disappearing. As L’Amour put it, “I wrote pulps for several years and at the end of the time I was making a very good living at it. Then overnight they were gone like snow in the desert” (Davidson, Lupoff, and Wolinsky 164). One genre, however, was flourishing. The western was entering a golden age. In 1945, there were over three dozen markets for western stories (Cawelti 31). In 1950, at least 110 western films were made (Levy 75), and by the end of the decade westerns accounted for a significant percentage of published fiction. For people in the industry like Margulies, the problem was finding enough material. He asked L’Amour, “Why don’t you write me some Western stories? I need Westerns in the worst way” (Davidson,
Lupoff, and Wolinsky 164). L'Amour agreed to try. In the next three years, he would produce almost a hundred stories for magazines such as Popular Western, Thrilling Westerns, and Texas Rangers. It was an unexpected development for someone who, by his own admission, “never really intended to write Westerns at all” (Dye 355).

Soon L'Amour began to write novels under various pseudonyms. As Tex Burns, he wrote four volumes of a Hopalong Cassidy series; later, he would disavow these his entire life. In 1950, Westward the Tide appeared in England under his own name, but it would not be available in the United States until 1977. Then, in July 1952, he published a short story called “The Gift of Cochise” in Collier's Magazine. The film rights were bought by John Wayne's company Wayne-Fellows Productions, and on 25 November 1953, Hondo, the movie and novel, were simultaneously released. It would be the key moment in L'Amour's career. He was forty-five.

Hondo established L'Amour. The Gold Medal edition quoted John Wayne as saying, “Best Western novel I have ever read.” The front cover also insisted, “At last—a novel big enough to join the classics of the West.” Soon, that suggestion was made into the statement: “Louis L'Amour's Classic of the West.” In almost fifty years, the book has never been out of print, and in the 1970s, it was named one of the twenty-five best westerns ever written. As Michael T. Marsden notes, “It would be an understatement to suggest that Hondo was an important step in L'Amour's career. It truly was a turning point both in terms of the direction his writing would take and in terms of his reputation as a best-selling writer” (“L'Amour's Hondo” 17).

After Hondo, L'Amour published novels at a phenomenal rate. In the next few years, he wrote additional books for Gold Medal, Ace Books, and other publishing companies. In 1955, he signed a con-
tract with Bantam agreeing to publish two books a year (eventually this would be changed to three), and Robert L. Gale speculates that the success of *Hondo* led to Bantam's interest. With Bantam, L'Amour would become a publishing juggernaut. During his career he would produce over a hundred books, becoming the best-selling writer of westerns in the world. His most recent book, *May There Be a Road* (2001), announces that there are over 280 million copies of his work in print. Over a dozen years after L'Amour's death in 1988, works continue to appear under his name as his literary executors repackage and release his writing, including the Tex Burns novels, at regular intervals. L'Amour's enormous popularity resulted in a Congressional Gold Medal in 1983 and a Medal of Freedom in 1984. In awarding the latter, President Ronald Reagan praised L'Amour for his books which "brought the West to people of the East and to people everywhere" (Weinberg 116). For many, L'Amour's name has become synonymous with the popular western. As Richard Wheeler notes, "At one point in the early '80's, [L'Amour] was virtually the only author of single-title Westerns being published, and he kept the category alive at a time when publishers had largely abandoned it" (21). It may be that few writers in the second half of the twentieth century have so profoundly shaped or solidified popular conceptions of the American west.

Later in his career, L'Amour wrote repeatedly about three families, the Sacketts, the Talons, and the Chantrys. He planned to devote fifty novels to them which would span from the 1600s to the late 19th century. When considered together, they would provide an overarching epic of the west. L'Amour insisted, "Whether I complete it or not, I have started the biggest literary project that anybody ever attempted. Balzac's *Human Comedy* is the closest thing to it" (Dye 359). Yet although L'Amour clearly saw this project as his career's achievement and he is closely identified with
his Sackett novels, *Hondo* remains the book that readers, critics, and L'Amour himself reference. For example, in her examination of popular westerns, Jane Tompkins begins with a description of *Hondo*, and she uses a phrase from it, “west of everything,” for her book’s title. She insists, “L’Amour in his way was a great writer; his works spoke and still speak to millions of people. He has had the praise and the gratitude of millions, and so he doesn’t really need the words of critics. Still, he deserves critical attention, and certainly he rewards it” (206).

Tompkins is among several critics, including Gale, Marsden, Lee Clark Mitchell, John Nesbitt, and Jon Tuska, who have seriously examined L’Amour’s work. Overall, however, considering the extent of his writing, the amount of useful critical commentary is sparse. For some, his flaws are too glaring to ignore. For others, his prolificness is suspect. Gale notes, “L’Amour’s work was too popular and facile to deserve being defined as an absorbing critical challenge” (20). Most dismiss L’Amour with little, if any, discussion.

As Tompkins argues, however, L’Amour’s books, and particularly *Hondo*, reward close attention. *Hondo*, as much as a single work can be, is representative of both the western at mid-century and of L’Amour’s writing. It exemplifies many of the archetypal elements identified by John G. Cawelti in his study of westerns, *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Cawelti argues that westerns usually contain three character groups—the hero, townspeople, and Indians—and focus on the clash between wilderness and civilization on the frontier. The heroes, who “possess many qualities and skills of the savages but are fundamentally committed to the townspeople” (73), resolve conflicts between the other groups in a series of events that follow a pattern of capture, flight, and pursuit (94). Although it contains key variations, *Hondo* follows these patterns. Since L’Amour relies on repetitive plots and formulaic treatments, examining one work
in depth can offer insight into what type of west L'Amour “brought” to “people everywhere.” For example, Marsden points out, “With Hondo, L'Amour began the lifelong exploration of the family on the frontier, native American culture, and female as well as male strength of character” (“L'Amour's Hondo” 20). Hondo can serve as a locus for issues ranging from the nature of the western hero to the treatment of the desert as a wasteland.

Hondo's composition is also of interest. For thirty years, L'Amour would insist that Hondo was his first novel. It wasn’t. According to his son, Beau, who is L'Amour's official biographer, “Louis had already sold several novels (Westward the Tide, his four Hopalong Cassidy stories, Crossfire Trail, Utah Blaine, and Silver Canyon) to paperback publishers when Hondo, a film made from his short story “[The] Gift of Cochise” (collected in War Party) hit the silver screen” (Official L'Amour website). Furthermore, the novel was based on the screenplay written by James Edward Grant, a fact that was never publicly acknowledged. The story therefore exists in three versions—short story, film, and “novelization.” Examining the similarities and differences between the three works is instructive. For example, since Grant was writing specifically for John Wayne, it's reasonable to conclude that the Wayne persona helped shape the characterization of Hondo Lane.

Considering its origins, why did L'Amour want Hondo to be considered his first book? In part, Hondo offered a clear starting point for his career as a novelist. Since Westward the Tide was unavailable in the U.S., why mention it? L'Amour was a master at promotion, and he recognized the opportunities afforded by the media event of a new John Wayne movie. Hondo may not explain how the west was won, but it does suggest how it was marketed. Exploring the novel’s relationship with the film can serve as a starting point for understanding how L'Amour constructed his literary persona.
At the beginning of the novel, Hondo Lane, a dispatch rider for General Crook, is riding across the southwestern desert accompanied by his dog Sam. Whites have broken the most recent treaty with the Apaches, and every tribe has sworn to drive the settlers and soldiers from the region. Hondo encounters two Apaches and although he kills both of them, he loses his horse. Continuing on foot, he comes to the ranch of Angie Lowe, which is hidden in a valley. Angie has lived on the ranch, built by her father, all her life. Her husband, Ed Lowe, hates the work, the desert, and the Apaches. He has abandoned Angie and their six-year-old son Johnny.

Afraid to let Hondo know that she is alone, Angie claims that her husband is only gone for the day. Hondo calls her a liar and points out the details which indicate the truth. Angie finds herself disturbed by his presence, and yet “Oddly, despite his strangeness, she felt more at home with him than she ever had with anyone else [. . . .] He made her feel like a woman” (19).

Hondo advises Angie to leave the ranch, but she refuses, insisting that her family has always had a good relationship with the Apaches. After taming a horse, giving advice to Johnny, and doing a few tasks around the ranch, Hondo prepares to leave. Before he does, he tells Angie that she reminds him of his Apache wife, Destarte, who is now dead. He kisses her, explaining, “Handsome woman like you, walks with her head up, ought to kiss a man before she dies” (38).

After Hondo leaves the ranch, Vittoro and his Apache tribe arrive. Vittoro gives an order to Silva to kill Angie. As Silva approaches with a knife, Johnny comes out of the house with a pistol. He shoots and knocks Silva unconscious. Impressed by Johnny’s courage, Vittoro makes him his blood brother, naming him “Small Warrior.” Eventually he will insist that Angie take a
new husband because Johnny needs a father. He tells her to choose from several of his tribe. When she refuses, saying that it's against her religion, he tells her that she must decide by the time the planting rains come.

As Hondo rides toward the army post, he comes across Company C, which has been wiped out by Apaches. He brings this news and the company guidon, or flag, to the army commander, Major Sherry. At the post, Hondo clashes several times with Ed Lowe, but he doesn't tell anyone how Lowe has abandoned his family. Instead, although no whites are supposed to leave the post, Hondo receives tacit permission from Major Sherry to do so, and he plans to return to the ranch. When he leaves, Lowe and Phalinger, a gambler, follow him, intending to rob and kill him. They attack Hondo's campsite at the same time as a group of three Apaches, but Hondo, having heard a noise, has slid from his blankets into nearby bushes. The Apaches kill Phalinger, but Ed is saved when a bullet hits a tintype of Johnny that he carries. Hondo shoots two of the Apaches, but the third gets away. As Hondo considers the situation, Ed reaches for his gun; warned by a growl from Sam, Hondo kills him first.

Continuing toward the ranch, Hondo is captured by Silva. The Apaches begin to torture him when they discover Johnny's picture. Vittoro, believing Hondo is Johnny's father, orders him released. Silva, who has been publicly insulted by Hondo, claims the right to a knife fight. Hondo is wounded further, but he wins and spares Silva's life. Vittoro then takes Hondo to the Lowe ranch and asks Angie, "Is this your man?" (121). She says he is. As the Apaches leave, Silva kills Sam.

As Hondo recovers, his relationship with Angie deepens, but he doesn't tell her the truth about Ed. He begins to teach Johnny the ways of the desert and of the Apache. At one point, they meet three Mountain Apache, and Hondo is forced to kill one. Vittoro,
coming upon the scene, approves and says, “The watcher of my brother is well chosen” (149).

A squadron from the sixth cavalry arrive at the ranch. Led by Lieutenant McKay, they are tracking Vittoro. McKay asks Hondo to serve as a guide, but Hondo refuses because he has given his word to Vittoro that he will not go with the army. One of the soldiers tries to blackmail Hondo, and Angie overhears how her husband died.

The cavalry leaves, and Hondo prepares his bag to go as well. Angie asks him to stay. As they pledge their love and discuss what to do, the cavalry returns. They were ambushed and only survived being wiped out because Vittoro was killed. With Silva as the new chief, Angie and Johnny are no longer safe. Hondo takes charge of the squadron’s retreat. The Apaches attack again, and Hondo kills Silva. Having lost a second leader, the Apaches are disorganized, and the soldiers will be able to make it back to the fort. From there, Hondo and Angie plan to go to California.

HONDO’S THEMES

For the thirtieth anniversary edition of Hondo, L’Amour wrote a special foreword. In his first sentence, he asks, “What do we have here?” He answers the question by saying we have “a lonely man [. . . ,] a woman [. . . ,] an Apache [. . . ,] a boy” (v). These are the four pillars of the story. They provide L’Amour the framework to explore the themes that interest him: the role of the hero, the relationship between men and women, the conflicts of the frontier, and the importance of education. There is also a crucial fifth element—the desert itself, which provides a necessary setting for the novel’s drama of character.

A Lonely Man

Robert L. Gale has classified the typical L’Amour hero as someone who:
is broad-shouldered, thin-hipped, military in bearing (and often in experience), taciturn but capable of poetic utterance, and possessed of a fighter's appreciation of scenes, beasts, and women. He is always a fighter—a wild one if aroused—but he rarely throws the first punch or shoots the first bullet. He fights with fists as often as with firearms, can take enormous punishment, and retaliates with swift precision.

(99)

Hondo has all these attributes. He is a "big man, wide-shouldered" (1). He aids the U.S. Army. During the course of the novel, he wins a knifefight and a fistfight, and he kills more than half a dozen men. He speaks rarely, but when he describes Destarte, Angie says, "Why that's poetry!" (37). Like other L'Amour heroes, Hondo also has enormous patience and the ability to respond to situations quickly. He can observe motionlessly for hours, and then suddenly move faster than conscious thought. Tracked by Apaches, Hondo surveys the landscape: "Patience at such a time was more than a virtue, it was the price of survival" (2).

Hondo has mastered the skills that are valued in the west. He is a champion horse-rider, a gunfighter, and a scout. He knows the desert. He has lived with the Apaches. He has these skills, yet exactly how he acquired them is unknown. Hondo tells Angie that he is "part Indian" (27), but there is no explanation of his heritage or whether he is speaking literally or metaphorically. He has lived among the Mimbreno ands and established a ranch in California, but it's unclear when he did either. One comment hints that he may have served on the Confederate side during the Civil War. Hondo's friend, the scout Buffalo, remarks that the Lowe ranch reminds him of Hondo's place in California, "Where we stayed before we went to fight with those people up north" (161). (In "The Gift of Cochise," Ches, the character on whom Hondo is based, "had learned knife-fighting in the bayou country of Louisiana" [88],
another indication of a southern heritage.) Hondo is the quintessential stranger, a man who has a reputation but remains mysterious. Garry Wills points out, “Western heroes appear from nowhere. Their past is mysterious, their name a title or a mask” (37). Hondo Lane simply arrives at the ranch, and his name is enigmatic. It seems to be a Spanish first name with an Anglo last name. In Spanish, “Hondo” means deep, and the novel’s opening emphasizes the name’s appropriateness. His toughness is “in-grained and deep,” and he may have “wells of gentleness” that are “guarded and deep” (1). As for his Anglo name, it too is apt since it is similar to Lowe and suggests how easily Hondo takes Ed Lowe’s place. Hondo has an Apache name as well, Emberato. Thus, with Spanish, Anglo, and Native American names, he embodies the three predominant cultures of the southwest (at least, as they appeared to Anglos in 1953). He is a type of Everyman, crossing the boundaries of race.

Hondo is a “half-breed” who is not a tragic figure. Rather than being ostracized by both natives and whites, he is admired. Cawelti notes that the hero can be a complex figure “because he has internalized the conflict between savagery and civilization [. . . .] While he undertakes to protect and save the pioneers, this type of hero also senses that his own feelings and his special quality as a hero are bound up with the wilderness life” (83). Even as Hondo rides dispatch for General Crook and develops a relationship with Angie, he sees the world in Apache terms. This is precisely why both Vittoro and Major Sherry value him. Henry Nash Smith argues in Virgin Land that the paradox of western literature is that as the frontiersman—whether Daniel Boone or Natty Bumppo in the east or Buffalo Bill in the west—settles the land, he destroys the very environment in which he thrives; however, L’Amour’s heroes are different. They adapt themselves to times of change. They move adroitly from one situation to another, being
equally at home in the desert, a wickiup, a major's tent, or a ranch, and they also move smoothly through turbulent times. They may recognize and even regret the passing of an era, but they usually become leaders in the new age.

Respected by all, Hondo portrays himself as an independent individual. He prides himself on a doctrine of non-interference. He explains to Angie, “a long time ago I made me a rule: I let people do what they want to do” (38). He offers advice, and people can follow or ignore it. When Johnny asks to pet Sam even after having already been warned against it, Hondo shrugs: “you do what you want to, young one” (16). After Sam snaps at Johnny and Angie confronts Hondo, the man responds, “People learn by getting bit” (17). A philosophy of free will includes an acceptance of negative consequences. Ed Lowe claims that he’s not going to walk around Sam, who is growling in the doorway, and Hondo says, “Man should always do what he thinks he should” (71). Yet, in part, this attitude is a pose, a rhetorical tactic. After all, Hondo holds a rifle whose “muzzle was aimed at [Lowe’s] stomach and not eight feet away” (71). Lowe does not have a real choice. When Hondo learns that Johnny doesn’t know how to swim, he tells Angie, “You do what you want to, but if it was me, I’d see the kid could swim” (140). He then immediately throws the boy into the water. At the army post’s bar, he sees Pete Summervel in a card game. A teenager who has been drinking, Pete is “in no condition to play poker” (77). Hondo intervenes against the protests of other players. Regardless of his claims of non-interference, Hondo looks after others. Angie finds his voice “slow, somehow restful, and underlying his words there was understanding, compassion. There was none of this you-get-along-on-your-own-or-die feeling” (152).

Hondo’s treatment of Sam reveals the ambivalence he has toward relationships, the tension between being independent and making connections. Hondo doesn’t want Angie to feed the dog, explaining,
“Sam’s independent. He doesn’t need anybody. I want him to stay that way. It’s a good way.” When Angie notes, “but everyone needs someone,” Hondo replies, “Yes, ma’am. Too bad, isn’t it” (12). Hondo fears attachments. They are dangerous because they result in weaknesses. Hondo gets caught by the Apaches because he tries to save Sam when the dog is wounded. Throughout the book, Hondo refers to Sam either by name or by saying “the dog” or “that dog.” When Angie says, “strange dog you have,” he responds, “I don’t have him” (25). He makes it seem as if they simply travel together. L’Amour himself has said that the book “was a story of a fiercely independent man. So independent his own dog was independent, it wasn’t his dog, it was just with him [sic]” (Davidson, Lupoff, and Wolinsky 388). There are two moments which suggest that this attitude is disingenuous. After killing Lowe, Hondo “dropped to the sand, his face gray and ghastly, holding the tinfo type and his rifle and realization. And Sam came close and nudged against him, whining softly. And this time he was allowed to come close” (113). The verb “allowed” indicates that Hondo controls the relationship and has deliberately kept the dog at a distance against Sam’s desires. Independence must be taught. The second moment is when Hondo kills Silva. He “gutted the Indian as the Indian had gutted the dog” and he says, “Like my dog . . . you die!” (178). Hondo’s use of the possessive “my” in this moment of passion reveals that he thinks of Sam as his.

Angie applies the term “strange” to both Sam and Hondo, and they are compared throughout the book. “Both were untamed, both were creatures born and bred to fight, honed and tempered fine by hot winds and long desert stretches, untrusting, dangerous, yet good companions in a hard land” (11). It is not that Sam is human-like, but rather that Hondo has animalistic qualities. He is a “creature,” who is “untamed” and capable of brutality. He “guts” Silva. He fights with knives—which Cawelti points out is unusual
for a hero because it “suggests a more aggressive uncontrolled kind of violence” (88). Richard McGhee argues that by killing Sam “Silva killed something in Hondo himself. Killing the dog (symbolically) transforms Hondo from his primitive, animal wildness (of independence) into a domesticated, civilized white head of a family” (106). At the same time, Hondo's relationship with Sam shows that he is capable of making attachments. They've been traveling together for years. They've shared difficult times. When Hondo allows Sam to come close after killing Lowe, it indicates his need for comfort.

Hondo's sensitivity is seen in other ways. When asked about the name Destarte, he becomes lyrical:

You can't say it except in Mescalero. It means Morning, but that isn't what it means, either. Indian words are more than just that. They also mean the feel and the sound of the name. It means like Crack of Dawn, the first bronze light that makes the buttes stand out against the gray desert. It means the first sound you hear of a brook curling over some rocks—some trout jumping and a beaver crooning. It means the sound a stallion makes when he whistles at some mares just as the first puff of wind kicks up at daybreak. (36)

His explanation demonstrates his connection to the land. He uses imagery of nature—dawn, fish, light, rocks—to give a sense of what Destarte was like, and his language shows his depth of feeling and the “wells of gentleness” mentioned in the book's opening.

Calling the book a story of “a lonely man,” L'Amour describes Hondo as someone “hiding his loneliness behind a cloak of independence, a man as bleak as the land over which he rode, yet beneath the harshness and the necessary violence, a kind man, a just man, a man who had come to terms with the land in which he lived” (Hondo v). “Lonely” is one of L'Amour's favorite words.
There are his books *The Lonely Men* (1969), *The Lonesome Gods* (1983), *High Lonesome* (1962), and *Lonely on the Mountain* (1980). In *Hondo*, as Phalinger dies, he rolls over on his back and sees “a white cloud there, so small, so lonely, so white against the vast blue dome of morning” (111). The scout of Company C, Pete Britton, holds out the longest against the Apache attack, and when Hondo finds his body he sees, “On his hard old face there was a taunting, wolfish grin. He had defeated his ancient fears of loneliness, sickness, and poverty” (56). Loneliness is the price of independence. The very quality L'Amour's characters value causes them to be unfulfilled and empty; as a result, they wander, searching for meaning, a cause, a partner, or a place to feel a part of. As Gale puts it, “Home is the implicit far-off goal of every major L'Amour hero, just as it was the explicit end toward which wily Ulysses wandered, especially when weary and wayworn” (103).

**A Woman**

In discussing Hondo and other L'Amour heroes, Harold Keith makes the observation that “they're all desert-roving supergunmen who undergo little if any character change themselves but work such a profound change upon the main female character that she often becomes the most interesting person in the book. For example in *Hondo*, Angie's introspection, her looking within herself, especially in the first third of the story, is the best part of the book” (28). In fact, Angie does seem to be a strong character. Married to a worthless man, she tries to take care of the ranch. She refuses to be driven away. She confronts Vittoro, standing straight and attempting to negotiate. She says, “I have no wish to fight your people. Your people have your ways, I have mine. I live in peace when I am left in peace.” She even challenges him, “I did not think that the great Vittoro made war upon women!” (66). However, although she has lived on the frontier all her life, she does not know how to
properly shoot a firearm. She never leaves the ranch. She is rooted while the men circle around her. She seems, simply by the nature of her sex, to have a desire to know the latest fashions. In short, she may be strong and “interesting,” but like the male hero, she remains a “type.” As a white woman, Angie’s role is to help Hondo establish the home he seeks.

Marsden notes, “Given that Hondo is an ode to family values, it seems appropriate that the sexual tension between Angie and Hondo should develop in intensity as Hondo works at breaking a horse and tries to serve as a surrogate father for young Johnny” (“L’Amour’s Hondo” 18). It also is appropriate because there is an implicit, and in some cases explicit, connection between women and horses in westerns. Some women need to be “broke,” a sentiment that’s expressed in many L’Amour novels, such as The Daybreakers (1960) and Shalako (1962). Trace Jordan in The Burning Hills (1956) has repeated encounters with Christina, a woman he says is “all mustang” (56), and whom he tries to tame by grabbing her roughly. Hondo is a champion bronco rider, and he arrives at the ranch carrying a saddle. He will master the half-broken horse there and Angie as well. Nesbitt shows the parallel is “not entirely subtle” (“A New Look” 37) by referring to two passages. Hondo glances first at the corral where there is “a lot of horse, all right,” then at Angie’s house where he sees “a lot of woman too” (20). Hondo also thinks that Angie’s breeding is obvious: “It was like seeing a thoroughbred horse in his winter coat” (21). Furthermore, he challenges her, calling her a liar, at the same time that he works on the horse. Although the horse is wary and nervous, “the calm sureness of the man prevailed” and the man “seemed to understand just how he felt” (20). Similarly, when Hondo proves that he can smell Angie, “She felt a strange tenseness come over her, and fought it, with a sudden desperation” (27). She too, however, will become calm as the man’s presence
reassures her. In the film, there are repeated shots of Angie watching in awe as Hondo rides.

L’Amour denied his work was sexist and insisted, “a check of my books will show that I have probably written the stories of more strong women than any other writer” (Sackett Companion 20). He claimed to have “at least fifty” strong women characters. If a “woman needs a man” in his books, the reverse is equally true. Trace Jordan says, “A man can’t make it alone. Needs him a woman. These here city women, they look mighty nice but a man out here needs a woman who can walk beside him, not behind him” (The Burning Hills 82). The sexes complement one another in a partnership. This does not mean equality, however. A character in The Walking Drum observes, “We had met as equals, rarely a good thing in such matters, for the woman who wishes to be the equal of a man usually turns out to be less than a man and less than a woman. A woman is herself, which is something altogether different than a man” (qtd. in Trail of Memories 29). For L’Amour, there are male and female roles; a passage in Hondo explains, “There were things a man must face and things a man must do that no woman could understand, just as the reverse was true” (87).

Angie, the only woman in the novel, represents a life force. (Although her father is buried on the ranch, her mother is never mentioned.) When Hondo sees the ranch, it is an oasis in the desert. It is “green, lovely, and peaceful” (7-8). Angie is important, not simply because she is a woman, but because she is a mother. She is a fertility figure, and Hondo is brought to her during the planting rains. In fact, her significance as a fertility symbol accounts for one of the only times in a L’Amour novel where sex is even suggested. At one point, Hondo and Angie lie down under the trees: “It was night, and there was no sound. Or anyway, not very much” (156). They do this during the “Bermaga, the planting moon” (151).
Angie exists to create sons. When Hondo is about to be tortured and reviews his life, he thinks:

How could a man prepare himself for death with the smell of the desert in his nostrils? What he wanted was not to die, but to live, to return again to Angie . . . and to Johnny.

He had always wanted a son. But what man does not want a son? What man wishes to die and leave no man to carry on, to continue the strain, the bloodline? Who wishes to waste what he has learned? Who wishes to see it die with him? (122)

Hondo moves quickly in his thinking from Angie to Johnny. It is not romance or love that drives him, but the idea of a bloodline. Likewise, Vittoro admires Angie because she has raised a strong son, and he insists she take a husband because Johnny, who “hungered for the company of a man” (87), needs a father. Sons represent salvation for their parents. Johnny saves his mother when he shoots Silva, and once Vittoro makes him a blood brother, it is “as mother of a Chiricahua warrior” (67) that she lives in safety. Johnny’s image on the tintype saves his father, at least temporarily, when a bullet hits it, and it saves Hondo from being tortured. In a world absent of God, what gives meaning to a life are children and the continuation of the species. Ed Lowe’s rejection of his family can therefore be seen as a type of suicide. Comparing Hondo and Lowe, Marsden notes, “The contrast between the two men is not just one of courage and cowardice, it is one of concern for the hearth or its abandonment. We find in Hondo the essence of the Sackett saga—a longing for spouse and hearth and children to guarantee immortality” (“L’Amour’s Hondo” 18).

Unlike other westerns, Hondo does not force its hero to abandon the archetypal “dark” woman in order to make a home with the “fair” one. Cawelti explains these two female types:
The blonde, like Cooper’s Alice in *The Last of the Mohicans*, represents genteel, pure femininity, while the brunette, like Cora in the same novel, symbolizes a more full-blooded, passionate and spontaneous nature, often slightly tainted by a mixture of blood or a dubious past. In the contemporary Western, this feminine duality shows up in the contrast between the school marm and the dance-hall girl, or between the hero’s Mexican or Indian mistress and the WASP girl he may ultimately marry. The dark girl is a feminine embodiment of the hero’s savage, spontaneous side. She understands his deep passions, his savage code of honor, and his need to use personal violence. (76)

In *Hondo*, Angie is fair, and Destarte has hair “black as ten feet down. It shined black like those plums you find up on the Powder. You know how the wing of a crow is shiny? Black and gleaming” (37). Angie puts some blankets on the floor for Hondo saying, “It would be uncivilized to let anyone sleep outside. And after all we are civilized, aren’t we?” He hesitates then says, “I guess you could call me that” (29). She tells Johnny to watch Lieutenant McKay for “the kind of manners I want you to have” (160). Destarte, as an Apache, represents an alternative, passionate, culture. For Hondo, however, these two women of different races are fundamentally the same. Even though they look physically different, they carry themselves in a similar way. Rather than choosing to become more civilized by Angie, in one sense, he makes her more “wild.” The second time she makes a bed for him, she puts it outside, under the stars, and she does it because “A squaw would. I want to feel like a squaw woman. Feels good. Real good” (155). Furthermore, they confirm their relationship with an Indian practice of saying “Varlebena” or “forever” to one another. Whereas the western usually forces the hero to choose between the two types of
women, Hondo gets to have lives with both. Again, he represents a synthesizing figure.

Typically, white women in westerns represent a civilizing force, and most protagonists try to resist a perceived feminization. They light out for the territories like Huckleberry Finn, or like the Virginian in Owen Wister’s genre-establishing novel, they reject the woman’s pleas (and threats) to resist fighting. Examining the role of women in westerns and the absence of religion, Jane Tompkins argues that “The female, domestic, ‘sentimental’ religion of the best-selling women writers—Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, Maria Cummins, and dozens of others—whose novels spoke to the deepest beliefs and highest ideals of middle-class America, is the real antagonist of the Western” (37-38). She makes a “point-for-point contrast” between the nineteenth-century domestic novel and the twentieth-century western and concludes, “The Western answers the domestic novel. It is the antithesis of the cult of domesticity that dominated American Victorian culture. The Western hero, who seems to ride in out of nowhere, in fact comes riding in out of the nineteenth century” (39).

L’Amour does not reject the domestic novel’s emphasis on a home; rather he offers a masculine vision of it. It’s a home conceptualized on a man’s terms. When a L’Amour hero “settles down,” he does not forfeit his masculine identity. On the contrary, his presence is crucial to the establishment of a true home. Rather than fleeing from or being subsumed by a woman’s control, Hondo takes over the domestic sphere. Just as he can move between the Apache and the Anglo cultures, he moves between the desert wilderness and the comfort of the indoors. He notes that Angie is a good cook, which a woman should be, and then adds, “I’m a good cook myself” (13). He doesn’t need her skills, but she needs his to accomplish “the little things that are done by a man” (9).
Ultimately, as Nesbitt points out, the family “will find its new hearth on Hondo’s ranch rather than Angie’s” (“A New Look” 39). With its insistence that a man completes a home, *Hondo* should be considered in relation to its time of publication in post-World War II America. The 1950s, in general, represented a period when women, after making enormous advances in the public sphere, were again being relegated to the domestic one. During the war, while American men were overseas, Rosie was allowed to be a riveter. When the men returned, they wanted to take back their jobs and to insist that women exchange their overalls for aprons. Women, *Hondo* suggests, can maintain the ranch for a limited time if the men are gone, but eventually, a man must take over again if the ranch is to survive and prosper. In the absence of her father and husband, Angie “had been trying to keep [the place] up, but it was a man’s job, and she had her woman’s work and that child” (23). *Hondo* is, as Nesbitt puts it, “a celebration of the power of the male” (“A New Look” 38). It offers a fantasy of male control and a conservative hierarchy where the man is in charge and the woman knows her place.

Marsden sees Hondo as the male principle and Angie as the female one with the home being the “omega point.” In this novel, “the end of all westward movement,” for Marsden, “is clearly hearth and home” (“Louis L’Amour” 31). The book ends with those two words: Hondo watches the remaining soldiers “riding proudly to the parade ground” and then thinks about the future which includes a quiet place with “a woman who would be there with him, in that house, before that hearth” (149). The family does not have to be rooted in one place. Significantly, Hondo, Angie, and Johnny are headed west at the book’s end. The home can be mobile. Nor is it the equivalent of “civilization” or white society. In fact, it can be at odds with that society. As Lee Clark Mitchell notes, “In L’Amour’s conservative vision, a larger society only interferes with
the natural relationships that bind the nuclear family together” (199). Angie and Hondo have broken the traditional moral code. She loves the man who killed her husband. Consequently, she wants to go to California in the hopes that it is “too far for gossip to travel” (171). In this sense, society is something to be fled, even for a woman. In L'Amour's books, the stereotypical representatives of “civilization,” such as school-teachers, sheriffs, and shop-keepers, are figures of scorn. They can be weak, corrupt, and intolerant. The family, according to Marsden, is the key social unit. It is “the protector of the law, moral standards, and social order. Without the family, there is only the wilderness and its counterpart, savagery, a truth of which the Indians in L'Amour's fiction are keenly aware” (“The Concept of Family” 21). Indeed, Native Americans’ concern with family is, in part, responsible for L'Amour’s overall positive portrayal of them.

An Apache

Hondo acts as a spokesman for Apache culture. Even after being captured, when he knows that a brutal end awaits him, he thinks,

And these people—how could he blame them? They were the People. That was what their name meant. They had believed they were meant to be the People. Yet when the first Americans came they had greeted them with friendship, and had been met with war. (123)

The Apaches fight, but it is in vain because of “the white men endlessly coming” (123). In Hondo white migration is not a sign of manifest destiny, but rather one type of species crowding out another. L'Amour offers a basic social Darwinism. In an interview, he says,

The strong will survive and the weak will not. Now more weak are surviving because the strong are protecting them
and making law as to help them. In many ways that is the kind, gentle, decent thing to do. But it is not really the best thing for our people, our race, our species on earth, because people are staying alive who really shouldn’t be, and wouldn’t be if it was left up to nature. (Dye 356)

On a frontier this means that one race will overcome another. Barnabas Sackett in Sackett’s Land (1974) appreciates Native Americans, finding them “of shrewd intelligence, quick to detect the false, quick to appreciate quality, quick to resent contempt, and to appreciate” (152). Nevertheless, he believes, “when two peoples come together that one which is most efficient will survive, and the other will absorb or vanish” (168). The whites come endlessly and cannot be eradicated. As the title of L’Amour’s first novel puts it, they are a tide, a sea force. In Hondo, some buildings of the white community are “places more suited to the residence of scattered and indifferent centipedes, scorpions, or occasional tarantulas than of human beings” (68). Like insects, whites are a breeding species that cannot be stopped. Powder-Face in Treasure Mountain (1972) explains, “We burned them out, we killed them, we drove off their horses, and we rode away. When we came back, others were there as if grown from the ground—and others, and others, and others” (130). (This reverses the usual visual representations in films of the time. Indian attacks are staged as swarmings whereas the whites fight in orderly lines or circles.)

In comparison to the Apaches, many of the whites in Hondo are portrayed negatively. The whites have broken the treaty. Since the story emphasizes honesty as a primary virtue, this is unforgivable. Even Lieutenant McKay, a gentleman and graduate of West Point, doesn’t feel a white man’s word needs to be kept when given to a savage. When Angie tells Vittoro, “I hope someday someone befriends your sons,” he answers, “My sons are dead—in a white
man’s prison” (67). The implication is that he has shown more concern for a white child than has been shown for his. Although Silva is cruel, Lowe, Phalinger, and Lennie Sproul are despicable. And in another indication of humanity, Apache characters are the only ones who laugh.

L’Amour was proud of the way he represented Native Americans. In Hondo, he believed that he had created an Apache who was “no poor, pathetic red man being put upon by whites, but a fierce warrior, a veteran of many battles, asking favors of no man” (v). John Wayne, when accused of being a racist and anti-Indian, cited the film Hondo as an example of how he had “never shown the Indians on the screen as anything but courageous and with great human dignity” (qtd. in Levy 290).

Throughout his work, L’Amour emphasizes that Native American cultures are different from, rather than inferior to, Anglo-American culture. William Tell Sackett says, “Folks talk about human nature, but what they mean is not human nature, but the way they are brought up.” He notes:

The Indian, before the white man took up the West, was physically cleaner than the white man. He bathed often, and it wasn’t until white man’s liquor and poverty caught up with him that he lost the old ways. But the Indian warrior would have been ashamed of all the milk-sop talk about the poor Indian. He was strong, he was proud, and he was able to handle his own problems. (Sackett 48-49)

William Tell’s ancestor Barnabas Sackett asks, “What is a savage? . . . It is another way of life” (Sackett’s Land 84). In this regard L’Amour’s work alters the concept of the frontier. Frederick Jackson Turner, the seminal historian, defines the frontier as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (qtd. in Smith 251). This conception dominates most pre-1950s westerns. In
contrast, for L'Amour, the frontier is a border conflict between two cultures. This is why L'Amour objected to the term “Western.” He insisted, “I am a writer of the frontier, not only in the West but elsewhere. Wherever there is a frontier, I am interested; wherever there is a frontier, I am concerned” (Education 136). It is also why L'Amour’s technique can be considered, in a sense, Plutarchian. He offers comparisons of lives across cultures and across time. In his foreword to Hondo, L'Amour makes a point of comparing Native Americans to classical figures.

However, L'Amour has also been criticized for his portrayals of Native Americans. He often presents “Indian” culture as monolithic, and many of his comments contain contradictions. For example, L'Amour made statements like, “The Indian was a primitive, a savage: bravery was the basis of his thinking [. . . .] They had no conception of mercy according to our standards. It was an accepted part of their life to torture. Many of the white men of the time had no better standards than the Indian” (Bannon 319). The statement suggests that whites should have had “better standards,” and Indians were inferior creatures, after all.

In L'Amour’s work, numerous anonymous Apaches are killed. Sensational aspects of tribal cultures, such as torture, are emphasized. Although Hondo seems to be a half-breed, certain relationships between the races are not a serious option. When Vittoro wants Angie to take a member of his tribe, she says, “an Apache woman for an Apache man—a white woman for a white man” (84). This reasoning is never questioned. Hondo contains the conservative and racist stance of most westerns that a white man can have an Indian wife, but a white woman cannot have an Indian husband. (Even though Angie doesn’t want to be an actual squaw with one of Vittoro’s men, she wants to feel like one with Hondo.) Hondo himself thinks, “he had never lived with a woman. It was one thing with a squaw” (74). Furthermore, Jon Tuska argues of
L’Amour’s westerns, “[W]hite men educated by Indians—such as the character played by John Wayne in Hondo or that played by Rory Calhoun in Apache Territory, both films based on novels by Louis L’Amour—are always shown to excel their teacher—ergo: an Indian’s never a match for a well-trained white man” (The American West 253).

Even though, as Gale notes, L’Amour may be considered “ultra-conservative, anathema to modern revisionists” (114), since the beginning of his career, he has used Native Americans as spokespeople to criticize white culture. In Westward the Tide, a character insists:

[T]he white man is not fitted to survive, for he knows not content. He knows not peace. [. . .] The Indian fought, but his battles were short and soon over, and the Indian returned to this hunting and his lodge and his squaw. But the white man lives in violence. Where he goes there is fury, and he will die, tearing at the agony of his wounds, crushed and bloody and wondering because in all his hurry and his doing he has never understood his world nor what he does. (156)

In Hondo, the hero credits his experience with the Apaches for his knowledge, his hatred of lying, and his generosity. Native American culture rather than the white one exemplifies desirable virtues. Counteracting the images of the “pathetic red man,” L’Amour errs at times into stereotypes of “noble brave warriors,” but he also provides portrayals of Native Americans who laugh, who raise families, who have desires and fears. When asked if he liked living with the Apaches, Hondo responds that they don’t have any locks: “Nobody steals. The old women with no men to provide for them . . . the chiefs drop half their kill at the old women’s lodge before they take the rest home to feed their women and kids. Nothing selfish about an Apache. Yeah, I liked living with them” (152).
A Boy

Vittoro is pleased that Hondo is Angie's man because he can teach Johnny the ways of the Apache. Every time Hondo talks to Johnny he imparts information. He tells him how to keep an ax edge sharp, how to fish, the value of different desert plants, how to track animals. He teaches him how to swim, what clothes to wear, how to make a good fire, and how to find water. Each interaction is a mini-lecture. This would become a trademark of L'Amour's. His books are packed with historical and geographical facts, details about botany, and information about subjects ranging from wine to weather. As one critic puts it, L'Amour acts as "the poor man's encyclopedist of the far West" (Gale 98). As Hondo educates Johnny, L'Amour is educating the reader. L'Amour once said, "I see myself as a kind of funnel through which a lot of knowledge is flowing to other people" (Marsden, "Louis L'Amour" 264). Although L'Amour mocked formal schooling, he presents himself as a teacher and all his books emphasize the importance of education. Some characters start off almost illiterate, like William Tell Sackett, but in the course of their travels, they read and learn. Others, like Will Reilly and Hondo, teach their surrogate sons.

L'Amour's work insists on the importance of knowledge in its various forms: of books, of woods, of people. Every event, situation, and detail offers a chance to learn something. As he relates to Major Sherry what happened to Company C, "Hondo described the action briefly [. . .]. It was a clear, accurate picture and had its value. Every battle was a lesson; in each there was something to be learned" (73). In Reilly’s Luck (1970), Will Reilly tells Val, the boy he raises, "Train your memory . . . and observe. Learn to know and recall every card that has been played, and who played it; but above all, notice people, places, things" (21). It is advice that is no different from that given by Henry James: Be one of those upon whom nothing is lost. Always connect. As Angie says to Hondo,
“you notice everything” (152). His attention to the world entails a sharpening of the senses.

_Hondo_ is a book of sights, sounds, and odors. Its first two sentences refer to the taste of tobacco, sun-glare, and the smell of sweat. When Hondo speaks of Destarte, he does so in terms of physical sensations—sound, sight, smell, and touch. He proves his developed sense of smell by standing next to Angie and noting that she has baked bread, cooked with pork, and bathed. Sensuality connects with sexuality when he tells her, “[Y]ou smell all over like a woman. A woman’s got a different smell from a man. Not salty and sharp, but kinda soft and rich and warm” (27). There is a suggested eroticism in the comment, “I could find you in the dark, Mrs. Lowe” (27). Later, he remarks on her clean hands and facial expressions. Hondo’s sharpened sensitivity suggests his animal-like nature, and it shows how people can develop their capacity to be attuned to the natural world.

Observation is matter of survival. Hondo tells Angie, “Good way to lose your hair, not noticing things” (155). At one point, he notices how “a small bird started to land in a clump of brush, then veered away” (4), and he realizes that the action signified someone was hiding there. To be aware of animals and plants is to have a map of relationships. It can tell a person where danger and safety are. As Hondo explains to Johnny, the flight of a bee can tell you where water is and consequently save your life. L’Amour characters survive because suspicious details or actions put them on their guard and because they constantly take note of their surroundings. A character in _Comstock Lode_ (1981) counsels, “Study your own room, your own house, your own neighborhood as if it were a battleground. Learn how to use it for defense, for escape, for counterattack” (177).

Observation is also a philosophy of life. When the protagonist of _Flint_ (1960) believes that he has terminal cancer, he thinks about
all the tastes and sights and sounds that he loves: “Life, he de-
cided, was never a question of accumulating material things, nor
in the struggle for reputation, but in the widening and deepening
of perception, increasing the sensitivity of the faculties, of an
awareness of the world in which one lives” (154). Similarly, in
Hondo, when Phalinger has a premonition that he is going to die,
he suddenly realizes how “he loved life and loved it dearly, and in
that awful moment of realization he saw in the clear, sharp beauty
of the morning what wasted years he had left behind” (110). He
then experiences a rush of sensations:

Phalinger heard a bird call. He heard the soft fall of horse’s
hoofs. A leaf brushed his face, and off across the far hills
there were low clouds. The very canyons, moraines, and
hanging valleys showed sharply clear in the bright air. He
liked the feel of the horse moving under him, liked the smell
of it. He liked the smell of sage, and of crushed cedar . . .
Why had he waited so long to realize this? (110-11)

Phalinger dies, as do a hundred others. Hondo is a novel perme-
ated by death. The death of the father hangs over the ranch where
he is buried. As his body deteriorates in his grave, so does the
ranch he built. C Company is wiped out. Lieutenant McKay’s
squadron is ambushed. Ed Lowe, Phalinger, Vittoro, Silva, and
dozens of Apaches die. At four different times, Hondo kills
Apaches that he meets, once in front of Johnny. According to
McKay, almost a thousand settlers have been burned out and
killed. Death is a constant, and one of the novel’s primary con-
cerns is to examine how one faces it. As part of his education,
Johnny must “count coup” on an Apache that Hondo has killed. He
must strike an enemy to demonstrate bravery and, in this case, to
show he is able to deal with death without flinching. It is “the fi-
nal measure of a man” (39).
Nesbitt argues of *Hondo*, “In this novel the highest values are to survive with honor, to pass on what one has learned, and to die well” (“Change of Purpose” 152). To die well in *Hondo*, as in most westerns, means to be one of those who are the last to fall, who have all the bullet holes in the front, and who do not show signs of fear or suffering. These are marks of manliness, and *Hondo* is a treatise on what it means to be a man. L’Amour, in his foreword, says the boy “needed a man to show him how to become a man himself” (v). (See Mitchell for a discussion of education and the anxiety about masculinity in *Hondo*, *Shane*, and *High Noon*.)

When Hondo is captured, he thinks, “If he must die, he would show them how a man should go, he would show them with contempt and insults that there burned within him a fire that could not die” (120). The ultimate courage in the face of death is not giving up or acting cowardly. Hondo tries to lie to Angie about Ed’s death, but eventually she finds out the truth. It doesn’t surprise her because “He wasn’t the type of man to die well” (169). To die well is important because it is the ultimate act. As Tompkins puts it, “To go west, as far west as you can go, west of everything, is to die” (24). There is no indication of an afterlife or spiritual comfort in *Hondo*. Tompkins argues that “Death as represented in Westerns is death under the aspect of nature, of beauty, and of some kind of spiritual transcendence” (24).

However, while a dying person may experience a heightened awareness of nature, it is not a moment of transcendence. Rather, it is a moment when a person realizes his insignificance within the larger universe. Phalinger realizes that he has wasted his life. Hondo has a similar regret. When he believes he is about to be killed he thinks, “And he, Hondo Lane, was only a small part of the much vaster picture, and it mattered not at all to that picture that he was not through living, that he left things undone, that he wanted a son, that a woman waited for him” (123). The sentiment
echoes Stephen Crane’s poem in which “A man said to the Universe: / ‘Sir I exist!’ / ‘However,’ replied the universe, / ‘The fact has not created in me / A sense of obligation.’” Ultimately, rather than offering a transcendental aesthetic, L’Amour offers a pulp fiction existentialism. The man who was fond of quoting Nietzsche and who admired Albert Camus for his work of “power, originality, and courage” (Weinberg 90) portrays a world where existence precedes essence, where the individual acts according to his own dictates, and where the dread of “loneliness” and a landscape of nothingness predominate.

A Beautiful Wasteland

L’Amour lists as the principal characters of Hondo: a man, a woman, an Apache, and a boy. He could have added a fifth: the desert. The landscape plays a critical role in Hondo. L’Amour believed his knowledge of geography was one of his strengths as a writer, and most critics agree. As Tompkins puts it, “L’Amour in particular is captivated by the rich potential of the terrain his characters move across; the single most important relationship they have is to the land. They are in constant contact with it” (78).

Hondo takes place in a desert. From the beginning, the heat is emphasized. The first sentence mentions “the sun glare,” and a few sentences later there is the simple declaration, “The day was still and hot” (1). Later in the chapter, the sentence comes again: “it was hot.” Chapter two begins, “It was hot and still in the afternoon sun” (13), and chapter three’s penultimate sentence is, “It would be very hot” (38). A harsh region of heat waves and sun glare, at one point this landscape is described as a “heat-baked nightmare of waterless, treeless land” (91). After Hondo is captured by Silva, the disparity between humans and the landscape is emphasized:
And with the afternoon the heat became a living thing. The sun hung in a wide sky and seemed to spread until all the sky was a great reflector pouring its heat upon the desert, which reflected it back. And the vast distance was a space across which moved the tiny figures of the Apaches and their captive [. . .]. (118)

Hondo is “lost” in this setting that is all heat and no orientation. *Hondo* explicitly contrasts the “heat-baked nightmare” of the desert—which elsewhere L'Amour calls a “Hell” and a “wasteland” (*The Burning Hills* 86)—with the fertility of Angie’s ranch. As John R. Milton contends, “[T]he western novel features the ancient pattern of destruction, the experience of hell, and ultimate rebirth” (18). Although Hondo doesn’t die, he comes near in his torture, and his hand is burned in the western equivalent of stigmata. In one sense, Hondo is the redeemer who will save Angie, Johnny, and the remains of the cavalry. Such Biblical typology is typical in westerns. Shane, for example, is often regarded as a Messiah figure who sacrifices himself, and protagonists are often considered American Adams. In 1923, Zane Grey’s *Wanderer of the Wasteland* reworked the Cain and Abel story. In it Adam, who believes he has killed his brother, goes to the desert. The west is a place to start over, and the desert, as Tompkins notes, can be seen as “a tabula rasa on which man can write, as if for the first time, the story he wants to live” (74). Or, to borrow from John R. Milton, it is the hell from which a redeemer-hero emerges.

Like Grey, L'Amour specifically describes the desert as a “wasteland,” and his westerns, particularly *Hondo*, can be considered wasteland texts in a literary sense. In a review of L'Amour’s work in 1977, Paul Bailey noted the connection: “Twenty years ago, L'Amour was obviously under the influence of T.S. Eliot: *The Burning Hills* [1956] contains dozens of references to ‘The Hollow Men’ and the final section of *The Waste Land*” (1037). Although
neither Bailey nor other critics pursue the implications, the popular western can be seen not only as a reaction to the sentimental novels of the nineteenth century, but as a response to the literature of "high modernism." Isolated men wander through seemingly sterile landscapes. The Burning Hills speaks of "broken lands" where "a man might lose himself in any one of a thousand canyons and might himself be lost" (2). Characters are dislocated. In L’Amour’s work, they stumble across fragments of previous eras: ancient ruins, old trails, the rusted armor of Spanish conquistadors, and drawings on caves. The mistrust of language, the search for meaning, the sense of alienation are the concerns of both modernist and popular western writers. Whereas the former develops an urban aesthetic, a poetics of the city, the latter set their characters in the country—especially the ostensibly vacant western plains and deserts. Furthermore, in contrast to Eliot, Ezra Pound, and others who engage in deliberately erudite explorations of the angst of a modern sensibility, western writers put a populist spin on the subject, with accessible language, a survivalist ethic, and plenty of action.

Taking the environment as a given, L’Amour’s protagonists are determined to survive. His books say, “yes, we live in a wasteland, and here is what you do about it.” They attempt to reinstill a sense of purpose. L’Amour’s characters are isolated. They drift and search. Hondo is disconnected from both Apache and Anglo cultures. What Hondo and other L’Amour heroes don’t suffer from is a sense of self. They know who they are. They are not conflicted. Although they may live in towns called Confusion (The Empty Land) and wander through the desert, they retain their moral compasses, and as Richard Wheeler puts it, they care “about right and wrong and [believe] in traditional virtues—loyalty, courage, and honor” (10). L’Amour said of Ernest Hemingway, “I had known people like those in The Sun Also Rises and had not found
them interesting, just a bunch of self-involved people who were coming from nowhere and for the most part going nowhere” (Education 169). In contrast, although L’Amour’s characters occupy a similar post-war atmosphere—the Civil War rather than World War I—they search for ways to connect and somewhere to go.

L’Amour’s characters do not think; they act. Modernist works often explore states of consciousness and anxieties about identity. Self-conscious characters, such as J. Alfred Prufrock, become incapable of making decisions. In contrast, when the time comes, Hondo moves without thinking: “He saw a movement of brown and his finger tightened and the rifle leaped in his hands” (3). He has so internalized his environment that as he surveys the landscape and notes where Apaches might be, “He thought none of this. Rather it was something he knew, something born of years in wild country” (2). As Tompkins puts it, “The hero doesn’t need to think or talk; he just knows. Being the hero, he is in a state of grace with respect to the truth” (52). If the western “answers” the domestic novel, it also offers an alternative to the paralysis described in most works of literary modernism.

The wasteland of L’Amour’s work is not a cause for despair. The desert only appears to be sterile. In fact it is “strangely alive. Not a dead land, but a land where all life is born with a fire, a thorn, a sting. Yet a strong land, a rich land for the man who knows it. […] One learns its way and its life, and moves with care, and never ceases to be wary, for the desert has traps and tricks for the careless” (Hondo 114). To those who work to understand it, the land can be beautiful. One evening, in Hondo,

Long streaks of red remained in the sky, and on the western edge of a cloud there was a blush of old rose. Pale yellow light lingered on the topmost leaves of the cottonwoods, and their leaves whispered in the dry way they have.
Shadows gathered beneath the trees and beneath the western shoulder of the mountain, reaching out in long fingers toward the man and woman who stood by the corral, talking. (26)

What the couple are talking about is brutal. Hondo explains to Angie how a dog can be trained to smell Indians by having a "tame" Indian beat him four or five times a day. Harshness and beauty coexist. One of Ed Lowe's great flaws, according to Angie, is that he "never saw the beauty in this country" (169); Hondo does. He appreciates the desert and embraces the wasteland rather than cursing it, and in doing so, he "was no longer afraid" (27). Similarly, Native Americans are to be respected precisely because they have learned how to live in the environment: "There was food in the desert if a man knew where to find it, and the Apaches knew" (34).

A harsh land takes harsh people to survive in it. As the opening of The Burning Hills puts it, "They were hard men bred of a hard and lonely land, men with eyes red-rimmed from sun-glare" (2). L'Amour explicitly connects people and place. He insists, "My story people live with the country, not against it [. . .] They fit themselves into the land and become a part of it. They are rocks among the rocks, dust in the dust. They are the sound of streams and the shadows of trees" (Weinberg 35).

With the people and land so intimately connected, it's not surprising to find in L'Amour's work a philosophy of environmental responsibility. In Hondo, Angie thinks about her father, who said: "We do not own the land, Angie. We hold it in trust for tomorrow. We take our living from it, but we must leave it rich for your son and for his sons and for all of those who shall follow" (63). In L'Amour's books, the heroes live with the land and act as responsible characters, and the villains plunder. Gale points out of Hondo, "the tragedy is not that one human side lost but that nature lost,
and L'Amour knew this to be true. Apacheria has not been so much conquered as simply ruined" (31).

**L'AMOUR AS STORYTELLER**

In his foreword to *Hondo*, L'Amour asks, "Did Demosthenes or Cicero ever speak with greater eloquence than Chief Joseph [...]?" (vi) He compares his subject matter to Greek and Roman classics, insisting, "I do not need to go to Thermopylae or the Plains of Marathon for heroism. I find it here on the frontier" (vi). When asked about his statement that the frontier era of the American west was the equivalent of the Homeric Bronze Age, L'Amour responded,

[T]hey mesh perfectly. [...] You could take Jim Bowie or Wild Bill Hickok or Buffalo Bill or any famous character you know about in the West and put him in the streets of Troy and he'd be perfectly at home. (Dye 362)

Furthermore, a character in *The Lonesome Gods* says, "You will find that our Homers will sing of the plains, the deserts, and the mountains. Our Trojans may appear in feathered war bonnets, but none the less noble for them. Our Achilles may be Jim Bowie or some other like him, our Ajax might be Davy Crockett or Daniel Boone" (116). Thus, not only does the west contain characters worthy of the writers of antiquity, but L'Amour, who states, "I sing of arms and men" (*Hondo* vi), considers himself a contemporary Homer. In a letter to Michael Marsden, he says, "As for myself, whatever else I may be I am a storyteller. I see myself as carrying on the story of my people just as the shanacies in Ireland and the Druids before them, and as Homer did in Greece, and many another like him" ("Remarks" 180).

This was L'Amour's favorite pose. He would insist that he was just a guy by a campfire telling tales, and Bantam incessantly
promoted him as “America’s favorite storyteller.” This persona is simultaneously modest and grandiose, suggesting an unpretentious attitude while at the same time placing L’Amour in a line of other “storytellers” such as Homer. It serves as both a literary claim and a defense. It is seemingly populist in its focus on supplying an old-fashioned good time to the audience, and therefore, it offers a justification for a career in “the most blatantly commercial end of the publishing business” (Bold 143-44). Accepting a Golden Saddleman Award from the Western Writers of America in 1981, L’Amour said, “The only people who are important to you and to me are the readers [. . . ] We have to know what they want and what they are buying” (Weinberg 256). In the world of twentieth-century publishing, the mantle of “favorite storyteller” meant commercial success even as allusions to Homer suggested lasting literary value.

John Nesbitt, however, in “Louis L’Amour—Paper Mâché Homer?” scorns L’Amour’s pose precisely because L’Amour was not working in an oral tradition, but in a written one. Nesbitt sees L’Amour’s claim as an excuse for not revising his work. L’Amour frequently claimed to write only a single draft and as a result his books have numerous mistakes. Names change unexpectedly. People forget relationships. Details are inconsistent. In The Daybreakers (1960), Don Luis allegedly doesn’t speak English, but several chapters later he apparently does. In Silver Canyon (1957), a person is ambushed by someone with a rifle, and later another person explains that the Benaras boys couldn’t have done it because “they use rifles” (53). People express uncharacteristic attitudes or perform inexplicable actions in order to advance the plot. When Angie in Hondo wants to escape, she suddenly remembers a map that her father has made of the area and she searches out her father’s things (100). Since she has lived in the area her entire life, it’s not clear why this wouldn’t have been considered a useful tool earlier. In Last Stand at Papago Wells (1957) five people are
killed but one character counts six bodies; when asked about this in an interview, L'Amour responded, smiling, “I'll have to go back and count them again” (Tuska, “A Visit” 103). Nesbitt points out that L'Amour wanted to be taken seriously, yet became annoyed when critics analyzed his writing and found it lacking. For Nesbitt, L'Amour has no Homeric depth or understanding of adult complex behavior.

Because of their formulaic plots and what Gale calls “alarming stylistic infelicities” (unnumbered preface), L'Amour's writings offer an easy target for critical contempt, or, what can be worse, critical laziness. Some readers also seem to have such preconceived ideas about either L'Amour or the western genre that they insist on elements which are not there. For example, Scott Cupp argues that “In Hondo, L'Amour created those basic Western characters who continued throughout his novels,” including “the strong-minded, hard-working, loyal and dedicated woman who stood by her man and never regretted the life she might have had” (280). This is a strange statement considering that Angie's husband was Ed Lowe, and it isn't clear what alternative life was available. Nor is it clear that Hondo chose the culture “he most enjoyed” (280). In a similar fashion, Randy Roberts and James S. Olson say, “Hondo can do nothing about the cruel landscape, but he can do something, and does, about renegade Apaches, incompetent soldiers, vulnerable women and children, and irresponsible husbands and fathers [. . . .] He also battles Apache warriors to preserve a place for civilization in the wilderness” (405). This discussion badly misinterprets the narrative. As savage as Silva may be, he isn't a “renegade Apache.” Nor are any of the other Native Americans that Hondo encounters, especially the disciplined Vittoro. The soldiers are not incompetent, although Lieutenant McKay is young and inexperienced. Lane does not actually mean to kill Lowe, and he is hardly acting to preserve “civilization.”
Such observations offer more insight into the critics’ assumptions than the book.

Nesbitt insists, “Louis L’Amour is the Zane Grey of his age, but not the Homer” (“Louis L’Amour” 47). It is a reasonable comparison. Both authors were the most popular writers of western novels in their times, and their work contains numerous similarities, including repetitive plots, a lack of psychological depth, insistence on classical allusions, and a focus on masculine behavior. It is also a comparison which certainly would have annoyed L’Amour. Although he grew up reading Grey and similar authors, he attempted to distinguish himself from such narratives. When discussing how he would interview “old gunfighters and outlaws,” he said, “I heard that when Zane Grey traveled the West he always ‘made his own campfire,’ kept his distance. I wasn’t like that, I was one of them” (Jackson 166). L’Amour insisted that his work offered an alternative to pulp fiction clichés. In his novels, characters often have unrealistic expectations because of books they have read. In The Man from Skibbereen (1973), Barda McClean convinces Crispin Mayo to ride off impulsively after the bad men who have kidnapped her father. She is then surprised that they have nothing to eat or drink. Mayo chastises her that they do not live in a book: “Nobody seems to eat much in the stories, and when they do, they just happen on meals when they need them” (32-33). She wants him to attack a gang even though they are outnumbered sixteen to two because she “has read stories” where this is done. In contrast, L’Amour insisted that he portrayed an “authentic West.”

The numerous mistakes in his work are striking, precisely because of L’Amour’s repeated emphasis on his credibility. He insisted, “In writing my stories I try to present as accurate a background as possible. The stories may be fiction, the settings are not” (The Sackett Companion 239). For decades, the author’s note
of his books claimed, “When I write about a spring, that spring is there, and the water is good to drink.” Once, showing an interviewer his extensive collection of maps, he said, “When I say there is a rock in the road in one of my books, my readers know that if they go to that spot and look they’ll find that rock” (Tuska, “A Visit” 103). Many editions of his books come with maps as well, as if to say: *this is where the story happened.* In a letter criticizing a review of his novel *Shalako*, L’Amour insisted, “The Apache raid and the resulting army maneuvers as related in my story are factual. The names of the officers, the Indians and all the places are factual. Even the Apache called the Quick-Killer was a real warrior, and known to be as I have written of him. The locale of the story is correct down to the finest point” (Weinberg 305). Thus, even as he presents mythical heroes, Ulysses-type characters, he insists on their authenticity. As Gale notes about *The Sackett Companion* (1988), “L’Amour coquettishly mixes remarks about the doings of his Sackett characters with various historical items, as though his Sacketts were as true as Pikes Peak [sic]” (75). L’Amour wants to be considered both a storyteller and a documentarian.

L’Amour’s style also asserts his authority. He uses simple declarative sentences, such as “The day was hot.” There are few long introductory or subordinate clauses, and compound sentences are constructed simply by using “and.” The majority of the sentences are short and consist of a subject/verb sequence: “He listened to their movement. They did not talk. He heard the rustle of the horses through the coarse growth, an occasional click of hoof on stone. And then they were gone” (7). It is a stripped-down language which conveys the essential information, and, in doing so, it has the effect of making each sentence seem like a fact.

In *Selling the Wild West*, Christine Bold argues that L’Amour’s simultaneous emphasis on authenticity and his disparagement of
other writers represents L'Amour's attempt to clear out a literary space for himself. Even as he packs his books with facts, references, and characters, he "just as quickly empties them out with sweeping descriptions which rub the scene clean of all humans, near the start of every book" (151). Bold points out the emphasis on "nothing" that occurs in *Hondo*. In the opening where "nothing moved," the emptiness of the land is asserted. Similarly, L'Amour's novels often end with the characters leaving the scene. Bold argues that this is a strategy to deal with the anxiety of so many other westerns having come before L'Amour's and with the repetitive nature of his own novels. In a crowded field, he must establish himself, and, with each book, he starts anew.

L'Amour countered criticism about his repetitiveness by insisting that there are only a small number of plots. At times, he put the figure as low as seven and at other times as high as 36. These plots, according to L'Amour, are used by all writers, including himself, Dickens, Shakespeare, and Victor Hugo. He makes this point in *Hondo* when Hondo tells Lieutenant McKay that the Indians have a story "about a hunter who chased a puma until he caught him. Then it was the other way around" (157). McKay notes that the story was told in ancient Rome and is "world-wide." The exchange demonstrates the universal nature of stories, and, more specifically, it again connects the stories of the west to those of classical Rome. It also represents another aspect of storytelling. As the rhetorician Horace insisted, stories should delight and instruct. In addition to presenting himself as "a troubadour, a village taleteller, the man in the shadows of the campfire" (Author's Note, *Hondo*), L'Amour sees himself as an educator and moralist. In this respect, it is not Homer who is his model, but Plutarch.

Besides the story of Ulysses, L'Amour repeatedly refers to *Plutarch's Lives*, the book Ralph Waldo Emerson called "a Bible for heroes" (xxi). His characters read and reread it. In *To Tame a
Land (1955), the narrator is given the book as a youth and told to read it five times. L’Amour insisted of Plutarch that “more great men have read his Lives than any other book, except possibly the Bible,” and he believed Plutarch had “a sophisticated, urbane mind dealing with aspects of leadership” (Education 100). He prided himself on the fact that his works had led his audience to the Greek writer. Plutarch deliberately wrote biographies to give moral instructions. This is L’Amour’s life-long work.

Comments regarding the two writers sound remarkably similar. Describing Plutarch as “a moralist rather than a historian,” Arthur Clough argues that Plutarch’s “interest is less for politics and the changes of empires, and much more for personal character and individual actions and motives to action—duty performed and rewarded; arrogance chastised; hasty anger corrected; humanity, fair dealing, and generosity triumphing in the visible, or relying on the invisible world” (xxviii). This could be a description of Hondo itself. L’Amour does not give details of the treaty or supply the backgrounds of characters and relationships; rather he focuses on how an individual succeeds or fails in the demonstration of virtues. Both writers are admired for their anecdotal stories and details. The statement, “Much has been said of [his] inaccuracy; and it cannot be denied that he is careless about numbers, and occasionally contradicts his own statements” (Clough xxix) could appear in any assessment of L’Amour’s work; it was said about Plutarch. James Atlas notes of the Greek writer, “He didn’t believe in character development; his subjects were static not evolving” (Clough xiv); whereas Harold Keith says, “An arresting facet of L’Amour’s technique is that his heroes bypass the principle that to be interesting the protagonist must undergo some gradual character change, either growth or deterioration [. . .]” (28). This is a common observation about L’Amour’s characters. (See for example Gale 96, or Weinberg 10.) For L’Amour psychological development
was not the aim. His two-dimensional static characters preclude individual psychology. In fact, his protagonists all sound the same, thereby demonstrating the universal nature of the hero. He portrays an Everyman for an Everyage.

**HOW CHES BECAME HONDO**

In addition to insisting for most of his career that *Hondo* was his first novel, L'Amour suggested that the film was made from it. As both Tuska and Marsden have shown, this is not true. The film was based on the short story “The Gift of Cochise.” The novel came afterward. Although various sources and interviews give different information, Beau L'Amour states, “The book *Hondo* was taken from the screenplay” (L'Amour web site). The confusion about the sequence of works is understandable considering the cover of the book. Most editions contain the Wayne quotation: “Best Western Novel I have ever read.” The back cover of the first edition contains an additional statement, “When I read Louis L'Amour’s exciting novel I knew I had to play Hondo Lane in a motion picture.” According to Tuska, these statements were standard publicity tactics. Tuska explains, “[L'Amour] got the Wayne-Fellows group to agree to let him novelize James Edward Grant's screenplay and publish it under his own name, as if it were his story, and he even got Wayne to allow himself to be quoted ...” ("Hondo" 285).

L'Amour did more than simply turn the screenplay into prose. Although he kept the plot and characters, he added key scenes, cut speeches, and shifted dialogue. Thus, there is the short story, the screenplay written by Grant, and the book, or to consider the sequence another way, there is L'Amour's work, Grant's revision of it, and then L'Amour's reworking of Grant.

“The Gift of Cochise” tells a significantly different story than either version of *Hondo*. In the short story, Angie Lowe raises her
two children, a daughter and a son, on a ranch established by her husband Ed Lowe. She is alone because Ed, "an amiable soul, given to whittling and idle talk" (80), has gone to town and not come back. Cochise's warriors have attacked the ranch, but she has fought them off so determinedly that Cochise himself comes to see her. Impressed by her courage, he insists that her husband is dead, then asks if her son can shoot. When Jimmy shoots the bud off a cactus, Cochise says, "My people will trouble you no longer. You are the mother of a strong son" (78). He even returns the ranch's stolen ponies, and the tribe begins to leave antelope at the doorstep. At one point, Cochise suggests that Angie "join my people. Take Apache for man," but he doesn't press the issue.

In town, Ed intervenes in a dispute involving Ches Lane. Ches has found himself cornered by three brothers seeking revenge for an earlier fight. Ed takes Ches's side and is killed. Subsequently, Ches begins to search for Ed's widow and children. He crisscrosses the desert until all the Apaches in the area are both hunting him and curious about what he seeks. They come to respect him because of his desert skills: "Even as they tried to kill this man, they loved him, for he was one of their own" (84).

Ches is captured, and the Apaches make plans to torture him. He convinces them to let him fight someone with knives instead. When he wins and spares his opponent's life, Cochise takes him to Angie, dumps him on the ground, and says, "No take Apache man, you take white man. This man good for hunt, good for fight. He strong warrior. You take 'em" (91). It is the first time that Angie has seen Ches. She takes him in, recognizing that the Apaches will kill him if she doesn't. The story ends with a hint at the relationship to come. Angie and Ches watch a sunset, and he says, "A man could get to like it here" (93).

Missing from the story are the cavalry, the treaty, and any "evil" men. There is no Silva or Phalinger. Lowe is not bad, but lazy,
and he dies saving Ches rather than being killed by him. Ches is not “part Indian” and has never had an Apache wife, although he does say “I’ve lived among you” in reference to his months in the desert. When the war party captures him, “several of the young warriors pushed forward, talking excitedly and waving their arms. Ches Lane understood none of it” (88). He talks to Cochise in Spanish.

The different emphasis of “The Gift of Cochise” is suggested in the title. Ches, the man who would become Hondo, has been captured and is a piece of property. He is the gift to be given to Angie the way they have given her antelope meat. Although admirably skilled in the ways of the desert, Ches is not a western superhero.

The story opens with the focus on Angie, who is much more knowledgeable about guns than in the novel. A “certain shot” with a rifle, she drives the Apaches off three times, killing seven of them and wounding three. She rides and knows the region. She even chooses the spot where the ranch will be built. Significantly, unlike Hondo, “The Gift of Cochise” contains other women. Angie has a daughter, and there is an exchange with an Indian girl whom Angie gives a ribbon. Angie is unequivocally a strong character.

It is not surprising that the story interested Wayne-Fellows Productions. The figure of Cochise had been prominent in several recent films, including John Ford’s Fort Apache (1947) which starred Wayne, The Battle at Apache Pass (1952), and The Conquest of Cochise (1953). Most importantly, the film Broken Arrow, starring James Stewart, had been released in 1950. The story of a relationship between a white soldier and an Apache woman, it signaled a major shift in the way westerns depicted Native Americans. According to Mitchell, “[A]lmost single-handedly, Broken Arrow was responsible for transforming cinematic attitudes toward the Indian” (10). L’Amour, who acknowledged that
he studied the market, would have noticed such trends; Wayne and Grant would have as well. In fact, Wayne had already played several characters who respected Native Americans. In Raoul Walsh’s *The Big Trail* (1930), Breck Coleman, played by Wayne, says of the Indians, “They taught me all I know about the woods. They taught me how to follow a trail by watching the leaves, how to cut your mark on a tree so you won’t get lost [. . .]” (Wills 50). In *Fort Apache*, Wayne’s character, Captain Kirby York, confronts Colonel Owen Thursday, played by Henry Fonda, in an exchange similar to that between Hondo and Lieutentant McKay. After finding out that Thursday has tricked the chief, York says, “I gave my word to Cochise. No man is going to make a liar out of me, sir.” Thursday responds, “Your word to a breech-clouted savage! An illiterate, uncivilized murderer and treaty-breaker! There is no question of honor, sir, between an American officer and Cochise.” York disagrees, “There is to me, sir.” Both McKay and Thursday have the same stiff posture and the same kepi with a white kerchief draped on the back of the neck. Furthermore, in *Fort Apache*, Cochise can “outgeneral” the cavalry much as Vittoro does in *Hondo*, and both are compared to Napoleon.

For reasons that are unclear, Grant changes Cochise’s name to Vittoro and Ches’s to Hondo. Perhaps he was inspired by Ches’s knowledge of Spanish or by places, such as the Arroyo Hondo, the Rio Hondo, or the Texas and New Mexico towns of Hondo, thus tying the character even more firmly to the land. Ironically, L’Amour did not name one of his most famous characters. Grant made significant additions to the story, including giving Hondo an Apache heritage, partnering him with Sam (thus giving him a sidekick whose death evokes audience sympathy), and placing the action in the middle of an Apache uprising. He also made a significant deletion. Angie’s daughter disappears. Consequently, the story becomes one about fathers and sons. Since it is not Ed Lowe who built the
ranch, but Angie’s father, the issue of inheritance, both literally and culturally, becomes foregrounded as well.

The beginning of the film focuses on Hondo rather than Angie. In the opening shot a figure walks out of rocks. The screen is divided into three parts: the cloudy blue sky, the rocks which contain a small, almost imperceptible figure, and a pond in which the rocks and figure are mirrored. There is a shot of a boy watching, and then the camera returns to the walking figure. In seconds, the film’s concerns have been established. It will concentrate on the relationship between man and boy, and the man is a force emerging from nature. It is as if he is one of the four elements: sky, earth, water, Hondo.

Hondo’s character is strengthened at the expense of Angie’s. Throughout the film, she follows Hondo around as he does tasks. Whereas in the short story she has held off attacks by Cochise's warriors, in the film when she tries to shoot Hondo she doesn’t realize the gun doesn’t have a bullet in the chamber. He instructs her on how to use it. When he arrives, she brings out a gun for safety, then places it under a cloth and walks yards away from it. In contrast, Hondo approaches with his rifle unsheathed and ready. Although he initially introduces himself saying, “My name’s Lane,” and Hondo Lane is someone she has “heard of,” she is shocked later to realize his identity. For a frontier woman, her survival instincts are not as honed as one would expect. She keeps insisting that she has “nothing to be worried about” even when she hears the Apaches are on the warpath, and in trying to negotiate with Vittoro, she is almost inarticulate. It is up to the son, Johnny, to say, “I ain’t afraid of you” and stand up to Vittoro.

The film and the book, unlike the short story, emphasize Hondo’s honesty. He is a straightforward man who “possessed no qualities of the hypocrite. He was a man whose likes and dislikes were obvious” (163). He came to value honesty when living with the
Apaches: “Indians hate a lie. I got to feel the same way” (154). In the film, when Hondo compares Angie to Destarte, he admits, “You don’t look anything like her.” Angie responds, “I’m fully aware that I’m a homely woman, Mr. Lane.” Embarrassed, Wayne’s Hondo says, “I didn’t mean that. I got a bad habit of telling the truth. But being pretty isn’t much.” Although Hondo would like the issue of honesty to be simple, it is not. He acknowledges, “I guess there’s sometimes when a man has got to lie if it makes it easier for someone” (154). He tries to make it easier for Angie by lying about how her husband dies. Furthermore, he is saved precisely because Angie lies to Vittoro and claims that he is her husband.

The film suggests the sexes have different attitudes about honesty. When Hondo is going to tell Johnny the truth about how his father died, Angie stops him. She says, “You and your silly ideals. You think truth is the most important thing.” Hondo, taken aback, replies, “It’s the measure of a man.” Then Angie gives her most emotional speech of the film, saying, “Well, not for a woman. A man can afford to have noble sentiments and poses. But a woman only has the man she marries. That’s her truth. And if he’s no good, that’s still her truth.” She lists Ed’s faults, including his drunkenness, cowardice, and unfaithfulness, and concludes, “And that’s your fine truth for you. Could I bring Johnny up on that?” Extolling Lane’s qualities of goodness, she says, “Now with your vanity you want to spoil Johnny’s chances and mine.” Her speech simultaneously praises Wayne/Hondo and insists that he compromise himself. In part, it recognizes the way the sexes must negotiate their different circumstances. A woman cannot afford the luxury of a simplistic black-and-white morality. She does not have the freedom or the power. Furthermore, Angie suggests that Hondo’s valorization of honesty is a pose. However, her position also makes it clear that women must define themselves by their relationship with men.
L’Amour cut Angie’s speech from the novel perhaps because he felt that it weakened Angie’s character even further or he didn’t agree with its sentiments and the way it has Hondo seemingly acquiesce. Calling the film a “tale of irony,” Richard McGhee points out that at the end “Hondo learns to lie, to live with lies and to be a lie himself” (101). At the end, “Apaches, with their good ways, are disappearing, and Hondo must take his new family to another place to keep its secrets secure” (101). L’Amour made other changes as well. Whereas in the film, Angie reminds Hondo of Destarte because “some people you can trust,” in the book, where Angie is “a beautiful woman,” it is because of the way she holds herself. And in the key scene with McKay, it is Angie, not Hondo, who corrects the lieutenant about the morality of keeping one’s word to an Apache. McKay doesn’t believe that a word “given to an Indian desperado” needs to be kept. In the novel, Angie chastises the lieutenant, pointing out that “as an officer and a gentleman surely you must agree that one’s word given to anyone is binding” (166). It’s clear that she shares the same fundamental values as Hondo. In the film, Wayne/Hondo says, “Mister, when I give my word I keep it.” He alone is the moral standard-bearer.

The scene in the film where Hondo intends to tell Johnny about killing his father has another significant element, one L’Amour chose not to put in the book. In Grant’s version, as Hondo talks to Johnny, the boy sticks himself with a fishhook. Hondo gives him a piece of wood to put between his teeth, teaching him how Indian boys deal with pain, then he begins to suck the blood from the finger. The scene parallels an earlier one in which Vittoro cut Johnny’s finger to make him a blood brother. Here, Lane literally and metaphorically removes the blood. He is replacing not only Ed but Vittoro as the father figure. By the end of the film, Johnny will have renounced his ties with the chief. As the cavalry is at-
tacked, he turns to Angie and says, “I don’t want to be Apache, Mommy.”

Marsden believes that Grant’s “most significant addition” to the narrative was “a deepened respect for the Apache culture which existed in the short story in nascent form” (“Louis L’Amour’s Hondo” 17). When Angie and Hondo talk in the film, they note that Indians place great value on male offspring and on “dying well.” The values of the Apaches are the values of the western itself. Vittoro in particular is portrayed positively. He wraps Hondo’s burned hand in a bandana before Hondo fights Silva. He is given a speech about bravery and courage. He has the capacity to overcome his hatred of those who killed his own sons and to “adopt” Johnny. The warriors torture Lane only to get information, not for pleasure. Lane himself is made part-Indian and explains Apache culture to Angie, Johnny, and the audience. The film’s opening credits run in stripes of red and white, visually showing Hondo’s mixed heritage.

The film’s appreciation, however, is possible only because it is elegiac. In the last scene, it’s noted that General Crook is on his way with a large force and “that will be the end of the Apache.” Wayne/Hondo remarks, “End of a way of life. Too bad. Good way.” It’s a surprising sentiment at that particular time, since only moments before they were fighting for their lives. The cavalry is in retreat after having been ambushed twice, Angie has had to flee her life-long home, and other white settlers have been killed, burnt out, or forced to retreat as well. Hondo’s “Too bad,” then, makes no sense within the context of the film’s action; it requires the retrospection of a larger historical perspective. The Apaches, as a race, are “dying well,” fighting as much as they can. As L’Amour puts it, “The Apache knew his hour was past. He knew the white men would take even his last land, but it was not in him to knuckle under. He would fight, sing his death song, and
die" (Hondo 121). Although the film may show some degree of “respect,” Johnny, the next generation, explicitly rejects Apache culture. As for the novel, a certain amount of knowledge will migrate into the white world as Hondo teaches some ways to Johnny and Angie plays at being a squaw, but this represents an assimilation and exoticization rather than a preservation. Angie “would like her son to know how to live off the country as the Apache did, yet he must remain true to his blood, true to his God, and true to his people and his country” (85).

Since all the principals involved with the development of Hondo have died, the precise amount of interaction between Grant, L’Amour, and Wayne may never be known. Marsden believes that Grant’s “dialogue is so strong that L’Amour repeated it virtually verbatim in his novelization” (“Louis L’Amour’s Hondo” 17). In some places sticking closely to the film seems to limit L’Amour. For example, in the film, a brass plate on the butt of his rifle reveals Hondo’s identity. It reads, “First Prize / Hondo Lane / Winchester Arms Company.” L’Amour places this plaque on the saddle and makes it for bronco riding, but its presence is awkward since later in the novel Hondo tells Johnny to avoid objects that can reflect: “Nobody but a fool or a tenderfoot wears bright shiny stuff on his clothes [. . . .] You can see it too far off. That bright shiny stuff is for sissies, townfolk” (143). It’s doubtful that Hondo would ride with visible metal. In fact, rodeo riding seems contrary to Hondo’s character. He tames horses because he needs them rather than for the entertainment of others. Furthermore, several times Wayne’s Hondo spins his pistol before holstering it, an action that L’Amour disdained.

In a number of places, L’Amour expands and deepens relationships. He includes an entire chapter detailing the ambush of Company C. Even though he doesn’t originate the character of Sam, he makes the parallel between Hondo and Sam explicit. He
fleshes out the interaction between Silva and Angie. In the film, the antagonism between Silva and Angie is not as pronounced. She doesn’t see Silva kill Sam. Instead, she walks out of the house to discover what he has done. In the book, she witnesses Silva deliberately ride the animal down, and suddenly, she “knew then how a man could kill” (130).

Many of L’Amour’s changes involve a more graphic depiction of violence, and the most important difference is the scene when Hondo kills Ed Lowe. In the film, after Hondo shoots, he looks at his rifle, then hurls it away in frustration. In the novel, Hondo “dropped to the sand, his face gray and ghastly, holding the tinfoil type and his rifle and realization” (113). Notably, he keeps the weapon with him; it is as much a part of him as his “realization.” Grant’s scene suggests a Shane-type renunciation of violence. At the end of an earlier Grant film, Angel and the Badman (1947), Wayne’s character Quirt Evans, a gunfighter and former deputy for Wyatt Earp, gives his gun to the woman he loves. She drops it on the ground. There are no such moments in L’Amour’s work.

The film Hondo was frequently compared to Shane (1953). Both stories feature gunfighters who become surrogate fathers to young boys. Some critics speculate that the enormous success of Shane hurt both Hondo’s box office and reputation. Despite some surface similarities, however, the two stories are different. For one, they have fundamentally different attitudes toward violence. Shane is about a man who tries to put his guns down. An elegy for a passing era, it can even be considered an anti-western. The homesteaders are clearly in the right; Joe Starret, the leader of the “sod-busters,” is an admirable man and a strong fighter; and the cowboys are negative characters. Even though Shane says that guns are simply a tool, Shane makes a strong anti-gun statement. They may have been necessary to settle the land, but their time has passed. Furthermore, Shane insists that once you begin to use
guns, you cannot stop. L'Amour's version of *Hondo* adopts no such viewpoint. It never questions the value of guns. In his foreword, he uses a favorite phrase, “necessary violence,” and in his promotional photographs, he was often photographed with a gun even when standing by his work desk. Guns are symbols of manhood. In L'Amour's *The First Fast Draw* (1959), Cullen Baker explains to Katie that his guns are “as necessary to me as hairpins to you, or the ring on your finger” (84).

L'Amour offered a number of explanations for the violence in his work. He claimed that reading about violence could act as a way to sublimate actual violence. He insisted that it was a fundamental part of both storytelling and history. Pointing out that the Bible, Shakespeare, and the daily newspaper contain large amounts of violence, he said, “We forget the many generations that have grown up on stories of violence. The bloodiest of all, perhaps, were the so-called fairy tales, but I would have missed none of them and doubt if I did, yet I see little difference between Jack killing a fable giant and Wyatt Earp shooting it out with an outlaw” (*Education* 84). As for his own stories, he insisted, “There is no violence for the sake of violence. I tell it as it happened and my books are thoroughly grounded in history” (85). Thus, as with his adoption of the mantle of Homer, he simultaneously insists that his works are mythic and also historically true.

Post-World War II stories, both *Shane* and *Hondo* ask, “After an era of violence, is there a time to lay down one’s guns?” L’Amour answers no. The war itself may have changed his viewpoint. When it began, L’Amour in a series of letters to Rob Wagner’s *Script* asked, “[. . .] may it not be wrong to fight at all? Can violence, even for fun, be right?” (Weinberg 63) He stated in 1940, “War is never necessary and whenever a nation declares war its statesmen are admitting their own incompetence” (Weinberg 64). As World
War II developed, however, he found his ideas changing. In 1942, he wrote, “I am a lover of peace and believe that most wars can be avoided. Yet in a world where ambitious men and nations resort to force, soldiers have their place, as we are discovering” (68). Although Hondo contains negative portrayals of whites, none of the villains are in the army. Even the untested Lieutenant McKay, whom Hondo refers to at one point as a “little boy” (160), is praised for his actions under fire. Buffalo says that he “ain’t ashamed of him, nohow. All his bullet holes is in the front part of him,” and Hondo responds, “All them youngsters from West Point is like that” (173). He says that the young ones learn or die, but “I never saw one of them I had to be ashamed of” (173). Writing only a few years after his own military service, L'Amour glorifies the army and its leadership. The novel’s fourth chapter, which describes Company C’s demise, an event which occurs off-screen in the film, is a homage to the brotherhood of the army. In their last moments, Lieutenant Davis and Clanahan, who have clashed during their years of service, bond and die together: “Hondo could picture the scene [...] the Lieutenant giving the bottle to the man he had several times sent to the guardhouse for drunken brawling, but a man who died well beside an officer he understood” (56). Hondo reports what he has seen to Major Sherry, saying, “Clanahan fought ‘em off Davis’ body at the end. They went out together him an’ the Lieutenant” (73). When he hears the story, Major Sherry pictures Clanahan, “a big, black-haired Irishman with a brutal face. A drunk, a brawler, a troublemaker, but a fighter. And he was Army.” The major remarks, “He was a good man” (73). The army offers a place for troubled men and allows them the chance to redeem themselves by fighting and dying well. This is a repeated theme in L'Amour’s work, and, of course, in the work of John Wayne.
By the time he made *Hondo*, John Wayne was a superstar. In 1949, he was one of the ten most popular stars in the United States, a position he would keep until 1974 (Levy 17). He had made the classics *Stagecoach* (1939), *Red River* (1948), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *Rio Grande* (1950), and *The Quiet Man* (1952). In 1951, he formed his own production company to have control over his work and image, and L'Amour's short story was one of the company's early purchases. It was a good choice. *Hondo* is frequently cited as a solid achievement. Critic Allen Eyles considers it "a distinct plus in Wayne's career and one of the best of his producing ventures" (141), and Roberts and Olson, who consider it "vintage John Wayne" (404), use a photo from the film for the cover of their 1995 biography, *John Wayne, American*. Wayne himself admired the film, saying, "You don't get that kind of story very often" (Davis 176).

Wayne was crucial to the establishment of Hondo's character. Originally, Glenn Ford was to play the role, but he refused to work with the director. Wayne took over the part, and subsequently Grant revised the script and deliberately tailored the story to him. Grant's job as Wayne's favorite screenwriter was to make the actor look good. One biography of Wayne notes, "Grant had a natural talent for writing dialogue that Duke was comfortable with and so Duke made a habit of bringing him into his projects—officially if possible, secretly if necessary" (Shepherd 208). Careful of Wayne's reputation, his writers, according to Levy, "were so influenced by his already established image that they did not dare deviate from the formula" (113). A Wayne character had to be honest, straightforward, committed to his work and task, and faithful to his personal code. Wayne occasionally insisted on script changes in his films because he didn't want his character to seem "mean and petty" (Eyles 16), and it reached the point that directors had
difficulty with stories where his character was supposed to be wounded or killed. Already on his way to being an “American hero” in his westerns and war films, in Hondo, Wayne wears a red, white, and blue bandanna.

When asked about his work, Wayne said, “I always look for a story with basic emotions. A dog, a kid, a woman’s love, a man’s love” (Eyles 12). This, of course, serves as a description of Hondo and echoes L’Amour’s foreword. The actor loved a story with a “kid” because as Levy notes, “one of Wayne’s most typical screen roles is that of the patriarch involved in teaching his children (or his soldiers) to behave courageously. His cinematic function was truly sociological, having to initiate a group of youngsters into manhood through a series of ceremonies and rites of passage” (61).

As Hondo, Wayne teaches Johnny how to swim, fish, cut wood, and break horses.

Hondo’s patient independence, his mantra “you do what you want,” is also in keeping with the Wayne persona. Grant said, “We evolved a system of making [Wayne] a sort of bystander in situations, instead of actively taking part in them.” A Wayne character was someone “who was not looking for trouble, but was relentless in tracking it when it affronted him” (Levy 114). Wayne often said that he didn’t act, but react. Hondo listens to Angie’s lies, and then confronts her. He lets Ed Lowe choose whether or not to attack. He waits, watches, and then moves.

Wayne also was known for his movement. Film critic Vincent Canby said, “Mr. Wayne’s presence, physical as well as emotional, shaped his movies as much as the contributions of the writers, directors, producers, and cameramen” (qtd. in Levy 102). Everyone commented on Wayne’s walk, and Wills explains, “Wayne’s control of his body was economical, with no motions wasted. This gave a sense of purpose to everything he did. He worked out characteristic stances, gestures, ways of sitting his horse [. . .]” (18). Although
Ches Lane does not move in a particularly noticeable way, Hondo Lane does: “Even when he moved there was a quality of difference about him. Always casually, always lazily, and yet with a conservation of movement and a watchfulness that belied his easy manner. She had the feeling that he was a man that lived in continual expectation of trouble, never reaching for it, yet always and forever prepared” (12). Watching him chop wood, Angie believes, “There was a beautiful and easy rhythm in his movements. He handled his body as if it were all one beautifully oiled and coordinated machine. Nor was he awkward on his feet, as are so many riding men” (16). When Hondo assesses Johnny, he says that “he’ll make a good man” not only because he is smart but because he “moves good—light on his feet” (170).

The book owed its success to its identification with the man who, in the popular imagination, embodied the west. Although Wayne’s biographers Roberts and Olson believe that “the simultaneous release of Hondo as a film and Hondo as a novel was purely accidental” (404), this seems willfully naive about the marketing savvy of those involved, and it ignores the cover of the first edition which is blanketed with Wayne quotations. Besides the front’s famous praise mentioned earlier in this essay, the back cover contains an image of Wayne’s face and the statement, “When I read Louis L’Amour’s exciting novel I knew I had to play Hondo Lane in a motion picture. In the man Hondo, I found the very spirit of the old West. I hope in my new movie, HONDO, I have portrayed some of his high courage, quiet strength and resolute humor.” An editor’s note then follows: “John Wayne did capture Hondo’s great qualities in James Edward Grant’s excellent screenplay. Read this fine novel—then see John Wayne’s 3D-movie, HONDO.” Wayne clearly put his marketing identity behind the book. Fawcett initially printed 320,000 copies, a high number for such a book. An adaptation and excerpt of it even appeared in the March 1954
issue of *John Wayne Adventure Comics*. Furthermore, the film had an additional marketing angle. Hoping to ride a current fad, it was the first western shot in 3-D. The previous year several films had been released in 3-D, including *Dial M for Murder*, and the technology supposedly placed the audience in the middle of the action. For example, in Hondo's fight with Silva, knives would seem to come off the screen toward the spectators. A backlash, however, developed quickly against the format, which was considered a cheap gimmick. A week after its initial release, the film was distributed in a standard flat version.

*Hondo* gained additional publicity when it received two Academy Award nominations: one for best actress for Geraldine Page and one for best motion picture story. (L'Amour wrote to the Academy explaining that since the story was based on an already published short story it was ineligible.) Page's nomination shocked Wayne. By almost all accounts, he disliked working with her. Page, however, respected him. She described him in terms which echo one of the film's main concerns: "He's a terribly honest man, you see. And that comes across underlined by the kind of parts he plays. He always plays an honest man, and his own honesty feeds into it, and the simplicity of his acting" (Roberts and Olson 403). Big stars, Page said, "are a combination of their own personality and the parts they play, and if the combination of the two symbolizes something that's very dear to all of our hearts, we want to see them again and again, and that makes them stars" (Roberts and Olson 403). According to Page, "*Hondo* provided exactly that kind of role for Duke" (Roberts and Olson 403). Wayne's persona matched the character, and, in becoming Hondo Lane, Wayne would become the prototypical L'Amour hero. As Randy Roberts and James S. Olson point out, "Millions of Louis L'Amour fans came to picture Wayne as the protagonist of his stories" (404).
In *Hondo*, the unanswered questions are almost as numerous as the deaths. How long has Ed Lowe been gone? Why would Ed Lowe keep the tintype of a son that he has abandoned? Why doesn’t Hondo mention at the army post that Ed Lowe left his family? How did Angie’s father die? When? Who was the mother? What happened to her? Who are Hondo’s parents? How did he come to live among the Mimbrenos? Why did he leave? Was it because Destarte died? Why did he leave his ranch in California? Was it because of the Civil War? Angie has heard of Hondo killing three men, but who has been there to tell her this? The hired hand who went back to town? How long has the hand been gone? Where is the town? Is it the army post? In the west, where people know your business, wouldn’t people at the post know Ed Lowe had a wife?

Perhaps the biggest question is: why didn’t L’Amour write a sequel? He built a career on multiple stories of Bowdrie, Kilkenny, the Sacketts, the Chantrys, and the Talons. Since the novel ends with Hondo and Angie on the road rather than settled, a sequel seems inevitable, and another Hondo novel would have had enormous appeal to L’Amour’s readers. Most likely, L’Amour did not write a sequel because he had sold the rights. Although Wayne-Fellows Productions allowed L’Amour to do the novelization, it may have kept control of the character. Wayne’s company Batjac made a television production starring Hondo in 1967 and released it as a movie, *Hondo and the Apaches*. According to Gale, L’Amour expressed regret at selling the film rights to Hondo cheaply. Considering his lack of reputation at the time and the importance the film played in his career, it seems a strange attitude. It may be, however, that he regretted losing another Sackett-type franchise.
Lee Clark Mitchell speculates that L'Amour's refusal to acknowledge the contributions of others to the development of Hondo “is as if he were establishing his own authority in starkly Oedipal fashion by figuratively clearing the field of his predecessors” (198). Grant’s role was easily and quickly covered over. Taking credit from Wayne proved more difficult, but the process can be traced on the covers of various editions. The original shows the knife fight with Silva. A bearded Hondo in jeans and a half-ripped shirt seems about to roll onto a yucca plant as an Apache attacks him. The image captures two of the story’s essential conflicts. Hondo struggles between the knife of the Native American and the knife-like leaves of the native plant. Wayne’s face, name, and quotations dominate the book’s front and back. Covers for later editions include Hondo holding what appears to be a flintlock rifle and powder horn while in the background Indians burn down what seems to be a church, and Hondo riding alone out to meet an Apache tribe. Significantly, none of them features Angie. On each successive cover L’Amour’s name becomes more prominent; Wayne’s disappears. For the thirtieth anniversary edition, the cover has a beardless man who walks in the desert carrying his rifle and saddle. Sam can be seen in the corner. The image’s details refer to the beginning of the book rather than the film. In Grant’s screenplay, Wayne/Hondo carries only his rifle and saddlebags, having apparently abandoned his saddle. Significantly, Wayne’s image has been replaced by a photograph of L’Amour. Under the photo of L’Amour in center-spaced type are the words:

He was a big man,
wide-shouldered with the lean
hard-boned face of the desert rider.
There was no softness in him.
His toughness was ingrained and deep,
without cruelty, yet quick,
hard and dangerous. Whatever wells of
gentleness might lie
within him were guarded deep.

This description of Hondo is placed like a caption as if it describes L’Amour. The Author’s Note included in most of L’Amour’s books emphasizes such comparisons as well, stating that L’Amour could “physically fill the boots of the rugged characters he writes about.” Arturo Gonzalez, Jr., even calls L’Amour “the epitome of the Western heroes he chronicles in print” (22). If L’Amour gave up Hondo initially to Wayne, over the years he reclaimed him.

Like the west itself, the development of Hondo is complicated and contradictory, and like the myth of the west, it has been simplified, sanitized, placed into a familiar narrative—honest, hard-working writer finds success—and sold to “people of the East and to people everywhere.”
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(list continued on inside of back cover)

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