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Paper 1

Fault in the Hero: Boone Caudill's Treatment of Women in A.B. Guthrie Jr.'s *The Big Sky*

In A. B. Guthrie Jr.'s *The Big Sky*, the main character Boone Caudill is a rugged frontiersman who lives a rough life in the West. While he has many qualities, such as resilience and strength, that help him sustain his way of life in such a rough atmosphere, it is his faults that are his undoing. Boone's fault comes from his inability to show emotion, to communicate with, and to respect the women he loves.

Boone's inability to show emotion to women in his life is evident from his earliest interactions in the novel with his mother. After he fights his father and decides to leave town, Boone sees his mother as "her eyes wouldn't come level with his" and "he saw that she looked like a tired, sad rabbit, her eyes round and watery and her nose twitching. He felt his face twist suddenly and his throat knot and the tears about to come" (Guthrie 7). Her voice is a "rusty whisper" as she says, "Good luck to ye, Boone" (Guthrie 7). While Boone does seem to have a lot emotion in this scene, he holds back and leaves his mother with a simple "goodbye" and not so much as an embrace (Guthrie 7). It is only later, alone in a stranger's barn, that Boone lets his emotions out as he thinks of his mother and his home: "a sob broke in his throat. He turned his face against the flank of the cow and let himself cry. 'Good luck to you, too, Ma,' he said" (Guthrie 13). While at this point in the novel Boone is letting his emotions out to some extent,

he is unable to show this sensitive side to his mother. One explanation for this can be found in John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism*, as he states, "Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance" (582). While Boone is still showing some emotion, it will, according to Mill, appear less and less as Boone neglects to foster these emotions.

His deficient emotional skills become obvious in his relationship with his wife Teal Eye. We see a noteworthy example of this when Boone's friend Jim brings Teal Eye a gift from his travels. After Jim gives Teal Eye a looking glass, Boone notices that "Teal Eye made a little noise in her throat as she took it" (Guthrie 268). In what appears to be Boone's response to Jim's gift, Boone catches "Teal Eye's glance and [makes] a gesture with his head. 'I left a beaver outside'" (Guthrie 268). After this, Teal Eye immediately "went outside to skin the beaver" (Guthrie 268). While an Indian woman like Teal Eye, who has grown up in the West would undoubtedly understand the importance of having a spouse who provides food for her, she is still a woman who obviously appreciates a special gift. Boone's response to Jim's gift appears to convey his equating of the two gifts. While this is a small instance, it is significant in noting Boone's inability to show his feelings to his wife. He directly mentions his feelings about showing emotion when he states that "[h]e drew back from showing Jim what was inside of him, as he drew back from showing Teal Eye, feeling weak and shamed for them to see" (Guthrie 333). His failure to show emotion is easily recognized throughout the novel. This inability to show emotion is also visible in the main character Shane from the film *Shane* directed by George Stevens, and also written by A.B. Guthrie. While Shane has feelings for Marian Starett, he says nothing to her. The difference here, however, is that Boone is married to Teal Eye, while Marian is married to Joe. It would be inappropriate for Shane to be open with his feelings to Marian.

After his first meal with the family, he tells her that “it was an elegant dinner” (*Shane*). While his remark may seem like a simple courtesy, he says it with an apparent understanding that the compliment would mean a lot to a woman who probably rarely has the opportunity to entertain new guests. And while Shane may not speak his emotions, he shows a great deal of tenderness toward Marian in these little ways. In contrast, Boone does not show very much tenderness to Teal Eye even if does feel it. When Boone first reunites with Teal Eye, before they are married, he does seem quite tender as he nonverbally shows his feelings: “He pointed at her and at himself and brought the tips of his forefingers together in the sign for a tepee. All the time it was like his eyes speaking to her and her eyes answering, saying things that couldn’t be said with words or all understood by the mind” (Guthrie 254). The moment, however, is fleeting and Boone and Teal Eye do not share another moment comparable to this for the rest of the novel. As Mill states, this kind of nobler feeling “speedily dies away if the occupations to which [a man’s] position in life has devoted [him], and the society into which it has thrown [him], are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise” (582). Boone’s admiration for the rough lifestyle of the West likely leads to his dismissal of such tender actions.

Another one of Boone’s most obvious faults appears in his inability to communicate. Throughout the novel other characters note Boone’s reticent nature. This becomes most problematic in his relationships with the women in the novel. When Boone tells Teal Eye that he will be leaving, she asks him, “You will come back?” (Guthrie 283). Boone answers with a vague description of how long he will be. Teal Eye then asks, “You will come back to the Piegans?” with the obvious emphasis on the difference of whether he will come back to the group (Guthrie 283). Boone angrily responds, “I told you once I would!” and, after Teal Eye tells him that she will look for him every day, he says, “I reckon you could get yourself another man,

if it came to that” (Guthrie 283). Teal Eye had reason to worry about Boone coming back to the group after overhearing his argument with Red Horn (273), but Boone does not make this connection and Teal Eye is left to walk away “as if what he had said had hurt her” (283). His inability to converse leads him to jump to conclusions, ignore his wife’s already hurt feelings, and suggest that “Jim would take you, I reckon” (283). This scene illustrates his inability to read Teal Eye’s emotions as well as sufficiently communicate with her.

Lastly, what is arguably Boone’s most damning flaw is his disrespect for women. When he begins to ponder whether his pregnant wife Teal Eye will have a boy or a girl, he hopes for a boy thinking, “[s]quaws didn’t grow up to be fighting men with scalps on their leggings and gun covers. Squaws’ lives weren’t much no matter what” (324). While Boone does happily contemplate his life with Teal Eye, he disturbingly notes that “[h]e reckoned he never would take a second woman in his lodge, and never have to cut Teal Eye’s nose off, either, the way a Piegan did when he found his woman had lain in secret with another man” (259). It is disturbing that Boone considers this practice at all, but, after having the thought, he thinks that he would not “have to cut” her nose off. It is not that he sees the act as inappropriate, but only that he thinks he will have no cause to employ it.

Most of Boone’s thoughts concerning Teal Eye are not related to any of her character traits or personal intricacies, but her submission to him. When Boone meets Dick Summers’ wife and is annoyed by her advising Dick not to get drunk, he thinks, “Teal Eye would know, looking at him with her big eyes not saying anything, letting him have his way, not thinking he was right or wrong or drunk or sober but just that he was himself. Just that he was her man” (379). Here, Boone does not show value for Teal Eye as an individual with a personality of her own, but as a wife who knows to shut up and show gratitude that she is somehow lucky enough to be with

Boone. In another instance, Boone fondly thinks of something he respects about his wife: “It was one of the things he prized her for, that she didn’t argue” (283). He does not follow this statement with any other, more sentimental descriptions of what he values in Teal Eye.

A similar disrespect is obvious in John Wayne’s character Tom Doniphon from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. While Tom obviously cares for Hallie, most of his conversations with her end with his telling her, in a very demeaning way, “you sure are pretty when you’re angry Hallie” (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*). In Hosle and Roche’s article “Vico’s Age of Heroes and the Age of Men in John Ford’s Film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*”, they say that Ranse is the patronizing one, but it is Tom who does not respect Hallie’s wish to become educated. When he finds her in Ranse’s classroom with the other students, he says, “Hallie go on back where you belong. I don’t want you going to school in no shooting gallery” (*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*). While he disguises his remark as concern for her well-being, his comment about her going back where she belongs clearly shows disrespect for her interest in learning. If she belongs in her family’s kitchen, then it does not really matter if she is in danger at the schoolhouse or not; he suggests she should not be there regardless because she does not belong there.

While Boone does sweetly say that “One woman was enough” for a man “if she was the right one” (259), he quickly follows this with what he views as Teal Eye’s qualities: “Teal Eye never whined or scolded or tried to make a man something else than what he was by nature, but just took him and did her work and was happy” (259). While he starts by discussing the importance of finding the right woman, he follows it with the banal description of Teal Eye as obedient and content, much like one might describe a good dog. As if his limited description of her personality were not enough to prove his lack of respect for Teal Eye as an individual, he

follows in the next sentence with a physical description of her saying, “She had got a little heavier lately but was still well-turned in her body” (259). It is only up to conjecture to assume what Boone could have said about her had she gained too much weight for his liking. The first thing he mentions about his mother, after not having seen her for a number of years, is that “she overflowed the chair she sat on, being big-hipped” (362). He also mentions Teal Eye’s size when he thinks about her being pregnant and wonders if by the time he returns she will have “birthed the young one now and would be slimmed down” (324). It is clear by the number of times that he mentions her size that is definitely of importance to him and very much affects his view of her.

One of the most disturbing examples of Boone’s disrespect for women appears in his sexual encounter with Nancy. He shows his annoyance as she “put talk in the way and made piddling dodges, pretending all the time not to know the prime thing that brought a man and woman together” and he “sat wondering, with an edge of anger in him, how a man went about making up to a white woman (Guthrie 374-375). When Nancy does not catch on to Boone’s blatant hinting, Boone becomes more forceful. He uses his arm to squeeze “her to him and bore her back while his mouth hunted on her face” (375). Boone continues to force Nancy even after she tells him no and “her back stiffened against his pull” knowing that “the make-believe was gone” (Guthrie 375). Afterwards, when Nancy asks, “When’ll we be married, Boone?”, he thinks how “he had wanted this women and now he had had her and never wanted her again. In him there was only a deadness, the numb deadness of a man sure enough about dead” (Guthrie 375). As Mill says, men “addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying” (582). Nancy is not an inferior person, but her relationship with Boone is inferior to that of his with Teal Eye. Boone, in his hurt over losing

Teal Eye, not only uses Nancy, but also forces her to have sex with him and then leaves “her sobbing in the grass” (Guthrie 376).

Boone’s disrespect for women is also clear in his encounter with Dick Summers’ wife. Boone is angered when Dick’s wife tries to look out for his best by saying, “Liquor don’t set good with him no more. Too old to drink is what I tell him and tied up with rheumatics. I hope you won’t be temptin’ him to get hisself drunk” (379). Her response is hardly bossy, but more informative than anything. She tells Boone of what she has previously told Dick, and says that she “hopes” Boone will not tempt him to get drunk. Boone does not appreciate this as he “looked at the ground, feeling the blood stir in him. It wasn’t right for a woman to plague a man, leave alone an honest-to-God man like Dick. She ought to leave him be, like a Blackfoot woman would know to do, like Teal Eye would know” (379). This scene shows the extent of Boone’s disrespect as he describes Dick’s wife as plaguing Dick. Boone is unable to see the care in the remark and sees it only as an act of insubordination by a disobedient wife. Boone’s response to the remark is also reminiscent of his father. At the beginning of the novel, after his dad accuses him of drinking and causing trouble, Boone’s mother tries to stand up for him saying, “If he did, he come by it honest” (4). Boone’s dad cruelly responds, “It ain’t for the calf to beller like the bull. You keep your long nose out of this, old woman” (4). As much as he despises his father, Boone appears to have embraced some of his father’s beliefs.

While Boone shows many strengths in his ability to withstand the harsh frontier, it is his inability to show emotion, communicate with, and give respect to the women in his life that causes his downfall. It seems that Boone’s concern for being a rugged man in the West and his lack of concern for many other character traits and qualities cause him to have a terrible oversight. At the end of the novel, Boone wanders away from Dick Summers’ house with no

apparent destination. Without his wife, Teal Eye, Boone is unable to truly feel the happiness he once felt for the West. Although Boone is told at the beginning of the novel that the West is disappearing due to new settlers, it is Boone's troubles with women, Teal Eye in particular, that makes the West lost for him.

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