

Spring 5-15-2015

## A Fire Stronger than God: Myth-making and the Novella Form in Denis Johnson's Train Dreams

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A Fire Stronger than God:  
Myth-making and the Novella Form in Denis Johnson's *Train Dreams*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
English  
Teaching

by

Chinh Ngo

B.A. University of Vermont, 2010

May, 2015

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## Abstract

Using concepts of cognitive evolutionary theory, the author explores how narrative storytelling manifests itself in Denis Johnson's novella *Train Dreams*. The novella form is also discussed, focusing on its manipulation of linear time, its naturalization of supernatural elements, and its deconstruction of dichotomous relationships. Utilizing the novella's distinct structural and thematic elements, Johnson's text shows the myth of American expansionism and industrial progress and that of Kootenai holism in collision, resulting in a narrative renegotiation that seeks to affirm coexistence and complexity.

Denis Johnson, *Train Dreams*, novella form, cognitive evolutionary theory, American literature, Kootenai, myth, narrative myth-making

## I. Introduction

Barely three years into Robert Grainier's marriage, his wife Gladys and three-year-old daughter Kate perish in a wildfire that sweeps across Bonners Ferry, a town in the Idaho Panhandle. This tragedy lies at the heart of Denis Johnson's *Train Dreams*, and however far the narrative moves from this day in September 1920, the reader habitually returns to it, as Grainier does, following his physical journey in life and spiritual journey out of grief. Grainier's attempts to make meaning out of the debris left behind by the fire is a human one, based on the evolutionary need for knowledge and its part in power and survival. This personal story, then, is not Grainier's alone but rather part of a bigger cultural picture, representing the conflict between the natural world and human culture, as the latter seeks to control what it views as chaotic and unknown. Johnson's novella creates universal meaning out of specific and seemingly disparate elements. From a small town in an isolated region of Idaho, the story of early twentieth century United States is rendered. From the life of one man—his particular tragedies and small triumphs—the reader participates in the conflicts of universal humanity: life, death, rebirth, and death again. That is, the reader participates in the process of myth creation.

The nonlinearity found in Grainier's journey reflects the novella form's close relationship with narrative myth-making. As the far-reaching and authoritative narratives with which humans organize their beliefs and actions, myths must be universal in order to be transferable as human societies evolved and multiplied. The mythic stories themselves, however, must adapt to societal changes; they must command a particularism in order to be useful to the human group in which they are told and retold. Mirroring myth's dual narrative role, the novella attempts to portray universally relevant messages through the telling of a specific story by employing structural and

thematic elements to achieve three ends: the manipulation of linear time, the naturalizing of supernatural events, and the deconstruction of dichotomous relationships. In the case of *Train Dreams*, the specific framework is both regional and historical, and so although Grainier lives well into his eighties, the majority of the story's content deals with only eighteen years of his life; and while Grainier meets strange characters and experiences extraordinary events, the realism and probability of these occurrences are always highlighted; and even though Grainier helps create the myth of American industrial progress, the natural pilgrimage he undergoes following the death of his family undermines this dominant narrative, rendering the boundaries between nature and human culture porous. The result is a narrative centered on myths that simultaneously questions any one myth's claim to singular truth.

Johnson is no stranger to myth, and his work often interrogates humanity's fraught relationship with these grand narratives. Scholarship on Johnson revolves around violence; the drugged or otherwise altered mind; his usage of disorienting structures; and how all of these elements work to illustrate the individual or collective quest for spirituality. Critical work on *Jesus' Son*, Johnson's only collection of short stories to date, focuses on the protagonist's fevered mind as representative of a removed and arguably higher mental state. Jay A. Hamm states that the fragmentation found in the collection reflects the relationship between schizophrenia and recovery. Alan Soldofsky calls *Jesus' Son* a bifurcated narrative, reflecting the protagonist's fractured state of mind. In their individual essays, Timothy L. Parrish, Robert McClure Smith, Kevin McCarron, and Harry Geanuleas discuss the subjectivity of a drugged state as a dangerous, but effective attempt to attain redemption through communion with the sacred. The conversation about Johnson's novel *Fiskadoro* follows the same vein, taking the human impulse for spirituality to national, transnational, and often dystopian dimensions. The works of

Christopher Nank and Millicent Lenz concern the complete spiritual destruction wrought by nuclear annihilation, with focus on the post-apocalyptic landscape as tattered mythic-spiritual text. The destruction is human-made, and the characters in the novel are representative of a species on the brink of literal and metaphysical cannibalism.

To this dialogue, I seek to add another layer, focusing on the structural and thematic elements of both myth and the novella form in order to argue that, of the three genres of fiction, the novella, exemplified by *Train Dreams*, presents mythical narratives the most cogently. This essay starts by creating a theoretical foundation based on the claim that storytelling is an evolutionary trait that aided collective human survival. Myths, the most influential and long-lasting of these stories, are manifested not only pragmatically, but can also be found in religious and artistic iterations. The novella represents one of these latter forms and I will discuss its structural and thematic elements in order to show that they are integral parts of the novella's distinct narrative purpose and not merely coincidental or left behind by the more popular genres of short story and novel. The exploration of critical literature concerning the works of Denis Johnson will come next, focusing on the nonlinear structure and the religious and mythic themes of his earlier fiction. Finally, I will analyze *Train Dreams* according to the three aforementioned effects to demonstrate the affirmation of myth-making while also interrogating Western culture's bid for mono-narrativity.

## II. “Making Special”

Language facilitates the process of meaning-making, which is necessary for human survival. As human tribes accumulated information about the world and as individual human minds evolved to better process this information, language evolved to aid storage and usage towards the creation of social and cultural knowledge. Human survival is based on collectivity, and knowledge is useful evolutionarily if it fosters communication and action at a group level. Thus, information becomes knowledge through understanding, and the preeminent way this is achieved is through the creation of narrative, which connects facts and events in a way that is memorable, coherent, and convincing. The narratives concerned here are grand ones: myths, whose provided explanations are vast and long-lasting. The process by which these narratives are effectively transmitted from person to person, group to group, generation to generation, indicates myth's capacity for universal significance while simultaneously maintaining personal, and therefore shifting, relevance. In addition to creating pragmatic knowledge of the worldly, myths also provide aesthetic and sacred fulfillment, through dance, painting, decorative pottery, fiction, and so on. The multifarious forms myths take reveal the changes narratives, and therefore language, have made to accommodate the increasing complexity of human thought.

In *Origins of the Modern Mind*, Merlin Donald argues for a theory of language evolution based on Charles Darwin's contention that human language emerged in three stages. During the first stage of language acquisition, human developed not only the capacity to represent the world symbolically, but also the desire to make propositions about it—what Darwin called “human intentionality,” or the impulse towards meaning-making, which began in the species' pre-linguistic state. Next the “primal form” of language emerged; that is, a vocal communication



system which began first as rudimentary and emotive noises such as songs, then later became language itself. The third stage emerged when “the existence of a primitive system of vocal communication drove a further general expansion of cognitive power, which in turn led to complex articulate language” (35). As human thought about the world became more complex, language evolved into a system that could accommodate this expansion by aiding memory and recall. Donald calls this External Symbolic Storage (ESS), which refers to forms of knowledge representation that exist outside the human mind, of which the written word is an advanced form. The need for systems of ESS points to a proliferation of human-made knowledge as our species multiplied and moved.

Human are social beings, which means survival is contingent on how effectively we form and maintain community. Cognitive evolution, then, is based on the fact that humans live in groups, and the growth of these groups necessitated growth in brain capacity, translating into increased numbers and complexity of memories: “Complex societies make great demands on memory: large numbers of relationships have to be analyzed, understood, stored, and serviced regularly in order to sustain large group organization. With certain exceptions, the more advanced primates cluster together in larger and larger social groups, culminating in the human capacity for organizing and sustaining very large groups” (10). This process feeds back into itself. The growth in group size fostered growth in memory function to aid the group's survival, creating impetus for further communal expansion. Individual human thoughts and behavior, as well as the evolutionary motivation behind them, should be contextualize as parts of a whole.

Human survival is a group activity. Competition does exist—over land, over resources, over other people—but it exists on a collective basis. Donald states, “Within such a species, able to adapt to virtually any climate ranging over the whole globe, major advances would probably

be driven by this competition between subspecies. Moreover, competition would no longer be between the survival strategies of the individual so much as between the survival strategies of groups, and would test particularly their ability to act as a cohesive society” (209). Since all humans possess a relatively equal set of physical tools, the superiority of one group over another is established on an intangible level. A strong society possesses a strong culture.

Defined by Donald as “shared patterns of acquired behavior characteristics of a species,” culture can be seen as rapid group adaptation and change with language as facilitator (9). Donald states, “If we wished to put the proposition even more strongly, we might assert that what humans evolved was primarily a generalized capacity for cultural innovation. Part of that capacity was linguistic communication; part of it was the ability to think and represent the environment” (10). To be able to make sense of one's surrounding; to frame its potentially deadly randomness into understandable and useful knowledge, and then to pass that knowledge on and convince other people of its validity is to have a real sense of control and power.

Humans distill and organize knowledge in order to make sense of themselves and their environment through narrative myth-making, a process that attempts to create large and fixed significance out of various moving parts. As our cognitive capacity improved and the knowledge relayed became more complex, language evolved to accommodate this accumulation as well as make up for the species' relatively poor short-term memory: “The mind has expanded its reach beyond the episodic perception of events, beyond the mimetic reconstruction of episodes, to a comprehensive remodeling of the entire universe. Casual explanation, prediction, control—myth constitutes an attempt at all three, and every aspect of life is permeated by myth” (214). Within myth-making lies the process of storytelling, which constitutes the driving force behind language acquisition and use; and because humans live communally, narrative skills are group-survival

skills, the end product of which is a public and authoritative version of reality.

The myth is a collective narrative with roots in ancient human civilization, which explains why, even when logical and scientific evidence are furnished in opposition of certain myths, many people still find it difficult to relinquish these old stories: the act of letting go is counter-intuitive on a deep evolutionary level. Donald elaborates, “The social consequences of mythic integration were evident at the cultural level: narratives gave events contextual meaning for individuals...Myth governs the collective mind. This remains true today, even in modern postindustrial cultures, at least in the realm of social values” (268). Human culture, created by narrative skill, the oldest and deepest product of which is myth, facilitated by language, lies at the core of the identity of the human species. The impulse to tell stories is a universally human one and suggests that the power of myth lies in its ability not only to explain practical reality, but also to fulfill less tangible but no less real human needs. Myths are a form of narrative art, which also aids human survival.

In *Homo Aestheticus*, Ellen Dissanayake adds another layer to Donald's contention that the impulse for language and storytelling evolved out of improvements to human cognition by arguing that narrative creation is inherently artistic. Every human society created shared beliefs, encoded and expressed in oral traditions, ceremonies, and books, reflecting art's widespread influence and humanity's cultural need for it. Dissanayake calls for a “species-centric” investigation of art as manifestations of “a core human nature that was evolved to require aesthetic and spiritual satisfactions” (3). But as Dissanayake contends, to argue that art is behavioral means ultimately to argue that art is fueled by biology, which requires the broadening of the concept of the artistic act from specific behaviors to a “general behavioral complex” that uses these acts to achieve common goals or effects, the dominant one being the human need for

“making special” (37, 39).

How this specialness affects art's relationship with religion depends, in part, on the definition of religion. In *A Biocultural Approach to Literary Theory and Interpretation*, Nancy Easterlin critiques the assumption that religion simply refers “to a coherent cosmology and set of beliefs,” affirming instead a more holistic idea based on the argument that “various aesthetic practices emerged in tandem with the development of ritual and myth and that these processes drove the evolution of language.” Religion, then, can be conceptualized as the human impulse to solve or resolve metaphysical conflicts. Easterlin proceeds to comment on literature's role in illuminating these conflicts: “In my estimation, we need to honestly confront what some of our best scientific theorizing suggests about literature: that its objects are unimaginably complex and that its origins are bound up with the deepest human fears and longings” (32). The impulse behind artistic endeavors remain enigmatic, as is art's effects on the human mind. What is clearer is that art, myth, and religion are part of humanity's search for meaning in a world constantly shifting.

The creation of significant narratives out of disparate information is an act of making special, and it is not only located in written and oral storytelling, but also observed in the ceremonies humans create to mark certain events (weddings, funerals, harvest festivals) and in the way they physically represent themselves on these occasions. Few spectacles, for example, are considered more special than a bride dressed in full regalia on her wedding day, whether it be a white gown or a red sari. Implied in this argument is the existence of non-special things. Dissanayake states, ‘The thesis that the evolution and selective value of a behavior of art arises from a tendency to make special rests on the claim that humans everywhere, in a manner unlike other animals, differentiate between an order, realm, mood, or state of being that is mundane,

ordinary, or “natural,” and one that is unusual, extraordinary, or supernatural” (49). The making of specialness, which resides at the heart of artistic behavior, predicates itself on humanity's ability to differentiate between these two fundamental characteristics, and as culture evolved perceptions of specialness changed.

Though the qualities by which humans apply specialness shift as human cultures changed and multiplied, the impulse behind the behavior does not because the need to make sense of the world, and in this way control it, is an evolutionary one. The definitions of control vary, ranging from knowledge creation and adaptation to knowledge use as a means of aggression or domination. Though making special may not always be an artistic act, art is always an attempt at making special. In the case of literary art, this specialness is obvious because, as Dissanayake explains, “Literary language everywhere, whether spoken or written, differs from ordinary language not only in being more formed and patterned, but by using special elaborating devices to increase beauty, memorableness, and effectiveness” (113). Literary art is a distinct way of making special, and I argue that the novella's method of making special is further specialized due to its ability to create universal significance through a particular and personal story, reflecting its strong ties with mythic narratives.

### III. "Narrative of Suggestion"

The novella form is conducive to narrative myth-making due to its manipulation of linear time, the supernatural, and binary relationships. Mary Doyle Springer suggests that one begins a discussion of the genre by establishing a single conjecture: form and function are connected. A simple statement, but one that is often dismissed when one considers that the conventional definition of a contemporary novella rests on word count or page numbers with little regard to how this affects the way content is structured and meaning is produced. In *Forms of the Modern Novella*, Springer defines the novella broadly as “a prose fiction of a certain length (usually 15,000 to 50,000 words), a length equipped to realize several distinct form functions better than any other form” (9). These “distinct form functions” combine to form a network of structural and thematic elements that create a narrative capable of maintaining a singular focus while reaching outward toward universality.

The novella's ability to render the particular and the universal simultaneously may seem contradictory, but in reality the two effects work in tandem. Judy Leibowitz refers to the novella as a “narrative of suggestion,” which she defines in *Narrative Purpose in the Novella* as “an intensive analysis of a limited area with wide, undeveloped implications” (18). The outward expansion from this particular focus is the typical plot construction of the novella and results in a single conflict being explored intensively. In the case of *Train Dreams*, the plot results from the destruction of Grainier's family in the forest fire. Every external and internal moment in the rest of the book, even the ones seemingly unrelated, even the ones occurring chronologically *before* the fire, works to explore this tragedy and Grainier's attempts to move on from it.

The plot to *Train Dreams* is relatively simple because it is not plot that truly matters; it is

everything that surrounds it that works to create the overall meaning of the text. The plot is like the pit of a fruit; one does not consume the pit, but without it there would be no fruit. This everything else is described by Leibowitz through a structure called the “theme complex,” where all motifs and imagery, however variant or oppositional, are bound together to achieve a constant focus on the subject, resulting in “the double effect of intensity and expansion.” Leibowitz elaborates, “While the plot accommodates itself to intensive treatment of the subject through repetition or other devices, and while the interrelatedness of the motifs reinforces this intensity, at the same time the undeveloped implications of the theme complex serve to expand this material” (17). Johnson’s novella is peppered with small details, images, and parallel events that seem significant only in the moment they appear, but must be seen in the context of the overall effect. Secondary characters are utilized in the same fleeting manner because it is imperative that the compact novella be finely tuned, with everything subordinating the central conflict. In “Notes on the Novella,” Tony Whedon explains, “Not capacious enough to include a large cast, [the novella’s] secondary characters appear in cameos to further plot or help understand their protagonist who often is not the novella’s narrator” (566). These characters’ fleeting presence in the story are referential, always leading back to the main protagonist and eventually the novella’s central conflict of which the main protagonist is also a subordinating element. Together these elements form a network of signification and leitmotifs that grows outward from the specific plot, enabling the novella to create a strong over-arching theme, characteristic of myth.

The result of the theme complex is the creation of the central conflict. Not to be confused with the plot, the novella’s conflict contains implications that far surpass the personal one found in the plot alone. And they *are* implications, for it is characteristic of the novella that the conflict not be fully or linearly developed, but rather left ephemeral. Leibowitz states, “The central

conflict in a novella is often conceptual and does not necessarily coincide with what I call specific situation in focus. That is, we are made aware of the central conflict only by its fleeting representations . . . and the fleeting, interlocking thematic associations give the central conflict its only development” (53). Though the novella suggests universality and the text does proceed to test out its claim, it does not explicitly argue for a particular one. Thus the conflict in *Train Dreams* is not Grainier's personal grief, nor is it specifically about the fire that caused it, but rather the conflict manifests through the context in which the grief exists as well as the ways it manifests itself to reveal the human-made conflict with the natural world. The novella protagonist is, then, a conduit through which this larger conflict is played out and from which meaning is created. Examples of this kind of metaphysical conflict can be found in other contemporary American novellas such as William H. Gass's *The Pederson Kid* (the central conflict, enacted through the hunt for a rural murderer, is the cruel power plays between the protagonist and his father) and Joyce Carol Oates's *Blackwater* (the death of a young woman and her adulterous lover, a powerful senator, symbolically represents the destructive secrets of the modern American family). In order to achieve this result, the protagonist must be situated in a way that allows him to be the focus, but not the point.

The novella form distances its main character to underplay the individual plot from which the story takes place, making room for meaning that reaches beyond the particular. Springer argues that the novella is linked with a modern version of the apologue, an allegorical story utilizing exaggerated details in order to convey a lesson without stating it explicitly. She points to the separation of the reader and the characters as the dominant characteristic, to which all other structural and thematic elements are bent: “distance being in its turn a requirement for giving the message room to shine through” (40). Springer cites several distancing techniques, including



making the characters seem less than human, killing off the main character before the story opens (Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, for example, begins with Ilych's funeral in order to cast immediate emphasis on the life, and not the man), using multiple point-of-view character, and most importantly for the purposes of this essay, giving the main character a proper name, “a practice which keeps our attentions fixed on the significance of the person or place at the expense of individualizing them” (41). Robert Grainier's is introduced in the first sentence of *Train Dreams*, and this artificial specificity is maintained throughout so that the reader does not question the lack of character history or self-reflection.

Narrative distance is also created in the novella by the main character's passive nature, reflecting their repetitive trajectory. Springer explains that while characters in long novels “not only learn but are able to complete their process of change in a complexity of interactions with other characters,” the novella specializes in “a single character revelation, or on an isolated learner” (12). In “Notes on the Novella,” Graham Good adds to the isolated character model by contending that the post-1800 novella is only minimally connected to its Renaissance-era predecessors. The novella is, instead, an exceptionally tragic form.

This is because the novella's formal function is to recall something that once happened to a man, whereas the tragic hero has to ask “What shall I do?” and make an ethical choice in the present. Instead of this heroic assertion of will and responsibility, the novella character tends to show an inner spiritual passivity...where tragedy immediately presents an ethical choice in the present, the novella subjectively mediates through the personality of the narrator the story of a fated life already essentially past. (155)

This hero of the novel is able to mediate his tragedies through actions that have yet to happen, and because of the novel's length is able to do this through interactions with other significant

characters, who themselves undergo change. The tragedy of the novella hero is that he must suffer alone, and the structure of his sufferings is nostalgic, circular so that even if he does overcome his plight, he inevitably revisits it later. These distancing technique aids the theme complex by subtly creating space for expansion through the three techniques aforementioned.

Time is nonlinear and often circular in the novella so that chronology is undermined in order to create a repetitive story structure which uses parallel events and subplots to build up the central conflict. Whedon provides a useful image: “Time in the novella is compressed, contrasted to the more spread-out time spans in conventional novels. They are often concentric, onion-like, and one reads them by peeling away layers of scenes and exposition and time (and meaning) until one has a revelation of character” (566). This revelation, however, does not occur at the end of the novella, but rather somewhere before that because the form does not work in explicit conclusions, but rather propositions, suggestions towards an overall meaning that the reader must create herself, without the help of the protagonist's self-reflection. Leibowitz states, “In its presentation and further examination of something problematic, the novella uses a structure particular to itself. The novella's double aesthetic goal is to be both micro and macrocosmic, to go beyond revelation to a testing out, to a novelistic treatment (in microcosm)” (78). This testing out leads to an effect that is not extensive but intensive, a singleness with manifold associations.

Nonlinearity frees the theme complex temporally, while still working to develop overall significance. Springer posits three main methods for manipulation of the reader's sense of time: the employment of the present tense to suggest an immediate quality of universality and timelessness; the creation of uncertainty through sporadic and disorienting movement back-and-forth through time; and the enlargement of the reader's sense of significance through large gaps in time (43). *Train Dreams* utilizes all three of these methods, particularly the creation of gaps in

Grainier's lifetime to suggest the ongoing, and therefore universal, thematic qualities of which the given life is an example. Through selecting particular moments, the writer implies the total pattern of experience: "Years passing in a single leap carry both the suggestion that years can be skipped because all years have the same quality and that the author is selecting out of the sameness those years or incidents which most expose the quality the story wishes to expose" (Springer 44). A collateral effect of this narrative technique is the expense of plot excitement, and the creation of almost the reverse where the plot is already known, and therefore story advancement—that is the advancement of the conflict—is through stressing, or redevelopment.

Plot, as previously discussed, is unimportant to the development of the novella's central conflict, but it must, in its own way, be specific and unfamiliar. Character distance helps create this novelty because it is often the case that the character's world, whether social, geographical, or historical, portrays a distinct subculture not widely known or explored. In the case of *Train Dreams*, once again, it is all three, rural loggers and railroad workers in the Idaho Panhandle during the former half of the twentieth century. This framework sets up the second novella element amenable to myth, the naturalization of the supernatural. As Good explains, 'The novelty, though often "out of the ordinary," still lies within the realm of the possible. Even if the events are inexplicable in rational terms (as in the ghost story, for example) they are presented in the real world in the knowable, retrievable, or witnessed past; this is not generally true of the fantasy, the folk tale, or the fairy tale' (161). To this, Springer adds that the farther back historically the novella was written, the more unrealistic it is (45). Modern novellas generally work to logically explain its extraordinary moments or at least cast doubt on their extraordinary nature.

By imbuing the unreal with real qualities, the novella creates mythic narratives through

its distinct treatment of spirituality. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade argues that the mythic experience is an encounter with the sacred. Furthermore, any experience, no matter how mundane, can become sacred provided that it is perceived in a mythical-religious way. Eliade states, “Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different” (26). To bask in divine light is to be lifted, albeit fleetingly, into a plane where significance is total and fixed. Hierophany, however, is a paradox because the sacred is nonetheless experienced in a real space; that is, it contains a point of common origin from which the religious experience emanates: “By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes something else, yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu” (12). The bush ablaze with heavenly flame is still irrevocably a bush. Something is mythic, in other words, if it can be both, “the sacred is pre-eminently the real, at once power, efficacy, the source of life and fecundity” (28). Humanity's impulse to evoke this holistic space can be seen in the development of rituals like animal sacrifice, designed to break the mundane qualities of everyday life in order to make the moment special, and in this way create lasting meaning to help humans make sense of worldly unknowns.

The desire for aesthetic and spiritual fulfillment through the creation of a hierophonous space is indicative of what George Lukács calls “transcendental homelessness,” or the human longing for community, the sacred, and the absolute. First coined by Lukács in 1971, transcendental homelessness also describes the impulse against displacement and a spiritual yearning for home. Martin Heidegger later takes this idea and places it in the context of literature's purpose:

For Heidegger the great threat to human existence is that thinking has become a kind of

technical information processing. . . Against the account of transcendental homelessness stands genuine philosophy as a kind of home-coming, a thinking back from our current displaced sense to finding our place and preserving what we have found. In this way this can be understood as secularization of the Fall and the return. (Moran 244)

Heidegger proceeds to discuss the problematic development of technology and other ideas of Western progress, arguing that the modern world sees technology as not merely a way to accomplish practical objectives, but also as a metaphysical tool that discloses and reveals Being. Modern human cultures have created of gods out of machines and by doing so fragmented narrative into facts, data.

Technological meaning-making is artificial and unsustainable. It uses up resources without producing more: “It turns nature into a mere stockpile of resources—coal, iron, uranium, water, and so on. The nature of this technological revealing is such that it obscures and does not reveal its own essence” (245). Among the resources mentioned, one can add human beings who get caught up in the production of meaning without understanding the agendas behind it or their part in it. Philosophy and poetry can counteract this consumptive process, Heidegger argues, by reconstituting narratives to be more than products and by reaching for more than just base, exclusive reality. Narrative myth-making, the conflation of the real with the unreal to create simultaneous and compatible existences, can make human stories more humane.

Mythic holism finds a welcoming home in the novella form and leads to the third element of the genre's narrative purpose: the undermining of dichotomous relationships in favor of complex wholeness. The myth-making process seeks to integrate knowledge, not separate and categorize it. Donald states that “ By definition, history, and most narrative, is a reconstructive act; it is an attempt to piece together a large number of episodes so as to give a place and a

meaning to the smaller-scale events the myth encompasses” (267). The idea that myth is reconstruction of past events towards present meaning to aid future survival is reflected structurally in the novella's nonlinear repetition as well as its foregone conclusion. The revelation, as previously stated, is not the end of the story, but rather the testing of that revelation's truth that creates the novella's conclusion: “Thus the novella's repetitive structure results in an intensified resolution, as a consequences of having reexamined the problem in the light of expanding motifs, additional metaphors, or parallel events” (Leibowitz 111). The theme complex is a mythic engine that works to bind various parts into a universal whole, resulting in a conflict and a resolution that are both conceptual and external of the distanced protagonist's problems. The novella, as a narrative of suggestion, highlights the reader's task of making special by removing the protagonist as a figure of meaning-making. The main character is not present at the end. The significance of the text, resulting from the resolution of the central conflict, belongs to the reader alone.

The engagement of the reader in mythic reconstruction reveals the cumulative effect of the novella's theme complex and structural elements, the emphasis on human agency as integral to meaning-making. Good describes this generic purpose by referring to the novella's oral quality. “In the novella, narrator and listener are fictively copresent, but the character is absent (even if he is the narrator's earlier self)...The novella is the social transmission (the telling in company) of extra-social content (the distant or excluded)” (162). This oral quality further strengthens the relationship between the novella and myth, evoking a long evolutionary history of unwritten narrative. However, the sacred and mythic are not themes found in the novella alone. As discussed, it is the intensity of the themes, the way the character is presented, and the way the reader is positioned that make the novella's treatment of myth unique. The next section

will explore religious-mythic elements present in Johnson's short stories and novel, showing their different and *lesser* degrees than that of the novella.

#### IV. "A Story Had Been Told"

Like *Train Dreams*, *Jesus' Son* and *Fiskadoro* employ nonlinear structures and themes of reconstruction found in narrative myth-making. The degrees to which they utilize these elements and the conclusion these two texts reach reflect the generic differences between the short story and the novel and reveal the novella form's liminal existence. In a 2004 interview with Charles D'Ambrosio, Denis Johnson discusses the process by which he wrote *Jesus' Son*, stating that "What was funny about the form of those stories was that to make it feel as if a statement had been made, or a story had been told, I would put a couple of anecdotes together. So if you look at those stories they often consist of two anecdotes put side by side, which created a suggestion that somehow they were related." (189-190). By "somehow" related, Johnson explains, he means that the anecdotes that make up the stories were often times borrowed from other people and cobbled together into a cohesive narrative indicative of one person's experiences. Our stories are often not ours alone, and Johnson's writing process here reflects this theme of unification through narrative often found in many of his fictional works. However, while the short story deals primarily with the particular nature of myth and the novel's focus is on myth's universalism, the novella shows these two spheres in deep connection.

Perhaps the primary point of divergence between the short story, the novel, and the novella is the textual space in which they position their main character. *Jesus' Son* details Fuckhead's personal recovery from addiction through the slow and circuitous journey towards grace. *Fiskadoro* is a post-apocalyptic novel about the necessity of and quest for mythic narratives in order to maintain a coherent human history in the wake of utter erasure. While Fuckhead's journey exists in the vacuum of his own existence, the characters in *Fiskadoro* have



no choice but to contend with the world-at-large, their identities and self-understanding relies solely on the reconstruction of collective knowledge. Between these two points stands Grainier, whose personal journey enacts the greater conflict, but who is simultaneously removed from the significance of the conflict by the insular and incomplete nature of his revelation.

Like Grainier, Fuckhead is a character marked by passivity and inaction. In “To Kingdom Come,” Timothy L. Parrish states that Fuckhead's passivity indicates his inner tumult, the confrontation of the feeling that he is between lives, neither fully alive nor truly dead. Thus, Fuckhead's identity, the one he is attempting to reconstruct, is not social, but metaphysical and religious in nature, “the spiritual evolution evident in the sequence of stories is a movement toward proximity, toward acknowledgment of a higher power” (182). Each story presents a state of being, and the movement towards resolution is not based on action or interaction, but predicated on Fuckhead's interiority, his ability to escape a self-dug hole he is unconvinced exists. In “Eloquence and Plot in Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*,” J. Scott Farrin argues though each story shows a character in stasis and passivity, taken together they form a recognizable trajectory. Farrin states, “But the entire eleven stories present a more traditional plot. Over the course of these stories, Fuckhead wavers and arrives at the collection's end saved from the tyranny of circumstance” (133). The wavering effect is partly created by the disjointed narrative time, representing Fuckhead's troubled mind and conflicting desires.

The wavering indicates a reconstructive act and eventually leads Fuckhead to a small moment of epiphany. Critic Robert McClure Smith states that “Recovery is intrinsic to the narrator's method of storytelling. His associative thought process and delight in digression produce a circuitous textual structure: often, as a result, he must loop back to *recover* a prematurely abandoned narrative” (184). The circular structure of the stories reflect their themes

as Fuckhead's recovery is not only from his addictions; he is also attempting to rebuild a past, a cohesive narrative to help him make sense of his mistakes, and from there move forward.

Though both *Jesus' Son* and *Train Dreams* utilize a circuitous narrative structure, Fuckhead's ability to move forward reflects a linear character arc that differentiates him from Grainier, whose connection with his environment, tenuous and fraught though it may be, places him within a social-cultural context that does not allow him to move on.

The spiritual revelation Fuckhead experiences is the end of the story. Unlike *Train Dreams*, there is no testing out. The reader understands that Fuckhead is on his way, but the moment of rebirth is not found in the story proper. Rather the reader is asked to piece together these fragments into overall significance. Through this process the space between the reader and Fuckhead is made uncomfortably small, revealing one of the reasons why many have found Johnson's stories so affecting. Smith explains that "The reader's temporal processing of the eleven interrelated stories—with all the various recovers, minor and major, that reading experience necessitates—lead to the reconstruction of the unwritten twelfth story in *Jesus's Son*" (190). The discovery of this Ur-narrative, the story told in the intersections and gaps, is placed in the hands of reader, and in this way Johnson's short story collection is akin to his novella: they both, in their own ways, engage the reader directly in the mythic act of reconstruction. And in both texts, the central conflict is based on spiritual, or otherwise existential crises, but while the conflict in *Train Dreams* originates in the personal, its overall resolution and significance strives for the universal.

The human desire for the spiritual in the midst of catastrophe is a recurring theme in both *Train Dreams* and *Jesus' Son* to varying degrees and is also found in *Fiskadoro*. However, in the novel, reconstruction is seen as a culturally collective act, with myth being the narrative glue that

holds human history together. Though books and historical documents still exist in the world of *Fiskadoro*, the information they provide lacks the cohesive agent provided by myth. In his essay on the novel, Parrish states, “*Fiskadoro* does not question the practice of history as a worthwhile goal; rather, it shows that absent a structuring narrative that compels belief, historical facts mean virtually nothing” (234). In this manner, *Fiskadoro* shares a similar theme with *Train Dreams*, the idea that details, facts, and information are only as important as their usage in the collective story of the particular community in which they exist. The rural inhabitants of the Idaho Panhandle, for example, do not view the passing of World War I as important until it has disrupted the logging industry that makes up most of the region's economy. This similarity between the two works point to a connection shared between all three of Johnson's fiction, the enormous role of narrative creation in human survival. However, the novel's treatment of narrative myth-making lacks a personal dimension, focusing as it does on a protagonist whose importance lies in his ability to act as a stand-in for the divine.

The search for meaningful history is the search for God in *Fiskadoro*, and the eponymous character is a savior figure whose self-inflicted wounds grant him the power to forge new narratives through forced remembrance of the world before the end as well as the violence that caused it. By undergoing a ritual in which he splits his own urethra, Fiskadoro transform into a mystical conduit for racial memory and the collective unconscious, allowing him to tap into type of hyper-empathy as he is not only able to intuitively understand the analogies between nature and human culture, but also take another person's memory into himself, relieving them of the pain it may cause. These powers are not without cost, however, as Millicent Lenz explains, because “Fiskadoro's transformation of consciousness and myth-making powers are bought at the price of his individual identity” (116). Slowly he loses his personal memories, until the only

identity he possesses is a collective one, and herein lies the biggest difference between the novel and the two shorter forms of fiction. *Fiskadoro* is mythic in the sense that its central conflict is based on the search for collective narrative through communion with the sacred. Parrish states that the “work's greatest strength—one that is explicitly religious in orientation—is to reveal history in its most powerful form to be a ritual for the expression of communal belief and aspiration” (266). Fiskadoro's role reflects Frank O'Connor's argument in *The Lonely Voice* that the novel “adheres to the classical concept of civilized society, of man as an animal who lives in a community” (19). This established role within a normal society, however, means the erasure of individual identity and the personal connection to narrative myth it entails.

The works of fiction discussed share thematic as well as structural similarities. They all use elements of myth to create meaning and they all stress the importance of narrative continuity in human life. However, the protagonists in these work stand on different grounds, and their positions affect where they eventually end up. Fuckhead's journey is internal, concerned with his personal myths and creating his own way forward. Fiskadoro's journey is not a personal one at all; rather, he becomes a totemic figure who sacrifices his own identity for the betterment of his community and whose story is the all-story. Grainier's personal turmoil and rebirth create a point from which the central conflict and mythic significance can emanate. He may not be the point, but he is the focus of the novella, serving as a link between nature and humanity, though he is unaware of his part of this bigger social-cultural connection. If Fuckhead is at the base of the mountain looking up, and Fiskadoro is fixed on the summit looking out, then Grainier is somewhere in between. He climbs the mountain and stands for a moment at the top, but eventually, inevitably he must journey downward again.

## V. “Mountains Enough For Everybody”

*Train Dreams* interrogates the myths of American expansionism and industrial progress by showing them in collision with Kootenai supernaturalism. The significance of Johnson's novella arises out of this conflict, and the form's distinct character placement, nonlinear structure, and mythic themes create a narrative that embraces holism and the complexity of human life in a changing world. The story through which the central conflict is exemplified and tested concerns Robert Grainier, a self-identified everyman who drops out of school in his early teens, but who nevertheless “learned to decipher writing on a page, and it helped him get along in the world” (29). From Grainier's personal tragedy, the relationship between human culture and the natural world is revealed; expanded, as the novella does at times, the conflict becomes the fraught border between the material and the spiritual. Through the act of mythic reconstruction, the reader alone contends with the central conflict because Grainier, fitting his role as novella protagonist, lacks the self-reflection to make his moment of epiphany anything but fleeting.

To maintain a singular focus, while developing its vast central conflict, the novella theme complex subordinates Grainier's personal story—that is, the plot—through the creation of character passivity and distance. In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette distinguishes between story and discourse by using “the word *story* for the signified or narrative content (even if this content turns out, in a given case, to be low in dramatic intensity or fullness of incident), [using] the word *narrative* for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself, and [using] the word *narrating* for the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place” (27). Though I will not use “narrating” in this discussion, its ties to narrative and reconstruction are clear: it is the act of telling the story, the

impulse and decision to make meaning through narrative. I use story (and plot) to mean the events portrayed in the narrative, and I use narrative, or narrative discourse to mean the text as a whole, the accumulation of the utterances that tell the story through which the central conflict is revealed. Story and narrating, therefore, exist “only by means of the intermediary of the narrative” (29). Doyle similarly differentiates between story and discourse: “Things happen [in a novella] sequentially, step by step, incident after incident bound together not by plot necessity but in narrative sequence” (42). Narrative, in other words, is the force that holds the story together and enables its sensible telling and reconstruction. As the main element of the story, Grainier's life acts as the example by which the narrative's central conflict is tested out. To this end, Grainier maintains an unreflective and distant relationship with the reader in order to highlight the latter's agency in the reconstructive process.

Fitting for the role of distant novella protagonist, Grainier's patchy childhood history allows him to be removed from his particular time and place, even while he engages in present action. Grainier cannot remember how he lost his parents, though he knows “he'd been born sometime in 1886 either in Utah or in Canada, and had found his way to his new family on the Great Northern Railroad, the building of which had been completed in 1893” (26). The specificity of the Great Northern Railroad's completion contrasts the tenuousness of the protagonist's birth, alluding to Grainier's role in the text as conduit of and representative for his time and place. The events of Grainier's early life are obscured. His train ride to Fry, Idaho to live with his uncle's family had an erasing effect that “made him forget things as soon as they happened, and he very soon misplaced this earlier part of his life completely” (26). This amnesia is particular and aids in the narrative's portrayal of Grainier exclusively through ordered events in the narrative. It also proceeds to explain away his inability to meaningfully reflect. “Later in his

long life Grainier confused the chronology of the past and felt certain that the day he viewed the World's Fattest Man—that evening—was the very same day he stood on Fourth Street in Troy, Montana, twenty-six miles east of the bridge, and looked at a railway car carrying the strange young hillbilly entertainer Elvis Presley” (23). Great attention is paid to detailing a moment that may not have even occurred. Grainier is, then, a man who can neither recall his childhood nor place the events of his adult life in order. He is character whose only tether to reality rests on the present moment as they are portrayed, sequentially but not linearly, in the text.

This dislocation serves the novella theme complex and reflects Grainier's confusion at seeing two conflicting myths enacted simultaneously. Following his wife and daughter's deaths, Grainier becomes hermetical, choosing to stay on the same tract of wooded land where they perished, though he still works in Bonners Ferry, running a horse-and-cart transportation service between the isolated communities. Grainier becomes a link between wilderness and human settlement, reflecting the central conflict and significance of the novella. By rendering Grainier ahistorical, a hero without a past, Johnson creates the theme complex around Grainier's personal story. He may be a man of his time, but his story is universally relevant. For a story that is oftentimes bleak in its matter-of-factness, this is a hopeful message. It suggests that a life, no matter how ordinary, is important in the sense that it is representative of a collective experience. This significance is not lost on the reader, but Grainier himself is unaware of his role in the narrative and its movement toward the resolution of the central conflict. His encounter with Widow Clare Thompson is indicative of this obliviousness. Aboard his horse-and-cart, Thompson tells him, “I wanted to see if your impression of you matched up with mine is all, Robert...God needs the hermit in the woods as much as He needs the man in the pulpit. Did you ever think of that?” (95). Grainier has not, and his reaction is one of awe and even fear because

in this moment his identity is clear: he is a mythic intermediary between the natural world and human civilization.

Grainier's lack of self-awareness and his inability to place himself along a narrative continuum is due to his participation in the divisive narrative of American expansionism, which through aggression and erasure seeks to proclaim itself a mono-myth. A few months before the catastrophic fire, Grainier finds himself in the forests of northwestern Washington, working for the Simpson Company. The mentality of the loggers and other white settlers is represented in the character of Arn Peeples, who, believing trees to be killers, states, "It was only when you left it alone that a tree might treat you as a friend. After the blade bit in, you had yourself a war" (14-15). The action of cutting down a tree is removed from human agency in Peeples's statement. It is not a man who cuts down a tree, but a blade. By taking the destructive act out of human hands, Peeples is able to maintain distance and therefore innocence. It is not him who fell the tree. It just happened. And so when the tree turns from friend to foe, retaliation is justified. The loggers' "war," in other words, is fought in self-defense, further reinforcing the narrative that the natural world is wild, dangerous, and therefore must be tamed if humankind is to survive.

This moment occurs early in the novella, and though Grainier is in the company of these men, he also establishes himself as a character whose relationship with nature, though fraught with ambivalence and tragedy, is more nuanced than those of the men around him. While the loggers' mentality is steeped in the rhetoric of conquest, for Grainier, the forest is a peaceful, even familiar, place. "He liked the grand size of things in the woods, the feeling of being lost and far away, and the sense he had that with so many trees as wardens, no danger could find him" (14). Grainier instinctively senses that the forest is alive with forces that aid in humanity's well-being. His feeling of being protected turns the woods into a home-space and not a place of

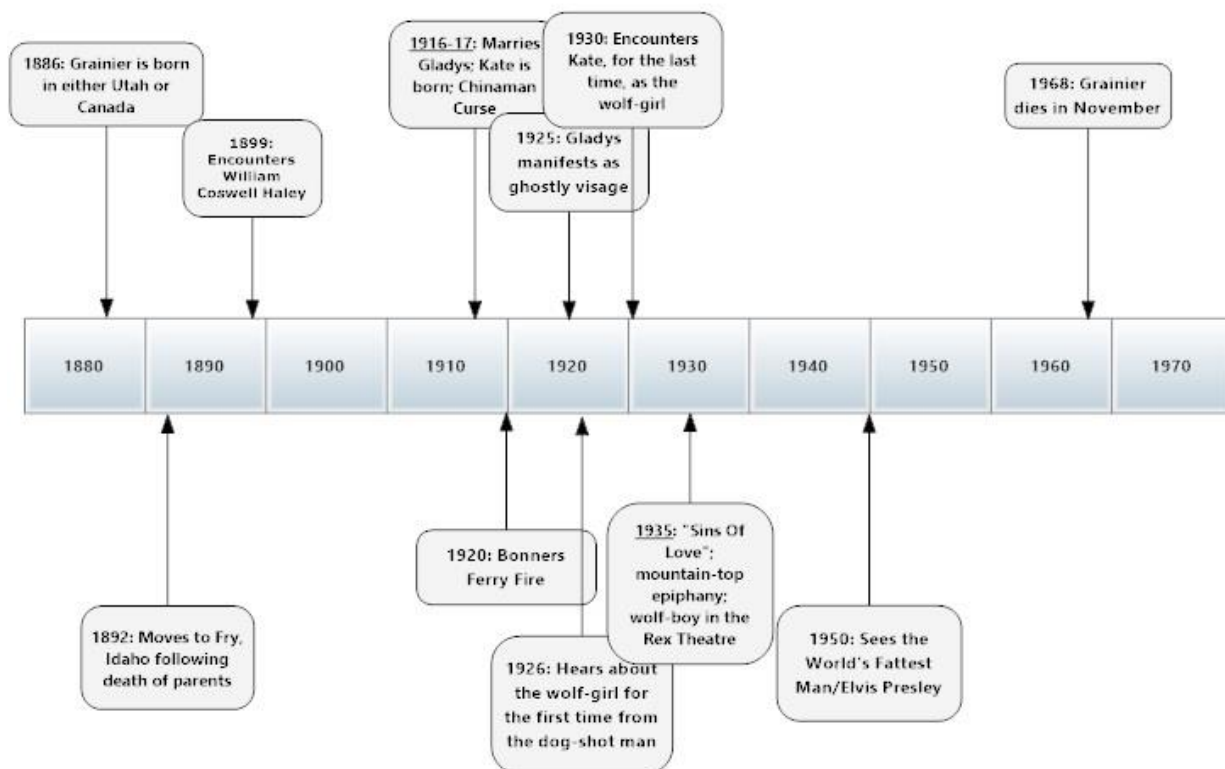


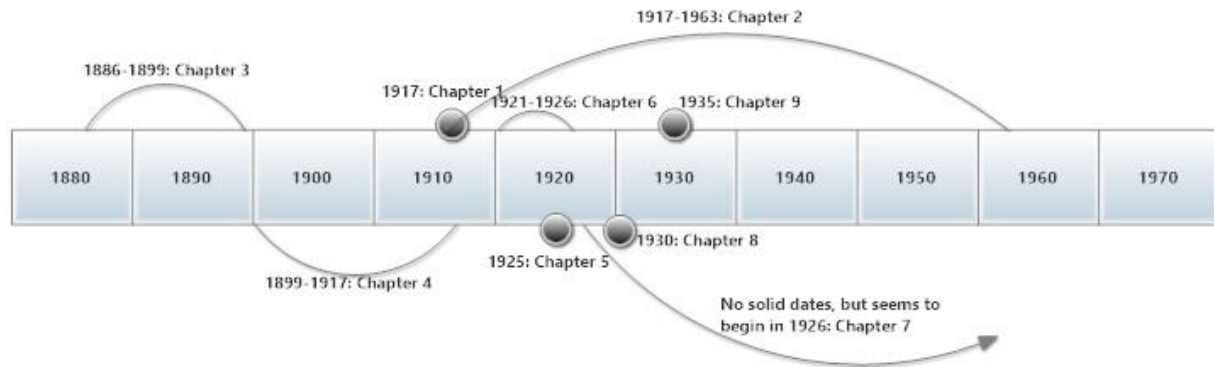
conflict, and explains why he will spend the rest of his life in the forest despite his family's death there. It is a small moment of characterization that goes a long way in establishing Grainier as the protagonist. Ordinary though he may feel himself to be, Grainier is more attuned to the natural world than he will ever realize. This may explain why his existence and death, linked to the recognition of nature-culture as holistic and not oppositional, are largely ignored by the communities of Bonners Ferry, preoccupied as they are with fighting nature in the name of civilization.

Grainier's initial participation in the self-righteous task of human conquest reflects the passive nature of his role as novella protagonist and mythic conduit. Industrial progress is not only divisive in the sense that it places human culture as separate from and superior to nature, but also linear, arguing that the only productive direction is the one forward. Heidegger feared that technological innovations would lead to human dependence on machines as both sources of productions and artificial narrative engines in which meaning is created as a resource to be consumed. Grainier's symbolic relationship with trains is indicative of this linear and consumptive relationship. Like a locomotive, like Peebles and his fellows, Grainier is, at first, bound to one trajectory, unable to remember or conceptualize his life as much more than the present moment in which it exists. As previously mentioned, Grainier's first ride on a train erased his early history, leaving him rootless. Grainier works for the railroad companies for many years, fully ready to participate in the conquest of the natural world. However, as events move towards the fire, Grainier experiences a brief moment of doubt as he watches the first locomotive cross Bonners Ferry gorge thanks to the bridge that he had helped build. "The men cheered and whooped. Grainier felt sad. He couldn't think why" (12-13). Though Grainier is in many ways an everyman, he is specifically placed in a position where he can feel that the movement of this

train represents the destruction of something important (a similar emotion occurred in the forest scene aforementioned and will occur at the moment of his mountaintop epiphany), but he cannot, and will never, fully comprehend the significance of his emotional responses.

Grainier's passivity, reflecting a life of having things done instead of doing and engaging with the consequences of his deeds, works in tandem with the novella's nonlinear structure. Because he is unable to remember his past or make sense of his present, Grainier's story is necessarily disjointed. The events of his life appear non-chronologically and his experiences and encounters have elliptical, often times symbol-laden, so that they seem to jut from and loop around the central conflict. Below are two visual representations of this structure. The first shows important events in chronological order, the second the span of time covered by each chapter.





Notice the continuity as well as the overlap the narrative takes in the second time line. Events occur non-chronologically, and though great expanses in time are portrayed in certain chapters, the thread eventually goes back to the Bonners Ferry fire in 1920. Thematic redevelopment and parallel events coalesce and with each loop, the theme complex grant these seemingly tangential stories more cohesive force, which then feed into the narrative, imbuing its overall significance with universal timelessness.

Indicative of the novella's mythic ties, the events of Grainier's life are important only if they contribute to a sustaining group narrative. The narrative is, at first, one of conquest and subjugation, but as events swirl towards and away from the fire, this singularity becomes holistic when it engages with the same Kootenai myths it seeks to erase. The plot of *Train Dreams*, Grainier's personal story, begins in 1917 and ends in 1935, and includes both the First World War as well as the Great Depression and Prohibition. Yet these major historical events are mentioned only fleetingly. WWI is important insofar as it affects the Panhandle's lumber industry. "The war in Europe had created a great demand for spruce. An armistice had actually been signed eighteen months before, but the captain believed an armistice to be only a temporary thing until the battles resumed and one side massacred the other to the last man" (19). Grainier overhears this sentiment in 1920. The armistice had actually ended the war. Likewise, Prohibition is mentioned only when it personally affects a member of the Bonners Ferry community. Kootenai Bob, an

important mythic figure, drinks himself to death on British Columbian shandy (54). The Panhandle's communities are isolated and independent, and therefore the big events of the twentieth century are felt as ripples, not waves. WWI and Prohibition are like the dates and facts in *Fiskadoro*. History means nothing if there is no thread holding it together, and this cohesive force seems to be most important element in creating a narrative's mythic importance regardless of whether it is universalism servicing particularity, or the opposite. The novella contains both. The events that happen to Grainier alone can also have communal meaning.

The overall significance derived from the central conflict undergoes tremendous change during and after the Bonners Ferry fire. This event triggers Grainier's attempts at understanding the natural world instead of simply tearing it down. However, because Grainier is still undoubtedly embedded in human culture and its desire for control, the awareness that he has been changed by the fire is fleeting, relegated again to instinctual emotional reactions even as he witnesses extraordinary and supernatural events, even as he discovers his personal connections to these events and the bigger picture they create. The fire rages and Grainier attempts dangerously and unsuccessfully to reach his family amidst choking smoke and ash, and “beneath the wondrous sky the black valley, utterly still, the rain moved through it making a great noise but unable to wake this dead world” (43). The train Grainier hears is the northbound Spokane International, halted in its tracks by the fire, and only now able to make its journey again. The train is in the far distance. Unlike before, Grainier is not part of the train's journey, he cannot even see it. Only the sounds as the train moves away from him can be sensed. The wildfire, a natural manifestation, has stopped human progress. It has rewritten the narrative for the people of Bonners Ferry, Grainier the most affected among them. Though Grainier does not understand the larger implications of what has happened, he feels its effects keenly. Surrounded by the debris

that used to be his home, he “saw no sign of their Bible, either. If the lord had failed to protect even the book of his own Word, this proved to Grainier that here had come a fire stronger than God” (45). Grainier's disillusionment is not only with the myth of progress, but also the divine mandate it uses to justify itself. His crisis is one of faith, and his journey out of grief is a movement, more complex this time, toward a different relationship with the sacred.

The ghostly visage of his deceased wife, which appears to him five years after the fire, affirms his mythic-religious journey from grief. Her appearance, like all other supernatural occurrences in the novel, is ambiguous in nature: “She shimmered and her light shook. Around her the shadows trembled. And then it was Gladys—nobody else—flickering and false, like a figure in a motion picture. She mourned for her daughter, who she couldn't find” (77). From Gladys, Grainier learns that Kate is still alive. This moment foreshadows the importance of the wolf symbol in the story. Gladys the ghost is tied to a “real” image through the description of her flicking like a motion picture. What is interesting is at this point in Grainier's life, he had yet to see a movie. This simile not only naturalizes the supernatural (the ghost is perhaps the hallucination of a grief-stricken mind), therefore revealing its hierophany, but also depersonalizes the moment, making it one that conceivably anyone could experience.

Gladys's presence does, however, aid Grainier in sorting out his the train dreams that caused him unrest: “He was on it; he could smell the coal smoke; a word went by. And then he was standing in that world as the sound of the train died. A frail familiarity in these scenes hinted to him that they came from his childhood. Sometimes he woke to hear the sound of the Spokane International fading up the valley and realized he'd been hearing the locomotive as he dreams” (76). This is the last time a train will appear in the novella, and Grainier's vast distance from it (it is a dream; it is “fading”) indicates his growing distrust of linearity and artificial dichotomies. He

cannot articulate his thoughts, but his behavior (the decision to remain on the land, for example) points to his desire to sort things out. The fire acts as the catalyst for this change in Grainier, and Gladys's appearance is the thematic redevelopment of the turning point.

The undermining of linearity and mono-narrativity reflects the growing importance of mythical holism to both Grainier's story and the overall narrative from this point on. Because the theme complex works by building parallel events as well as redeveloping thematic content, Gladys's ghostly visit not only marks the last mention of the trains and the linearity they symbolize, but also precedes sequentially (but not chronologically) by an event representing Grainier's gradual acceptance of circular narratives: he goes for a plane ride. Occurring in chapter 7, the only chapter where no concrete dates are offered, the plane's arching and looping movements cause Grainier discomfort, but eventually he "felt he might be getting accustomed to it all" (84). For Grainier, a character who has great difficulty compiling past events into a significant whole, the plane ride allows him to do just that:

The plane began to plummet like a hawk, steeper and steeper, its engine almost silent, and Grainier's organs pushed back against his spine. He saw the moment with his wife and child as they drank Hood's Sarsaparilla in their little cabin on a summer's night, then another cabin he'd never remembered before, the places of his hidden childhood, a vast golden wheat field, heat shimmering above a road, arms encircling him, a woman's crooning voice, and all the mysteries of this life were answered. (85)

The plane ride jostled something inside of Grainier, allowing him to make sense of things as well as enabling him to recall childhood memories long forgotten after the train ride to Idaho. Circular narratives, through Grainier's experiences, gain structural and thematic significance in this moment.

The awakening Grainier experiences on the biplane leads directly to the most significant mythic encounter in the text, revealing not only Grainier's irrevocable connection with the wilderness around him, but also the narrative's core tenet concerning mythic holism: he meets a supernatural spirit of the forest, the wolf-girl who also happens to be his daughter. Kate, having survived the fire, becomes the embodiment of culture-nature holism, an idea that troubles Grainier deeply he believes that nature is not only a dangerous place but also a site of perverse reproduction. The novella's theme complex builds and rebuilds significance through parallel events, and so this encounter, as well as its importance to the overall conflict, is established earlier in the text through the William Coswell Haley event. Grainier meets Haley, whose formal name evokes historical ties, but who in actuality is purely fictional, in 1899, after the amnesiac train ride to find his uncle following the deaths of his parents. Haley's appearance is describe in a supernatural light as "a mouth hole moving in a stack of leaves and rags and matted brown hair" (30). Haley himself perpetuates this image when he says, referring to his gangrenous leg, "That rot will travel till I'm dead right up to my eyes. Till I'm a corpse able to see things. Able to think its thoughts" (31). A theme begins to emerge through subtle redevelopment, the mysterious and malevolent nature of the woods as seen through the eyes of white inhabitants. Haley is a decaying natural presence, reflecting the narrative myth that places human culture in opposition to nature.

The Haley incident redevelops this theme again by foreshadowing a personal connection Grainier has with the environment. Before dying, Haley tells Grainier that he's led a tramping life due to consequences of the sexual abuse he perpetuated on his young niece ("I touched her, lifted her shift, did every little thing I want. Every little thing. And she never woke"), causing her father to beat her to death. "Little young Susan had a child in her, is what her mother told me.

And her father beat on her to drive that poor child out of her belly. Beat her till he'd killed her” (32, 33). Later, the narrator remarks that this “incident affected [Grainier] in a way nobody could have traced,” not even Grainier himself (35). From the encounter with Haley, the seeds of Grainier's fears are planted. Fears that will full manifest themselves in 1935, but from this point reveal themselves slowly in Grainier's relationship with his daughter, who's biological as well as familial connection to him places Grainier in a deep liminal space between the civilization he had help built and the wild he encounters on a daily basis. The thematic significance of the Haley moment is alluded to fleetingly, and the novella protagonist's distance from the reader, and from himself, prevents serious self-reflection. Grainier frequently thinks of his life's particulars, but the meaning he garners from them is framed in the moment he experiences them; in other words, he does not have the narrative thread that would allow him to see how they have all worked to shape him.

The figure of the wolf-girl as the site of man's tangible and productive relationship with the natural world finds its roots in Kootenai mythology as well as the revision of this narrative by white settlers. Myths abound in *Train Dreams*, and the blending of Christian myths with Kootenai supernaturalism allows the novella to organically break the boundaries between man and beast, real and unreal. Unlike the world that Christianity establishes, the Kootenai's world does not create a hierarchy of cosmological planes. There is no heaven above and earth below. Heaven is earth, and vice-verse. One only has to look in the right places to see that supernatural forces co-exist with humankind. In “Wolf and Two-Pointed Buck,” Claude Schaffer retells a Kootenai creation story. “Earlier occupants of the world island were invisible and powerful entities, able to transform themselves at will into human or animal form. In their faunal guises, the nupī'ka were endowed with human attributes which enabled them to live together in family



and band groups” (1-2). The myth explains that in the very beginning, the Supreme Being announced that one day humankind would come to earth, displacing the nupī’ka. Most of the supernaturals, though loath to leave their accustomed lives, accepted their fate. Several of them even prepared for humankind's arrival and the post-supernatural period: “Scarcely had the last spirit spoken and assumed his animal form to vanish in the forest, when the first humans were seen approaching in a canoe. Thus the supernatural period was brought to a close by the arrival of mankind” (3). This holistic worldview reflects the Kootenai Indians' relationship with the natural world. They hold the belief that the earth is inherently sacred and myths like the one above explain why they seek to live with the land, not shape it to their will.

The revisions and eventual erasure of Kootenai holism by American myths of expansion and progress have discernable historical and socio-economic consequences. Because myth-making is an evolutionary impulse aiding human survival and expansion, the narrative that the land is something to be controlled was also used as justification for ceasing territory as well as for the “civilizing” campaigns implemented by white settlers that are indicative of the long history of Native American exploitation and general cultural destruction. A blatant example can be seen in the remarks made by Idaho governor George L. Shoup in 1889, who argues that unless the Kootenai Indians be “compelled” to cultivate the land in accordance with modern agriculture methods, they will continue to live “clustered together in camps or villages” where little progress can be made. Shoup further states that it is in the nature of the male Indian to be lazy because they are taught that “useful avocation” is disgraceful, or otherwise beneath them, and that “as long as permitted to live this way, and fed and clothed by the Government, their time will be wasted in idleness and mischievous roaming over the country, and in gambling, horse-racing, and other amusements peculiar to the Indians” (Blank 48). Obvious falsehoods aside (one wonders,

for example, who introduced “gambling, horse-racing, and other amusements” to the Indians in the first place), Shoup's speech reveals a belief that progress can only be created through decisive war against nature's presumed savagery.

Nature, however, is never just one thing, and Grainier's encounters with the wilderness reveals this complexity. The Kootenai Indians figure into the story through a character fittingly called Kootenai Bob. Grainier first meets Bob in the summer of 1921, some ten months after Gladys and Kate died in the fire. In the interim, Grainier has made his way back to the charred land where his home once stood, and rebuild a cabin in its place. “In early June the red dog appeared, took up residence in a corner, and whelped a brood of four pups that appeared quite wolfish” (52). Grainier tells Bob about the wolfish pups, to which the latter responds, “Might be you've got yourself some dog-of-wolf. Might be you've started your own pack, Robert” (53). Kootenai Bob's appearances elaborate the tenuous nature between human and beast, revealing the possibility that one can be both. When Grainier tells him that he has been attempting to teach one of the pups how to howl, Bob replies, “Howling are you? There it is for you, then. That's what happens, that's what they say. There's not a wolf alive that can't tame a man” (55). Grainier's habitual howling has a cathartic affect; “it flushed out something heavy that tended to collect in his heart” (53). Howling allows Grainier to tap into a deeper connection with his environment.

The howl is a form of communication; it is a language all its own, and the ritualistic way Grainier participates in the act reflects a sort of spiritual communion in a lost and dying tongue. Howling helps him regain control, albeit an indecipherable one. The bond between the natural world and Grainier becomes stronger in the years following the fire. He is fully immersed in it, visiting Bonners Ferry only when he needs to, and even attempts to speak its language,

participating in an act of mythic reconstruction.

The red dog and her semi-wild offspring are symbolic figures who foreshadow the theme of supernatural cross-breeding and the porous border between human civilization and an untamed, natural state later portrayed in the figure of the wolf. Kootenai legend has it that while the vast majority of the supernaturals accepted that their time would end when humankind arrived, Wolf, stubborn and prideful, refused to relinquish his claims on the land (Fisher 123). The story goes that shortly before the end of the supernatural period, the Deer and Wolf people lived in harmony along the Kootenai River. One day, the second oldest of three Wolf brothers decided to marry into the Deer clan. He chose Young Doe because he had long admired the moccasins that the Deer people wore and knew that Doe was the finest craftswoman among the members of her tribe. When the moccasins Doe crafts are not to his liking, Wolf takes it as a personal affront, and what follows is a tale of vendetta with Wolf and his brothers hunting down and killing members of the Deer clan. To make their task easier, Wolf runs to the top of the tallest mountain and sings for three kinds of weather to immobilize his prey (Schaeffer 8-12). Fortunately, Two-Pointed Buck, the leader of the Deer people, had sensed Wolf's plans and prepared his people for the onslaught, ensuring the survival of most of the clan (16).

This myth not only offers an explanation for the predator-prey relationship between the two animal groups, but also explains the history behind many Kootenai rituals. Wolf's weather calling reflects the Lower Kootenai's own mid-winter hunting ceremonies. As Schaeffer explains, "The game-calling rights were designed to bring back into Kutenai territory the deer enticed away through the magical powers of alien shamans. If the ground happened to be snow-free at this season, the songs of Wolf were sung to bring snow and then crust its surface, so that deer hunting would be facilitated" (6). The Kootenai Wolf songs, like Grainier's howling, are rituals

designed to evoke a personal spiritual connection with the natural world. Unlike the Kootenai, however, Grainier does not understand the motivation besides his act outside his emotional response to it (howling makes him feel better while he does it) because he lacks the narrative that would connect his feelings to the impulse behind the act which causes them. It is only when the connection is made more apparent with the introduction of the wolf-girl myth that Grainier is able to take a step closer to his epiphany.

Grainier's relationship to the wolf reveals his attempts to reconcile the dichotomous narrative told to him by his community with a much more complicated personal story. Grainier learns about the wolf-girl, a supernatural force who inhabits the woods around Bonners Ferry, through Peterson, the dog-shot-man, who himself heard it from Kootenai Bob. Peterson tells Grainier that after disappearing for a few days, his own dog had returned a changed creature. "That dog *knew* things—because of what happened to him, which is what Kootenai Bob the Indian told me about him—that animal all of a sudden *knew* things" (68). Bob had told Peterson that the dog was tainted by his interactions with the wolf-girl. Peterson goes on to explain Kootenai spiritual belief and its relationship with Christianity. "You know they believe in Christ...The Kootenais—in Christ, and angels, and devils, and creatures God didn't create, like half-wolves. They believe in just about anything funny or witch or religious they hear about. The Kootenais call animals to be people. 'Coyote-person,' 'Bear-person,' and such a way of talking" (71). This willingness to combine myths reflects the Kootenai Indians' ability to create narratives that defy dichotomies. Christian and Pagan gods can co-exist. One can be both human, and not. And because Grainier spends the years following his family's death living alone in the woods, with an occasional dog as his only companion, he too begins to see binaries break down, though he will have a much more difficult time coming to terms with this knowledge.

The wolf-girl myth, as Pederson proceeds to tell it, rewrites humanity's relationship with the environment, turning the narrative of nature as a benevolent mother figure into something unnatural by personifying nature in the distorted figure of the wolf-girl. The holism inherent in this myth—that one can be both beast and human, or more precisely, that the two are in some ways identical—creates discomfort for the white inhabitants of the Panhandle, because it undermines hegemony by rendering identity fluid. There can be no cultural superiority if identity can be shifted, if whiteness can be infiltrated. This fear is explicitly realized when Pederson describes the wolf-girl's ability to take on the voice of other people after tasting their blood. “She'll be blood-drunk and running along the roads talking in your own voice...In your own voice she'll go to the window of every person you did a dirty to, and tell them what you did” (70). The wolf-girl is a “creature God didn't create. She was made out of wolves and a man of unnatural desires” (71). She is not only a trickster figure, one whose actions create discord to humanity's understanding of itself, but also a created and creative force.

The wolf-girl's birth is a product of human culture's direct interaction with nature. Her actions maintain this relationship. Pederson states, “Stout's cousin visiting from Seattle last Christmas saw [the wolf-girl], and he said she had a bloody mess hanging down between her legs...Bob the Kootenai feller said some of them want to believe it was the afterbirth or some part of a wolf-child torn out of her womb” (70-71). This story attempts to reaffirm the separation between nature and human culture, implicitly arguing that any relationship with the natural world not based on conquest of it leads to perversity. However, the novella deconstructs this narrative by creating a protagonist who is more in-tuned with the wilderness than his fellow white settlers, as well as making Grainier's daughter an iteration of the same wolf-girl the white inhabitants fear so deeply.

If the wolf-girl is a product of an unnatural sexual relationship between man and beast, then Grainier's marriage and his connection to the natural world take on a sexual dimension. Grainier's relationship with his daughter is, from the beginning of the novella, tenuous and fills him with confusion and fear. Kate's wild existence is foreshadowed early on as Grainier looks at his then four-month-old daughter: "In the dark he felt his daughter's eyes turned on him like a cornered brute's. It was only his thoughts tricking him, but it poured something cold down his spine" (9). Her characterization throughout the entirety of the novella is always that of a wild animal, never interacting with human civilization before her transformation due to her very young age at the time of the fire and the fact that the Grainier family lived very far away from town—it takes Grainier "several days" to reach his charred home from Bonners Ferry (44).

Kate is wild through and through, and her appearance causes a sudden shift in the plot, leading directly to its ending. It does not take long for Grainier to recognize the creature, feral, injured, and whimpering outside his cabin ten years after the fire, as his daughter Kate: "Nothing about her told him that. He simply knows. This was his daughter...But her eyes only watched in flat terror, like a wolf's. Still. Still and all. Kate she was, but Kate no longer" (101). Grainier bandages his daughter's injuries and in the morning she leaves. He never attempts to track her down, but her visit had "shocked" him into making the vow that he would stay on this land for the rest of his life (98). His daughter, no longer his daughter, binds him to the wilderness and perhaps his lifetime of howling is an attempt at communicating with her. "Kate she was, but Kate no longer" reflects the girl's liminal nature as both human and beast, and links her to the Kootenai myths as a supernatural spirit, a *nupī'ka*. This in turn imbues Grainier with extraordinary characteristics, because it was partially through him that Kate was born. There is a sense, however, that Grainier has no control over his part in these narratives. His human qualities,

his participation in civilization and its expansion, create a disconnection that never allows him to fully understand his relationship to these myths, even as he participates in their creation.

The theme complex goes to work immediately in this moment and the unease the wolf-girl, and all the mythic significance surrounding her, is redeveloped in the next chapter in which he comes “into a short season of sensual lust greater than any he’d experienced as a younger man” (105). On this particular Sunday in 1935, Grainier encounters “two half-breed witch-women” in the fairgrounds of Bonners Ferry (106). The two Kootenai women are selling wolfish-pups as well as a bobcat in a willow cage. It is when Grainier leans in to examine the bobcat that his lust is sparked. “The cat had big paws with feathery tufts, as if it wore the same kind of boots as its women captors. The older woman had her leg so Grainier could see her calf. She scratched at it, leaving long white rakes on the flesh. The sight so clouded his mind...He knew something bad had happened inside him” (107). The conflation of the bobcat with the two women, and Grainier’s arousal at their joint visage reinforces his ambivalent relationship with nature, particularly his relationship with the wolf-girl and his part in the myth of her birth. His “sensual lust” blurs the line between culture and nature in a physical, unavoidable way. It invests Grainier deeply in nature's perpetuation and undermines the dichotomous narrative Grainier believes in even through his shaken faith in it. This makes him deeply uncomfortable (he calls his lust “lecherous half-thoughts”), and it only gets worst from here.

The cross-breeding theme is rapidly redeveloped when, upon leaving the two Kootenai women, Grainier finds himself attracted to a theater advertisement in Bonners Ferry that promises graphic depictions of “Sins Of Love” like abortions, natural births, blood transfusions, and “A Real Caesarian Operation” (108). Grainier returns to his isolated cabin where he attempts to extricate his dark desires by lying naked on a pallet he erects in the yard. After several nights

dreaming of eternal hellfire, Grainier finally exorcises his inner demons, not by the help of Christianity and its god, but by reestablishing a connection with nature:

At sunset, all progress stopped. He was standing on a cliff. . . Beyond, he saw the Canadian Rockies still sunlit, snow-peaked, a hundred miles away, as if the earth were in the midst of its own creation. . . The forests that filled his life were so thickly populous and so tall that generally they blocked him from seeing how far away the world was, but right now it seemed clear there were mountains enough for everybody to get his own. The curse had left him, and the contagion of his lust drifted off and settled into one of those distant valleys. (112)

It is a moment of profound revelation as Grainier realizes that the disjointed relationship with nature—the one that humanity must conquer, or be conquered—he was taught to believe does not hold true. He is finally able to literally see the forest for the trees and realizes that coexistence is possible, has always been possible.

The moment above retells the scene of Judea-Christian spiritual communion commonly found in literature, particularly among the Romantics. In *Natural Supernaturalism*, M.H. Abrams explains that the “insistent and haunting image of the consummation of all things as the celebration of a sacred marriage had its roots in the ancient Old Testament concept of marriage as a form of covenant with Israel by the metaphor of marriage between the people of the Lord” (42-43). Abrams proceeds to explain that the belief that the relationship between humanity and the divine constituted a personal and sexual connection is based on the idea the myth that the Apocalypse will be heralded by the marriage between God and his Chosen People as described in the Book of Revelations. In this context, apocalypse does express its conventional meaning of fire, brimstone, and eternal damnation. Rather, as Abram explains, it “signifies a vision in which



the old world is replaced by a new and better world” (41). The Apocalypse, like a wildfire, makes room for growth.

Though it cannot be argued effectively that Johnson had this particular notion of apocalypse in mind when writing *Train Dreams*, the symbolism of a marriage between humanity and a spiritual force is clear, though it is at first perverted. As the novella progresses, this mono-narrative is peeled away through the various experiences Grainier has in his forest home, culminating in the revelation on top of the cliff. Standing there, he sees the world “in the midst of its own creation,” reflecting the cyclical nature of renewal found not only in naturalist stories of the Kootenai Indians, but also in the stories of the Bible. By combining myths from different cultural sources, *Train Dreams* is able to show them in harmony with one another, undermining the culture-nature binary, and by doing so reaffirm narrative's roots in human knowledge and its power to recreate that knowledge.

The end of the plot, however, does not constitute the resolution of the central conflict. As the novella protagonist, Grainier's realizations are strongly based on instinctual reactions (this feels right; this does not feel right) and even the moment atop the cliff, when he realizes as if through epiphany that the curse of sinful lust had been lifted, is marked by ambivalence. He returns to his cabin and sleeps soundly, missing the live “Sins Of Love” performances, and later remarks that he does not know whether this meant “he'd saved himself or deprived himself” (113). Though Grainier does acquire knowledge throughout the course of the text, the lessons are learned alone—he never gets a chance to confirm the validity of these potential truths with anyone else. Nor is he able to articulate the importance of his cumulative experience. Because the novella form does not allow for in-depth character interactions, and because this particular novella's content rests on a character who chooses isolation, the overall meaning of the text is

pulled out of Grainier's particular human experience, and placed into a metaphorical space.

The character distance created by the novella form highlights the reader's task in the reconstruction of events towards the resolution of the central conflict. Grainier does not remark on his epiphany after his experience of it, and in the last chapter his role is further diminished as he becomes an indistinguishable part of his community, reflecting myth's role in collective meaning-making. The wolf returns, this time manifested as a costumed performer, a "counterfeit monster." Two weeks after Grainier rids himself of the curse, and he sits in the darkened auditorium of the Rex Theater. Grainier consciously notes that he is "amid a crowd of people pretty much like himself—his people, the hard people of the northwestern mountains. . ." (115). The moment builds in anticipation of the wolf-boy's appearance, the literal and symbolic final act. "He wore a mask of fur, and a suit that looked like fur but was really something else. Shining in the electric light, silver and blue, the wolf-boy frolicked and gamboled around the stage in such a way the watchers couldn't be sure if he meant to be laughed at." The audience, Grainier included, is not impressed by the performance. They take pride in being able to discern the behavior of a real wolf from an artifice. They could, in other words, discern between what is real and unreal, and so they "were ready to laugh in order to prove they hadn't been fooled." Embedded in this confidence, however, is the guilt and shame that suggests its own frailty.

As Grainier and his people are preparing to laugh at the wolf-boy, they remember what else had proven deceptive. They remember that "they had given their money to preachers who had lifted their hearts and baptized scores of them and who had later rolled around drunk in the Kootenai village and fornicated with squaws" (115). The dichotomous myth of Christianity, used to justify hegemony by placing white culture against Kootenai supernaturalism, is undercut. Again, the holism of nature-culture is shown through the act of sex and the sacred marriage

between the Christian God and his people is undermined—it is not God that the preachers are communing with. The purity of this mono-narrative is tainted not only by sex, but also by drunkenness, a characteristic evolutionarily accurate but willfully misattributed as a determining characteristic of the Native American population in order to justify their subjugation and exploitation. At the very least, this small but powerful moment shows that there are many ways to live, but due to the distance the novella form creates, the reader cannot be sure whether or not Grainier and his fellows understand the significance of this moment as well.

Howling, a wild act and one that Grainier has made a habit throughout his life, is here transformed from the ritual of an eccentric and lonely hermit to a symbol of universal communication. The audience in the Rex Theater laughs at the wolf-boy, but are silenced “when he stood still at center stage, his arms straight out from his shoulders, and went rigid, and began to tremble with a massive inner dynamism.” The “counterfeit monster” lets loose an awe-inspiring howl that coalesced in “the originating ideal of all such sounds ever made, of the foghorn and the ship’s horn, the locomotive’s lonesome whistle, of opera singing and the music of flutes and the continuous moaning music of bagpipes. And suddenly it all went black. And that time was gone forever” (116). It is the call and call-back of human culture and history—the myth created from all the other myths found in the story.

Those last lines signify a connection with the world that humanity no longer possesses. The narrative is lost, or at the very least misinterpreted. It reflects a cultural distancing due to the novella’s attempt to show how the two sides are intertwined. The changes in human interactions with nature also affects how the species create culture and view history. This is, in a sense, the real tragedy *Train Dreams* presents, that myths can be forgotten, that universality can be shifted, even shorn. However, through the act of mythic reconstruction, the act the reader partakes in

simply by reading the text, there is a sense that despite the finite nature of the ending, culture and nature are still connected, that humanity still has ties with the natural world, ties that can be rebuilt and strengthened. Dissanayake explains, concerning the aesthetics of control that motivates meaning-making, that once “something is shaped, made comprehensible and structured, it may appear more real than life, and take on a life of its own” (78). And because the “something” here is the novella form, the narrative is able to be both personal and universal, and in this way belongs to one as well as many. There is a sense that this reconstructive act leads to a new narrative, one that is holistic and restorative. On that suggests that, that time is gone, but perhaps not forever.

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