

Noble Characters, Hard Truths, and Invincible Whining in the Opening Parts of Portis' *True Grit*

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I started out with the purpose of writing on the Coens' movie *True Grit*. I discovered quickly, through a comparison of the movie and the early scenes of the Portis book, that they just are not the same story; the book is much better. I will get around to doing a little comparison as a sort of appendix to this film. Otherwise, all I have done is think about Mattie's trip to Fort Smith with Yarnell Poindexter to recover her father's body and to see to it that his murderer is brought to justice. I ended up lingering for a long time on a hanging scene involving three men. This was the big (and the only) event in Fort Smith on the day they arrived. I could not help, of course, but often think about what I discovered about these early scenes in light of the book as a whole. I have reached no big conclusion, but a lot of little ones.

The first thing we learn is that a black man, Yarnell Poindexter, is accompanying Mattie to pick up her father's body. Ordinarily, this job would have been done by the Lawyer J. Noble Daggett, who was away on one of his "steamboat suits" (19). Mattie acts as the Lawyer in his absence, taking \$100, then writing and signing the Lawyer Daggett's name to a letter of identification. Even in the Lawyer's absence, Mattie needs his authority, that of a full-grown man with the ability to sue effectively, to act under the law. Her business success selling her father's ponies depended on her threats that her lawyer would sue. Without the authority of Daggett, her cleverness would have gotten her nowhere. To mess with her, Mattie threatened, was to mess with a lawyer that had forced railroads into receivership and was on familiar terms with important people. Acting, as do all the book's heroes, as a good southern Democrat, Lawyer Daggett is for the people against the northern oligarchic interests, i.e., the corporations. So Mattie's unnatural manliness (in terms of being highly unusual for a child and especially for a girl) is underwritten by conventional authority. She is a little girl playing an adult man, thinking she has a "grown man" (35) back-up for when things get tough. The Lawyer Daggett, we learn, really is a noble man, a "gentleman." He cares for Mattie, especially after Papa's death, as almost a father. He calls her his "pearl of great price" (79). He is with her mother during the time she almost died and her arm was amputated. He was ferociously angry with Rooster for putting her life in danger, although the ways he wanted to bring him to justice were all within the law. He was not about to go after him (or go get her) in the lawless Indian nation, where the authority of the law (including property rights) and lawyers (as Mattie finds out to her surprise) mean nothing. Being a gentleman, Lawyer Daggett shamefully changed his judgment when he found out the whole truth about Rooster's grit, about his saving Mattie's life. And so he apologized and gave him a sizeable monetary reward in person.

Daggett was Frank's good friend, apparently loved Mattie almost as a daughter, was personally protective of her mother, but was no warrior. Unlike the other heroic white men we encounter, he did not fight for the Confederacy, and his thoughts never turn to shooting or hiring guns to get personal revenge. He reminds us that contract law, to be a force for good, has to be deployed by gentlemen protective of particular persons. He also reminds us of both the nobility and the limits of the law. The law is not always enough to protect particular persons or property; Mattie was on her own and much more vulnerable than she imagined so long as she was in the Indian Territory. The law did not protect her father when he meddled with drink nor did it protect her property-owning and law-abiding (and so unarmed) father when he paternalistically meddled in the affairs of his armed drunk tenant. Displays of magnanimity, in truth, have to be armed, as Rooster shows us.

A Free Man and Friend

Replacing Daggett as Mattie's temporary guardian is the black man with the unique name Yarnell Poindexter. The first thing Mattie tells us is that he, like the gentleman-lawyer, is a "good man" (13). We also learn, quite insistently, that he is in almost every respect a free man. He was born a free man in Illinois and was kidnapped into slavery. He is also "thrifty and industrious." He lives on land he rents from the bank-or not from any white man in particular. Renting is somewhere in between slavery and self-ownership, but renting from the bank is, in this case, much closer to the latter. Unlike the trusty Tom Chaney, he is no tenant. What he earns is his own, but he is not a property owner, and so he must work for others. He was hired by Frank to look after his place and his family because Chaney whined his way out of that tenant duty. Mattie clearly regards him as a friend to whom she is readily grateful and acknowledges him as her equal. She even goes to the extent of traveling with him in the colored section of the train. When the conductor calls him a "nigger," she boldly tells him not to be so "hateful" (19). She observes that the conductor's inability to respond to her was evidence of how "little" she had made him look to the other occupants of the car. "Little" means, of course, petty and contemptible, which is the way Mattie (we can assume like her Father) regarded trashy racism in general. It also means the conductor could easily have been overwhelmed by the occupants of the car; fear silenced his racist arrogance. We see that the admonitions of a child can be disarming, and little girls can get away with a lot more sass than grown men can. Later, however, we see that Mattie can drive a grown man (the Texas Ranger) to spank her, and then only a grown man (Rooster) can save her.

We also learn that Yarnell later went on to be a successful housepainter, a man who worked for himself. Mattie, her brother, and his family also went to his funeral as friends. Yarnell was close enough to the family to go coon hunting with Frank and Mattie. He was a good man who looked out for Mattie not for money but out of friendship and because her father, his friend, had been good to him. So we learn that her father Frank was a good man who earned the friendship of other good men. "People would use him" (12), but not Lawyer Daggett and Yarnell. He, in fact, could reliably depend on both of them to help him far beyond the constraints of their

contractual relationship. Friends, in each case, served each other quite voluntarily as free men. Southerners characteristically notice that “classical liberal” accounts of who we are have little to nothing to say about friendship, and that’s one reason they have such an impoverished view of who free men are.

We learn something like liberty and equality, to be human goods, have to depend some on fraternity. This does not translate into civic friendship or sharing the public burdens of citizenship, but rather it’s showing the friendship of one good man with another in the context of a particular place. We learn that Frank was both a Cumberland Presbyterian and a Mason, a member of the Danville Lodge. A Cumberland Presbyterian, from the view of an American or southern Presbyterian, is soft on the doctrine of election because its harsh truth conflicts too radically with ordinary ideas of fairness, the ideas that govern the relational life of any decent, civilized man. (And, in this case, the category “decent” includes Rooster, who never steals from or kills those who either don’t deserve it or who aren’t out to kill him and who knows he owes burial, whenever possible, to the outlaws he kills.) A Cumberland Presbyterian also does not demand that a preacher be educated, that a preacher know the Bible as well as the older narrator Mattie. Obsessing too much on the hard truth is at the expense of the relational pleasures that make life worth living. Frank prided himself in his gallantry (or how he looked on a pony), his responsibility for his own, being a good friend, and his rather silly business “schemes,” which did not distract him too much from being a solid property owner and successful farmer.

Frank was decent and friendly enough that he could be both a Presbyterian and a Mason, and, in fact, more a Mason than a Presbyterian. Frank was buried, Mattie reports, in his Masonic apron by the Danville Lodge. He was buried by his friends, by the members of his fraternal organization that were, apparently, more dear to him than his church. Mattie complains that the preacher at his father’s funeral did not do so well. Had she been there the preaching would have been better. But it’s not like she failed her father, in this case, in a way he would have cared about at all. She took care of her father’s burial as a matter of business, but his friends put him into his final burial place. Here’s one reason why Frank is more a Mason than a Presbyterian: the Bible has a lot more to say about a family than friendship, especially the friendship of man for man. Adam’s loneliness was cured by Eve; he did not seem to have any other buddies.

The Triple Hanging and “Amazing Grace”

The train on the way to Fort Smith is overflowing because there’s a “triple hanging” (19). Those going to the hanging are on an “excursion trip,” to a circus-like event complete with concessions. Before we get too morbid about this, we must remember that hangings really were public, and events like the one described here really did happen.

Mattie and Yarnell, of course, aren’t about going to the hanging. They do, however, find out that they can’t get any of their business done with the sheriff or anyone else until the hanging is over. Everyone had gone to the hanging. Yarnell, we find out, wants to go to the hanging. It’s something most men would want to do. Mattie did not care about it. She was focused on the work she had to do, and we find out eventually that she had never had any interests in circuses

and such. Amusements, in general, she regarded as frivolous or silly, not to mention nasty. Mattie quickly grew impatient with entertainment, like shooting up corndodgers, that had “nothing educational about it” (170). Here’s her impatient question for which she had no answer from personal experience: “Why do people *wish* to be silly?” (171). Mattie is never silly in her own eyes. A child who does not know how to play, of course, ought to appear to us as rather shockingly wounded or disfigured by nature. Children, by nature, view the world through the lens of play.

Yarnell, not thinking it appropriate that a girl should go to a hanging, proposed that they should wait in the sheriff’s office until it was over. Mattie, seeing that her friend wanted to go, agreed that they both should go. She knew Yarnell would never leave her by herself, although she could have taken care of herself. Yarnell was really worried that Mattie’s mother would find out that he had let her go, and so Mattie, to make her friend happy, assured him she would not be told. We learn a lot here about what Mattie cares about: not about public spectacles or seeing men die or justice in general being done, but about her friend and, of course, her father.

We find out that two white men and an Indian were to be hanged. We also find out that the hangman is a Yankee who would not hang his own, i.e., members of the GAR. Mattie’s view, in general, is, as a Southern Democrat, that Yankees are all about killing her people. They’re her enemies, and the country they rule is not her own. They are ruthless aliens, and she is much more psychologically distant from them than she is from the Indians. The war, for her, was not about some abstract principle of justice, but about invaders threatening her people and place, and she thinks not in terms of the nation, but in states and states’ rights. Mattie’s understanding of justice is shaped by love of her own, as was her father’s. It’s also following, it seems, his lead, strikingly free from racism and sexism, even by today’s standards. When it comes to judging southerners, including Indians, she is a meritocrat of character and competence.

The Marshall reads the sentences, but Mattie can’t hear him. So whatever we find out about the crimes that are to be punished we find out from the criminals themselves. A man with a Bible leads the condemned “in singing ‘Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound’” (21). Some—but not all—of the people in the crowd join in. Some believe, and some don’t, in what grace can do for the men soon to be hanged. The song, of course, is about a wretch who was once lost but now is found. Only one of the three condemned had that experience of once being blind but now being able to see. He is joyful and confident about being saved from his sins and the biological death that would otherwise be his fate. The other two condemned men remain, from this view, blind without knowing it. And so they see themselves as neither sinners nor saved, as neither lost nor found. They certainly aren’t full of joy.

Apart from the hymn there is only one other mention of grace in the book. Mattie comments, “There is nothing free except the Grace of God. You cannot earn it or deserve it” (40). That means you have to pay for everything else, everything from goods and services to murders. Mattie learns you have to pay if you want justice done to your father’s murderer. This justice could maybe even mean paying with both cash and your arm. We certainly have reason to believe this, this voice of the southern Presbyterian narrator woman and not the Cumberland

Presbyterian girl. Even the woman remembering the girl certainly did not regard her relationship with her father and his and her friends as merely transactional or reciprocal or free from acting generously or out of love. Friends, she clearly says, don't "use" each other. Friends only owe friends gratitude, and that is, in fact, what she gave Yarnell and nothing more. Maybe she paid Lawyer Daggett some, but not nearly what he was worth to her. And surely she did not regard the gritty chivalry of Rooster that saved her life as being properly compensated for by Lawyer Daggett's \$200 reward. It was not, she said, worthy of praise, and it's the lawyer who interpreted that to mean worthy of money. Mattie acted—by reburying him in her family plot—as if his was an act of love by a foster-father. (And not a husband: there's no evidence of any erotic attraction in either direction in that relationship. Rooster was done with women, and the question of Mattie's sexuality is not addressed. Mattie's lack of eroticism—she can't imagine *anyone* in her bed for the right reasons—is evidence that in one respect she remained a child her whole life.)

The experience that everything has to be paid for does conform better to the life of the adult Mattie. She assumes, for example, that any man who would want to marry her would be after her money. That's because any woman without an arm and who is stuck with a disabled mother and a "frank tongue" (224) is too disadvantaged to be lovable. The experience that everything has to be paid for is that of a self-sufficient, lonely woman of means. (Mattie says nothing about her relationship with her disabled mother that would suggest that it is anything but an unfulfilling burden. And, she does not say anything good or affectionate about her brother and sister. She is told them she does not mind bearing the whole burden of their mother, but that's the only evidence we have that she does not mind being saddled by her mother.)

Certainly, Mattie's view of grace is that of a woman who loves her bank and loves her uncompromisingly Presbyterian church. That grace is free means, of course, you don't have to pay for it, and maybe that's good news, but not being able to earn it or deserve it might be bad news. It does not necessarily come to those who have worked hard to get it, the way money usually does. God's free or sovereign granting of grace to whomever he pleases for reasons hidden to us is the only exception to a cause-and-effect world. The granting of grace, as far as we can tell, does not remedy what seem to be the deficiencies of this world from the point of view of justice. Grace is not meant to correct what seems to us to be pointless randomness: that, to begin with, bad things seem to happen to good people. From one view, grace is the invincible source of randomness in a world otherwise governed by impersonal necessity. Actually, we know grace is not random, but we don't know why in particular cases.

Mattie later pointedly says about her view of grace, the uncompromising affirmation of the doctrine of election: "I confess that it is hard doctrine" (115). She confesses that it's tough for someone like her to accept. She can't help but see it as "running contrary to our earthly ideas of fair play." A world governed by contract and personal responsibility, a meritocracy of competence and character, is the world Mattie describes and understands. This is a world in which she can reasonably struggle to find a place. It's both amazing and hard—and so far, for Mattie, from being a source of comfort and joy—that God, from our view, does not play fair. She accepts that conclusion only because "I can see no way around it," after reading the Bible with

care and reflecting on her own experiences. Far from seeing grace as explaining why she once was lost but now is found, she seems to see it as another reason why she is anxious and troubled in this world. The phrase “amazing grace” does not have a sweet sound to her, and so neither does the beautiful hymn. She reports that the hymn “Beulah Land” is one of her favorites, a hymn about the longing of those homeless in this world. Mattie is a somewhat displaced person who does not seem to have much real faith that she’ll find her true home somewhere else. There’s some connection between overemphasizing or obsessing on the doctrine of election, after all, and the anxiety of existentialism.

Mattie does not talk about her own grace or lack thereof. She does not seem to wonder whether she is saved or not, presumably because such speculation would be idly presumptuous. She does talk about her gifts and lack thereof. She means natural gifts, but surely she understands that they too are given or withheld by God. She says she “do[es] not boast” (15) about her gift for numbers and words. She does not make it clear that in those two areas she is superior to her parents. Her dad has a “common school” education, but is not as adept in figuring out the bottom line and is honorably inclined to have little interest in that direction. Her mother “could hardly spell cat” and did no better at “sums.” So, as a girl, she did her father’s books, or, in other words, pretty much ran his business. She was stuck being about her father’s business, including, she thought, seeing to his burial and bringing his murderer to justice.

Mary, Martha, and Mattie

“Figures and letters are not everything” (15), Mattie knew. She did take pride in not flinching or being resolute or facing up to unpleasant duties and hard truths, but even that is not everything or the most important thing, the one thing needful. She compared herself to her mother by thinking of herself and mother as two sisters found in the Bible: Martha and Mary. Her mother, like Mary, “had chosen that good part.” She had “a serene and loving heart,” whereas Mattie, like Martha, was “always agitated and troubled by the cares of the day.”

In the Bible, of course, Martha whined to Jesus that she was left to do all the work, while Mary sat and listened as Jesus talked. The Lord, in fact, did not seem to care about that injustice, and did not order Mary to help her. Instead, he criticized Martha for her obsessively zealous service at the expense of companionship and reflection. Martha, it turns out, was careful and troubled by everything but the one thing needful: that Mary had chosen, “that good part, which shall not be taken away from her” (Lk 10:42 KJV). The one thing needful, it seems, is to attentively listen to Jesus, and the resulting wisdom is the foundation of the loving serenity that should, most of all, characterize every human life.

Mattie’s memories here and elsewhere border on whiny. She did all the unpleasant and dangerous work while her mother took to her bed. Her disabled mother was totally dependent on her, but she also saw the truth: she excelled in “doing” and her mother in “being.” Her heart was not, in fact, serene and loving, and maybe we can say that serenity must be the gift of grace. Without that gift, maybe it’s impossible to listen to Jesus. But that way of looking at things excludes the possibility that the way to grace is asking for it, and the wisdom comes through

being attentive to Jesus' most loving and personal words. We see Mattie's serenity-free and remarkably love-free life in her observation/complaint near the end of the book that time gets away from us. Time especially flees from those who live in the past and the future, who can't be in love in the present and trust in others and the Lord more than Mattie ever seems to have done. Mattie is aware, of course, that she did not choose the best part, but she also sort of whines that both her circumstances and her nature make that choice either difficult or impossible for her.

Mattie distinguishes herself from her father by a "mean streak" (12), a quality that keeps her from being used. She was capable of appreciating gentlemen, but only to a point. Her father's chivalric indulgences were literally fatal for him, and they caused him to, in effect, stick his daughter with the details of his business both before and after his wasteful death. There was something of the gentleman in Rooster, but he was a terrible businessman—having, to begin with, none of the skills associated with literacy—and was too uncivilized to be fit for decent society. Gentlemen, she reminds us, "are only human and their memories can sometimes fail them" (166). So it's always better to have a contract. "Business," gentlemen often forget, "is business." Gentlemen think the mean streak is a lack of generosity, but it's really one basic way of holding people accountable.

While in the cave with the bats, the snakes, and the dead bodies, Mattie remembers "I told numbers to measure the time. It gave me a sense of purpose and method" (206). It fended off anxiety and panic. It allowed her to keep her head and not surrender her will and let the snake's bite. So this purposeful method, as much as Rooster, saved her life. The striking use of "method" suggests that Mattie even ordinarily was unusually unguided by personal purpose: love. But that's not completely true, because her method was, for most of the story, in the service of her father's business: in the service, despite the commercial language, of love. So, it's fairer to say that her confidence in her method and her belief that it could be the source of purpose keeps her from critically examining her real purpose, giving her that unjustified confidence that her knowledge of numbers was evidence that she was right about justice. Even in the cave, her method was subordinate to her fear, and so too to her rather stunningly willful determination not to surrender her life. But it turns out that nobody can methodically save themselves all by themselves.

If, as philosopher-Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, sin flows from a failure to gratefully acknowledge and do the duties that flow from our deeply relational being (44), then Mattie was, in a way, sort of a sinner by nature (as are we all, due to Original Sin), who added to her natural brokenness through her proud willfulness. The loss of her arm may or may not have been grace or punishment for sin (we can easily become guilty of over discerning the visible sign), but it does correspond to the mutilation of her soul. She surely did not learn enough about grace from either her gracious, chivalric savior or her dismemberment. Despite all her theology, surely we're allowed to pity her for having no discernible sign of grace. But, we also question whether she is as good as she might have been discerning.

To return to Martha and Mary: Those two sisters are extreme cases. Both display part of the virtue of a woman, at the expense of another part. Not only did Mary not work, she did not

gratefully acknowledge her dependence on the competent service of her sister. But Martha could not lighten up to gratefully acknowledge her dependence on the word of the Lord. A perfect woman would be a perfect balance of the excellences in working and listening, in doing and being, in taking care of the future and being in love in the present. But the Bible, we can say, differs from modern, technological thought in giving the preferential option to trusting in the Lord, in grace, given the hopelessness of a wholly chance-and-necessity or cause-and-effect world. The fundamental question is whether, deep down, the world can be described best by numbers or best by love. In this sense, Mattie lived as if she were an atheist, despite her uncanny knowledge of the Bible. In her view, we're stuck with living as if grace did not exist, because there's no discernible way we can rely on it. That's why Mattie, in a decisive sense, lacks faith: God does not provide justice; we have to achieve that for ourselves. That's also why we see in the sort of subtext of Mattie's narrative more than a bit of whining, although she knows perfectly well that whiners are contemptible and far inferior to lovers and gentlemen, as well as to the resolute manliness of true grit.

We can also see that the future belongs to neither Martha nor Mary. Mattie (Martha) does not reproduce. Mama (Mary) can't take care of herself. She needs someone like Mattie (Martha) just to survive. She is no self-reliant American woman. Mattie, of course, is overly self-reliant, much more self-reliant than she was made to be.

Fair Play, Election, and Manliness

Those to be hanged pronounce three theories about exceptions to our fair play, cause-and-effect world. At first glance, the hangings should satisfy our desire that the unjust be punished. Murderers have been sentenced to death; we see the cause followed by a morally satisfying effect. The worldly standard of fair play is triply affirmed. But one of the men offers us the proposition that the truth about cause-and-effect make such moral judgment impossible. The cause of the murder is not the free, conscious choice of the murderer; it is, instead, his deficient socialization, which was beyond his choice. Who he is and what he does can't be considered within his power. We also hear the proposition that what seems to be reasonable or "caused" is really random; everything human is accidental. We, finally, hear the proposition that someone who has repented can be saved from the annihilating consequences of biological death, although not in a way that suggests that God arbitrarily negates the rules of fair play. The effect of salvation has a human cause; grace can be, in a way, earned. None of the condemned had affirmed the hard doctrine of election, but nothing Mattie sees contradicts it. Quite the contrary!

Each of the three to be hanged is allowed to speak a few last words. These words, of course, are the most significant part of the spectacle of hanging, as were, say, the last words of Jesus' or Thomas More's were the most significant parts of their public executions. The words, which can properly be free of self-serving calculation, can be the measure of the man. The white men speak first and third, and the Indian speaks in the middle. In terms of character and competence, we might want to say that only the Indian knows who he is and what he should say and do at this final point in his life. It's his death that we might want to rank with Socrates' or Jesus' or

Thomas More's. There is, of course, one big difference: he knows he deserves to die. That's why it occurs immediately to Mattie to compare the Indian to the Bible's good thief on the cross. But by putting him in the center, we're still tempted to compare him in some way to Jesus too. All such comparisons are no more than imperfectly suggested. The other two men to be hanged were not thieves but murderers, and neither of them died in any obvious way mocking the Lord. (Arguably they do mock all he stands for in subtle ways.) But it's also true that neither die well, or in a way worthy of a man.

Mattie remembers that the first white man did not seem to be "nearly as upset as you'd might expect from someone in his desperate situation" (21–22). He was not acting like a man whose very being was to be extinguished in a few moments, or as a man who finds hope in being delivered by God from death. His statement is about all of life being chance, and his luck being bad. He did not kill the right man. Had he done so, he would not have been convicted. This man makes it clear that he does not deserve to die. There are men in the crowd worse than he who still get to keep living. He is apparently taking refuge in the thought that all of life is random, and so even the distinction between living and dying is weightless. The least we can say is that he has diverted himself from having to think about who he is or what is really about to happen to him. If all of life is chance, then even death, somehow, is not a necessity. Nihilism of a certain kind is working for him, but we can't admire him, of course, for it.

The Indian says that he is ready to die. We don't find out what he did to be condemned because he does not offer any explanations or excuses. He has repented, and so he knows he will soon be in heaven with his Savior. Like the good thief in the Bible, he knows that he has been condemned with justice, and he has faith in the person Christ can remember him as—and so save him for—in his Kingdom. The Indian, like the good thief, has done all that's required for salvation according to most of the Christian tradition. He has acknowledged or confessed his sins, repented or asked for forgiveness, and has had faith in his personal Savior. He can have confidence, he thinks, that biological death is only a prelude to paradise. He has not been abandoned to his natural and legal fate. As a sinner, death is what he deserves. But his faith (which is not chosen) and his repentance (which is chosen) causes him to confidently expect more than justice. He can't help but suggest that those who repent, those who follow the word of the Lord, deserve to be saved.

The Indian adds that he "must die like a man" (22). This noble assertion, of course, is hardly specifically Christian. Indians were admired for the courage with which they faced death, with their unwillingness to display any fear or trembling. The courage, of course, in this case is mitigated by the confidence that death does not end all. But this Indian actually seems to have acquired his Christian faith without surrendering the virtue that distinguishes his people. Neither Mattie nor anyone else is moved to tears by the Indian's speech. A good death, like a good life, is not at all about the public shedding of tears. The Christian problem here, of course, is that the Indian is taking pride in the way of which he is dying. He confuses his noble ability to virtuously control himself during the act of dying, it seems, with evidence of grace or it at least distracts him some from his invincible dependence on God.

Mattie's reflection on the Indian's speech is strange: "If you are like me you think of Indians as heathens" (22). She does not go on to say that this Indian, in fact, is an exception to that stereotype. He is a Christian Indian. She says, instead: "But I will ask you to recall the thief on the cross. He was never baptized and never heard of a catechism but Christ himself promised him a place in heaven." She might have said that that thief was, in fact, a Christian, because he had faith in Christ and knew he was a sinner. But, for her, the bigger point is that he was "never baptized," and so was technically not a Christian, although the Indian surely was. The Indian "never heard of a catechism," that is, so she assumed he was unaware of Christian doctrine, although the Indian surely was aware.

So, in her eyes, the thief on the cross is more of a heathen than the Indian and is not distinguished by his faith or repentance. He is distinguished by his lack of baptism, by what's required, from a kind of legal view, to be a Christian. (St. Augustine wonders, in fact, whether the thief might have been baptized at some point (*OSO* 3.12).) For her, the point of the Biblical account of the thief on the cross is that Christ can save whomever he pleases. He does not have to save the baptized, or not save the unbaptized. That means, of course, he does not have to save those who have faith and repent. He did not give any reason for saving the thief. We seem to have no right to believe that heathen Indians (whether or not they die like men) are not saved. The Christian, baptized Indian's good death, based on his truthful self-awareness, is no discernible sign of his salvation.

Drunkenness, Repentance, and Tom Chaney

The third man to be hanged—the second white man—had prepared a longer speech of which he memorized. It was more formal, beginning with "Ladies and Gentleman," and written to have a particular effect on the audience. He says that his "last thoughts" are of his wife and children "far away" (22), or who are not present and whom he has not seen lately. We can guess he had already abandoned them. His fear is that they will be "slighted" and be "compelled" to fall into "low company on account of the disgrace I have brought them." What may happen to them is not just; they weren't the cause of their being abandoned by and isolated from decent society. The truth is they've been abandoned and abandoned again by their irresponsible husband and father. But this man does not say THAT.

It's unjust that his family is blamed for his disgrace. But that's nowhere near his last thought. He explains, quite movingly, why he should not be held accountable either. The cause of what he has become is "drink." While drunk, he killed a friend over nothing, a trifle, and he might have killed anyone—even his brother or, we can assume, even his wife and children. Can a man really be held responsible for what he does while drunk? Only if he can be blamed for being drunk, if he is in that respect the cause of his action.

Why is he a drunk, the man goes on? The cause is not having being raised well, in not having "good instruction." Had he been raised well, he claimed, he would now be with his family and "at peace with his neighbors." His nature is peaceful and loving, and all he needed was to be taught how to be a good man. He, of course, can't be blamed for being raised badly. And so he

can't be blamed for abandoning his family and killing his friend. In that way, he fully agrees with the first white man that what distinguishes the man who walks freely and the man condemned to death, from a personal view, is chance. Nobody can be praised or blamed for how they are raised, and so the anger anyone would feel for this man is misdirected. He deserves our pity.

His last words are the admonition he gives to the crowd: "train up your children" (22). If you don't raise them well, they will turn out to be murderous, out-of-control drunks like me. And it will be your fault, not theirs. A reasonable response would be, of course, that you have already explained why it's almost inconceivable that your own sons won't be raised well; you know what to do to make them free, loving, and peaceful men. But you did not do it. The white man's response: I can't do it for them, because it was not done for me.

So, we can say that this white man is no closer than the first one in taking responsibility for his sins and repenting. He is not dying like a man in full awareness of who he is. From the Indian's noble view, he dies neither as a Christian nor as a man. But his eloquent, carefully prepared speech of self-pity had its intended effect on him. He moved himself to tears. It had the same effect on Mattie, and she is not ashamed to remember that fact. She was moved to pity by his at least somewhat undeserved plight. Who can deny that there's some truth in his words? And the law has to exaggerate personal responsibility in condemning men to death. The exaggeration of American individualism—or the exaggeration of almost any legal system—is that anyone is completely responsible for anything he or she does. We are all shaped by who we are by nature and how we are raised, and we did not choose either. Mattie's tears might be called Christian in some way or some particularly feminine weakness, but she does not say either. She is moved by beautiful words that express part of the truth about the life of a man about to die. But only part of the truth: She does not end up thinking his sentence is unjust.

This white man turns out to be a lot like Tom Chaney, the man who murdered Mattie's father. Chaney killed his father while drunk, and, in the book, he regretted it later. He too was a restless wanderer far away from his family, and a man wounded by nature and upbringing who could not ever experience himself as being at home with his family or at peace with his neighbors. Chaney, like the second white man to be hanged, is quite the "whining baby." He never thinks his misfortune is his own fault. As Mattie says, he never takes his losses "like a man" (16). And so he imagines himself suffering injustice and being the victim of circumstances when what happened to him is largely his fault. "Everything is against me" and "Nothing has gone right for me" are pretty much constant beliefs. Still, we might say, in truth, Chaney is never completely wrong: Frank arguably should not have meddled in the affairs of a drunk and maybe he should have left him to his own devices. Maybe he should not—at least unarmed—have "felt responsibility" for a tenant who did nothing but "use" him. In any case, it's not entirely Chaney's fault that he spent almost his whole life as an outlaw and without any real friends. (In his restless wandering as a murderer and in many other ways, he is compared to the Bible's Cain, but that's for another time.)

The pity Mattie feels for the man to be hanged is not felt for Chaney. Almost no one could be that truthful when it comes to the man who murdered your father. She hopes not only to bring him to legal justice but that God will add eternal suffering in hell, that God will justly deny this horribly evil man grace. Her pity for the condemned man is rather detached; she does not really know him. Her hatred for Chaney is personal and somewhat unreasonable. She wants the federal marshall and the law that holds Chaney accountable to be pitiless. She knows that it's natural for her to hate beyond reason anyone, even the ponies, who took her father away from her. It was easy for her to remember that ponies, by nature, are innocent, but it was impossible for her to remember that Chaney's guilt is incomplete and that she has no way of reading his heart. Again, Mattie's view of justice was conditioned by her partisanship, her natural love or at least deep attachment to her own. It's not Christian justice; she is not trying to do the work of God, but just the work of law in doing justice to particular persons.

Probably because he saw Mattie's tears, Yarnell tried to cover Mattie's face with his hand when the actual executions occurred. She pushed the hand aside; she remembered that she was determined to "see it all" (23). Initially she did not care about the hangings because she thought of them as a trivial excursion. But, like most people there, she was drawn in by the human drama of men facing death in different ways. The hangings turned out to be quite educational. She was not strongly repulsed, at least, by watching men actually die, but neither were the others present. The men deserved to hang; justice was being done. Mattie's situation was not the character described by Socrates who struggled to face up to the fact that in the long run we're all dead bodies and nothing more. The crowd, after all, was not united by some common understanding of who man is and so what death is. Some believed in amazing grace, and some did not. Mattie did in her own way, which is not to say she was not experiencing some of the wonder of the philosopher: wonder fairly commonly shared, after all, but hardly ever by men knowing they're about to die.

Among the many things worthy of wonder: the man who died well, i.e., like a man, was both an Indian and a Christian. He had, we can say, two cultural resources or personal self-understandings on which to rely. The white men who died badly by using chance to deny the reality of human agency were neither Christian nor Indian. We did not get to see an Indian dying well who's not a Christian, or a Christian dying well who's not an Indian. We can remember, of course, that Tocqueville, among others, established the close connection between the proud Indian warrior and the proud southern warrior. And we get the southern impression that modern Americans, those not distinguished by courageous nobility or faithful repentance, don't have what it takes to die well.

Outward Signs, Injustice, and Election

We get another piece of evidence right away in that Mattie is not insensitive to suffering or incapable of experiencing revulsion. She does not really want to see it all. The two white men died immediately from hanging. The Indian's neck did not break, and so he strangled very slowly and painfully—jerking all around "in spasms." Mattie remembers that that—and nothing

else—“was the bad part” (23). She and Yarnell followed many in the crowd by turning away in revulsion and hurrying away in haste.

There are so many reasons why the Indian’s hanging should inspire revulsion, and any decent person would have looked away. It goes without saying that they all did not occur to the girl Mattie, but the woman Mattie had decades to think through what she saw and could not help but remember. First off, of course, his punishment was unintentionally (but really) cruel and unusual. To be sentenced to death by hanging is roughly the same as being sentenced to death by beheading. It’s to be sentenced to a dignified death that comes almost immediately after giving a speech. That, in fact, is not all that hard to watch. It might even be right to say that it puts death under the control of the condemned more than death usually is. We all have to go sometime, and many or most of us will have little warning of the moment. Certainly Frank did not, not to mention various outlaws. Neither did the men killed (one by mistake and the other over a trifle) by the two white men. But heart attacks and train wrecks come about as quickly as being shot by or as an outlaw.

Then, there is the seeming injustice of the horrible death given to the man who has prepared himself as well as he could to die well. Nobody can “die like a man” under those circumstances. It is true that the painfully uncontrollable spasms and writhing were the result of bad luck. But that reminds us that dying well seems to depend, to some extent, on good luck. The white men, who sort of said that life and death are governed by chance, got the good roll of the dice. It’s easy to argue that hanging is better than the white men deserved (although they would never admit it), and exactly what the Indian thought he deserved (without grace, which does not, of course, come from the law). The white men were given the opportunity to die well—or as dignified and truthful men—and they did not take advantage of it. They did not take advantage of their good luck, of the gifts of both life and death.

It would have, of course, been edifying for the crowd to have a discernible sign—beyond the Indian’s confident words—that the Indian was saved. The good thief heard the promise of Jesus, and that was meant to be enough for him. The word of Jesus, as he understood it in the Bible, was enough for the Indian. The good thief, in fact, had no other sign. He saw his savior die a painful, natural death, but we have no evidence that the biological death shook his faith, that both he and Jesus could be more than biological beings. Surely, some in the crowd were reassured by the manly serenity of the Indian’s readiness to die. And so they must have been more than shaken to see that serenity evaporate. For those who look for signs of grace in nature, what happened to the Indian could only be interpreted as God showing him the opposite of favor.

But for the southern Presbyterian, of course, there is no discernible sign. Surely even the Indian’s confident words are misplaced; even those who repent don’t deserve to be saved. The Indian’s confidence, someone might actually say, was more the product of his heathen pride than a genuinely Christian awareness of his sinful depravity. For Mattie, we have no idea whether the Indian was actually saved, just as we can’t be sure whether or not Tom Chaney was saved. Someone might say that fact so offends ordinary ideas of fairness as to be repulsive. Maybe it took years for Mattie not to be repulsed from what she really learned at the hanging. The white

men might say, of course, that she came to see that amazing grace, like everything else, is completely subject to chance, and the willful God contributes to rather than corrects the huge place of chance—a force that always threatens to undermine honor and virtue, praise and blame beyond belief—in human affairs.

Mattie concludes her recollection of the hanging by saying she learned later that the judge who condemned the men watched the hangings in their entirety. Mattie gives him the benefit of the doubt by supposing he did so out of “a sense of duty” (23). Her suspicion, it seems, is that he might have been depraved enough to have enjoyed them, even the bad part. The benefit of doubt came only from the Christian fact that “There is no knowing what is in a man’s heart.” St. Augustine explains that that fact should take all proud pleasure out of being even a conscientious judge (*CG* 19.6). Finally, decisions have to be made for the sake of law and order, but no man knows who’s really guilty or innocent. So, a Christian judge would be more repulsed than most people by the likely injustice of many or most hangings under the law. It was or should be harder for him to watch the hanging—especially, of course, the bad part—than it was for the people in the crowd.

Flinching and True Grit

Mattie recalled the hanging, in part, to make us “imagine how painful it was to go directly from that appalling scene to the undertaker’s where my father lay dead” (23). The “appalling scene,” of course, was not the deaths, but the bad part and all it suggests about who we are. The timing, for Mattie, was terrible, but she is “never been one to flinch or crawfish” from unpleasant duties, which is why, of course, she could imagine the judge was doing an extremely unpleasant duty. The virtue of not flinching seems to rank with and be very similar to the high virtue of showing grit or manliness or being resolute for Mattie. She explains that she would not flinch from doing her “Christian duty” in bringing justice to her father’s murderer, for the same reason she did not flinch from burying him (92). (When challenged, she can’t explain, in fact, why the former is a particularly Christian duty; that’s because it was not.) She was about “her father’s business” (27); if she is comparing herself to Jesus here, it’s in her capacity to get unpleasant jobs done. She took care of all her father’s business, which included vindicating his confidence in the law. Mattie finally admired her mother, who otherwise she had seen fleeing from unpleasant duties, when she did not flinch from sitting with her during her amputation.

Mattie did not let any of this existential or theological stuff, or the whole human drama that the hangings displayed, affect at all the way she took care of her father’s burial. She does not say or do or apparently think anything religious all, but she shows the proper respect. The same with Yarnell, who did nothing more than remove his hat. She thinks the coffin the undertaker had given her father was too cheap and carelessly prepared. So she tells Yarnell to make sure he gets a better one when he gets home. When Yarnell tells her the undertaker is taking advantage of her on the costs, she refuses to “haggle” (24). It’s the undertaker who’s “counting” at that moment, not Mattie. She sends Yarnell home with the coffin, although he clearly does not want to get into trouble for or be irresponsible by leaving her alone. She does not order him like a slave or

servant; again she leads him to what he is really inclined to as a friend. Mattie admits that she is open to criticism for not attending the funeral, but that's only because she had the rest of his business "to attend to." She knew his friends—Yarnell and the members of the Danville lodge—would get him properly buried. The big point here is that the girl Mattie does not seem to be moved by any Christian duty at all; she is not concerned with her father's soul. Insofar as she is concerned with justice, she is moved by anger, but, like the Lawyer and her father, she assumes that lawmen and contract law can get her father's business done. And, it's her anger and her confidence in numbers that cause her to be so sure she is in the right. When challenged from a Christian view, she has no answer. But she does not let that moment cause her real doubt or slow her down.

Mattie as Modern Woman

We have to think hard about Mattie as a modern woman: She is all about lawfulness, mathematical order/calculative reason, and "spirited" partisanship. We don't usually connect math with anger, measure with indignation. Mattie has, to a remarkable extent, the "Platonic" control of her desires, but obviously in a mutilated form. She is unplayful, unerotic, unserene, unfriendly, unloving, anxious, and worried. Her interior life is too tough to bear with serenity or even acceptance. That's why she does not really have her anger under control. But there's something wonderful in her living her meritocratic judgmentalism, in mostly not holding others to a higher standard than she holds herself. Mattie displays one version of what it means to live as a free person in a free country. But she knows well enough—and whines more than a little—that she was not given what she needs to have chosen the better part, the part displayed by her mother in being in love in the present and unobsessive about the future.

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