

## ANALYSIS

*The Preacher and the Slave* (1950); *Joe Hill* (1969)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

*The Preacher and the Slave* (Houghton, 1950), reissued as *Joe Hill: A Biographical Novel* (Doubleday, 1969), is now available in a Penguin edition.

“Born in Sweden in 1879, Joel Hagglund was a quiet, musical child. Shortly after the death of his mother, he emigrated to the United States in 1902. He came expecting to find gold in the streets.... At first young Hagglund worked at odd jobs in New York; sometime later he was fired and put on a blacklist for trying to organize laborers in Chicago; he changed his name to Joe Hill...and moved West to Washington, California, Hawaii, possibly to Mexico; he appears to have joined the Industrial Workers of the World (Wobblies) in San Pedro, California in 1910. During the next few years he became well known for such union songs as ‘The Preacher and the Slave,’ ‘Casey Jones—the Union Scab,’ ‘Workers of the World, Awaken!’ and many others which appeared in the Wobblies’ ‘Little Red Song Book.’

But the troubadour of a singing union did not begin to achieve international fame until he was arrested on January 13, 1914, in Salt Lake City. Found wounded in a boardinghouse, Joe Hill was charged with the murder of a grocer and his son. His alleged accomplice, Otto Applequist, was never found. The litigations over the next two years were extremely complicated. Hill claimed that he was shot in a quarrel over a woman. Arguing that it was the state’s task to establish his guilt, he refused to identify her, and she failed to come forward. He was executed on November 19, 1915.

The case of Joe Hill was an international *cause celebre*. Appeals came from such notables as President Wilson...and the Swedish Minister to the United States. The Wobblies, who rallied to his defense, were convinced that their songster was the innocent victim of Mormon capitalists hostile to their organization’s agitation. The union lost the legal battle, but they elevated their hero to martyrdom after his death. ‘Joe Hill’s Last Will,’ written the day before his execution, is a masterpiece of artless simplicity and a key element in his legend. But legends simplify; they persist only because certain questions are forgotten or overlooked.... He may have been a double murderer, but most observers agree that he was convicted on inadequate circumstantial evidence. A clear motive was never established; the ‘why’ remains unclear; the problem is reduced to what one makes of the man.... Double murderer or martyr, that is the issue....

Stegner describes the famous Wobbly in terms that apply equally well to Bo Mason [based on Stegner’s father]: he was ‘a certain type of Western badman, with a pleasant manner, an immaculate exterior, and a lot of cool nerve.’ To be sure, there are important differences between the two men—for example, Joe was a loner who avoided women, liquor, and tobacco—but the similarities are much more striking. They were both dreamers; both had a knack for lyrics; both (according to Stegner) were prone to violence; both operated outside of the law; both struggled against things as they are; both died frustrated...

Marxist and militant, advocates of class warfare and the abolition of the wage system, the Wobblies were bent on revolution. In the light of Stegner’s previous pronouncements on radical movements, his hostility comes as no surprise. Never sympathetic to labor agitation—an attitude he shared with Bernard DeVoto—he condemns the Wobblies as ‘a direct-action movement, believing in sabotage and violence’.... Rejecting Joe Hill’s story that he was protecting a woman, he goes on to relate that ‘every old-timer I have found who knew Joe Hill admits that he was a stick-up man.’ Violent crook that he was, however, the Wobbly troubadour was easy ‘to blow up to martyrdom because he had the poet’s knack of self-dramatization.’ Especially in his ‘Last Will,’ and in the many telegrams that he composed during the final days of his life, Joe Hill laid the foundation of his own fame and martyrdom....

Joe Hill, as Stegner represents him, is the violent, at times sentimental, self-dramatizing personality we meet in the essays. According to Stegner, he carries a gun; he is a thief; and his thoughts and actions, most of them the creations of Stegner's interpretive imagination, are permeated with violence. 'I want to die a martyr,' he tells the Pardon Board, and another crucial element in Stegner's interpretation of the man takes fictional confirmation. But, if imagination constructs an irascible felon and a self-generated martyr, it also envisions a talented, intelligent, sometimes gentle man whose human potential is blocked by vague fears and by a crippling sense of personal inadequacy. Joe Hill, we feel, is basically a good man whose background and circumstances combine to bring out what is weakest in his nature. Moreover, Stegner's potent descriptions of unemployed workmen struggling for survival in a San Pedro slum, or grossly underpaid migrant workers living in squalor outside of Sacramento, go far to account for Joe's hatred of 'the system'....

But even those who disagree with Stegner's interpretation of the man and the movement will concede that his fictional reconstruction is a plausible, extremely well written, compelling 'act of the imagination.' Since the truth of the case is beyond recovery, no fictional treatment of the subject can do more.... In the absence of clear answers to the 'what' and 'why' of Joe Hill, the preacher refuses to take a final position. The reader, it appears, is being invited to join Lund in his rejection of partisanship and in his resignation to ambiguity. In short, the preacher's moral seems to bear the stamp of Stegner's approval. Paradoxically, however, while Lund's ultimate uncertainty is justified, the reader's is not. As we have indicated, the narrative of *The Preacher and the Slave* bears the crystal clear implication that Joe Hill assisted Otto Applequist in the robbery and homicide for which he was tried, convicted, and executed. Lund has no access to this information; therefore his uncertainty is warranted and just. For the reader, however, there is neither uncertainty nor ambiguity. Joe Hill, according to the interpretation presented in Wallace Stegner's novel, is guilty as charged....

*The Preacher and the Slave* met with a mixed critical reception. Predictably, the radical press flayed it for daring to debunk one of labor's holy martyrs. The few more moderate publications that noticed the novel generally praised it; but, for the most part, Joe Hill's fictionalized biography was resolutely ignored by the critics. Silence, we are told, is more painful than criticism. Not surprisingly, sales were poor. As a writer used to commercial and critical acclaim, Stegner found the silence and slim sales extremely discouraging."

Forrest Robinson and Margaret Robinson  
"Wallace Stegner: *The Preacher and the Slave* and *A Shooting Star*"  
*Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*, ed. Anthony Arthur  
(G. K. Hall 1982) 76-82

"He turned next to history, writing a fictionalized biography of the labor martyr, Joe Hill. *The Preacher and the Slave*, as the book was first called, was the product of an intense period of research—the author even traced with his own feet Joe Hill's last steps at the Utah State Penitentiary—and an enormous amount of hard work. The novel, however, is a cold one, very authoritarian. The author keeps his distance from the material throughout, and although there is much in the book that might be of interest to a western history buff, he doesn't bring the historical character to life and there is little to warm the cockles of the heart. But it seemed to Stegner a subject that was bound to arouse attention, or at least controversy, and when it turned out to have provoked only a very limited popular and critical response, he was so discouraged...he stopped writing novels for ten years and turned back to the short story, to real history and biography, with expectations of only a limited audience."

Jackson J. Benson  
"Finding a Voice of His Own: The Story of Wallace Stegner's Fiction"  
*Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer*, ed. Charles E. Rankin  
(U New Mexico 1996) 216

"In the early 1940s Wallace Stegner began studying the life of American labor's famous songwriter, Joe Hill. Stegner might have decided to write a history, as he did about John Wesley Powell, but Hill's life, unlike Powell's, presented enormous gaps filled with popular myths. The inquiry began with the revolutionary ideology of the Industrial Workers of the World [IWW], to which Hill belonged, and became personal as Stegner recalled having heard his parents tell 'Wobbly' tales during his childhood.

Furthermore, his close boyhood friend Milton Cowan belonged to the family that had owned and lived in a Salt Lake City meat market next door to Morrison's grocery, the store where Hill reportedly killed two people. Cowan vividly recalled the incident and related it to Stegner. As a teenager, Stegner had dated the daughter of a prison warden in Salt Lake City, the prison where Joe Hill had been executed a decade earlier. The mystery of Hill's early life, his controversial murder trial, and the subsequent mystique making him a union martyr who 'wouldn't die'—all this, to Stegner's mind, made perfect material for a novel....

'I'm not really interested so much in Joe's guilt or innocence,' he wrote privately when nearly finished with the novel, 'as I am in his capacity for violence and his personality as a rebel.... The gun under the coat is enough. The shooting of the Morrises is almost irrelevant.' When he published *The Preacher and the Slave* in 1950, Stegner described Joe Hill's social conscience as high-minded, his motives as mixed, and his personality as unstable, hard, and at times brutal. In one episode Stegner portrayed Hill...fleeing a 1913 hopfield strike in California. Being broke, Hill took a migrant job on a ranch near Gaviota. After collecting four dollars in wages for four days' labor, he returned at night to break into the farmhouse and rob the owner. Then 'an assassin's desire seized upon him' and 'deliberately and without heat he swung the clubbed gun and brought it down on McHugh's thinning hair. The blow made a dull meaty sound, like a pick in soft dirt, and as McHugh pitched sideways Joe caught him and eased him to the floor'....

The IWW's entire history was almost invisible in 1950, with solid evidence on the union, and on Joe Hill, being extremely thin even in IWW archives.... When Stegner concluded with the strong implication that Joe Hill could have been guilty of murder and that Hill's execution by a firing squad was not entirely unjustified, he debunked a legend. He insulted the martyr hero of followers who '*dreamed I saw Joe Hill last night, / Alive as you and me...*' Throughout his career, Wallace Stegner eloquently and positively answered the question about mixing history and literature. He believed that the blending of fact with fiction, the intensifying of reality through drama, was his vocation. Occupying a middle ground between history and literature was entirely legitimate, he wrote in 1965.... For Stegner, fiction could be fused with history as well, as he did in *Wolf Willow*....

In 1915 more than five thousand persons filled a Chicago auditorium for Hill's funeral while crowds overflowed in the streets outside. Wobblies sang his songs and scattered his ashes in every state except Utah and in dozens of countries across the world. Hill became a legend, resurrected in John Dos Passos's *Nineteen Nineteen*; in Upton Sinclair's play *Singing Jailbirds* (1924); in Alfred Hayes's poem 'I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill Last Night' (1925); in Carl Sandburg's poem 'The People, Yes' (1936); and in Hayes's poem set to music by Earl Robinson (1936) and sung by Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger. Joe Hill, while not Lenin or Marx, was not 'a small relatively unnoticed individual.' By 1941, when Stegner began his research, Joe Hill seemed a deliberate creation of the American left—in Stegner's words, 'an I.W.W. legend with a Stalinist tinge'....

His own conclusions about Hill...were more than sheer speculation; they rested on extensive study. Seeking to test a legend that he initially believed, Stegner could find only 'a pitiful little pile of authenticated facts supplemented by an enormous pile of misinformation, rumor, labor and capitalist propaganda, and plain mis-remembering.' After examining trial and probation records in Utah, reading Salt Lake City newspapers, reading IWW documents, talking to a half dozen old Wobs such as Harry McClintock, and corresponding with Ralph Chaplin, he met Hill's executioner and then literally followed the convict's footsteps from death row to the seat before a firing squad. Stegner eventually concluded that Hill was 'as violent an IWW as ever lived'... 'I knew more about the IWW than most historians knew. And what I didn't have was a protective impulse to make the IWW glow like shining knights in armor. I think you can wear overalls and be a bum. It's possible'....

His...essay 'Joe Hill: the Wobblies' Troubadour,' created a sensation on the radical left when...it appeared in the *New Republic*. Once again Stegner emphasized that the legendary and idealized Joe Hill carried more power than the historical person who most likely was just a tough hoodlum. The early Wobblies, he wrote, believed in sabotage and violence, beliefs clearly reflected in Hill's lyrics. Hill was 'probably guilty' of murder in Salt Lake City, although the state of Utah failed to convict him beyond a reasonable doubt.... As he eventually wrote it, Stegner's novel neither blasted Joe Hill nor was it a drippy eulogy. The fictional character, much like Bo Mason in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, mixed virtue and

weakness, courage and blindness. Stegner left his readers uncertain about Hill. He questioned the legend, exposed fantasies on both sides and, although he came close to doing so, ultimately did not convict his main character....

*The Preacher and the Slave* did not defame the real Joe Hill. Stegner did not radically rewrite or invent history, but mainly posed questions unanswered in 1915. Was Joe Hill guilty of murder? Answer: still uncertain. Was his trial fair? Answer: no, but justice comes hard. Who was Joe Hill and why did he act as he did? Answer: He was a tough, frustrated, violent man belonging to an alienated and oppressed social class. In working with these questions, Stegner did not invent history 'out of whole cloth.' He conducted extensive research and then published his factual conclusions separately, making it easy to distinguish the historian in the *Pacific Spectator* and *New Republic* from the novelist who created *The Preacher and the Slave*.... Stegner published *Joe Hill* at the beginning of the Cold War and shortly before government suppression of left-wing politics reached its climax in the McCarthy era. Analyzed politically, the novel sided with the powerful to undercut radical ideology and reform.... It required perceptive readers to see that the novel questioned the human condition, not just violent revolution.

Never a writer of political tracts, Stegner mainly sought to demythologize through his novel.... For Wallace Stegner, it was the intellectual's duty to carefully analyze myths, to expose delusions through scrutiny. In this sense, *Joe Hill* is vintage Stegner. He instinctively favored ambiguity and paradox over dichotomies and extreme positions. In Utah, 1915, both sides created distortions and acted on illusions surrounding a real person. If Stegner assumed any voice in *Joe Hill*, it was that of Gus Lund the preacher who chose to slowly whittle away at the truth instead of throwing bombs.

Stegner in 1948 explained his position clearly through the *New Republic*: 'I hate to see the complete abdication of the critical intelligence and the complete disregard of the truth that was indulged in by Hill's defense. They lied like hell, over and over again.... I have been convinced for a long time that what is mis-called the middle of the road is actually the most radical and the most difficult position that a citizen can take—much more difficult and radical than either reaction or rebellion'."

Robert H. Keller

"'Joe Hill ain't never died': Wallace Stegner's Act of Literary Imagination"  
*Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer* (1996) 163-68, 170, 174-77

Michael Hollister (2015)