Writing a western woman's life| Agoraphobia in Dorothy M. Johnson's "The Hanging Tree"

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WRITING A WESTERN WOMAN'S LIFE:  
AGORAPHOBIA IN DOROTHY M. JOHNSON'S  
"THE HANGING TREE"

by
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for the degree of  
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Montana writer Dorothy M. Johnson is recognized as one of the leading contributors to western American literature, although her most famous stories rely on stereotypical characterizations of the western male hero. However, the now seemingly hackneyed "The Hanging Tree" was originally conceived as the tale of a young woman newly arrived in the west who, traumatized by a robbery and the death of her father, becomes afflicted with agoraphobia, a psychological syndrome literally translated as "fear of the marketplace" but now more commonly identified as a "fear of open places."

Originally written as a novel-length manuscript entitled *The Prisoner of Skull Creek*, the eventually published novella endured nearly ten years of rewrites as editors and agents advised Johnson to shift her focus from her cabin-bound female protagonist to the "more dramatic" storyline involving the male characters. This thesis includes a detailed analysis of the unpublished original manuscript and extensive correspondence between Johnson and numerous agents and editors from the years 1951 to 1957. Also included is an analysis of the female character's psychological condition as prepared by Catherine A. Burnham, a clinical psychologist and friend and advisor to Johnson.

This study also examines the condition of agoraphobia, its significance relative to women's frontier experiences and the "epidemic" of female illnesses, such as hysteria, prevalent among 19th-century women. The conclusion attempts to draw parallels between gender-role conflicts during that period and the 1950s when Johnson was writing.

While even in its original unpublished form "The Hanging Tree" is not a feminist tract, it portrays one woman's response to frontier society and how that experience illuminates an unconventional interpretation of the western experience for both men and women. Finally, this glimpse into the publishing pressures that influenced Johnson's revisions exposes the difficulties genre writers face not only in publishing non-formulaic works, but also in conceiving models for new narratives.
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ONE

Introduction: Finding a Place for Women in the West

A little more than a year before her death in 1984, a mass market magazine published a biographical sketch of western writer Dorothy M. Johnson under the headline: "The 'Mystical Muse' Who Helped Make the West So Wild." The author of sixteen books and nearly one-hundred short stories, many of them set in the 19th-century West, Johnson is often considered "one of the boys," remembered primarily for works that reinforce Western stereotypes popular during the 1940s and 50s: the stoic gunfighter who can't shoot when it matters most ("The Hanging Tree"), the greenhorn who seeks revenge for the ridicule he endures at the hands of a predatory outlaw ("The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance"), and the noble white man who finds love and cultural sensitivity as a captive of an Indian tribe ("A Man Called Horse").

But there is another, less well-known, side to Johnson. More than half of Johnson's published works are told from the viewpoint of women, children and Native Americans, an
all-too-rare perspective in the western fiction of her day. Even the seemingly hackneyed "The Hanging Tree" was originally conceived as the tale of a young woman suddenly abandoned in the "wild" West. This thesis explores how Johnson's novella, "The Hanging Tree," portrays one woman's response to frontier society and how that experience illuminates an unconventional interpretation of the western experience for both men and women. It is a portrait that is at odds with the popular mythology of the mid-20th century, yet profoundly in keeping with the sex-role struggles of 19th-century women seeking self-determination.

Elizabeth Armistead, the female protagonist of "The Hanging Tree," becomes afflicted with agoraphobia, a psychological syndrome literally translated as "fear of the marketplace" but more commonly identified as "fear of open spaces." Elizabeth's inability to leave not only her crude log cabin, but also the mining camp of Skull Creek throws the "community" into turmoil. Lives are threatened and lost by what this study will interpret as a gender-based struggle to maintain a patriarchal social order.

Along with examining the authenticity of Elizabeth's symptoms, I will also consider the connections between her "illness" and what some historians of the 19th century have called that period's "epidemic of women's ailments." Certain theorists speculate that Victorian women were not merely adopting certain behavior patterns as a response to
sex-role limitations, but were doing so as a protest against them. I will test that theory against Elizabeth Armistead's fictional situation and explore whether or not her stereotypical depiction in a work of "popular" fiction might, nonetheless, offer the contemporary reader an insight into the depth of psychological tensions that existed between men and women on the American frontier.

Set in a rough, makeshift mining camp in the Far West of the 1870s, "The Hanging Tree," one of Johnson's most commercially popular stories, has been examined almost exclusively as the story of Doc Frail -- a Shane-like character defending an innocent lady's honor in the face of a mindless, blood-thirsty rabble. "There is something magnificently touching about this man's arrogance and loneliness and his aloof care for the girl in distress," Curtis W. Casewit, wrote in a 1957 New York Herald Tribune review (Smith 125).

Dorothy Johnson, a 51-year-old assistant professor who looks as if she may have just talked to the ladies at the opening of a church bazaar, writes with authentic familiarity about the men who opened the American West. (Time 79) [emphasis mine]

While media critics lauded the authenticity of Johnson's tale -- "'this is how it must have been,' you say to yourself as you put it down" (Hutchens 23) -- literary critics focused their attention on the relationship between Doc Frail and Elizabeth.4 Anthony Arthur noted the themes of "solitude, isolation and loneliness" (xi) in the story,
arguing that both characters learn "that the essential for contented survival is acceptance of the need for mutual dependence" (xi). For Judy Alter, the emphasis shifted to the "depth of love" as the provider of "saving grace" (26). And, in an unpublished master thesis, Elizabeth James characterized the story as an "affirmation of humankind" (76).

However, few if any have read "The Hanging Tree" as Elizabeth's story, even though that was the story Johnson wanted to tell when she began working on it in the 1940s. "What if?" she asked herself after seeing two Western films about men lost in the desert.

Instead of having a bunch of men lost and thirsty in the desert, how about making it a woman? This makes for a terrible problem. How in the world did she get out there in the first place? (Smith 128)

Johnson understood the complications such a "simple switch" entailed, since many of the possible answers struck at the very heart of societal conventions. What woman -- what kind of woman -- would be lost in the desert alone? How would she respond to the situation, to physical hardship? What would her relationship to her rescuers be? Where would she fit in the social hierarchy of the male-dominated gold camp? How could she adhere to or refute the cultural expectations of the 19th-century woman? What would be the male response to this interloper?
Johnson wrote numerous versions of the story, finally completing in the late 1940s, a 65,000-word novel she called The Prisoner of Skull Creek. The story began making the rounds of publishers with little success. Elizabeth, one editor concluded, was "tiresome."

Johnson was urged by publishers and editors to downplay the woman's angle. A Random House editor worried that the book fell "between two stools. . .It is not a straight action Western. . .but as a novel placed against the background of the old West with psychological overtones and symbolism...it does not seem to us to quite come off." By 1957, long tired of reworking the story and eager to finally get some financial remuneration for years of work, Johnson sold the novel-length piece to Ballantine Books, who accepted the story under the condition that it be drastically cut to fit into a collection of short stories. Rechristened and now only 39,000 words, "The Hanging Tree" became, as a result, less about a woman lost in the desert and the consequences of that event than about Doc Joe Frail, a loner with a secret past, unrivaled skill with a pistol and a deck of cards, and a fated meeting with frontier justice and the end of a hanging rope. Like other popular western stories of the day, "The Hanging Tree" depicts a laconic, but ultimately noble, prototypical western hero who fights alone for his ideals and is rewarded with a sort of spiritual renewal through the love of a "good" woman.
Were the editors right? Was the original *The Prisoner of Skull Creek* boring because of its claustrophobic theme? Was the psychological focus "undramatic"? Was Johnson’s second attempt at a novel unpublishable because of her artistic failure or were there other, more practical but infinitely subtler reasons for the publishing world’s lack of interest?

Johnson excised more than 7,500 words about Elizabeth from the original, unpublished manuscript, many of them long internal monologues that try to capture the woman’s uncontrollable fear and conflicting emotions. Having read both the original novel-length manuscript and the published/edited version, I would agree with the editors who noted the failings in Johnson’s treatment of Elizabeth. "The Hanging Tree" comes alive when the characters "act" and move about the western landscape. Johnson was less successful at moving across her characters’ interior landscapes. Instinctively, Johnson seemed to understand that this was important terrain to examine, particularly in relation to the experiences of women on the frontier, but she struggled to find a way to do so successfully. Whether it was because she had few literary models to follow or because her own literary talents were inadequate to the task, the story of Elizabeth Armistead is not an essentially compelling tale either in the original manuscript or the published version.
Nonetheless, given the social changes of more than thirty years of feminism, the women's rights movement and revisionist interpretations of Western history, the contemporary reader of "The Hanging Tree" can discover an illuminating depiction of the frontier woman's cultural predicament as "The Hanging Tree" unconsciously exposes the social status of the late 19th-century western woman. Elizabeth Armistead, who moves from being the "Lost Lady" to the "Lucky Lady" (and implicitly, beyond the story's end, Mrs. Joe Frail), transports the "Woman Question" of the 19th century from the urban centers of the East to the frontier West. The questions raised by her presence in the gold mining camp of Skull Creek mirror the manifestations of that period's gender struggles: the belief in the pathological frailty of woman's health; the proliferation of unexplainable illness that confined women to their homes and beds; conflicts over female participation in the workplace and the public arena; the middle and upper-class "lady" as the repository of morality; and, the notion of "home" as a place of self-discovery and spirituality.

A thorough researcher although not a feminist, Johnson was clearly sensitive to the pressures facing frontier women. "The experience [in the West] was different for the woman," Johnson said in a 1978 interview. "It would have to be. She would not go alone for one thing" (Mathews, "Winning" 161). What happened to a woman in the West
suddenly abandoned by the requisite male guardian? While eastern women were making small inroads in the professions, higher education and factory work, the acceptable options available to western women were few: wife, widow, whore, school teacher -- role models that all appear in "The Hanging Tree." The nineteen-year-old Elizabeth, however, does not fit into any of these roles (although she does try unsuccessfully to become a school teacher). She is not married, or even engaged. Moreover, she displays a predilection for independence and entrepreneurial enterprise. When her father is murdered on their journey West, Elizabeth becomes a most troubling entity--an unattached woman. "The Hanging Tree" explores just how unsettling such a woman’s presence can be to the social order.

Ultimately, Elizabeth fails to secure an independent life for herself, not surprising given the cultural pressures against such a possibility and the few role models that existed for women in that time and place. The absence of these role models affected not only those who lived the western life, but those who would later try to write about it. "Lives do not serve as models," Carolyn Heilbrun concludes in Writing a Woman’s Life. "Only stories do that. It is a hard thing to make up stories to live by. We can only retell and live by the stories we have read or heard" (37). In the telling of those model stories, Johnson, the
rare woman western-writer, was stymied, not just in her efforts to write a different version of a western woman's life, but to get that story published. One editor described Elizabeth as "too true to the period" implying that this publication house at least believed the book reading public was not interested in stories reflecting deep-seated psychological anxieties about the western experience. In some ways, Johnson's limitations were the same as those of her character, willing to jab a toe into the contrary waters of sex-role stereotyping, but so untutored in the skill of swimming as to be unwilling to risk plunging bodily into the stream.

Women writers, like successful women in male-dominated professions, have failed to imagine autonomous women characters. With remarkably few exceptions, women writers do not imagine women characters with even the autonomy they themselves have achieved. (Heilbrun, Reinventing 71)

Johnson was a single, self-supporting career woman in an age of homemakers and mothers. Yet, she rarely created a story that included a fully, self-determined woman. The contradictions between Johnson's life and the content of her work suggests the depth of the ambivalence facing such a woman in the 1940s and 50s. "I believe in love," Johnson once said. Yet, except for a brief, unhappy marriage to a footloose soldier who abandoned her, Johnson never seemed to find the love for herself which so often appeared in her stories. Nor is there much indication she wanted or needed it, even though her female characters almost always do.
Johnson also considered herself a professional writer rather than an artist. "I write for money as well as love," she told a group of historians in 1967. "I want to be read by lots of people, who want to be entertained."^^

Did Johnson's hunger for publication, insecurities about her "creative vision" and ambiguous feelings about women's roles in society contribute to her willingness to repeatedly "rewrite" Elizabeth's story until it virtually faded into the woodwork? That question is the focus of this study. The various components of the issue are examined in separate chapters. Chapter Two provides a detailed synopsis of the published version of "The Hanging Tree." Chapters Three and Four examine the subject of female illness; first as it relates specifically to Elizabeth's condition, agoraphobia, and secondly, in the broader perspective of female "hysteria" as a prevailing condition of 19th-century women. Chapter Five takes a look at the nearly 29,000 words edited from Johnson's original manuscript, The Prisoner of Skull Creek, and the influence of editors and Johnson's own agents in re-shaping the story to make it more "marketable." Chapter Six draws parallels between the biographical and cultural influences of the mid-20th Century, especially those of the late 1940s and early 50s when Johnson was writing the story, and the conditions experienced by the 19th-century woman in the West. Chapters Seven and Eight attempt to bring together the foregoing strands of
historical, psychological, biographical and literary thought in a new reading of "The Hanging Tree."

Both the late 19th Century and 1950s promoted a strong message about womanhood, one that many women found not only untenable but repressive. Along with popular images of frontier women as "Madonnas in sunbonnets" or the self-sacrificing, worn-to-the-bone pioneer women is the portrait of the frontier woman driven to the brink of madness by fear and intense loneliness. Even contemporary historical scholarship about the western experience tends to focus heavily on the human reaction to landscape.

But was it landscape that drove women mad? Does the blame fall on the hard-pan shoulders of the seemingly hostile environment that continues to linger in our imagination about the West? Has our attention been so mesmerized by landscape that we have failed, deliberately or inadvertently, to look at the "social" structures of the West? Is the western experience less about our relationship to the land than about our failures in our relationships with other human beings? This thesis applies those large questions to a tiny snapshot of the western frontier experience as portrayed in the Dorothy Johnson story, "The Hanging Tree."
Chapter 1

ENDNOTES

1. Rebecca McCarthy, "Dream True, Dorothy Johnson: True Enough, the 'Mystical Muse' Who Helped Make the West So Wild Goes to New York City to get Unbombed," Prime Times, Spring 1983, p. 10.


4. Very little literary criticism exists of Johnson's work. Judy Alter wrote the Dorothy Johnson pamphlet in the Western Writer Series for Boise State University, published in 1980, which summarizes Johnson's life and writings. Alter also produced a biographical sketch with some brief story analysis in Fifty Western Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook, edited by Fred Brisman and Richard W. Etulain, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982. In 1980, a Gregg Press re-issue of The Hanging Tree contained a critical introduction by professor Arthur Anthony, part of which he delivered as a paper at the 1979 Western Literature Association convention. A previous paper, "Straight Talk in Missoula," was read at the same convention a year earlier and was derived from his taped conversations with Johnson. Sue Hart, a professor of English at Eastern Montana College in Billings, has published (as Sue Mathews) "The Winning of the Western Fiction Market: An Interview with Dorothy M. Johnson" along with James W. Healey in Prairie Schooner 52 (1978): 158-167; (as Sue Mathews) "Pioneer Women in the Works of Two Montana Authors: Interviews with Dorothy M. Johnson and A.B. Guthrie, Jr.," Western American Literature, 18 (1984): 124-130; and (as Sue Hart) "Love and Sacrifice in Dorothy Johnson's Nineteenth Century West." Barbara Howard Meldrum looks at pastoralism in Johnson's short stories in "Dorothy M. Johnson's
Short Fiction: The Pastoral and the Uses of History," *Western American Literature* 17 (1982): 215-226. An unpublished masters thesis by Elizabeth James of Colorado State University takes a conventional view of Johnson's fiction: "A Thematic Analysis of Dorothy Johnson's Fiction" Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University, 1971. Finally, Steve Smith's biography, *The Years, The Wind, and the Rain*, details the chronology of Johnson's life, quotes Johnson at length and contains a good summary of newspaper and magazine reviews of her work, but provides no literary assessment of her writings. University of Montana English professor William Bevis' two 1974 audio recordings, in the UM archives, offer a critical interpretation of Johnson's story "The Unbeliever" and an interview with the author. Missoula writers William Kittredge and Steve Krauzer also discuss Johnson's fiction in a KUFM interview in 1974. Alter, Hart and to a lesser extent James, carried on a lengthy correspondence with Johnson and she occasionally reviewed drafts of their work for accuracy. Alter even revealed that she herself was agoraphobic. James also wrote to Johnson with questions during the preparation of her thesis. The original letters are maintained in the University of Montana archives, Dorothy Johnson Collection. Smith conducted dozens of hours of taped interviews with Johnson, his next-door neighbor at the time. These tapes are in his possession.

5. Johnson frequently claimed she was a failure as a novelist. In a letter 13 September 1951 to her then literary agent, Jacques Chambrun, she bemoaned her efforts to revise *The Prisoner at Skull Creek*: "I seldom wilt and have to ask for advice, but I must on this story, "The Prisoner at Skull Creek." I did it once before, too; then you told me to make a two-part 20,000 word novelette of it. It stretches at the seams at that length, too, but I am no novelist."

6. Johnson was by this time a proven entity in the magazine fiction market with 22 short stories in *The Saturday Evening Post*, 11 in *Collier's*, and another ten scattered between *Cosmopolitan*, *Argosy* and *Seventeen*. A collection of stories, *Beulah Bunny Tells All*, had been published by William Morrow & Company in 1942.


9. The exception is her novel about the Lakota Sioux woman, *Whirlwind*, in *Buffalo Woman*. Perhaps, Johnson was more successful in imagining this strong woman since she had to go outside her own culture.

In the opening paragraphs of "The Hanging Tree" we meet the story's three main characters, Doc Frail, Rune and Elizabeth Armistead, who all arrive, separately and at different times, at the same place--"the brow of a barren hill" outside Skull Creek. Their markedly different reactions to the hanging tree set the stage for the central conflict of the story.

Dr. Joe Albers is the first to pass beneath "the out-thrust bough of a great cottonwood." Dangling from the limb is a "short length of rope, newly cut." The sight sends a shiver through Doc, who has cynically rechristened himself Joe Frail. He remembers the one man he killed and the curse the dead man's wife cast on him. The sight of the rope revives his fear that he might someday die at the end of a hangman's noose.

Doc quickly earns himself a reputation in Skull Creek.
Doc was quietly arrogant and he was the loneliest man in the gold camp. He belonged to the aristocracy of Skull Creek, to the indispensable men like lawyers, the banker, the man who ran the assay office, and saloon owners. But these men walked in conscious rectitude and carried pistols decently concealed. Doc Frail wore two guns in visible holsters. (146)²

While local legend has it that Doc has murdered four men, he has, in fact, killed only one man--and that in self-defense after beating the man at poker. Frail had two skills: he was a top hand with a pistol and an expert card player, but Joe Frail avoided gambling. It made the sweat run "down inside his dusty shirt" and his hands shake. Still he had a talent for it, a capacity honed by the tutoring of a master, Joe's huckster father.

On his first venture west, young Joe Albers is robbed by bandits of his horse and all his money. "Hell, that's unlucky," his partner mused later. "I'm usually unlucky," Joe answered, which was not exactly true. He never lost at cards. Joe saved himself and his partner by gambling with the pair's last forty dollars.

But he played cards only when he did not care whether he won or lost. This time winning was necessary, and he knew what was going to happen--he would win, and then he would be shattered. (134)

When Joe wins, his partner can't understand the young man's despondency.

"And what the hell ails you?" Harrigan inquired. "You won."
"What ails me," said Doc with his teeth chattering, "is that my father taught me to gamble and my mother taught me it was wicked. The rest of it is none of your business." (135)

But it was the loser's business. He follows Joe outside the saloon and pulls a gun on him, shouting: "He cheated me, had them cards marked, I tell you!" (135). Before the old farmer can utter another slur against Doc's reputation, "Young Doc Frail gasped and shot him" (136). In the smokey aftermath, Doc escapes, but not without hearing the widow's "keening cry": "He'll hang for this, the one who did it!" (136) The woman's curse haunts Doc. From that day forward, whenever he meets a man, Doc gives the other a challenging look that seems to say,

"Do you amount to anything? Can you prove it?"
That was how they read it, and why they moved aside. What he meant was, "Are you the man I'm waiting for, the man for whom I'll hang?" (147)

Having killed once, Doc realizes that he can never kill again, even when necessary. A couple of years later, a jealous cowboy guns down Frail's best friend. Doc witnesses the shooting, but with his gun drawn and a clear shot at the murderer, Doc freezes. The cowboy gets away, later to be brought down by Doc's rival, Frenchy Plante. Doc digs his partner's grave himself, and then, the next day, a second one for his partner's fiance who slits her throat that night over her lost love. But only Doc knows of his incapacity to fire a gun at another man and a reputation as a cold-blooded gunman clings to him like horsehair even in Skull Creek.
A year after Doc arrived in Skull Creek a boy calling himself Rune drives a freight wagon into the gold camp. The hanging rope is now weathered and raveled, but it sends no shiver of fear through the cocky young man. "If they don't catch you, they can't hang you," Rune reflects (132). Before the night is over, Rune loses all his pay in a card game. Hungry and desperate, he robs a sluice. In the process, he's shot in the shoulder by the sluice's owner. Eventually, Rune ends up on Doc Frail's doorstep. In exchange for an indentureship of undetermined length, Frail tends Rune's wound.

Frail and Rune's relationship is one of master and slave -- Frail at one point addresses Rune as his "White Sambo" -- but Rune endures the indignity because he, like the rest of the camp, stands in awe of the mysterious, taciturn Doc Frail. Rune dreams of becoming a man like Doc, "the kind of man from whose path other men would quietly step aside" (185). He fancies a career for himself as a road agent, but he has one major handicap: he doesn't know how to shoot a gun. Gambling that Doc might someday teach him a thing or two, he's willing to work indefinitely for Doc. But Rune isn't docilely waiting for Doc's mentoring. Whenever he gets an opportunity, he searches Doc's cabin looking for the gold dust the rich Doc surely must hide there.
The last to arrive in Skull Creek is the nineteen-year-old Elizabeth Armistead, who passes beneath the hanging tree just two weeks after Rune. Unlike the others, however, she doesn’t see the western symbol of justice for there is a bandage over her eyes.

Elizabeth and her father had been headed by stagecoach for Skull Creek, where Mr. Armistead hoped to establish a school. His fortune lost in some unarticulated, but questionable dealings, Armistead fled West, his daughter in tow. He planned to support them by finding a town with enough children for a small private school.

He took it for granted that their parents would be willing to pay for their education. He assumed, too, that he could teach them. He had never taught, or done any other kind of work, but he had a gentleman’s education. (144)

Forty miles south of the Skull Creek diggings, an outlaw rides out of the brush, and robs the six occupants of the stagecoach. Armistead panics and pulls a derringer on the road agent. The outlaw guns down the eastern tenderfoot and the stagecoach driver. The gunshots spook the horses who careen off into the desert with the terrified Elizabeth inside. Hours later, when a search party finds the overturned coach, it is empty.

When word of the incident reaches Skull Creek, two posses form -- one to track down the road agent; the other, the larger of the two, to seek traces of the mysterious "Lost Lady." Doc is uninterested, but Rune "would sell his
soul to go out with the searchers" (148). For an additional month's service (added "to a time that might be endless"), Doc offers Rune the use of his bay mare. Rune zealously accepts and to Doc's surprise joins the group headed after the "Lost Lady."

Each man thought he was moved by compassion, by pity for the lost and lovely and mysterious lady whose name most of them did not yet know. If they went instead because of curiosity and because they needed change from the unending search and labor in the gravel gulches, no matter. (149-150)

Like the rest of the "motley, bearded men," Rune dreams of finding the "living prize," "comforting her, assuring her that she was safe now" (149). But it is the tough, unscrupulous Frenchy Plante who discovers the prostrate Elizabeth, her face bloated with sunburn, lips cracked with blood, eyes temporarily blinded by the glaring sun. Frenchy becomes the hero of Skull Creek, and Rune, second on the scene, groused, "I should have been the one, but it's always somebody else" (151).

Frenchy brings the semi-conscious girl into a nearby stage line way-station where she stays for several days rebuilding her strength. Then she is moved by hay wagon to Skull Creek. Elizabeth is escorted the last mile into camp by a stream of curiously silent miners who pad alongside the wagon, staring at the "lady in a blue dress, with a white cloth over her eyes" (163). Doc arranges for Elizabeth to stay with the sharp-tongued Ma Fisher, a cantankerous woman
bone weary from the ceaseless grind of running the camp's only restaurant.

Doc and Rune, Elizabeth's self-appointed attendants, nurse the young woman faithfully, careful to see that her genteel sensibilities (for it is apparent to everyone that she is a "lady") are not offended by dirty linen, coarse food or the shocking realities of vigilante justice when the town hangs the captured road agent. Doc goes to the trouble of bathing and cutting his shoulder-length hair on the morning he removes Elizabeth's eye bandages. Elizabeth's presence is a diverting, but, as far as all are concerned, merely temporary respite in an otherwise routine and boring existence. No one is prepared for the consequences when, upon her first venture outside Ma's cabin, Elizabeth collapses in a fit of frantic crying followed by a dead faint. Try as they might, Doc and Rune have no idea how to deal with Elizabeth's seemingly irrational behavior.

Elizabeth had already demonstrated signs of an unstable mental state with her amnesia about the robbery, and her refusal to believe the news about her father's death. "She waited patiently in darkness for someone to give a reasonable explanation for her father's absence" (162). That intransigence and her unexplainable fits frustrate and anger Doc.

For Elizabeth, Ma's cabin becomes her sanctuary. "The center of her safe, circumscribed world was the sagging,
double bed where she rested" (169). But as Doc knows, as everyone in Skull Creek except Elizabeth implicitly understands, Elizabeth cannot stay. "The girl was a disturbing influence for him, for Rune, for the whole buzzing camp. She must get out in a few days" (172).

Disgusted, Doc would prefer not to have anything more to do with the young woman, but he feels too responsible for her well-being to just walk away. He orders Rune to stand guard over Elizabeth and serve as her errand boy, buying food, chopping wood, and hauling water for her. After a few days, Elizabeth tries to pay for her food with a five dollar bill. Doc comments:

"Why, that'd buy her three cans of fruit, wouldn't it? And how much is Flaunce getting for sugar, say?"
"Dollar a pound."
Doc scowled thoughtfully. "This is a delicate situation. We don’t know how well fixed she is, but she doesn’t know anything about the cost of grub in Skull Creek. And I don’t want her to find out. Understand?" (168)

Doc devises a strategy to protect Elizabeth’s dwindling funds and her feminine sensibility. He gives Rune a poke of gold to use strictly for Elizabeth’s maintenance without her knowledge. Elizabeth does try another attempt at leaving the cabin. At Doc’s urging, she perkily dons her bonnet, and takes his arm for a walk across camp. While she murmurs her appreciations for the kindness of relative strangers, Doc launches into a series of preemptory instructions.

"To the left," he said. "The tougher part of the camp is to the right. You must never go that
way. But this is the way to the hotel, where the stage stops. Next week you will be able to leave Skull Creek." (175)

But Elizabeth doesn’t hear him for she is already trembling with fear, her imagination inexorably drawn past the edge of town, along the rutted road that "took a sudden sweep upward toward a cottonwood tree with one great out-thrust bough."

Doc tries to reassure her.

"You are perfectly safe...There is nothing here to hurt you."

But up there where she had to go sometime was the hanging tree, and beyond was the desert. Back all that distance, back all alone--a safe, quiet place was what she must have now, at once.

Not here in the glaring sun with the men staring and the world so wide that no matter which way she turned she was lost, she was thirsty, burning, dying. (175)

Elizabeth awakens from her faint in the cool, safe darkness of the cabin, her solitary refuge. A few days later, another disaster strikes the camp. Ma Fisher’s tent restaurant burns down when a drunken prospector’s donkey breaks loose, wrecking the place and overturning the cookstove. Ma decides to leave Skull Creek for good, but she can’t afford to walk away from her cabin. Impulsively, Elizabeth dips into the last of her father’s savings to buy the building from Ma. Now Elizabeth owns her sanctuary and no one can make her leave.

She soon begins plans to start a school for the camp’s children. Although she has no training as a teacher, and
has never even had to think about working for a living, she is an educated woman and is certain she can teach others. After all she has the books her father brought along to start his own school. Her efforts, however, have been unwittingly undermined by Doc. During her first days in camp, Doc brushed off the inquisitive, but socially respectable Mrs. Flaunce, claiming Elizabeth was too weak for visitors and that he and Rune were all she needed for company for the moment. "The obvious conclusion to be drawn—which Mrs. Flaunce passed on to the other respectable women of the camp--was that the doctor was keeping the mysterious Miss Armistead" (167-168). Naively, Doc cuts Elizabeth off "from all decent female companionship" not realizing that his brush-off of Mrs. Flaunce leads her and the other "respectable" ladies of the camp to misinterpret his relation to the young woman. Thus, when Elizabeth tries to open the school, no decent family will even consider sending their children to "that" woman.

Rune doesn’t help matters either, sitting at the front door with a rifle across his knees.

"You planning to shoot the children when they come?" he [Doc] demanded.
"Planning to shoot any miner that goes barging in there with the door open," Rune answered. "Because I don’t think there’s going to be any children coming to school."
Doc sighed. "I don’t either. After all the notes she wrote their mothers, all the plans she made."

At eleven o’clock, they saw Elizabeth shut her door. No one had crossed the threshold. (186)
Doc believes Elizabeth must get out of Skull Creek as soon as possible since each day she stays increases the possibility of her becoming the object of some crazed prospector’s drunken, lecherous attack. Several have tried already. Even Frenchy Plante calls on the "Lost Lady," planning his visit for a time when Doc is conveniently busy elsewhere. Doc realizes he can’t keep a 24-hour watch on Elizabeth, and even if he could, what would he do if the threat were a real one?

The noted physician of Skull Creek can outshoot anyone within several hundred miles, but will he fire when the target is a man? Never again. Then his hand and his eye lose their cunning, and that is why Wonder Russell sleeps up on the hill. If I could not pull the trigger to save the life of my friend, how can I do it for Elizabeth? I must have a deputy. (185)

Rune is his man. The teenager’s wish to become a gunslinger finally comes true when Doc begins very public target shooting lessons for the young man. The two rig an elaborate system of bells and connecting ropes from Elizabeth’s cabin to Doc’s cabin that she can operate to signal Doc for help. They also board up her windows and cover them with blankets, leaving only a small peephole for her to look out through.

To let in daylight by taking the blanket off the window was to invite stares of men who happened to pass by—and sometimes the curious, yearning, snowbound miners were too drunk to remember that Doc Frail was her protector, or if they remembered, too drunk to care. (196-197)
Finally, they ensure Elizabeth’s safety by having Rune sleep on the woodpile behind the cabin. Thus, no entrance to Elizabeth’s fortress remains unguarded.

Winter arrives and with it Doc temporarily gives up attempts to get Elizabeth out of camp. With the trails snowed under, there will be no coming or going for many months. At first, Elizabeth occupies herself with scrubbing the walls and floors of her cabin, sewing and mending, reading and re-reading her father’s books. She even makes a bit of money lending her books out to prospectors starved for reading matter, but these activities take up only a small part of the day and tedium soon sets in.

Doc commissioned her to make him a shirt and one for Rune. She finished them and was empty-handed again. Then she peeled every sliver of bark from the logs that made her prison. (190)

The only break from the boredom for Elizabeth are the few hours a day she spends teaching Rune to read and write. When her plans for the camp school fall through, and Rune sees how disappointed Elizabeth is, he volunteers himself as a pupil. "Rune drew a deep breath and offered her all he had—his ignorance and his pride. 'You can teach me,' he said. 'I ain't never learned to read'" (187). Covering her shock, Elizabeth agrees, but as the winter wears on, her too-able student moves quickly beyond the fundamentals and Elizabeth’s own abilities, and soon turns to studying Latin from Doc’s medical books with one of the other prospectors.
Before long, the little bit of gold dust Doc gave Rune to pay for lessons is not enough to support Elizabeth, so Doc concocts a plan to hide six bags of gold nuggets in Elizabeth's woodpile. Meanwhile, Elizabeth, upset that her "friends" are busy with their own lives and don't have as much time for her as she'd like, petulantly tells Rune that she no longer needs his assistance. "Hereafter, I will bring in my own firewood and snow to melt for water. It will give me something to do" (191).

Her venture into woodcutting lasted three days. Then, with a blister on one hand and a small axe cut in one shoe--harmless, but frightening--she began to carry in wood that Rune had already chopped and piled earlier in the winter. She was puzzled when she found a leather bag, very heavy for its size and tightly tied. (192) When she opens the bags to reveal the gold nuggets, Elizabeth's reaction is immediate and visceral. She caresses the gold nuggets, running her fingers ceaselessly through the gold. She pores the contents of the bags onto her kitchen table where they shimmer like golden beacons.

This new-found wealth dazzles Elizabeth. Even though she still refuses to leave the cabin, she now has something on which to focus her mind. She makes plans for the gold -- how to get more of it. So, when Frenchy Plante shows up at her back door, she gives half of it to the crafty prospector for a grubstake.

Doc is furious. After all, it was his gold that Elizabeth has squandered on his rival Frenchy. Moreover, he
recognizes that the now wealthy Elizabeth is another kind of target. A few days later, a prospector tries to break down the back door to her cabin. Elizabeth fires a shot from her father’s small derringer. It scares the intruder off, but Doc fears worse is to come. "I don’t know," Doc said helplessly. "I don’t know how to protect you" (197). But Rune, who is hopelessly in love with Elizabeth, has an idea.

"All you do is boss Elizabeth around. Why don’t you get down on your knees instead? Didn’t it ever dawn on you that if you married her, you could take her out of here to some decent place?" Rune was working himself up to anger. "Sure, she’d say she couldn’t go, but you could make her go—tie her up and take her out in a wagon if there’s no other way. How do you know the only right way to get her out of Skull Creek is to make her decide it for herself? Do you know everything?" (198)

Doc, too genteel to hog-tie a woman and abduct her from camp, decides to court Elizabeth instead. He takes to spending his evenings with her, Elizabeth sewing beside the fire, Doc reading poetry aloud. Elizabeth enjoys the company. It reminds her of evenings with her Papa, life serene and safe. "And Elizabeth, who had never had a suitor before (except old Mr. Ellerby, who had talked across her head to her father), understood at once what Doc’s intentions were" (198). Even though she knows she can not marry Doc, Elizabeth does nothing to discourage Doc’s attention. So, when he finally builds up the courage to ask her to marry him he is shocked by her refusal. She explains to him that a man as old as her father, Mr. Ellerby, once
offered to marry her in exchange for covering her father's debts. And now she has decided that Mr. Ellerby should be her husband after all. "I'm going to marry a man named Ellerby. And I expect I'll make his life miserable" (202).

Doc refuses to except Elizabeth's rejection of his offer, believing it is somehow connected to her fear of crossing the desert. "I want to protect you and work for you and love you and--make you happy, if I can," he tells her (202). He takes her in his arms and wipes away her tears. "When the roads are passable--soon, soon--I'll take you away and you'll not need to set foot on the ground or look at--anything" (202).

Still, Elizabeth refuses. "No, Joe, not you. Mr. Ellerby will come for me when I write him, and he will hate every mile of it. And I will marry him because he doesn't deserve any better" (202).

Elizabeth refused Doc because she understood intuitively that his offer of marriage was made in part out of pity, a rescue effort for a financially and emotionally destitute woman trapped by circumstances. Her vow to marry Mr. Ellerby represents a kind of self-inflicted penance. After all, if she had initially accepted Mr. Ellerby's offer, her father would likely still be alive, living comfortably in familiar, and safe, surroundings. She must submit to Ellerby now as a belated punishment for her earlier willfulness.
Meanwhile, Frenchy Plante, his grubstake nearly run out, uncovers a big strike and returns to Skull Creek to give Elizabeth her share of the fortune. But Plante wants to break the news to Elizabeth alone. In order to get Doc out of the way, Plante tricks Frail, arranging for two hired men to club Doc on the head and leave him "in the slush at the far side of Flaunce's store" (203). When Doc regains consciousness, he rushes to the cabin to find Plante there and Elizabeth spellbound. "Golden peas and beans were on the table" (205).

Frenchy chortled. "Meet the Lucky Lady, kid. I got a strike and half of it is hers. I'll be leaving now. No, the nuggets are yours, Miss, and there'll be more." (206)

The experience transforms Elizabeth.

She did not go to bed at all that night. She sat at the table, fondling the misshapen golden apple and the golden peas and beans, rolling them, counting them. She held them in her cupped hands, smiling, staring, but not dreaming yet. Their value was unknown to her; there would be plenty of time to get them weighed. They were only a token, anyway. There would be more, lots more....The golden lumps would build a wall of safety between her and Mr. Ellerby, between her and everything she didn't want. (205-206)

Frenchy's strike sets off a goldrush. In a matter of days, most of Skull Creek's inhabitants pack up and head for Plante's Gulch. Some semblance of a town continues as outsiders, hearing of the strike, pass through, stopping long enough for supplies and directions to the new gold camp. Elizabeth invests her "income" in grubstaking these new miners. Soon, she is the wealthiest person in town.
Rune becomes her hired hand. She displays new-found confidence and independence. The endless racket of a gold rush outside her cabin walls doesn’t frighten her as it once would have. "Even when someone pounded on her door, she wasn’t afraid. The walls are made of gold, she thought" (206).

Even though she remains confined to that golden-walled cabin, it becomes a kind of palace. She stocks it with fine furniture, covers the walls with yards of fine white muslin, and orders a piano from the States. When Doc hears about the piano, he tells her:

"Elizabeth, that’s defeat. If you order a piano and wait for it to get here, that means you’re not even thinking of leaving Skull Creek."
"When I thought of it, thinking did me no good," she answered, and dismissed the argument. (207)

Doc does not like the new Elizabeth.

This is some other woman, not the lost lady, the helpless prisoner. This is the Lucky Lady, an imprisoned queen. This is royalty. This is power. She has suddenly learned to command. (206)

The trouble Doc feared soon makes an appearance in the person of a fanatical preacher, Grubb, who rants about wickedness and sin in wild, maniacal speeches to the passing crowd. Soon his attention turns to the topic of the Lucky Lady. "There was no more fascinating topic in Skull Creek, for she was young and desirable and mysterious, and she represented untold riches, even to men who had never seen her, who knew her only as a legend" (215).
Doc's mythical stature has been undermined by his relationship with Elizabeth and the disorder caused by the gold strike. He no longer wields power in the community. "Let's see if I'm what I used to be, Doc thought, before Frenchy tricked me and got me hit over the head" (208). He steps in front of a pack-laden man and glares at him with his old arrogance. The man shouts at him angrily and shoves Doc aside.

"No, I am not what I used to be, Doc admitted silently. The old power, which had worked even on strangers was gone, the challenge in the stare that asked, Do you amount to anything?" (208)

Before long, Grubb rouses the entire camp against Doc and Elizabeth.

"Lo, there is sin in this camp, great sin!" Grubb was intoning. "The sin that locketh the door on deliverance, that keepeth a young woman prisoner against her will. There is a wicked man who shutteth her up in a cabin, that she escape not, and putteth a guard before her door that righteousness may not enter!" (215)

An angry, riled-up mob, looking for action, storms Elizabeth's cabin. Barricaded inside, Doc dictates his will, leaving his fortune to Elizabeth and Rune. Then he steps outside, ordering the others to lock the door behind him. Facing the inflamed rabble, he hears Grubb shriek:

"Wicked woman! Wicked and damned! Will all your gold save you from hell fire? Wanton and damned--"

Doc forgot he was a coward. He forgot a man lying dead in Utah...His voice was thunder: "Grubb, get down on your knees!"

Grubb was blind to danger...Clawing the air, he came on, screaming,"Babylon and the wicked woman-" Doc Frail gasped and shot him. (218)
The mob swarms over Doc, knocking him unconscious. When he comes to, bruised and battered, he finds himself at the foot of the giant cottonwood tree as the lynch-mob argues over the proper way to hang him. Suddenly, in the distance, he sees the cabin door bang open. Elizabeth stumbles out, an arm across her eyes. "She was leaning forward against the wind of the desert that was thirty miles away" (221). Rune follows, carrying the red box in which Elizabeth keeps her gold nuggets and grubstakes.

As Frenchy lowers the noose around his neck, Doc watches Elizabeth struggling up "the first slope of the barren hill, fighting the desert" (221). When she has the crowd's attention, she stops and Rune opens the red box. Elizabeth takes a poke from the box, empties the nuggets into her hand and tosses them into the crowd. "No one moved. No one even spoke or murmured" (221). She reaches inside again, taking out the sugar bowl with the most beautiful nuggets. This, too, she throws into the crowd, then, a handful of papers, the grubstakes she holds on paying mines. She continues until the box is empty and the air is filled with flying paper. "Frenchy's voice roared with glee: 'She's buying Doc Frail! The Lucky Lady is buying her man'" (202). The declaration frees the crowd and they rush, shouting and howling, to gather up the nuggets and the scattered papers. "They swarmed like vicious ants, fighting for the treasure" (222).
The story ends as:

A jeering voice behind Doc said, "Hell, if she wants you that bad!" and cut the rope that bound him. The knife slashed his wrist and he felt blood run.

The Lucky Lady was running up the slope to him, not stumbling, not hesitating, free of fear and treasure, up toward the hanging tree. Her face was pale, but her eyes were shining. (223)

Love, the story seems to tell us, overrides all, including the heretofore insurmountable power of a psychological disorder. Elizabeth's love for Doc "cures" her fear of the desert and the open hillside upon which sits the hanging tree. Such a convenient resolution of her illness might be thought to call into question the authenticity of Elizabeth's agoraphobia, but questions of authenticity have long been applied to cases of agoraphobia and women's illnesses in general as the next two chapters will show.
Chapter 2

ENDNOTES

1. Virtually every character in the story has been rechristened upon their arrival in the West, perhaps emblematic of the belief of the West as a location for "rebirth." Rune’s given name is Leonard Henderson. Frenchy Plante, Tall John, Wonder Russell and Ma Fisher bear nicknames we assume were assigned them as more appropriate once they moved West. The saloon girls surely don’t use their real names. Elizabeth is correspondingly known as the "Lost Lady" and then the "Lucky Lady." Even the respectable Mrs. Flaunce’s name is one she adopts after marriage.

THREE

Elizabeth Armistead - A Case Study:  
An analysis of agoraphobia and a 
psychiatrist's evaluation of Elizabeth's 
condition

"The Hanging Tree" is dedicated to Johnson’s friend, 
Dr. Catharine A. Burnham, a clinical psychologist, "who 
understands the Lucky Lady better than Doc Frail did."¹ 
Burnham and Johnson were neighbors in New York City’s 
Greenwich Village during the late forties when Johnson began 
work on the story. Their close friendship continued for the 
rest of Johnson’s life. Burnham, completing a doctorate in 
clinical psychology, was just the resource Johnson needed to 
flesh out the psychological struggles of the female 
protagonist buzzing through her mind. "She [Burnham] had 
just about held my hand through the rough draft of this 
story, constantly assuring me that these imaginary people 
would act that way," Johnson wrote in the late 1970’s.² 
Years later, after the story had been published, Burnham 
presented Elizabeth’s "case history" to her medical 
colleagues at the Veterans’ Administration hospital in
Brooklyn. Their analysis will be discussed later in this chapter.

As imagined by Johnson, Elizabeth Armistead, traumatized by her father’s murder, her own physical injuries in the desert and her subsequent blindness, comes to suffer from agoraphobia, a psychological fear that prevents her from leaving her cabin. While agoraphobia was not identified by name until about one hundred years ago, Johnson had Burnham’s assurance that the syndrome did exist long before that (Smith 129).

The recognition that otherwise sane persons could suffer from irrational fears dates back to the time of Hippocrates (Snaith 673). However, it wasn’t until the late 19th Century that researchers singled out individual phobias for research and study, although even then, agoraphobia’s manifestations were considered part of a larger body of psychological illnesses labeled "hysteria" or "neurasthenia."

In 1870, the German, M. Benedikt, assigned the description Platzschwindel, to describe a condition in which individuals became dizzy and fearful in public places (Snaith 673). Benedikt’s terminology was superseded two years later, however, when another German psychiatrist, Westphal, published a monograph entitled "Die Agoraphobie" (Snaith 673). In that study, Westphal discussed the cases of three men who experienced the "impossibility of walking
through certain streets or squares, or [the] possibility of doing so only with resultant dread of anxiety" (Snaith 673).

Literally translated as "fear of the marketplace," the term has, over time, been extended to include a "fear of open places". In their 1980 comprehensive survey of agoraphobic literature, "Anxieties: Agoraphobia and Hysteria," Dianne L. Chambless and Alan J. Goldstein point out that this definition suggests only a portion of the situations agoraphobics fear, among them:

- crowds, bridges, tunnels, public places and conveyances, elevators, expressways, being distanced from home, or being separated from a trusted companion. The theme throughout this array of phobias is that the agoraphobics fear any situation in which escape to safe territory or to a trusted companion might be hindered; the more confining the situation, the more anxiety-provoking. (119)

Ironically, that retreat from a suffocating, confining situation, even an open place, most often leads to what might also be considered another confining place, namely the victim's home. These "safety zones" can vary from individual to individual and over time in the same individual, say Chambless and Goldstein. Sufferers can also often venture into otherwise anxiety-provoking locations when accompanied by a trusted companion (219). Unlike other phobias, there seems to be a strong gender link to the disorder since over 80 percent of sufferers are women, most of them married, explaining why it is also labeled as late as the 1970's, "the housewives' disease."
Agoraphobics commonly respond to stressful situations with high levels of "chronic anxiety, depression, depersonalization, derealization, and, most importantly, 'panic attacks'" (Chambless 120). Research suggests that these panic attacks play a key role in the development of the syndrome since the response -- heart palpitations, loss of control, fainting, and thoughts of mental illness -- become the focus of the agoraphobic's fear. Chambless and Goldstein argue that it is not really a fear of places that drives agoraphobia. "Rather, it is a fear of panic attacks and their fantasized consequences--a fear of fear" (124). It is this fear of experiencing fearful feelings that prompts the avoidance behavior of the sufferer. Usually this means avoiding those locations where the anxiety is felt, rather than addressing the underlying reasons for the anxiety.

In her preparation for writing "The Hanging Tree, Johnson, a diligent researcher concerned with historical accuracy in her stories, studied

firearms, prices of commodities on the frontier, the nature and cost of a physician’s education almost 100 years ago, the discomforts of stagecoach travel, the technique of placer mining, the slang of gold gulches, the kind of shelters that prospectors built and lived in, the nature of poverty and luxury in a gold camp, and exactly how to go about hanging a man from a handy tree. (Smith 129)

She did similar preparatory work on agoraphobia. Along with consulting frequently with Burnham, she also spent a
great deal of time in the New York City Library. "While working on "The Hanging Tree," I became so interested in phobias that it was hard to stop reading about them," she wrote in 1982.5

Did she get it right? This chapter takes a detailed look at the subject of agoraphobia and whether Elizabeth Armistead's "presenting symptoms" conform to contemporary medical diagnoses.6 I have relied on Chambless and Goldstein's systematic overview of the syndrome in their article "Anxieties: Agoraphobia and Hysteria" to examine the disorder's symptoms point by point. Their work provides the best historical review of the medical literature currently available. Few such studies are available for the period of the 1940s and 50s when Johnson was writing. Those that do exist appear in the generalized analysis of anxiety neuroses in the writings of Freud, Jones and Deutsch.

Agoraphobia differs from other simple phobias, such as the fear of spiders or heights, by its pattern of onset. Chambless and Goldstein report:

Agoraphobia begins with a period of generalized anxiety and seems in part to be a stress reaction. While the most frequent stressor is marital dissatisfaction, other precipitants include bereavement, physical illness (particularly hypoglycemia), childbirth, and moving to a strange setting. (120-121)

The age of onset falls most often in late adolescence and the late 20s-early 30s (123-124). Elizabeth Armistead is 19 and has experienced three of the above listed onset
conditions: the murder of her father in the stage robbery (bereavement); her subsequent physical injuries -- extreme sunburn, dehydration and temporary blindness (physical illness); and the abandonment of a long-established home in the east (moving to a strange setting). Her bereavement might also conceivably be extended to include a mourning for the comfortable home and community reputation that she and her father lost with his financial misfortunes.

The psychiatrists argue that agoraphobia may be viewed as a "stress" syndrome, an extreme response to a "precipitating event" such as those described above (127, 129). Yet, they point out that many individuals, even those with other anxiety disorders, also experience these traumas with no manifestation of agoraphobia. The answer lies in two other crucial factors: personality type and the "threatened or actual separation from important attachments" (127). "On the whole, agoraphobics have been described as passive, dependent people who lack the ability to appropriately express their feelings and needs" (126).

Since we are given only a brief glimpse of Elizabeth before the precipitating events of her stress, it is difficult to determine just how passive or dependent she is. Clearly, her behavior after the shooting is passive in the extreme. She becomes childlike, relying on Doc and Rune to provide for all of her physical and emotional needs. She is dependent upon them for her nurturance, for physical
protection, for advice on the workings of western life, and for the surreptitious management of her finances. "She had never had to handle money, and only in the last year had she even had to be concerned about it, since Papa's affairs had gone so badly" (184). Even after she "magically" discovers a fortune in her woodpile and decides to invest some of it in grubstakes, she defers to the boy Rune to tell her how to handle the matter.

"Another thing: grubstaking Frenchy brought me luck. Other miners will think of the same thing, and I will grubstage them, to keep my luck."

Rune growled, "Nonsense. Hand out a stake to every one that asks for it, and you'll be broke in no time. Set a limit--say every seventh man that asks. But don't let anybody know it's the seventh that gets it." (207)

Elizabeth maintains her childlike behavior though most of the story. For weeks, she clings to the water canteen Frenchy first gives her on the Big Flats as if it were a pacifier. "You want a cup to drink out of?" Rune asks her. "I guess it's silly," she answered, "but water tastes better from this canteen" (166). She also refuses to believe that her father is dead, despite Doc's repeated discussions with her about the matter. She won't leave Skull Creek because "How could she go without Papa, who was dead, they kept telling her?" (169) When Doc gets angry over her hysterical response to venturing outside the cabin, she thinks:

He was not Papa because Papa was never angry; Papa would never have let her be afraid and alone in the glare and thirsty and going to die here, now, if he would only let her give up and fall. (178)
This characterization of her father also ties in with Chambless and Goldstein's assertion that agoraphobics have often been "parentally overprotected" (127). Onset often occurs at late adolescence when "issues of separating from one's family must be faced" (128). Those who develop agoraphobia at this time "experience a more severe form of normal separation anxiety" (128). Mr. Armistead is sixty-four-years-old and sickly when he makes his first and only appearance in the story. He is "bone-tired" from the long, tough journey, and we are led to understand that he is also emotionally wrung out by the financial ill-fortune and disgrace that has befallen him. "He was a gentle, patient, hopeful man with good intentions and bad judgment" (144). Elizabeth refuses to believe the rumors about her father's presumed dishonesty (we must guess at some sort of embezzlement or misappropriation of funds). Several times Elizabeth recalls her father's "gentle" manner and his goodness. "This could not be, must not be, because Papa was all she had to look after and to look after her" (143). While Elizabeth might wish to act as an adult and parent her father, she has no sense of how to do that, except by sticking with him. "Papa was disgraced and she was going with him into exile. She took some comfort from her own stubborn, indignant loyalty" (143).

Yet this loyal pride is somewhat misguided and self-indulgent. Mr. Ellerby's marriage offer also meant a small
income for Elizabeth's father, "as long as he stayed away" from them (143). Elizabeth rejects Ellerby and gives up the prospect of "living as she had always lived in comfort" (143). Of course, her refusal also denies her father any sort of financial "comfort." This decision suggests a desire to act independently, even though the independence involved is illusory since she remains submissive to her father's wishes.

If Papa had told her to do so, or even suggested it, she would have married Mr. Ellerby. But he said it was for her to decide and she chose to go away with Papa. Now that she had an idea how harsh life could be for both of them, she was sick with guilt and felt that she had been selfish and willful. (143)

As we've seen, her one tentative venture into autonomy proves to be a tragic error since it indirectly leads to her father's death, a factor that must undoubtedly contribute to her anxieties.

Still, Elizabeth clings to the belief that she possessed a measure of autonomy her father did not. "Papa had no choice, except of places to go. But Elizabeth had had a choice" (143). Yet clearly her dependence on her father, her fear of separating from him, and her own inability to take charge of important matters, nullifies any mature decision-making process on her part. This personality characteristic is reinforced later in the story when Doc orders her to take a walk outside with him. She meekly obeys Frail's authority.
Of course he was a doctor, and he could be expected to be always right. He was a determined man, and strength came from him. It was good, really, not to make a decision but to have him make it, even though carrying it out would be painful. Like the time Papa made her go to a dentist to have a tooth pulled. (178)

Elizabeth obviously has less "choice" that she would like to believe due to her failure to resolve the issues surrounding her separation from her father, the "attachment figure."

Chambless and Goldstein report on a Temple University Medical School study that found agoraphobics were "highly perfectionistic individuals with strong obsessive traits" (129). While the story doesn't provide enough of Elizabeth's background for us to assess fully whether she possessed a perfectionistic personality, there are several instances of her obsession that things be "just right." Her elaborate preparations for the opening of her school being the primary example. She draws up lists of families with school-age children, writes to them in carefully worded notes, scrubs the floor, drapes the rough plank table with an embroidered cloth and organizes her father's books on her kitchen table to await the children who never arrive. Her obsessive nature also comes to the fore when she acquires the gold nuggets and spends hours admiring them from every angle and multiple arrangements, including how they look rolling about between her fingers.

Procrastination is often a companion to perfectionism, as one postpones certain tasks for fear of being unable to
complete them to satisfactory high standards. Elizabeth puts off confronting her anxieties. Doc once again insists she walk outside. "'Oh, I couldn't,' she answered with gentle firmness. 'In a few days, but not now. I'm not strong enough'" (177). After experiencing two panic attacks during her attempts to venture beyond the cabin, Elizabeth never again attempts a walk outside, supporting Chambless and Goldstein's assertion that it is the fear of another panic attack and its fantasized consequences that rules an agoraphobic's behavior.

Elizabeth's panic attacks closely fit the descriptions appearing in the medical literature.

Panic attacks are described as terrifying episodes during which the victim may experience tachycardia, faintness, difficulty in breathing, a powerful urge to urinate or defecate, and a desire to scream or run. Typically, these seem to strike "out of the blue." (Chambless 120)

In their own research on agoraphobia, Chambless and Goldstein utilized a Fear Survey Schedule closely correlating four events with panic attacks: heart palpitations, loss of control, fainting, and thoughts of mental illness (121). "Agoraphobics rated themselves significantly more fearful of all these occurrences" (121).

Elizabeth experiences two episodes of panic attack, and in each case, her response follows a similar pattern. She is at first innocently amenable to going outside, chatting blithely with Doc as she prepares to leave. "She managed a laugh as she walked with her eyes down" (178). Then, a few
feet from the cabin, her fear suddenly takes hold. "She did not seem to hear him. She trembled" (175); "She was burning and thirsty and could not see anything for the glare and could not breathe because she had been running" (178).

Both times Elizabeth faints and has to be carried back to the cabin. We might deduce heart palpitations by her trembling and her sudden heightened response to the hot, glaring sun. Her reference to shortness of breath and running would also indicate a pounding heart. She notices the "dizzying" space engulfing her and has an overwhelming urge to flee it. Elizabeth is also conscious of the "staring men" that she believes are inordinately preoccupied with her appearance. She struggles to maintain self-control since it is this control she most fears losing along with her sanity.

The men had seen her fall, then, the staring men of Skull Creek, and she had fainted, and they must think she was insane and maybe she was. (178)

Above all, Elizabeth powerfully desires a retreat to safety, to a safety zone. Episode one: "a safe, quiet place was what she must have now, at once" (175) and "there must be some way out, somewhere safe, the cool darkness of a cabin, if she could only run in the right direction and not give up too soon--" (176). Episode two: "She was lying down--where? On the bed in the cabin? ... Then she was crying with relief, because surely now nobody would make her go out again until she was ready" (178).
As mentioned earlier, it is this "fear of fear" experienced during a panic attack that induces agoraphobic behavior in the victim. Elizabeth very much wishes to avoid the sensations she experiences during her panic attacks and believes that her dramatic behavior should be sufficient evidence to forestall any additional pressure from Doc about leaving the cabin. The strategy works. Doc, unable to use either logic or coercion to overcome Elizabeth's fear, backs away from further confrontation and takes actions that have the effect of encouraging Elizabeth's housebound behavior. Doc provides Rune as errand boy and security guard, and rigs up an alarm system to keep intruders out. In effect, he arranges it so that Elizabeth can have everything she needs without ever setting foot outside the cabin. Chambless and Goldstein discuss this "operant reinforcement," particularly as it relates to the agoraphobic's separation anxiety and the lack of individual autonomy:

First, there is the negative reinforcement derived from avoiding the noxious situations, that is, the identified phobic stimuli as well as the core fear of leaving home and being on one's own. Second, there is generally covert positive reinforcement from parents or spouse for remaining dependent, as they tend to view independent functioning as threatening to the survival of the relationship. Third, there is the punishment the conflicted person receives for appropriate autonomous behavior in the form of subtle or blatant abuse from significant others. (128)

All of these elements exist in Elizabeth's situation. She avoids her panic attacks by remaining inside the cabin, a place she describes as her "safe, circumscribed world"
(169). She maintains a relationship with Doc through her dependency and he supports that behavior with his own paternal actions. Finally, as I’ll discuss in the next chapter, the social structure of 19th-century society provided the sometimes subtle, more often blatant, punishment for a young, unmarried woman acting autonomously. The clearest example is the refusal of the community to send their children to Elizabeth’s school.

According to Chambless and Goldstein, another factor that leads to the agoraphobic’s distress is the process of "mislabeling" which "is the interpretation of any intense feeling as a sign of mental illness" (126). They cite psychoanalytic writers who attribute this reaction to sexual repression, but Chambless and Goldstein provide another interpretation, namely that the mislabeled feelings involve unexpressed, intense grief (126). If we believe her expressions of deep affection for her father, Elizabeth must surely feel tremendous grief at his death. Yet, there is not a single hint of that grief (unless we are to interpret her agoraphobic behavior as a displacement of that grief). For some time, Elizabeth flatly denies her father’s death, but then, she quietly gives up that line of argument and, it would seem, forgets her father altogether. He does not enter her thoughts again in the story. She expresses no interest in seeing her father’s grave, holding a memorial service for him, providing a grave marker, or writing
relatives about the death. (In fact, as far as the story is concerned, Billy McGinnis and Mr. Armistead are simply left dead "beside the road" (146) without any burial at all.)

For Chambless and Goldstein "such individuals have avoided going through a normal mourning process and when reminded of their loss, experience what they label as anxiety" (129). Elizabeth Kubler-Ross suggests that this lack of grieving bodes ill for the emotional state of the survivor. As Chambless and Goldstein assess it:

The content, therefore, seems less important than the overall pattern of suppressing recognition of a strong reaction, mislabeling it as anxiety or "craziness" (a perception that elicits considerable anxiety), and misattributing the eliciting stimuli. This misattribution leads to avoidance as a type of superstitious behavior. (127)

Elizabeth avoids rational reasoning and eagerly employs "superstitious" thinking with her acceptance of "Lucky Lady" status and the distribution of grubstakes according to a lucky number.

In May 1957, Burnham prepared a case history of the "Lucky Lady" and presented it to the "pride and flower of Brooklyn psychology" at her institution’s weekly therapy seminar. She reported to Johnson that nine to ten members of her department attended the session.

We passed the book around the department all week, so almost everybody got to read the story. Then, squatting together on one of the danker ledges in our air-conditioned cave in Brooklyn, we held a pow-wow that turned out to be much more solemn in spirit than I had expected.¹⁰
Burnham diagnosed Elizabeth as having suffered an "acute traumatic neurosis" and she likened it to the "shell shock" and "battle fatigue" reported in wartime. Freud, in his discussions of neuroses, alternately substituted the term "anxiety hysteria" for agoraphobia (Snaith 676-677) and it is this terminology that Dr. Burnham and her Veterans' Administration colleagues assigned to describe their interpretation of Elizabeth's disorder.

Burnham's overall assessment agrees in principle with the symptoms that Chambless and Goldstein ascribe to the agoraphobic personality. Burnham writes in her clinical report: "There seems to be a predisposing factor in the role conflicts the lady was experiencing due to changes in familial socio-economic status and diminution of confidence in the protecting father-figure prior to the precipitating incident." Burnham further suggests that the unfamiliar, and apparently "threatening surroundings projected the entire problem into the role-conflict area," an argument that I will pursue at length in subsequent chapters. However, from Burnham's report it is difficult to discern precisely what she means by "threatening surroundings." Is it the desert where Elizabeth suffered physically and which plagues the young woman consciously? Or does the environment of Skull Creek present some other threat to Elizabeth? Does the threat come from the miners, who Doc and Rune are certain pose a danger to Elizabeth? Or are the
"threatening surroundings" a subtler, less identifiable perception that Elizabeth is an "outsider" and therefore unwelcome? Does Elizabeth represent some kind of threat to the community as the preacher will later claim? Likely, all of the above factors contributed to Elizabeth's state of mental and emotional anxiety.

Burnham adds that "deprived of all her basic security identifications she could feel safe only with the father substitutes who accepted her dependency at an infantile level." Burnham concludes from this that Elizabeth's refusal to walk to the store reflects her fears of assuming adulthood and that "only through maintaining complete helplessness could she insure the security of their protection." She also speculates that Elizabeth's rejection of Doc as a suitor results from her seeing him "only in the omnipotent nurturing role." Elizabeth's "unrealistic resolve" to marry Mr. Ellerby is "clearly a regression to the earlier protected situation when her father was alive."

Burnham then turns to a discussion of Elizabeth's attempts to move toward a more "positive self-evaluation" and uses her acceptance of Rune's request for reading instruction as evidence of this step forward.

Although she had verbalized independence previous to this, it is significant that she had refrained from any actual move toward abandoning the protective womb she had determinedly retained for herself in buying the cottage.
While it would be interesting to examine the romantic notions that led Burnham to upgrade a one-room, unpeeled log cabin into the cozy image of a "cottage," I am more interested in exploring whether the cabin does in fact represent a "protective womb," and additionally whether it provides Elizabeth with a freeing environment, a "room of one's own" if you will, for forging her own individual personality. That discussion appears in Chapter Seven.

Elizabeth's rehabilitation progresses, Burnham says, when the young women interprets certain events as arising out of her own initiative.

Seeing herself as exerting a positive influence in the life of a protector who had revealed a weak spot, the magical appearance of the pokes of gold in the woodpile, and the unexpected validation of her judgment in grubstaking Frenchy Plante were all incidents that provided ego build-up while they tempered her initial instinctive rejection of her new surroundings. Her frank enjoyment of the gold when it began to pour in, and self-dramatization as a "lucky" individual when the community accepted her as such contributed further toward the happy acceptance of an entirely new role in life.15

During the therapy seminar at the Brooklyn Veterans Administration Hospital, Dr. Leo Katz described this process as "gradual reintegration." Dr. Irving Barnett also noted that this reintegration occurred despite having her first attempt at independence, starting a school, "rejected by the community, leaving her entirely without resources and making Rune's request for schooling even more important as a turning point."16
This "gradual integrative process," the analysts agree, must necessarily have been under way long before the final, violent act of the mob, or Elizabeth would not have been equipped to respond as she did. Burnham summarized the process as follows:

Had she retained her passivity, her protector would have sacrificed his life for killing in her defense. However, she was able at this time to take the final conclusive steps toward self-assertion. She abandoned her protected situation and took appropriate means to control the social group in its most frightening phase by offering the two material things most valued in a mining town—gold and grubstakes. In doing so, she conclusively reestablished her self-esteem by assuming "protector" status on an equal footing with the doctor. An adult relationship rather than a neurotic dependent one was now possible.17

The therapists also turned their attention to the psychological makeup of the story's author, as Burnham describes:

There ensued an abstract discussion among the analytic contingent as to the nature of creativity and its relation to sublimation, since both are manifestations of libidinal energy. Feeling rather lost at this point myself, I snatched the occasion, when somebody mentioned Art, to wonder aloud how a writer in creating such a character, managed from the artistic point of view to include such telling clinical detail as the girl's reverting to her intention of marrying Mr. Ellerby as a defense against losing father figure to gain suitor. Somebody flatly suggested that I just ask my friend.18 Dr. Winn suggested that the writer must briefly at least, in some developmental phase, have experienced conflicts in rejecting independence from a father figure, and that detail could be manufactured to fit the emotional pattern. (If this seems personal to you, just remember everybody has or has had a father, such experience is well-nigh universal.)19
The influence of a father-figure is an interesting one when applied to Johnson herself. Lester Johnson, a restless man with lofty ambitions never realized moved his wife and young daughter frequently about the west, searching for better employment. A frail and often sickly man, Lester died just before his daughter's tenth birthday. A strong proponent of conventional roles for women, Dorothy's mother, Louisa, was, nonetheless, forced to enter the workplace to support herself and her daughter. The bond between mother and daughter was an unusually close one. Except for two brief periods, when Dorothy attended college and the first few years immediately after and again at the end of Louise Johnson Alger's life when she was confined to a nursing home, mother and daughter spent almost all of their lives together.

Burnham lived next door to Johnson and Mrs. Alger in New York City's Greenwich Village in the 1940s. Years later, she commented about the mother-daughter relationship to Johnson's biographer, Steve Smith.

I remember Mrs. Alger as a strong-minded lady, small in stature, white-haired and very pretty. She was Dorothy's number-one fan and an avid scrapbook keeper. You could see that Dorothy must have been somewhat isolated by unconsciously made parental demands (an only child has a lot of responsibility) and yet encouraged to be a law unto herself in many ways all of her life. They lived in a three-room apartment and Dorothy did her writing mostly in the bedroom. Actually, it was in whichever room her mother wasn't in at the time. They were very experienced in living together. The only outright complaint I recall Dorothy making was about interruptions: "She
thinks if she just whispers or speaks softly it doesn’t really count. But if I’m miles away in the middle of a big gunfight I sometimes feel as if I’d been shot. Dulcet tones don’t help it a bit. I have an awful time getting back to where I was.” (Smith 93)

Although Johnson apparently never suffered from agoraphobia, she did suffer a nervous breakdown when she was nineteen, the same age as Elizabeth (Smith 36). Johnson’s recuperation took several months. She then enrolled at Western Montana College of Education in Dillon.

She realized within a month she had charted the wrong course and when her mother became ill and asked her to return home [to Whitefish], she did so without reluctance, not completing the quarter. (Smith 38)

Johnson then wandered from business college in Spokane to Seattle where she stamped gas bills. She then returned to Whitefish and a steno job for a local attorney and a brief stint demonstrating washing machines for Montana Power Company. In 1925, she enrolled at the University of Montana to complete her college degree.

Johnson frequently admitted that emotions "inspired" her stories. "I start with an emotion, find a situation or some characters to fit it, and fill in painfully from there". Did Johnson herself suffer from role-conflict, separation anxiety, avoidance, mislabeling and an inappropriate response to an overcontrolling parent?

To answer this question, and more specifically whether she transferred these conflicts to her imaginary creation
Elizabeth Armistead, we must look at one more significant characteristic of the agoraphobic personality--the "hysterical response style" (Chambless 126).

Hysterical personality has been descriptively defined above as the inability to accurately connect feeling states with their eliciting stimuli or even to appropriately label current feeling states. Hence, agoraphobics who appear sad or angry frequently described themselves as anxious instead. A common example is the report of an anxiety attack out of the blue which follows the phobic's having been treated badly by a spouse or parent. The agoraphobic interprets the arousal which another might label "anger" as anxiety and displaces the cause of the feeling to the environment, that is, "I feel trapped by this elevator" rather than "I feel trapped by my inability to refuse unreasonable demands." (Chambless 126)

Elizabeth frequently fails to properly identify her emotional state. As just discussed, there is the denial of grief and guilt and her insistence that her inability to leave her cabin is a matter of physical weakness. Even though the physical evidence runs counter to her assertion, she clings to this rationale rather than admit it is fear or an emotional state that keeps her cabinbound.

Freud believed females were more inclined to hysterical traits than males because of their tendency to repress rather than resolve the conflicts of the phallic-Oedipal period (Chambless 113-114). Chambless and Goldstein counter this outdated thinking with discussions of several studies which postulate that females have a "tendency to be more dependent on the reactions of others" (114) than men do. Moreover,
the hysterical personality is but an exaggeration of the female stereotype and suggest[s] that girls are trained to have careers as hysterics. Girls are taught to overemphasize the importance of others' reactions and, in more extreme cases, develop histrionic, manipulative behavior to obtain attention and approval. (114)

Since the "sick" role for women is a culturally acceptable one, agoraphobia arising out of stress may be construed as a "maladaptive" solution to conflict.

The woman who feels trapped by her marriage but afraid to leave is relieved of the decision by a fear which prohibits her going out alone. The woman who is "sick and tired" of nursing an infant parent can go off duty when she develops her own illness. (Chambless 131)

This reference to the acceptance of women's frailty, leads us from the specific discussion of agoraphobia as displayed by one fictional character to an examination of the cultural setting in which this drama took place -- the 19th-century and the "epidemic" of female illness.
Chapter 3

ENDNOTES


2. Letter from Dorothy M. Johnson to Dr. Anthony Arthur, 7 October 1978, in the possession of the University of Montana Archives, Box 1, File 6.


5. During the early 1980s, Johnson carried on a lengthy correspondence with Judy Alter who had been assigned to write the Johnson pamphlet for the Western Writers Series, published by Boise State University in Boise, Idaho. At one point, Alter admitted that she herself suffered from agoraphobia. On June 23, 1982, Johnson responded: "No, I didn't know you were an agoraphobic! While working on "The Hanging Tree," I became so interested in phobias that it was hard to stop reading about them. The funniest sounding one was the fear of the number 13. For years I was determined to use that word in a piece of writing, but when the happy day came I couldn't spell it. So I consulted a dusty scholar at the New York Public Library, told him what I thought it sounded like, and he casually picked up an all-Greek dictionary. Then he announced, "Triskaidekaphobia" and I was off and running. Of course maybe it was "treiskakaphobia." I need that man again!

6. With the exception of Freud's *The Problem of Anxiety*, I was able to locate very little psychiatric literature on agoraphobia from the 1930s, 40s or 50s, the literature Johnson would most likely have used. Chambless and Goldstein's sources were derived mostly from work beginning in the early 1960s; Snaith relies heavily on neuroses as understood in psychoanalytic circles beginning with Freud, progressing through Eric Jones and Helene

7. Chambless and Goldstein suggest that in cases such as these there is also often evidence of an earlier, devastating separation experience. We have to wonder about the circumstances involving the absence of Elizabeth's mother. There is no mention of the woman anywhere in the story, or in Johnson's original manuscript. Did she die or abandon them? Under what circumstances? Could this "separation" have prompted Elizabeth's seemingly obsessive attachment to her father?

8. In Johnson's original manuscript, Elizabeth does mention her father again, but later in the story than in the published version. On both occasions she is troubled because she can not recall the murder at all. It seems this amnesia is meant to explain the lack of mourning for him as well.

9. Burnham sent a copy of her case analysis, dated 5-17-57, to Johnson and then a week later forwarded a long, handwritten letter summarizing the discussion session. Copies of the two documents are held in the University of Iowa Libraries archives and photocopies are included in the Appendix here.

10. Letter from Dr. Catherine A. Burnham to Dorothy M. Johnson, 24 May 1957.

11. Interpretations of hysteria which will be discussed in the next chapter underwent revisions around the turn of the century, so that the term neurasthenia moved away from being attached to women and came instead to be used almost exclusively to describe the psychological responses of men to battle.


13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Letter from Dr. Catharine A. Burnham to Dorothy M. Johnson 24 May 1957.
17. "The Case of the Lucky Lady," case history written by Dr. Catharine A. Burnham and sent to Dorothy M. Johnson, dated 17 May 1957.

18. We have to assume that Dr. Burnham was not being disingenuous in posing this question to her colleagues since, as I’ve already indicated, Burnham apparently "held her hand" through Johnson’s writing of the story. Burnham’s comments would seem to suggest that this was not a detail she had assisted Johnson with.

19. Letter from Dr. Catharine A. Burnham to Dorothy M. Johnson 24 May 1957.

In the mid 19th century, urban America experienced what one scholar calls an "epidemic of women's ailments" (Stephens 5). Social reformer Catherine Beecher warned, in 1855, that "the standard of health among women was so low that scarcely a healthy woman existed" (qtd. in Cott 264). The nature of this epidemic was ambiguous, with almost no confirmed organic cause. Lumped under catch-all diagnoses such as "hysteria," "neurasthenia," and "nervous prostration,"

the vague syndrome gripping middle and upper-middle class women had become so widespread as to represent not so much a disease in the medical sense as a way of life. (Ehrenreich 105)

While neurasthenia, "nervous exhaustion" or "nervous prostration" could afflict anyone, hysteria was almost exclusively a female disorder (Smith-Rosenburg 197; Dercum 87; Duffin 31). Deriving from the Greek word for womb, hysteria had, for centuries, been associated with the notion
that the womb wandered through the body, afflicting women with numerous debilitating illnesses. Hippocrates, for instance, believed that terrible nightmares were induced when the menstrual flow was unable to leave the uterus and more blood flows into the womb on account of the body’s nourishment of it and its growth, then the blood which has no place to flow out rushes up because of its abundance to the heart and to the lungs; and when these are filled with blood, the heart becomes sluggish, and then because of the sluggishness numb, and then because of the numbness insanity takes hold of the woman. (qtd in Stephens 4)

Later, Plato argued that "the womb is an animal that desires ardently to engender children; when it remains sterile it controls itself with difficulty; it is indignant; it wanders about the body, obstructing the air-passages, arresting respiration, throwing the body into extreme dangers, and causing diverse maladies" (qtd. in Dercum 87).

Treatments for the disorder varied greatly, from alternating foul and sweet odors to drive the uterus away from the upper portions of the body and toward the lower, to bandaging the ribs to hold down the womb. Since the malady was associated most often with young, unmarried girls, remedies were devised to cure the supposed lasciviousness invading their sterile bodies. One Greek physician recommended the following antidote: My prescription is that when virgins experience this trouble, they should cohabit with a man as quickly as possible. If they become pregnant, they will be cured. (qtd. in Stephens 4)

The emphasis on marriage and pregnancy as a treatment for hysteria persisted through the 19th-century, despite changes in thinking about the nature and corresponding symptoms of the affliction. Galen offered one of the first significant
revisions in the wandering womb concept, theorizing that
hysteria was caused by the poisonous effects of suppressed
menses or retained semen. With the advent of greater
medical knowledge and a more "scientific" approach to
disease, the womb lost some of its preeminence and attention
turned to the nervous system. By 1895, a medical textbook
on nervous disorders described hysteria as

> a psycho-neurosis, of which the physical symptoms
> are the most conspicuous, tending to disguise the
> mental phenomena and to simulate superficially,
> the effects of various organic diseases. (Dercum
> 89)

By the 19th-century, physicians had "narrowed"
hysteria's symptoms to include headache, muscular aches,
weakness, depression, menstrual difficulties, indigestion
and general debilitation (Ehrenreich 103). The most
sensational characteristic, however, was the seizure, or
hysterical "fit."

> Such seizures, physicians generally agreed, were
> precipitated by a sudden or deeply felt emotion--
> fear, shock, a sudden death, marital
> disappointment--or by physical trauma. They began
> with pain and tension, most frequently in the
> "uterine area." The sufferer alternately sobbed
> and laughed violently, complained of palpitations
> of the heart, clawed her throat as if strangling,
> and at times abruptly lost the power of hearing
> and speech. A deathlike trance might follow,
> lasting hours, even days. (Smith-Rosenburg 201)

As the 19th century wore on, the "fit" lost its significance
as the primary delineator of hysteria. Presenting symptoms
became so generalized as to encompass any malfunction or
disorder of the female body (Smith-Rosenburg 202).
Physicians' interest in the malady turned to emotions and what came to be called the "hysterical personality." Highly impressionable, suggestible, narcissistic, egocentric, superficial, dramatic mood swings -- these were characteristic descriptions of hysterical women (Smith-Rosenberg 202).

Given the ambiguous nature of these symptoms, doctors, not surprisingly, developed ambivalent responses, and increasingly superior attitudes, toward their hysterical patients. Others thought the illness nothing more than a charade.

It has been too much the custom to regard hysteria as a conglomerate affection made up mostly of fantastic, assumed and purposive symptoms, which are the evidences either of foolish or of designing women. Hence hysteria is still confused by some authors with folly, mendacity and malingering. (Dercum 89)

Dr. John Hendrie Lloyd, writing in the late 19th-century, warned other physicians not to confuse genuine victims of hysteria with manipulative "impostors."

The most common vulgar error is to identify hysteria with the machinations of frauds and malingerers. The young woman who, decked in a bridal garment, fasts and is fed by stealth, the heroine of the story of the Cock Lane ghost, and the vixen who gives birth to frogs, are not hysterics--they are impostors. There is no more reason to call them, than to call any other jugglers, examples of this profoundly interesting psychosis, the very first essential of which is a series of mental impressions of undoubted originality and genuineness...An emotional crisis, a perverted temper, a dramatic outburst, or a crafty display, do not constitute the disease of which I am writing. (Dercum 129-130)
Such debates about the authenticity of the complaints reflects the inability of the almost exclusively male medical profession to resolve its own ambivalence about this primarily female complaint. The physicians of the time were at a lost to explain or do much to alleviate the symptoms of their patients and yet an influx of great numbers of well-to-do women to the doctor’s consulting rooms provided the profession with a lucrative economic boost, and the number of women afflicted with the illness grew at an alarming rate over the course of the century. Many notable women spent part, if not most, of their adult life in bed or confined to their home as a result of some variation of hysterical debilitation. Among them were Jane Addams, Emily Dickinson, Margaret Sanger, Mary Baker Eddy, Alice James, and, across the Atlantic, the woman who gave her name to the era, Britain’s Queen Victoria.

Invalidism had become something of a career for upper- and middle-class women. Physicians encouraged female incapacity since bed rest was the preferred prescription for all nature of ailments, including pregnancy and menstruation. This professional endorsement induced women to retire to bed at the slightest provocation—a case of "nerves" or "sick headache." A pioneering female physician of the period, Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi, observed:

... it is considered natural and almost laudable to break down under all conceivable varieties of strain—a winter dissipation, a houseful of servants, a quarrel with a female friend, not to
speak of more legitimate reasons... Women who expect to go to bed every menstrual period expect to collapse if by chance they find themselves on their feet for a few hours during such a crisis. Constantly considering their nerves, urged to consider them by well-intentioned but short-sighted advisors, they pretty soon become nothing but a bundle of nerves. (qtd. in Ehrenreich 108)

With this focus on malfunctioning nerves, medical treatment soon fell into two categories: therapy for the body and therapy for the mind. Victorian physical therapeutics involved removing "diseased" organs, dosing the uterus with silver nitrate or arsenic, injections, cauterization and bleeding (Wood 224).

Treating the mental aspect of the disorder, on the other hand, verged on a form of brainwashing, a strategy demanding a particular relationship between the attending physician and his patient. The treatment of hysteria ought to be of two kinds: the first is to be directed to the mental state, the second to the bodily functions. The first is vastly the more important, and, in fact, the success of remedies in the second class often depends in a measure upon the fact that they make strong mental impressions. In the first class, therefore, are included all the influences of a strong and appropriate personality in the physician and attendants, all moral impressions, all appeals to the emotions and imagination, all suggestions, and the skillful use of the association of ideas... The essence of it is suggestion, and this has been used from time immemorial by those skilled to treat the neurotic and hysterical. It is used, in some measure, by all successful physicians who aim to gain an ascendant influence over the minds of their patients. (Dercum 132)

This observation by Dr. Lloyd appeared in an 1895 medical text on nervous disorders with contributions by a number of notable Philadelphia nerve specialists including William
Osler. By the 1870s, Philadelphia had become the leading medical center in the country, home of two renowned medical colleges, and the leading scholar of hysterical disorders, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell. Revered as "the greatest nerve specialist in the country," Mitchell earned a fortune and a sort of cult following among well-to-do women in the country. Physicians of the period were profoundly influenced by Mitchell's theories and treatments for "nervous" women, among them Mitchell's conviction that the disease was a sign of emotional indulgence, moral weakness, and a shocking lack of will-power and self-rule (Smith-Rosenburg 205). Mitchell's most famous remedy was devised in 1872 and became known as the "rest cure," or "cure Mitchell" abroad (Burr 154).

One of Mitchell's better known patients (although not of the financial and social standing of most), Charlotte Perkins Gilman, borrowed money from her mother-in-law to pay for the 100-mile journey to Philadelphia and a consultation with the acclaimed Dr. Mitchell. Gilman brought with her a lengthy and detailed chronicle of her symptoms, including the observation that her illness only appeared when she was home with her husband and children and vanished when she was not. Ehrenreich notes that Dr. Mitchell dismissed Gilman's history as "self-conceit...He did not want information from his patients; he wanted 'complete obedience'" (Ehrenreich 102).
Mitchell's prescription for Gilman was:

Live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you at all times...Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours of intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live. (Ehrenreich 102)

Gilman attempted to follow Mitchell's orders, but they led her "perilously close to losing my mind" (Ehrenreich 102). Eventually, Gilman abandoned Mitchell's "treatment" and her husband and child, to embark on a career as a writer and social activist.

Mitchell promised his patient a "positive cure" under one condition: that she totally relinquish control of her feelings and thoughts to Mitchell and concern "herself with nothing but following directions" (Bassuk 141). Once the physician's authority was established, the patient was removed from her home and family, put in the care of a professional nurse at a secluded location and was fed copious amounts of food. The duration of the treatment depended upon the severity of the individual case, but usually lasted from six weeks to two months. Mitchell made use of every grade of rest from repose on a lounge for some hours up to entire rest in bed. At first, and in some cases for four to five weeks, I do not permit the patient to sit up or to sew or write or read, or to use the hands in any active way except to clean the teeth. I arrange to have the bowels and water passed while lying down, and the patient is lifted onto a lounge for an hour in the morning and again at bedtime, and then lifted back again into the newly made bed. (Mitchell Fat 66)
Aside from the complete passivity and enforced helplessness of the patient, Mitchell thought it advisable to remove patients from contact with family members and to shield the patient from any news from home that might cause anxiety or worry. Such relationships, Mitchell surmised, played a critical role in the development of the patient's nervous disorder. "Seclusion from the family, he thought, was invariably beneficial" (Bassuk 142).

Key to the success of Mitchell's treatment was the personality of the physician himself, an exacting, confident manner that insisted on the complete abdication of control by the patient (Bassuk 143). Mitchell adopted a course of "moral reeducation," instructing a woman how to gain self-control "to make clear to her how she is to regain and preserve domination over her emotions." The "habit of yielding too easily to the expression of all and any emotion, or of cultivating to excess the outward manifestation of feeling" was thought to be a precipitating cause of nervous disorders (Bassuk 143).

Mitchell's attitudes and his application of the "rest cure" were intimately linked with prevailing Victorian assumptions. With the advent of rapid industrialization, separate male and female "spheres of influence" evolved. Women were believed to be innately inferior to men in their physical and intellectual capacity. Their primary contribution was as the upholder of spiritual morality and
the creator of a serene and harmonious setting for the preservation of these values in the private home. Above all, a woman's most important duty was the propagation of the race.

Mitchell, like many of his day, believed the contaminating influence of contemporary life fostered nervous disorders. The "epidemic" of hysterics was due to the "the strain on the nervous system resulting from the toils and competitions of a community growing rapidly and stimulated to its utmost capacity" (Bassuk 145). This stimulation was dangerous for women, medical scholars believed, because of women's "frail" nature, but more importantly because such excitement threatened the health of the reproductive organs. It was believed that living organisms possessed only a finite amount of energy, and that "anything that diverted women's energy from the reproductive function, such as education or work outside the home, must be avoided" (Bassuk 145). A woman's education, Mitchell wrote, should be altered so as to place less demand on her limited physical resources. Even school teaching was inappropriate since the function of school was to prepare women for their role as the "source and center of the home" (Bassuk 146). Women should not aspire to anything beyond their traditional roles.

The woman's desire to be on a level of competition with men and to assume his duties, is I am sure, making mischief, for it is my belief that no length of generations of change in her education
and modes of all activity will ever really alter her characteristics. She is physiologically other than the man. (Mitchell Doctor 13)

The prevalence of this thinking, say contemporary scholars, contributed at least in part to the skyrocketing incidence of female illness. One could argue that Mitchell was not incorrect in concluding that hysteria developed as a response to rapid cultural changes, but his attempt to assign blame merely to industrialization, ignores the psychological implications of the burden imposed on women to fulfill their two central roles in society: True Woman and Ideal Mother.

Carol Smith-Rosenburg points out that even during the late 19th-century, observers noted how ill-prepared the young woman was to assume the duties of marriage, motherhood and maturation (199). Not only was she programmed to believe in her innate moral "purity" and physiological weakness, but the late Victorian woman daily confronted the reality of producing the ideal domestic environment. The health risks of frequent pregnancies, the demands of children and housekeeping, and a sense of isolation and loneliness all added to a woman's sense of inadequacy. What's more, rapid changes in the public sector invaded the private one.

Despite such basic social, economic and demographic changes, however, the family and gender-role socialization remained relatively inflexible. It is quite possible that many women experienced a significant level of anxiety when forced to confront or adapt in one way or another
to these changes. Thus hysteria may have served as one option or tactic offering particular women, otherwise unable to respond to these changes, a chance to redefine or restructure their place within the family. (Smith-Rosenburg 200)

In addition to conforming to the cultural expectations of a complex domestic ideology, women seeking to define a new, more active role for themselves in 19th-century society also faced the hard reality of legal prohibitions against such behavior. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon’s 1854 pamphlet on "Married Women and the Law" reflects the depth of a woman’s "imprisonment" in the institution of marriage.

A man and a wife are one person in law; the wife loses all her rights as a single woman, and her existence is entirely absorbed in that of her husband. He is civilly responsible for her acts; she lives under his protection or cover, and her condition is called coverture.

A woman’s body belongs to her husband; she is in his custody, and he can enforce his right by a writ of habeas corpus.

What was her personal property before marriage, such as money in hand, money at the bank, jewels, household goods, clothes, etc. becomes absolutely her husband’s, and he may assign or dispose of them at his pleasure whether he and his wife live together or not.

A wife’s chattels real (i.e. estates) become her husband’s.

Neither the Courts of Common law nor Equity have any direct power to oblige a man to support his wife.

The legal custody of children belongs to the father. During the lifetime of a sane father, the mother has no rights over her children, except a limited power over infants, and the father may take them from her and dispose of them as he thinks fit.

A married woman cannot sue or be sued for contracts—nor can she enter into contracts except as the agent of her husband; that is to say, her word alone is not binding in law.

A wife cannot bring actions unless the husband’s name is joined.
A husband and wife cannot be found guilty of conspiracy, as that offence cannot be committed unless there are two persons. (qtd. in Heilbrun 84-85)²

Social class also played an integral role in the manifestations of female hysteria. First, the increased prosperity of the industrial age expanded the numbers of upper and middle class families. Further, these classes tended to be the primary advocates and arbiters of domestic ideology. Perhaps not coincidently, upper- and middle-class women were the most likely to suffering from nervous disorders while being the group most able to afford the attendant costs of medical treatment. Nonetheless, Charlotte Beecher, travelling through Ohio in the 1870s repeatedly conversed with drivers and others among the laboring class on this subject, and always heard such remarks as these: "Well, it is strange how sickly the women are getting!" "Our women-folks don't have such health as they used to do!" (qtd. in Cott 266)

In the 18th-century, the American family functioned as a cohesive unit, men, women and children working together in the home to produce the necessities of life. With the advent of industrialization and urbanization in the next century, the male figure left the home for the public workplace. Basic products were produced outside the home, creating the environment for the evolution of sexually segregated spheres. On the western frontier, the homesteaders essentially recreated the communal, self-sufficient family unit of the 18th-century. But that did
not mean that men and women raised and educated in the industrial east abandoned the newly evolving value system regarding gender roles. Smith-Rosenburg concludes that the pressures of domestic ideology were also felt among the poor, rural and working classes.

Normative prescriptions of proper womanly behavior were certainly internalized by many poorer women. The desire to marry and the belief that a woman's social status came not from the exercise of her own talents and efforts but from her ability to attract a competent male protector were as universal among lower-class and farm women as among middle- and upper-class urban women. (200)

In separate studies, Robert Griswold and Susan Armitage both confirm the influence of domestic ideology and sex-role conflicts among western, pioneering women. Armitage refutes the Turnerian thesis of the frontier as "fundamentally liberating." Sex-gender roles did make a difference, Armitage says, "but the accumulating evidence points strongly to the conclusion that most pioneer women did not view the frontier as a way to free themselves from constricting sexual stereotypes" ("Western Women" 6). Frederick Jackson Turner’s theory that pioneering was fundamentally liberating, Armitage argues, was at best half-right. "The frontier experience does not explain women’s experience. We must recognize that there were two Wests: a female, and a male one" ("Western Women" 7).

The lack of real economic freedom for the frontier woman becomes apparent when we look at the range of occupations available to these women. Using data from the
1870 census, Michael Bargo documented the distribution of women in the labor force throughout the West. Bargo's research reveals that the amount of economic "opportunity" available to women during the period had less to do with factors of east versus west, than urban versus rural. In urban centers such as Denver, Salt Lake City and parts of California, women participated in a wide variety of "non-typical" jobs: photography, boot making, sales, factory work and the professions (33). Yet in predominately rural territories such as Montana and Wyoming, job opportunities for women were extremely limited and fell into stereotypical categories. Even though the Montana Territory was among the largest in size, it recorded only 168 working women in 1870, out of a total population of 18,170 (43). While fifteen percent of the population was female, only 1.2 percent of workers were women and they were clustered in the following occupations:

1 dairywoman
10 boarding and lodging house keepers
80 domestic servants
11 hotel and restaurant keepers and employees
36 launderers
19 teachers
1 trader
7 milliners, dress and mantua makers
3 tailoresses and seamstresses (Bargo 38).
Wyoming's 300 working women filled the identical occupations. Left untabulated, however, were several "occupations" such as prostitution and farm work. Bargo notes that women were counted in the census only if they were "gainfully employed" outside the home, farm, or ranch, a circumstance most often found in towns and cities (41). Thus, in sparsely populated areas, which, of course, was the dominate condition of the rural west, women "participated in the occupation that was readily available to them, just as the men of the time did" (40). However, contrary to Turner's hypothesis, those employment opportunities most "readily available" to western women were highly circumscribed.

While Griswold does not deny that pioneer women took with them "a set of values, assumptions, and ideals that enabled them to make sense of their lives," he prefers to evaluate the female western experience as part of a "cultural system" where domesticity meant "different things to different women" (15).

A lonely, passive, sad-eyed rancher's wife and a fiery, determined Montana temperance reformer might both pledge allegiance to domesticity. (Griswold 16)

William Chafe labels this tendency to maintain contradictory attitudes "cultural schizophrenia," with "attitudes going one way and behavior the other" (qtd. in Riley Inventing Vol II 124-125). Chafe has most notably applied this theory of cultural schizophrenia to another period in American history
in which the cult of domesticity once again flourished, the post-World War II 1940s and 50s.

There are striking parallels between the Victorian 19th-century and the mid 20th-century in America. Once again, motherhood was revered and idolized. Women were forced from their work in factories, offices and businesses to make room for returning servicemen. The ideal woman became the G.I.'s helpmate, an attractive adornment to a husband ambitiously competing in a hostile economic world. Just as westering frontier women were isolated by vast distances and scarce populations, women of the 1950s also followed their men to an isolated frontier, the reclusive insularity of suburbia. Women attended college in increasing numbers, but the vast majority saw as their ultimate lifelong career objectives marriage and motherhood.

While women of the 1950s attempted to fulfill the expectations of this nouveau domesticity, men were also reliving 19th-century fantasies as the result of a boom in print, film and television westerns. A *Time* magazine article of 1959 called it "the biggest stampede for the wide open spaces since the California gold rush" (52). Eight of the top 10 shows on the new living-room companion were westerns; 35 shows in all on the networks' schedule (*Time* 52).

But just as was the case during the Victorian era, the reality of the female experience was often strikingly at
odds with the ideal. While women's magazines extolled the virtues of creative tuna casseroles, gleaming bathroom porcelain and child-rearing, the numbers of women in the workplace grew steadily, so that by 1960, 40 percent of all women over sixteen held a job (Riley Inventing Vol II 124). These working women claimed not to reject domesticity. They were merely "supplementing" their income to make life better for their families. Life magazine devoted an entire issue in 1947 to the "American Woman's Dilemma." The story announced that women were now choosing to have both a husband and paid work--conditions once thought mutually exclusive. Life "puzzled over how this could have happened in a society that discouraged independence and autonomy for women, urging them to stay docilely at home" (Riley Inventing Vol II 125).

The apparent conflict clearly took its toll on American women, spawning a new epidemic of women's illness--an alarming increase in alcoholism, drug addiction and divorce. Betty Friedan memorialized this situation under the slogan "the feminine mystique," the problem that had no name.

In New York City, a divorced, single Dorothy M. Johnson pursued an independent career that did not include marriage or motherhood. For fifteen years, Johnson worked on magazine staffs, first for a prominent business press, Gregg Publishing, and then as editor of The Woman, a popular woman's digest. An extremely valued employee at Gregg
publishing's magazine, Business Education World, Johnson wrote clever articles and manuals designed to improve the letter-writing abilities of ambitious, diligent businessmen. When she moved to The Woman in 1944, Johnson's task was to collect previously published articles of interest to women, edit and condense them. She occasionally wrote original pieces of her own, most of them light-hearted fluff such as "Shorthand through the Ages" and "The Feud of the Fur-bearing Fish."

To avoid having her name appear on too many bylines in an issue, Johnson frequently used pseudonyms for her Woman pieces. One of her favorites was the pseudonym Libby Root (Smith 92), a name that succinctly combines the period's struggle between tradition and change. When it came to her fiction, Johnson also used pseudonyms, but for a different reason. Many magazine publishers insisted she keep her gender a secret, fearing their predominately male readers would not take kindly to a woman writing westerns. Argosy, for instance, published Johnson's "Hold that Bull" under the by-line L.R. Gustafson (Smith 94). Many other editors routinely ran her stories under the name D.M. Johnson. When Johnson eventually confronted one editor at a party, "He said finally that he would let me write as a woman. But I never sold them another thing."

In this social and personal climate of contradictory messages about female roles, Johnson began her story of the
agoraphobic Elizabeth Armistead. If some of the background details of Elizabeth's life were not deliberately calculated, they were certainly fortuitously coincidental. "When Elizabeth, the heroine, left my typewriter, she was a dark-haired girl from Philadelphia and afraid of her own shadow," Johnson wrote (Smith 143). *The Hanging Tree* predates the work of feminist and revisionist historians who have now brought to the forefront an analysis of female experience not only in the west but in 19th-century America as well. Despite her diligence as an historical researcher, Johnson would not have had access to the interpretations we do today of such influences as the cult of domesticity, female hysteria, Dr. Mitchell, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's account of Dr. Mitchell's treatment in the fictionalized *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Nonetheless, Johnson's inclination as a fiction writer was to imagine herself the characters she wrote about, and as a result, she quite accurately created a story that reveals the psychological and emotional pressures confronting a non-conforming 19th-century western woman.

In her own life, Johnson, by day as The Woman managing editor, advised women about the virtues of domesticity. At night, she immersed herself in the creative persona of the male western hero. A photo of Johnson taken when she was 35 years old shows her dressed like a western badman: black shirt and pants, ten-gallon hat. A holster is slung across
her hip, her right hand resting lightly on the gun handle, ready for a quick-draw. In Christmas letters to friends, she jokingly called herself "Calamity Johnson." Yet when a depiction of "Dorothy Johnson, Author" appeared on a high-school parade float with that unconventional woman of the West, Calamity Jane, Johnson snidely commented:

> Center is Calamity Jane, billed as a cowgirl. That's the nicest thing anybody ever called her. She was notorious in four states. I think the rest of us ought to sue somebody for putting us in the company of Calamity Jane, but she wouldn't have liked us either. She was definitely a man's woman.  

Those same words were recently used by a childhood acquaintance to describe Johnson herself. Felicia Stimpson grew up with Johnson in Whitefish, Montana. Stimpson's husband, Dave, was one of Johnson's frequent camping and hiking companions. "She was a man's woman, not a woman's woman. She didn't care about dainty women's things," Stimpson said. "She even had a man's walk, big, long strides."

For Johnson, like many ambitious women of an earlier age, fashioning a life for oneself meant juggling conflicting expectations—the conventions of femininity enforced by culture versus individual, internalized aspirations. Even "playing" with convention in a work of fiction presented formidable obstacles as Johnson learned when she began sending to publishers her story of "The Prisoner of Skull Creek."
1. Mitchell was not only an influential thinker in 19th century medicine, but as attending physician to Mrs. Sarah Wister and her son, Owen, he actually influenced the course of western literature. Mitchell's prescription for the young Owen Wister's failing health included the rehabilitating effects of arid desert air, sending Wister to the western desert. The affluent Philadelphian's experiences there and, more significantly the publication of his story The Virginian, forever altered popular mythology about the American frontier.

2. English Common Law which was frequently incorporated directly into U.S. State Law. Montana Statute 1-1-109, for instance, enacted in 1871, adopted English Common Law as precedent in all cases not expressly addressed in U.S. and Montana state law.


By the fall of 1951, Johnson had lost confidence in her story about a "lost lady" and an arrogant mining camp doctor. She wrote to her agent, Jacques Chambrun, asking advice. "I seldom wilt," she told him, probably unnecessarily. But Chambrun had already seen an earlier draft of "The Prisoner at Skull Creek" and Johnson hoped he would have some advice to help her now.¹ On the first go-round, Chambrun had told her to "make a two-part 20,000-word novelette of it." Johnson didn't much care for the suggestion. "It stretches at the seams at that length, too, but I am no novelist."

Johnson worried that something "big" was wrong with the story. "But what is it? And can it be fixed?" She had been working on the story at least two years by then and she still had not settled on the point of view. Whose story is this?, she wondered. "The idea seems unusual and the
characters strong, but I don’t get much satisfaction out of the story," she wrote. "I feel a lack of strong emotion. It ought to be there, but it doesn’t get across." She knew that if she focused her story on the boy Dune (later Rune), she could elicit that emotion--a young, inexperienced boy passionately in love with a helpless, beautiful woman but without the skills to win her love.

Telling the story from Dune’s viewpoint posed another problem. "Lots of things happen that the reader wouldn’t know about if I told only what Dune might see and understand." Chief among them was the psychological agony her female protagonist endures. Without a center, Johnson feared her narrative:

reads like a pulp story, but for a pulp it would need more blood. I could easily have Dune shoot somebody--he’s ripe for it--but that would make it longer.

In a postscript, she added:

I could make this story longer, and it’s hard not to, but what’s the use of adding length to something that’s bad to begin with?

But Johnson expressed confidence about one thing: her handling of Elizabeth’s agoraphobia.

The only thing I’m sure of is that the psychology is all right. The lady suffers from agoraphobia--but decades before psychologists found out there was such a thing.

No complete drafts remain of these early versions except for about a dozen pages of manuscript, notes and plot summary.² In these fragmentary accounts, Elizabeth
Armistead is a more mysterious figure than in subsequent versions. Her background becomes the subject of speculation among the two hundred or so miners who come out to see the blindfolded woman’s arrival in camp. They gossip that she is "European nobility, didn’t speak English, and was fleeing from someone who wanted to marry her off to a king." Others claim she is looking for her scalawag brother, or is the heir to half a dozen rich claims and had come out for revenge on the men who dry-gulched the original owner. And there were those who said she was a school teacher, or a dancer headed for the hurdy-gurdies.

In these few pages, Elizabeth’s personal history remains a mystery, but her affliction does not. Just as in the final version of the story, she suffers panic attacks that incapacitate her and resists medical treatment. One characteristic that receives emphasis in these early drafts is her unconcealed appetite for gold.

More distinctive alterations appear in the portraits of the story’s male characters. Doc Joe Frail begins as two separate men, Ward Harper and Doc Frail. Harper, 29, is a prospector made rich in the original gold strike at Skull Creek. By the opening of the story, he has quit the mine to start up a wagon freight outfit. When Elizabeth arrives in Skull Creek he is attracted to her and takes on the role of her protector. Later, he fains a lack of interest in Elizabeth although secretly he can’t get the young woman out
of his mind. The sixtyish Doc Frail drinks hard and gambles freely. His hangovers often leave him indisposed when it comes to practicing his profession. Elizabeth is first taken to Doc’s place and the cantankerous old man steps in to fill the void created by the death of her father. He takes over her supervision when Harper pulls out of town. Dune, ten years older than he will appear in later versions, works as an errand boy for the storekeeper, Flaunce. When he becomes Elizabeth’s "hired gun guard," Dune is transformed from a nobody into somebody to be reckoned with.

Doc and Dune (Johnson notes in her plans for a revision: "Names Doc and Dune are bad and can be confusing. Change Dune throughout?"), care for Elizabeth and shield her from the other men in the camp as they do in the published version. The elderly Doc is not the romantic love interest here; that falls to Harper who is mostly off stage in these pages.

In these early drafts, Dune secretly uses gold from his own poke to try to cheer up Elizabeth, by buying her a kitten, for instance. Then, he pretends to find a poke of gold dust under her cabin. Elizabeth in turn uses the gold to grubstake other miners, including Frenchy Plante. Dune is heart-stricken to hear the news, since he could ill-afford the gesture, one clearly intended as an anonymous love offering.
Sometime later, Frenchy comes back into town to announce he's struck gold, and Elizabeth, as half owner, will share in the wealth. She revels in the gold, going on a spending spree, buying furniture, lining the walls of the cabin with calico and even paying Dune to hire a team to haul in logs to build a lean-to for the cabin. When she decides to order a piano from back east, Doc loses his temper. He warns Dune he'll kill him if he goes to Flaunce with the piano order. "Elizabeth, if you get a piano in here, it means you've given up for good."

"What good is being rich if I can't have what I want?" she demanded. "Not much good if you're a prisoner," Doc agreed.

"Elizabeth, look ahead. Long years ahead. What do you see, say twenty years from now?" "Stop," she pleaded. "Stop making me think!" "I'll do it for you, then," he offered. "Twenty years from now--even ten years from now--Skull Creek will be only history. Don't you know how gold camps decay? The gravel of the gulches will be only gravel. All the gold will be done--and all the people. The wickiups will be crumbled in, with weeds growing on them. And where will you be, Elizabeth? A living woman imprisoned here in a calico jail with ghosts for company?"

In a twist dropped in later versions, Dune suggests Elizabeth learn to shoot. Doc agrees and insists he will be the one to teach her. Later, Doc confides to Dune that Frenchy has been grousing about his partnership with Elizabeth, saying she gets 40 percent for doing nothing. What also worries Doc is that Elizabeth keeps her gold and
grubstake claims in her cabin with her, an easy target for a thieving miner. That’s when Dune becomes her hired guard.

Ward Harper then reappears in Skull Creek, intent on courting Elizabeth. Doc advises Dune to stay away from the cabin when Ward visits her. "'The knight is getting set to rescue the imprisoned princess,' he said sardonically." Dune is jealous, but powerless to challenge the intimidating Harper.

Ward proposes to Elizabeth, but she turns him down. "I can’t marry while I’m a prisoner here. And I can’t climb the hill, even for you.'" Secretly, she has made several attempts to climb the hill out of town on her own, but she has failed every time. Devastated by Elizabeth’s rejection, Ward abruptly takes a job hauling two wagons out of camp. A few miles out, a gang of angry men catches up and accuses Ward of stealing gold. The wagon he is driving has a false bottom and inside the mob finds a large cache of stolen gold. The gang ties up Ward and, using his own wagon as a gallows rolled beneath the hanging tree, tightens a noose around his neck.

Elizabeth, having learned what is about to happen, stumbles up the hill with her box of gold and grubstakes in her arms. "She lures the angry men, one by one, by tossing out the little gold bags and giving back the contracts. The men drift away. When her treasure is gone, she shivers,
empty-handed. Then she walks toward the hanging tree, looking only at Ward."

Dune stood frozen, watching Ward and the Lucky Lady. She stood by the wagon, drooping with unspeakable weariness, partly supported by the wheel and by Ward’s hand on her arm. He was talking to her earnestly, saying words the boy could not hear. Dune turned away, feeling cold, feeling lost. It was all over, and he wished he were dead.

Chambrun, having received this manuscript and outline, responded to Johnson by agreeing that the work was "quite long enough as it stands -- should not be any longer."

He agreed the story was missing a "center" because "it is (again, as you say) ‘nobody’s story.’" He doesn't encourage Johnson to shift the emphasis to Dune. "I think you will have to try to 'get into' Ward a lot more. As he is now, he's just noble all the way through. I think you might complicate him up a bit, give him something to wrestle with inside himself."

Johnson finally complicated Frail by combining the elderly frontier doctor and Ward Harper characters, and adding the less than honorable traits of gambling and gunfighting to Harper’s new persona as story hero.

Johnson continued to rework the story and two years later, now writing from Whitefish, Mont., to her new agent, Elizabeth Otis of MacIntosh and Otis in New York, Johnson enclosed a "bunch of rough draft manuscripts plus an outline." However, Johnson was still unhappy with the story.
Sometimes I think this has the makings of a cracking good story, and sometimes I think the hell with it. I've been working on it for several years and the wasted manuscript makes a big thick heap. The characters that have been in it and yanked out again would make a good mob scene.

Johnson asks Otis to take a look at it. "Anything longer than 5,000 words is awkward for me; I feel I can't control it or keep up suspense. The narrator doesn't seem very emotional."

Johnson cursed the day she started on the project. "Damn it, I'll never again start with a plot. The way to start is with an emotion." The "plot" that apparently inspired Johnson occurred to her when she saw two Hollywood movies featuring men lost in the desert during the late 40s, one starring Gregory Peck and the other John Wayne (Smith 127).

Despite the importance she assigns to plot as a starting point for her story, Johnson also recognizes the crucial role emotion, or at least an emotional state, plays in her story. In her cover letter to Otis, she advised the agent that "this has the endorsement, from the psychological point of view, of a practicing psychologist who helped me suffer with the heroine before I left New York."

There is no reply from Otis in the Iowa files. Nearly a full year later, February 1, 1954, Johnson sent another letter to Otis, again including an outline of "The Prisoner of Skull Creek," explaining that "a writin' friend of mine says Collier's is yearning for a three-part western serial."
She notes that she has about 33,000 words completed. "I don't know whether it would break down or cut up into three parts." Just three months later, Johnson forwarded to Otis an original typescript and two carbon copies of what has now become "The Hanging Tree." A handwritten notation at the top of the letter reads "63,674 words."

Johnson's letter appears to have been in response to a written request, now missing, from Otis that Ballantine Books was interested in looking at the story. Johnson wrote:

Let me know if you want a carbon. The original, I suppose, you will try to sell to Collier's or some other magazine. Maybe Ballantine won't be too happy with a carbon copy.

It would appear that Otis was attempting to sell the story on both the magazine and book markets. While the flourishing magazine market was lucrative, book publication carried more prestige. "A writer is not an author until he has produced a book," Johnson remarked in an article relating to her first book, Beulah Bunny Tells All (Smith 78).

What the book is doesn't matter much. Beulah Bunny contained 10 or 12 short stories that had already appeared in the Saturday Evening Post. Any one of them brought a bigger check from the Post than the total royalties on the book. They were the same stories, no better in hard covers than they had been singly, and in book form they were not read by nearly so many people (Smith 78).

Johnson's second book, Indian Country, published in 1953, was also a collection of short stories that included "The

Within the month, Warren Brown, associate fiction editor at Collier's, responded to the submission. His letter began with a compliment. "I could not help thinking as I read The Hanging Tree by Dorothy M. Johnson that working on fiction would be an undiluted pleasure if everyone wrote as well as Dorothy." Still, try as they might to imagine ways of "making a serial out of this novel...The Hanging Tree was still a novel, not a serial. There just isn't sufficient physical action and taut enough emotional suspense to break this up into parts."

Again the matter of viewpoint comes up. Virtually the only editor to encourage this tactic, Brown indicated that "if Dorothy ever considered writing a two-part, 20,000 word version of Elizabeth's story, we would most certainly like to consider it as a Collier's possibility." But Brown was not particularly hopeful that Johnson would attempt such a task since "the alteration is so major...that we cannot in all conscience urge Dorothy to rush into it. It would mean a complete reconception of the story."

While Collier's was among the top-paying short story markets in the country at the time, and Johnson had placed several other stories with the magazine in the preceding years, among them "Journey to the Fort" and "The
Unbeliever," the thought of still another rewrite must certainly have seemed daunting to Johnson. A few days later, when Otis sent the Collier’s letter on to Johnson, Otis wondered if the novel "might do better as a one shot in a woman’s magazine. I am sure you could reduce it." In a penned postscript at the bottom of the letter, Otis added: "Have decided to try Sat. Post first."

The very next day, Otis wrote again to Johnson. "...word from Bernard that he likes the book and they are going to take it." The elation, however, was tinged with caution. "Ballantine [has] been having a hard time. Their sales have gone down and they have had a fight with Hearst who were their distributors. I don’t know what new arrangements they are making. In any case they are cutting down to publishing two books a month."

"Glad to know Ballantine likes The Hanging Tree even if Collier’s can’t see it as a serial," Johnson answered by return mail. She considered shortening the story.

I wonder if I could cut The Hanging Tree to 20,000 words. I couldn’t write it at that length--I tried. But on The Woman, I used to condense a novel a month to 10,000 words. Of course, they weren’t very good novels! I write tightly in the first place, being lazy.

"Yes, try it as a one shot," she finally decided. "Now I’ll worry about Ballantine’s troubles, which also become the troubles of Ballantine’s authors." What happened next is unclear. There is no further mention of Ballantine in the Johnson/Otis correspondence until March 29, 1956, nearly
two years later. Most likely, Ballantine's financial troubles put an end to the book contract.

Meanwhile, Otis kept the novel-length version in circulation. That fall, Harry Maule, editor at Random House, turned the book down. "We did not think it entirely successful in what it aimed to do and we have some doubts as to how well it might sell in the present market." Maule also commended Johnson's ability and reputation, but felt it essential to get the support of some book reprinters before making an offer. Unfortunately, he didn't have any success in that pursuit. For Maule, The Hanging Tree fell "between two stools."

Obviously it is not a straight action Western, but I assume that what she has tried to do is a novel placed against the background of the old West with psychological overtones and symbolism. As such it does not seem to us to quite come off as for instance the Walter Van Tilburg Clark's novels The Oxbow Incident and The Track of the Cat do.

Van Tilburg Clark's name came up again in another rejection letter a few months later, this one from Patricia Schartle, associate editor at Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. Schartle prefaced her three page remarks by indicating that her publisher had been interested in "Miss Johnson's talents for some time."

The simplicity and vitality of one of her short stories first caught our attention, and it seemed to us that she could become an important voice in western writing; that she might, in fact, one day have reason to count herself with Van Tilburg Clark and Guthrie.
That *The Hanging Tree* would not be the vehicle for that achievement is implicit in Schartle's lengthy critique. Nonetheless, her analysis provides the most explicit insight into the novel's shortfalls that Johnson had yet received.

"The novel starts off with a bang," Schartle conceded. She especially liked the intriguing possibilities of the love triangle that made its appearance on the opening page. Elizabeth's ordeal in the desert is "superbly done and Rune's first scenes are splendid." She did, in fact, like the first four chapters very much.

But then it seems to us that Miss Johnson's story loses its focus, which could have been as direct as that in *The Oxbow Incident*. The book really becomes the story of the lucky lady instead of the hanging tree.

Schartle quickly clarified why this prospect was unsatisfactory.

Perhaps the reason lies in the undue emphasis given Elizabeth's agoraphobia and hysteria. Whereas this is a fine excuse for keeping Elizabeth on hand, and enlisting Doc and Rune to her service, it becomes exceedingly dull over a long stretch of pages.

This "dullness" may, in part, have been an aspect of the western woman's experience that Johnson wished to capture.

But, It also keeps the reader from participating in enough real conflict and dramatic development or in the life of the town as a whole. We do not feel, in other words, that it is enough of a peg to hang the dramatic development of the entire novel on.
Schartle may have had difficulty with Elizabeth’s "continuing and rather static neurosis" since it runs counter to popular notions of women as the binding force in the formation of western communities. Schartle suggested that the "much more dramatic storyline" involved Doc, Rune and Frenchy. Not to say that Doc didn’t need some work himself.

Unfortunately, despite the self-doubting, the cowardice and the flashbacks...he remains a rather stock figure while he should engage our full sympathy and excite us as a character...It is Doc Frail the doctor, the man who gambles only occasionally and then trembles under severe strain, Doc Frail who is going to kill a man - some man - who interests us.

Schartle went on to point out that there had been little written about frontier doctors and she would have liked to have seen Doc in action in a "dramatic doctor scene."

More important, it seemed to us that the set-up in the first chapters - and it’s a good one - calls for Doc Frail to kill and to almost hang at last for something he really cares about.

Rune, Frenchy and Grubb were also interesting characters, Schartle explained. She would have liked the conflict between Rune and Doc played up more for the love angle and the scramble to win Elizabeth’s affections. "Rune, though loving Doc, should continue to hate him too."

Rune, with the help of Doc’s target practice, should turn into a killer before our eyes, yet a killer we know and understand, one with whom we, and Doc, sympathize.

Rune, Schartle wrote, should be the one for whom Doc will almost hang. After a suggestion to expand the conflict
between Frenchy and Doc also, Schartle returned to the matter of Elizabeth.

Elizabeth must go into town much sooner and involve us in the town life. Needless to say, it would help to see a bit of the saloon girls and more conflict over the lucky lady (both Grubb and French can be used there).

Schartle's recommendations have the effect of equating Elizabeth, and the saloon girls, with the other primary commodity in camp: gold. The women become little more than foils around which to explore the flaws of the leading male characters. Still, the editor did want to see some form of growth in Elizabeth's character.

Elizabeth, too, must develop as a character. She is static here and often merely tiresome, perhaps in part because she is too true to "the lady of the period" and not necessarily true to fiction.

Schartle, in fact, had pinpointed the crucial weakness of the story. While Johnson had the imagination to create an original situation, or at least one that had not been explored in popular westerns before, her imagination was nonetheless hamstrung by conventional thinking. She, too, like countless writers before her equated masculinity with activity, femininity with passivity. Johnson recognized that often women could get themselves into unusual situations, that they could desire something more than custom allowed them, yet Johnson seem stymied when it came to showing how such women could act upon those desires. Thus, Elizabeth Armistead epitomizes manifold paralysis. For Schartle, an editor of western fiction wherein action is everything,
Johnson's story confirmed conventional wisdom which said that women could not be the protagonists of successful westerns.

The story had other problems, too.

The lack of sex is a decided handicap in selling the book and it could be used to literary advantage as well.

In the end, Schartle felt that the story did not live up to the expectations created in the first four chapters.

The reader expects the book to build in action and in importance, and it does not. The ending has some good moments but it is too much based on the gold and on Elizabeth rather than on the fatal weaknesses of all three. All in all, the lucky lady takes the book away from the hanging tree.

Otis passed Schartle's letter on to Johnson, noting that "Pat Schartle is one of the best of the young editors and is coming up fast." Since Schartle's report "more or less goes along with other comments we have received," she suggested Johnson should be carefully "turning this over."

Meanwhile Otis planned to send the novel off to Pocket Books, which was in the processing of considering a "more literary type of western." Six months later, with no response from Pocket Books, Otis wrote Johnson asking if she had a copy of the outline for the novelette version of the story on hand. Collier's, she explained, was looking for novelettes of twelve to fourteen thousand words.

Johnson replied that she no longer had a copy of the novelette outline, "but I could make one based on the novel."
The novel changed a great deal from the novelette planned. The only reason I made a novel of it was that I couldn't get all the story into a shorter length. That's not saying I couldn't condense the novel, now that the story line is clear. At least it was a year ago—I've forgotten it now and would have had to have a manuscript to work from.

Otis forwarded Johnson the original manuscript, urging her to put together a two- to three-page synopsis that Otis could send to Collier's before they got "stuffed up" with westerns. Then came a warning.

I hope in this new version you will tread softly on the agoraphobia. That has been the main complaint we have had about the book. Nobody has liked having the girl sit in that cabin so long. Even though that was the idea that set you off on this story, perhaps you will think of eliminating it entirely. It would be a perfectly good western without it and probably somewhat more convincing.

Johnson did think about taking out the agoraphobia. "The story is dim in my mind now, and I should be objective about it," but apparently, in the end, she decided to stick with her original concept, for a month later, Otis responded:

I am privately very dubious about whether it will be worth your time to rewrite The Hanging Tree according to the outline you sent. I am always leery of the first person, for one thing. And for another, unless Elizabeth is a more spirited girl than she seems to be here, and unless there is more tension and action in the love story, I am afraid this version will turn out to have the same fault as the other.

With this "encouragement," Johnson set The Hanging Tree aside. Six, possibly seven years, had transpired since Johnson first began work on the story of the Lost Lady. She had left her editing job in New York City to return to
Whitefish, hoping to support herself with her writing. But in her first year back in Montana, she sold only two pieces of fiction, undermining her confidence. "It was a frightful thing to have to worry about," she told biographer Smith (102). "I didn't have anywhere near the income that I had counted on to support my mother and me."

So she went to work at the local weekly newspaper, The Whitefish Pilot. Three years later, in 1953, Johnson moved to Missoula to take on a part-time position as secretary-manager for the Montana Press Association. The Association's office was situated in the Journalism Building on the University of Montana campus and came complete "with elegant parking space out front." That same year brought a windfall $5,000 advance for Indian Country. The 48-year-old Johnson used the money to purchase a house for herself and her mother.

Indian Country received much acclaim, and several of her stories had been turned into television episodes, but finding a publisher for The Hanging Tree still nagged at her. She was ready to write it off as a lost cause. Then in March of 1956, Ballantine Books rose from financial ashes. After a lunch with the publishing house's new editor, Otis wrote Johnson that the company had plans to publish five new works a month and "they need books."

We talked about the possibility of their doing another collection of your stories, using Hanging Trees [sic] as a major item, if you think you
could cut it back to novelette length of about 25,000 words.

Johnson was pleased "to salvage" The Hanging Tree and she had no doubt she could cut it.  

I would have rewritten it except that what people seemed to object to was my imprisoned heroine, and if she isn't tied to her cabin, there is no reason for her being around at all. Is it going to be all right if I just cut but leave the characters the way they are?

There was little jubilation in the succeeding correspondence. Rather it reflects a businesslike relief that a bit of old inventory was finally clearing the shelves, even if discounted. Contracts were prepared and circulated by May of 1956. Johnson was offered a four-percent royalty, no hardbound edition, a $500 advance (less her agent's ten percent cut), and a six-week deadline to produce the condensed version.  

Otis tried to smooth the waters by filling Johnson in on Ballantine's still less-than-impeccable economic condition. "...there were many rumors, and even confirmation of rumors, that they were going out of business entirely...in the course of trying to pull themselves together they simply had to reduce both royalties and advances."  

I would have gotten a better deal on this if I could and I hope you know it. But that is the way things stand at present, and the difficulty of placing a collection of short stories anywhere except Ballantine is so great that I don't believe we have any come-back.
Johnson agreed to the terms, but she still had two other problems that took the entire summer to resolve. The Ballantine contract identified the work as "Untitled collection of frontier stories." Johnson preferred to call the work The Hanging Tree and Other Stories. Ballantine didn’t think the title had salability and suggested Red Men and White instead. Johnson thought that title a "poor" one, claiming it wasn’t "an attractive title when Owen Wister used it" (Smith 145).

I took a poll among my friends at lunch yesterday, and even those who were temporarily mad at me preferred my title The Hanging Tree as inherently dramatic and provocative.

She surveyed her journalism students classes (she was now also teaching magazine writing half-time at the University), offering them the additional choice of her original title The Prisoner at Skull Creek. The Hanging Tree kept coming up the winner.

By July, Houghton-Mifflin had gotten in on the debate. The publishing firm had purchased hardbound rights for the book and had gone ahead with an announcement in their catalog of the forthcoming publication of Johnson’s Red Men and White. Johnson finally gave up haggling. "If Ballantine and Houghton-Mifflin think the second one [Red Men and White] will sell more books, I won’t distress them with any more complaints. We have identical interests."

Her other concern was less easily conceded. When Johnson signed the contract with its six-week deadline for
revisions, she did so with extreme reservations, explaining she couldn't possibly meet the requirement.

I do not like at all having to sign a promise to deliver the manuscript by July 1. I cannot possibly do so and will not be bound by this.\(^3\)

Otis assured her that Bernard Shir-Cliff, Ballantine's editor, understood; the date was merely a contractual technicality and he wouldn't hold her to it. Johnson accepted Otis' reassurances and then reminded her that Shir-Cliff had the only original. Her eyesight, a problem since childhood, was continuing to decline and she couldn't see well enough to work from a carbon copy to make the cuts. She was also anxious to hear from Shir-Cliff as to exactly what kind of changes he envisioned for the story.

But it wouldn't be Johnson who held up producing a finished manuscript. By July, a month and a half after the contracts had been signed, Shir-Cliff still had not returned Johnson's manuscript. Otis got involved.

I reproached Bernard, of course, for not having written you about the cuts. He said that he had had suggestions from two other people, both of whom had suggested not only cuts but rather extensive revisions as far as characters etc. were concerned. He said that while these were good suggestions, he felt you probably wouldn't want to do such extensive work, and that now he himself is going to get down to indicate what he thinks could be accomplished by straight cutting. Let's hope he does so now. He is a very nice young man but slower than time.\(^3\)

Johnson would have had little time to work on the revisions anyway. She was deep in the middle of researching an introduction for a new edition of N.P. Langford's Vigilante
Days and Ways, his 1890 account of the men who ruled the goldmining camps of southwestern Montana. But, in the end, Johnson wouldn't be troubled by the pressure of competing deadlines.

It wasn't until October, three months later, before Shir-Cliff even got around to corresponding with Johnson. By then, the project had turned into a rush job—pushing to get the book into print by "early next year."  "The only thing that is holding us up is the condensed version of The Hanging Tree," Shir-Cliff wrote Johnson in October.  "After rereading the book twice and thinking about it for a considerable time," Shir-Cliff decided that most of the revision work would be a simple matter of cutting.

At its present length The Hanging Tree seems too long and tends to drag somewhat in the middle portion. I would suggest that the first six chapters would go pretty much in their present form with simply the deletion of the character Wonder Russell. Actually that can be done very easily, since he is dead by Chapter Two and only comes in again later in Chapter Eight (which we can also cut out). Chapter Seven, which concerns the Doc's past as a gunman and gambler, probably ought to be retained, but might be handled in a shorter style perhaps earlier in the book. By this point it is established that Elizabeth has suffered a real traumatic shock from her experiences in the desert and that she is incapable of leaving Skull Creek by herself. It is clear further than [sic] winter is coming on and that she is going to be in the cabin at least until spring. At that point I think you should take a good long breath, brace yourself, and cut right through to Chapter 13 (Chapters 8 through 12), at which point you can pick up the story after a lapse of several months.
The elimination of these chapters would remove the scenes in which Doc and Rune talk about planting gold in Elizabeth’s woodpile. This posed a problem for Johnson since somehow Elizabeth needed to acquire enough gold to provide a grubstake for Frenchy, an event that precipitates the events of the final third of the book. Shir-Cliff suggested that "perhaps Doc himself has managed to plant some gold dust where she would find it or perhaps she even thinks she has enough so that she can spare half of her savings in a last ditch gamble for riches."\(^{34}\)

Like earlier reviewers, Shir-Cliff expressed a desire for heating up the head-to-head conflict between Doc and Frenchy. The struggle should develop, Shir-Cliff wrote, so that "eventually Doc is going to find himself in a spot where he must either fight or run."

In the full-length version, the Preacher Grubb appeared as a failed prospector and his rage against Elizabeth arose as much from his humiliation at losing the grubstake she gives him as from outrage at her perceived immorality. Shir-Cliff suggested simplifying the character.

I suggest we keep in the religious fanatic character who is useful in stirring up the town, but that he be simply a lay preacher and not a disappointed grubstaker. This will take care of the problem of Elizabeth’s staking all the miners in the town.

Shir-Cliff was also dissatisfied with Rune, "particularly since in the very end he really contributes nothing to the book."
I would suggest that we cut his part considerably and make him more of a boy than he is at present. Perhaps he should be around fifteen and less of a rival for Doc.

In addition to the rewrites required to bolster the conflict between Frenchy and Doc, Shir-Cliff felt the book's final scenes needed work.

The end of the book has always seemed to me the most troublesome part about *The Hanging Tree*... I always found it hard to believe that an aroused and angry camp of miners could be diverted from a lynch attempt simply by Elizabeth's scattering nuggets and grub stake contracts to the mob. It struck me that they would probably hang Doc first and then investigate the riches scattered about. If we eliminate Elizabeth's large scale grub stake activities, the fight is more clearly between Doc and Frenchy and one in which Elizabeth's intervention is more forceful (the derringer?) and more direct.

Johnson's handwritten comments appear beside this paragraph, perhaps jotted down when she first read Shir-Cliff's letter. Her notes read: "They would be divided about the lay preacher--the hanging anyway," suggesting that the mob was not fully committed emotionally or intellectually to their action and so any action out of the ordinary might sway them from their task.

Johnson was not particularly receptive to Shir-Cliff's recommendations for changes. Her follow-up letter two weeks after his outlined her concerns.

1. If I delete Wonder Russell, what's the motivation for the mental block that makes Doc unable to shoot anybody? This is what makes Doc so vulnerable. Doc was not able to shoot Wonder's murderer; Frenchy Plante did it, and this is the basis for conflict between Doc and Frenchy. I'd like to leave Wonder in long enough to get killed.
2. Your second paragraph suggests eliminating the business of Rune's giving Doc's gold to Elizabeth. I'd rather cut this in length, not eliminate it. Anyhow, she has to have a large quantity of gold, we agree.

3. Your suggestion that Grubb be a lay preacher, not a miner, is fine. If Grubb is crazy, there would be a division of opinion among the miners about hanging Doc for shooting him, and we want this division. Elizabeth's dramatic scattering of gold will divide them further.

4. Why don't you like my boy Rune? I'll cut down his personal history in the interests of brevity. He is important as a messenger and a foil for Doc's remarks, and when he gets left, at the end, he is pathetic but has a future ahead of him.

How about just letting me cut viciously all the way, aiming at the length you specified? I worked for six years on a digest magazine and am a demon cutter. But changing the plot in order to shorten the manuscript would cause awful complications.®

Johnson wrapped up the letter with an expression of relief that a hardback version of the book would be printed after all. In a postscript, a not-so subtle critique of Shir-Cliff's promptness, she added: "Without waiting to hear from you, I'm going to start cutting The Hanging Tree according to my own lights."

This time Shir-Cliff was on top of it. Five days later, he sent a letter to Johnson addressing each of her four points.

(1) Wonder Russell is a fine character. My only reason for cutting him was that it seemed to me that there were so many problems in getting the book down to the proper length that I thought this was an ingredient that could be removed. Maybe it can just be handled as you say, very briefly. The gunman with a guilty past is such a familiar figure in Western novels that I thought we might best get past that part of the story as quickly as possible. The fine characterization of Russell
gives freshness to the incident and, if you can keep him in, so much the better.

(2) Yes, I'd still like to eliminate the part of Rune's giving Doc's gold to Elizabeth. I know you mean to show by this that Rune is being regenerated by responsibility, but I didn't feel that he was an easy character to present and that, if we had to shorten the book, the problem of making him understandable would get even more difficult. It could be that, since Doc was paying Elizabeth's expenses to a large degree, she would still have enough money left over from her father's tiny estate to grubstake at least Frenchy.

(3) You say you have ideas for improving the ending--making it more believable and removing my doubts that the miners would give up a hanging just to pick up a few bits of gold. We are in complete agreement about Grubb and I think all that is needed now is a measure of toughness in the writing of that scene which didn't come through the first time.

(4) Inevitably in shortening the book, there will be less of Rune. As you say his real function is as a messenger and as a kind of unspoiled foil for Doc. He is not a principal in the story though and doesn't need to be treated fully.36

"Let's not change the plot if you don't wish to," Shir-Cliff concluded.

Shir-Cliff advised Johnson to cut the 60,000-word plus manuscript to somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000 words.37 By December 9, about six weeks after the exchange of opinions on the deletions, Johnson had an original typescript of the revised manuscript and a carbon in the mail to Ballantine and Elizabeth Otis. In the cover letter to her agent, Johnson suggested Otis now try it with magazine publication. "It is greatly changed, and it certainly whizzes right along."38
Johnson deleted approximately 27,860 words. Years later when she donated the original manuscript to the University of Iowa Libraries for inclusion in their Iowa writers' collection (Johnson was born in McGregor, Iowa), she enclosed a brief note.

This is the full-length 65,000-word version of The Hanging Tree. It explains why Doc Frail is the kind of man he is and also develops Rune's hopeless love for Elizabeth. Ballantine's editor didn't think Rune was a very important character and required that this love angle come out. The version as published is about 39,000 words long, and that's longer than the publisher wanted it. But I cut it so it bled.39

The bleeding came mostly from passages focusing on Doc and Elizabeth. Doc Frail's background was dropped to the tune of 10,535 words; Elizabeth's story was 7,518 words shorter.40 In both cases, Johnson also added new passages to provide transitions or brief explanatory matter covering the deleted portions. Nearly 3,000 words were added relating to Doc Frail, only 1,464 about Elizabeth. The net deletions for Doc Frail came to 7,609 words; Elizabeth 6,054.

There were, however, notable differences in the kind of material that was removed for each character and its impact on the overall story. As already mentioned, Johnson primarily eliminated background information about Doc Frail. Eleven of the thirteen pages in Chapter Seven that were cut dramatized the following: Doc's childhood as the illegitimate son of a gambler and preacher's daughter; his
teenage experience in the West under the tutelage of his father; the old man's death and funding of Joe's medical training; the then-Doc Albert's experience as a young frontier doctor; his return to the States with a cache of gold as a present for his girl Sue; the discovery of her marriage to another man; Doc's fleecing at the hands of robbers; the desperate card games to rebuild his stake; his partnership with Wonder Russell; their big strike; and, Wonder's shooting at the hands of a jealous cowboy, an event Doc would have prevented if he could have pulled the trigger on the cowboy.

The sections eliminated about Elizabeth deal mostly with her thoughts and emotions, understandable considering the fundamental differences in the handling of the main characters--scenes with Doc and Rune revolve around their interaction with others, Elizabeth spends a great deal of time alone and the dramatization occurs primarily in her head. Chapter Nine, for instance, described Elizabeth's feelings of elation and anticipation as she prepared to start her school. "She saw herself: the gracious lady, mothering the flock, acting much older than nineteen" (ms. 9-6). The contents of her letters to the children's mothers are deleted as are her thoughts about what she might tell people back home.

Mentally she composed a letter to one of her friends back home. The girls would be startled indeed at a description of this shooting right outside her door, and of the men who were engaged
in it. But if she wrote that, she must write about Papa, and she could not do that. She could not quite believe what Dr. Frail had said so many times about Papa's being killed in front of her eyes, because she could not remember anything about the holdup. So she wouldn't write to anyone at all (ms. 9-3).

Later in the same chapter, Elizabeth ventures out at night, trying on her own to overcome her fears of that vast, invisible desert that threatens to engulf her. "But the heat of the desert beats down on her," and Frenchy who happened to be watching her cabin from the saloon, rescues her once again.

Accounts of her nightmares and daydreams are also eliminated. In one nightmare, "she was not safe in the only place where she could be safe, and she fled outside, and turned to the left and ran" (ms. 9-9). She takes to sleeping with the kerosene lamp on. "Night and day were not much different in the cabin. At night, the lamp must burn because she was afraid of darkness, and in the daytime, it must burn because the blankets on the windows shut out not only the stares of curious men but also the light of the sun" (ms. 9-10).

As the tedium of winter sets in, Elizabeth begins a journal. "She began keeping a journal because it was almost like having someone to talk to. Most of the things she wrote in it did not matter much; the important things she was afraid to put on paper" (ms. 12-1). The portions of Chapter 12 and 14 containing her diary entries hit the waste
basket. These include an account of her finding a stray cat and then selling it to Flaunce, the storekeeper, for $100, an incident revealing Elizabeth's preoccupation with money. "Tom is company, but not friendly," the journal entry notes. "And I am avaricious" (ms. 12-1). Another passage, also eliminated, re-enforces this particular characteristic of Elizabeth. In Chapter 11, after the first heavy snowfall, Elizabeth asks Doc why anyone stays in camp at all through the winter. He tells her it is because those who stay are the greedy ones, hoping the winter will be mild or the spring early so that they can work the streams for gold while the others are away.

"They are avaricious," Doc tells her. "Every single person in camp is, except you."
"I would be too, if there was any opportunity," Elizabeth said with an edge of sharpness (ms. 11-2).

In the spring when the snow melts, Elizabeth makes one more attempt to escape her cabin.

She went further than she had ever gone before. She did not turn back. She fought the desert step by anguished step, with her arm across her aching eyes to keep out the burning light. But the desert defeated her again (ms. 13-2).

After that experience she daydreams of "victory and gracious triumph." She imagines several scenarios, again passages all eliminated from the published version. In the first scene, "she would not be dependent on them any more because she would be rich with her share of Frenchy's mine" (ms. 13-2).
Rich, she could go anywhere she wished, so she would one morning take a bag with just a few necessary things in it (leave the trunk, leave everything, when you’re rich you buy new things) and walk briskly up to the hotel and get into the stage (ms. 13-2).

This daydream suggests that her fear is economically based, that she is unable to venture out because she feels uncertain, even inferior to others because of her financial standings, a feeling triggered perhaps by the disgrace she and her father faced after his financial dealings went bad.

Elizabeth’s daydreams continue. In another variation, with what could only be described as poetic justice, Doc Frail comes running.

"Elizabeth!" he would shout. "Where do you think you’re going?"
"Away from Skull Creek," she would answer in gentle surprise at his violence. "You always said I must go. Today I am going. Good-by. Good-by." Leaving him standing there in the street, heartbroken (ms. 13-3).

Another scenario produces an empowered Elizabeth. This time the dream is "of victory and its earned fruits."

She crossed the invisible desert with no help from anyone and on the other side Joe Frail waited, encouraging and fiercely proud. He said, "Elizabeth, oh Elizabeth!" and she had a choice. That was the fruit of victory that she could choose. She might answer gently, "Yes?" or she might walk past him because she was free (ms. 13-3).

The contradictions inherent in these imagined scenarios reflect not only her conflicting readings of Doc’s attitudes towards her, but also, her struggle for her own self-identity and measure of autonomy. When Elizabeth becomes
aware of Doc's intention to ask her to marry him, she rejects the possibility, partly because "she had gold and would have more," but, more importantly because "she would not go to Joe Frail like a slave girl. How to reach freedom, the same freedom everyone else had?" (ms. 15-10).

In another incident, again excised, Frenchy Plante comes calling. Flush with the gold from the woodpile, Elizabeth considers grubstaking this man who rescued her from the desert.

She should be cautious about disbursing it, of course, because everything cost so much--she was not sure what anything cost, because Rune was vague about her bill at the store and Doc did not help a bit in straightening out the arithmetic. Papa used to say, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." Frenchy Plante had been rich twice before, she knew. If he said his claim was rich, why doubt it? When she, too, became rich, she would not have to be bossed around by anyone (ms. 12-6).

Later, she attempts to quell Doc's anger at her for throwing her money away on Frenchy. The published/edited manuscript retains Elizabeth's statement: "I simply invested half of it" (196). Elizabeth then adds: "Because I have plenty--and I want more" (196). The published/edited version then cuts to a scene of Frenchy drinking and gambling away most of Elizabeth's stake, flaunting his profligacy in front of Doc before Frenchy finally heads out of camp to do some prospecting.

In the unpublished/complete manuscript version, however, Elizabeth responds to Doc's anger at giving Frenchy
the money by saying she did it "because I need the return on it" (ms. 12-9). The unpublished/complete manuscript then contains a 300-word conversation between Doc and Elizabeth in which Doc pleads with Elizabeth not to ever feel so desperate again. Sounding like an indulgent but exasperated husband, he says: "Spend what you must for whatever you need or want. Don’t think about the cost. You won’t find any more gold under the woodpile, but I will not let you starve. I want you to think only of going out when the stage starts running again in the spring. Don’t worry about anything. Only plan to go home" (ms. 12-10).

She said with dignity, "I do not wish to be under so much obligation! I can’t bear to be."

He had not known it would be so hard to keep from taking the little bird in his hand. "Everybody is under obligation to someone," he said. "I thought you knew that (ms. 12-10)."

The published/edited version also eliminates a two page passage of diary entries by Elizabeth, recounting in a detached fashion the course of Doc’s courtship of her. The entries, reminiscent of authentic frontier women’s diaries, are short and tend to focus on the superficial: the makeup of the day’s meals, for instance, including the lack of certain foods--butter, potatoes, molasses. Elizabeth also records Doc’s moods, noting that he gets progressively restless and uneasy as the days wear on. He takes to dropping in at odd times.

Friday. He came in the morning! I was soppy, washing my hair with the snow water, demanded why a gentleman called at such an hour (ms. 14-1).
Elizabeth, nevertheless, is clear-headed and far from romantic about Doc's intention to ask her to marry him. The text suggests that Elizabeth seems to enjoy the domestic tranquility of mending Doc's socks, and making his dinner, but more because the winter is long and lonely than because she is in love with him. During the second week of his courtship, Frail begins revealing his personal secrets to her. "He was moody again, confessed he once killed a man. I professed mild shock, though it was a relief--had heard long ago that it was four men" (ms. 14-2). The next night he disclosed that his name was not Frail after all, and Elizabeth chides him for selecting such a poor pseudonym. When Doc announces that he will come the next evening to read poetry, Elizabeth hastily writes a letter.

I wrote to Mr. Ellerby, telling him that if he will come for me, I will marry him. Because Joe is going to propose, and I cannot marry him because I cannot walk along the street without collapsing. I tried again today, before writing Mr. Ellerby. Mr. E. deserves no better than he will get. Joe does (ms. 14-2).

This advance intimation of Elizabeth's feelings about marriage do not appear in the published/edited version until Frail actually asks Elizabeth to marry him in Chapter 8. In the unpublished/complete manuscript, that scene takes place in Chapter 14 and is about twice as long as the published version. The excised passages also explore in greater depth's Doc's own emotional insecurities. As he reads to Elizabeth from Tennyson, Browning and Shakespeare,
"Elizabeth, he judged, was pretty well hypnotized" (ms. 14-5).

He was thoroughly contented, and he judged that Elizabeth was, too, except, he reminded himself, that a young lady should have a chaperon and should be free to tell an admirer, "No, I cannot marry you" (ms. 14-5).

Several of Doc's internal monologues contain references to Frail's self-deprecating alter egos: Sir Bag of Wind and Lord Bubble. In the revision, Johnson eliminated most of these references which appeared frequently throughout the unpublished/complete manuscript. "The Sir Bubble business seems a bit coy," Schartle observed in her critique of the novel, and they do come across as disingenuous and too clever given the context of the story. Johnson seemed to be searching for a way to depict the gulf between Doc's abundantly self-confident public persona and his deflated, self-conscious inner doubts. Throughout the story, we are told that everyone considers Doc arrogant, ruthless and without a conscious, but the reader has the benefit of getting inside Doc's head and learning that Doc is none of these. In some ways, Doc is also as much a victim of cultural expectations as is Elizabeth, although Doc struggles with living out society's idea of western masculinity.

Who am I to deserve felicity? he reproached himself. Sir Bag of Wind, my Lord Bubble, will now promise to rescue the grateful, imprisoned princess--but where were the dragons he should have had to conquer? On the other hand, why should I demand dragons? Few men ever see one.
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Why, I am the dragon! Sir Bag of Wind must conquer himself. And that is something I had not reckoned on. She has no father to chide so with "Sir, you are not good enough for my lovely daughter." And Elizabeth doesn’t know it. But I do (ms. 14-5).

Johnson thus sets up the irony of two individuals, "fated" for each other, but convinced neither is worthy of the other. Also among the deleted chapters are several passages disclosing Doc’s perception of Elizabeth. "I have a pretty bird, Doc Frail told himself. A pretty, frightened bird that cannot fly away" (ms. 10-1).

I do not know how to heal her so that she can go free. But if I do not look after her, she will perish. A caged bird flutters in the cabin just across the way. A hundred men would be glad to have the pretty bird—but I am the one who can have her because she trusts me (ms. 10-1).

Doc gets drunk and muses about his possession. On the one hand, he doesn’t want her because he "doesn’t like things too easy or too difficult" (ms. 10-1). He wishes the bird would fly free so he could "honorable" pursue her (ms. 10-2). On the other hand, "honor" is a "nonsense word seldom heard in these regions" (ms. 10-2).

It is not the question of whether I would like to keep this bird. Any man would. Then what is the question? Why, the cage is the question. The cage that I do not understand (ms. 10-1).

There is another caged prisoner in the camp who suffers from nightmares: Rune. Johnson eliminated over 4,600 words about Rune. Unlike her original vision of him, Rune, in later versions, is young, and much more vulnerable to Doc and Elizabeth’s manipulations. In both the original
unpublished/complete manuscript and the published/edited version, Rune is now only sixteen years old, inexperienced, with few skills, a chip on his shoulder and an overwhelming desire to be treated with respect. This longing is a direct result of his childhood experiences, discussed at length in the unpublished/complete manuscript, but mostly eliminated in the published/edited version.

Rune’s character has been shaped by the experience of being booted out of his home by his mother when he was only fourteen. She sends him off with only a single silver dollar. While she had done the same with two older brothers, Rune had been sickly when young. Since his brothers had been ousted at an even younger age, Rune had come to believe he would escape their fate. Then, Rune’s mother began having a neighboring widower over for supper. "But he did not guess, or would not admit he guessed, that she might marry the farmer to get a home for herself and the two little girls. There was no place then for Rune and his brother Bart. The farmer had boys of his own" (ms. 3-6).

So Rune and his 12-year-old brother Bart are sent off. "'The other boys made out, I guess, so you will,' had been the only comfort she could give him in farewell" (ms. 3-5). Somewhere along the way Bart is taken in by a farmer’s wife who wanted to "baby him." "Rune went on alone, seeking his own fortune. He had not found it yet" (ms. 3-5).
Rune's nightmares are of a cold night in the gulch, his teeth chattering. "He had been shut outside a door that should have been open, and he had been crying there" (ms. 3-5).

Even though Elizabeth is only three years older than he, Rune gravitates to her because, for a change, someone else needs his help. Elizabeth clings to Rune the first night after her rescue. From then on, she is dependent on him for everything from food, water and firewood to conversation and instruction on the functioning of a mining camp. Rune gains stature, even if most of it occurs in his own imagination. He pretends, for instance, that it is he who provides the gold Elizabeth uncovers in the woodpile, not Doc. As the scene appears in the unpublished/complete manuscript, Rune can with some justification take partial credit for this event because he and Elizabeth find the gold together. Rune is helping Elizabeth prepare for a special Christmas dinner. A turkey has been ordered, freighted in from Salt Lake City, at a cost of $40. Elizabeth decorates the cabin with sprigs of evergreen hacked from the firewood logs. She plans to give Rune and Doc presents from her father's things, because after all she can't do any other shopping. Rune announces that he once got a present for Christmas. "Once?" Elizabeth asks in astonishment. Suddenly, sadness overwhelms her. "It won't be like
Christmas back home. And I wish--I wish I were dead" (ms. 11-8).

Rune decides that this is the time to find the gold. This is the time to find it, he understood. When she’s talking about being dead. This is the time to find the present for the lost lady. And it is my present for her, not Doc Frail’s. Because I had it and brought it back and hid it there (ms. 11-8).

Elizabeth joins him at the woodpile and so Rune has to do some clever maneuvering to find the gold "accidently." When he does finally uncover the sodden poke, Elizabeth is uninterested, distracted by her own worries and the cold. He tosses the poke to her, but "so unimportant was a leather poke to Elizabeth that she did not make much effort to catch it. Rune had to dig in the snow to find it again" (ms. 11-9).

Rune feels magnanimous handing over the poke to Elizabeth. He toted up his accomplishments for the past few months: he’d learned to read; he was becoming a fair shot; and he knew how much he was owed for eight head of horses at seventy dollars per. "He was Santa Claus, lordly and benign in a hand-me-down coat with ragged elbows" (ms. 11-10).

That evening, Doc gives Elizabeth a large necklace made from hammered nuggets, a present he’d made for a girl back East who had jilted him years before. Rune conceals his hurt and jealousy. "I don’t care, thought Rune. I don’t give a damn. I gave her a present that was better. Because Doc
has plenty more nuggets where those came from. I gave her all I ever had" (ms. 11-12).

Since Elizabeth is unaware of who her real, or pretend, benefactor is (she believes Rune's suggestion that the gold must have been Ma Fisher's), she acts as though she were free to do with the gold as she wishes. That's not what Doc and Rune had intended, for they had assumed she would cherish the treasure and spend it judiciously. When her first decision is to give half of it to Frenchy Plante, Doc's enemy and Rune's would-be usurper in Elizabeth's rescue, both men are angry and bitter. Part of Doc's anger is that Frenchy has once again outsmarted Doc and gained some stature at Doc's expense. When Rune hears:

He burst into Doc's cabin with his face so white that Doc thought for a moment he had frosted it. "They say she staked Frenchy," he accused. "They say she gave him half!"
"She did. She told me so. It was partly gratitude because he saved her life."
He ain't the only one that ever done anything to help her. Oh, God, it wasn't even hers!" (ms. 12-11)

Doc is puzzled by Rune's reaction since he has been so preoccupied with his own feelings about Elizabeth it hadn't occurred to him that Rune had fallen in love with her too.

Rune paced, raging. My gold she threw away! My gift, and she didn't know that but it don't matter that she didn't know (ms. 12-11).

Rune's estimation of women has been confirmed. He hated his mother for what she had done to him. He resented his sisters because they were with his mother. "Inside in
comfort, as he remembered comfort, were his sisters, still protected and warm" (ms. 3-5). Now he was overwhelmed by the urge to get out of Skull Creek. "Can’t stand it to stay in the same camp with her, a fool like her, a fool and no better than a thief, throwing away my gold" (ms. 12-11). Then, as Rune curses the day he set eyes on Elizabeth, he remembers when she was close to dying, "no pretty, foolish, frantic girl but a tormented animal, blind and broken" (ms. 12-11). His anger subsides somewhat as he recalls her desperate clinging to him, and his own long-ago pain from a bullet wound in his shoulder that sent him to Doc’s for help. "The wound was long since healed and harmless. But the lost lady had a wound, too, a hurt of the mind, and it was not healed" (ms. 12-12).

When he buried the poke under the woodpile, he buried something of himself. When he turned away he was someone who had not existed before. Elizabeth had given away a part of Rune with a handful of nuggets and dust as if Rune did not matter (ms. 12-12).

The published/edited version of this major turn of events is quite different. Rune has taken to spending less time at Elizabeth’s during the winter. She has taught him to read and write and he is now getting advanced training in medicine from Doc and in Latin and Greek from one of the other miners, Tall John.

With these changes, and another 3,000-word net reduction in scenes involving Preacher Grubb and Frenchy’s big strike, Ballantine editor Bernard Shir-Cliff felt
Johnson had finally made the story "not only more vivid, but immeasurably stronger and I can appreciate the amount of work you did in making these changes."

While for the most part Johnson had kept her word that she would simply run a cleaving knife through the manuscript, she did write almost 7,500 new words for the revision. The final draft closely adhered to the chronology of the original version, except that Chapter Seven, which had explored Doc's background at length, was now condensed and moved up to the first pages of the story. Other minor reordering occurs during the winter scenes in the middle of the story and with the planting and discovery of the gold in Elizabeth's woodpile.

Johnson's most extensive rewriting occurred in Chapter Seven with the introduction of Preacher Grubb. Originally, Johnson conceived of Grubb as a jealous, down-and-out prospector, tottering on the edge of madness. Grubb struggles with stooping "so low" as to ask the Lucky Lady for a stake. "To ask her for a stake was beneath him" (ms. 17-2). He resolves the dilemma ultimately by castigating the source. "Still, she was not like real ladies, because the miners said Doc Frail kept her" (ms. 17-2). In the unpublished/complete version, Grubb's masculinity suffers deeply when, out of desperation, he finally does go to Elizabeth for money. He tells himself that she was, after all, greedy like the rest of them, and that he might
mitigate the indignity of what he was doing by trying to reform her. "Perhaps all she needed was someone rich in wisdom if not in gold" (ms. 17-2). Grubb's pride is further insulted by having to confront the Lucky Lady's guard, Rune. When he finally gets an audience with Elizabeth, "Grubb made his play briefly and without hope, working up to righteous anger that must explode for this young wanton's good" (ms. 17-4). Elizabeth gives him the money without even asking the most elementary of questions. This further insults Grubb, in as much as she shows no interest in having him enunciate his outstanding, but totally fabricated, skills as a prospector.

Months later, when Grubb has been a complete failure at prospecting (despite the frenzied success of other miners at Frenchy's new mine) and has used up his entire grubstake, he returns to Skull Creek on the brink of madness. Grubb storms into Elizabeth's now newly refurbished cabin, and in front of Miss Flaunce, the storekeeper's spinster sister, flings a handful of nuggets onto the floor. "You have sold your soul to the devil, young woman. You are living in sin. Get out! Get out, I say! Repent and save yourself!" (ms. 18-4).

Rune throws Grubb out onto the street. Miss Flaunce flees in terror. Grubb heads to the Big Nugget to stir up the drunken crowd there. When the miners, including Frenchy, hear Grubb accuse Doc of paying her to "keep her
from seeking salvation," the crowd turns an interested ear.

"'You mean he keeps her there against her will?' Frenchy thought he knew better, but this was an interesting thought to pursue" (ms. 18-5).

There was a stir among the lounging men. They had not considered that, either. The Lucky Lady was not their affair--or had not been until now. They began to mutter (ms. 18-5).

An informer slips out of the saloon and warns Rune and Elizabeth that trouble is afoot. He then heads out of town to find Doc who is tending to a miner caught in a cave-in. Doc slips back into town, and goes to his cabin where he fills a saddle bag with a few items. A full page internal monologue appears in the unpublished/complete manuscript at this point, with Doc calculating the danger he faces from the mob. He struggles with the fear of being shot in the back, and more importantly, the prospect of his being unable to shoot if Elizabeth's safety were threatened. Finally, there is the problem of getting Elizabeth out of Skull Creek.

Just in case someone might try to rescue the Lucky Lady from the clutches of Doc Frail, he must take her out of Skull Creek sometime tonight if he should live so long. He should have done it long ago, before she learned to love the cage Frenchy lined with gold. But Doc Frail is a selfish man. He does not like to admit that, so he called his selfishness "principal" and used it for an excuse to wait until the pretty bird fluttered contentedly into his hand (ms. 18-8).

The unpublished/complete manuscript version also contained scenes of the mob in the saloon, drinking heartily, inflamed
by Grubb’s ranting and included a bit of foreshadowing with Frenchy throwing nuggets about the saloon floor, the men bloodying themselves fighting over them. This touch, although eliminated in the published/edited version, prepares the reader for the plausibility of what will come later on the hanging hill. It’s even possible that Elizabeth got the idea for her final action from the mob itself, since Rune returns from a scouting trip to the saloon and reports on what is happening there.

Another key incident ultimately deleted occurs when Tall John reveals to Doc Rune’s behavior in the saloon. "Frenchy said something to him, and his right hand moved a fraction but he didn’t pull his gun" (ms. 18-12). Doc wants to know what Frenchy said to Rune. "He called Rune the Lucky Lady’s fancy boy. And Rune took it" (ms. 18-14). This behavior so impresses Frail, he adds another thousand dollars to his bequest to Rune in his hastily prepared will.

A few moments later, the crowd converges on Elizabeth’s cabin and begins hurling insults at Frail. He remembers Rune.

Joe Frail went tense and relaxed with an effort of will. If Rune could endure being called a fancy boy, Doc Frail could endure being called a coward (ms. 18-15).

But then, the insults turn to Elizabeth. "Wicked woman! Wicked woman!" Grubb wails. "Will all your gold save you from hell fire? Wanton and damned--" (ms. 18-15)
This Doc can not bear. As it appears in the published version:

He forgot he was a coward. He forgot a man lying dead in Utah and Wonder Russell, sleeping forever on a hill. His voice was thunder: Grubb get on your knees!" (218)

The next action is markedly different in its transformation from manuscript to published story. As it appears in print:

Grubb was blind to danger. He did not even recognize Doc Frail as an obstacle. Clawing the air, he came on, screaming, "Babylon and the wicked woman--" (218)

But in Johnson's original version:

Grubb saw doom and turned to run. Doc Frail shot him in the back (ms. 18-15).

Perhaps it was this violation of the Western code of ethics that disturbed many of the early readers of Johnson's original unpublished/complete manuscript. In any event, Shir-Cliff found Johnson's new ending improved "immensely and what seemed to me before an almost incredible incident is now completely convincing."44

Shir-Cliff was also pleased by the compression of the winter months and "the elimination of several of the episodes in which Elizabeth tried--and failed--to escape her cabin."45

The overall effect of these many deleted passages is to provide more direct evidence of the unspoken expectations each of the main characters holds about acceptable and honorable modes of behavior. Even in the novel-length version, however, the characters are not necessarily
deepened in complexity. We simply are given more details about their personalities, and their behavior in a broader range of contexts than in the published version. The deleted background, however, does help make sense out of behavior that in the published edition sometimes seems far-fetched and contrived.

By early 1957, Ballantine and Houghton-Mifflin had come around to Johnson's thinking about the title and in June of that year *The Hanging Tree and Other Stories* finally reached the bookstores. The book received extensive and generally good reviews. Most lauded Johnson's skill and her emergence as an important western writer.

Women are no longer scarce in the American West, but there is still a scarcity of important Western fiction by women. Dorothy Johnson is one of the few exceptions."

Charles Poore of *The New York Times* found the title story "almost a ballad" that is "Western fiction at its best." The *Hanging Tree* went into several editions, including paperback and a 1974 Gregg Publishing reprint. Before the summer of 1957 was over, Hollywood film producer Martin Jurow would purchase the film rights to "The Hanging Tree" as a vehicle for a Montana-born star, Gary Cooper. In the process, the story of Elizabeth Armistead is once again revised and slips even deeper into the background, but as much as the focus of "The Hanging Tree" is reworked and shifts from Elizabeth as the focal center, the story
nevertheless continues to revolve around the complexity of male and female roles on the western frontier.
Chapter 5

ENDNOTES

1. Letter from Dorothy M. Johnson to Jacques Chambrun, literary agent, dated 13 September 1951. All documents cited in this chapter were provided to author by the University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, where they are part of the Iowa Writers' Collection.

2. Originals are held by the University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

3. This quote comes from a typed manuscript page numbered "-7-" at the top. It is one of only two double-spaced, manuscript pages surviving in the University of Iowa Libraries archive of Johnson papers. It appears early in the file, immediately following a 1951 letter from Johnson to her agent Jacques Chambrun, and ten single-spaced, typed pages of notes and outlines for "The Prisoner of Skull Creek."

4. Ibid.


6. Letter from Dorothy M. Johnson to Elizabeth Otis, literary agent, 11 February 1953. An undated "Novel Outline" for "The Prisoner at Skull Creek" that appears in the University of Iowa files at about this juncture closely matches the manuscript version of the story and was conceivably the document Johnson refers to in her letter.

7. Indian Country happened as a result of a fortuitous connection. Johnson had been corresponding with Jack Shaefer, the author of Shane. Shaefer was in touch with Ian Ballantine who was just getting into business with Ballantine Books. Johnson and Otis went up to Connecticut one night to have dinner with Shaefer, Ian and Betty Ballantine. Ballantine stayed up all night reading Johnson's stories and the next day he called Otis, offering a contract with a $5,000 advance (Smith 109-110).


20. Dorothy M. Johnson column, "This is No Lie," *Whitefish Pilot*, 27 March 1953.


25. Letter from Dorothy M. Johnson to Elizabeth Otis, 1 June 1956. University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.


27. This same debate cropped up again when *The Hanging Tree* was sold to Hollywood in 1957. "The producers worried because *The Hanging Tree* sounded violent and might scare off women. Martin Jurow [the producer] telephoned to ask whether I had ever used any
other working title for the story. Yes, I had--The Prisoner at Skull Creek. I could hear him shudder all the way from Hollywood." Smith, p. 145.


30. Letter from Dorothy M. Johnson to Elizabeth Otis, 1 June 1956. University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.


32. Letter from Bernard Shir-Cliff to Dorothy M. Johnson, 1 October 1956. University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.


34. Letter from Bernard Shir-Cliff to Dorothy M. Johnson, 1 October 1956. University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.


37. Letter from Bernard Shir-Cliff to Dorothy M. Johnson, 1 October 1956. University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.


39. Undated note attached to manuscript of The Hanging Tree in the University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

40. Author's word count.

41. All references from the original unpublished manuscript of the novel-length The Hanging Tree, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa. Johnson began renumbering with each chapter, so the reference 9-6, for instance, represents Chapter 9, page 6.

42. Letter from Patricia Schartle to Elizabeth Otis, 15 February 1955. University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City, Iowa.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.


SIX

Re-reading "The Hanging Tree":
An interpretation of the female predicament

Modern therapists assert that agoraphobia results from an individual’s fear of "losing control" and treatment requires simply a re-learning of response behavior to "cure" the condition (Seagrave 25). Robert Seidenberg and Karen DeCrow in Women Who Marry Houses, however, staunchly disagree with this theory. They point out that of the five to twenty million Americans who claim to suffer from agoraphobia, eighty-eight percent are women, most of them married (4). How can agoraphobia be about the "absence of control," Seidenberg and DeCrow argue, when there are "very few situations in our society where women actually have control?" (5) They postulate that agoraphobia is, in fact, an "uncompromising" feminist strategy derived from the unconscious recognition that women are "not fully welcome in the marketplace" (6).

We believe that in a culture that has consistently doled out punishment to women who travel away from home (from unequal pay in the workplace to blame for children who turn to drugs to actual physical assault on the streets), it is no surprise that
certain women, sensing the existential irony of their situation, refuse to leave the home. We see agoraphobia as a paradigm for the historical intimidation and oppression of women. (6)

It is possible that Elizabeth Armistead resorts to a covertly "feminist strategy" as a protest against the suffocatingly restricted roles available to her. That she, as Seidenberg and DeCrow argue certain women do today, adopted a behavior which unconsciously insisted that women will not be placated or bribed by small favors or grants of limited access. Sensing that they are not welcome in the outside world, they have come to terms with their own sense of pride by not setting foot on land that is deemed alien and hostile. (7)

Thorstein Veblen claims in his Theory of the Leisure Class, that a 19th-century "lady" had only one important function, "and that was to do nothing, that is nothing of any economic or social consequence" (Ehrenreich 106). Elizabeth Armistead is a "lady," her social class highly evident: she travels by stage coach; her father is a man of some wealth although now fallen circumstances; she is used to fine clothes and servants (their home in Philadelphia had nine rooms, a maid and a cook); Elizabeth has never had to deal directly with money or finances; and, when her relationship with Doc and Rune reaches a low point and she is forced to chop her own firewood, she imagines the task a playful lark. "Elizabeth had never known any woman who carried water or cut wood. She felt like an adventurer when she undertook it" (191).
Just as her childlike joy regarding the untested pleasures of woodchopping reveals Elizabeth's innocence about frontier life (her woodchopping foray lasted three days), she is equally guileless about the implications of her precarious position within the community. She embarrasses and then pleases Rune by asking about his second name. "She was indeed ignorant of frontier custom or she would not make an issue of a man's name. Realizing that, he [Rune] felt infinitely superior and therefore could be courteous" (166). Her total helplessness in this environment is compounded by her naivety regarding the high cost of food and supplies in the camp, and her foolish expectation that the camp's residents and numerous transients are all of noble and pure moral intent.

This "helplessness" is compounded by the physical and emotional trauma she has suffered over the loss of her father. She is at first physically unable to care for herself, and, as her body heals, she remains emotionally childlike in her refusal to confront the hard realities of her situation. Doc and Rune also conspire to keep Elizabeth ignorant of many of these realities, including the retributive hanging of the hold-up man who killed Mr. Armistead and the stage driver. Implicit in this strategy is the assumption that Elizabeth is intellectually incapable of handling the truth of life in a western mining town. Certainly, this type of thinking arises in part from the
cachet of moral purity attached to Victorian "ladies," whose strictures insist that women be shielded from any and all elements that might be considered offensive. In the original manuscript of The Hanging Tree, after Elizabeth has been rescued from the desert and is recuperating at the stagecoach station, Doc refuses the assistance of another woman because that woman is of the wrong social class.

Doc hoped the stage would bring in a woman who could give her a little comfort with a sponge bath--he did not dare offend her by offering to do so himself, and she was not strong enough to move her arms. She lay limp, sometimes sleeping. But the only woman who came through was destined for one of the Skull Creek hurdy-gurdies, and she might have a heart of gold for all Doc knew, but he would not let her touch Elizabeth Armistead.

While Doc's attitude is, on the one hand, admirable, it is also paternalistic. He justifies his behavior by insisting that he is merely shoring up Elizabeth's tentative hold on a perhaps illusory sense of personal integrity. "Now she doesn't even have her pride," Doc explodes when he learns Rune has divulged to her the economic realities of mining camp life (184). Doc had already explained to Ma Fisher that his reason for surreptitiously paying for Elizabeth's expenses is that "I want her to keep thinking the world is kind" (172).

Much of Doc's paternalism undoubtedly arises from his role as Elizabeth's physician, in as much as the relationship of doctor as "moral and physical reformer" and female patient as invalid was a well-established one in the
period (Ehrenreich 116). S. Weir Mitchell was by his own admission a "despot" in the sickroom (Ehrenreich 132), disparaging a woman's "habit of yielding too easily to the expression of all any emotion" and insisting that she concern herself "with nothing but following directions" (Bassuk 141). Similarly, Doc Frail takes over total control of Elizabeth's rehabilitation. He has rigid notions of how her cure should be accomplished. Yet, his beliefs often run counter to conventional sexism; he believes it is imperative that Elizabeth take personal responsibility for her actions, that she must walk out of Skull Creek under her own power.

It is the uneducated Rune who promotes a solution more in keeping with the attitude that women should be passive and must be managed by men. If Elizabeth's safety is at issue, he says, then do whatever you have to do to get her out. "Tie her up and take her out in a wagon if there's no other way" (198). Such a crude, low-class solution is hardly palatable to Doc given his unfailing tendency to elevate all actions as tests of moral imperative.

For her part, Elizabeth complies with the conventional image of a lady as physically and emotionally weak. She uses her illness to avoid hard work and unpleasant facts. Her temporary blindness metaphorically establishes her relationship to the mining camp. She abdicates complete control to Doc. "Of course, he was a doctor, and he could be expected to be always right" (178). Yet, her inability
to leave the cabin might also be viewed as an unconscious and unchallengeable rebellion against Doc’s authority, an unspoken conflict that also existed between real 19th-century doctors and their female patients.

The suspicion of malingering—whether to avoid pregnancy or gain attention—cast a pall over the doctor-patient relationship. If a woman was really sick (as the doctors said she ought to be), then the doctor’s efforts, however ineffective, must be construed as appropriate, justifiable, and of course, reimbursable. But if she was not sick, then the doctor was being made a fool of. His manly, professional attempts at treatment were simply part of a charade directed by and starring the female patient. But how could you tell the real invalids from the frauds? And what did you do when no amount of drugging, cutting, resting, or sheer bullying seemed to make the woman well? (Ehrenreich 136-137)

Doc’s fear of being made a fool of and the questionable nature of Elizabeth’s "illness" add an edge to their relationship and their standing in the community.

The roles open to women in Skull Creek are clearly delineated. There are the hurdy-gurdy girls of the saloon, the working class Ma Fisher, and the "respectable women" of the camp represented by Mrs. Flaunce, the storekeeper’s wife. Each is proscribed in her movements according to the particular layer of the social strata she occupies.

Even the treacherous and cynical Frenchy Plante is offended to find two saloon girls in Doc’s cabin when he comes to tell Doc about the "lost lady." "What’s Luella doing in your place?" Frenchy growls. Clearly, private cabins are off-limits to the saloon girls (although this may
have as much to do with the fear of one man monopolizing public property as with social impropriety). All Luella is doing in his cabin, Doc barks back, is dying. A few hours later, Luella's consumption wins out and releases Doc from his medical duties to her. He heads off to tend another frail woman, Elizabeth. This willful delay does not win Doc points with the other men of the camp, since in their mind there is no question whose life takes precedent: the "lost" lady or the "lady" of the night. The function of this incident is to set Doc off as someone different from the run-of-the-mill miner and also to show the reader his willingness to flout convention--he will treat whoever he pleases, wherever he pleases, whenever he pleases. Likewise, he demonstrates an ethical responsibility to his patient, regardless of class, by not being easily drawn away to tend to someone of a higher class. Yet, the overriding factor in his behavior towards Elizabeth when he finally does reach her is based almost exclusively on respecting her upper class status. The end result is to paint a picture of Doc as simply a contrarian, rather than a devoted upholder of moral values.

We see Doc's concern with preserving Elizabeth's dignity when he arranges for the widowed Ma Fisher to take in the young woman. Ma Fisher is the liveliest and in some ways most autonomous character in "The Hanging Tree." She is excused from the strictures of True Womanhood and
domesticity on two counts—she’s working class and well beyond child-bearing age. Ma has managed to hang onto her cabin and put aside a little gold dust through long grueling hours feeding miners at her tent restaurant. While it is unusual for a woman to spend so much time away from her home, Ma is nevertheless just as effectively confined to this "restaurant-home" as she would be to the private one. But Doc doesn’t understand how his good intentions can be misread by the community. "Ma Fisher’s stern respectability was not enough to protect her [Elizabeth], because Ma herself was strange. She chose to earn her living in a community where no sensible woman would stay if she wasn’t married to a man who required it" (168).

As for the other women in camp: "The ladies of Skull Creek were few and circumspect, armored with virtue" (156). These respectable and married women quickly pass judgment on Elizabeth. Except for two brief appearances by Mrs. Flaunce, (both efforts to determine the "respectability" of Elizabeth Armistead), the other town women remain invisible and confined, although we must assume voluntarily, to their own cabins and the duties of their families. These women are conspicuously absent when Elizabeth makes an attempt to establish her independence by starting a school. However, Doc’s prescription for Elizabeth’s recuperation, his version of S. Weir Mitchell’s infamous "rest cure," sends the message to the other women that Elizabeth is Doc’s "kept"
woman, an action that essentially cuts Elizabeth off from contact with the other "ladies" of the camp. Not a single family sends their child to Elizabeth’s school. Thus it is ironically other women who help enforce the moral patriarchy and squash Elizabeth’s attempts at self-sufficiency.

Elizabeth deeply misses female companionship. Smith-Rosenburg’s work on female friendship in the 19th century reveals the importance of same-sex relationships during the period and their importance as both reflections of sexually segregated worlds and a supportive network that provided intimacy and emotional complexity.

Most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women lived within a world bounded by home, church, and the institution of visiting—that endless trooping of women to one another’s homes for social purposes. It was a world inhabited by children and by other women. Women helped one another with domestic chores and in times of sickness, sorrow or trouble. Entire days, even weeks, might be spent almost exclusively with other women. (Smith-Rosenburg 61)

Elizabeth, as has been discussed, was isolated from other women from the story’s beginning. Her father’s move west removed her from the proximity of her friends, and the Armistead’s changed social status also negatively influenced Elizabeth’s prospects for making new friends soon. Elizabeth does "room" with Ma Fisher at first, but the reader senses Elizabeth’s awareness of their differing social classes. Neither does the older woman encourage friendship, being noncommunicative and cranky besides. The demands of Ma’s work, Elizabeth’s illness, the differences
in their age and social class all work against an immediate intimacy between the two women. Then, of course, Ma abruptly leaves the camp.

A greater emphasis is placed on female friendships in Johnson's original manuscript where we see Elizabeth mentally composing letters to her friends back home. But Elizabeth refrains from actually writing the letters because it would require acknowledging the death of her Papa, "and she could not do that" (ms. 9-3). Even her diary keeping, a common practice among frontier women, reflects, in part, her loss of female friends. As she records events in her life, she realizes "there was no one to tell except Doc and Rune, who already knew as much as she did about those important occurrences. She began to keep a journal because it was almost like having someone to talk to" (ms. 12-1).

In the original unpublished/complete manuscript, Elizabeth does eventually acquire a female "friend." After she becomes rich, Elizabeth goes on a spending spree, purchasing items from the camp storekeeper, Mr. Flaunce. His "maiden-lady sister, newly come from the States" arrives and helps Elizabeth decorate her cabin and make a new silk dress.

Elizabeth had respectable female company at last, and she was going to hang on. Miss Flaunce had felt at first that hemming muslin was a mite beneath the status of a skilled dressmaker, but the promise of working on a new silk dress had converted her. Rune wandered out, leaving the women to chatter over women's business. (ms. 17-6)
All of these references to female friendship are ultimately removed from the published/edited version. Of course, under the pressure of reducing the manuscript's length, Johnson had to delete a great deal of material related to character development. One effect of eliminating these specific references to Elizabeth's relationships with other women is to isolate her, leaving her without any human connections except with the male protagonists. Elizabeth is not only imprisoned in her cabin, she is serving solitary confinement.

The threat of physical attack is another factor contributing to Elizabeth's agoraphobia. When Doc takes charge of Elizabeth at the stage line station, his first act is to expel the hovering men from the room. A few days later, when she's strong enough to get out of bed, Doc Frail tells Elizabeth, "Tomorrow you can wash, if you want to try it. There will be a blanket over the window, and one over the door, and I will be outside to make sure no one tries to come in" (162). From that moment on, a virtual armed guard surrounds Elizabeth day and night. Doc gives orders that under no condition should Elizabeth be left unattended. He assigns Rune to the duty, forsaking the assistance Rune had been providing him. Rune sleeps on the woodpile behind Elizabeth's cabin and an alarm system between cabins that Elizabeth can ring if she feels threatened. Her cabin windows are boarded up and then further obscured by hanging
a blanket over them. One warm, sunny day, when Elizabeth
decides to leave her cabin door open, Rune sits nearby with
a rifle across his knees, "planning to shoot any miner that
goes barging in there" (186).

Despite this highly visible protection, a few brave
souls do attempt to break into the cabin. "Lady! Lady,
just let me in....Lady, you ever seen a poke of nuggets? I
got a poke of gold right here. Lady, let me in!" (170)
Terrified by the strange voices, she takes to carrying her
father's derringer. "I was frightened," she tells Rune.
"You're safer that way in Skull Creek," he answers (171).

That Elizabeth, new female blood in the camp, would be
the target of lecherous miners is not at all surprising.
What is interesting is that Doc's security measures begin
long before Elizabeth even gets to Skull Creek, in fact,
back at the stage line station when Doc arrives to take
charge of her care. In miner's lingo, Doc might be seen to
have staked his claim on Elizabeth and since most of the
others consider Elizabeth a "big strike," Doc is compelled
to expend a great deal of effort protecting his "motherlode"
against "claimjumpers." Yet Doc is relatively indifferent
to the gold fever that rages among the other miners. He's
made his fortune, having struck pay dirt some years back
with his partner Wonder Russell, and is inured to the
craving for gold, occupying himself with his medical
practice and the occasional grubstaking of a prospector.
So, the unemotional Doc Frail, the only male character not aroused by Elizabeth's presence in the camp, has no interest in "working his claim" and quickly determines that to make the least trouble for himself, Elizabeth must return East as soon as possible.

But Elizabeth refuses to go. She soon refuses even to leave her cabin and the story's main plotline focuses on the bind Doc finds himself in. He can't just abandon Elizabeth now that he's taken on the duty of protecting her, and yet, his alignment with her places him in direct opposition to the rest of the camp, isolating him, and reducing his power over the other men by the appearance of being in some kind of domestic thrall over Elizabeth. This notion takes on symbolic significance when Doc gets his hair cut. Like the tale of Samson and Delilah, Doc wears shoulder-length curls that serve as a symbol of his unchallengeable masculinity.

His long hair was no accident, and it was clean. He wore it long as a challenge, a quiet swagger, as if to tell the camp, "You may make remarks about this if you want trouble." Nobody did in his presence. (171)

So Doc's haircut is important. Everyone quickly makes the connection between Doc's haircut and the arrival of the lost lady. Up to now, Elizabeth's eyes have been bandaged as a result of the sunblindness she experienced on the desert. "You gettin' all fixed up for the lost lady to take a good look?" the barber teases Doc (172). But others in the camp interpret the action not so much as a matter of hygiene and
fashion as an indication of Doc’s waning power. Elizabeth, no matter how indirectly, is held responsible for the transformation.

This undermining of Doc’s mythical power inevitably leads to the final showdown when the mob builds up the courage to challenge Doc’s authority outright, and lay claim to his female property. Skull Creek exudes what Mary Austin describes as "the faint unmistakable odor of maleness on the loose" (qtd. in Stauffer 7).

Doc’s protective instincts are perfectly in keeping with the behavior of a 19th-century gentleman. If women—ladies—were by nature physically weak, it stands to reason that men have the duty to protect them. Women unwittingly get themselves into trouble, as Elizabeth surely does, and need men to rescue them. Frenchy rescues Elizabeth from the desert; Doc rescues Elizabeth by tending her injuries; Doc and Rune rescue Elizabeth from assault by lecherous miners; Doc rescues Elizabeth from financial destitution by hiding six pokes of gold in her woodpile; and ultimately Doc rescues Elizabeth from spinsterhood or worse by declaring his love for her. "The Hanging Tree" is essentially a series of rescues—emotional as well as physical. But no man manages to rescue Elizabeth from Skull Creek itself. In fact, the ending turns the tables on the model of male rescuer/female victim. Elizabeth rescues Doc from hanging.
And she rescues him from emotional barrenness with the blossoming of his love and commitment to her.

The image of love presented in the unedited text is an ambivalent one. Motherhood especially comes under assault. Rune bears continued hatred towards his mother for tossing him out into the cold, cruel world. Yet, his fierce attachment to Elizabeth suggests how desperately he wants to feel connected to a woman who treats him with affection and kindness. Likewise, Doc's mother seems incapable of functioning as an autonomous individual and deprives the young Joseph Alberts of a childhood relationship with his father. Joe’s mother, the daughter of a stern, authoritarian minister, becomes pregnant, but does not marry her lover because of her own father’s disapproval. Several times during the course of Doc’s childhood, his father appears at the family home. Each time he leaves—alone, yet for days after, Joe’s mother weeps "dreadfully." Then, when Joe is fifteen, his father comes again. This time Joe goes away with him, and his mother does nothing to keep her son with her. The young man learns from his father to be "complete master of a gun and a deck of cards" (ms. 7-8), and he learns too, that he has limitations. "There's something of your mother in you," Joseph Brent said, "but I wish it wasn't fearfulness" (ms. 7-9).

Reduced to its simplest interpretation, Elizabeth's agoraphobia epitomizes fearfulness, fear so extreme that it
incapacitates. The story at times seems to connect fearfulness with love and the power of one individual to affect another, either positively or negatively. This power of love haunts Doc’s entire existence as he hears the shrieking curse of the wife of the one man Doc kills. "He’ll hang for this, the one who did it!" (136). And the curse accompanies Doc’s every waking moment.

Doc’s most vivid memory of "true love" occurs early in his medical career. He tends a "middle-aged man, work-worn and weary," dying from smallpox.

And while he was dying, his woman stooped and kissed that sickening, scaly, oozing cheek. She had taught him something vital. That, he understood when he saw the ghastly kiss, that is what love can be. The last unflinching gift. (ms. 7-2)

For Doc, the most "noble" gift of love is given by an ill-fated dance hall girl named Julie. Doc’s partner, Wonder Russell, is shot and killed by a jealous cowboy as Russell attempts to elope with Julie. While Doc is digging Wonder’s grave, "Julie cut her throat and died quietly and alone" (142). Doc has never known a love so strong that he would be willing to give his life for another’s. But, of course, that is the very transformation he will undergo by story’s end. When Elizabeth is threatened by the mob, Doc steps between them and Elizabeth, ready to take their wrath in Elizabeth’s place.

The example of an ideal love of woman for man resonates in the final scene of "The Hanging Tree." This time, the
woman is able to rescue her lover from death, but Doc is keenly sensitive to love denied. Once again, Rune is left alone, unloved. The original ending of the novel-length version, in fact, ended not with the embrace of Doc and Elizabeth under the hanging tree, but with the spotlight on Rune. "As Doc leaped down from the cart, he saw Rune all alone, motionless and watchful, and he understood, This is what love is" (19-6).

The 19th-century woman was considered the repository of innate morality and the dispenser of "saving grace." The woman’s natural self, representing spirituality and moral action, impelled her to "shed an 'improving influence' over humanity" (Van de Wetering 24). But it is this Christian worldview, Jane Tompkins argues in West of Everything, that the Western story is "at pains to eradicate" (41).

The women and children cowering in the background of Indian wars, range wars, battles between outlaws and posses, good gunmen and bad, legitimize the violence men practice in order to protect them. (Tompkins 41)

The men of the West insist that women conform to very rigid standards of behavior while they pay lip service to the ideals of Christianity, domesticity, motherhood, God and country. The 19th-century conception of "home" also plays a part in the miner’s rejection of traditional values, and the message the text puts forth about the power of home is a peculiarly ambivalent one. "Home" for the 19th-century urban man was intended to counter the disharmony of the
frenetic, commercial world "outside," to be a private place of peace and harmony "in which a family member could reveal and work out the vicissitudes of her or his personality" (Van de Wetering 16). Nevertheless, for Elizabeth, her home sanctuary supplies "the realization of what was natural, hence permanent, in the human spirit" (Van de Wetering 17). Doc and Rune pity Elizabeth for the emotional weakness that makes her a prisoner in her home, yet they seem completely oblivious to the possibility that all women are some kind of prisoner of the home. Nonetheless, Doc attains a new level of freedom when he purchases his Skull Creek cabin. After his rich strike with Wonder Russell, Frail puzzles over what to do with his money. "He was suddenly tired of being one of the anonymous, bearded, sweating toilers along the creek" (138). Most of the miners are content to live in miserable wickiups rather than be saddled with a piece of real estate they might not be able to sell if they used up their fortunes. Joe Frail, however, decides to use his gold to put a roof over his head. He even has a particular cabin in mind. He wakes up the owner in the middle of the night and fifteen minutes later, the owner is out on the street with all his possessions and Frail is a proud new home owner.

"A whim," he said aloud. "A very solid whim to keep the rain off."

Suddenly he felt younger than he had in many years, light-hearted, completely carefree, and all the wonderful world was his for the taking. He spent several minutes leaping into the air and trying to crack his heels together three times
before he came down again. Then he threw back his head and laughed. (138)

Elizabeth enjoys the same sort of pleasure when she acquires Ma Fisher's home for herself. Like Doc, she stands out from the rest, in that it was a rare woman who could afford to buy her own home. Elizabeth considers the small cabin with its scanty furnishings her sanctuary, a safe place that protects her from the "unknown, raucous settlement of noisy men just outside the door" (170). The irony lies in the understanding that "home" is her sanctuary when it is exactly her inability to participate in a wider, public world that drives her there.

And while the walls of the cabin protect Elizabeth from the outside world, they also offer an escape from the duties of that same world. By succumbing to some inexplicable "disease," Elizabeth neatly avoids a great many of the burdens of domestic labor, chief among them the onerous task of shopping for the household. In modern therapy for agoraphobia, much is made about the connection between women and shopping.

One of the first symptoms of agoraphobia is a woman's inability to shop; panic attacks are experienced in supermarkets and department stores. Needless to say, when a housewife cannot do the shopping, family arrangements change drastically. It might be observed that the housewife who is 'too sick' to do the shopping is now spared a task that takes many hours of her week. But she pays a price: Even loving, indulgent husbands and children grow angry and irritated. Her children resent her behavior; her husband feels that their bargain has been broken. (Seidenberg 26)
The "mode of treatment" for agoraphobia today is a trip to the shopping mall, a reward for good behavior, and evidence of a "cure" (Seidenberg 30).

Even in the crude shopping environment of Skull Creek, this trading activity is a vital and time consuming one. Supplies come in erratically and it is incumbent upon the principal shopper to be there, for instance, when the month's only supply of fresh eggs comes in. Rune is truly disgusted by Elizabeth's ignorance about the realities of life in a mining camp as he tells her in the published version.

"You don't know nothing about prices here...Sugar's ninety cents a pound at Flaunce's," he told her. It went down. Dried codfish—you're tired of it, I guess, and so's everybody—it's sixty cents. Dried apples—forty cents a pound last time they had any. Maybe you'd like a pound of tea? Two and a half, that costs you. Potatoes and eggs, there ain't been any in a long time. Fresh meat you can't get till another bunch of steers come in." (184)

With some justification, Elizabeth can be viewed as deadweight in frontier society. Whereas the well-to-do women of upper-class Philadelphia could afford the luxury of being bedridden, the frontier allowed little room for such indulgence. Elizabeth's agoraphobia provides a convenient mechanism for avoiding the "chores" of life on the frontier. Her behavior would have been intolerable on a wagon train or homestead, but the mining camp, with its semi-permanent dwellings and some semblance of community relieves Elizabeth from pitching in when it comes to matters of survival.
Elizabeth, in fact, clearly has ambitions inappropriate for a woman of her time and place. Even though her father is on the run from creditors, what appeals to Elizabeth is the adventure of heading west and, it is hinted, the possibility of undertaking some joint venture with her father. The text insinuates that Elizabeth secretly fancies herself a better "businessman" than her father. She's quick to make investments and risk her small cache of money without undue or timid deliberation. When Ma's restaurant is destroyed, Elizabeth immediately uses the last of Papa's money to buy Ma's cabin from her. She tries to start a school as a business enterprise and even though her attempt fails, she doesn't shy away from taking the mysterious "pot of gold" she finds in her woodpile and using some of it to grubstake Frenchy. Her instincts pan-out and when Frenchy returns in the spring with his big strike, Elizabeth sets up a private lending operation for other miners that returns her a sizeable fortune. We suspect she shares some of the frustrations of the southern woman who confided to her diary: "I am like a pent-up volcano. I wish I had a field for my energies" (Degler 155).

Gold is a powerful emblem throughout the story and Johnson makes much of describing Elizabeth's infatuation with the precious metal, calling to mind Trina in Frank Norris' *McTeague, A Man of San Francisco*:

At the very bottom of her trunk, under her bridal dress, she kept her savings. It was all in
change--half dollars and dollars for the most part, with here and there a gold piece. Long since the little brass match-box had overflowed. Trina kept the surplus in a chamois sack, and emptying the contents on the bed, counted them carefully. It came to one hundred and sixty-five dollars, all told. She counted it and recounted it and made little piles of it, and rubbed the gold pieces between the folds of her apron until they shone. (154)

Elizabeth and Trina are ultimately portrayed as being somehow morally weakened by the power of gold. More significantly, these portrayals emphasize the rarity of a woman holding such economic power in her hands. The now "Lucky Lady's" first action upon acquiring wealth is to burn her letter to Mr. Ellerby. "The golden lumps would build a wall of safety between her and Mr. Ellerby, between her and everything she didn't want" (206). Suddenly, Elizabeth has found the means of being autonomous. No longer would she have to be dependent upon a male provider. The walls of her cabin-prison were now "made of gold" and "nobody can break them down" (206). She also orders such unfathomable luxuries as satin dress material and a piano.

Doc does not care for the new Elizabeth. "This is some other woman, not the lost lady, the helpless prisoner. This is the Lucky Lady, an imprisoned queen. This is royalty. This is power. She has suddenly learned to command" (206). Doc does not dislike the transformations in Elizabeth because he is offended by a woman giving orders and taking charge. His reasons are more pragmatic. He has seen the same behavior in dozens of men who have struck it rich. "A
handful of gold has changed us all," he muses to himself (207).

Doc said gently, "Elizabeth, there may not be very much more gold for Frenchy to divide with you. You are planning too much grandeur" (207).

Again, Elizabeth is warned about the realities of life on the frontier, but she refuses to listen. "There will be a great deal more," she contradicted serenely. "I am going to be very rich. I am the Lucky Lady" (207).

In the end, "The Hanging Tree" is about power and control, and in keeping with the conventions of the period and the literary genre, Elizabeth is allowed to savor power only briefly. The hunger for wealth drew many to the west. Equally driven by a yearning for autonomy and self-sufficiency, the western prospector endured hardship, pain and poverty out of the eternally hopeful expectation of the serendipitous finding of a fortune in gold. They didn’t look in woodpiles for treasure, but chancing upon a fat vein of paydirt in a mountain stream was just about as likely.

In some ways, all the characters of "The Hanging Tree" might be classified agoraphobes, but of an economic type. They are trapped by a prison -- "the promise of riches untapped" -- held out to the poor like a golden bowl. Just around the bend, in the next gulch, a few days earlier or later, and it would be the next one’s turn to be "lucky." The reality, however, was something different. Few ever struck paydirt, and those that did often quickly lost their fortune either
in the gambling saloons, or in attempts to parlay a small fortune into a larger one. Thus, given the tenuous nature of their existence, it is understandable that such pioneers saw any intruder—male or female—as a competitor and their attempts to exclude that individual from the community can be read simply as a survival strategy.

Nonetheless, certain groups of individuals had more right than others to participate in this economic struggle, and women were not among the privileged. By the end of the story, Skull Creek is in turmoil, its very existence threatened by Frenchy’s lucky strike several miles down the gulch. The town collapses, and in a short time, the once-flourishing mining camp becomes little more than a one-night camp site for the stream of strangers, "prospectors replenishing grub supplies and going on to the new riches" (208) at Plante Gulch.

This swarm of strangers unsettles the core inhabitants of Skull Creek, particularly with the arrival of the maniacal preacher, Grubb. Even though the preacher rails against Elizabeth and the threat to the social order she represents, the two are, in fact, equally disparaged. As Ann Douglas points out in The Feminization of American Culture, by the late 19th-century, religion had lost its power in America, and clergymen and educated women, powerless and insignificant in the male-dominated industrial world, banded together to exert "influence" on domestic and
religious concerns and to preserve and foster those virtues denied them in the larger culture. "The cruelest aspect of the process of oppression is the logic by which it forces its objects to be oppressive in turn, to do the dirty work of their society in several senses" (Douglas 11). This "dirty work" entailed supervising the behavior of those deemed second-class, in effect, doing the work of their oppressors. Just as the other respectable ladies of Skull Creek shunned Elizabeth for her lack of moral virtue, the obsessed Preacher Grubb condemns a co-victim of oppression for violating the carefully delineated social order. Grubb, too, is an outsider. He's neither a competent prospector or an effective minister, nor can he elevate his status simply by pointing out a cultural infraction. But he can provide a form of entertainment for a rabble of bored, frustrated and sometimes violent men.

The miners do not so much rally behind Grubb as use his self-righteousness as an excuse to clear the community of Elizabeth's presence and to finally strike back at Doc's perceived uppitiness. The preacher's reward for his deed, however, is a bullet in his chest. If Doc hadn't done it, someone else certainly would have in time. The miners, in fact, dislike Grubb and "his religion" as much as they do Elizabeth's ascension to queen. Grubb violates the miners' sensibilities on several levels. First of all, he's a talker. "Westerns distrust language," says Tompkins (49),
who quotes the poet Octavio Paz: for men "not talking is a
demonstration of masculine control over emotion" (57).
Grubb's "emotion" rolls over his tongue like a prairie
thunderstorm. Words are Grubb's work. Elizabeth, too, has
a craving for words. She misses conversation and one of the
primary pleasures of her reclusive existence is the dinner-
time conversation she shares with Doc and Rune. Elizabeth,
like Grubb, would also like to be in the business of
"spreading the word." She had hoped to be a school teacher,
teaching book learning to the community's children. In the
end, all she can do is loan out her father's library of
books to a few of the educated men in camp.

Elizabeth and Grubb also violate conventional
sensibilities about the public expression of emotion: Grubb
with his ranting and raving, indulging in emotion and
feeling when there's man's work to be done; Elizabeth with
her public display of tears and cries and thrashing about in
a "fit" of anxiety whenever she tries to venture outside the
boundaries of her cabin. Pain is another badge of
masculinity--the ability to bear it silently whether it be
emotional or physical. That is something neither Elizabeth
nor Grubb manages.

Finally, Grubb unsettles the miners with his
castigations against their own morality, "a sinful nation, a
people laden with iniquity" (211). Now these men hold
little stock in the Bible, but they also won't ignore
someone calling them "evildoers." "He scares me," Rune admits. "They don't like him, but he gets everybody mad and growling" (209). Grubb uses his rhetorical pick-axe to uncover a poisonous vein of mob rule in the mining camp. Embedded in the western myth is a fear of the power of the community to enforce its morality. Men often claimed to leave the East in order to escape this imposition of group standards on the individual. Yet vigilantism, a form of group justice, was a favored approach among these western "individualists."

This "cultural schizophrenia," to use Chafe's term, is most clearly evident in the person of Doc Frail. Doc's adherence to a rigid, middle-class Victorian morality makes his hands shake, and sweat run down his chest when he gambles. Just as the domestic ideology's model of True Womanhood looms over the weak-willed individual tempted by "sinfulness," the hanging tree is meant to act as a deterrent to violators of the western male ideology.

Doc, in effect, has let down his guard. In a series of complicated actions, he has moved away from his membership in the male community and positioned himself as straddling the line between competing values. The mob is quick to put an end to that. When the moment is ripe, they provoke Doc and use his shooting of Grubb to drop a noose around Doc's neck. Eager to punish Doc, they are nonetheless delayed as they argue about "the right way" to hang a man. In the
lull, Elizabeth's cabin door bangs open. Half running, with her head bent, Elizabeth emerges from the cabin, carrying a big red box in her arms. She stumbles, "leaning forward against the wind that was thirty miles away" (221). She makes it past Flaunce's store, then up the first slope of the barren hill, "her right arm across her eyes" (221). The hangman is about to kick the plank from under Doc's feet when Elizabeth fires her derringer into the sky. The men stop, and turn to watch her. She sets the box on the ground, opens it and takes out "something white--the sugar bowl. She flung the great, shining nuggets of the golden treasure, two and three at a time, toward the motionless men on the slope" (222). She tosses out more gold and all the grubstake contracts she holds against these miners.

Frenchy's voice roars with glee: "She's buying Doc Frail! The Lucky Lady is buying her man!" Frail is mortified, sickened by Elizabeth's willingness to completely strip herself of all dignity. Frenchy urges on the hesitant miners. "Come and git it, boys! Git your share of the price she's paying for Doc Frail!" (223) and with that the men swarm "like vicious ants" for the treasure.

However, just as Doc had revealed his admiration for other women who gave up everything in an act of love for their man -- the small-pox victim's wife, Wonder Russell's fiance Julie -- Doc now is capable of accepting the depth of Elizabeth's love. This North American variation of the
Indian practice of *purdah* returns the male-female roles to their "rightful" balance. Doc's shame has, in some way, been ameliorated by Elizabeth's willingness to accept an even greater shame.

As the "Lucky Lady" runs up the slope and into Doc's arms in an ending intended to be hopelessly romantic, we are expected to realize the depth of Doc and Elizabeth's love for each other. Implicit is the knowledge that their love will culminate in the inevitable act of marriage. Elizabeth has overcome her fear of the great wasteland that stretches before her. She is no longer a prisoner of her cabin. But the ending is not as upbeat and hopeful as the "romantic, happily-ever-after" emotions suggest. The clues are there in the second to last sentence:

> The Lucky Lady was running up the slope to him, not stumbling, not hesitating, free of fear and treasure, up toward the hanging tree.

Free of fear and treasure. Elizabeth has escaped one prison only to enter another. She strips herself of all means of independence and self-sufficiency, her treasure, in exchange for a husband, someone to protect and support her. But the prison of wifehood is well-known one to her, accepted and condoned by her culture; the other way of independence is treacherous, booby-trapped with unseen hazards, a route with no pathway. At the moment of crisis, Elizabeth does what is expected of a woman. She sacrifices her needs for those of someone else. How can her secret
desires and ambitions, ones she can hardly articulate, carry any weight in a choice between them and someone’s life? What’s more, these very "unwomanly" ambitions are what have led Doc to his near fatal predicament. Once again, Elizabeth is shown as partially responsible for a man’s misfortune. The decks are stacked against Elizabeth from the start. There is no irony intended in the story’s final image: Elizabeth stumbling into Doc’s arms, her face pale, eyes shining, the noose of the hanging rope swinging between them.
Conclusion: Writing a Western Woman's Life

The dust jacket of Steve Smith's 1984 biography of western writer Dorothy M. Johnson, The Years and the Wind and the Rain, is a Technicolor cartoon in earthy shades of blue, green, brown and black. Johnson, softly waved white hair, cat-eye glasses and a prim, plain navy sheath with white Peter Pan collar, fills the center of the frame. She looks the image of a prim librarian, except for the glossy bear claw necklace draped around her neck, seemingly poised to lash out at passing prey. Far in the distance is the spectacular landscape on which the former owners of those deadly claws once roamed—snowcapped peaks, rolling green hills, grassy prairies.

But the free-ranging spirit in Johnson alluded to in the portrait is barred from those "wide, open spaces" by a quartet of Hollywood western heroes also portrayed on the cover: John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart and Lee Marvin, actors who played the leading roles in three of Johnson's short stories turned into movies.
These four men, exuding toughness, stoicism, power and heroic honor, pose shoulder to shoulder, hemming Johnson in like a bronco-proof corral. She’s confined to a small, claustrophobic space in the very foreground of the illustration. The "breathing room" allowed Johnson in this artist’s-summing-up-of-a-career includes a simple desk, carved chair, and a bulky gray manual typewriter. Near to hand are two neat and tidy stacks of plain white paper. What the image unconsciously portrays is the circumscribed world of a western woman, even a talented and ambitious one. The four men act as the "little lady’s" protector from the "wild west" behind them. In fact, they present a nearly impenetrable wall that both real and fictional western women encountered when they attempted to make the same use men did of the West: a blank slate where individual fortune and identity could be written anew, uncovered and nourished. That the West is a place of adventure and danger is clearly indicated by the giant, dead, broken topped cottonwood astride a small rise just over the villainous Liberty Valance’s (Lee Marvin’s) left shoulder. A loop of hanging rope dangles from a stout branch.

"Don’t worry your pretty little head, Ma’am," we can almost hear Wayne drawl or Stewart sputter. Yet it is the matronly Johnson, who over a writing career spanning nearly sixty years, had a hand in perpetuating the Hollywood stereotypes by which these same actors earned their fame.
In stories like "The Hanging Tree," "The Man who Shot Liberty Valance," and "A Man Called Horse", and history books like The Bloody Bozeman and The Bedside Book of Bastards, Johnson managed to escape from her gender-assigned role, finding adventure through those blank white pages beside her on the desk. "I have to be the people I write about," she once said. "But I must respect the characters I invent. I won’t associate with anyone I can’t stand. If there isn’t something about them I respect, I won’t have them in my mind" (Brier 6).

In West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns, Jane Tompkins recalls her childhood fascination with the Western heroes that pranced across her neighborhood movie screen each week. Simultaneously attracted and repelled by the power these men seemed to wield, she was also jealous of it and longed to participate in the myth.

But though I felt contempt and hatred for the Western hero, for his self-righteousness, for his silence, for his pathetic determination to be tough, the desire to be the Western hero, with his squint and his silence and his swagger, always returns. I want to be up there in the saddle, looking down at the woman in homespun; I want to walk into the cool darkness of the saloon, order a whisky at the bar, feel its warmth in my throat, and hear the conversation come to a sudden halt. (19)

From a very young age, Johnson must have dreamt of being a western hero. She tramped into the mountains and through the thick fir forests surrounding her Northwestern Montana home, toting a .22-caliber Savage rifle (Smith 22).
Her admitted idol was Whitefish Chief of Police George Taylor, a man who wore his six-gun under his coat to church and was not afraid to stand up to the "bad guys."

"I just adored him," Johnson said. "He was so good to us. He was the typical western hero and a marvelous man for a little girl to admire. (Smith 18)

Uncle George also allowed Marie, as Johnson was called as a girl, to spend her evenings in the Whitefish jail, chatting with prisoners as her mother, the City Treasurer, worked on the town's financial ledgers in a vault downstairs (Smith 22). Johnson never outgrew her interest in outlaws and Indians and her frequent exploration of female and Indian viewpoints in her work offered another perspective to the stereotypical western story. Her efforts in "The Hanging Tree" suggest that the "crustiness" and acerbic tongue Johnson was known for in her private life vocalized the struggles of a woman thwarted by the social conventions of her time. Elizabeth Armistead manifests the symptoms of agoraphobia and her illness mirrors the behavior of thousands, perhaps millions, of other upper- and middle-class women of the late 19th-century. Yet, in the end, "The Hanging Tree" is a story of romance, a woman's quest tale with only one inevitable Holy Grail: marriage.

Johnson ranks as "one of the boys" of Western popular fiction, not only for her tight, lean prose, and her emphasis on action plots, but because she reinforces popular beliefs about gender roles. These days, many of her stories
are simply no longer "politically correct." Many simply seem trite and hackneyed. What is of lingering interest in her work is the story of how one western woman tried to make some "elbow room" for herself on that big sky landscape. Johnson sought out, both in her characters and in her life, to explore alternative female narratives. That she never quite managed to bring that vision to full flower does not deny the desire.

She and Elizabeth Armistead might nod with understanding if they were to hear the words of poet Denise Levertov.

In childhood dream-play I was always the knight or squire, not the lady: quester, petitioner, win or lose. . .
(qtd in Heilbrun 115)
WORKS CITED


