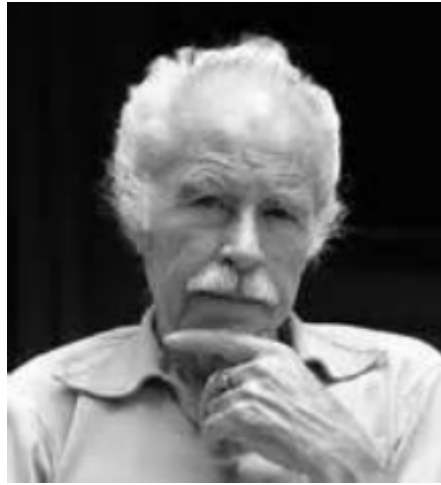


## ANALYSIS

### *The Field of Vision* (1956)



Wright Morris

(1910-1998)

“Altogether his richest work is in the linked novels, *The Field of Vision* (1956) and *Ceremony in Lone Tree* (1960, which are expositions simply in multiple instances of this impossible polarity as the principle of ordinary life. The principal characters of these novels, middle-aged Middle Westerners, are all somewhat in and somewhat out of this world, struggling, with death on either side of them, for a full sense of life. The novels compass five contemporaneous generations. They look into the long past and the long future, but their center is in this middle age in this middle place between and informed by the extremes. It is the tense middle vision that is productive of life... They are novels...almost without action other than a system of intersecting reflections, their richness made by the number of lives in motion they gather in a single field of vision. It is virtuoso work in a landscape and with characters Morris knows to every nuance, and the great trick turned in it is that so many persons in their individual voices, and bound to various metaphors, do consolidate and cohere about a constant theme.

Morris has himself spelled out the theme, in some jacket copy he wrote for *The Field of Vision*: These Middle Westerners, assembled for the moment in Mexico to watch a bullfight, see in the bull ring a mirror which reflects the fragments of their own lives. They seem compelled to come to imaginative terms with them. ‘This book grows from the belief that this imaginative act is man himself.’ And indeed the two novels are ceremonies of the imaginative act. But they are just that, with the act seen to be compulsive and perpetual and always incomplete. The stated theme is really an extension of the meanings of the presented drama, and not the meaning of the drama itself. These people don’t actually *accomplish* the imaginative act. They don’t create their lives except as the pattern of their lives is in the repeated act of re-creation. And the meaning of the drama itself is that the patterns of their individual lives, lived in largely exclusive circumstances, is the same pattern. It is the way and the motion of their imagining that is the meaning.

In fact Morris in the same copy seems to propose as merely the dramatic device of his theme comes closer to the meaning achieved. ‘In my effort to dramatize this idea,’ he says, ‘I have dealt with the imagination of the plains, where corn is sometimes grown, dust sometimes blows, but the bumper crop is still fiction and romance. I have tried to suggest what a changing world does to the unchanging derives of this imagination—drives which seek to transform an ever-changing set of facts to their own terms. The range and nature of the plains imagination—its audacity, however ill advised, and its practicality, however illusive—contain elements that are peculiarly American.’

It is after all a most cautious statement, but the achieved subject of these two novels is an image of the American imagination, concentrated in the place where after all it is most likely to be found, in Morris' home place.... 'Audacity' and 'practicality' are merely other terms once again for the two worlds that had always polarized the home place wherever it was found. The multitude of characters in these novels are so many pendulums between these polarities, their movement being the act of the imagination, and their imaginations being their lives. There is Boyd, who is as much as anyone the protagonist of *The Field of Vision* and who is a principal of *Ceremony in Lone Tree*, who has lived a life proposed by audacity, delinquency, the pursuit of the higher vitality. He had once tried to walk on water, he had kissed his best friend's fiancée, he had ripped the pocket from Ty Cobb's uniform, and in the action of the first novel he squirts soda pop into the muzzle of one of the fighting bulls—his life has been a series of poor but meaningful gestures of his dedication and his failure, and his need now is to make some practical meaning of his life.

His best friend, McKee, has meanwhile lived a life dedicated entirely to conservation, compromise, and practicality, and his need is to find within the fragments of his life some principle of audacity, some reality to let him know that he is alive. The novels go from their center in middle age backward to the life of Tom Scanlon, the old man rescued from *The World in the Attic*...who is really twice his age because he thinks he is his own father. They go backward through his birthday and funeral—the twin ceremonies of the *Ceremony in Lone Tree*—to the pioneering past. And they go forward through his grandchildren and his great-grandchildren to the present, where heroic pioneering is the disallowed necessity. The great-grandchild is projected further forward in *Ceremony in Lone Tree* in another young man, who predicts one of his possibilities, who runs amuck in Lincoln, Nebraska, and shoots and kills ten people because, as he says, he wants to *be* somebody. Both backward and forward there are masculine principles of violence, which are to be opposed by the necessity of everyday life, opposed by Morris' constant guardians of ordinary life, the women." [compare Willa Cather]

Marcus Klein

*After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century*  
(World/Meridian 1965) 238-41

"He tried to blend two main strands in American fiction: the masculine tradition associated with 'ordeals,' of which the bullfight is one test; and the pastoral tradition... Morris's pattern is to bring together a seemingly disparate group of people at a Mexico City corrida, and his plan within the pattern is to observe his characters as the bullfights continue within their 'field of vision.'

The most interesting of the characters is Boyd, a failed actor and failed person. Boyd has tried to reach beyond his background in Nebraska, given up the land and what it means, and made himself into a gypsy. He is as dedicated to failure as McKee, his counterbalance, one who had turned to failure as a field that offered real opportunity for success. Boyd had come to Lehmann [his analyst] when it was clear that he had failed to fail. That he had failed to touch the floating bottom within himself. Having run the full gamut of success-cliches—including the quick rise and fall from favor—he had found Failure a nut that refused to crack.

McKee has remained a Nebraska man, deeply devoted to Mrs. McKee, but lacking the sensitivity to her and to himself that would give him a full field of vision. He is like the tortoise that wins through perseverance, rather than the rabbit that flashes wit and style. Pastoral values have blinded him, especially to the fact that Mrs. McKee and Boyd has an affair in the deep past. McKee is the pivotal force in the book: made strong by his close feeling for the land of his birth, but hobbled in imagination by his concentration on one thing.

Scanlon is Mrs. McKee's father, now blind, but full of memories of a pioneering past. He sits at the bullring seeing nothing, but picking up associations. A plainsman, he has made the plains into a sea, a world, which he travels endlessly in his mind. He lives backward, the man who has made the western part of the country possible; the very opposite of the image the others carry of Boyd, a hopeless individual living out failure in the emptiness of a shell-like New York loft filled with nothing. As Boyd perceives the field of loneliness in himself, the blind Scanlon has visions of what can be. In *Lone Tree*, he stares at the

fields. "The faded sky was like the sky at sea, the everlasting wind like the wind at sea, and the plain rolled and swelled quite a bit like the sea itself. Like the sea it was lonely, and there was no place to hide. Scanlon had never been to sea, of course, but that was beside the point."

Despite the extreme range of the group and its diversity of focus (or field of vision), the activity in the bullring brings each to a privileged moment, an existential crisis of sorts. Each must discover the self that he (or she) clings to, and each must redefine himself in the light of the bullring's field of vision. Morris meets Hemingway's sense of the *corrida* in that he makes it the measure of the individual: in Morris's case, for the spectator, not the performer. We go from the 1920s and 1930s to the 1950s, when introspection and counterfeit have replaced acts of (foolish) heroism. Morris's very point is that while acts of great daring may occur in the bullring, the spectators are forced into an examination of themselves, into, mainly, perceptions of failure, evasion, withdrawal from life. The matador's immersion in life before them is not a measure but a contradiction of them. They are defined by then negative of their field of vision, or, put another way, by another kind of field of vision.

Morris is able to handle all this by way of interior monologue, meanderings into the past, either generally as with the McKees or more specifically with Scanlon, to a time when his survival depended on his wits. For Boyd's analyst, the bullring is an even greater test, for his carefully structured irony, cynicism, impersonality begin to show seams. "Each man," Morris writes, "his own bullfighter, with his own center, a circle overlapped by countless other circles, like the pattern of expanding rings rain made on the surface of a pond. How many had been traced on the sand of the bullring that afternoon?"

At the center of disorder, a dispossessed Garden, is Boyd, who will, along with some of the others, appear also in *Ceremony at Lone Tree*.... Boyd's prowess made him and them feel he could walk on water, and although he almost drowned, the attempt remains in memory as an Edenic moment. Yet juxtaposed to this memory, as of Jesus himself, is one of equal intensity: when the crowd from Nebraska come in on Boyd in his New York cold-water flat and see a man reaching for the bottom. Boyd lives at these extremes, and since the Nebraska group shelters itself at the center, he is their beacon: his early successes and now his later failures illuminate them. He is a figure in both the Garden and the dispossessed Garden.

Near the end of the book, Boyd helps the McKees' grandson into the bullring to give him the same moment of excitement that he, Boyd, once felt when he attempted to walk on water. Although the bull is dead, there are suggestions of danger—the darkening arena, blood everywhere, groups of local children racing around, young Gordon wild and untamable, and Boyd urging him on to his 'privileged moment,' the young boy under the coonskin cap sharing for the moment the matador's excitement.... The book ends with McKee herding everyone back to his car, but young Gordon, who had wanted everything he saw, is yelling for something he will not be able to buy. The spatiality of pastoral has been shrunk to the size of the bullring; then expanded to include an alternative life style, with its possibilities of expansion and escape.

#### *Ceremony at Lone Tree* (1960)

*Ceremony at Lone Tree*, with many of the chief characters from *The Field of Vision*, focuses on the breakup of a pastoral existence by way of two small Nebraska towns: Polk, where the McKees live, and Lone Tree, Scanlon's place... In this novel, on the eve of the 1960s (published in 1960), Morris foresees the generational struggle; but even more, some of the cultural nihilism implicit in the revolt of the young. When McKee is displaced, little is left of old pastoral values; rural areas have gone the way of towns and cities. The pastoral dream in *Lone Tree* is embodied in the half-mad and blind Scanlon and some of the people gathered there for his ninetieth birthday."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 51-52

Michael Hollister (2015)