

Lois Steinbeck

Professor Karen Henderson

Montana Literature 213

3 May 2023

Montana Treasure: Language in Its Literature

Oro y Plata – gold and silver – is the state motto of Montana, the Treasure state. Another very rich, valuable Montana treasure is the language created by its writers. These authors effectively employ and rely on characteristics of Montana even when they write about universal topics not entirely unique to the state. Montana authors use the wind, landscape, animals, and crops to animate characters, paint unique, visual pictures, create an almost instant emotional response, and illustrate the human condition.

Wind figures prominently in Montana literature, just as wind is a significant element of the state's environment. In *Winter Wheat*, Ellen describes the vastness of the wind in eastern Montana. "I got the notion while we were listening that wind in this part of the county, so far inland from water, is kind of a big dry sea, itself" (Walker 237). Not only is Montana wind as big as an ocean, it can also be ferocious. Montana has "real wind that blows dirt into your eyes and hair and between your teeth and roars in your ears after you've gone inside" (3). Wind has a presence in Montana life and literature – expansive and intense.

Montana authors use wind to explain elements of a character's personality. Nica, the love interest in "A Woman Among Them, Painting," is described as "petulant as any wind" (Kwansy 266). In *Winter Wheat*, Warren Harper's mother reflects on his birth saying "I remember how the wind blew. I've thought maybe that was why he was so strong-willed and set on having his own way" (Walker 214). Wind, used to explain both stubbornness and moodiness, easily establishes central tenets of a character's personality.

Wind is used to amplify a character's feelings. In *Winter Wheat* when Ellen considers how fragile her relationship with Gil had been, she thinks of their plans, their love "crumpled into so much dust . . . The wind could blow it away like topsoil" (Walker 91). When Ellen comes home after quitting her teaching job, she thinks "I was almost glad of the wind. I didn't feel still or calm, myself" (262). Wind easily conveys the emotional pain of a seemingly solid relationship that implodes like wind scattering dust and the internal tumult of a character by imagining the wind whirling inside her.

Another of Montana's enduring characteristics is its vast landscape. Authors use the landscape to emphasize how small, alone, and ungrounded a person can feel. In *Winter Wheat*, Ellen headed to a first job away from home in the flat plains thinks "[t]he emptiness surrounded me and swept over me until I was nothing" (Walker 147). A part-time resident driving back to Montana says "[t]he night beyond our high beams obliterates all horizons, all distinctions between land and sky. . . Nothing but the ground beneath me tells me that gravity exists" (Meloy 301). Writers use the Montana landscape to reinforce the smallness and sometimes solitary nature of human existence.

Montana authors note the desolation of the state's landscape capturing it starkly, sometimes poignantly describing its deadly allure. A cowboy driving across Montana takes a road that "ran to the riveredge and stopped, as though enticing travelers in the face of such barrenness to choose the consolation of cold perpetual sleep" (Zupan 284). Another character, on his way to a boxing match felt an apartness "without fully understanding what it was: knowing only that it had to do with the emptiness of that land, especially in winter" (McMahon 198). Montana authors use the Montana landscape to portray the loneliness and emptiness all persons sometimes suffer.

Authors use Montana's landscape for the opposite of effect as well, illustrating feelings of spirituality and awe. In *Winter Wheat*, Ellen tells one of her students how she

thinks God speaks “in the things we see in the country and in the snow and the skies and the mountains and the grass. If you don’t like this country God couldn’t speak to you through it” (Walker 215). In *The Big Sky*, mountain men sitting “under the sky and watch[ing] the stars or moon and listen[ing] to running water . . . would feel a pushing inside . . . a reaching for things [they] couldn’t single out” (Guthrie 693). Montana authors use the Montana landscape to embody the voice of God and to show how the landscape can inspire deep emotions – even in hardened, solitary men.

Animals also figure prominently in the language of Montana literature as they do in the environment and history of the state. In *Breaking Clean*, Judy Blunt describes a treacherous trip to the doctor over roads that had turned into gumbo mud. When the pickup leaves the muddy road and turns onto the highway into town, it was “easy to imagine the pickup blowing and trembling like a winded horse” (274). In *Winter Wheat*, in another challenging drive through and exit from a muddy place in the road “the truck plunged ahead like a sheep coming out of the sheep dip” (Walker 83). Both these depictions of traversing mud give the reader a vivid picture of the difficulty by imbuing the vehicles with qualities of animals working to the extreme and escaping, exhausted and terrified, from a bad situation.

Animals are also used to depict characters in Montana literature. Soja, an immigrant settled in Butte, is described by her husband as “[t]here were times when she appeared wistful, fragile as a hatchling chick” (Pavelich 91). Although Soja is a strong, independent woman, this language provides a ready image of the difficulty of being a stranger in a strange land. Vera, a character in *Winter Wheat*, is so sad she looks “like a bum lamb that’s going to die” (Walker 27). The author employs an image a baby lamb on the verge of death to paint the picture of despair. On a more raucous note, strangers meeting at a party and quickly bonding are described “like water ducks lined up in a row of corn-fed chorus girls” (Borneman 282). This image immediately portrays contentment and companionship.

Familiar barnyard animals are used effectively by Montana authors to invoke instant, deep images of human emotion.

Insects and arachnoids, also prominent in parts of Montana, are tapped by Montana authors. In *The Milk River*, James Welch exploring another favorite Montana theme of the ignorance of “green horn” outsiders, explains what happened to a “genius promoter” (129) who dropped plans to hold a concert along the Milk River. “A Gros Ventre friend said his [the promoter’s] BMW was carried away by a black happy swarm [of mosquitos] never to be seen again” (129). In “Warrior”, when Krystal visits her mother who has been hospitalized after an automobile accident, she sees a network of complicated medical equipment and “beneath it all, a small spiderlike body that perhaps belonged to my mother” (Holmes 193). The mental picture of an emaciated person surrounded by a plethora of medical equipment is just as indelible as the image of a BMW being carried away by mosquitos, language effectively using the smallest Montana critters to create distinctive imagery.

Horses have been a staple of Montana culture from early inhabitants to present day ranchers, cowboys, and equestrians and are reflected in the language used in Montana literature. A mark of respectability is given to Walter Brekke, a character in *This House of Sky*, when he is described as “a storied man with horse and rope” (Doig 875). A boy dismounting from his bicycle “as if a rope horse sitting back on a calf” (Beer 37) creates a vivid mental picture. In *Winter in the Blood*, a young man’s horse farts and at the same time the boy realizes Yellow Calf had been his grandmother’s protector. “It came to me, as though it were riding one moment of the gusting wind, as though Bird had had it in him all the time and had passed it on to me” (Welch 124). In these linguistic instances, a horse imbues competence and respectability to a character, creates a dramatic visual image of a simple childhood skill and has a wise understanding its human’s life.

One of the main characters in *Winter Wheat* is the wheat. It represents aspects of life in Montana, and in some places in the novel, life for every person. One of the most powerful uses of winter wheat as metaphor is when Anna describes the bond she shares with Ellen's dad to Ellen. "'We get mad sure. Like ice 'n snow 'n thunder 'n lightning storm, they don't hurt the wheat down under'" (284). Like winter wheat planted in the ground, anger and tough times do not kill Ellen's parent's marriage. As in other successful human relationships, romantic or otherwise, there is a steadfastness that anchors the relationship to weather the storms of life.

The enterprise of planting wheat is used to describe taking risks in life. Anna says to her husband "'[i]f you're going to be afraid of drought all the time, you might as well be afraid of planting in the first place'" (Walker 44-45). In other words, raising wheat is used to show there is a risk to all human ventures – business, personal, and emotional.

Wheat is also used to describe emotions. Ellen wants to tell Gil about how she sometimes becomes sad. She wants him to know "that terrible feeling of sadness that creeps into my mind sometimes, like the rust on the wheat" (Walker 53). The image of a grain of wheat becoming infected with rust that coats it gives a clear mental picture of sadness clinging to a person.

Finally, winter wheat is like "treasure in the ground" (Walker 4). The wheat crop can make the difference between financial survival and failure. Just as gold and silver were often treasure in the ground, now wheat and agriculture are part of Montana's treasure in the ground.

Montana authors use language born of their home state. Montana authors create treasure that fills the mind with vivid pictures, treasure that charges the heart with instant emotion, and treasure that delights and nourishes its readers. Like winter wheat, gold, and

silver, the language used by Montana authors is treasure – treasure evolved from the wind, landscape, animals, and crops of Montana.

## Works Cited

- Beer, Ralph. "At the Edge of Things." Newby, pp. 36-41.
- Blunt, Judy. *Breaking Clean*. Knopf, 2002.
- Borneman, Bill. "Bill's Bongo Party." Newby, pp. 275-282.
- Doig, Ivan. "Selections from *This House of Sky*." Kittredge and Smith, pp. 864-879.
- Guthrie, A.B. Jr. "From *The Big Sky*." Kittredge and Smith, pp. 684-695.
- Holmes, Kryss. "Warrior." Newby, pp. 183-192.
- Kwasny, Melissa. "A Woman Among Them, Painting." Newby, pp. 263-274.
- Kittredge, William, and Annick Smith, editors. *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*.  
Montana Historical Society Press, 1988.
- McMahon, Neil. "Journeymen". Newby, pp. 197-207.
- Meloy, Ellen. "A Map for Hummingbirds." Newby, pp. 300-306.
- Newby, Rick, editor. *The New Montana Story: An Anthology*. Riverbend Publishing, 2003.
- Walker, Mildred. *Winter Wheat*. 1944. University of Nebraska Press, 1992.
- Welch, James. "The Milk River." *Headwaters: Montana Writers on Water & Wilderness*,  
edited by Annick Smith, Hellgate Writers, 1996, pp. 129-130.
- . *Winter in the Blood*. 1974. Penguin, 2008.
- Zupan, Kim. "Shelterbelt." Newby, pp. 283-299.