

The Fiction of Jessamyn West

John T. Flanagan*

In 1970 Jessamyn West published *Crimson Ramblers of the World, Farewell*, her ninth work of fiction and her twelfth book.¹ Since 1945 when *The Friendly Persuasion* appeared, she has written five books of short stories and four novels; and she has contributed to such major American magazines as *Harper's*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Yale Review*, and the *New Yorker*, not to mention such defunct periodicals as *Collier's* and the weekly *Saturday Evening Post*. One volume, *Cress Delahanty*, was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1954. Yet she has never won a Pulitzer Prize nor has her work attracted substantial critical attention. Her depiction of adolescent girls, her low keyed plots, her occasional preference for historical themes, and perhaps even the quiet authority of her writing have deflected critics who are basically concerned with splashy techniques and perhaps the more immediate social and economic problems of the day. One is reminded of Edwin Arlington Robinson's reply to the stricture that his work consisted mostly of blacks and browns and grays. "Those are pretty fast colors," he insisted.² It is likely that Miss West's work will reveal a durability not enjoyed by the more sensational and iconoclastic writers of her time.

Much of what Jessamyn West has written suggests her Quaker heritage. Not only do practicing members of the Society of Friends frequently appear as characters, but such stalwart Quaker virtues as sobriety, tolerance, industry, thrift, and integrity seem to be the criteria by which she judges and conceives people. She has found models for some of her characters within her own family. Thus Joshua and Elizabeth Milhous, great-grandparents not only of Miss West but also of President Richard Milhous Nixon, are the prototypes of two of her most memorable individuals, Jess and Eliza Birdwell. Moreover, Miss West's life has been closely linked with two states—Indiana and California—in which Quakers appeared early and where they

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¹ Fiction by Jessamyn West includes *The Friendly Persuasion* (1945), *The Witch Diggers* (1951), *Cress Delahanty* (1953), *Love, Death, and the Ladies' Drill Team* (1959), *South of the Angels* (1960), *A Matter of Time* (1966), *Leafy Rivers* (1967), *Except for Me and Thee* (1969), and *Crimson Ramblers of the World, Farewell* (1970). She has also written *A Mirror for the Sky* (1948), the libretto for an opera about John James Audubon, and an autobiographical narrative, *To See the Dream* (1957). She has edited an anthology, *The Quaker Reader* (1962). Miss West's publisher is Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. in New York.

² Quoted in Jay Martin, "A Crisis of Achievement: Robinson's Late Narratives," *Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays*, ed. Ellsworth Barnard (Athens, Ga., 1969), 138.



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Jim Theologos, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

made notable contributions to the educational and cultural growth of the commonwealth.³

Jessamyn West was born twenty miles from Madison in Jennings County, Indiana, in 1907 but was taken as a child of six to California. In later years she remembered revival services, singing, and ragtime hymns; obviously the Quaker atmosphere of her childhood was not necessarily a quiet one.⁴ She grew up in Yorba Linda in a region of orange groves southeast of Los Angeles which had been originally settled by Quakers from Indiana. Immediately across an irrigation canal lived the family of President Nixon. She recalled subsequently that "Richard Nixon's father was my Sunday-school teacher and the father put into his Sunday-school teaching all of the vigorous verbal polemics the son displays in politics."⁵ A birthright Quaker herself, she graduated from Whittier College, Whittier, California, an institution sponsored by the Society of Friends, and subsequently studied in England. She then entered the University of California at Berkeley with the intention of taking a Ph.D. degree in English and had proceeded to the oral examinations when an attack of tuberculosis disrupted further academic education. For two years she was confined to a sanatorium. This experience turned her attention to writing as similar forced inactivity at Gaylord Farm Sanatorium, Walling-

³ Miss West's personal interest in the Quakers and their history in England and the United States is confirmed by the book she edited in 1962, *The Quaker Reader*. This volume of 523 pages with an extensive bibliography quotes extensively from such famous figures as William Penn, George Fox, John Woolman, and Rufus Jones and provides considerable information about Quaker doctrines, customs, support of nonviolence, shrewdness in business matters, and interest in educational and eleemosynary activities.

⁴ Biographical information about Jessamyn West (in private life Mrs. H. M. McPherson of Napa, California) is scarce. See Cleveland Amory, "Trade Winds," *Saturday Review*, LIII (October 24, 1970), 8; Helen Beal Woodward, "Housewife in Hollywood," *ibid.*, XL (February 23, 1957), 19; Jessamyn West to John T. Flanagan, November 3, 1969. Miscellaneous details about her life appear in Jessamyn West, *To See the Dream* (New York, 1957). Alfred S. Shivers recently published a brief bibliography of Jessamyn West although, since it omits some articles and excludes all reviews, it is hardly complete. See "Jessamyn West," *Bulletin of Bibliography*, XXVIII (January-March, 1971), 1-3. Indiana University conferred an honorary degree upon Miss West on June 8, 1959. The citation reads as follows: "JESSAMYN WEST, nationally acclaimed novelist, imaginative writer of short short stories, inspiring teacher of young writers, you are sincerely beloved in Hoosierdom for your loyalty to the state of your birth. Indiana University rejoices in tribute to your literary achievements. Richly endowed with uncommon talent, as perceptive and sensitive observer you have given to others of your own insights into the American scene. Today we welcome you into further fellowship with the degree DOCTOR OF HUMANE LETTERS."

⁵ *To See the Dream*, 131. President Nixon is also aware of the close link between his family and Indiana. On June 24, 1971, he made a special trip to Vernon in order to dedicate a plaque commemorating the birthplace of his mother, Hannah Milhous Nixon. Mrs. Nixon was born on a farm in 1885 four and one half miles southeast of Butlerville in Bigger Township. *Chicago Tribune*, June 25, 1971, Section 1, p. 3.

ford, Connecticut, made a dramatist out of Eugene O'Neill.⁶ Indeed she once remarked that she compulsively took the horizontal rather than the vertical approach to writing.⁷

Certainly Miss West's own illness and the knowledge that cancer had taken the lives of several grandparents as well as her father and mother enabled her later to speak sympathetically of protracted and severe illness.⁸ Such a book as *A Matter of Time* (1966), which deals sensitively with a woman's choice of suicide rather than to submit to the senseless suffering of a rapidly growing and inoperable tumor, probably could not have been written without the author's personal experience of hospital life.

In the early 1940s Miss West began to contribute short stories to such periodicals as the *Atlantic Monthly*; and a collection of them loosely spliced into a longer narrative, *The Friendly Persuasion*, became an immediate success. Miss West later spent some months on location in Hollywood helping to convert the book into a motion picture. When it was finally produced with Gary Cooper playing the leading role of Jess Birdwell and Dorothy McGuire that of Eliza Birdwell it was widely acclaimed.⁹ Indeed one of Miss West's most recent books, *Except for Me and Thee* (1969), reverts to the story of the Birdwells, the Quaker rural couple whose quiet life won so many readers for the author a quarter of a century ago.¹⁰

Geographically Miss West's fiction is divided somewhat inequitably between the two states with which she is linked personally. Four books deal with Indiana, three with California; the latter state is also the locale of the miscellaneous short stories in *Love, Death, and the Ladies' Drill Team* (1959) and the recent *Crimson Ramblers of the*

⁶ Louis Sheaffer, *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (Boston, 1968), 245-57. Sheaffer writes, "It was at Gaylord that Eugene O'Neill decided to write for the theater, or, more precisely, that he finally became aware of a decision he had unconsciously made long before" (p. 252).

⁷ Quoted in Edward Weeks, "Books: The Peripatetic Reviewer," *Atlantic Monthly*, CCXX (December, 1967), 130.

⁸ Webster Schott, "A Gentle Storyteller Challenges Death," *Life*, LXI (October 21, 1966), 8. This is a review of *A Matter of Time*.

⁹ The film, *The Friendly Persuasion*, directed by William Wyler, was released by Allied Artists Pictures Corporation in 1956. Michael Wilson was originally engaged to write the screen play but subsequently Robert Wyler and Miss West herself were called to Hollywood for the purpose. Because of the tangle of authorship no credit was given to any scriptwriter when the picture was first shown. Miss West wrote her version of what happened during her Hollywood sojourn in the subjective and impressionistic volume *To See the Dream*. See also the succinct account of the author's relations with the cinema world and the screenplay writers' controversy in Elizabeth Poe, "Credits and Oscars," *The Nation*, CLXXXIV (March 30, 1957), 267-69.

¹⁰ *Except for Me and Thee* is subtitled *A Companion to The Friendly Persuasion*. Apparently there are to be no more stories about the Indiana Quakers. At least the author wrote in a personal letter, "Thats [sic] the end of the Quaker line for me." Jessamyn West to John T. Flanagan, November 29, 1969.

World, Farewell. Chronologically a similar division is apparent. The four Indiana volumes are all set in the nineteenth century although it is true that *The Witch Diggers* (1951) begins on Christmas Day, 1899, and spills over into the following year. The other three Indiana books take place in pre-Civil War days and are localized in the southeastern section of the state in which Madison, Vernon, and Connersville are focal points. On the contrary, the California novels are twentieth century narratives. Miss West's longest and most ambitious novel, *South of the Angels* (1960), is a panoramic account of the subdividing and settlement of a tract of land located in the neighborhood of Anaheim. The transformation of the rolling barley fields into citrus groves, a story repeated more than once in the historical development of Orange County, is as authentic history as Miss West's account in *Except for Me and Thee* of the operation of the Underground Railroad in Jennings County, Indiana.¹¹

A good deal of Miss West's fiction has appeared in magazines, and some of the earlier stories remain uncollected. Her habit has been to select sufficient stories or sketches and to arrange them in chronological order to form such books as *Cress Delahanty* and *Except for Me and Thee*. Despite the absence of transitions from story to story the reappearance of the protagonists and even of some of the minor characters provides a superficial coherence which can substitute, at times quite effectively, for genuine plot development. But rarely is there a strong dramatic interest, or a narrative which gradually evolves and develops in intensity until a climax is reached. Even where the author from the outset apparently conceived of her story as a structural whole rather than as a grouping of disjunctive episodes, her habit of concentrating on scenes and sketches contravenes artistic unity. Indeed one might argue that her major limitation as a novelist is her lack of firm structure.

There are, to be sure, several books in which Miss West clearly wrestled with the problem of structure. In *A Matter of Time*, a chronicle of the Murphy family, it is the relationship between the sisters Tasmania and Blix which provides the backbone of the novel. The Murphy family is presented in fragmentary episodes. Orland Murphy, originally from Kentucky, is inept and somewhat of a tinkerer; his wife Maude strives to hold the family together but is neither sharply aware of nor sympathetic with the world around her. The Christmas reunion of the children is convivial, but in this California Quakerish household there is no Christmas tree, no crib, no churchgoing. Both

¹¹ "Neighbors," the longest story in the book (pp. 137-210), concerns Jess Birdwell's role in helping fugitive slaves avoid recapture by southern slaveowners.

sisters have sexual adventures and both marry; Blix is the more sensual and the more impulsive, Tassie (short for Tasmania) the more intellectual. Blix' ailment, a malignant intestinal tumor, draws the sisters together, and much of the novel focuses on Blix' sick bed with Tassie alternately ministering to the wants of her dying sister and recalling past experiences. Eventually a plan develops: when Blix reaches the point of being unable or unwilling to endure further pain, she will kill herself with an overdose of pills which her physician has conveniently provided. Thus *A Matter of Time* does build up to a conclusion and stops abruptly with Blix' death.

In *South of the Angels*, a sprawling novel of 564 pages, Miss West has provided a huge cast, so numerous indeed that one reviewer suggested that a reader would benefit from a list of *dramatis personae*.¹² In all some seventeen fairly important characters are introduced, described, interwoven with the events of the novel. But the artistic method of shifting back and forth among them leaves the reader puzzled to the end as to which figure is meant to be the protagonist. The technique utilized here is reminiscent of John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* trilogy in the days when such labels as the breadthwise novel were employed.¹³ Thus the story opens with the introduction of Syl Perkins and his wife, Syl being the promoter of a land scheme which will attract immigrants and produce citrus crops providing that adequate water is available. But after the first section of chapter one Perkins vanishes for almost a hundred pages and he seldom reappears thereafter. In the meanwhile the stage is filled with others: Tom Mount, carpenter and itinerant lecher; the Mexican couple Pete and Rosa; the Shel Lewis family; Basil Cudlip, inveterate hater of Negroes and Mexicans and paradigm of the Old South; Lute Cope, newspaper editor, and his somewhat less than faithful wife, Indiana Rose Cope; Asa Brice, described in Thoreau-like terms but not endowed with Henry David Thoreau's intellectuality; the widow Opal Tetford and the spinster schoolteacher Eunice Fry, both seduced and jilted by Tom Mount; the old line Quakers Wendlin and Mary Jessup; the self-named preacher LeRoy Raunce, who yields to the demands of the flesh more than a Quaker should; and of course the younger people, Medora Cudlip, Press Cope, Chad Lewis. Almost anyone of these persons could have served the author as a central character; instead the narrative moves from one to another, from episode to episode, without sequence or apparent direction, save that the absence of water works

¹² Edward Weeks, "The Atlantic Bookshelf: The Peripatetic Reviewer," *Atlantic Monthly*, CCVI (July, 1960), 96.

¹³ *U.S.A.*, collected in 1938, includes *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936).

a hardship on the orchard growers, romances between unlikely couples blossom, and births and deaths occur. Also there is a long flashback to explain Eunice Fry's affair with Tom Mount in Fort Collins, Colorado, although it took place two years before the settlement of the tract began. The story pattern is like a broken line in one's palm; life somehow continues but in leaps and bounds and even pauses. *South of the Angels* has considerable merit as a piece of fiction but its narrative appeal is slight. The characters too often seem to get out of hand.

Probably *Leafy Rivers* (1967) is Miss West's most successful book structurally, but it too is complicated by the intentional alternation of place and time. The novel is set in Ohio and Indiana about 1818 and deals with the Converse family, Quaker farmers. Leafy (born Mary Pratt Converse but nicknamed Leafy because of her habit of saying "I'd just as lief") marries Reno Rivers, a young rural schoolmaster, and they begin married life in the Whitewater Valley of southeastern Indiana. Reno is even less successful as a farmer than as a rural pedagogue; he raises hogs on rented land and dreams of prosperity; but, when he falls sick, it is Leafy who takes command and sees that the hogs reach the Cincinnati market. En route to the meat packing center Leafy falls in with an attractive young drover Cashie Wade, accepts his hospitality, and sleeps with him in his peripatetic hog hospital. Pregnant as a result of this liaison Leafy returns to the Converse home in Ohio to have her child. The story of the novel is basically Leafy's life as she remembers it while awaiting motherhood. Scenes of the Converse home, with the father Bass retaining the habits and principles of Philadelphia Quakerdom and the older son Chancellor trying to express his yen for acting and preaching, alternate with glimpses of Leafy at school, repeating the eighth grade because her parents could not afford to send her elsewhere. Other scenes intermingle Leafy's Ohio bedroom with visions of the Indiana homestead in the woods where Reno struggles half heartedly with farm work. Finally Leafy remembers the hog safari to Cincinnati, how she maneuvered the herd past a nest of copperhead snakes which the sows cheerfully trampled on and ate, and how she ferried the animals across a river. As the time of her delivery approaches, Leafy's present situation increasingly dominates past memories; and despite the inept obstetrician who virtually flees from the sickroom, Leafy gives birth to a healthy girl. Thus the heroine's marriage and pregnancy provide the enveloping action for the entire story.

But even if the narrative thrust of *Leafy Rivers* is not always satisfactory, the novel like the rest of Miss West's fiction has other

strong merits. Conspicuous among her artistic achievements is a magnificent sense of place. The Converse farm and the Indiana woods cabin where Leafy and Reno try to make a go of marriage, the suburban home on the edge of the California desert in which Blix Murphy awaits death, the ranch house where Cress Delahanty experiences the qualms and joys of adolescence, the undeveloped tract of *South of the Angels* with its dry washes, irrigation ditches, and brown arid hills are all vividly depicted, presented with carefully selected details and a constant awareness of light and sound. The county poor farm in *The Witch Diggers* is almost a character in its own right, with the fields that must be kept productive, the stock that must be made to multiply, and the shabby buildings where the pitiful inmates bicker and complain and tattle about their trivial jealousies.

The reader recalls smaller scenes too. Eliza Birdwell in *The Friendly Persuasion* goes to court in a successful endeavor to retrieve her wayward goose Samantha and insists that Samantha can be identified by her gait; she is a goose which can pace.¹⁴ There is the shabby hotel in Madison to which Cate Conboy in *The Witch Diggers* flees in misery, hoping to escape a disappointing love affair and the revelation of an unexpected family skeleton.¹⁵ Earlier in the same novel there is the sociable (the local term for it is play party) held at the Wesley Cope house, where on a hot August evening nothing stronger than lemonade is served, but the guests promenade to "Skip to My Lou" and later sing "King William was King James' son, Up from the royal race did come" before dancing stops and banana ice cream and coconut cake appear.¹⁶ A quite different scene, more comic than most of Miss West's, shows Cress Delahanty, having badgered her father into allowing her to purchase an extravagant hat for beach wear, parading up and down a California boardwalk. But Cress gets tired, stops to rest near an aquarium, and suddenly sees her precious hat slowly settling into the water, which quickly turns a flamingo red from the dye in the hat's ornaments. The crowning humiliation to Cress is the insistence of the proprietor of the aquarium that Mr. Delahanty pay for the fish which Cress' hat has supposedly poisoned.¹⁷

Part of Miss West's success in realizing such scenes derives from her control of the physical locale and her use of authentic and specific colors and objects. The forests of early Indiana are not just collections of trees but are full of sycamores and gums, of willows and beeches. The underbrush includes sarviceberries and shadbush, fox

¹⁴ "The Pacing Goose," *The Friendly Persuasion*, 29-46.

¹⁵ *The Witch Diggers*, 312-21.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26-39.

¹⁷ *Cress Delahanty*, 63-75.

grapes come in profusion in the fall, there is sassafras for those who know how to brew tea, squirrels and copperheads haunt the woods. In California, on the other hand, the flora include eucalyptus and umbrella trees, palms and jacarandas, cactus and poppies. Farmers begin to raise sweet potatoes and peanuts instead of barley. Towhees, hawks, and buzzards fly overhead, and quail run along swales. The aroma of four o'clocks, zinnias, and bougainvillea supplements the fragrance of orange blossoms. Tarantulas and centipedes appear on the floors of the settlers' houses; horned toads, pack rats, and an occasional bobcat populate the arroyos. Nor is this local color obtrusive. The Indiana and California backgrounds fit naturally into the story, providing both a backdrop and a proscenium for the narrative action.

The characters of Miss West's fiction form a diversified and well defined group with some basic similarities.¹⁸ In the novels about early Indiana they are of necessity rural and are often pioneer settlers. Towns play a small role since the interest is concentrated on the farm home, occasional barn raisings or quilting bees, the camp meeting, the country school, the tasks of field or kitchen. Indeed the reader is often reminded of the genre pictures in such novels of Edward Eggleston as *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* (1871) and *Roxy* (1878). Miss West's Hoosiers are farmers or nurserymen, stock raisers, rural pedagogues or physicians, itinerant peddlers, exhorters or backwoods preachers. Jess Birdwell in *The Friendly Persuasion* peddles nursery stock throughout southern Indiana; Odis Korby in *The Witch Diggers* is an undertaker, furniture salesman, and feed merchant; Link Conboy in the same book is a country lawyer who took over the poor farm in the hope that he could support his family more comfortably; Simon Yanders in *Leafy Rivers* was a homesteader and hog raiser who lost interest in such occupations after his wife died and thus became the local sheriff.

In the California novels the occupations differ somewhat but the social level and the economic focus show no substantial change. Citrus ranches, which produce oranges and lemons, substitute for the Ohio Valley homesteads where corn and hogs and fruit trees are raised. The subsistence farmer is still common although he is not so labeled; the log cabin or unpainted frame dwelling has been replaced by the ranch house; the children find school a location for peripheral

¹⁸ Miss West, like Sinclair Lewis, has a fondness for unfamiliar and unusual personal names. In addition to such figures as Odis Korby, Tasmania Murphy, Indiana Rose Cope, Opal Tetford, and Simon Yanders, the reader will meet minor characters with such appellations as the following: Prill (short for Aprilla) Converse, Dr. Junius Daubenhay, Venese Lucey, Leathy Wade, Doss Whitt, Airey Creagan, Floy Oates, Swan Stebeney, Laban Birdwell, Dr. Horace Chooney, Persis Hughes, Arod Johnson, Missouri Overfield, Merlin Webster, and many others.

activities such as athletics, picnics, and dramatic and musical events; the women attend PTA meetings and supervise bake sales and raffles. Instead of backwoods hired hands there are itinerant fruit pickers, largely Mexicans, and oil drillers, textbook salesmen, seaside resort fry cooks, fish peddlers, and piano tuners. Occasional scenes take place in small towns and there are references to restaurants, high schools, movie houses, and town halls placed conveniently over hardware stores or funeral establishments. But Miss West is not interested in the sophistication, or the crime and violence, of the big city. Only a few characters in *South of the Angels* and *A Matter of Time* ever get to Los Angeles despite the proximity of the southern California metropolis to their homes. The author's focus of concern remains the country, no longer the lush forests of the Ohio Valley, where the big butts scarcely allow the sunlight to filter to the forest floor, but rather arroyos and brown hills and desert land parched for much of the year until a wind from the sierras brings coolness and flowers simultaneously.

It must be admitted that Miss West is not always successful or convincing in her depiction of male characters. The husbands in *A Matter of Time* are vague background figures who barely impinge on the reader's attention, even as Orland Murphy seems the most incompetent and abstracted member of his family. Reno Rivers is inept and vacillating; his attraction for Leafy can be explained only on the grounds that there was no available rival for a young girl determined to leave home. Christie Fraser, the putative hero of *The Witch Diggers*, seems uncertain and evasive when direct action is called for and is even allowed to drop out of the story for several long chapters. Tom Mount in *South of the Angels* is the conventional philanderer and woman chaser; he has only to look at a female to insure a conquest. Cress Delahanty's father is oddly tolerant and protective even when his adolescent and quirky daughter goes from one strange kick to another.

Some of the men in *South of the Angels*, to be sure, have stronger outlines. The real estate promoter Syl Perkins is an amiable shyster whom Miss West makes an error in not developing further. Lute Cope, despite being imposed upon by both his daughter and his wife, has a certain individuality which also might have been given further exposition. Basil Cudlip's willingness to take the law into his own hands, especially if his prospective victim is dark skinned, suggests that the mentality of the Old South can be transferred all too easily to southern California. And LeRoy Raunce, a combination of artisan and self-taught preacher, is a figure relatively well known in the vast amorphous region south of the angels.

As one might expect, Miss West's best drawn men are the Quakers, whose firm virtues she can sincerely admire and whose peccadilloes and gentle stubbornness she can review with smiling tolerance. Wendlin Jessup, helplessly watching his wife battle futilely against death, is admirably calm and self-controlled. His son Benjamin will certainly do credit to the Society of Friends which he hopes to serve. Bass Converse, surprisingly unyielding in his role of local despot even in pioneer Ohio, will attend camp meetings although he is reluctant to testify, dislikes the fuss and decoration that Christmas brings to the homes of his neighbors, but on many occasions fumbles with a French harp. He will play camp meeting hymns without conviction.

Above all there is Jess Birdwell, the hero of two books or, more properly, of a number of loosely connected short stories. Born in Ohio the youngest of nine children, Jess is slow to make a start in the world but eventually after becoming "engaged" to three girls simultaneously decides to marry Eliza Cope, a female Quaker preacher, and with her migrates to a spot a few miles beyond Vernon in Jennings County, near the valley of the Muscatatuck River.¹⁹ A red headed Irish Quaker who is both stubborn and resolute, Jess retains his plain speech, his directness, and his aversion to fancy dress, oaths, Christmas gifts, and of course liquor. Jess is industrious and persistent; he also has a green thumb and soon becomes a well known nurseryman in the region contiguous to Cincinnati. His knowledge of back country roads stands him in good stead when he becomes involved in helping fugitive slaves and avoiding difficulties with the authorities. But Jess is not completely a paragon of virtue. He cannot disguise his innate love of music and insists on placing an organ in the attic of his house. Nor can he ever overcome his love for fast horses. He takes considerable satisfaction in being able to drive a Morgan mare which can outpace the big black stallion owned by a Methodist preacher named Marcus Augustus Godly.²⁰ Certainly Jess Birdwell is one of the most attractive characters in recent American fiction.

With her females Miss West is almost consistently successful. Among the older women Eliza Birdwell, Lib Conboy, Tassie Murphy, and Eunice Fry have special vitality. Jess Birdwell's wife, even more of a dyed-in-the-wool Quaker than her husband, is a competent cook, nurse, seamstress, and housewife; she preserves the second person singular in her speech and is not only devoted to her family but humane to others. The wounded lad from John Hunt Morgan's raiders who is

¹⁹ *Except for Me and Thee*, 3-69.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 211-31. The chapter is appropriately entitled "Fast Horseflesh."

brought to the Birdwell farmhouse gets as much care from Eliza as her own children would expect.²¹ But Eliza is also a recorded Quaker minister who, despite years of marriage, never forgets her early training as an exhorter. Lib Conboy, mistress of the county poor farm, is by turns a slattern and an actress; she strives to run the home and also to control her family but is wholly successful in neither attempt. Tassie Murphy, by turns confidante and nurse to her younger sister Blix, is more introspective and analytical than most of Miss West's women. She is the voice of the family as well as the narrator of the story. She also shares the bookish interests of the author, and her choice of reading—the Bronte sisters, Elinor Wylie, T. E. Shaw, E. E. Cummings, F. Scott Fitzgerald—is probably to some extent Miss West's. Although she is a professional librarian rather than a writer, Tassie's literary interests distinguish her further from the other fictional women. Eunice Fry, the Colorado schoolteacher who desperately wants a man, is naive in her conviction that she is the only woman approached by Tom Mount and more than a little reckless in her quick surrender to him. Subsequently her mixed devotion and resentment lead her to ambivalent actions which in the circumstances do not seem unexpected.

Miss West's most engaging portraits, however, are the adolescent girls, the young women reaching out for emotional and economic security, whose lives are strange juxtapositions of embarrassment, humiliation, surprise, and minor triumph. Leafy Rivers, Cress Delahanty, Emma and Cate Conboy are plausible and vibrant individuals, facing life with curiosity and eagerness, determined to establish their identities and to share the experiences of maturity.

Leafy Rivers' life is shown in retrospect since she is expecting her first child, and a series of flashbacks reviews her past years. But her adolescent days at home, her sessions in the country school where she first met and admired Reno, social gatherings and festivities, the trek to the Indiana backwoods, her life in the forest cabin until she single handedly drove the hogs to Cincinnati, these are realized clearly and specifically. At the end of her chronicle Leafy emerges as a young woman who knows her own mind and is determined, in Hoosier parlance, to "get shut of" her nickname. As Edward Weeks points out, there can be "no doubt of the girl's courage and willpower."²²

Cress Delahanty, on the other hand, is younger and more girlish. She is presented as growing from twelve to sixteen through a series of crushes and humiliations. At the beginning of the book she has

²¹ *Ibid.*, 254-76.

²² Weeks, "Books: The Peripatetic Reviewer," 132.

just knocked out one of the teeth of her boy friend Edwin in a too vigorous effort to shield him from injury. Later she becomes his rival in memorizing lines from Virgil in a school Latin play and buys the fantastic beach hat which had such a deplorable end. Above everything else Cress wants to be an individual with a glamorous personality. Honesty and kindness and cheerfulness she admits to be desirable traits but denies that they have much utility in becoming popular, so she decides to be known as crazy. And when wearing bedroom slippers and carrying her shoes in her hand she rushes out of the house to meet the school bus, claiming that in this way she can save a few minutes of valuable time, her act begins a reputation for eccentricity. Cress is superstitious and naive. She counts white horses, tea leaves, bridges, mules, and one eyed cars. She becomes aware of signs and portents. A pointed elbow denotes a sour disposition, a sweating glass prophesies rain, if you laugh before breakfast you will certainly cry before dinner. She copies beautiful lilting phrases from Shelley and dreams of boyish lovers although she manages to convey to her parents the notion that she is not interested in the other sex. When her story ends leaving her at sixteen, she is still immature and unaware of a liaison which an older female friend is having immediately under her eyes.²³

The Conboy sisters also reveal Miss West's admirable command of the psychology of adolescence. Emma, going into her teens, is skinny, unattractive, and brash. To simulate the appearance of hair although she has not reached puberty, she jabs burned matches into her arm pits. She is intentionally candid and at times impertinent. Once she strips off her clothes before a surprised male inhabitant of the poor farm so that he can view a female form rather than depending on pictures of underwear cut out from mail order catalogues. Cate Conboy, eccentrically spelling her name with a capital C, uses other means to attract attention. When Christie Fraser courts her, he takes her on an excursion across the Ohio River to the far state of Kentucky and also to hear an Orpheus Club concert at Madison; Cate considers this experience to be the height of sophistication. Marriage is all but assured when Cate suddenly learns that her father Link Conboy has not been strictly faithful to her mother in the past. This

²³ Frederic I. Carpenter in "The Adolescent in American Fiction," *English Journal*, XLVI (September, 1957), 313-19, points out that it is more difficult to tell effectively "the story of a normal and successful heroine" than to narrate a tragic story and calls Cress Delahanty "the typical adolescent American girl" (pp. 317-18). W. Tasker Witham remarks in *The Adolescent in the American Novel, 1920-1960* (New York, 1964) that Miss West was highly successful in describing Cress Delahanty's infatuation with an older man and praises her dramatic presentation of "a very unusual but quite believable girl" (p. 43).

knowledge Cate finds devastating. With such a stain on the family reputation she finds she cannot honestly wed Christie and impulsively jilts him. Acting with similar abandon she accepts the hand of a neighboring boy whom she had heretofore scorned and by this vicarious expiation insures her future unhappiness. Like Cress Delahanty she is wounded by life, but she is older than Cress and after the wedding there is no reprieve.

Leafy Rivers, Cress Delahanty, and Cate Conboy are not shown as dramatic figures engaged in sensational actions. Rather the reader is interested in their day to day activities, in their petty disappointments and desires. In terms of years their stories are short. But their personalities are established by the author's careful selection of details and her sympathetic understanding of their whims and frustrations. There is no adolescent boy in Miss West's fiction who achieves equal distinction. But when she writes of the young girl growing up in a domestic environment and first trying out her fledgling powers, she is on firm ground.²⁴

Miss West is equally successful in her command of language, the colloquial diction of the backwoods and the farm as well as the use of striking analogies and similes. Much of this mastery is the result of her Indiana heritage and her Scotch-Irish legacy. She once wrote of her grandmother: "She was Irish and Hoosier before she was a Quaker, and she had picturesque ways of saying things: When she was warm she was 'hot as a little red wagon'; when she cleaned, she 'cleaned like fighting a fire.' Disorder 'made hell look like a lightning bug.' When she died it was, to use her own words, 'like the stopping of running water.'"²⁵ Family tradition preserved dialectal or archaic terms because of *their unique appropriateness or their sound*. Indeed some of the locutions employed by Miss West linger in Indiana today, as any traveler in the counties adjacent to the Ohio River can testify from experience. Miss West never deliberately studied the ordinary speech of an earlier period, as Conrad Richter pored over newspapers, diaries, and letters of colonial Pennsylvania to give authenticity of dialogue in his chronicle of settlement in the Ohio Valley.²⁶ But she

²⁴ Other well drawn adolescent girls are Elizabeth Prescott and Ellie Courtney, heroines of "Crimson Ramblers of the World, Farewell" and "Live Life Deeply," in *Crimson Ramblers of the World, Farewell*.

²⁵ *To See the Dream*, 8.

²⁶ Conrad Richter's distinguished trilogy about life in the early Ohio Valley includes *The Trees* (1940), *The Fields* (1946), and *The Town* (1950); the last novel was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. Richter took great pains to reconstruct the colloquial language of a century and a half ago and to employ the localisms and archaisms presumably characteristic of the Scotch-Irish settlers. See John T. Flanagan, "Folklore in the Novels of Conrad Richter," *Midwest Folklore*, II (Spring, 1952), 5-14; John T. Flanagan, "Conrad Richter: Romancer of the Southwest," *Southwest Review*, XLIII (Summer, 1958), 189-96.

did consult dialect dictionaries and such works as John Russell Bartlett's *Dictionary of Americanisms* in order to verify usages she had learned at home.²⁷

Colloquialisms and archaisms appear more frequently in the Indiana books than in those set in California. Characters are "dauncy" or "feisty" or act "meechin'." When Jess Birdwell is impatient, he falls into a "swivet" while his horses suddenly become "notionate" and plod along. On the other hand, Jess' recently purchased steed is "a two-ended horse, head up and tail over the dashboard." Farmers who need no stimulus to work in the fields are called "work-brickel" although when fatigued and thirsty they seek solace in the "switchel jug." But those who soldier on the job or are easy marks are "born poke-easys." The frontier housewife is careful to "redd up" the house even though the cabin might be no "great shakes." Leafy Rivers' hogs chomp and squeal and "wowsle" around. When her husband suffers from a boil, he has a "rising," an affliction which makes him feel "bodacious." Babies begotten without benefit of clergy are known as "wood's colts" while the natives of the backwoods, like Conrad Richter's Luckett family, are "woodsies." Nonconformist youths live a "chancy" life and cannot always escape a family "ruckus" while fugitive slaves are "cobbed." Both a cow and a boy could be called "breachy." One could be knocked "si-goggling" or headed "si-goggling" in another direction.²⁸

Perhaps the flavor of Miss West's rural idiom can best be conveyed by a speech made by Odis Korby in *The Witch Diggers* where

²⁷ John Russell Bartlett, *Dictionary of Americanisms. A Glossary of Words and Phrases Usually Regarded as Peculiar to the United States* (New York, 1848). Subsequent editions appeared in 1859 and 1860, and the fourth edition (Boston, 1877) was very much enlarged. Miss West disclaims any linguistic scholarship although she admits that dialect dictionaries fascinate her. She once outlined the requirements for anyone wishing to know the language she employed in her Hoosier fiction: "I think, to know the words I know, a person would need (1) to have been born in Southern Indiana. (2) Have parents with a Scotch-Irish background. (3) Have a mother who loved words, used them in quotation marks in her speech, because she has once heard them and they delighted her. (4) Have a young mother in California homesick for 'the hills of Southern Indiana.'" Jessamyn West to John T. Flanagan, November 3, 1969.

²⁸ References for the paragraph follow in order using abbreviated titles and page numbers: dauncy, *Leafy Rivers*, 225, 232, 247, 292, *Friendly Persuasion*, 38, 127, 158, *Except for Me and Thee*, 106, 216, 270; feisty, *Leafy Rivers*, 206, 290, *Except for Me and Thee*, 95, 172; meechin', *Except for Me and Thee*, 149, 260, 297; swivet, *Except for Me and Thee*, 253, *Leafy Rivers*, 137; notionate, *Except for Me and Thee*, 227, *Friendly Persuasion*, 133, 138; two ended horse, *Except for Me and Thee*, 213; work-brickel, *Friendly Persuasion*, 3, 138, *Except for Me and Thee*, 235; switchel jug, *Except for Me and Thee*, 235; poke-easy, *Leafy Rivers*, 144, 249; redd up, *Leafy Rivers*, 123; great shakes, *Leafy Rivers*, 110; wowsle, *Leafy Rivers*, 232; rising, *Leafy Rivers*, 141, 142; bodacious, *Leafy Rivers*, 228; wood's colts, *Leafy Rivers*, 259, *Except for Me and Thee*, 63; woodsies, *Leafy Rivers*, 98; chancy, *Except for Me and Thee*, 25; ruckus, *Except for Me and Thee*, 13; cobbed, *Except for Me and Thee*, 152; breachy, *Leafy Rivers*, 4; si-goggling, *Friendly Persuasion*, 149, *Leafy Rivers*, 17, 112.

the Hoosier undertaker and feed merchant attempts to give Christie Fraser some advice.

"Have big thoughts, son . . . Plan big, but act meechin. Look what happened to our Lord. He got to acting biggity. Took to cussing hogs and blasting fig-trees. I'd be the last to fault him for it, understand. Send me down to earth under like circumstances, doves flapping around my ears and dead fish multiplying when I say the word, and I reckon I'd make an equally poor out-of-it. No, no, the poor boy never had a fair chance. Carried around on a chip from the beginning till he finally had to advertise everything in stud-horse type. Couldn't keep his voice down. Had to give them the word with the bark on it every time he opened his mouth.[""]²⁹

But it is not only the wealth of colloquial and diurnal diction which impresses the reader of Miss West's fiction. Equally vivid and original is her figurative language, often exemplified by surprising similes taken from ordinary life and observation. A creek is "as pliable and sinuous as a fat summer snake." One of the inmates of the poor farm complains, "It goes against my grain always seeing the squeaking wheel get the grease." Leafy Rivers, riding two on a horse behind her brother and clinging to him, finds that "His thin waist, beneath her hands, tingled like a pump handle when the water begins to climb." On a fall day in the Ohio Valley "Blue haze, like ribbon through the eyelets of a bodice, was laced between the trees on the horizon." On the main street of a California town "A black cat passed below, its blackness not even skin-deep, for its hair, wind-blown, exposed a skin as white as that of any butcher-shop rabbit." In an Orange County hamlet cicadas "were stitching their sewing-machine song." Tassie Murphy observes that in Palm Springs "the exposed haunches of Midwestern matrons show, before the leather is tanned, expanses of baby-bottom heat rash." Amid the extreme desert heat "A few wispy mare's tails tarnished the blue metal sky." The Raunce cow, tied to a stake in the backyard, was "surrounded by straw like a prospective martyr." Ellen Lewis wandering toward her brother's tent at night finds that the sky "was pricked like a colander with stars." The rag carpet in a desert house was difficult to keep anchored down but "was filled with rolling swells, like a pot of corn-meal mush coming to a boil." Lute Cope, puzzling about his wife's behavior, remembers that some women take their sex like men, "threshing around like beached catfish, unable to live or die." Outside the Raunce house on the tract there were "blue four-o'clocks trained up cord strings at one end of the porch like notes on a zither."³⁰

Miss West is sensitive to proverbs too and uses them appropri-

²⁹ *The Witch Diggers*, 42.

³⁰ References for the quotations follow in order using abbreviated titles and

ately and often. More than one character relies on a proverb to express his attitude or his philosophy, and the maxim is more revealing than several sentences of dialogue. Shel Lewis, depressed by his own experience in trying to better himself, concludes that he was the man caught in the proverbial dilemma, between the devil and the deep blue sea. The Raunce household was unpredictable, certainly not a dwelling where there was a place for everything and everything in its place. Basil Cudlip, the biased southerner, doesn't like mulattoes; to him Negroes should be the real article, all wool and a yard wide. A farmer planting corn remembers the old adage, "Three to grow and one for the crow." Jess Birdwell is happily married and a faithful husband but he has his passions, and one of them, "not to beat the Devil around the bush, [is for] fast horseflesh." A self-reliant man, he believes that "The Lord helps those who help themselves." Jess is also aware of weather signs and seasonal changes which he expresses in axiomatic form: "When roosters wake crowing hoarse, summer is here." One of his sons, caught in an argument, relies on the old maxim, if the shoe fits, wear it. Eliza Birdwell also employs proverbial expressions. Since she has always insisted on personal cleanliness she opposes building a bathroom in the house, a needless expense which would be simply carrying coals to Newcastle. Somewhat of a fatalist, she admonishes her husband, "Don't whistle till thee's out of the woods," and she insists that "Bad things go by threes." Chad Lewis, reproved by his mother, recalls that misery loves company and that it is always good policy, if possible, to kill two birds with one stone. And Mrs. Murphy in the midst of a family festival exults: "'As the old lady said' . . . 'When I make water, I make water. When I make tea, I make tea.'" ³¹

Jessamyn West's fiction, it must be apparent, has many merits, but two certainly stand out: her characterization and her feeling for language. If her narratives seem unexciting and even incoherent at times, her people are a constant delight, freshly conceived, individual, even a bit eccentric. The fecundity of her imagination is surprising. Generally commonsensical but often endowed with a quirky humor or an ironical point of view, her characters enter the reader's presence in full stature and linger there like old acquaintances. The distinguished contemporary novelist Eudora Welty, reviewing *The Witch Diggers*, remarks that the novel could be labeled "Indiana, 1899, Breughel," a remark which captures memorably the genre quality of

page numbers: *Witch Diggers*, 10, 164; *Leafy Rivers*, 40, 74; *Love, Death*, 32; *Matter of Time*, 104, 267, 278; *South of the Angels*, 26, 204, 248, 327, 514.

³¹ References for the examples follow in order using abbreviated titles and page numbers: *South of the Angels*, 385, 217, 116, 19; *Except for Me and Thee*, 220, 17, 72, 290; *Friendly Persuasion*, 139; *Except for Me and Thee*, 25, 165; *South of the Angels*, 119; *Matter of Time*, 73.

Miss West's work.³² William E. Wilson, discussing the same novel, also pays tribute to the characterization but observes that the author somehow missed the "Faulknerian dissonance" that fiction about Indiana definitely needs.³³ William Hogan in commenting on *South of the Angels* remarks that the novel is "outsized" and perhaps "overpopulated" but commends the author for her "real and sympathetic" characters; he also perceives that Miss West resisted the temptation to satirize the land of wonderful nonsense which is southern California and instead produced a book of remarkable "mass characterization."³⁴ Edward Weeks sees in *South of the Angels* a novel of "Chaucerian dimension," a novel perhaps too ambitious for the author's technical powers, but emphasizes what he calls Miss West's "gleaming moments" and praises her mastery "of the swift descriptive phrase and of the intimate revelatory action."³⁵

In a 1957 essay Jessamyn West stated briefly some of her ideas about the writing of fiction. "Any serious novel," she says, "is the result of a writer's struggle with himself, the world in which he lives, and the means at hand or which he develops to body forth this world fictionally."³⁶ This self-struggle is paramount and continuous for writing is hard work and success does not come easily. The writer's goal she expresses as "openness" which she equates with "space" and "exposure," not hostility. Moreover, she agrees with Ernest Hemingway that a writer must write truly; there must be no falsification, no hypocrisy. Whatever else might be said about Miss West's work, there can be no question about her dedication to her craft nor about the vitality of her people and the language which clothes them.

It is possible that readers might weary of the domestic environment, not to mention the rural setting, of many of the fictions and might demand characters with greater sophistication. But other novelists treat urban scenes, often with doubtful success or with a spurious sensationalism the appeal of which wanes almost as soon as it lures the reader beyond the opening chapters. Certainly few contemporary writers evince the ability to create people with the idiosyncracies, homeliness, honesty, wit, and simple humanity of those in whose portraiture Jessamyn West excels. A reader must be grateful for her precision, her authenticity, and her charm. She is a writer to be treasured.

³² Eudora Welty, "A Search, Maddening and Infectious," *New York Times Book Review*, January 14, 1951, p. 5.

³³ William E. Wilson, "Indiana Tragedy," *Saturday Review*, XXXIV (February 3, 1951), 17, 42.

³⁴ William Hogan, "West to Eden," *ibid.*, XLIII (April 23, 1960), 23, 50.

³⁵ Weeks, "The Atlantic Bookshelf: The Peripatetic Reviewer," 96.

³⁶ Jessamyn West, "Secret of the Masters," *Saturday Review*, XL (September 21, 1957), 13-14, 44. Quotation is from page 13.