James Stevens

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James Stevens
By 1930, James Stevens had gained a national reputation as one of the Northwest's most promising and outspoken young writers. Seventy-five years later, he has slipped so far into obscurity that relatively few people know of his contributions not only to Northwest writing but also to American literature in general and to the literature of the American West in particular. His tall tales made Paul Bunyan one of the great heroes of American popular culture. The controversial literary manifesto he co-authored with Oregon author H. L. Davis led to a new era in the history of the Northwest's literature. And Stevens's short stories and novels celebrated the spirit and achievements of workingmen such as loggers, teamsters, and miners whose lives he saw as being almost as heroic as the lives of Homer's ancient Greek warriors. In his best novel, *Big Jim Turner* (1948), Stevens created a would-be modern-day Homer who tells about the creative force unleashed by living and working in the Northwest and by reading in its public libraries.

Although both Jim Turner and Jim Stevens came of age in the Northwest, they were born in the Midwest. According to Warren Clare, Stevens was born on 15 November 1892 in or near Moravia, Iowa, a small town with a population of slightly fewer than 500 ("Big Jim Stevens" 12-14). Ellis Lucia, however, says Stevens was born in Albia, another small town about ten miles from Moravia ("Stevens" 737). Wherever Stevens was born in south-central Iowa, his father wasn't there to greet him, since he had gone to Idaho to
look for economic opportunities. Stevens's mother, left on her own, tried to survive on a mortgaged farm but eventually took a job as a waitress in Moravia. About four months after he turned five, Stevens and his mother moved from the farm to live in her mother's home in Moravia; and from then he was raised, for the most part, by his maternal grandmother, Mrs. Martha Turner (Clare, “Big Jim Stevens” 13-23). In many ways, his boyhood resembled that of Mark Twain's Tom Sawyer; and as Stevens grew older, he tried more and more to be as free and independent as Huck Finn.

By the time he reached thirteen, Jim Stevens had become so rambunctious that Grandmother Turner put him on a train headed to Idaho, where he went to work on his father's homestead near Midvale (Clare, “Big Jim Stevens” 23-28). He also attended school in Midvale during 1905 and 1906, and after that he enrolled in a Congregationalist boarding school in nearby Weiser. In an article he later wrote for the Oregon City Enterprise-Courier, Stevens gave this description of the school:

Down near Weiser, on the Snake River, there was this Idaho Industrial Institute. It had been started back in the early 1890's as a school where boys and girls from the sage-brush might secure highschool education. Jobs were provided on the school's big ranch and in the dairy and the shops for the boys—in bakery, sewing rooms and laundry for the girls. (qtd. in Clare, “Big Jim Stevens” 31)

To pay for his schooling, Stevens worked thirty hours a week in the dairy. Although his work was satisfactory, his behavior was not, at least in the eyes of the school principal. Increasingly fractious and faced with increasing disciplinary consequences, Stevens left the Institute one night by jumping the train (Clare, “Big Jim Stevens” 31-36).
After getting off the train in Caldwell, Stevens began hiking to Boise. On the way there, he encountered a camp of hoboes and traveling workers, and they were talking about construction jobs in southern Idaho. He went with one of the workers to an irrigation project north of Shoshone. After working as a cook's helper until winter, Stevens headed to Boise, where he awaited the arrival of spring by spending his days reading in the Carnegie Free Public Library and his evenings listening to miners, loggers, and cowboys telling tall tales in the Silver Bell Saloon (Clare, "Big Jim Stevens" 39-43). For the next decade, Stevens traveled around the Northwest and California, working at all sorts of outdoors jobs and reading books in the public libraries of the region. Inspired by the title character of Jack London's *Martin Eden* (1909), Stevens began writing; and in 1916, he sent some of his verses to Otheman Stevens, editor of the *San Francisco Examiner*. The newspaperman sent the poems on to George Horace Lorimer, editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*; and Lorimer published them and sent Stevens a check for $50 (Clare, "Big Jim Stevens" 44-54).

Stevens's success in earning the $50 did not free him from the need to continue working at jobs such as being a timber faller on a logging operation at Mount Lassen, where he went soon after he had received the payment for his poems. Who knows what direction his life might then have taken if the United States had not entered World War I. Stevens joined the Oregon National Guard, was stationed for a while at Fort Lewis in the state of Washington, and was sent to France, where he came under fire several times. Ironically, however, he and his infantry company faced their greatest challenge (at least as he remembered it) in a barroom brawl with an American company of engineers. Stevens also filled his time overseas by continuing to write; and he later recalled that several of the contributions that he sent to *Stars and
Stripes (the Army's newspaper) were published, including one tall tale about Paul Bunyan (Clare, “Big Jim Stevens” 55-58).

After the war, Stevens went back to work as a laborer, but within a few years, he also resumed his efforts to get his writing accepted by editors. When he wrote to the American Mercury, the editor, H. L. Mencken, not only accepted one of his Paul Bunyan tales (“Black Duck Dinner”) but also became his advisor and suggested that he contact Alfred A. Knopf to see about having a collection of his Bunyan tales published. Stevens followed Mencken's suggestion and received Knopf's encouragement to send a manuscript for a book. In 1924, Stevens spent five months in Tacoma writing and polishing the tales that Knopf would publish in 1925 under the title Paul Bunyan. The beginning of his correspondence with Mencken clearly marks the start of a new stage in the life of James Stevens (Clare, “Big Jim Stevens” 59 and 78-80).

Cheered by the publication and generally favorable reception of Paul Bunyan, Stevens proceeded to write his first two novels, Brawnyman (1926) and Mattock (1927). The first novel tells the story of a young workingman whose adventures closely parallel those of Stevens himself; and the second novel is based on his experiences during World War I. After the publication of Brawnyman, Stevens accepted Knopf's invitation to come to New York to promote the novel. While in that city, he met many of the literary notables of the day; and after he had returned to Tacoma, he began in 1926 what Warren Clare says was an “extensive correspondence” with many of his new literary acquaintances, including “Mencken, H. L. Davis, Harry Leon Wilson, Jim Tully, Countee Cullen, Sinclair Lewis, Carl Sandburg, and many others [Thomas Wolfe among them]” (“Big Jim Stevens” 91). Stevens also wrote Mattock in Tacoma.

In early 1927, he traveled to Corvallis, Oregon, where he attended several readings given by Carl Sandburg. At a reception
after the readings, Stevens and H. L. Davis began discussing the region’s literature. They shared similar views about it and wrote that “Something is wrong with Northwestern literature. It is time people were bestirring themselves to find out what it is” (Status Rerum 359). They published those statements in a literary manifesto titled Status Rerum, a strongly worded critical salvo that opened a northwestern front in H. L. Mencken’s war against genteel writing. Northwestern genteel authors included writers such as Frederick Homer Balch (whose pious novel The Bridge of the Gods: A Romance of Indian Oregon [1890] went through twenty-nine editions by 1935) and Colonel E. Hofer of Salem, Oregon, who wrote in his literary journal, The Lariat, that he “saw himself leading the fight for ‘clean literature’ in the Northwest, ‘sweet, readable songs that leave a good taste in the mouth and sweet jingling in the hearts of readers’” (Love 324-28). To confront writers such as Balch and Hofer, Davis and Stevens paid to have their manifesto printed, and they mailed copies to the leading literati of the region. Although the genteel writers denounced the manifesto, it ended their reign as the arbiters of literary taste in the region. And while they argued against Stevens’s view of literature, he put together a collection of his far-from-genteel stories about the Northwest’s laborers, Homer in the Sagebrush (1928).

In early January 1928, Stevens and another Northwest writer, Dick Wetjen, sailed from Grays Harbor on a timber ship headed to South America. The five-month round trip took them around the Horn and then up a river to the city of Rosario in the heart of Argentina’s wheat land (Clare, “Big Jim Stevens” 103-05). When Stevens was back in Washington, he received an invitation from a Hollywood producer to come to California to write screenplays, and Harry Leon Wilson, who had been recently divorced, urged Stevens to visit him in Monterey, where he would be free to relax and write. He declined those offers after he walked into the office
of the *Seattle Star* and met Theresa Fitzgerald, the woman he soon asked to be his wife (Clare, "Big Jim Stevens" 112-14). While he courted Theresa, he prepared sketches for a half-hour radio show that would soon be aired by Adolf Linden's new American Broadcasting Company in Seattle. H. L. Davis assisted Stevens for the program's first ten weeks of broadcasting, and Stewart Holbrook helped out for the remaining sixteen weeks that Stevens was in charge (Clare, "Big Jim Stevens" 107-09).

In early 1929, Stevens came down with a protracted case of the flu and developed a rapid heartbeat. To help complete his recovery, he and his bride traveled to New York, where he asked Alfred A. Knopf if he would be interested in publishing a second collection of Paul Bunyan stories. With Knopf's encouragement, Jim and Theresa Stevens headed to the Saginaw country in Upper Michigan, said to be the home of the Paul Bunyan legend. They spent two years doing research in the area, then rented a home at the mouth of the Saginaw River, where Stevens wrote the book that Knopf published in 1932 under the title *The Saginaw Paul Bunyan*. With the check Knopf sent for the book, added to the money Stevens had received in payment for sales of stories to magazines, he and Theresa thought they had enough financial reserves to see them through the economic downturn (Clare, "Big Jim Stevens" 116-18).

Unfortunately, soon after the Stevenses thought their financial future was secure, many of the country's banks failed, including several where the couple had deposited their money. They spent the next four years struggling to get by and living with relatives much of the time. In 1936, when Stevens landed a job as head of the public relations department of the West Coast Lumbermen's Association, he and Theresa returned to Washington State (Clare, "Big Jim Stevens" 119-25). For the next twenty-five years, he kept his position with the Lumbermen's Association (Lee 414). His
public relations work took most of his time, but he managed to write anyway, although not as much as he had before. Most of his post-1936 works—including *Timber! The Way of Life in the Lumber Camps* (1942), *Paul Bunyan’s Bears* (1947), *Tree Treasure: A Conservation Story* (1950), and *Green Power: The Story of Public Law 273* (1958)—are either aimed at an audience of younger readers or express the views of the timber industry or both. None of these books, however, constituted a significant contribution to the literature of the American West.

In 1948, however, Stevens’s last and best adult novel, *Big Jim Turner*, was published. As Warren Clare notes, “*Big Jim Turner* follows much the same action as the earlier book, *Brawnyman*. But Stevens has made many changes in theme and technique alike” (“Big Jim Stevens” 126). Moreover, in 1946, two years before *Big Jim Turner* was published, Stevens’s participation in a Western Writers’ conference at Reed College indicated that he retained his love of literature, even if he no longer had time to write much (Clare, “Big Jim Stevens” 132). In 1967, four years before Stevens died, Warren Clare completed his doctoral dissertation on Stevens. Although Clare does not provide much information about Stevens’ life after 1948, Ellis Lucia notes that in 1958 Pacific University of Forest Grove, Oregon, awarded Stevens an honorary Litt. D. degree (737). Lucia also says that “for years he wrote a newspaper column called *Out of the Woods*” (739). Stevens died on 31 December 1971 (Lucia, “Stevens” 737).

Since Stevens's death there have been very few published studies of his work. That lack of attention is surprising, given the popularity of his *Paul Bunyan*. Published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1925, the book includes an introduction and twelve tales. Together, the stories tell readers about Paul Bunyan's invention of logging and its subsequent history. The first tale, “The Winter of the Blue Snow,” starts in the “Northland” (i.e., Canada) when a blue snow
And great as the plates were, by the time one was heaped with a brown fried drumstick, a ladle of duck dumplings, several large fragments of duck fricassee, a slab of duck
baked gumbo style, a rich portion of stewed duck, and a mound of crisp brown dressing, all immersed in golden duck gravy, a formidable space was covered. Yet there was room for tender leaves of odorous cabbage beaded and streaked with creamy sauce; for mashed potatoes which seemed like fluffs of snow beside the darkness of duck and gravy; for brittle and savory potato cakes, marvelously right as to texture and thickness; for stewed tomatoes of a sultry ruddiness, pungent and ticklish with mysterious spices; for a hot cob of corn as long as a man’s forearm, golden with syrupy kernels as big as buns; for fat and juicy baked beans, plump peas, sunny applesauce and buttered lettuce, not to mention various condiments. Squares of cornbread and hot biscuits were buttered and leaned against the plate; a pot-bellied coffee-pot was tilted over a gaping cup, into which it gushed an aromatic beverage of drowsy charm; a kingly pleasure was prepared. (108-09)

Stevens’s hyperbole casts a mythic aura over the dinner; and the rest of the tale indicates that Paul’s men also belong to the world of popular myth rather than the actual world. The narrator says, for example: “He [Paul] worked his men twelve hours a day, and, had they thought about it, they would have been astounded by any idea of working less” (95). No real worker would have been at all astounded by such an idea.

In the book’s next tale, “The Old Home Camp,” John Shears is a failed logger who becomes a good farmer and provides Paul with supplies. When Shears becomes envious of Paul, he decides to ruin Paul by poisoning Babe. A good logger saves Paul and Babe; and a repentant Shears again becomes Paul’s ally. In the next two stories—“Shanty Boy” and “The Kingdom of Kansas”—Paul again manages to overcome various problems, including not only unrest among his loggers but also a “hot winter.” “Oratorical Medicine” is
a satirical attack on mind cures and perhaps on the temperance movement as well. In “New Iowa,” Stevens creates a character that he names Professor Sherm Shermson, who criticizes Paul Bunyan for his lack of eloquence and who is partly responsible for encouraging people like Paul’s loggers to write bad poetry.

To get his loggers to quit writing bad poetry, Paul takes them to the He Man Country, where he begins to cut the forests of sage trees. He has Hot Biscuit Slim feed the men Buffalo Milk pancakes. This regimen restores the loggers’ virility, but it also makes John Shears’ men, the scissorbills, virile and pugnacious. A battle between the loggers and scissorbills rages until rain pours up “from China,” and that stops the fighting in “The He Man Country” (221). The next and last tale in Paul Bunyan, “Evil Inventions,” tells us about one of the other effects of the forty-day rain from China. Forced into idleness, Paul’s loggers begin discussing a subject that he knows nothing about: women. Although Paul begins a new project after the rain leaves, his men go to Nowaday Valley, where they find women, marry, and move into cozy cottages. Paul follows and, using oratory, tries to lure his men back, but his eloquence is no match for the alluring force of the women. Paul returns to his camp and his fellow heroes, and they fade into the shadows of history. Of that now-legendary Paul Bunyan, the narrator says: “He would have power, but it would be only the power of a vast spirit breathing in the dark, deep woods” (245).

Whatever else the tales in Paul Bunyan may be, they are another version of a westering literature. From the Leather-Stocking Tales (1823-41) of James Fenimore Cooper to Owen Wister’s The Virginian (1902), American authors had depicted the European-American settlement of the continent as the westward progress of a frontier zone eventually displaced by civilization. Frontier life, in these fictional accounts, was a Golden Age of sorts for bold and
adventurous men. When women entered the picture, they appeared as the agents of the advancing civilization. The world of Stevens’s *Paul Bunyan* is similarly for men only. The women of Nowaday Valley signal the end of robust frontier life and the beginnings of industrialization and domestic life.

In earlier accounts of westering, homes and families cannot be securely established until the Indian threat is removed from the frontier. In Stevens’s *Paul Bunyan*, no Indians keep the loggers from settling down; instead, it is Paul Bunyan’s insatiable desire to log all the forests that keeps the loggers swinging their axes. Paradoxically, Stevens locates Bunyan’s spirit in the “dark, deep woods,” as if the trees themselves sought their own destruction. In *Having It Both Ways: Self-Subversion in Western Popular Classics*, Forrest R. Robinson explains how and why readers can accept texts as self-contradictory as Stevens’s tales about Paul Bunyan:

The popular American texts I have studied are written for an audience of empowered participants in the social and political process. Most of the members in this audience [. . .] perceive themselves as enfranchised, morally responsible actors in, not the merely passive subjects of, the world that unfolds before them. Thus their anxiety arises out of a feeling of inner complicity with power, and not from the spectacle of its threatening encroachment from without. Concomitantly, their pleasure results not from the revelation of the constructedness of power but from the concealment of its injustices. It is not what the audience sees, but what it contrives not to see, that provides the relief; and it is relief from the anxiety arising out of guilt, and not out of fear, that contributes to the experience of pleasure. (140-41)

*Paul Bunyan* may have achieved its great popularity because, like other popular western works, it lets its readers have it both ways:
although they know that their desire for wood products leads to the destruction of the forests, they allow Stevens's tales to conceal that knowledge by the agreeable fiction that the spirit of destruction arises from deep within the forests themselves. Readers can feel not only satisfaction in Bunyan's conquest of Mother Nature, but also how fitting it is that Bunyan has to fade into the shadows when he is finally confronted by the presence of women. As a result, Paul Bunyan is a good example of the frontier mindset that sustained the self-injurious destruction of the nation's old-growth forests.

This first book of Stevens not only sold well but also received generally favorable reviews. In the Saturday Review of Literature, for example, Constance Rourke wrote:

Some of his [Stevens's] narratives are undoubtedly private invention. But they are invention kept within the happy bound of a substantial tradition; old and new, they have the windy breadth, the loose and casual structure, the sly pitfalls which everywhere characterize the Paul Bunyan stories. (Hoffman 110)

Not every reviewer agreed with Rourke. In fact, Stuart P. Sherman wrote a strong attack on Stevens's Paul Bunyan, probably because, at least in part, the professor took Sherm Shermson in "New Iowa" as a personal affront (Clare, "Big Jim Stevens" 84). Although Stevens had the name Sherm Shermson removed from later printings of the book (a tacit admission that Sherman was right in seeing himself as the target of the satire), Sherman and his friends did not forget what had appeared in the first printing. As I will explain in more detail later, Stevens's satirical thrust at Sherman was probably responsible for the force of the attacks that academic folklorists launched against Stevens in the 1950s and later.

16
After the generally favorable reception of Paul Bunyan, Stevens wrote his first novel, Brawnyman. Published by Knopf in 1926, it tells the story of Jim Turner, whose early life parallels the early life of Jim Stevens (although the author and his character are different in many ways). Told in the first person, this bildungsroman ("growth novel") consists of two books: "Days of Adventure" and "Women and Work." The entire story is told in the first person by the protagonist, who is also the brawnyman of the title. As Warren Clare points out, the influence of Walt Whitman and Jack London on Stevens is readily apparent in this novel. A reader can also see the influence of Mark Twain, since Jim Turner often sounds like an only slightly modified version of Huckleberry Finn.

Turner begins his story with the first phase in his growth from innocence to experience. He tells us that he spent his early childhood in Iowa and was then raised by an uncle in Idaho. The uncle sent him to a private school where the children earned their board and schooling by working thirty hours a week on the school's farm. Jim Turner's first step from childhood to the adult world comes when he helps an ex-convict deliver milk from the school's dairy to Big Mag, the madam of the local bordello. Although Jim is given another task when the principal of the school finds out about these milk deliveries, his contact with other ex-cons and adults at the school makes Jim restless and dissatisfied, and he eventually runs away. A group of hoboes that he falls in with direct him to a construction job on a government ditch near Shoshone, Idaho, and he heads there. Since he's still only fifteen, Jim fails to get a construction job and settles for being a helper. He earns enough money to treat all the men to a round of drinks when they go to Shoshone for some entertainment; and he especially loves listening to the bunkhouse stories.

Since Turner hails from Appanoose County, Iowa (Stevens's home place), the men he's working with nickname him "Appanoose
Jim.” They also let him sit in on a poker game. He wins big; and the next time he goes to Shoshone, he has with him $140 of wages and poker winnings. In a Shoshone saloon, Jim enters another stage of maturation when his boss, Paddy the Devil, introduces him to Len Gager, a workingman bard/storyteller and oral chronicler of the exploits of latter-day Byronic workingmen heroes. In his first narrative performance for Jim, Gager says that when he got the cramps and went to the camp’s “inkslinger” for some treatment, that would-be intellectual tried some amateur psychoanalysis on him by asking him to recount his most vivid dreams. When Gager told about his dream of the devil as a strawberry roan mule, the inkslinger said his dream was what was making him sick. What Gager needed, according to the frontier Freud, was a red-haired woman. After throwing a fit that brought a real doctor who cured his cramps and billed the camp (resulting in the firing of the inkslinger), Gager still had the dream, so he went to Pocatello and “recuperated” with a red-haired woman. The cure, he says, was “glorious.” After hearing the tale, Jim regards Gager with awe and admiration, and the boy tries to become the kind of workingman hero idealized in Gager’s tales and epitomized in Paddy the Devil.

Even as Jim sets off for Boise with these two mentors, he encounters evidence that life can sometimes be harsh and unforgiving. When the train comes into the Shoshone station, someone finds an old hobo dead and with his hands frozen to the train. Before the corpse can be removed, the hands have to be thawed with steam to loosen his grip. And on the way to Boise, Gager laments to Paddy: “The West is won. Where’ll we find our god of adventure, you great dark devil, you?” (53). In a contemplative frame of mind when they arrive in Boise, Gager and Paddy take Jim to stay with Honest John Malone, and they ask Honest John to keep Jim from hoboing while they go to California for the
winter. Honest John, who thinks the older a person is the more extensive his vocabulary should be, amuses Jim with his use of big words, but he is a steadying influence on Jim and keeps him from hitting the road again.

Another important phase in Jim's maturation is his introduction to the companionship of girls and women. While in Boise, Jim meets a girl named Isis Dowell, who is an orphan and a fervent Christian. But he misses her company for a while when winter ice blocks the Payette River near Horseshoe Bend and cuts off water to a nearby power plant that supplies electricity to Boise. Honest John and Jim join a crew of workers hired to dig a new channel for the water. Honest John works as a powder monkey, and Jim drives a wheel-scaper on the graveyard shift. Honest John accidentally sets off an explosion that blows him to bits and injures Jim. After two days in the hospital, Jim leaves and resumes his residence in Honest John's house. Isis talks the young man into going to church with her and getting a good job milking cows in a dairy not far from Boise. When Jim returns to Boise, he finds out that Isis has been caught with Frank Dariel, the two of them doing something unacceptable (the reader is not told what) in a church. Her zealously pious second cousins have beaten her, and she has run away. Since Frank has gone to join the Navy, Jim can think of no one to vent his anger on, so when he sees Frank's father, he throws an old bottle of ketchup at him and runs off. Later that day, he overhears some thieves say that the bottle incident stopped their intended theft of Mr. Dariel's store. Later still, the thieves catch Jim and beat him, but he eventually manages to run off again.

At this point in Brawnyman, Stevens immerses his protagonist in the life of a workingman in those parts of the Northwest that were still virtually frontier zones, even though the frontier had officially been declared closed before Jim Turner was born. With
Honest John dead and Isis gone, Jim Turner has no reason to stay in Boise, so he resumes his wandering. For the next several years, he travels around the Northwest, working for construction crews. In Pocatello, he runs into Paddy the Devil, who joins the crew Jim is on. In an epic fight with pick handles, a bruiser named Hard Foot Rax is defeated by Paddy, who is later shot and killed by a pimp named Dago Tony. Jim heads west and lands a job on a railroad construction project near Eugene, Oregon. While Jim is there, Gager comes to the camp and gets a job, too. The old storyteller has a lying contest with Snub Peters. First, Gager tells a tall tale about the Cyclone Cut; then Snub tells one about the petrified tree for hanging liars in Bozee Basin; and Gager finally wins by telling how he planted that petrified tree.

Once reacquainted with his older friend, Jim tells Gager about everything that has happened since he last saw him. Gager says Jim is suffering from a desire for women, but he agrees to take him and another young worker named Indiana Beaut with him to Panama to work on the Canal. Once they reach San Francisco after a steamer trip that gives Jim an even greater appetite than usual but that leaves Gager and Beaut weakened by seasickness, Gager changes his mind and tells his two younger companions that they should go to “Loss” (Los Angeles) because they need to spend time with women before they go off to a faraway place like Panama. Jim and Beaut decide to take Gager’s advice, and that ends Book I of Brawnyman.

When Book II (“Women and Work”) opens, Jim has already settled into life as a driver (of mule-pulled trucks) in the City of Angels. In his growth from innocence to experience, Jim has learned how to get along not only in frontier construction camps but also in one of the West’s cities. He has bought fancy dress-up clothes and attended the theater with Beaut and Looking Glass Tex. Jim has also followed Gager’s advice to spend time with
women, and the young man now has four or five girlfriends. In fact, Jim is almost ready to propose to Tiva Fletcher when he runs into Isis Dowell. He starts seeing her again, and she tells him she's a hopeless romantic who imagines every person and place she sees as being exotic and quite different from what they really are. Nevertheless, Jim falls for her again and begins to think she loves him, too. Then she doesn't show up for a date, and he learns that she has married Frank Dariel. Heartbroken, he tries to find Tiva but discovers that she and her family have left for El Paso. He quits his city job and leaves Los Angeles.

At this point in his narrative, Jim Turner shares with the reader some insights he later gains from his experiences:

He [a young fellow] must learn that women and work are the two realest propositions in all his years to come. If he doesn't [learn this,] he will get to continually cussing everything in life up one side and down the other simply because it isn't funny any more, and he becomes a crank. Or else he will go booming from one job to another all his days, looking everywhere for the frolicsome adventure he had as a kid. But you have to own a talent for this; you have to be able to keep on dreaming things, something like that girl, Isis, did. Life will just drab out on the average workingman if he doesn't get to taking his little part of it as serious and important, and he will become mean and miserable and fit for nothing but the name of a crank. (229-30)

In Los Angeles and for some time thereafter, however, Jim can't see that he has to take his part of life as serious and important, so he travels around for a year or two, working and brawling but never content. Then, in San Francisco, he meets up with Gager again, and the workingman's bard leads his young friend to a logging job at Mount Lassen, where Jim enters the last phase of his growth from innocence to experience.
Having reached the age of twenty-two, Jim has the strength and experience necessary for any job in the logging camp. He also appreciates the lesson behind the fable that Gager tells about mythical animals whose story shows that the bigger the challenges a man has to face, the stronger the man will become if he meets those challenges. When news reaches the logging camp that World War I has started, Gager joins Jim in ridiculing the European-born workers’ desire to be part of the war. But then Gager wants to go, too, because, he says, it will be “the last adventure” (300). To try to get Jim to understand, Gager tells his own reworked western-frontier version of the Roman story of Androcles and the Lion. Jim thinks it all over and decides to join Gager in heading off to war. They quit their jobs and head to town. When they stop in a saloon for a drink, an anarchist or socialist starts denouncing capitalism and the war. Jim can’t stand such talk, so he leaves and walks by a sawmill. He’s fascinated with the machines, and when one of the workers gets sick and has to stop, Jim volunteers to take his place and ends up with a fulltime job at the mill. He goes back to the saloon and tells Gager about his new job, and Gager heads off to war by himself. Brawnyman ends with Jim sitting on a hillside with his Italian girlfriend snuggling by his side.

The reviews of this first novel by Stevens were generally positive. One reviewer, for example, wrote that “Human stories of this kind are few, but whenever they come they are memorable. They remind one of the wanderings of Knut Hamsun, Jean Paul Richter and Maxim Gorky. Once given to the world they continue to live through successive reprintings” (Clare, “Big Jim Stevens” 88). A number of the reviewers noted Stevens’s sincerity and attention to regional details. The novel’s weaknesses were also apparent to the reviewers. As Warren Clare puts it, although some parts of the novel are impressively well written, “Yet other parts are a bit stilted, a bit unreal, perhaps too visionary. He [Stevens] would
have to learn to sustain his mood, gradually develop his implied themes, and above all, 'keep it natural’” (“Big Jim Stevens” 93).

An even greater weakness in the novel is the characterization of some of the leading characters. Although Jim Turner has to be at least twenty-two years old and quite experienced when he tells his story, he sounds at times like a version of fourteen-year-old Huck Finn. Jim shares insights that reveal his intelligence, yet he unquestioningly accepts Gager’s advice that he should refrain from reading lest it mar his workingman’s spirit. Although Gager doesn’t declare oral stories and discussions off base, Jim nevertheless refuses to listen to speakers whose ideas challenge his own. He even walks out of an address by Emma Goldman, a real-life radical of the period. If Stevens meant to satirize Jim Turner’s willful ignorance, he was too subtle in doing so. And although it’s clear that Gager carries his Byronism to foolish extremes, the workingman bard comes across as an appealing character nonetheless. If Jim Turner were Candide, his narrative would make more sense in terms of character development. But Stevens does not ask us to regard Jim in the same way that Voltaire wants us to think of Candide; and Gager is too sympathetic a figure to be another Dr. Pangloss.

In spite of its weaknesses, Brawnyman has much to offer readers. Whereas most novels of the early twentieth century depict workingmen as victims of the capitalist system who are trapped in a hell of unendurable toil, Brawnyman gives us workers who relish the life they live. The work is hard and sometimes breaks bodies and minds, but Stevens gives us a sense of the satisfaction the men have in surviving such trials. The world of Brawnyman is a man’s world, and Jim Turner is a man’s man. His sexist attitudes are so extreme (he says that a man should lie to the women he dates, for example) that they may strike a twenty-first-century reader as being medieval; but the novel also reveals how
ineffective such views are in helping a man to be successful in his relationships with women.

Jim Turner’s relationships with women take up at least as much of the narrative as do his descriptions of the work he does. Even more of his account is devoted to what takes place among the laborers after the work of the day is over. Whether around the campfire or in the bunkhouse or a saloon, telling stories and tall tales provides entertainment, information, and inspiration for Jim Turner and his fellow workers. Given the high value placed on narrative by Gager, Jim, and their comrades, their opposition to the written word seems odd. Perhaps their resistance to written literature is of a piece with their resistance to the passing of the frontier; they sense that an epic period is passing and will soon take its place among the world’s other golden ages, and they want to preserve the oral tradition that has been a rich part of the life they have loved. They may feel that they honor that oral tradition by remaining resistant to written literature.

So pervasive in *Brawnyman* is that sense of the passing of a latter-day Homeric era that the *ubi sunt* theme stands out as one of the novel’s most significant. Although Stevens is careful to show that the West’s frontier era was not all triumph and glory (e.g., the frozen hobo on the train), it’s also clear that he feels the struggles of frontier life challenged the pioneers and strengthened those who succeeded. The novel’s ending suggests that there’s also much of value in the domestic life of the post-frontier West, but it’s a life without adventure. In making the transition from the life of a laborer like Jim Turner to the life of a man of letters, it may be that James Stevens felt uneasy about giving up what was to him satisfying hard physical labor. He may have had doubts about whether the demands of writing could give him as much satisfaction as working as a logger or a teamster.
Clearly, however, he took writing seriously, as indicated by his 1927 attack, with H. L. Davis, on genteel literature of the Northwest. In both his doctoral dissertation about Stevens and in a separate article titled “Posers, Parasites, and Pismires,” Warren Clare gives a detailed account of Stevens’s introduction to Davis, of their composition of the manifesto Status Rerum, and of their distribution of it and the response to it. Stevens, Davis, Sandburg, and Richard Wetjen (a northwestern writer who was a friend of Stevens) all had experience as laborers, and they all enjoyed the humorous, sometimes bawdy tales that were part of the folk tradition among working people (“Posers” 342-46). The genteel, pious, and sentimentalized writings that flowed from the writing classes of the region’s colleges and that appeared in the Northwest’s periodicals lack the robust humor and sense of actual experience that mark the works of Stevens and his friends. Status Rerum not only denounces writing classes, professors, and editors in general, it also names the colleges, teachers, and literary journals that had been churning out incredibly bad poems, short stories, and novels.

Status Rerum’s strong attack was directed against specific people because Davis and Stevens believed these people had damaged the Northwest’s reputation:

Other sections of the United States can mention their literature, as a body, with respect. New England, the Middle West, New Mexico and the Southwest, California—each of these has produced a body of writing of which it can be proud. The Northwest—Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana—has produced a vast quantity of bilge, so vast, indeed, that the few books which are entitled to respect are totally lost in the general and seemingly interminable avalanche of tripe. (Status Rerum 359)
The targets of Status Rerum's attack responded by condemning the manifesto and its authors. In fact, the diatribe embarrassed some of their friends, including Dick Wetjen (Clare, "Posers" 347-48).

Stevens and Davis knew the risks they were taking when they mailed out the manifesto, but they had strong reasons for mailing it anyway. As Glen A. Love explains in "Stemming the Avalanche of Tripe," they were right in denouncing the abysmally low literary standards of the region. Love gives a number of specific examples of northwestern writing of that era, and it does deserve to be called bilge. The region's most popular and famous novel, Frederick Homer Balch's The Bridge of the Gods: A Romance of Indian Oregon (1890), is filled with genteel diction, sentimentality, and piety; and its occasional "realistic touches do not aid the novel in reaching the mythic status toward which it strains" (Love, "Stemming" 324-27). As for the poetry of the region, Love gives the titles of some typical poems from The Lariat, one of the journals singled out by Stevens and Davis as one of the most egregious offenders of literary taste: "My Chum God," "To a Bird," "Little Spider," and "When Muriel Smiles" ("Stemming" 328-29).

In addition to knowing that their manifesto was right in what it said about the poor quality of northwestern literature, Stevens and Davis were also following the example of H. L. Mencken. In his capacity as editor of The American Mercury, Mencken had published stories and poems by the two northwestern writers. Since, as Love points out, "[. . .] The American Mercury [was] probably the most influential magazine for thinking Americans in the mid-1920s," Stevens and Davis had good reason to be grateful to Mencken ("Stemming" 332). What did it matter if Status Rerum made them pariahs in the Northwest as long as they had the respect and support of one of the East's foremost writers and editors? Moreover, one of Mencken's most famous essays, "The Sahara of Bozart," was
a specific model that his northwestern protégés could follow. As Love notes, Mencken's "attack upon the artistic and cultural vacuity of the South" had first appeared in 1917, and its style has many of the elements that can also be found in Status Rerum, including "the alteration of polysyllabic verbosity with Anglo-Saxon brevity," "nouns and verbs crackling with specificity, gaudy adjectives and adverbs to push them into greater prominence," and "the imagery of natural disasters to heighten the sense of cultural catastrophe" ("Stemming" 333-35).

Status Rerum has all the marks of a work modeled on Mencken's "The Sahara of Bozart," but Love adds that Stevens and Davis did not write their diatribe with the same zest and exuberance evident in Mencken's essay. The fact that they did not send Mencken a copy of Status Rerum suggests that they knew it was not up to his standard. They probably also sensed that they deserved no great credit for using a sledgehammer approach to dispose of literary "butterflies" (Love, "Stemming" 335). "But," Love concludes, "if Status Rerum was not as brilliant as it could have been, it was sufficient. Its publication in 1927 marked the virtual demise of the Emmeline Grangerford school of Northwest writing" ("Stemming" 335). If any of the Northwest's Emmeline Grangerfords were still living in 1950, they would have had a chance to see James Stevens made the object of a strong critical attack that would mark a literary turning point as decisive as the one caused by Status Rerum, an attack that I will discuss later.

In addition to getting Status Rerum printed in 1927, Stevens also managed to have his second novel, Mattock, published in that same year. Warren Clare is right in saying that Mattock is a satire; and since most of the reviewers missed that fact, it comes as no surprise to learn that many of the reviews were unfavorable (Clare, "Big Jim Stevens" 98). Reviewers saw the novel's protagonist and narrator, Private Parvin Mattock, as a self-portrait of
Stevens. But Mattock unwittingly reveals his own weaknesses in what he tells us, and there are so many differences between the author and the character that it is clear Stevens was not creating a self-portrait when he came up with Mattock.

As the summary will show, it is surprising—almost astounding—that the reviewers missed the satire in Mattock and thought that Parvin Mattock was a self-portrait of James Stevens. The book is also remarkable because it is a war novel in which the protagonist never goes into combat (unless his one brief stay in a bomb shelter can be called combat). What Stevens gives us is a character study of an ignorant young man from the country who goes off to war and learns that his beliefs and values will not sustain him in the theater of war. As a result of what he learns, he begins to grow intellectually and morally. That growth is stopped by a series of disappointments when he returns home, and he reverts not only to his earlier religious beliefs but also to a number of prejudices. The narrative becomes tragic and an example of naturalism, since the protagonist is likable in many ways but succumbs to his early training after struggling to find some other acceptable way to live.

The imaginary soldier begins his narrative with the time when he is stationed with his infantry company in France during World War I and is just getting off the ten days of extra duty on K.P. (kitchen patrol) that he was assigned for arresting a drunken officer. Mattock made the arrest because an Army chaplain convinced him that he should be a “Christian American soldier,” that is, one who does his duty by the book. Mattock confesses to us that he was not always so righteous. In fact, when he was still living on his parents’ farm near Clevisburg, Kansas, he got Sade Nixon pregnant and then sold two heifers and gave Sade the money to pay for an abortion in Kansas City. He has not heard from her since then, but he resolves not to become “mired in sin” again.

He soon gives in to temptation, however, when he lets a fellow soldier talk him into visiting a bordello in a nearby French town.
Their revelry is interrupted when a group of Army engineers enters the bordello, and Mattock realizes they are probably the same engineers who beat up Joe Beedy, a soldier from his company. Sure enough, one of the engineers punches Mattock, who fights back so furiously that, with the help of his friends, the engineers are beaten. When the military police arrive, Mattock’s friends have left, and the MPs think Mattock must have beaten the engineers all by himself. He has to report to his company’s senior lieutenant, known to the soldiers as “Johnny Hard.” The lieutenant resents the overbearing engineers and admires Mattock’s gumption, so instead of reprimanding the Kansas private, he praises him and sends him back to the cheers of his fellow soldiers.

Raised in his companions’ esteem, Mattock does not mind the days of endless drilling in preparation for being sent to the front, but he lives for the times when he can write letters home or eat with Joe Beedy at the home of a Frenchwoman or harmonize with other soldiers at a bar called the Red Bull. One day, Johnny Hard turns the drill over to Frank Landon Dill, another of the company’s lieutenants and a writer of popular western romances. The soldiers cannot hear Dill’s high, squeaky voice; as a result, the formation ends in a tangle in front of the company’s colonel. Better the drilling than the actual fighting, however, as Mattock learns when a wounded soldier from the front describes one of his friends getting his head blown off by an artillery shell. Mattock begins to doubt the officers’ claim that the “Boche” (the Germans) are all cowards.

Orders arrive for half of the men in the company to be sent to the front as replacements. Joe Beedy’s name is on the list; Mattock’s is not. Those (including Johnny Hard, Sergeant Shevlin, and Mattock) who want to be sent to the front find that any requests are denied. Before his departure, Joe tells his friend Mattock about a girl he fell in love with. Her name is Sade Nixon,
and she joined the Salvation Army. Mattock does not tell Joe that Sade is the girl he got pregnant back in Kansas.

After Joe and the other replacements are sent to the front, Mattock and the remaining soldiers continue to visit the local bars and women. Johnny Hard and French war hero Black Jean, home on leave, fight an epic battle over the Frenchman’s fiancée. Although Johnny wins the fight, he tells Black Jean that the girl is still his, and the two men shake hands. Envious of Johnny Hard, Lieutenant Dill schemes to get him into trouble; and when Dill hears of the fight with Black Jean, he orders Mattock to meet with him in order to set the country boy up to testify against Johnny Hard later on. Dill gets Mattock to agree to be one of his informers by telling him that they have a duty to discover any traitors in the ranks. Relieved that Dill did not mention Johnny Hard’s fight, Mattock foolishly agrees to serve as a stool pigeon and accepts his promotion to corporal.

Corporal Mattock failed to graduate from the eighth grade until he was eighteen, so he’s no good with a drill book. He can handle a bayonet well, however, so Johnny Hard makes him a bayonet instructor. The new corporal enjoys his status and the letters he receives from home, including one from Lola Bandon, the sexy cousin of Elsie Snodgrass, Mattock’s good Christian girlfriend. Lola sends photos, too, and Mattock shows them to his fellow soldiers and boasts that she’s his fiancée. When word of the photos reaches the Frenchwoman he’s been seeing, Mattock has to buy her a pair of silk stockings to convince her that he has no fiancée.

Mattock has done so well as a corporal that he is sent with other officers to lead a group of replacement soldiers to the front. While he’s near the front, an airplane attacks, and when Mattock takes refuge in a nearby bomb shelter, he undergoes the only “combat” he will experience during the war. He does participate in “the Battle of Paris,” but that is only what the soldiers call any leave
time spent in the French capital. Later, after he has returned to camp from that "battle," Mattock gets a letter from Joe Beedy, who is in a hospital because one of his legs was blown off by an artillery shell. Joe says that when he gets back to the U.S., he plans to find Sade Nixon. Mattock writes Joe to convince him to stay away from Sade. Meanwhile, Johnny Hard has been drinking far too much, while Lieutenant Dill has managed to become the company's intelligence officer. Dill persuades Mattock to accept a position as an intelligence soldier who will look for and report on any Bolsheviks in the company.

By now, Mattock and the other officers have trained several groups of new recruits, including soldiers from Montana, Tennessee, and New York City (the latter group are mostly Jewish Americans). His growing respect for these men has made Mattock more tolerant of those who are different from him. Unfortunately, he feels duty-bound as an intelligence soldier to take Lieutenant Dill a poem written by one of the New Yorkers. The poem is certainly no indication of disloyalty, but Mattock and Dill fail to understand the sophisticated expression, and Dill arranges to have the New Yorker sent to a labor battalion. When word gets around that Mattock is a stool pigeon, two of the sergeants persuade him to confess that he had agreed to feed Dill "intelligence" information. Just as Mattock confesses, Johnny Hard arrives with the news that the Germans have asked for an armistice. During the ensuing celebration, one of the company's sergeants taunts Mattock for being a stoolie, and Mattock punches him. For hitting a superior officer, he is demoted back to private and put on K.P. again.

Mattock keeps a low profile thereafter, and eventually his company is sent to Brest to await transport to America. While they are in Brest, Sergeant Shevlin arrives and tells them what happened after they left camp. Black Jean Buson had been unfairly
arrested and sentenced to hard labor, but he escaped and returned to Bordaire, where he found Johnny Hard with his fiancée. But he could see that Johnny was a broken man and that Junie Tadousac loved only herself, so he decided not to fight Johnny, who offered to help him escape to Mexico. Johnny Hard swears off Junie Tadousac, but after Black Jean has left, the tough lieutenant comes crawling back to her.

For Mattock, everything goes from bad to worse. As the troops board the ship for the trip home, an officer chews him out for wearing a greasy uniform. Then when he gets to the U.S. and visits Joe Beedy in a veterans’ hospital, he finds that Joe needs more operations and now despises him for being a liar and a stool pigeon. Joe is also bitter because he found that Sade Nixon has married an officer in the Salvation Army. On top of all that, Mattock learns that Lola Bandon has married her employer. Private Mattock heads for the nearest bar to drown his sorrows in booze, but on his way there, he hears a revivalist holding forth in a church. The preacher stirs Mattock’s thoughts and feelings and eventually gains his repentance. Now a good “Christian American Citizen,” Mattock returns to his parents’ farm and tells them everything. They rejoice that he has been saved. When his father dies, Mattock inherits the farm and marries Elsie Snodgrass. He rises in the church, the legion, and the Klan. At a religious convention, he hears a speech by Frank Landon Dill, now the author of the war novel God’s Crusaders. Dill praises Mattock for being an exemplary Christian patriot. Mattock reverts to all his earlier ignorant nativism and narrow-mindedness.

In addition to being a character study of failed intellectual and moral growth, Mattock also sheds light on Stevens’s sense of America’s regions and their differences. Of the characters from the West, the contingent of recruits from Montana comes closest to the view of westerners as tough but friendly and generous. We never
learn whether Dill, author of western romances, is actually from the West or even knows anything about it, but he is not tough, nor is he friendly or generous. In fact, we see that Dill is a liar and a hypocrite. He uses people, and it seems unlikely that such a person would write anything that was truthful. Because Mattock never sees Dill for what he really is, we know that Mattock himself is seriously flawed. Mattock does perceive the differences in regional accents, attitudes, and customs, and he begins to see that ignorance is often what leads people to hate others because of such differences. Unfortunately, in the end, Mattock lacks the courage of his newfound convictions and reverts to his earlier ignorant views. In that reversion, he is similar to the eponymous protagonist of Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* (1922).

At first glance, Stevens's next book, *Homer in the Sagebrush* (1928), appears to be a collection of disparate tales. As Warren Clare points out, however, "it is tightly unified" ("Big Jim Stevens" 141). Its themes are what unify the collection. That appearances can be deceptive is clearly one of the major themes in *Homer in the Sagebrush*. And it is often those who can tell a good tale who are most deceptive. Yet in spite of the risks of accepting a good narrative at face value, stories can awaken in us an epic spirit and can inspire us to accept the greatest challenges that we must face in the world of commonplace reality. In the following passage from the title story, Stevens's narrator yearns for the fusion of the epic past with the everyday present of the American West:

Homer in the sagebrush, Homer free of the classroom and the library, his story carried in the soul of a rebel and a bard to the raw Western lands of a new world, and there, in the mean saloon of a sagebrush town, to flash free on winged words and enchant with its magical glory the imagination of a sagebrush boy! Oh, Homer, hero of poetry in an age when bards were also men! You would not have scorned that
obscure scene! There a brawny hand smote the lyre. There your epic was sung from a throat that could clang and roar. There your tale was sown on a virgin imagination in words that were fertile because they were a hero's. . . . (264)

What most unifies the stories in Homer in the Sagebrush is Stevens's own attempt to capture the epic spirit of the frontier West. Some of the stories were first published in The American Mercury and Adventure Magazine, and they all deal with the lives of workers in the Pacific Northwest in the years around 1900. Once again, Knopf was the publisher of the book. Stevens dedicated it "To H. L. Davis[,] Westerner and Bard" (iii).

Homer in the Sagebrush has three sections. The first is titled "Tales of the Northwest Coast" and includes five stories. "The Dance Hall Fisherman" tells about Alex Bergsen, who emigrates from Norway to join his Uncle Eric in Astoria, Oregon. When he plays the accordion his uncle gives him, Alex receives praise and applause from Norwegians and Americans alike. But he decides to be a fisherman only. When he loses his leg in a fishing accident, Alex turns to playing the accordion to make a living. He becomes known as Accordion Alex, but he drinks heavily, and after he's spurned by a woman, there's a strong hint at the end that he might have committed suicide: "Yep, he just dropped out of sight,' say the old fishermen" (29).

In "The Bullpuncher,\" we read about Black Larrity, "an Achilles of the Gray's Harbor logging towns" (30). This story recounts the Gray's Harbor Achilles' barroom brawls in graphic detail: "[. . .] Black Larrity popped his [the Swede's] eye out on his cheek just like you'd squeeze a pit out of a prune!" (54). Larrity dreams of settling down with a woman, but he knows he never will because he's locked into his violent lifestyle: "Yea, lad, you got to perform! You're a timber beast from now to the end. So what the hell, Bill, what the hell!" (56).
“The Old Warhorse” refers to Johnny McCann, who is the head sawyer of the big Menominee and Tacoma sawmill and who sets cutting records even on the days just before he retires after forty years on the job. The friend referred to in “Ike the Diver’s Friend” is Mouthy, a longshoreman from Liverpool who emigrates to Seattle, where he becomes the pal of Ike, another longshoreman. Ike leaves and strikes it rich on the Klondike, but he returns to share the wealth with Mouthy. In “C.P.R. [Canadian Pacific Railroad],” the last story of the first section, we read about an epic drinking contest between Shot McCune, an Irishman, and Johnny Flemmand, a Canadian Métis. The winner of the contest will supposedly get to take Essie Creel to a dance, but after the two men drink three quarts of whiskey, they pass out simultaneously, and Essie goes to the dance with someone else.

The second section of Homer in the Sagebrush, “Sagas of the Sagebrushers,” also includes five stories. “The River-Smeller” is about Spud Hawley, a Columbia River steamboat pilot who lost his position and became the boat’s cook. By using his incredible sense of smell to identify the river’s currents, Spud saves the boat when it becomes lost in the fog. Only the pilot knows what Spud has done, and he says he’ll deny it if Spud tries to take credit. Instead of becoming bitter or trying to fight back, Spud returns to his kitchen and cooks a breakfast that becomes legendary because the boat’s crew and passengers find it so good. The descriptions of food in this story are as mouth-watering as those in Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.”

“Jerkline” recounts the epic competition between two teamsters in Oregon to see who can be first to get his freight wagons from the Dalles to Prineville. “Mr. Stahlberg” illustrates how the tall tales of a liar—even when his lying is exposed—can influence impressionable youngsters. “Dyno Red the Miner” reads like one of the tall tales Mr. Stahlberg tells. A common miner named A. P.
Carver says that he owned a saloon until it was destroyed by a shoot-out between a union organizer and a stoolie. The action in “The Hardshell Elder” begins in the Overland Saloon in Boise, where a preacher and a gambler come into conflict. The preacher kills the gambler’s hired gunman, but the gambler kills the girl who started the conflict by kissing one of the preacher’s men.

The third and last section of Homer in the Sagebrush, “Idyls of Western Youth,” includes three stories about storytelling in the prosaic world of the working-class Northwest. The title story, “Homer in the Sagebrush,” tells about a sixteen-year-old ranch boy who goes to town, longing for adventure. In a town bar, he hears Poker Tom Davis tell the story of Homer’s Iliad. The boy’s imagination is so fired by the story that he seeks out Poker Tom the next day in the hope of hearing more marvelous tales. Hungover, Poker Tom is in no mood to tell stories, so he tells the boy to go read Homer. Seeing how dejected Tom is, the boy decides to return to the ranch and be common, but his imagination has nevertheless been fired by Poker Tom’s recital. Stevens’s writing shows that he, too, was inspired by Homer, as he was inspired by Walt Whitman, Jack London, and other great writers. Like the boy, too, Stevens was not comfortable with the contrast between literature’s thrilling world of adventures and the commonplace world of everyday reality. In much that he wrote, he made an effort to connect those two worlds.

The last two stories in the section and the book tell about liars whose lies are more satisfying than the realities they conceal. “The Little Angel” is the life story told by Alice Duval to a young hobo. Alice, the Madam of a whorehouse in Pocatello, says her father’s drunken sprees forced her to go into saloons and brothels when she was still a child. After her father died, she says, she went to Paris, where she was “ruined” by an English lord. Before she can finish her story, Alice is taken away by her man, Don Pindo.
Later, on a freight train to Butte, the young hobo hears the real story of Alice Duval, but, “Like most true stories, it failed to satisfy or inspire” (294), so he continues to daydream about the phony Alice. “Three Bartenders” tells about a tramp poet’s discussion with three supposedly noble and distinguished foreigners. The three are actually San Francisco bartenders who have no objection to talking poetry and getting drunk with the tramp poet.

Three drunken bartenders and a drunken tramp poet are not likely heroes of an epic of the American West. Nevertheless, although Homer in the Sagebrush is not a new Iliad or Odyssey, it does give us the work of a writer who was trying to follow the advice he had given in Status Rerum. He wanted his work to depict life in the forests and sagebrush of the Northwest without doing so in a genteel manner and style.

For his next book, Stevens returned to his first subject: Paul Bunyan. Instead of becoming the Northwest’s Homer, Stevens became a tall-tale spinner by adding to the narratives about the popular culture hero that he and other writers had been creating since the first printed mention of Paul Bunyan in 1910 (Hoffmann 2). As the title of his second collection of tales about Bunyan indicates, Stevens makes the central locus of the tales the Saginaw country of Upper Michigan, where he and his wife had spent two years doing research. And in the introductory chapter of The Saginaw Paul Bunyan, Stevens explains how he created the tales from what he had learned among the old loggers of the Saginaw. He says that he used the storytelling skills he acquired when he was “a Western woodsman” who listened to “the deeds of the king jack of all loggers recited for nigh on twenty-five years” (14). Eventually, Stevens says, he became a “camp bard” himself and “revised the tales of older bards, giving them whatever form the inspiration of the moment revealed” (14).

Then Stevens becomes quite explicit about how he composed his tales:
For this is the one royal road to truth in the history of Paul Bunyan. It has no documents for the seeker. Truth comes to the Bunyan bard as it comes to the Gospel preacher, in flashes of inspiration. There is a body of simple texts known to all woodsmen. Here is one of them: “Paul Bunyan invented logging in the winter of the Blue Snow.”

The honest bard never repeats the tale another has told about the famous season. He takes his text, lets the Bunyan spirit work, and then tries to cast new light, as the loggers say, on the first grand event of timber-country history.

Long after my ordination in the woods, I recorded certain elements of the history of Paul Bunyan in a book. I kept the pious purpose and followed the sacred method of the old camp bards in this work, never repeating another’s tale, but yielding entirely to inspiration. Often the light failed, but some new facts were revealed. (14-15)

Obviously, Stevens is speaking as a tall-tale spinner when he says that “some new facts were revealed” by this process of inspiration.

The “facts” in eight of the eighteen tales in The Saginaw Paul Bunyan focus on how the rivers and lakes in the area were formed or how they were used by loggers. “The Outpost of the Saginaw” and “Taming of the Big Auger” chronicle a battle between Paul Bunyan and a river named Big Auger—a battle that resulted in the formation of Niagara Falls. “The Round River Crossing” involves another Bunyan battle with a river, the Round River, which is said to be the original “Father of Waters” (39). “Little Fraid and Big Skeery” personifies two rivers that Bunyan bolsters so that they can have the power to transport logs. In “The Colossal Cornstalk,” Round River is transformed into two of the Great Lakes when Paul uses his sagacity to topple a giant cornstalk into the river. And in “Pokemouche the Red Beaver” and “The Seven Mississippis,” Babe’s battle with a giant beaver eventually
provokes the beaver into damming “the seven Mississippis,” thereby creating the last of the Great Lakes. As land-formation myths go, these are not very noteworthy.

Five of the tales in *The Saginaw Paul Bunyan* are about Paul’s efforts to keep his loggers happy and to defeat his rivals and an assortment of imaginary creatures that threaten to end the logging. In “Snoose Mountain,” for example, Paul has to find an inexhaustible source of snoose (the form of tobacco chewed by loggers) to keep his giant assistant, Hels Helson, happy. In “The Hunting of the Mince,” Paul invents hunting so that he and Babe can bring the loggers meat for a mince pie. In “Iron Man of the Saginaw,” Paul must use his sagacity to defeat Shot Gunderson, one of his rivals. Paul succeeds when he cleverly arranges matters so that Shot knocks himself out. Imaginary creatures in “The Bully Bees” and “The Dismal Sauger” stop the logging until Babe’s tail switches away the bully bees, and the “hodag” (a beast that logs trees) and the “sauger” (a beaver-like creature) defeat each other. Except for Paul’s cleverness and the weirdness of some of the imaginary critters, this group of tales is generally unremarkable.

Another group of tales is somewhat more memorable because of the bizarre features of the fictional natural world. The title of “The Trotting Trees” indicates the bizarreness in the narrative. Paul and his loggers come upon trees that trot by using their roots as legs, and Paul has his loggers lasso the trees so that they can log them. In “The Spring of the Mud Rain,” the weather declares war on Paul and his camp by literally raining mud on them. “The Same Old Saginaw” and “The Big Rubber Drive” show the challenge Paul and his men face when they encounter trees made rubbery because of their proximity to the Big Rubber River. The limber timber bounces the axes back, so Paul tells his men to pivot on their toes, a maneuver that swings the men in a half circle and that effectively makes the trees cut themselves down.
The strangeness in the tales of this group makes them more interesting than the others in the collection.

*The Saginaw Paul Bunyan* ends with a patriotic and nostalgic story titled “The Year of the Good Old Times.” Paul decides to head out for the West, and his loggers decide to go with him. Before they go, they express in the following assertions their devotion to the nation that has made their way of life possible: “My timber country! [...] May she always be right. [...] But right or wrong. [...] My timber country” (254-55). The nationalist patriotic fervor of their declaration suggests that for James Stevens the logging way of life was not just a simple matter of choosing an occupation but a fundamental expression of what it means to be an American. Stevens’s mindset is so determined by a frontier ethos that he can proclaim:

Paul Bunyan owned the Lincoln spirit.

In all other respects the first and greatest of North Woods heroes revealed American traits in the grand style. (11)

Whatever his intentions had been when he wrote his first Paul Bunyan tale, Stevens completed his second collection feeling that he had created a myth expressive of the essence of democracy. The Fuehrer-like aspects of Stevens’s Paul Bunyan make one wonder, however, whether Stevens ever realized when he was writing the tales how far in the direction of fascism his fascination with a Nietzschean *Ubermensch* (Superman) had taken him. Perhaps he intended the tales to be understood ironically but failed to include unmistakable markers of his irony.

In 1952, twenty years after the publication of *The Saginaw Paul Bunyan*, Daniel Hoffman did call attention to Stevens’s transformation of Paul Bunyan “into a symbol of unfettered free enterprise and managerial paternalism [...]” (112). Hoffman sees Stevens’s Bunyan as being “a parody of the Germanic *Kultur* hero” and “a
vulgarized caricature of a Hegelian World-Historical-Personality [. . .]" (102 and 104). In fact, more than twenty pages in Hoffman’s *Paul Bunyan: Last of the Frontier Demigods* are devoted to a devastating attack on Stevens and his Paul Bunyan tales. Hoffman criticizes Stevens for taking “the greatest pains of any popularizer to convince his readers of his roots in the old tradition [. . .]” (95), all the while making up entire tales on the basis of a single line. Stevens also, according to Hoffman, “propounds and ‘proves’ a fallacious theory of Bunyan’s origin” (96). Moreover, says Hoffman, “[. . .] Stevens seems to me to depart in every possible way from the standards of his models and from the concepts of his sources” (99). His Paul Bunyan is a doltish and “monopolistic timber baron, with his tribe of serfs in jolly peonage [. . .]” (106), and his satire of “prohibition, professors, and poetry” is a facile play for popularity, one that is badly written and in “bad taste” (106).

Although many of Hoffman’s charges are justified, the ferocity of his attack is surprising. What explains that ferocity is the history of a feud between H. L. Mencken and Stuart P. Sherman that began with an exchange of hostile reviews in 1917. The combat had abated considerably before Sherman’s death in 1926 (Vandebilt 210-12, 218, 246, and 247). Since Mencken was Stevens’s editor, one can understand why Stevens picked Sherman as the target for the satire in “New Iowa,” a tale in *Paul Bunyan* (1925), and why, after Sherman’s death, Stevens had the veiled allusion to Sherman dropped from later printings of the book. I suspect that the fallout from the Mencken–Sherman feud fed the ferocity of Hoffman’s attack on Stevens. Hoffman’s book was originally written as a Master’s thesis at Columbia University, where Carl Van Doren had taught until 1930 and where some of his colleagues were probably still teaching when Hoffman was a student. Since Van Doren was a former student, a fellow editor, and a good friend of Stuart Sherman, it seems likely that Hoffman could have heard
criticisms of Mencken and Stevens before he began writing his thesis (Hoffman ix; Vanderbilt 10-12). Even if Hoffman knew nothing about the Mencken–Sherman feud and Stevens’s contribution to it, he had the encouragement of a fellow folklorist and harsh critic of Stevens: Richard M. Dorson.

In 1950, two years before Hoffman’s book was published, Dorson had agreed to take part in a written exchange of views published as a kind of debate by Mencken’s successor at the American Mercury (Dorson, Folklore 5). “‘Folklore and Fake Lore’ [Dorson’s essay expressing his side of the debate] mounted an attack on the growing popularization, commercialization, and resulting distortion of folk materials [. . .]”; and among Dorson’s examples illustrating this problem were Stevens and his Paul Bunyan tales (Folklore 5). Stevens responded with an essay entitled “Folklore and the Artist.” In his later book Folklore and Fakelore: Essays toward a Discipline of Folk Studies (1976), Dorson accurately summarizes Stevens’s response:

Stevens replied patiently and without rancor save toward his competitors whom he felt had defaced the image of Bunyan. He saw himself not as a folklorist but as a literary artist drawing imaginative inspiration from the well of folklore, as Marlowe had done with Faustus, Byron with Don Juan, Homer with Odysseus. For thirty-five years he had been reciting and writing tales of his own invention. (6)

In his book’s concluding essay, “Folk Heroes of the Media,” Dorson says that most readers, including not only James Stevens but also Carl Sandburg and W. H. Auden, swallowed the popular myth of Paul Bunyan because the reporters who wrote for the country’s newspapers “had found a dusty, 100 percent American symbol in Paul Bunyan. Journalism, not folklore, has nourished Old Paul in the hearts of his countrymen” (336).
Dorson probably shifted most of the blame for fakeloring from Stevens to the newspapers because Stevens had not only agreed with almost everything that Dorson said but also seemed sincere in saying that he had not intended to deceive anyone and that he saw himself as a literary artist using scraps of folklore as the inspiration for his stories. Even Hoffman had found at least one of Stevens's Bunyan tales to be a redeeming part of the collection. Hoffman praised "The Colossal Cornstalk" for developing "a theme from oral tradition without condescension or distortion" and compared it favorably with the pre-Civil War yarns of Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Johnson J. Hooper, and A. B. Longstreet (114). Although Dorson did not repeat or mention Hoffman's praise of that particular tale, he at least exonerated Stevens from the accusation that he had deliberately tried to dupe his readers.

By 1932, when Stevens had completed *The Saginaw Paul Bunyan*, he had definitely broken with the genteel tradition of Northwest literature, but for all the workingmen's language he used, his work consisted of two collections of imagined "folk" tales, one novel romanticizing hard labor, another about his experiences during World War I, and a volume of short stories that combine a touch of the tall tale with an idealization of Stevens's early jobs on construction gangs and in the forests. As Warren Clare puts it:

> A survey of Stevens's work shows that, in spite of the precepts tacitly advanced in *Status Rerum*, his early fiction tended to idealize a period in Northwest history to which he looked back with sentimental nostalgia. (Clare, "Introduction" x)

When he wrote *Big Jim Turner*, however, he created what Clare says is "a mature work of fiction" and "one of the finest examples of literature yet produced in the Pacific Northwest" (Clare, "Introduction" x, xi).
Although Big Jim Turner is about the same length as Brawnyman and is based on many of the same incidents from Stevens’s own life, the novel resists brief summary because it has more than six dozen characters and from one to half a dozen incidents in each of the book’s nineteen chapters (not counting a short prefatory chapter and a short “Postscript”). Readers should also note that the name of the protagonist, Jim Turner, is the same in both Brawnyman and Big Jim Turner. The preface and postscript of Big Jim Turner serve as a prologue-and-epilogue frame of the other chapters. Chapters one through six form a kind of first act; chapters seven through twelve a second act; chapters thirteen through sixteen a third act; chapters seventeen through eighteen a fourth act; and chapter nineteen a fifth act. The discernible five-part structure provides a convenient framework for summarization, but the novel moves forward by a series of incidents that stand out in Jim Turner’s life, separated by chronological gaps that vary in length from a matter of hours to several years.

Letting his readers know in the novel’s preface that he had aspirations to be a poet at the tender age of four, Jim Turner signals that Big Jim Turner will be a kunstlerroman (a novel about his coming-of-age as an artist), unlike Brawnyman, which is a bildungsroman (a coming-of-age novel in general). Titled “The Silver Cap . . . ,” the preface characterizes Jim’s childhood in Iowa, when, as a four-year-old boy, he begged his Grandmother Barton (who was raising him) to let him have a quarter to buy a Silver Cap in support of Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. The narrator, who is Jim Turner himself at the age of twenty-two, says that although the Republican boys reduced the cap to tatters, “it kept for me the memory of the first stir and shine of poetry in myself” (2).

Chapters one through six of Big Jim Turner form the first part of the novel and show us the protagonist’s introduction to great
literature and to the joys and tragedies of real life. Jim tells us about his arrival in Idaho at the age of eleven to live with his Aunt Sue and Uncle Wiley Hurd. During his first several years in Idaho, he finds happiness with his aunt and uncle and the neighbor girl, Bess Clover, who lives with them. He also loves Inez, the horse given to him by another of his uncles, Gabe Turner, and he discovers the world of literature, first in the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley and then in the novels of Charles Dickens. He learns about the sadder side of life when Gabe has to sell Inez and when he sees the consequences of a cruel practical joke that Gabe has been cajoled into playing. He hears, too, about the assassination of Idaho's governor, Frank Steunenberg, on 30 December 1905 (a real-life event that is one of the most important in Idaho's history). Shortly thereafter, Jim leaves boyhood behind when he helps Lily Yardley, the twenty-six-year-old librarian in the nearby town of Knox, elope with his cousin Ramon Hurd.

The second part of Big Jim Turner introduces Jim to the world of work, beginning with Jim's admission to the Cumberland Institute, a Presbyterian school that allows poor boys and girls to work for their tuition at the school's dairy farm. At Cumberland, the real-life union activist and songwriter Joe Hill sees one of Jim's poems and says that Jim is definitely a poet. Also during this time, one of Jim's distant cousins, Ida Dorst, is "ruint" by a brakeman, and she runs off and becomes a prostitute. Jim's own life takes a similarly fateful turn when he walks into the Silver Bell Saloon on 30 August 1907. He sees a boy named Ollie Hicks drunk in the saloon; and when Ollie is later expelled from the Cumberland Institute as a result of the incident, the Hicks family holds Jim responsible because he had not lied convincingly enough to persuade the head of the school that Ollie was not in the saloon. The Hickses get revenge by tricking Jim into another saloon, letting Ollie beat him up, and pouring whiskey down Jim's throat.
so that he is thought to be drunk and is arrested when the marshal arrives.

Jim escapes from the jail by knocking out the marshal and then running to jump on a freight train. For the next several years, he lives as an itinerant worker on construction jobs in Idaho and Montana. On 3 April 1909, he heads for the construction camp of his cousin Ramon Hurd and Ramon’s partner, John J. Navarre (a.k.a. Jack Hard). Because the construction operation is being supported by the financial investment of an evangelist named Grundy Johnson, Jack Hard asks Jim to use his preaching skills to convince Grundy that the camp is suitably “Christian.” Jim does preach, and his preaching does convince Grundy.

When Jim goes to Boise in early November of 1909, Ramon has had the back of his skull crushed by an explosion set by a saboteur. Jim seeks his Uncle Dan Barton, because Dan’s consent is needed for Jack to make a business deal with Grundy Johnson involving the timber lands that Dan and Ramon own jointly. While Jim is in Boise, he visits Bess Clover, who had been working for the Salvation Army but quit to help the I.W.W. (International Workers of the World, also known as the Wobblies). Bess is staying with a radical union supporter named Mother Morgan, and both she and Bess admire Jim’s recent poetry (he has become an admirer of Walt Whitman). Mother Morgan then tells Jim that he can find Dan Barton in Spokane, but as Jim sets out to go there, he is mugged and dumped on a westbound freight train. Ironically, when the freight train stops at Umatilla and Jim gets off, he finds Dan Barton and Joe Hill there at a hobo camp. Jim joins these two radical union organizers in a free speech demonstration in Spokane, and then, with Dan, gets on a freight headed to Seattle.

In the third part of *Big Jim Turner*, Jim finds great satisfaction as a workingman. First he cuts down huge trees in northwest Washington; he leaves that job only because his felling partner,
Rud Neal, heads to the Queen Charlottes to marry his Haida sweetheart. Then Jim gets a job at the Copenhagen Sawmill in Portland, Oregon, where he is on the greenchain crew of the “seven bulls,” brawny workers led by their brawling foreman, Shot Gunderson. When Jim learns that Bess Clover is coming to Portland with Joe Hill and Emma Goldman to stand up for free speech, he and the other seven bulls go to the meeting and knock out the right-wing protestors who are trying to keep the leftists from speaking. The seven bulls are jailed for their tactics, and when Jim gets out of jail, he decides not to return to the sawmill. Instead, he joins his friend Bush Brown in working on a ranch near Joseph, Oregon. When Bush falls in love with his employer’s granddaughter and a marriage is imminent, Jim decides that he must return to Idaho and confront Russ Hicks, the man who had earlier led his family in framing Jim in Knox, Idaho.

That confrontation with Russ Hicks is the climax not only of part four but also of the whole novel. By confronting Russ, Jim learns to stand up and speak for himself. First, though, Ramon’s wife, Lily, and Uncle Dan Barton read Jim’s poetry and find it powerful and moving. Their positive response to his poems unleashes “a spring breakup” inside Jim, and they all weep for joy (241). After having his spirits lifted by Dan, Ramon, and Lily, Jim has the courage to confront Russ Hicks. He forces Russ and his brothers Ollie and Bud to confess that they tricked Jim. Russ even agrees to clear Jim’s record with the law if Jim will leave Idaho until the matter is settled. Before he goes, however, Jim stops to see Bess Clover. They profess their love for each other, and Jim spends the night with Bess. When he leaves her room the next morning, he discovers that Russ has tricked him again by breaking his promise to clear Jim with the law and by bringing a deputy to arrest him. Feeling trapped, Jim knocks Russ out of his saddle, but Russ’s foot sticks in the stirrup. Jim rides away and
over the Snake River bridge to Oregon and freedom, and as he looks back, he sees that the deputy has managed to lasso Russ's horse.

The novel's last chapter is the fifth part of *Big Jim Turner*, and it consists mostly of Jim's "Poem on a Poor Boy." A fitting end to the *kunstlerroman*, it gives us the evidence that Jim has found his voice as a poet. In the Public Library in Portland, Oregon, he encounters Ramon's wife, Lily. He shows her a revision of "Poem on a Poor Boy," which chronicles his life from the time he was seventeen until the novel's present. Finally, to tie up loose ends for the novel's readers, Jim adds a postscript in which he says that he has spent the last eight months writing *Big Jim Turner* and now he's ready to go hoboing. Russ Hicks, who was lamed when Jim knocked him off his saddle, has had Jim outlawed in Idaho. But Jim plans to join Rud Neal for a logging job in the Queen Charlottes. In his last lines, Jim asks us to mark well the day: "July 27, 1914." As most of Stevens's readers would probably have known when the novel was published in 1948, 27 July 1914 was the day before Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia—the commencement of World War I.

Interwoven with the threads of this packed narrative are a number of themes and ideas that were not new to Stevens's work but that receive their best treatment in this novel. First, Stevens shows us that Jim is a born workingman with the soul of a poet. Both the radical union organizers and the right-wing evangelical revivalists try to win him to their cause. Although Jim finds some ideas in each cause attractive, he is repulsed by the zealotry of both groups. The ideological zeal of Bess Clover and Joe Hill, on the one hand, and of Joanna Norblad and Grundy Johnson, on the other hand, blinds them to the real world that Jim experiences. It must be said, however, that his poetry often contradicts his own thoughts and feelings, and he is blind to the contradiction until
his friend Bush Brown points out to Jim that his poem about the misery of work expresses a feeling that is the opposite of the joy that Jim actually experiences from most of his jobs. Nevertheless, in showing us the ideas and emotions that surge through the mind and heart of young Jim Turner, Stevens shows us the complexity of life for the generation of northwestern working people who came of age in the decade and a half before the onset of World War I.

*Big Jim Turner* received mixed reviews. Jane Martin, reviewing the novel for the *New York Times*, wrote that “The whole saga seems enclosed in a chant, unable to break through to the five senses of the reader. Drama, general or personal, has become a legend by the time it escapes from the style of its presentation” (34). In contrast with Martin, J. H. Jackson praises *Big Jim Turner* in a review in the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

Stevens has succeeded beautifully. There is in *Big Jim Turner* a kind of tragic intensity which the Greeks would have understood very well: Jim Turner is Man Against Fate, and this novel about him and his struggle against forces too big for him to grasp wholly is done with warm sympathy and full knowledge. In creating Big Jim, “half poet and half horse,” Stevens has added a memorable figure to the gallery of American fictional heroes, and in his reflection of the labor struggle in the Northwest of four decades ago, he has recorded an important aspect of our social history. (14)

Contemplating the likely reasons for the difference between Martin’s thumbs-down response and Jackson’s high praise can help us understand the novel’s weaknesses and strengths.

Martin’s negative reaction to the novel’s style is understandable. In his aspiration to be the Walt Whitman of his time and place, Jim does, at a few points in the narrative, almost chant his story.
Here, for example, is how he describes William Edgar Borah (later to be a U.S. Senator from Idaho) prosecuting Big Bill Haywood for the assassination of Governor Frank Steunenberg:

[... ] I never can forget the proud picture that William Edgar Borah made as he stood out amid the bunting and above the crowd in the public square; arrayed in a frock coat, McKinley collar and Bryan tie; his jaws so strong and eyes so blazing under a tremendous black mane; his voice sounding as a trumpet of Joshua; his motions as mighty as Moses. (70)

And, like James Stevens, Jim has a tendency to romanticize the people he has known, a tendency that results in the drama becoming legend. But the yearning to be another Whitman and the tendency to romanticize are strong parts of Jim's character that shape his voice, and his voice gives the novel a distinctive quality and invites readers to recognize the complexity of Jim's response to his world. Perhaps if Martin had found that what Jim is saying is interesting, then she might not have reacted so negatively to how he says it.

Knowing that Jackson edited an anthology of California literature, Continent's End (1944), one can surmise that he probably found the content of Jim's narrative more interesting than Martin did. Certainly, Jackson had it right when he saw an element of literary naturalism in the novel, for Jim Turner does "struggle against forces too big for him to grasp wholly [...]." Moreover, since Jim finishes his narrative the day before the beginning of World War I, readers know what great force will soon shatter the world Jim has known. He will probably want to join the fight, if not right away, then when the United States enters the war. Even if he does not become a soldier, his world will be changed by the war and its aftermath. Jackson is right, too, when he says that
Stevens "has recorded an important aspect of our social history."

Other novelists had recorded the experiences of American workers, but Stevens stands out for his praise of the working life. Many, though not all, of the characters in Big Jim Turner get enjoyment and satisfaction from the hard work they do. Jim even relishes the twelve-hour days and the back-breaking loads he has to lift. Compare Stevens's depiction of Jim's work with the picture of manual labor in novels such as Upton Sinclair's The Jungle (1906) and John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath (1939). Sinclair and Steinbeck also show us big, strong workers who welcome the challenges of hard work, but the big, strong workers eventually collapse under the relentless and overwhelming demands of the economic system. Although Stevens's fiction includes characters who are casualties of the system, his protagonists remain strong and eager workers. For example, when Jim Turner describes his work as a timber-faller, cutting through old-growth trees "six foot through, more or less," he gives a long and detailed account of what he and his sawing teammate did. Midway through that account, he says:

Rud Neal and I were one man in the pull and ride of hands on the saw handles, in the turns of teeth and rakers from one position to another in the kerf, in the feel of just when to stop and slush coal oil in at binding pitch, in the time to wedge against the bind, in the sense of the tree's death shudder before crackling groan and fall notchward—the signal to yell, "Timber-r-r!" and jump from the springboards for shelter from limbs broken and flying.

Well nigh a year of it with Rud Neal, in one spot and another of the big-timber coast. I might have kept it up with him for fifty more years, as many pairs of friends have done. But then it was love for him, love of a girl [. . .]. (190)
Instead of shuddering at the memory of all the danger and hard work, Jim delights in recounting it all and says he would have kept at it for another half century if his teammate had not left to get married.

In addition to that difference between Stevens’s protagonists and those of other novelists who wrote about workingmen, Sinclair’s Jurgis Rudkus and Steinbeck’s Tom Joad eventually see the need for reforms such as stronger unions and government protections for workers. In contrast to such politicized workers, Jim Turner resists a total commitment to the union cause (although he sees some merit in the vision of the union supporters) just as instinctively as he refuses to give himself body and soul to the cause of the fundamentalist evangelical Christians. Seeking his inspiration in the works of Walt Whitman, Jim says: “Inside him [Whitman] it seemed I’d find something to live by, keeping on looking; to live by and for, and not having to ask for license from either the old religion or the new revolution” (153).

What Jim does surrender to is the call of his muse. He feels the call of poetry, and he wants to be the Walt Whitman of his time and place. As a portrait of a young workingman who aspires to be a poet, Big Jim Turner can be compared with James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916). Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus has a richer and more complex life of the mind than does Stevens’s Jim Turner, but Jim has a correspondingly greater experience of the world of work. As a workingman at the peak of his physical abilities, Turner is unexcelled, but as a poet, he has neither the depth and breadth of educational experience, nor the guidance from masters of his art form that have prepared Dedalus to be a great artist.

Jim Turner’s success as a poet depends upon the reader’s assessment of his poems, and Big Jim Turner gives us only a handful of his shorter poems (some of them in fragments, and all of them
either bad or unremarkable) and his magnum opus, “Poem on a Poor Boy.” Walt Whitman’s influence is clear in the prosy, incantatory style of “Poem on a Poor Boy.” Its power, however, lies in the poet/speaker’s ambivalence about his subject (i.e., the forces in his life). He is pulled between the opposing dreams of the political visionaries, who agitate for a socialist workers’ paradise, and the worker-capitalists, whose dream of wealth also promises paradise. The poet accepts wholeheartedly only Walt Whitman—“[. . .] I revere him and love him and know him by heart [. . .]” (270-71)—but the poet also knows that the world has changed since Whitman wrote about it. Turner’s poem ends ominously and without any of Whitman’s optimism:

In Walt Whitman’s day the American glory was as the virgin pines of the Lake States. Now it is smoke on a dark land. Now I have turned in my gear and my tools and my time. Now I only remember. (271)

By itself, “Poem on a Poor Boy” is not great art. As part of Big Jim Turner, it reveals the growth of the heart and mind of Jim Turner. The novel’s implied author and implied reader can see that, though Jim is not a great poet, he does tell his coming-of-age story with considerable artistry.

Why, then, has Big Jim Turner received so little in the way of critical attention? According to Warren Clare, one reason for the lack of attention is the fact that “The book had received little promotion from the publisher” (“Big Jim Stevens” 130). When Stevens sought the publication of his earlier works, he had benefited from the support of the publishing firm of Alfred A. Knopf. While Stevens was at work on Big Jim Turner, he told Stewart Holbrook about the novel, and Holbrook, who was then Northwest editor for Doubleday, persuaded Stevens to let Doubleday publish the novel. Another reason critics ignored the novel can probably be ascribed
to the controversy that arose in the early 1950s over Stevens’s Paul Bunyan tales. It should also be noted that the Western Literature Association was not founded until 1965, and before its founding, there was little encouragement for scholars to study and write about the literature of the American West. In 1975, when the University of New Mexico Press published a new printing of Big Jim Turner with an introduction by Warren Clare, it looked like the novel might at last become part of the western canon. But the novel soon went out of print again, and it has received nothing more than a passing mention since then.

The public reception of Big Jim Turner was probably not helped any by the fact that during the 1940s and 1950s, Stevens wrote five other books that add very little to his legacy. Timber (1942), Paul Bunyan’s Bears (1947), and Tree Treasure: A Conservation Story (1950) are intended for an audience of pre-teens and teens. Green Power: The Story of Public Law 273 (1958) explains legislation affecting the timber industry. Three of those books illustrate Stevens’s view of national and state forests as resources that could best be used by harvesting the timber and essentially turning the forests into tree farms. His position as publicist for the West Coast Lumbermen’s Association undoubtedly influenced his thinking. Stevens’s fifth book during this period (besides Big Jim Turner) was Door of Opportunity, which is listed in the bibliography of Warren Clare’s dissertation as having been privately printed in 1949. I have been unable to locate a copy of this autobiographical work.

The door of opportunity that Stevens refers to in the title of his autobiography is probably the chance he had when he received the invitation from H. L. Mencken to send more of his writing for publication in American Mercury. Stevens seized that opportunity when he wrote his tales of Paul Bunyan. Even if we accept Hoffman’s and Dorson’s criticisms of those tales—as Stevens
himself accepted many of them—we are still left with the question of what *Paul Bunyan* and *The Saginaw Paul Bunyan* have contributed to the literature of the American West. Because the tales come from a frontier mindset, their vision of westering should be resisted by today's readers, who are better informed about the consequences of the Anglo-American conquest of western landscape and native peoples. Stevens's tall tales still stand, however, as testimony to the frontier belief of an earlier West that the West's resources were essentially limitless. As for their humor, it is far from matching the hilarity of the best of the tall tales of the mountain men. Still, these books are the only ones by Stevens that remain in print at this time, and they are worth studying, if only to ascertain how they have shaped and are part of popular culture.

As for *Brawnyman*, *Mattock*, and *Homer in the Sagebrush*, they, too, deserve at least some attention. Although they have none of the genteel manner and style that Stevens and H. L. Davis had criticized in *Status Rerum*, their protagonists do not possess the naturalness of the voice in *Big Jim Turner*. The Jim Turner of *Brawnyman* earns only a small part of our sympathy because he so willfully refuses to cultivate the life of the mind. The eponymous Mattock grows in moral stature and begins to capture our sympathy until he reverts to being a narrow-minded bigot. And the protagonists in the stories collected in *Homer in the Sagebrush* have similar limitations. Since readers can see that the implied author wants us to notice and disapprove of these limitations, they share with the implied author the cosmopolitan vision that Tom Lutz says (in *Cosmopolitan Vistas*) is at the heart of literary regionalism and, indeed, of American literature generally.

Stevens's best expression of that cosmopolitan vision is in *Big Jim Turner*. Lutz argues that "American literary culture [. . .] lives and thrives at the crossroads where aesthetics and politics meet, and therefore cannot be described in aesthetic or political
Given Jim Turner's aspiration to be a poet committed only to poetry—even as he confronts ideologists who vie for his loyalty—Stevens's novel clearly "lives and thrives at the crossroads where aesthetics and politics meet." Furthermore, Lutz says that in those literary texts with the cosmopolitan perspective, "Readers are prompted to both identify and *not identify* [Lutz's emphasis] with characters in the text—since no character, no political position, no side of any cultural debate is represented as having ultimate value in the literary text, no character can provide, for literary readers, a model for being in the world" (57). Although the Jim Turner of *Big Jim Turner* gains readers' sympathy so that we can identify with him, at the same time we cannot identify with him because we can see that his worldview is still limited by his position in time. If he survives the coming war, he is likely to feel (as most artists of that time felt) that if he is to remain an artist, he must "make it new" (to use Ezra Pound's phrase).

We admire Big Jim Turner for his openness to life and art, even as we see not only his failure to understand and act upon his love for Bess Clover but also his inability to accept the conclusion of his "Poem on a Poor Boy" and to look beyond it. *Big Jim Turner* has a richness and complexity of meaning that cannot be exhausted by any single approach to the text. Like the best of western literary regionalism, it deepens a reader's understanding and appreciation of the region even as it prompts the reader to consider the region from a cosmopolitan perspective. It stands out as the crowning achievement of Stevens's career as a writer. That achievement has earned James Stevens a place among notable western American writers of the early twentieth century.
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ANTHOLOGIES INCLUDING WORKS BY JAMES STEVENS


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**OTHER REFERENCES**


About the Author

Jim Maguire has taught in the English Department at Boise State University since 1970. He helped Wayne Chatterton start BSU’s Western Writers Series, served as its co-editor from 1972 to 1998 and from 2000 to 2001, and wrote the second title in the series, *Mary Hallock Foote*. In 2003, the WWS also published Maguire’s *Reading Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping*. He also served as a section editor of, and a contributor to, two volumes sponsored by the Western Literature Association: *A Literary History of the American West* (1987) and *Updating the Literary West* (1997). His essay on “Fiction of the West” appears in the *Columbia History of the American Novel* (1991). Maguire is also an anthologist, having edited *The Literature of Idaho: An Anthology* (1986) and co-edited, along with Donald A. Barclay and Peter Wild, three more anthologies, including: *Different Travellers, Different Eyes: Artists’ Narratives of the American West, 1820-1920* (2001). Maguire hopes to retire soon so that he can loaf, play chess, and saunter (not necessarily in that order).

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