Riddle of experience

Armand Elroy Falk

The University of Montana

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THE RIDDLE OF EXPERIENCE

by

ARMAND ELROY FALK

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CHAPTER I

Alfred Bertram Guthrie, Jr. is a writer whose work has been largely ignored by critics. Aside from some laudatory comments made on the appearance of his first major book, The Big Sky, and the commentary which surrounded the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize to his second major novel, The Way West, little attention has been paid to him as a writer and the body of his work has gone unexamined. A late starter, The Big Sky was published in 1947 when Guthrie was 46, he has to date published a total of four novels, a collection of short stories several magazine articles, and his autobiography.

The value of an examination of his work stems from two sources. First, he has accomplished his stated aim of writing western fiction which is true to scene and setting and of depicting accurately and honestly the people who live in the West.\(^1\) Second, he has dealt with a number of themes in his work which he shares with a number of major writers. It is with these themes this paper is concerned. The paper will attempt to demonstrate that there is a development of

\(^1\)A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 149.
these themes to a conclusion.

Before examining Guthrie's fiction it will be con-
venient to group somewhat. Since the works used in this
paper have been selected this grouping is intended to pro-
vide an explanation of my choices. The first group of works
to be discussed will be the novels, all but one of which are
historical fiction. Here we find The Way West, The Big Sky,
and These Thousand Hills. The fourth novel, Murders at Moon
Dance, belongs in a later group.

The second group contains some of the short stories
and Guthrie's autobiography, The Blue Hen's Chick, to which
reference will be made periodically throughout the paper.
When I take the liberty of classifying the autobiography with
the fiction I do so for the following reasons: First, I feel
that this may be what Guthrie has in mind judging from sever-
al of his short stories which are autobiographical. Second,
I take a hint from his preface to The Big It and Other Stories
in which he states, "History is there for the writer of fic-
tion, else we have to burn a lot of books." Here I take some
liberty with the word history, interpreting it to mean person-
al history. Third, many writers, among them Thomas Wolfe,
Ernest Hemingway, and Sinclair Lewis, have used thinly dis-
guised autobiographical material as fiction. Perhaps The
Blue Hen's Chick is a thinly disguised novel used as auto-
biography.

Into this second grouping, besides The Blue Hen's
Chick, are the short stories "The Fourth at Getup," "Independence Day," and "Ebbie."

In the third grouping the material is also somewhat autobiographical but not nearly as clearly so as in the preceding group. Here we find "Old Mother Hubbard," "Last Snake," "Bargain," "First Principal," and "The Wreck." It is significant that if these stories are listed chronologically using publication dates all save one represent a movement from a historic to a contemporary setting. It may be a risky conclusion, but it would seem from this that as the writer matured he came nearer and nearer to the meaning of his own life. There may also be some significance in the fact that, save for one exception which is unclear, the more recent the work the more autobiographical.

It is necessary to add a fourth group of stories to this summary in order to account for all of Guthrie's fiction. This group may suit the author, stories written for fun. Hopefully, all of these fall into the author's classification, I had a tall time writing the tall stories. I enjoyed writing the slick ones.\textsuperscript{2} Murders at Moon Dance, Guthrie's first book, is included although this book contains the germs of ideas that are to mature and be used by the writer later. The short stories included are "The Therefore Hog," "The

\textsuperscript{2}A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Big It and Other Stories, p. vi.
Big It," "The Moon Dance Skunk," "Mountain Medicine," and "The Keeper of the Key." All of these are examples of tall tales and as such generally carry little meaning and do not fall within the scope of this paper.

It is with the first three groups that I will attempt to deal in the remainder of this paper. It is in these stories that Guthrie comes most to grips with themes of universal significance and the powers that move men.

Another matter that deserves discussion at this point is one of technique. The interior monologue lends itself to examination of character and was perhaps developed to its present state with this use in mind. It is significant, therefore, that one of Guthrie's favorite tools, and perhaps his most effective writing technique next to his evocative power is interior monologue. I make mention of this fact because the themes to which Guthrie turns time after time are those which concern individuals. He is generally not concerned with the effects of an event on a group of men collectively nor even on two men or a man and a woman. Generally speaking, we learn only how the event has affected one man. Thus, the reader is quite familiar with Boone Caudill in The Big Sky, but not with Jim Deakins. The reader becomes an intimate of Lat Evans, but of no one else in These Thousand Hills. The reader learns to know Charlie Bostwick, but not his father or his friends in "Ebbie" and "Independence Day."

Before discussing the themes Guthrie treats there are
two works which came early in his career and which give implications of things to come. The earliest example of Gurthrie's writing is a piece of fiction published in 1943. The original title of the work was *Murders at Moon Dance* and it was an admitted attempt to write a piece of western fiction as good as the pulp that Guthrie had been reading at the time. He classes it as a western-detective story. The story meets the criteria of the western and the detective story in all respects. Close reading, however, shows Guthrie's interest in portraying a universal experience as found in a western milieu or at least in the reaction of a man under pressure.

His attempts to grapple with the problem of the burning of Breedtown and the actions of Bally Buck in trying to prevent the burning indicates an interest in the psychology of groups of men and a concern with racism. This is the raw material for the same type of study which came off realistically in *The Oxbow Incident*.

Still another example of the concern for the universal experience is found in two very finely wrought pages in the middle of this generally weak book. The event is the death of Duke Deck, father of the heroine. His death is an unnecessary event in terms of plot and it bears only on one character, but the summary of his life is eloquent and at the same time ironic.

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3 A. B. Guthrie, Jr., *The Blue Hen's Chick*, p. 130.
To the point of his death Duke Deck has not been described. Now he is characterized as, "gentle, well-meaning, hopeful, handsome, gracious and utterly incompetent, he had been a constant promise, with never a fulfillment." For six paragraphs Guthrie writes of a death which has ironically ended a life, "of polished ineffectuality, of graceful mistake, of beautiful incompetence." Thus a strong portrayal of the universal experience of death is given an ironic twist which indicates more profundity than the rest of the book reaches.

It is pointless to continue this discussion of Guthrie's earliest book, since what he has done here is not the work of a conscious artist, but rather is incidental to an attempt to reproduce and combine the most superficial qualities of the detective and the western thriller.

After the publication of Murders at Moon Dance, three years passed before the next story, "Old Mother Hubbard," was published. In reality a greater time passed because Murders at Moon Dance lacked a publisher for many years.

The story seems to be a conscious effort to make an improvement over western pulp in that its characters are not stereotyped and it attempts to show the effect of an

4A. B. Guthrie, Jr., Murders at Moon Dance, p. 42.
5Ibid.
incident on personality. The first indication that this is not a conventional western story comes in the first para-

graph when a lead character is introduced as a "big, pie-

faced man who wore a sod-buster's outfit and looked at you slow and unwinking as if trying to get his mind in gear."\textsuperscript{6} This statement is a good distance from the delineation of character by the cut of the jaw or the color of the eyes as was done in \textit{Murders at Moon Dance}.

Another indication of the attempt to make realistic, meaningful fiction from the western experience may be found in the description of a turkey fight which is detailed in the story. The incident is included primarily to show the patience and sensitivity of the hero, but it is worth noting that it is not used to develop a dislike for any character. Cruelty is commonplace in the West and insensitivity to the suffering of animals and men is not uncommon. The fact that the cook whips turkeys with a black snake whip does not make him any more or less of a villain, but only a part of the background.

More to the point, however, is the fact that this story contains the first indication of Guthrie's intent to work with themes of universal significance. This is the first story told by a young boy and we are in on the change that takes place in this boy as he experiences the adult

\textsuperscript{6}A. B. Guthrie, Jr., \textit{The Big It and Other Stories}, p. 44.
world around him. One might call this a reverse end to innocence since what the boy discovers is that cruelty and violence are not necessary rather than that they are. The important point is that the boy is enlightened by his experience.

Returning to a discussion of themes, the themes that recur in the later stories with enough frequency to be significant are the following:

First, we find problems between a boy and his father recurring with regularity. In the earliest book, The Big Sky, Boone Caudill is forced to knock his father unconscious before he can break from him to find a more suitable father image. Lat Evans, in These Thousand Hills, leaves his father and is convinced that his grandfather may have been a better father. Lonnie Ellenwood, the boy in "First Principal," fears that his father is not a man and Charlie Bostwick, the most autobiographical of Guthrie's characters, finds that his father is a man of cruelty in "Ebbie."

A second theme which seems recurrent in the stories and novels is that of an initiation into the world of adults. The initiation is cruel and psychologically bruising. Charlie Bostwick faces it in "Ebbie" when his father kills his dog and again in "Independence Day" when he watches a man being beaten and witnesses the bloodlust of the crowd. The narrator of the story "Bargain" watches his employer being mistreated by a thug and bully and loses respect for
him which he doesn't want to lose and which is not restored by a trick ending to the story. In The Big Sky, Boone Caudill loses his innocence when he is stripped of his belongings and whipped by a cruel and vicious sheriff.

The third theme which we find throughout the stories and novels is the theme of man-woman relationship. It might be well to mention here that at no point in the books is there an example of a successful relationship between a man and a woman save perhaps in The Way West between Lije and Rebecca Evans. This love relationship is secondary. The main love relationship in The Way West is that of Brownie Evans and Mercy McBride and it is mechanical and tragic. In the other stories, Boone Caudill's love is either illicit or animal-like or it is destructive and damaging to both himself and his loved ones. Lat Evans in These Thousand Hills is also plagued by a love that is either damaging or illicit. In the short stories love is significant by its absence. A woman appears in only two of the stories and in one of these she is only an unhappy memory.

A fourth theme which frequently occurs is one which is many times religious in nature but which, for want of a better term, might be called a search for a pattern to life. The range of religious speculation is from fundamentalist orthodoxy portrayed in These Thousand Hills, to a form of pantheism in The Big Sky to the to yourself be true doctrine in The Way West to the bitter despair and utter pessimism.
expressed in the story, "The Wreck."

The point is that there are two developments in the work of Guthrie. The author begins his career with a concern for the accuracy and the honesty with which he portrays objective reality. As his work matures he becomes more and more concerned with an accurate portrayal of the subjective and the external, no less accurate or honest, becomes only the means by which the internal is revealed.

As an indication of this development there are three patterns which are significant. They are: The movement from a historical subject to autobiography, the movement from past time to time contemporaneous with the author, and the change in setting from a geographical locale at some distance from the author to one most intimately connected with his life, that of his home in youth.

The second development that may be observed in Guthrie's work is an attempt to develop a code or system which will take into account the vagaries and uncertainties of experience or at any rate sooth the turmoil of the man who ponders the meaning of existence.
CHAPTER II

Since the theme of a father-son relationship is the first theme encountered in a reading of almost any book of Guthrie's, it will be the first theme investigated. A fair and just approach to the novels will be to summarize the action first, then sort out the themes and treat them in the following chapters. The short stories will be summarized as they appear.

The Big Sky was written as a result of Guthrie's desire to tell an honest story of the West. It tells the story of the decline of the beaver and fur trapping trade from its zenith to the time when it no longer was a paying business. The author had this decline in mind when he wrote the story and also the theme, each man kills the thing he loves.¹

The story is of Boone Caudill, who breaks away from his home to go into the northwestern United States and there becomes a mountain man. After some misfortunes he is able to make his way from Kentucky to the Missouri River where he hires on as a laborer and apprentice hunter for the keelboat trip north.

He gets to the upper reaches of the Missouri where an ambush forces him and his friends into the wilderness on

¹A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Blue Hen's Chick, Ch. 21.
their own. This is precisely the course he wishes to take and for several years he traps and hunts and enjoys the mountain life.

In Part Three of five parts he finds the girl for whom he has been searching, an Indian girl who came up the river with the keelboat to be used as a bargaining point with the Indians. He settles down with the girl for a two year period toward the end of which a child is born, blinded by congenital syphilis. After brooding on this situation for some time Boone finally shoots his close friend Jim Deakins because of the false conviction that the child is Jim's and not his own.

Boone then leaves his mountain land, knowing that something has gone from it that he will not be able to recover. He also finds that he cannot be satisfied with the civilized country to which he returns and finally comes to realize that he has become alien to everything he once knew.

Boone Caudill exemplifies the destructive fur hunter as he watches and participates in the destruction of his wild country. In a smaller, but no less painful sense, he is also a symbol of that irrational and dark side of man that harms that which the man loves most. Through a combination of pride and chance Boone destroys his son and then his best friend.

Back tracking now, from an admitted theme to one not so acknowledged but still obvious, the theme of a father-son
relationship comes to our attention. In the first chapter Boone is forced to knock his father unconscious in order to avoid a beating. At this point he has taken an irrevocable step into a path he is not averse to taking. This is the first in a series of breaks from home which follow in Guthrie's novels and the first concern with a father-son relationship in his work.

The importance of this break lies in its finality. When Boone Caudill leaves home he is bothered by his father only one more time and after that never, neither in memory nor in reality. With the conviction that, "he hadn't done anything that a true man wasn't bound to do,"\(^2\) and excepting thoughts of being able to, "pick Pap up and shake his teeth loose,"\(^3\) which come to him later, Boone no longer thinks of his father. A very different situation exists as this theme is developed in later books.

The Way West, Guthrie's next novel, deals with another moment in American history. It is a tale of the Oregon Trail. The chief character is Lije Evans, a Missourian, who feels called to move west to Oregon. He loads his family and his belongings and begins the trek. After several months of strain and struggle the family reaches Oregon increased by the addition of Mercy McBee to whom son

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 125.
Brownie is married.

A pivotal character in the book is Dick Summers who played an important part in *The Big Sky* and who also provides a transition from one era to the next. It is Dick Summers who bridges the gap from mountain man to settler to mountain guide finally to die in the mountains as his era has died before him.

In *The Way West* the theme of a father-son relationship becomes less violent and more a theme of search rather than break. Here key roles are played by Brownie Evans, the boy in search of a father, and Dick Summers, the father figure. It is Dick Summers whom Brownie wishes to emulate and in his dreams he becomes more and more like Summers. In his day dreams he sees himself riding and fighting shoulder to shoulder with Summers and hears people say, "That Brownie Evans takes after Dick Summers like one pea to another."^4

When perversity and misfortune descend on both Lije and Brownie it is to Dick Summers that they both turn until Lije begins to wonder whether the train is his or Summers'. When Brownie seeks advice about his marriage to Mercy McBee and her pregnancy by Curtis Mack he turns to Dick and the turning brings echoes of an earlier questioning by Boone Caudill on what to do about the "clap."^5

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5 A. B. Guthrie, Jr., *The Big Sky*, p. 86.
In *The Way West* the father-son theme is a little less emphatic but much more pervasive than in *The Big Sky*. It is almost as though the problem has been solved. Lije Evans is an understanding father and seems to be able to communicate well with his son. When the break comes, as is inevitable, it is not a violent break as in *The Big Sky*. Whether or not the break is as complete as Boone Caudill's remains to be seen in a later story. This approach to the theme seems to be an indication that Guthrie has realized and is trying to convey the concept that while the break between a father and a son is almost always inevitable, it is not always violent or permanent.

An indication of this understanding seems to come in a short story published in the same year as *The Way West*. "Last Snake" is not only a valid attempt to examine the psychological bases of fear but also shows what the residual effect of a father may be.

Briefly, the story is of a boy who has taken a job on a keelboat going up the Missouri River. The keelboat has not gone far when he finds he fears the wilderness and Carpentier, the leader. He runs away and then discovers he fears his present situation more than he feared Carpentier and the wilderness. He is captured by Carpentier but as they return Indians attack. In the battle, Ross, the boy, learns by watching Carpentier what courage is and is able to regain his own. After their escape Ross is asked whether
they should go downriver, away from danger, or up. His answer is, "Which way you think, damn it?"6

Under the pressure of events Ross searched his own mind for a reason for the uncontrollable fear he experienced. As he thought he recalled some words of advice his father had given him. "His Pap had said you had to kill your own snakes..."7 meaning the fears that you faced, but Ross's ability to face his fear is marred by memories of his father, "... hating Pap again, seeing the bushed face and the little eyes and the hand ready with a whip,"8 and especially is Ross marked by his last memories of his father growing ill, weakening day by day until, "His bushed face would twist and his eyes would leak tears, and he pray and pray and hold his belly while the strength ran out of him. At the last, Pap couldn't kill his own snakes."9 Ross can't kill his own snakes either until at the last he is able to lay his father to rest with some certainty.

But this matter is not a simple one. Out of his hate for his father has sprung the hate for himself which causes his fear. When beaten by Carpentier Ross thinks of how his father beat him and from this comes, "A silent hate, ... of himself and of Carpentier and of a world in which he was no better than a bound boy."10 With such a feeling Ross

6A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Big It and Other Stories, p. 119
7Ibid., p. 104. 8Ibid., p. 104
9Ibid., p. 105. 10Ibid., p. 108.
cannot be brave because bravery demands that he have faith in himself. So he must see the bravery of a man like Carpentier and he must act in such a way as to be able to face himself. When he does this he manages finally to rid himself of the last vestiges of his father's influence and hence the answer to the rhetorical question at the end of the story is obvious.

The next story which seems to grapple with the problem of the search for a father has more in common with The Way West than the previous story in that there is no violent break even implied in the story. The story is set in Moon Dance, Montana, and the time is the late 19th century. The protagonist of the story is a German-American merchant who has been running a store in the community for two years. His life has been a struggle since he hasn't the capital of his competitors and he has been forced to advance credit to some poor risks. One of these risks is a man called Freighter Slade.

Freighter has owed Mr. Baumer, whom he calls "Dutchie" $21.50 for a long time. Mr. Baumer is persistent but each time he asks for the money Slade insults him until they come to blows and Baumer's hand is broken. Finally Baumer gets his revenge. Knowing that Freighter can't read, knowing that Freighter is prone to sample shipments of alcohol, Mr. Baumer hires Freighter to do his hauling from the railroad to Moon Dance. He then orders a barrel of wood alcohol
knowing full well that Slade will sample it. Slade does and dies.

The story is narrated by a school boy named Al, who is an orphan. As the story progresses we see that Al is searching for something in Mr. Baumer to which he can look up. As Mr. Baumer is more and more put upon by Freighter, Al grows less and less to feel he can count on Mr. Baumer. At one point in the story Al says, "But I didn't feel good. I couldn't look up to Mr. Baumer like I used to and still wanted to."\[11\] It is made clear then that Al seeks something in Mr. Baumer which he feels is essential.

But another matter enters the story here. Whether or not Al is aware of it at the end of the story is not clear, but he has witnessed a man defending his honor. As in the story just preceding this story, when Ross is finally able to face the last of his memories of his father he is able to face himself and thus is able to regain his courage. The added element in this story is an unstated "thing" which is crucial to self-respect. Al has stated earlier that he has no father and that Mr. Baumer seems to feel an obligation to substitute for a father. This puts Mr. Baumer in a position where he has to prove something to himself and to Al.

This point is clearly established when Al and Mr.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{11}}\text{Ibid.}, p. 83.\]
Baumer are discussing the bill that Mr. Baumer is collecting. Al suggests that perhaps it would be well to forget the bill. Mr. Baumer replies that the bill doesn't matter and Al asks, "What is it?" Mr. Baumer then replies, "It is the thing. You see, it is the thing." Al is puzzled by this yet seems to have a vague idea, "I wasn't quite sure what he meant." The same problems are stated more clearly, more directly and above all more autobiographically in the next story which is based on an experience of Guthrie's father.

The story is entitled "First Principal" and it chronicles the arrival in Moon Dance, Montana, of a schoolmaster from Ohio who is to be the principal of a new high school. The country into which Mr. Ellenwood comes is accurately described as one in which male school teachers were suspect. Mr. Ellenwood is early called upon by one of the local ne'er-do-wells and asked to prove himself. This he does very positively, forcing his antagonist to leave as hastily as possible on all fours. The entire story is presented through the eyes and ears of the principal's young son, Lonnie.

The theme of the story that comes first is the boy's relationship to his father. Early in the story an element of doubt is established in the boy's mind. Lonnie is faced with the realization that his father is quite different from

\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., p. 75.  
\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., p. 75.  
\(^\text{14}\) A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 35.
the men of this country and the difference is going to be to neither his nor his father's advantage.

Like most children Lonnie has an initial distrust or dislike of a strange and unfamiliar situation, "He wished he were back in Ohio, screened in the friendly woods and hills, away from this bare, flat land where even the sun seemed to stare at him." But beyond this fear an even more profound fear lurks, Lonnie's distrust or lack of faith in his father's masculinity. He instinctively fears the men who stand as a challenge to his father, "seeing bold and rude in them the veiled suspicions of the rest," and these veiled suspicions are stated more clearly by a man named Ross, head of the school board, a few pages later when he says, "Some may-be ain't used to a man teaching school," he said, not looking at Mr. Ellenwood.

The challenge to Tom Ellenwood and to Lonnie comes specifically in the person of Chilter, a cattlehand and loiterer who witnesses the arrival of the principal and his family. When Chilter is finally beaten it is vigorously and as if to express all the masculinity of Tom Ellenwood. It is as a result of the beating that Mr. Ross finally fully accepts Tom and Lonnie becomes an admiring boy, convinced of the certainty of his father's masculinity.

15 A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Big It and Other Stories, p. 90.
16 Ibid., p. 89.
17 Ibid., p. 93.
It is possible that the author intended a pun when he entitled the story "First Principal." It is obvious that the First Principal must establish a first principle, that is, he must prove that he is also a man even though his clothes, size, and his occupation may cast some doubt. This first principle must be established with his son as well as with the men of the town, and although the story doesn't make the point, with the man himself.

The same "thing" that Mr. Baumer had to deal with, the same thing Ross had to deal with is what Mr. Ellenwood has to deal with here. Ross had to prove himself because his father hadn't; Mr. Baumer was obligated to prove himself to both himself and Al; and Mr. Ellenwood had a responsibility to his son primarily, but also to himself. The beginnings of a code are here which will wait explication until a later chapter. For now it will suffice to note its existence.

If there seemed to be a movement toward greater subtlety in The Way West, These Thousand Hills continues this movement and seems to demonstrate a deepening understanding that the father-son theme is one of great complexity and depth.

There is also a more obvious and stronger bridge between The Way West and These Thousand Hills than Dick Summers provided between the former and The Big Sky. These Thousand Hills continues the story of the Evans family by
taking up with the son of Brownie Evans, the grandson of Lije.

Early in the book two characters from *The Way West* are introduced. One is Lat Evans' grandfather, Lije Evans, who seems to have retained the personality of his youth diminished only by senility. The other is Brownie Evans who seems to have been changed by a feeling of guilt to something if not dislikable, at least saddening, a man with an "extra-sore" religion in the words of Dick Summers.

This story opens with a revolt against father going on just as did *The Big Sky*. This schism is not, however, violent although the emotion is longer lasting and more deeply seated.

Lat Evans is leaving Oregon to make a new life in Montana. He is disappointed with what his father and grandfather have come to in Oregon and he seeks to improve this by moving on to new territory. He joins a cattle drive and moves a herd of cattle from Oregon to Fort Benton, Montana Territory. When he reaches Fort Benton he goes wolfing, is wounded and is captured by Indians. Before this occurs he is able to win a very fast horse and meet a girl, a prostitute. When he returns to Fort Benton he increases his stake by gambling and establishes himself as a cattle rancher. Through diligence and foresight he is successful as a rancher, rejects his shady lady, and marries a girl from the East. After some marital problems and a murder that presents a
threat to his senatorial aspirations the book closes when Lat returns to his ranch and his wife presumably to live a rewarding and worthwhile life.

As has been pointed out, we come in almost immediate contact with the theme of a father-son relationship. Here, however, the legacy of the father is inspected in much greater detail and one realizes that the break from a father is not a simple matter. The development of the father-son theme seems to have reached the point where the conclusion is that the grip of the father extends far beyond mere physical presence.

Lat Evans finds that his father returns to plague him and although he starts immediately attempting to replace him the replacement is not easy. With unwanted frequency Lat's father turns up in Lat's mind's eye as Lat goes about his business. In bawdy house, in bar, in bank, Lat Evans's father comes to life, each time preaching a religion that his eye and his heart bely.

Lat Evans describes his father early in the book and when one is aware that this father is the man who married a girl pregnant with another man's child and was advised to forget, it is obvious that Guthrie is beginning a portrait of the effects of guilt, passed from father to son. Lat describes his father, "Pa's face was lined and old, though at fifty-odd he wasn't really old. It was struggle, it was struggles of some kind or another that made him look that
way . . . But the Lord knew best. That was what he said. Always the Lord knew best. The Rock. The Salvation. Ma said so, too."\(^{18}\) A little later Lat goes on in detail talking about this father who bears a burden. "Sunday school. Church. Prayer meeting. Bible reading. Grace. No working on the Sabbath, except what couldn't be avoided. No play. No card playing, ever. No dancing and no drinking. The Lord was a jealous Lord. And Pa was a jealous father, a jealous Lord himself, who, like the Lord, had kind and sunny moments made dearer by comparison."\(^{19}\) Finally Lat ends with a comment that raises the ghost of Boone Caudill, "So you loved him and you kind of hated him and you had to get away."\(^{20}\)

But the irony is that Lat discovers that he can't get away. Unlike Boone Caudill who broke cleanly, Lat Evans finds that his father's legacy remains with him. At first he tries to find a substitute father in Ram Butler, the cattle drover, but soon discovers that just to leave his father is not enough and that he is not going to be able to find a substitute.

On his first night with Callie Kash, the prostitute, for example, he is sexually impotent and, although he blames

\(^{18}\) A. B. Guthrie, Jr., *These Thousand Hills*, p. 4.  
a tough bronc that "took the starch" out of him, when he comes to pay Callie he comes close to the problem. As he reaches in his pocket for the money he discovers, "The pocket was the wrong one. It held the letters got from home."21 Before he returns the next night, "He turned and went back into the barn and found his saddle and opened up a saddle pocket and put his letters in it and pulled the tie strap tight."22 This night he is successful even though, or perhaps because, he is drunk.

But his father is not to be gotten rid of as easily as slipping some letters in a saddle bag. When he returns from his adventures with the Indians and Callie Kash is tending him he remembers his father and his father's morality. As he lies with the girl, "Pa stood in his mind's eye with the whip in his hand and the wrought-up righteousness in his face."23 Yet there is something equivocal about his father's morality for at the same time as he wields the remembered whip he seems to Lat, "deserted and beaten. He wasn't God any longer or God's tool or Pa himself, but a stranger on whom God's hand lay too heavy."24

When finally he returns to his father, as any man must who is as father ridden as Lat, Lat does it in a way which is most common. He eschews Callie Kash, marries a

21Ibid., p. 75.  
22Ibid., p. 84.  
23Ibid., p. 147.  
24Ibid., p. 148.
respectable girl, rejoins the church of his father, and obeys the letter of the law. Lat Evans has found a substitute for his father—his father's ways. His father represents in this wild, young land, "... better courts, better law enforcement, more churches and schools, a more general respect for the finer things, ..." These things Lat now sees as necessities perhaps even part of the code. But these are only the things that a man shows. They are not what a man believes.

25Ibid., p. 332.
CHAPTER III

The second major theme is that of an initiation into the world of adults. Again, there is a change in emphasis and a change in subtlety of presentation as the theme develops in later books and stories. There is also a broadening and deepening of this theme comparable to the broadening observed in the first chapter.

Turning first to The Big Sky, Boone Caudill's initiation into the world of adults is singularly violent. He is stripped of his illusions very rapidly and some of his later actions are explained by his forced enlightenment.

After Boone has left his home, a not peaceful departure, he encounters successively Jonathan Bedwell, who steals his gun and then frames him; Mark York, a sheriff who apprehends him and later whips him; and an incompetent court, headed by Judge Test, that convicts him, fines him, and puts him in jail and at the mercy of Mark York. Boone to this point in the story has been essentially honest and straightforward. After this experience he doesn't hesitate to steal a horse and vows vengeance on all who wronged him.

He is profoundly changed by this experience but he still retains a great deal of naivete. The experience underscores a natural reticence and from this point on he becomes progressively more close-mouthed. This in turn causes him
more trouble in the long run because he finally kills Jim Deakins and deserts Teal Eye as a result of a lack of communication.

The experience also emphasizes Boone's distrust for human motivation and institutions. The earliest manifestations of this distrust come as Boone makes his way from Kentucky to St. Louis. On the first evening away from home he contemplates seeking refuge in a town and then rejects the idea because, "there was no telling what people were like, living crowded up that way."¹ As he moves westward Boone looks forward to the Ohio River and "country a man could get his breath in."²

Since his previous encounters with civilization have been limited, Boone's introduction to Bedwell and York and the court are rude introductions to civilization as well as items in his initiation to the world of adults. When Boone is half through his journey to the paradise he dreams of he meets his Uncle Zeb who emphasizes the prevailing theme, the inevitable spoilation of the wilderness by man. Uncle Zeb says, "Not sp'iled! Forts all up and down the river and folk everywhere . . . Why'n't they stay to home? Why'n't they leave it to us as found it?"³

Boone sums it up as he returns to civilization and looks for some relief from the cramping of the forest, "it

¹A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Big Sky, p. 10.
²Ibid., p. 21. ³Ibid., p. 150.
wasn't any better, with fools staring . . . and thinking how one man ought to be like another and all knuckling under to rules and ways and work and sheriffs and judges, and calling themselves free."⁴

The matter of initiation seems to be interwoven with the matter of a distrust for human institution in the early books and novels. That is to say, in almost every case when a child is introduced to the world of adults there is a strong indication that the source of unhappiness is human institutions. As this theme develops it becomes a distrust of human nature itself rather than of human institutions.

The next examination of the theme of initiation comes in *The Way West*. This time the initiate is Brownie Evans, son of the leader of the wagon train, Lije Evans. His initiation comes about in a way that is less violent, but no less cruel and poignant than that of Boone Caudill. After he has discovered that the girl he loves, Mercy McBee, is pregnant with Curtis Mack's child and will marry Brownie only to give her child a father and not because she loves him, Brownie expresses the shock and the pain when talking to Dick Summers. Dick listens to him and asks questions and, "beyond the leaness of the tone Summers caught a cry that stirred him more because it was held in, the cry of hurt, the cry of not-understanding, the cry for help, the

⁴Ibid., p. 357.
cry for answers." The innocence is gone the understanding has not yet come, and now comes the long hurting until the heart and soul have become inured to the knowledge that the world is what it is. Dick thinks, "You couldn't tell a boy how few were the things that mattered and how little was their mattering. You couldn't say that the rest washed off in the wash of years so that, looking back, a man wanted to laugh except he couldn't quite laugh yet. The dreams dreamed and the hopes hoped and the hurts felt and the jolts suffered, they all got covered by the years. They buried themselves in memory."

As with the earlier increase in the complexity of the father-son relationship so a corresponding increase in the complexity of the initiation to the world of adults is shown here. However, the story of Brownie Evans is less an illustration of the growing distrust of human nature than it is of the increase in understanding of human memory.

The two stories which follow, however, demonstrate the development of the distrust of human nature. One of these was published shortly after The Way West and the other was published in 1959, one of the last stories published.

The first of these is "Ebbie." Guthrie has described the genesis of this story in his autobiography. He traces

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5A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Way West, p. 262.
6Ibid.
the story to an action of his father. He indicates that at the time he was willing to accept the explanation of his father but that "Now I know that fury pulled the trigger." First comes the knowledge, then years later, after the damage has been done, comes the understanding, which may help but also may not. More than this, the story explicates the growing distrust of human nature one finds in the work of Guthrie. In the section of the autobiography that deals with the sources of "Ebbie" Guthrie says of his father, but it could be said as easily of all men, "... devils dwelt in him, inexplicable and uncontainable." Superficially the author is describing the emotional reaction of nine-year-old Charlie Bostwick as he brushes against the enigmatic and inexplicable adult world. Essentially the story is a commentary on human nature.

Briefly, the story is this: Ebbie, the Bostwick's Gordon Setter, is in heat. Harold, Charlie's father, is infuriated by the dogs hanging about the house and tries to drive them off with a baseball bat. In the attempt Harold strikes Ebbie, already blind in one eye as a result of one of Harold's fits of temper, and destroys the dog's sight. The following day he decides the dog must be destroyed and shoots it.

The story has all the potential of a maudlin,

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7A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Blue Hen's Chick, p. 36.
8Ibid.
sentimental tearjerker steeped in hatred were it to dwell exclusively on the emotional state of the boy against the background of a cruel father. However, in the process of describing the boy's emotional journey toward adulthood the author manages to make some observations which have universal value both about the boy and the boy's father.

The first thing that the author does is to state with great economy what the story is about. He uses the topic sentences of the first three paragraphs to establish the situation, imply the outcome, and state the theme of the story. This is not a story with a trick ending. First, the situation, "Ebony, the Gordon setter, was in heat again, and a bunch of dogs were always hanging around the Bostwick house." Then, the implied outcome of the story, "Because old Eb was in heat, Father was out of humor with her." Finally, the theme upon which the story revolves, "Charlie didn't know what made father feel that way. Grownups had reasons of their own that you wouldn't understand until you were grown up yourself." Thus we have established for us at the outset everything necessary to the completion of the story and at the same time have several problems before us all of which the author solves, skillfully and credibly.

There are three problems that must be solved in order

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9A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Big It and Other Stories, p. 59.
10Ibid.
11Ibid., p. 60.
to achieve the author's goals, that is, to be credible and to point out effectively the change that takes place in the boy. These problems are the boy's relationship to the dog, the father's relationship to the dog, and the father's relationship to the boy.

The first of these is neatly solved, and I cite two passages to establish this conclusion. The boy and the dog are very close because the dog has been in the home since, "... before Charlie could remember."\(^{12}\) Charlie has had past experiences with the dog and he anticipates the future, "He would try her out himself as soon as he was old enough to carry a gun... . He had broken her to lead and to pull a wagon, and she would scratch like everything for him, trying to dig a gopher out. He bet that next to hunting she liked to be with him best, tagging at his heels or retrieving the sticks he threw or just lying with him behind the big range in the kitchen where the slow warmth sometimes put them both to sleep."\(^{13}\) This illustrates well the deep attachment between the boy and the dog and also establishes the motive for part of the boy's emotion.

The second of the relationships is that of the father and the dog. This relationship is more complex, as is the character of the father throughout the story, which is reasonable and quite credible and essential to the success of the story. The man's relationship to the dog is complicated by

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 60.  \(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 61.
a human contradictoriness that shows up in the father-son relationship. The father at one time, "... had tried to dust her when they were out hunting, because she ranged too far, and one of the shot happened to get in her eye."\textsuperscript{14} After Harold has shot the dog, ending its life, he, "... went over to her and stooped and put his hand out and rested it on her side. He didn't speak, not for a long time, but just stooped and let his hand lie soft and kind on her side."\textsuperscript{15} This is letting action speak as words never do.

Lending further support to the portrait of the father is the aura of repressed sexuality expressed in Harold's reactions to the dog's being in heat. This goes far to explain the violence of the father's action and also has the effect of placing the motivation of the father far beyond the scope of the boy's knowledge and experience.

Finally, to the boy Charlie, the father is a mixture of an authoritarian and warm human being. This feeling is captured in the boy's description of the father, "like the sun shining in the house,"\textsuperscript{16} on the one hand and on the other, "like a thundercloud had come across the sun."\textsuperscript{17}

After Charlie has gone through all the emotional rending of his experience he finally breaks down and cries. This is as human as the fact that many persons find it

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 60. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 68. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{16}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 60. \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{17}\textit{Ibid.}
impossible to cry until they stand at the grave of a loved one. The ambiguity of this kind of sadness is well illustrated by the last statement in the story, "He didn't know for whom he cried, for Eb or Father or Mother or himself." Humanly, one doesn't know for whom the tears fall, for the dead dog, who needs no tears, for the father, whose human faults drive him, or for the boy because he is unalterably changed and has seen the complexity of adult life and of human nature.

The second story is "Independence Day" and Guthrie returns to the themes which he covered in "Ebbie" but this time with a powerful difference. The main character is the same Charlie Bostwick grown to a seventeen-year-old. The initiation this time is not only to the realization that there are things in this world cruel and bloody and damaging to men, but that many men actually enjoy these things. While "Ebbie" showed a boy coming to the realization that sometimes men were senselessly cruel to animals this story brings the realization that this is the case not only with an individual but with the mass of men and they like it.

The story is of a German boy who comes to Moon Dance, Montana, in the early 1920's and who keeps himself in an alien status by being boastful. Evidence that this is the strongest obstacle that lies in the path of his acceptance

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18Ibid., p. 69.
is the fact that his employer says of him, "He dun't spik English so good, y'knaw, and dun't know meat yet needer . . . but he fine worker, you bet." 19 Obviously, one need not speak unbroken English to be accepted in Moon Dance.

Bill the Butch has a great deal of pride in his ability to fight and doesn't hesitate to express his pride to anyone. For this reason a fight is arranged which is intended to test the mettle of Bill and see if he is the fighter he boasts of being. It is a rigged fight since the opponent selected for Bill is older, more experienced and has a verifiable record of success. The day of the fight is July 4th and the biggest attraction of the day is the fight. An enormous crowd gathers. Bill the Butch more than holds his own for the first round of the fight but once he has revealed to his opponent that he has only one method of fighting his opponent is able to beat him into unconsciousness.

Charlie Bostwick who was initially excited by the fight finds himself more and more repelled by it as he sees the sadistic interest his friends are taking in the beating.

Finally, after the fight, he goes to the room where Bill stays and sympathizes with him. But he finds that Bill wants no sympathy and is quite as obnoxious after losing the fight as he was before. When Charlie leaves the

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cellar in which Bill dwells he is ready to return to his friends and anxious for the camaraderie that his friends provide. But he can't shake the shouting and the cruel hunger of the crowd from his mind and he moves away from the crowd and his friend.

Charlie Bostwick has learned two things in this story about adult human nature. The first is that there is a bloodlust and cruelty in mankind so widespread as to be all but universal. He finds it even in himself and is repelled by it. He discovers that this blood lust is ordinarily well contained under the veneer of civilization but that, given the right circumstances it becomes so contagious it is epidemic. He discovers he is himself susceptible to the spread of it and is again revolted by his weakness.

Secondly, Charlie Bostwick discovers the existence in the world of a frame of mind epitomized by Bill the Butch. It is not the persistence shown in Bill's efforts to convince himself that he is a good fighter nor the stubborn belief in his own ability at the expense of good sense and intelligence. Both of these characteristics Bill has in large measure and both of them are valuable to man. These things are not what disturb Charlie. The thing that disturbs Charlie is the discovery, rude and abrupt, that people don't change.

That is to say, contrary to all of Charlie's
expectations, contrary to Charlie's subjective belief about himself projected to others, the character of Bill the Butch does not and is not going to change because of the beating he has taken. It would not change if he were beaten twice, it might not even change if the beatings were to go on endlessly. The realization that there is an invincible ignorance in the human heart is perhaps the strongest blow Charlie receives.

This is compounded by the fact that it is coupled to his experience that day with the crowd that came to see Bill the Butch beaten. Unconsciously perhaps Charlie Bostwick forms an equation between Bill and the crowd, Bill and George Jackson, and Bill and himself. He is made painfully aware of the fact that they are all condemned to the permanency of human nature. Subsequently Charlie finds himself unable to face his friend or himself or the "rocket that would sprinkle sparks against the dark."²⁰

CHAPTER IV

As was mentioned in the first chapter, the theme of the relationship of man to woman plays a part only in Guthrie's novels. It is almost completely absent from the short stories being depicted only in the story "The Wreck." In the novels man-woman relationships play an increasingly important role. This theme is important in The Big Sky largely as an element of plot. Later it becomes an instrument to bring out and emphasize other themes. Finally, in These Thousand Hills it becomes inextricably interwoven with the father-son theme and the search for a pattern to life.

In The Big Sky the theme plays a minor but significant part in getting the plot to work. There are only two male-female relationships portrayed but in the two we find a striking comparison. The first of the two is the relationship of Boone's mother to his father. It is notable only in that it is an almost purely chattel-master relationship.

In contrast, and perhaps the contrast is more of a complement, we find the Boone Caudill-Teal Eye relationship. After falling in love with Teal Eye while coming up the Missouri, Boone spends considerable effort to find her. When he does he takes her as his squaw and takes the greatest pleasure in the fact that, "What she cared about most was to please him."¹ There is little to distinguish this from the

¹A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Big Sky, p. 260.
relationship of Boone's father to his mother. Finally, Boone begins to suspect her of infidelity with Jim Deakins through the genetic chance of red hair showing on the baby. He shoots Deakins and leaves Teal Eye. When he returns to the West it is not specifically to see Teal Eye but rather a search for what she symbolizes and what, like her, is gone forever.

In sum, this relationship is perhaps intended to be more symbolic than real. One aspect of it is found in the lines, "... and Boone so jailed inside himself she couldn't know his heart or show her heart to him," but these lines are of importance only to later novels. It is revealing that Guthrie indicates in his autobiography that he wasn't called upon to portray a woman until he got to The Way West. This would indicate that he didn't feel that the man-woman relationship portrayed in The Big Sky was of significance, since the portrayal of a woman would be a vital adjunct to any man-woman relationship.

A much richer field for exploration is The Way West. In this book there are several interlocking relationships and it will be well to investigate them one by one.

Foremost is the Lije and Rebecca Evans pair. Of the half dozen couples whose pairing is described in Guthries

2Ibid., p. 339.

fiction these two seem to be the best suited and the best adjusted. It is almost as though Guthrie has chosen to write about an ideal man and his ideal family because Lije Evans is also an ideal father. Between Lije and Rebecca exists a pattern of mutual admiration and respect. They both lend support to one another and both are sensitive to the other's moods and needs. When Lije needs pushing Rebecca gently encourages him, as when he is being made the leader of the wagon train. When Rebecca wearies of the trail Lije understands and does what he can to ease her burden. Their sexual appetites seem balanced and neither demands what the other is unwilling to give.

In contrast to the older Evans are the Macks, Curtis and Amanda. Stemming from unequal sexual desires the troubles that plague Amanda and Curtis Mack are like a stone in a brook spreading ever widening circles to include Mercy McBee, Brownie Evans, and finally the whole train. Because of his frustration Curtis Mack on one occasion kills an Indian which causes trouble for the train. On another occasion he seeks relief by seducing Mercy McBee, gets her with child, and then regrets that he can do nothing for her. Later in the story when Curtis Mack has done nearly as much damage as he can he finds that he is able to communicate with his wife and the understanding that results diminishes their problem.
By this time, Mercy McBee is at her wits end and when Brownie, out of the depths of his naive seventeen-year-old heart, offers to marry her she accepts. She does, however, confess her condition before she gets Brownie irrevocably committed. Brownie consults his father substitute, Dick Summers, and marries Mercy. At the end of the story a satisfactory adjustment seems reached, but Guthrie may be looking forward. The burden of guilt has been laid in this book which later manifests itself in These Thousand Hills, as we have seen part of in Chapter II.

In These Thousand Hills there are two man-woman relationships which are notable. The first is between Lat Evans and Callie Kash. The second is between Lat Evans and Joyce Sheridan who later becomes his wife.

The first relationship is based on a strong physical and mental attraction. Lat loves Callie's body, he loves Callie's mind, he loves her understanding nature. She reciprocates. He finds in her everything his nature desires but also everything that his background denies him because these things are illicit in terms of his background. Perhaps the situation is best put by two of Lat's friends who are discussing Callie and Lat. One say, "I'd be proud to show that Callie around . . . Carmichael smiled, "Not if Lat's pa had broke you to harness."  

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4 A. B. Guthrie, Jr., These Thousand Hills, p. 215.
The second relationship is one based on duty. It results in a marriage based on obligation. In his thoughts Lat considers his life and the things he has earned, most of which he earned himself, and says, "So much of everything he owed to Joyce." And so, as was pointed out in the second chapter, Lat returns to his father and the pattern of life which is his father's. Even in his marriage it is to duty he turns when he finds no other solution to his problem. It is his duty to serve, but only to serve on the surface. Under the surface, in the mind, in the memory, in the intricate involved pattern which is the sum of experience, Lat's only important duty is to himself. Thus we arrive at a consideration of the last theme which is the search for a pattern in life.

\[5\text{Ibid.}\]
CHAPTER V

A final theme which seems recurrent enough to be discussed here is one to which the first chapter refers as a search for a pattern to life and further elaborates as a religious theme. Perhaps a better term for this would be a search for a code to live by. There seems to be a development here from the unstated code with a religious basis in *The Big Sky* to the formal code of *These Thousand Hills* which is based on the ways of man.

In *The Big Sky* there are representatives of two points of view. Jim Deakins represents a speculative and somewhat agnostic soul while Boone Caudill represents the extreme of disinterest and disbelief. There is in *The Big Sky* no orthodoxy, only its remains in Jim Deakins. This situation is important because there are a number of characters in Guthrie's fiction who stand among the shards of a religion of their youth.

Perhaps illustrative of the religious character of Jim are his last words as he dies from Boone's bullet, "I'll know about God, I reckon, now."¹ He is always searching. Earlier in the book Jim traces his background to his father's fundamentalistic religion that Jim followed

¹A. B. Guthrie, Jr., *The Big Sky*, p. 342.
automatically, "We had to pray and read the Bible and repent the livin' day and some of the night, too, unless you could go to sleep and forgit God was watchin' you. I didn't know what repent was, but I done it . . . Mostly, now, I just figure what the hell, and let 'er rip. So far, ain't no lightnin' struck." The break from orthodoxy which is described here forms an underlying theme in the works of Guthrie, but a less important theme than the search for faith or a code. Jim still retains a faith, but a faith tempered by the wilderness. "I figgered he must be a friend, Boone, and not no stiff and proper son of a bitch puttin' my name down for hel'. . . . Who made it all and give a body an eye to see with and a heart to feel with it if 'twarn't God?" asks Jim when he lies badly wounded.

Boone seldom thinks of God and speaks of him only under the influence of Jim and while struggling to save his life and the lives of his companions. Then he speculates, "If God was with him he wished he'd tone things down. He wished He'd stop the breeze and warm the air and ease up on the shine and put the meat where he could shoot it. If God was with him now, God must be almighty cold and empty paunched . . . nothing would come of figuring and praying

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\(^2\)Ibid., p. 98. \(^3\)Ibid., p. 306.
unless a man did it for himself." Here we have the first intimation of a code by which to live that is later to become more and more explicit. It almost seems to become later an adjunct to religion rather than a substitute. That is, this is what men live by and they only profess to live by a religion.

In his autobiography Guthrie indicates that he began *The Way West* intending to bring his guns to bear on orthodox religion. His character was Brother Weatherby. As the story progressed, however, he found he grew to admire Brother Weatherby. But the admiration was for Weatherby as a man, not as a representative of religion. The prevailing sentiment of the average person in the book seems to be that women should take care of religion. This sentiment is true to the form of the West and is an accurate description of the condition that existed in the West of the time and still exists today.

The outstanding men of the novel, however, seem to live by a vague code which has evolved from the bases laid in *The Big Sky*. Dick Summers and Lije Evans live by this code, but it is Curtis Mack, who has rejected God and terms himself an unbeliever, who verbalizes the code. At one point in the story Curtis Mack volunteers to get the cattle


5 A. B. Guthrie, Jr., *The Blue Hen's Chick*, p. 203.
to the Willamette in Oregon. Suddenly he discovers that what he is doing seems to be an act of atonement or restitution or repentance for the treatment he has accorded Mercy McBee. As he ponders this seeming contradiction in himself he things, "the part of good sense was to forget." As he thinks farther he finds that this does not satisfy him, this does not explain his action. Finally he verbalizes, "It wasn't to God . . . It wasn't to the train. It was to self. Its purpose was to square himself with self, to equalize accounts and so walk upright in the sight of Curtis Mack. That much remained, that stubborn much, of what was taught him as the way of heaven."  

Lije Evans, while not so articulate nor as profound, sums up too what he feels God may be like as he speculates on the religious beliefs of Dick Summers, " . . . whether Summers believed in God at all . . . Any God worth praying to would know Dick Summers for a good man, even if he didn't bow and scrape and make little of himself and beg for blessing regardless." Dick Summers is a man who exudes the image of being at peace with himself and thus with his God and his fellow men. 

In Chapter III reference was made to a change from criticism of man's institutions and his civilization to

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6A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Way West, p. 304.
7Ibid.
8Ibid., p. 45.
man's nature. Here we find that a criticism of civilization turns into a search for a set of rules for living, a religious theme. In *The Big Sky* there is a good deal of criticism of civilization. In *The Way West* there is much less criticism. This situation is easily understood since the latter is a book about a group of people intent on civilizing a region and there is less opportunity for characters to speak critically of civilization.

The code approach to civilization is involved with the code approach to religion and Lije Evans verbalizes this approach to both when he says, "Rules? You hardly thought of them but made out the best you could according to the time. You voted them and let them lie... Still, the way it was with men, maybe the rule served a purpose, ... Just because the rule wasn't broken was no sign it wasn't needed. Maybe the fact of it kept it from being broken."

When Dick Summers thinks further he makes a comment to himself that underscores three themes: religion, civilization, and initiation. He thinks, "And the rules that people set and broke and suffered from in the breaking? Like the rule against naturalness ... like the rule that a girl couldn't lie with a man ... how big would the lying

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seem to Brownie when the years had rubbed the fuzz off him . . . A man was a man by the nature of him and, grown up, knew himself in secret for what he was, unless he had an extra-sore religion."^ Not only are these words emphatic, they are also prophetic, for the boy Brownie turns into the guilt ridden father of Lat Evans, the man George Brown Evans is a man with an extra-sore religion.

It is finally in These Thousand Hills that we find the code fully applied. We have spoken at some length earlier of Lat Evans and have detailed some of his problems with his memory of his father and with his relationships to his women and with his initiation. In Lat Evans all the themes we have found are almost inseparably interwoven. He is father-plagued, he is searching for a code by which to live, he is plagued by his relationships with women. When Lat has returned to the ways of his father, as was discussed in Chapter II, he still is not satisfied with the solution he has found to his problem. The answer is not satisfactory until he finally arrives at the code to which Curtis Jack, Dick Summers, and perhaps even Jim Deakins subscribed, "Nothing mattered; all explained. Now was then and then was now. Old wounds into new. A man tried. He kept trying."^ The only certainty seems to be change and there seems to him

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^A. B. Guthrie, Jr., These Thousand Hills, p. 345.

Ibid., p. 262.
to be only one way to live. As he sums up his thoughts in
the concluding pages of the novel Lat Evans comes to the
essence of the code, no matter what the theme, "To be right,
he told himself, but to be right for the right reasons! To
square things up, he told himself, but to square them only
by squaring with himself."12

It would seem that the code is established but into
this seemingly tight little system a last story introduces
a question. This story is one of the latest stories Guthrie
has published. It was published in 1960 and since then one
other story, a short piece of non-fiction, and an autobio-
graphy make up Guthrie's entire output.

The story to which I refer and which seems to be
freighted with importance is "The Wreck." It is the story
of a man who is brought to trial for driving while drunk,
causing an accident which kills a valuable horse. In the
criminal trial the judge throws out the case on a techni-
cality. In the damage suit the defendant is assessed
damages amounting to $7500. Since the accused is a strug-
gling photographer barely making his way this is an immense
sum. The decision of the jury breaks the man who finally
becomes in fact the drunk he was once falsely accused of
being. The man muses about his fate, "A man did, finally,

12 Ibid.
what was expected, and the sayings quieted and the looks softened, and he went in peace, a kind of peace. At the end of the story a witness to the accident comes to confess to Mr. Cutter that he was responsible for pouring whisky on him in order to prevent "blood poisoning" and in doing so felt that he was doing Cutter a great favor.

The most important theme of the story at this point is Cutter's conviction of complete cosmic indifference. These sentiments are perhaps best expressed by Cutter when he screams, to the man who has just confessed what he did, "Then it just happened! There was not purpose to it! No purpose at all!" The man telling his story fails to understand what Mr. Cutter is driving at and finally leaves with the conviction that he has done the best thing.

Mr. Cutter has, on the other hand, received confirmation of what he seems to have felt ever since the trial, that life is a no-purpose stream which carries him and all others along with no meaning, to the end of existence. At this point this is to Cutter the only reality.

But the greatest irony lies in the comparison of two characters, Mr. Thompson and Mr. Cutter. Both of these characters are making an attempt to live by a code. Mr.

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13 A. B. Guthrie, Jr., The Big It and Other Stories, p. 39.

14 Ibid., p. 42.
Thompson asks the question, "You ever had to sit back and think about yourself, knowing your time wasn't long, and all you'd done kind of came home to you, until you couldn't stand yourself and figured God couldn't stand you either." Mr. Thompson is trying to live with himself and this forces him to go and talk to Mr. Cutter. The man is trying to live according to a rule that says you must "stand yourself" or not be able to live. Mr. Thompson has lost one chance, now he is trying to make another. Mr. Cutter on the other hand, has lived by the code, has faced himself, and through chance has lost everything and teeters on the brink of insanity. He realizes now that there is no code, there is no purpose, and that there is no place to go save to his bottle. There is no certainty but only uncertainty.

The other story published in 1960 seems to provide and alternative to "The Wreck." "The Fourth at Getup" is the only other story in Guthrie's work which treats an up to date event. It is also the most obviously autobiographical of the stories. In other of his stories there have been instances of the author using names of friends but in no story has he spoken of them as clearly as part of the story. In this story the author sees events and comments on them just as Charlie Bostwick saw them in his stories.

\[15\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 41.}\]
The lead character is a writer who meets four Southerners traveling through Getup, Montana. They have seen him riding in the 4th of July parade and now they wish to stop and see the rodeo that will follow. He takes them into the bar where are gathered his wife, his in-laws, and several Montanans. The travelers are all ladies.

In the course of the story the author comments on several things, "... of old and established and perished and yet imperishable things." He comments on the contrast between a part of the country with tradition, as Kentucky, and a new country, as Montana. He comments on the disparity of the things that go to make a state, a nation, or a race. He comments on religion. Yet all of these things are commented on from a distance and abstractly as though it is not a good idea to look closely at some things for fear one might see too much. After the demon-driven tale "The Wreck" the approach of this story is singularly mild. Tom Larson, father-in-law and fast friend of the author, stands firmly before the kaleidoscope background of the Montanans in the bar. He seems to provide the pivot point, a center around which all things revolve.

In the story one of the Montanans who inhabits the bar acts in a strange manner. The author comments on his strangeness. "I didn't add that he had always been a little..."
loco; all of us in Montana had the seeds of his insistence in us . . . We're young here, I said and let it go at that and was at once glad and regretful that we were."\textsuperscript{17}

When one looks back at the story and stories that precede this one perhaps this is a conclusion, that all the main characters have a little madness in them. Perhaps this is as close to a conclusion as it is possible to come. Perhaps this is a surrender. As Tom Larson says, "Sure takes all kinds of people all right."\textsuperscript{18} Which may be all that can be truly stated.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., p. 176. \textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 177.
CHAPTER VI

These four themes then seem to be dominant in Guthrie's work: The search for a father, the initiation into the world of adults, the search for a meaningful man-woman relationship, and the search for a pattern to life. The single unifying factor in all these themes seems to be an uncertainty.

A conclusion is then that a satisfactory solution to the problem of experience is hard to find. In a sense there is only one person who makes a satisfactory adjustment to the problem of the uncertainty of life and Lat Evans adjustment is more of a compromise than a solution. All the other characters came to grief. Boone Caudill destroys his whole world in an attempt to find certainty of beaver and squaws. Dick Summers wanders aimlessly seeking a dream of a girl by the Popo Agie. Lije Evans gains Oregon only to find that Oregon doesn't have what he expected and soon is spoiled by men just as the beaver country was spoiled. The only person with certainty is Lat Evans and his lies with the rules of men and leaves a distinct impression of being second best.

One could expand the meaning of the search for certainty and in doing so find that it fails significantly throughout the novels and the short stories. Taken in a
broad sense Curtis Mack is searching for a certainty which leads him to kill and seduce the innocent and which leads, finally, to a very uncertain compromise with his wife and with himself. Jim Deakin searches for certainty all his life and when he dies from Boone's bullet is still seeking. Mercy McBee seeks certainty of love with Curtis Mack and finds only the bleakest of uncertainty. Brownie Evans finds his Mercy McBee an uncertain girl and finally in the gap between books becomes a man with an "extra-sore" religion, a thoughtless form of uncertainty which gives the illusion of certainty.

Even autobiographical Charlie Bostwick who is seeking some sort of certainty in human nature finds only that which repels him, drives him back, that which he cannot accept. All of the characters seek certainty in love, in father, in the adult world or in God, and all are disappointed, at least in part. Mr. Cutter in "The Wreck" seeks the certainty of all these things, a wife, material goods, obedience to the rules, and he ultimately discovers that the only thing certain is the uncertainty, to him the purposelessness, of life.

The other man unmentioned is the lead character in "The Fourth at Getup" who expresses a counterview to the bleak despair of Mr. Cutter. Both views seem to stem from the same assumption, granted the world is patternless,
granted that uncertainty is the only certainty, each man
then has his madness. One proves his strong right arm,
another insists on recognition, and Tom Larson sums it up
in his final line.

Three patterns have been mentioned in the introduc-
tion and three patterns have been observed: in time, in
geography, and in subject. The Big Sky takes as its setting
the entire western United States; The Way West is narrowed
geographically taking place in a strip from Missouri to
Oregon; These Thousand Hills takes place almost exclusively
in Montana; the short stories are set almost exclusively,
save one or two, in Montana. The geographical movement then
is to Montana. In time the stories move from past to pre-
sent: The Big Sky, 1830-1843; The Way West, 1845; These
Thousand Hills, 1880-1888; the short stories range from the
1830's to "Independence Day" c. 1920 to "The Fourth at Get-
up" the present.

The movement to autobiography is prominently displayed
in the short stories as "Ebbie," "Independence Day," and
"The Fourth at Getup." Each is more autobiographical and
each is set more recently in time. Finally, The Blue Hen's
Chick, published after a five year silence, closes on a
question, or seems to, as did the sum of the works. In the
last chapter the author has been watching the activity of
the animals in the yard of his ranch home in the Rocky
Mountains of Montana. He writes, "Idly, while I've watched, I've wondered what I want, where I stand, and what's my doctrine. A simple answer came . . . Above all else to care! Suddenly the yard is bare . . . and I feel deserted and thrown in on myself as if I were the last of life."¹

Perhaps this is full circle. Perhaps the search can only end in this, a question. Early in his career when Guthrie had first been successful with The Big Sky he came back to the University of Montana and made a speech accepting an honorary Doctor of Literature Degree. We have reached the same point.

I speak in the face of another negative conviction. It is that answers, even general answers such as I've been suggesting, don't exist. There are no answers. There are only approaches to answers, tentative, temporary, reversible. We go through life wanting answers, wanting final, everlasting, absolute, guaranteed answers; and often in our hunger and our fright and our selfishness, we tell ourselves we've found them. But there are no answers.²

Fiction writing is the exploration of personality in relation to event—or that's part of what it is. If it succeeds, it is an illumination of life. It gives the reader at least some bit of insight, some flash of awareness, some additional understanding of human experience. If it doesn't communicate, it fails;

¹A.B. Guthrie, Jr., The Blue Hen's Chick, pp. 260-61.
²A.B. Guthrie, Jr., Twenty-six Years After, Remarks made by Mr. Guthrie at a Montana State University convocation on July 21, 1949.
and if it has nothing to communicate, it fails too, or it ought to. Unfortunately that isn't always the case. It seems to me that the inquirer, with all his confusions and contradictions and irresolutions, should have more to communicate than the man who closes the riddle of experience with the absolutes of yes and no.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid.
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