

Student Work

---

3-1-2000

## The memoirs of Ivan Doig: Donning new roles and revising old myths

Ellen M. Fangman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork>  
Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fangman, Ellen M., "The memoirs of Ivan Doig: Donning new roles and revising old myths" (2000). *Student Work*. 3285.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/studentwork/3285>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Student Work by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

THE MEMOIRS OF IVAN DOIG:  
DONNING NEW ROLES AND REVISING OLD  
MYTHS

A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Department of English  
and the  
Faculty of the Graduate College  
University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Ellen M. Fangman

March 2000

UMI Number: EP74684

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



UMI EP74684

Published by ProQuest LLC (2015). Copyright in the Dissertation held by the Author.

Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

All rights reserved. This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code

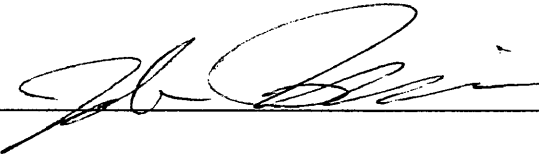


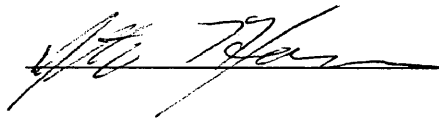
ProQuest LLC.  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346

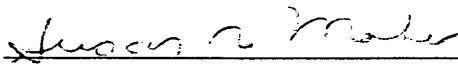
THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance for the faculty of the Graduate College,  
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree Master of Arts,  
University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Committee

  
\_\_\_\_\_

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Chairperson   
\_\_\_\_\_

Date 4/5/80

For my family, who have "donned the most hazardous roles" for my sake.

## CONTENTS

Introduction		1
Chapter 1	"The Slow Poetry of Fact"	6
Chapter 2	The Memory of Her Voice	17
Chapter 3	An Unexpected Hero	28
Chapter 4	Breaking the Barrier of "The Cult of True Womanhood"	40
Chapter 5	The Land as Metaphor and as Domestic Space	48
Works Cited		

## ***Introduction***

*"If, somewhere beneath the blood, the past must beat in me to make a rhythm of survival for itself--to go on as this half-life which echoes as a second pulse inside the ticking moments of my existence--if this is what must be, why is the pattern of remembered instants so uneven, so gapped and rutted and plunging and soaring? I can only believe it is because memory takes its pattern from the earliest moments in the mind, from childhood. And childhood is a most queer flame-lit and shadow-chilled time" (Sky 10).*

In his memoirs, *Heart Earth* and *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*, Ivan Doig remembers with respect and fondness the lives of his mother, father, and grandfather and their role in his coming of age. Doig's recollections show that he owes his maturation--from a boy bent on dream to a man sure of reality, yet still fond of dreaming--to his mother, his grandmother, and his father. Maternal grace, or "heart," is the foundation for Ivan's sensibility of the values of piety and endurance--values associated with myth in Western literature--and the paternal extension of these values, namely Charlie's hard work and persistence, are the chief reasons why Ivan is able to cope with loss in a world rough to the touch of youth. With concern for how the past and its people shape us in the present, Doig makes revelations about his family that are simultaneously revelations about himself. The beauty of these memoirs is that Doig can synthesize with retrospective maturity the events and words of his parents that impressed him most.

Elizabeth Simpson, in *Earthlight, Wordfire: The Work of Ivan Doig*, remarks about *This House of Sky* that it goes well beyond the conventions of biography, for in it Doig explores some profound and elusive issues: the relationship of past to present; the nature and function of memory; the creation of personal identity; the political and ecological impact of the westering impulse; the cultural and personal qualities that permit one group to prosper on land where others starve out; the apparent arbitrariness of death. (11)

Doig addresses these same issues in *Heart Earth*. Both memoirs deal strongly with the relationship of past to present in terms of the people who have affected Doig as a writer. Moreover, the cultural and ecological aspects of the places where the Doigs settled bears heavily on the formation of Ivan's psyche, and while his attitude toward the West may be different from that of his father and mother, still, he recognizes the landscape's enormous impact on his life.

For Doig, the past is a great teacher, precisely because of those who were involved in his education, and in *Heart Earth*, Doig explores his mother's influence during his formative years. Berneta Doig works within the domestic sphere, cultivating those virtues that are considered domestic in terms of the feminine myth--virtues like motherly affection and the nurturing impulse. She simultaneously confounds our idea of the passive woman of the feminine myth



who is too weak to do anything outside the realm of the home. Instead, she promotes the success of the ranch, herding sheep alongside her husband Charlie.

Because of her extraordinary energy and efforts as a woman and mother, Doig eulogizes her with poetic language, searching for the metaphor in his own memories of her and in the photographs and diaries from which he reconstructs her life. He questions why her life ended so abruptly, and why his father had to bear it all, thus touching our understanding of the fragility of life and the sorrow of loss. He writes, "I have had to think much how death has touched early into my family. It touched earliest of all toward my father. Why, if what is so far from having answer is even askable--why was his life so closely stalked this way? And how was it he lasted as he did?" (*Sky* 33). Charlie is, to the vision of his son, the one most harmed by the apparent "arbitrariness of death" (Simpson 11).

In *This House of Sky*, Doig remembers the influence of his father and grandmother after his mother's death. In retracing his family's steps throughout the most arid regions of Montana, Doig finds that the West had become for his family more than a place to live in--it had become a way of life. Charlie is a man whose worth is dependent on how well he relates not just to his family but also to the land, and he teaches Ivan the value of self-reliance and persistence in the face of desolation. Like his ancestors, Charlie seems to believe in the myth that one could succeed in an isolated land if one worked hard enough. He, Berneta, and Bessie are content to build up a home from nothing and live meagerly in the face of hunger, isolation, and the arid climate. And they are at home only when

cultivating this land, when connecting themselves to its very heart. Ivan, on the other hand, sees a kind of futility in this lifestyle. While he learns from his family's hard work and persistence, still, he longs for another identity that the land cannot give--an identity that is afforded in part by words and the constructs of the intellect and imagination. Ivan must have the stimulation of other minds bent on learning about how the traditions told in books come true in reality. This is not to say he rejects the identity that landscape and folklore instill in him. For when he leaves the ranch and all that he has known from youth, he only leaves it physically. What Montana and his family taught him--endurance, filial love, and practical wisdom--remain with him as he pursues his academic dreams. He never leaves the past behind, because it remains so strong in the forefront of his memory. And memory, Doig says, "*is a set of sagas we live by, much the way of the Norse wildmen in their bear shirts. That such rememberings take place in a single cave of brain rather than half a hundred minds warren'd wildly into one another makes them sagas no less*" (Sky 10). Doig lives by the lessons his father, mother, and grandmother teach him, and their lore is a part of his own lore as a writer. He inserts their diary entries and stories into his own recollections of their lives as if to weave the past and present together in one homogenous whole. Doig's memoirs are indeed a bridge from the past to the present, making the past's lessons indelible to the minds of readers who yearn to make sense of the "westerling impulse" in families like the Doigs.

Formally speaking, Doig's artistic maieutic is more than just a black and white representation of "hero" and "anti-hero." While the formulaic novel may lay heavy emphasis on the lofty values of myth, Doig creates a delicate balance between the mythical and real in his rendition of character and place. His characters, Ivan, Bessie, Berneta and Charlie, struggle against everyday calamities as vulnerable people, not as invincible, romanticized frontiers-people. They suffer the ironies of our faulted and sometimes faulty existence, ironies which Doig spotlights through his lyrical tones and unusual linguistic rhythms. Doig is a poet as much as he is a prose writer, and this adds to his vision of a family that stands out against the backdrop of the American West.

## ***Chapter One : "The Slow Poetry of Fact"***

*"Doig, Ivan, writer: independent as a mule, bleeder for the West's last chances, exile in the Montana diaspora from the land, second-generation practical thrower of flings, emotionally skittish of opening himself up like a suitcase, delver into details to the point of pedantry, dreamweaver on a professional basis" (HE 156).*

Critics of Western American literature who seek not simply a re-telling of history, but also an artistic representation of the psychological, moral, and spiritual aspects of the historical subjects will find in Doig's memoir the very artistry they desire. For Doig represents character in a way that dresses fact in imagination. And the fact is anything but overdressed. Rather, Doig fashions his medium--an array of diaries and letters and imprints of his own memories-- into an aesthetically powerful memoir. He particularly credits the "poetics" of the life of Berneta as being responsible for his own power of artistic recollection. He says, "What I know of her is heard in the slow poetry of fact" (HE 12). This paradox is Doig's assertion that his mother--and for that matter his father and grandmother--made poetry of reality, made an art out of the mundane elements of existence, and so the fact of their lives comes to him as poetry of itself. The artist in Doig, though, seeks to embellish their lives in a poem of a second kind, a drama-memoir that is studded with unusual linguistic portraits, patterns, rhythms, and melodies. In his memoirs, Doig attains a delicate balance between the mythical and the real (or the factual and the poetic), thereby transcending the limits of the formula Western and exploring the complexity of the human condition.

In order to better categorize the literature of the American West, Max Westbrook, in his essay "Myth, Reality, and the American Frontier," traces the meaning of fact and myth. His categorizations help the student of Doig's literature to understand how Doig achieves different levels of meaning in his memoirs. For if one understands the traditional and contemporary meanings of myth and realism, one can identify their presence in Doig's memoirs and see how they render these psychological and spiritual truths. The question then arises: Can one judge the memoir by the same criteria as one judges fiction or myth? David Stanley answers this question, saying,

Such narratives [i.e. memoirs] are, in essence, the stories we tell each other about our everyday experiences, stories which center themselves in decision-making, conflict, ethical ambiguity, and danger, so that the personal narrative is more often than not a tale about the teller as much as it is about his experiences. (qtd. in Simpson 100)

Such experiences fall under Max Westbrook's definition of fact. Fact, Westbrook says, is synonymous with reality, for, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, reality is "the quality of being real or having an actual existence" (12). And the actual is "that which changes--information available to the five senses, the facts" (13). Therefore, "*fact* and *truth* are the same...All you have to do is invoke the magic word, *reality*" (13). Fact is a part of literature inasmuch as it is the basis of the author's perception of the actual world. Myth, on the other hand,

is traditionally linked to the imagination. Myths have been viewed as imaginative dramas, the value of which lies in their ability to evoke pity, fear, or laughter from their audiences. Some myths are poorly constructed, leaving the reader to gape at the silliness or lack of value in the protagonist or antagonist, hero or anti-hero. Others, though, are worthy of serious attention. Some of the first dramas of Western literature, such as *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* and epics like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, contain mythical representations of gods and men and were intended to impress the reader with pity, fear, anger, and a host of other emotions. These classic stories of Western literature were intended to be a cathartic lesson for the emotions. In their values-consciousness, they have been considered the greatest of stories because they represented the human condition in a complex and compelling manner. Such mythical stories tell "how reality came into existence" (qtd. in Westbrook 15). According to the scholar Mircea Eliade, they "narrate a sacred history." They are "the story of creation, of what we are, our nature, being, how we are human rather than non-human"...They are about "the original, what it is and how to get in touch with it, how to restore it" (qtd. in Westbrook 15).

Max Westbrook states that Eliade's definition relates well to certain myths of the American West, because "there is a connection between the ancient belief in knowledge of the original as power and the widespread American fascination with the West" (16). That is, if one looks at the West as a place where men struggled with the land's ruggedness and with their own inadequacies, one can see why people were fascinated by it. For the desire to know how to cope with the

challenges of the present motivates the human heart to actively seek out the first examples of human courage in histories and in the myths or dramas of imagination. According to Westbrook, the myths of the West give us an understanding of our place in the world and how we ought to react to the wilderness. He says, "If we knew what it was like to move into a frontier wilderness, if we understood the original as the mountaineer experienced it, then perhaps we would be in better control of our present day self and world" (Westbrook 16).

In his memoirs, Doig, intentionally or unintentionally, prompts his readers to such an understanding of the world by posing universal truths through his depiction of character and landscape--truths about the brevity of our lives and the weaknesses and strengths of the human will. As Carl Bredhal states in his essay on Ivan Doig, "In *This House of Sky*, the imagination wrestles with voices, facts about ancestors, photos, and personal experience in an effort to understand itself in relation to the lives closest to it" (757). Consciously or unconsciously, Doig explores the myths of the West as "spatially defined" (Meldrum 2). According to Barbara Meldrum, such myths typically involve "a West which did not become geographically fixed until the end of the frontier era," a West which "constituted special challenges to those who sought to subdue it," a West which "impresses us with human limitations--the brevity of our lives, the insignificance of our fate" (2). Although Doig sees the fate of his parents as being important rather than insignificant, he recognizes the limitations of Berneta, Bessie, and Charlie, whose

struggles with illness and loss are tainted with human weakness but ultimately illustrate their possession of the values of piety and endurance.

While ancient writers of myth, like Homer, addressed these values in the lives of imaginary characters, Odysseus, Telemachus, Penelope, Hector, and Achilles, Doig depicts these traditional values in the lives of actual people in their contemporary journeys. Berneta's journey is marked by the endurance of physical and spiritual ills. On a physical level, she suffers the illness of asthma and its exacerbation by the harsh Montana climate. On a more spiritual level, she suffers the loneliness that comes of understanding the fragility of her own life and the added sorrow of being apart from her family in the North. Charlie's journey demands endurance as well. He faces the loss of his wife and the challenge of raising Ivan alone. His relationships with Ruth and Bessie are shrouded with regret and animosities, but he smooths out most of the grudges and makes for himself a life worth living. His appreciation for the power of nature and of language define his actions as a father, a husband, and son-in-law; and subsequently, he helps those around him to an understanding of reality that is characterized by the mysteries of self-sacrifice and familial love. Doig addresses his father's wisdom in "Endings":

You somehow kept to the one great rightness as well--the constant clasp of keeping me at your side, whatever the place or the hour or the weather or the mood or task or venture... You somehow saw yourself riding free from the Basin homestead and so had not a



word for me but in praise, encouragement, proudness...When you risked that truce [with Lady] time upon time, it was because you needed risk, needed somehow to sizzle ordinariness by dropping danger into it now and again... You and Lady had made your way to a cherishing of each other which went beyond family lineament.

(*Sky* 274)

Charlie tackles the realm of the extraordinary by fulfilling the dream of love in a world that is all too loveless. Bessie's approach to life is rooted in reality but bent on the dream of family love as well. She sacrifices her comfort, her store, her ease, and her pride for the sake of her family. Ivan, whose journey crosses the paths of Charlie and Bessie, carves his own existence from the values he learned from his parents during his coming of age, namely the values of hard work, persistence, and filial love.

Each journey in *Heart Earth* and *This House of Sky* expresses different levels of meaning about the "real" and the "sacred" elements of family existence. Doig spotlights these elements through the humorous and proverbial language of his characters, and in so doing, he affords the reader a dual view of character: one of the author's own memorable images and the other of the character's own remembrances and words. This gives a varied complexion to the memoir, with the nobler hues coming from Doig's lyrical prose and the rougher hues coming from those unschooled in bookish terms. Doig's descriptions of Berneta illustrate

this theory of language. In one passage, he quotes a rancher's wife who spoke of her:

*She was so quiet, had such a soft fine voice...She could do about anything a man could--ride, sling a pack, any of that. She even knew how to trap. We talked sometimes about runnin' a trapline, and I know she did in winters later on. But she had to be careful, y'know, anything she did, or she'd choke right down, short of breath. (Sky 7)*

Such a colloquial style has its own merits. It reveals the heart of a simple man who knew Berneta directly in a way that young Ivan could only sense with limitations. Doig, though, evokes stronger feelings in regards to her quality of womanhood and the depth of her illness--feelings like admiration and pity--precisely because he uses imagination to fill in his hazy remembrances of Berneta. His language has a certain maturity not found in the rancher's words-- it is rhythmically challenging and involves complex imagery. He writes,

My mother, here in some summer of early marriage, already seems frail, so slim--too light a being to last there so near the challenge of timberline...I print into my mind from her every pose how fine-boned she was, hardly more than tiny, with a roundish, slightly wondering face where most of my own is quickly read. I coax from the photos all detail which seems to tell the sickness eroding

in her; the pinch across her slender shoulders, the eyes which are almost too calm and accepting. (*Sky* 6)

That "hardly more than tiny, slightly wondering face" and "the pinch across her slender shoulders" makes her even more fragile to the reader than the blunt edges of the rancher's passage. Berneta's own letters also become part of Doig's linguistic patterns. Her words are heartfelt and simple, and Doig needs only to reinforce their truthfulness to give character to these parts of his memoir. He quotes Berneta's letter to her brother, in which she tells him she approves of his love for an older woman. She says, "*If a couple loves one another enough they can overcome most anything that happens to come along*" (*HE* 76) Doig then states with quiet force that "those four words were the only ones my mother underlined, ever, in her entire set of letters to Wally" (*HE* 76).

In another passage, Berneta describes the trip to Maudlow, Montana sparsely. She says, "I never saw such muddy roads in my life and as you know we've traveled some pretty muddy ones." Doig then adds physical description to her words as well as his own comments on the importance of the event. He writes,

The storm is coming toward us on lightning stilts.

CRACKuunnggg, the thunder-and-echo.

"Rain some more, why don't ye," my father responds from the mudhold where the Ford sits axle-deep...

My mother waits behind the steering wheel, wearing the look that says she and muddy roads do not get along. I am out of the car clumping around in her overshoes, not about to miss this chance to wallow in the mire in an almost official capacity. (*HE* 102)

What Doig does with Berneta's words he also does with Charlie's and Bessie's. In one passage, Charlie "recited his victory" with his sheep, "*Mother him like hell now, don't ye? See what a helluva dandy lamb I got for ye, old sister? Who says I couldn't jacket day onto night if I wanted to, now-I-ask-ye?*" (*Sky* 163). Doig answers back:

Recited. Yes, that is the word for this rhythmized period. Lambing was a season that recited itself with a clarity and cadence unlike any other in my past:...*nine'y-seven, nine'y-eight, nine'y-nine, HUNNERD, IVAN! One, two...*The numbers build in my head with the first warm morning of June, and before I can seat myself to write, are thrumming me into being again beside the gray-boarded corral as sheep plummet past. (*Sky* 163)

Doig describes the art of shepherding with the power of one who has been intimately associated with it. His words capture the intensity of the lambing season and the shrewd "ranchcraft" of his father. Doig also captures his father's intense love for Berneta first with Charlie's words and then his own. He writes,

*Ivan, you wouldn't believe the grouse that were on the slopes then. The summer we were married and went herding on Grass Mountain, all that country was just alive with grouse then. I'd shoot them five at a time, and your mother--your mother'd cook them at noon when the sheep had shaded up. We'd eat one apiece and seal the rest in quart jars and cool them in the spring water so we'd have them cold for supper. They were the best eatin' in the world. Lots of times we'd have them for breakfast too, before we moved camp. Y'see on forest reserve you're supposed to move camp about every day. The first summer there on Grassy, we moved camp fifty-eight times in the first sixty days. We had a brand new box camera we were awful proud of, and we'd take a picture of our campsite every time. Your mother...*

The pair of words would break him then, and fool that I could be, I would look aside from his struggling face. In these afteryears, it is my turn for the struggle inside the eyes and along the drop of throat, for I have the album pages of those campsites along the ridgelines and the swale meadows of their first summer months. (*Sky* 5)

Doig's prose lyricises the simple passion of the diary entries and letters of his characters.

Part of Doig's success as a storyteller is his ability to intertwine these passions of myth with the stark realities of Montana living. Dramatically, he tells how his characters met success and failure as real people not as fantastic untouchable heroes. The "slow poetry of fact" guides him in his portrayal of those whose values and human weaknesses make them unique among heroes of the American West. Each carefully chosen event, each letter, each diary entry is an example of the their sense of value in each other and in the land around them. The fact that the memoir is real or actual in no way makes it a dry piece of non-fiction. For the genre of memoir lends itself well to the author's ability to dress the fact in imagination. An author who writes memoir may reconstruct the past with an eye that is often more insightful than the experiencing eye-- a retrospective eye. Doig envisions the past as he will to make the kind of artwork he desires, to make the kind of characters that speak to the heart. He is essentially a writer who "utilizes historical sources to explore the psychological and philosophical realities they reveal." In so doing, he "discovers in the myth of the West a vitality that is not doomed to cliché" (Meldrum 3).

## *Chapter Two: The Memory of Her Voice*

*"No man has ever really entered into the heart of any country until he has adopted or made up myths about its familiar objects; until that is, he has achieved a sympathetic understanding of the land's features, animate as well as inanimate" (Dobie 21).*

In a drama that is propped by the idiosyncrasies of landscape and the unpredictability of death, the one constant is familial love. Berneta Doig is that one constant in the lives of her husband and son, and when she dies, Charlie and Ivan face a loss that can only be understood insofar as one understands who she was. Berneta influenced her son and husband in a way that both challenged and preserved the myths that defined her culture. She was a woman of action, and as such acted against the myth promulgated by many Western writers and filmmakers that women are "physically more passive than men and can embody the values of civilization while standing in the doorway of [their] homestead" (Lucas 303). She expended her energy not just in the home, but also on the range, and she was instrumental in making the Doig ranch successful. What is archetypal about Berneta, however, is that she had that "subtle but real forcefulness" found in the Western heroine who "helps the hero to his destiny while also finding her own" (Lucas 311). She is a kind of "spiritual center" in the lives of Charlie and Ivan, providing them with a sense of the values of piety and endurance, values mythologized by the authors of Western literature. She is, in Doig's portrayal, someone worthy of admiration, a spiritual icon.

Some have criticized eulogies like Doig's, saying: "So often did mothers die that describing their deaths developed into a literary art, as though an elaborate composition might make up for the life" that was lost (Hampsten 75). Perhaps Doig does take special care to describe his mother in order to mitigate his own sense of loss and to somehow cover the guilt his father felt for her death. But, his memoir, *Heart Earth*, is, for all its mythical appeal, firmly grounded in history. Doig writes as historians traditionally do in order to rescue from forgetfulness the memory of this great woman, and he draws on his fond remembrances of her and on her own letters to reveal the kind of woman she was. Berneta's letters preserve in simple language the meaning of a mother's love for her family, and her personal accounts give authenticity to Doig's memoir, since they attest to her strength and capacity for loving.

Doig observes that Berneta's ink "instinctively refused the fade of time" (*HE* 3), and his image of her sharpens as he reads her "heart-quick lines" (*HE* 3). The photos that accompany her letters reveal her plain physique-- her "wide-set eyes soft but with a minimum of illusions: on the verge of pretty but perfectly well aware she's never going to get there past the inherited broad nose" (*HE* 18). Her plainness does not repel, however, and Doig is quick to say that "whether the camera catches her as an inexplicable pixie in a peaked cap or gussied up as a very passable flapper, Berneta burned bright" (*HE* 19). In one photo that Doig describes, Berneta wears bib-overalls and a cowgirl hat, practical garb for the climate and the land, but she glows so aesthetically in front of the "house of sky."



Doig's use of photos, like his inclusion of letters, contributes to the authenticity of the memoir as both metaphoric myth and real history. As one Western author, William Kittredge, says in his memoir *Hole in the Sky*, "Our photographs serve as doorways into the past and its stories and as cautionary omens" (62). Doig sees not only the appearances that the photos present--a woman clad in working clothes, tending the ranch in a land made mostly of sky-- but also the metaphors that they convey. Through his purposeful description of the photo, the spiritual significance of his mother becomes apparent. He writes that she is "on horseback beneath a wall of rock across the entire sky behind her" (HE 19). The sky begs to frame her beauty, and she remains in the forefront of this imagery. She is not engulfed by it, nor does she overshadow its own presence. Nature and the woman complement one another, as if owing to one another the respect that beauty deserves. In the classic myths of English literature, nature yields to the divine heroine. Likewise, in Doig's memoir, something of the Divine glows in Berneta, making the very elements of Montana--clouds, earth, stream, and air--belong to her.

Doig further elegizes Berneta by using the powerful terminology of myth to describe her. He writes, "*Parents behave down toward us as if they are tribal gods, as old and unarguable and almighty as thunder*" (Sky 10). The use of such words as "tribal gods" who are as "almighty as thunder" is somewhat ironic, since he says earlier that Berneta is "soft-voiced" (HE 22), bringing to mind gentler images.

Berneta is grace and grit tied into one, a balance of divinity and humanity in one heart, and her heart is a part of the earth. She has the almost superhuman ability to "embrace a 'howling wilderness' as her beloved home" (Kolodny 35). But humanly

speaking, she needs a comforter just as anyone else who was accosted by loneliness, loss, and sickness would. She writes to her brother Wally, looking for this comfort, saying: "I shouldn't even be writing you my troubles but I have to spill over to someone. I'd just like to have you around so I could put my head on your shoulder and cry..."(HE 1). Afflictions plague her as they plague every human heart, but the divine part of her is that which hesitates to let anyone else "in on" her sorrows, the part that is ever self-effacing. Doig emphasizes this quality in his mother, thereby continuing to uphold her as the spiritual center of the family.

Through his portrayal of Berneta, Doig invites us to hesitate before typecasting the Western woman, either historically or theoretically. Berneta's versatility dissolves those mistaken identities of women that many mythographers portray. Rather than confining herself to the care of her family, Berneta embraces the outdoors. She is wife, mother, AND ranch-hand, and her moral responsibility for her husband and son informs her attitude toward the land. If she is to see them prosper, necessity dictates that she too cultivate the earth. The land thus becomes part of her domestic sphere. It is more than just the backdrop of her microcosmic society, it is the metaphor for her own heart, in its cyclical life patterns and its natural beauty.

Berneta's family are always the first to sense her value and learn from it, for she relates to them with tender piety. From the beginning, Berneta dotes lovingly on Ivan, but she also gives him his boyhood to dream with independently. She would teach, but she would not coddle. As Doig remembers, "My father's turn at seeing me toward gravitational independence would come. But my mother's came early, in her

determination that I should fly free of the close coddling she'd had as an ill child" (*HE* 52). Unwilling to spoil, Berneta impresses her son with a love that is extraordinary in its ordinariness, for what they enjoy together is as simple as ice cream on a Sunday afternoon or visiting grandmother with Christmas cookies. All of these experiences color the imagination of a reflective Doig. He remembers how she would let him build his "foxholes" in the yard and read voraciously whatever he could find. She is the woman who understands that "dreams give us life," (*HE* 133) and her most influential moments are her moments as a teacher. By example, she encourages Ivan in the most important dream of his life, learning. Although the Doigs were not settlers in a new land, they were part of a West that was still young, and the demands of working the land might have left Ivan little time for school had not Charlie and Berneta been intent on their son's education. Despite the poverty in Ivan's early, isolated schools, Ivan would eventually gain two college degrees.

Elizabeth Hampsten tells a similar story of a Norwegian immigrant on the frontier of South Dakota. This young girl survived the loss of her mother, attended Augustana College in 1889 and Brookings College in 1890 and met her husband while in school. Hampsten writes, "College and marriage brought Christine to a safer and more prosperous way of living; she achieved, we might say, the promotion to the middle class that is the American dream" (71). Ivan probably viewed the pursuit of knowledge as a more important dream than the promotion to the middle class, and this was something he could thank his mother for. From the time of Ivan's early youth, the paperbacks are piled high for his enrichment, and while Berneta urges him to read, she allows no stodginess.

Survival on the plains is all but theoretical, and so she steadies his book-learning with real experience. Work always accompanies study, and Berneta is the first to tackle any chore. She works both in the home and on the range, so as to facilitate her husband's success as a sheep herder. Her hard-working attitude, however, does not mar the grace of her manner. To Charlie and Ivan, she is ever a lady. Ivan remembers her beauty as framed by the landscape. Rather than subduing her, this landscape crowns her. Again, Doig sees the metaphor in the photographic memories of his mother. "The mountain West" is "as a stone rainbow, a girl-turning-woman poised beneath it" (*HE* 17). Again, the landscape becomes part of her domestic sphere.

To Berneta, as to one pioneer woman, Cindy French, "country life is a dream, a moment's observation of nature's wonders, the beauty of freedom, and the struggles of hard work" (French 6). But country life also means many long days and nights of tending sheep, and sheepherding is not an easy profession. As French notes, "What the average night lambing hand is most inclined to remember...can be summed up by the same couple words year after year--total exhaustion" (16). Asthma augments this total exhaustion for Berneta, affecting her ability to handle the aridity of the Northern climate, yet she "assembles herself as someone not growing out of childhood but simply flinging it off, refusing to lose time to the illness in herself" (*HE* 18). She is unwilling to fold under suffering, and Doig writes of her strong will, saying, "This teenage Berneta has the strange independence of a comet, a pushed pitch of existence that makes her seem always beyond her numerical age" (*HE* 18). Berneta is willing to make sacrifices for Charlie's sake. When Charlie moves from job to job and ranch to ranch, she follows, giving up

some of the stability that a woman longs for so that her husband can have the kind of work he needs. The photos Doig finds of his mother and father betray their simple happiness. He writes that the first months after their honeymoon "agreed with Charlie and Berneta Doig, an uncomplicated shirtsleeves-rolled-up summertime of following the sheep--my mother slender as filament, my father jauntily at home at timberline" (*HE* 24). The two of them are "acquainted with work" (*HE* 28), making do wherever the ranch shares are best. Berneta confounds our notion about the woman of the West as being too weak to share the enormous responsibilities of ranching. She takes on tasks that most women would have shirked, thus pioneering the revision of gender roles.

Doig is intent on portraying Berneta's generosity, showing that through the work of her hands, she is able to find a livelihood in the earth. What she finds, she gives to her family. Ironically, however, nature does not always reward her good will. Doig somewhat shatters the myth that the land is benefactor, that the land is "the earth as fertile mother" (*Quantic* 15), a myth that many advertisers in the East used as propaganda to attract future settlers. Hard times find Berneta stretched to the limits of endurance, causing her to think disdainfully about the places they ranched. She writes to her brother, "There are many disadvantages to farming in some parts of Montana...Sometimes there is alkali ground and in other places gumbo soil and then the chinook winds and grasshoppers and all different kinds of insects and sometimes not enough rainfall" (*HE* 16). The ranchland she and Charlie own is often more costly than beneficial. Each arid plot is susceptible to fickle weather patterns that cause draught and hunger, thus threatening the survival of their sheep; and finally, the arid climate takes the very breath

out of her, exacerbating an asthmatic illness which she would never recover from. The climate is better than others, but still leaves much to be desired. Yet another move is necessary to maintain Berneta's health, and Charlie is the first to take action. Berneta accepts with reluctance. Doig writes of Charlie's decision to move:

More and more spooked by her asthma battles in the isolation of the Faulkner Creek ranch, he flung the place away, piloted us out of Montana on war-bald tires and waning ration books, recast himself from ranchman into aluminum worker, he has desperately done what he thought there was to do, made the move to Arizona for the sake of health. (*HE* 38)

While the drier air is physically beneficial to her and Charlie, Berneta suffers loneliness without her family in the ranchlands of Montana. She understands as the writer D.H. Lawrence did, that "men are free when they are in a living homeland, not when they are straying and breaking away" (Haslam 20). Berneta is drawn to the barren Northland because it has informed her sense of being from her youth and because she has found what beauties it does offer, despite its sudden harshness. As Kent Ryden notes in *Mapping the Invisible Landscape*, "Place...is a complex intermingling and, ultimately, fusion of mind and landscape, so that neither is finally separable or meaningful without the other" (Ryden 254). Indeed, Berneta cannot separate herself from the place of her youth. Always, a longing for home pervades her letters, and she does not resign easily to being away. Doig writes of his mother's struggle:

Fuss about her health has always put a crowbar in my mother's spine and it does again now. She straightens up as if shedding this hard year. She tells my father all the truth she has at the moment.

"I'll try to get over this, Charlie."

She takes a breath as big as she is, not an asthma gasp but just fuel for what she needs to put across to him about her isolation amid a cityful of strangers, how she misses everything about Montana there is to miss.

"It's going to take some trying," she lets him know. (*HE* 39).

Doig recalls his reaction to their suffering as being that of the wondering observer, of a child that cannot comprehend the weariness of adulthood. He writes, "Invisible in plain sight at the kitchen table, crayoned combat forgotten on the tablet paper in front of me, I watch back and forth at these gods of my world in their confusion" (*HE* 39). His confusion is mitigated by the family's return to Montana, when they resume ranching in Wickenburg.

This change brings restoration to Berneta as she is reunited with her second love, the Faulkner Creek expanse. Duties become lighter when one favors one's surroundings, and the tone of Berneta's letters to Wally reflects her lightheartedness after the return to Montana. She is pleased with Charlie's health and Ivan's blossoming curiosities about life, and the house is abuzz with new wonders. Matchmaking and town hall dances, stray dogs and the ever-present demands of sheepherding--all of these light their lives in the place that they know and love best. Death, though, finds its way into the happiest of circumstances and assaults even the least deserving. The psychological boost that the

return home gives to Berneta lasts only so long. Her illness comes and goes in the subsequent years on the Faulkner Creek and deals her a final blow when Ivan is only six. Berneta dies where she was born, in the cradle of the West, and leaves behind her a legacy of letters and unspoken grace for her family to treasure.

Thematic to the memoir is that complex ironies characterize our fragile existence, and the one that would mark Berneta's existence is that the good too often die young. Their memory, though, is preserved by those whom they influence so well. Traces of Berneta's maternal grace live in Ivan, and he recognizes this in the final pages of his memoir. He writes,

--some of me is indisputably my father and my grandmother, and some I picked up along the way. But another main side of myself, I recognize with wonder in the reflection of my mother's letters. It turns out that the chosen world where I strive to live full slam--earth of the alphabet, the Twenty-Six country--had this earlier family inhabitant who wordworked, played seriously at phrase, cast a sly eye at the human herd; said onto paper her loves and her fears and her endurance in between; most of all, from somewhere drew up out of herself the half hunch, half habit--the have-to--of eternally keeping score on life, trying to coax out its patterns in regular report, making her words persevere for her. Berneta Augusta Maggie Ringer Doig, as distinct as the clashes of her name. (*HE* 156)

Doig is justified in idealizing his mother with such passages. By carefully portraying the constant struggles Berneta endures throughout her life in the West, Doig acknowledges



Berneta's position as a very real person connected with the heart of the earth. By accentuating the metaphorical significance in her letters and photographs, he raises her to the position of a kind of heroine in a myth, a heroine who touches the lives and the land around her with tenderness and strength. Just as Robert Frost concerned himself with "the realms of democracy and realms of the spirit" (qtd. in Haslam 20), so Doig connects himself to the intimate domestic sphere that Berneta carved out of Montana's vast, fragile earth. He recognizes that Berneta is the spirit of his family, replacing the mistaken identities of the West with a true sense of personality and place, of grace and grit.

### ***Chapter Three : An Unexpected Hero***

*"My father stayed in the moments of my days steadily now, even as his body dwindled from me. All of his way of life that I had sought to escape from--the grindstone routine of ranching, the existence at the mercy of mauling weather, the endless starting-over from one calamity or another--was passing with him, and while I still wanted my distance from such a gauntlet, I found that I did not want my knowing of it to go from me. The perseverance to have lasted nearly seventy years amid such cold prospects was what heritage Dad had for me; I had begun to see that it counted for much" (Sky 294).*

In most formulaic myths, the hero is strong and predictably invincible against the enemy-- be they forces of nature or forces of evil. As Barbara Meldrum remarks in *Under the Sun: Myth and Realism in Western American Literature*, "The myth of the West" is concerned with "acts of conquest (of the land, of Indians, of the forces of evil) and a cluster of values: freedom, courage, honor, daring, manliness" (2). From these myths come heroes, "the wooden stereotyped superhuman heroes who fail as they try to match the bigness of their Western setting" (Meldrum 2). The swashbuckling romancers of a Zane Grey-Louis Lamour legend are undaunted in the face of trouble. What little fear they have they overcome with a consistency of character that is often predictably inhuman. But Charlie Doig is, to the memory of Ivan, anything but an invincible, romanticized cowboy. In fact, in an interview with Gregory Morris, Ivan Doig criticizes the fiction that has arisen from the cowboy myth. He says,

The West was settled by a hell of a lot of people, different kinds of people--miners, homesteaders, schoolteachers, merchants, sheep ranchers, Chinese laundrymen--and the guy out herding cows was pretty minimal among them in most cases. So I find it bizarre that the cowboy is the

emblematic Western figure that so much potboiling fiction has made him.

(69)

This explains why the Shanes, the Lone Rangers, and the emblematic L'amour and Grey heroes do not dazzle Doig. He is concerned with a unique kind of hero, one in whom the humanness resides almost tragically. And Charlie is this hero. In his life, moments of failure and weakness temper his strong-willed nature, making him believable and real to those who have suffered loss.

Perhaps Charlie's greatest loss is that of his wife, Berneta, a loss which he is reluctant to bear, but which later raises him above the standard masculinity of the common Western hero. Elizabeth Jameson, in her essay, invites us to shed our stereotypical notions about the male hero in the West, and Doig's portrayal of Charlie does just this. Jameson says, "Rather than assuming that western men were mythic rugged individuals whom genteel women were to civilize, we need to explore whether both sexes shared desires for stable households and communities" (160). Charlie's desire for stability defines his actions as the quiet hero in Ivan's life. When Berneta dies, he must assume the doubly challenging role of a single parent, a role that requires more than his material provision. Such a loss calls for spiritual strength--nothing short of fatherly heroism--and at first, Charlie is irresponsive to the challenge. Reluctant to shed his sorrow, he indulges in self pity that is counterproductive of rebirth and renewal. Doig casts his hero in a human light with some of the most lyrical prose of the memoir. He writes,

Day by day, as autumn tanned the valley around us, now with bright frost weather, now with rain carrying the first chill of winter, my father stayed in the dusk of his grief. That sandbagged mood, I understand now, can only have been a kind of battle fatigue--the senses blasted around in him by that morning of death and the thousands of inflicting minutes it was followed by. He might go through the motions of work, even talk a bit with Clifford, but at any time his eyes could brim and he would lapse off, wordless, despairing. (*Sky* 17)

Doig sees a semblance between the harshness of his father's sorrow and the harshness of the landscape, and this metaphor adds depth to Charlie's character, making him more of a man and less of a legend than the formulaic Western hero. In fact, Doig overturns the common notion of "strength in masculinity" so often associated with the formulaic myth by feminizing (in a sense) his hero. Charlie is strong because he becomes like a mother to Ivan, nurturing him and fostering his emotional growth. His stamina and devotion to Ivan prove to be the paternal extension of Berneta's maternal values of piety and endurance. He weeps before Ivan when he recalls Berneta, thus shattering the masculine myth that emotion is weak. Even in his most reluctant moments, he has the aspect of a fallen hero, afflicted with self-pity and loneliness, on the verge of giving up completely, but then regaining his resolution.

In spite of the losses he is dealt, Charlie gains a reputation for being one of the most resourceful and witty ranchmen in the Sixteenmile Country. Snatches of diary which Doig incorporates in the memoir reveal more about Charlie than a single voice

could. One entry reads, "*I remember Charlie could spiel with the best of us knoheads...had a story ready whenever he remembered to look up from his work... He knew sheep ranchin' that feller did, but you know he could get kind of excited workin' cattle, he was too nervous to be the best cowman*" (Sky 31). Charlie has a talent for not only working with sheep, but also working with people. Elizabeth Simpson writes, "Charlie meets adversity with skill, knowing almost instinctively when to shear sheep, when to drive stock onto tender new grass, how to tactfully foreman crews made eccentric and touchy by isolation and endless work" (143). Charlie is a foreman whom workers respect and obey, and his way with words always evokes the most effort from those who might otherwise have been lazy. Doig writes,

Skill with horses and cattle and sheep were one thing...But along with muscle and feistiness, Dad had a knack of handing tasks around in a crew reasonably, almost gently: *Monte, if you'd ride up to the school section and salt those cows there. Jeff, if you'd work over that fence along the creek. Tony, if you'd...* That soft *if* of his seemed to deal each man into the deciding, and it was a mark of Dad's crews that they generally went out of the bunkhouse to the school section and the creek fence and a dozen other jobs just as if the work had been their own idea all along. (Sky 46)

Charlie's insight into human nature and his wry wit makes him a born leader, traits which leave a deep impression on his son. Doig scatters his father's wise truisms throughout the memoir, giving us glimpses of his character at the turning points in his life. He writes,

Little by little, and across more time than I want to count, I have come to see where our lives fit then into the valley. If Dad ever traced it at any length for himself, he never said so in more than one of his half-musings, half-jokes: *As the fellow says, a fool and his money are soon parted, but ye can't even get introduced around here.* (Sky 19)

About the harsh northern landscape, Charlie remarks drily: *As the Irish fellow says, this place must be the back of the neck of the world* (Sky 177). Such dry wit is necessary for survival in the Basin's obstinate landscape and fierce climate. Western filmmakers captured some of this same laconicism in the roles of John Wayne. Film critic Robin Wood calls Wayne in his role as Chance in *Rio Bravo* the "archetypal Western hero, strong, silent, infallible. His taciturnity becomes the occasion for humor...at the same time, the concept of stoical heroicism Wayne embodies provides the film with one of its major touchstones for behavior" (179). Inasmuch as he, too, is strong, silent, and infallible, Charlie is somewhat of an archetypal Western hero. At the same time, Doig confounds our stereotypical notions about gender roles in the West by his portrayal of Charlie's nurturing tenderness.

Doig writes that he felt the pressure to become like his father, to imitate his strength and his way with the world. He says of Charlie, "Dad took his decision about me. My boyhood would be the miniature of how he himself lived" (Sky 54). Doig recalls his father's continual influence during his coming of age, how he passes his work ethic on to him, and, despite spells of dejection, teaches him the wisdom of self-reliance and of family ties. He muses, "Dad's notion that I was fit for anything he himself might do

carried me, in this time when I was a six-seven-eight year-old, on a journey which stands in my memory as dappled and bold as the stories I heard of his own youth" (*Sky* 54). Doig writes off his father's survival to his wiry strength and "Scotch mulishness" (*Sky* 24). He recalls his father's words, "*Scotchmen and coyotes was the only ones that could live in the Basin, and pretty damn soon the coyotes starved out*" (*Sky* 24). From the time of his youth, Charlie knows a horse's ways like the back of his hand. What he does not know, however, he learns the hard way. His days of riding bronc are marred by injuries and bad breaks, and poor health disturbs his already tenuous existence as a rancher. Though he is blessed with sheer rancher's genius, he loses many sheep to the rough climate of the Tierney Basin, a force not even talent can override. Consequently, he moves from ranch to ranch, seeking to evade poverty while still doing what he loves best.

Following in his father's footsteps takes Ivan not only into the valleys and hills, but into the false-fronted Montana saloons, where he and his father become "lit with the lives" (*Sky* 67) of the colorful people there. Doig's realistic sense of place broadens here, as we get a glimpse of what town life held for the outdoorsman, and not just the grinds of ranch life. Doig revisits each saloon, sketching the faces of the barmen as vividly as he sketches the sage hills. He recalls the humors of the Stockman bar and the characters they encountered there: Bowtie Frenchy, "the dressy little foreigner" (*Sky* 59), Bohunk, Dutch, towering Long John and silent Deaf John. The owner of the bar, a friend of Charlie's would "set them up with a free beer now and again" (*Sky* 59), and "their company seemed to warm him from the cold agony he had been through" (*Sky* 60).

Through these characters, Doig "succeeds in giving a broad and varied selection of the folk materials from which the life of the region is woven" (Simpson 89).

Another of these colorful characters is Ruth, Charlie's second wife. Doig speaks of Ruth, curiously, as more of an outsider than a second mother, as someone to be endured rather than loved. The name he gives her, which becomes the title of the second chapter, is "Flip," capturing the hot-headedness of that strong-willed woman. "Ruth. Dad," Doig writes, "They were a pairing only the loins could have tugged together, and as with many decisions taken between the thighs, all too soon there were the bitterest afterthoughts" (*Sky* 71). After remarrying, Charlie leaves behind his old ambitions for new ones which prove unfulfilling. He, Ruth, and Ivan leave ranching to make a new life running a café in White Sulpher Springs, and a series of familial tensions make life difficult to bear. They fight more than they love one another, and this discord brings for Ivan a mix of "apprehension and interestedness" (*Sky* 76). The culmination of Charlie and Ruth's icy relationship is accentuated by the chill of the last Montana winter they would spend together. Charlie leaves Ruth, and he and Ivan resume ranching in the Norskie country. Commenting on the fragility of relationships in the West, Glenda Riley remarks in her book, *Building and Breaking Families in the American West*, "More than any other regional group in history, westerners have long exhibited a willingness to break unsatisfactory marital bonds and seek potentially more satisfying ties despite the costs" (113). The costs are less painful, however, than the loss of Berneta. Moreover, Charlie and Ivan regain a family member when they return to the Norskie country to ranch. There, Charlie patches up a long-held grudge with his mother-in-law, Bessie Ringer, so



that Ivan might have a "new mother." Again he reaffirms the feminine influence in Ivan's life, thus confounding again the old myth that emotional strength is found solely in masculinity.

Doig recalls the strength of that new "alliance" between Charlie and Bessie saying,

*Here is a man and here is a woman. In the coming light of one June morning, the same piece of life is axed away from each of them. Wounded hard, they go off their private ways. Until at last the wifeless man offers across to the daughter-robbed woman. And I am the agreed barter between them. Not even truth brought down to the bone this way can begin to tell what I long to of the situation shared by my father and my grandmother and myself during the years I call from memory here. For my father had to be more than is coded in the standard six-letter sound of father, he had also to be a guardian-to-an-adrift-boy and as well, mate-who-was-not-a-husband to the daunting third figure of the household. In turn that figure, my loving thunder-tempered grandmother, ...had somehow to mother me without the usual claims to authority for it, and at the same time to treat with her son-in-law in terms which could not be like a wife's but seemed not much closer to any other description either. I believe that I inherited the clearest, most fortunate part in this, allowed simply to be myself-older-than-I-was, and have the grant of a bolstered*

*parent and the bonus of a redoubtable grandparent at my side as well.*

*(Sky 238-39)*

Doig recognizes the sacrifice his father made for him, first by coming to a "truce" with Bessie and then raising him to seek what he loved by surrounding him with love.

Amid the demands of shepherding, Charlie and Bessie find a school for Ivan, and they encourage him to continue his education. Charlie's appreciation for an education beyond experience differentiates him from the common Western hero, for whom "intuitive knowledge and empirical knowledge are superior to book-learning and language--especially institutional language--cannot denote what is truly important" (Westbrook 35). Charlie's storying and way with words places him beside a Western hero who is just as unusual as Charlie--the Virginian, for whom learning is a new, uncharted, but well-loved territory. Ivan credits his father with much of his own ability to tell stories. He writes, "*It was you, in your burring troubadour's way of passing to me all you knew of the valley and the Basin, who enchanted into me such a love of language and story that it has become my lifework*" (Sky 273).

While many Western American novels stress the idea of intuitive rather than speculative learning, *This House of Sky* treats an important period in a boy's life in which he searches for academic identity. Ivan desires book-learning, not just rancher's skill, and he will stop at nothing to fulfill his college dreams. When Ivan is accepted to Northwestern, Charlie is supportive, though he is, in a sense, losing a son. He shows a mature appreciation for a world other than the West, a world that is foreign to hay bales and bleating lambs. Doig remembers his father's words, "*You got to do the deciding,*

*Skavinsky. We'll-back-you-to-the-limit-whatever-place-you-go" (Sky 237).* Ivan's coming of age inevitably hurts those closest to him, as his ambition drives him farther from the "house of sky" than his father would wish. At one point, Ivan must decide whether to take a summer job in Illinois instead of coming home to Montana. Doig recalls his conversation with his father regarding this decision on their last hunting trip together:

*Are ye gonna be able to look for a job out here?*

I faced around to him slowly, as if the motion hurt. *Dad, I don't think so. The jobs for me just aren't here. I think I'm pretty much gone from this country.*

*I figured ye were.* My father's straight, clean-lined face broke open in a tearful gulp, the wrenched gasp I had seen all the years ago in the weeks after my mother's death. I helplessly looked aside, swallowed, pulled at my lower lip with my teeth. I heard the breech of the .22 snick open, saw Dad palm the tiny cartridge out and finger it into the shellbox. His face was steady and square again. *Don't say anything to your grandma yet.*

*She'll miss ye enough these next months without knowin' beyond that. (Sky 259-60)*

When Ivan leaves, Charlie is a faithful correspondent, but his health is slowly deteriorating. Death finds its way once again into the Doigs's lives. After having struggled for years with emphysema, Charlie dies in Montana, where he had lived so fully. The reader must empathize with Doig, for the poignancy of his memoir and his ability to describe something as indescribable as death. He writes,

Split the tongue of the silence that beats in you when you first know that a parent is dying, and it will begin to recite everything unsaid across a lifetime. *Unsaid: that even in our most desperate time...you somehow kept to the one great rightness as well--the constant clasp of keeping me at your side, whatever the place or the hour or the weather or the mood or task or venture. I know, and again could not speak it, how drastically you turned your own life for me, choking down pride as never before to speak the truce with lady...know too that you needed risk, needed somehow to sizzle ordinariness by dropping danger into it now and again...know, and could say least of all, the final fact of triumph that you and Lady had made your way to a cherishing of each other which went beyond family lineament. (Sky 274)*

Witnessing the death of his father, Doig is inspired with thankful reminiscence. Loss brings recognition, and Doig delicately records his Father's importance, during turbulence and calm.

Who Charlie was-- his humanness and his heroism-- is clearer to Doig the remembering man than to Doig, the experiencing youth. This is evident in the way he relates so poignantly the pivotal moments in his coming of age, "where something like love can pass between father and son on the front stoop of a country bar as well as a lesson on life's pointers" (Beer 186). Impressed by his father's matter-of-fact philosophy, feisty wit, and devotion to his family, Doig highlights these characteristics in order to

recreate a person of universal, not just regional appeal. Doig's memories of his father yield a retrospective understanding of what he meant to him in youth. Truly,

while a man may not leave behind him a house or any other marks of a physical existence, he does leave memory, emotion, and experience. The succeeding generation absorbs its fathers, sometimes unquietly, in memory, and passes the accumulated experience on to its children. The result is a gradual refinement of the strain; but to make this strain a good one we need more than the Calvinistic goodness--we need also the recklessness of the explorer, the aspirations of the dreamer...". (Milton 98)

Doig, who once characterized himself as "dreamweaver on a professional basis," is eager to explore his father's influence on his own identity as a Westerner. The result is a uniquely constructed memoir with heroes as believable and real as they are mythical and iconoclastic. As Elizabeth Simpson notes, "Readers who believe that the most engaging heroes are 'of the folk' will find themselves justified by Doig's characters...His authorial voice sketches their life histories according to patterns familiar to the mythographer: unusual circumstances of birth and rearing, initiation by experience of loss and death, return to society and useful function within the community" (91). Charlie follows all of these patterns, thus emerging as one of the most important characters in Doig's memoir.

## ***Chapter Four : Breaking the Barrier of the "Cult of True Womanhood"***

*"She had never thought through roles of life but could don the most hazardous ones as automatically as her apron" (Sky 238).*

*Lady*--She may be to Doig's memory as striking as dawn on the "snaggled" peaks or dusk in the cradle of the Tierney Basin. She may be the belle of Moss Agate--a stout, peppery, good-hearted woman. But "kin" or "clan?" Such words are not "deft" enough to describe what she meant to her grandson and boy-turning-man, Ivan. She merits a language of her own, with "blood words" to describe her more "resonant" than "bobolink," "whisker," "daisy," or "sneeze" (Sky 238). Fussy, willful, but most of all devoted, Bessie Ringer comes to the Doigs in their dark hour and stays until the closing of her last hour. In "Lady," "Ivory," and "Endings," Doig recalls his Grandmother's influential presence in his life, as a woman of staunch values and awkwardly affectionate ways. Mother of Berneta, Grandmother of Ivan, Mother in Law of Charlie, ranch-hand, cook, and companion, Bessie Ringer "had never thought through roles of life but could don the most hazardous ones as automatically as her apron" (Sky 238).

Because of her versatility, Bessie emerges as a literary and historical figure who invites us to examine the significance of gender roles in a young Western land. Bessie comes out of a generation of women still reeling under the influence of what feminist critics call "The Cult of True Womanhood." Among the Cult's values were domesticity, purity, piety, and submissiveness, values which many Anglo-American women in the East misunderstood and thus misapplied. They felt that submissiveness was a virtue which immediately relegated them to the kitchen. And purity became a code word for

prudishness. But if a woman was to survive and prosper in the West, she could not subscribe to such strictures. The land was too harsh, and the men were too needy. Bessie Ringer, with her proverbial, rough-hewn wisdom, understood this. By necessity and by nature, she forged new ground for the woman in the West by embracing her roles in the domestic sphere and in the outside world, particularly in the landscape. With common sense and an open heart, she extended to Charlie and Ivan her own version of maternal grace, and her love for them informed her attitudes toward the places Montana held for them.

In "Lady," Doig writes that few settlers had the endurance of Bessie Ringer. He recalls, "Bessie was not like many of the valley women, or most of the men either. Down through the valley's history, such settlers had expected something of their work, and sooner or later uprooted themselves if it didn't come. Bessie only chored on" (*Sky* 116-17). Other women of the West, like their male counterparts or stereotypical Western heroes, "failed as they tried to match the bigness of their surroundings" (Meldrum 2). Some became insane, others died young, still others abandoned their families and homes. Probably these same women misapplied the cult of womanhood to situations which demanded hard labor and shrewdness, not petticoats or co-dependency. Soon they found their antique notions about gender roles shattering in a West that was changing. About these changing notions, Elizabeth Jameson writes,

While some of its [the Cult of True Womanhood's] ideals were expressed by some western women, the roles it prescribed could be attained only by leisure-class urban women. Definitions of Victorian womanhood arose

from the changing realities of an elite who did not perform productive labor and who were valued for their very economic uselessness. That ideal was far from the reality for the homesteaders or for working-class women in mining towns or urban areas. (150)

For women like Bessie Ringer, the demands of ranch life necessitated "flexibility and interdependence in work roles" (Jameson 150). Men might cook, and women might move hay bales, depending on how much work needed to be done and who was around to do it. Even distribution of the work became a necessity by virtue of the immensity of the tasks.

Jameson tells of a woman, Kathleen Chapman, who had to haul fuel in and ashes out as much as she had to scrub clothes. Bessie, too, assumes roles most typically associated with the male. She becomes a ranch-hand on days when Charlie is absent from the ranch, and in addition to cooking and cleaning and countless other duties, she tends the sheep. Doig recalls that she went for twenty-one days without a day off. This is during the time in which an attack of ticks nearly wipes out all of their sheep and a storm nearly plummets them over the edge of a cliff. Bessie and Ivan toil night and day to save their sheep, while Charlie (who has gone to town for supplies) remains ignorant of their plight. Clearly, it is the land that dictates who will do the ranching, not the "cult of true womanhood."

In that unfinished West, if a family wanted to stay alive and reap the benefits of their settlements, everyone in the family had to contribute. In no uncertain terms, it would be fatal to neglect the land. But, only a woman with common sense and a healthy



dose of hard-headedness could have realized this and acted upon it. Bessie is this kind of woman. She bears that "wan ranch life," that "spare weather-whipped land" (*Sky* 116-17) with uncommon bravery, following her son-in-law from ranch to ranch in an itinerant lifestyle that would not suit most women her age. She bears it precisely because her family is on the line. She had lost a daughter to the land, she would not lose her sons. Bessie compensates for her losses by pouring her heart into the labor that each new place requires of her. And whether she is cooking for McGrath or tending sheep in the Northlands, she works tirelessly. Doig writes that she would take "the worst accommodations and the dreariest chores" (*Sky* 133) for herself. Admiringly, he notes, "This inside-out chivalry she must have formed in the Moss Agate years, when she found that she minded the drudgeries there less than did her edgy husband or my frail mother or her frisky sons and so took most of them upon herself" (*Sky* 133). By portraying Bessie's chivalry, Doig inverts some of our notions about the woman in myth. Bessie disregards her feminine prerogative to be protected, because she would rather protect. In this way, she is taking motherhood to a higher level than many of her Victorian counterparts took it--she chooses self-sacrifice, not ease.

The motivating factor behind Bessie's fierce dedication to the land is her love for her family. Like Berneta, if she is to see her son-in-law and grandson prosper, she feels compelled to do her share of work. Having rejoined Charlie and Ivan after a bitter estrangement following Berneta's death, Berneta takes on her new role as "mother" with determination and a strange, sometimes awkward tenderness. She becomes attached to Ivan and influences him with her proverbial simplicity and love of storying. He writes

that she was "my compass point to the past, to my own youth" (*Sky* 306). When she first moves in with Ivan and Charlie, she bequeathes Berneta's belongings to Ivan, knowing that these little things of the past are what enlighten us about the present. Doig recalls their exchange on that dusty morning in the attic. Bessie says,

*This here was your mother's hope chest. The kids' dad made it back at Moss Agate, when she first started going with Charlie. With your dad, I mean. He worked on this at nights for the longest time. See, he didn't have anything but some pieces of flooring, but he wanted her to have a hope chest of some kind. He did a good job with it. It's sat here all these years. I want it to be yours now. (Sky 128)*

Between these "squalls of emotion" (*Sky* 128), Bessie is temperamental. At times her patience wears thin, but at others, she could be mistaken for a saint. Doig recalls that she spent days teaching him to read and making their house a home, with a realistic understanding of domesticity as it relates to both the interior life and the life outside the home.

Bessie works, as Berneta did, to keep the family together, using language as a bridge from the past to the present. Elizabeth Simpson remarks about Bessie's stories that they "were not part of the literary tradition [Ivan] was later to absorb through endless reading and formal training but stories about family and neighbors. They told him about his origins and taught him that there was mystery and meaning in the world around him" (93). Bessie's "storying" is as peculiarly humorous as Charlie's is, and she is apt to reveal her family's quirks with fondness. She tells Ivan where he was born and how "grand" he

was to see, with warts and red hair and "splayed" feet. Her pride over Charlie rings out in her stories about his baseball talent as catcher on the Sixteen Creek team. And she recalls her sons' pastime of making lemonade stands and shouting the advertisements she taught them, "*Lemonade, lemonade! Stirred by an old maid! With a spade!*" (Sky 139).

Bessie's humor gives complexion to her expressions, and contributes to the folklore of the memoir. Her simplicity is impressive to the book-eager Ivan, whose love of language would take him farther into the reaches of speculative wisdom than Bessie would go. She is wise to the world, in her own right, however, and Doig credits her with a certain savvy saying, "Lore ran both ways between us, and generally hers was more useful than mine, having come straight out of life instead of from printed pages" (Sky 139). Bessie's wisdom is as indispensable to Ivan as the love of his first mother.

While Bessie takes to Ivan easily, she never completely loses her reserve toward Charlie. Considering the painful emotional isolation that she underwent as a result of her husband's alcoholism, this is understandable. One might expect that such an experience would leave her emotions scathed and her heart insecure. Some of her diary entries reveal her sense of estrangement that come when she "loses" her husband to alcoholism. She says,

The one time, I was alone by myself on the place--the kids' dad was off again somewhere--and it rained and it rained until the creek started to come up around the cattle in the corral. It kept coming and kept coming until I had to saddle our old roany horse and ride through to let those cows out...But I got him through the water and tied one end of the rope to the

pole gate and the other end to the saddle horn, and the cows could follow me out then. A person can do a lot of things like that when you're in a corner. (*Sky* 117)

Even if Bessie's own marriage is unhappy, her reunion with Charlie and Ivan re-ignites her maternal instincts and gives her reason to live. She joins Charlie in a large part because of Ivan. And, despite character conflicts, she remains Charlie's loyal companion until his death. Doig writes of their relationship in the years following their "truce" lightheartedly. He says,

How much the old rift between them was mended that Sunday, I do not know. I was too young to read the presence of the past, although I could sense it was somehow there in the kitchen with us. But rilesome as both of these figures could be about whatever might have happened in some yesterday, that first visit surely undid some of the anger just by not becoming a brawl. (*Sky* 124)

Bessie and Charlie at least chore on with the "civility of allies" (*Sky* 157). Doig recalls,

The two of them being who they were, that life of course came at the elbow of hard work and had to pant as best it could to keep up. The one time of truce I could count on was summer dusk. After her dawn-to-supper day of cooking and house chores and his as-long day of haying and handling the crew, Grandma would go with Dad to the hayfield and help him repair machinery for the morning...all of it done with a certain declared calm between them. (*Sky* 154)

This relationship defies many of our notions about authority and gender roles. While Bessie follows Charlie from ranch to ranch, she plays an equally authoritative role in the rearing of Ivan. And her authority is not dictatorial, it is heartfelt, an extension of Berneta's maternal grace. Like Charlie, she teaches him through her simple ways the value of family and of hard work. Elizabeth Simpson notes, "Bessie's forceful, positive approach to life was tainted by the threat of losing Ivan, which would happen if the shaky family structure came apart" (93). Bessie strives to keep that family structure together by her loyalty to Charlie and her faithful correspondence with Ivan as he enters the world of academia.

Whether donning the role of ranch-hand or housekeeper, cook or book-keeper-- Bessie is always and first, a mother. But she is a mother who defies our notions of the passive, homebound woman. Her itinerant lifestyle during her years as Ivan's second mother and Charlie's right hand differentiates her from so many women of the generation preceding her, who remained largely relegated to the home. Instead, Bessie incorporates the fierce Montana landscapes into her domestic sphere by working the land with a determinism uncharacteristic of most women of the West. She subscribes to no cult of womanhood, but she does not discard the real meaning of the values of womanhood--a domesticity that is tied to the land and a heart full of maternal grace.

## *Chapter Five : The Land as Metaphor and as Domestic Space*

*"Montana's special gift is space, landscape made personal; space that reaches out to the horizon then comes back and gets under your skin. It reaches inward, wraps itself around your soul, incubates and grows. When you finally begin to understand just what it is about Montana that is important to you, it has already taken root in your heart and you'll never be the same." (Law 39)*

That man and his dwelling place are inextricably linked is central to the theme of both *Heart Earth* and *This House of Sky*. The land's fords and fallows, its highs and lows, its length and width can open the mind to new images. These images evoke strong passions from the inhabitant, the weakness and strength of which are often in direct proportion to the affability or severity of that landscape. Because the land plays such an influential role in the lives of Westerners, it acts as a kind of character in Western literature, affecting the dweller with its strange peace, its ravishing beauty, and its stark austerity. It is common for the Western writer to be smitten by these many faces of the land and become eager to court her with words that flatter her beauty. The land is just so alluring to Doig, and it shapes his voice and sense of place from the outset. Since "writers will always be listening for the rhythms of their living places" (Dobie 22), Doig tunes his words to Montana's sounds and texturizes the memoir with the feel of each bittersweet place his characters lived in. He shows how they are molded psychologically by the arid, lonely land and prove themselves to be survivors.

Doig's portrayal of Montana both challenges and preserves our most cherished myths about how gender is symbolized in the land. Traditionally, the land has become rooted in our understanding as a kind of character of itself, more typically a female

character, but for Doig, the land exhibits both male and female qualities. Furthermore, in Doig's portrayal, the land becomes part of its inhabitants' domestic space, informing their identities with its own dimensions.

Doig's original words bear out this symbolism that we attach to the land. Aside from shaping the landscape's fluid curves and sharp edges with his private dictionary of descriptions--"snaggled," "whangleather," the "slickening" rain, and the "skreeking" night--, Doig also personifies the land with adjectives like "stubborn," "taut," and "ignominious." His title words, "Heart Earth," give it the most essential of all human organs. In his essay, "The Writer's West," John Milton also speaks of the "passions of the land" as if the land were human. For Doig, the land is human because it is a lover. When he writes, "My parents' honeymoon summer on Grass Mountain wed them to this particular body of earth" (*HE* 24), he gives it a spousal character. This is Doig's way of avoiding the commonplace myth that the land is feminine. In one such "feminine" myth, *Wild Geese*, by Martha Ostenso, the land is considered to be "the earth as fertile mother" (Quantic 15). As Diane Quantic explains in *The Nature of the Place*, "Caleb Gare regards the land as his true mistress, caressing his flax with the affection he denies his wife" (15). In another myth of the West, *Giants in the Earth*, "Per Hansa regards the land as a fertile goddess, even as his wife Beret cowers in terror at the land's isolation and dreads the birth of her child, symbol of Per's violation both of her and of the wild land" (Quantic 15). Again, in *O Pioneers!*, "Alexandra has a recurring dream in which she is borne across the land by a strong man and immersed in cold water...[M]ost agree that the dream is clearly an echo of ancient fertility rituals, symbolizing Alexandra's deep

commitment to the land" (Quantic 15). Doig accommodates the understanding of the land as feminine, but he also allows the land to be a metaphor for our masculine notions of provider and protector, since he gives the land a spousal character. He writes that both Berneta and Charlie both are "wed to" the earth.

Ivan's relationship with the land is as sacred as the ceremonial marriage metaphor that characterizes Charlie and Berneta's relationship with the land. The vaulted symmetry in the mountain peaks, the "walls of high country" (*Sky* 21), and the windswept floor where shadows accent deep valleys--all these provide the dimensions in the "house of sky" which would become part of his heart and soul. Like Charlie and Berneta, the young Ivan finds the rugged topography a solace for his imagination. He writes,

A few thousand acres hugging onto the Smith River just as it began kinking through sage foothills into the southern edge of the valley, the place had more to offer me than it did a man trying to coax a profit from it. Its shale gulches and slab-rocked slopes pulled me off into more pretend games alone than ever, more *kchews* of rock bullets flung zinging off boulders, more dream-times as I wandered and poked and hid among stone silences. (*Sky* 54)

Whether it is in these rock formations, in silent ripple of the Faulkner Creek, in the hawk cries of the Smith River Valley, or in the familiar faces of the White Sulphur Springs--Doig finds consolation in the picturesque. Many of his descriptions of the land reveal the captivity of a soul deeply touched by the beauty of the West. In his innocence, Ivan



connects with the land in a way that an urbanized adult might not, thus learning to appreciate the subtle solitude that the land affords.

This solitude is an important part of the Doigs's psyche, marking their attitude toward the headlong rush of civilization. In "Time Since," Doig recognizes the peace and serenity that his family of three experienced on the Bridger Range, despite their isolation.

Doig writes,

The single sound is hidden water--the south fork of Sixteenmile Creek driving down its willow-masked gulch. The stream flees north through this secret and peopleless land until, under the fir-dark flanks of Hatfield Mountain, a bow of meadow makes the riffled water curl wide to the west... Alone here on our abrupt tiny shelf, the three of us eased through May and the first twenty. (*Sky* 3)

"Peopleless." What draws Charlie to this place is certainly not civilization. When he brings his family to herd sheep on the Bridger Range, he does so with the knowledge that this sprawling expanse holds opportunity only for those who are brave enough to live without the constant consolation of human company. He has what Ralph Beer calls the ability "to understand and accept the desolation of small town life and the vertigo of rural isolation" (186). In his essay, "In Spite of Distance," Beer insightfully notes that many Western writers are producing literature "that focuses on this western chaos; fiction that probes our shaky sense of place and our wobbly sense of ourselves...our alternating lusts for open spaces and wider highways, for untamed wilderness and greater access" (186).

Diane Quantic attributes this attraction to a desolate land to the popular myths generated out of Western fiction. She writes,

Why people were willing to leave the security of their homes and families and travel into unsettled land, why they continue to live in a hostile environment, why they insist that the family farm is to be preserved at all costs--these familiar contradictions reflect both historical tradition and mythic concepts that persist in the fiction and the popular imagination even when experience disproves them. (xviii)

Most of these myths promoted the idea that the West was the Great American Garden, and even if it turned out to be the Great American Desert, the settler could work hard enough to change his surroundings into some place livable.

Like these settlers, Charlie has the ever present optimism that tells him he can make Montana a home for his family, and his ambitions are shaped by the land around him. He is a man who is moved by the fact that solitude which breeds self-reliance. Thoreau said, "In wildness is our preservation," and Charlie recognizes this, as he emerges from an age of industrialism with no more than his own "place" in the wild of Montana. For Charlie, the copper factory in Arizona is insufferable, and although Berneta finds consolation in the physiognomy of the Sonoran desert, calling it "a good place to rest," and "beautiful...in the desert way" (*HE* 53), still, this dry land cannot compare to the Montana West, whose richness is at once desolating and alluring. Both Charlie and Berneta long for the comforts of their native soil.

The Doigs's decision to leave the desert confirms their belief that the beauty and serenity of Montana would mitigate the blow of a harsh, arid, climate. They can survive what the critic John Milton sees as a strange, even cruel paradox. He writes,

[A man on the open plains] may travel hundreds of miles without seeing appreciably different towns or a significant change of scenery, and yet the journey itself supports freedom of movement. Or, where the plains meet the mountains, he may drive from the flatland to a mountain peak in little more than thirty to sixty minutes, completely exchanging one world for another. Often, romantic grandeur exists within a few miles of desolation.

(51)

Desolation and grandeur--the two are incongruous--but the grandeur overshadows the desolation in Charlie's eyes. He shares that same seminal desire for Westward settlement which moved his ancestors to fulfill their Manifest Destiny. The myth of Manifest Destiny, Quantic remarks, "was self-renewing: as the frontier advanced, Americans experienced a perennial resurgence of the original mandate to transform the wilderness" (53). Charlie Doig is more interested in working with the land than in transforming it, and he has the same optimism that the early Scotch settlers had when they viewed the wide Montana expanse. Doig describes their initial reactions to the land:

A moment, cup your hands together and look down into them, and there is a ready map of what these homesteading families had in mind. The contours and life lines in your palms make the small gulches and creeks angling into the center of the Basin. The main flow of water, Spring

Creek, drops down to squirt out there where the bases of your palms meet, the pass called Spring Gulch. Toward these middle crinkles, the settlers clustered in for sites close to water and, they hoped, under the wind...Thumbs and the upward curl of your fingers represent the mountains and steep ridges all around. Cock the right thumb a bit outward and it reigns as Wall Mountain does, prowling its rimrock out and over the hollowed land below. And on all that cupping rim of unclaimed high country, the Scots families surely instructed one another time and again, countless bands of sheep could find summer grass. (*Sky* 24)

In this metaphoric description, the land is corporeal, yet another manifestation of Doig's desire to humanize the landscape. The land, moreover, has the attitude of a challenger. Doig writes, "The clean lines of this fresh landscape everywhere declared purpose and capacity, seemed to trumpet: *Here are the far bounds, all the extent anyone could need. Now live up to them*" (*Sky* 181). With metaphoric warrior terms, Doig establishes the conflict between man and land, saying:

The western skyline before us was filled high with a steel-blue army of mountains, drawn in battalions of peaks and reefs and gorges and crags as far along the entire rim of the earth as could be seen. Summit after summit bladed up thousands of feet as if charging into the air to strike first at storm and lightning, valleys and clefts chasmed wide as if split and hollowed by thunderblast upon thunderblast. Across the clear gape of distance, we could read where black-quilled forest wove in beneath cliffs

and back among the plummet of canyons, we could make out the beds of rimrock. The Smith River Valley had had mountain ranges all around. This high-set horizon twenty miles to our west thrust itself as if all those past ranges and twice their number more had been tumbled together and then armored with rimrock and icefield. (*Sky* 180)

The armored west marches, charges, strikes, and plummets--it is a force to be reckoned with, threatening the psychological and physical survival of its inhabitants. Through this symbolic language, Doig is imitating--perhaps inadvertently--the first settlers' descriptions of the West. Quantic explains,

As explorers and settlers drifted across the plains, they searched for images adequate to encompass the vast expanse. At first...they drew on standard metaphors to describe what the landscape was *like* not what it *was*. Later authors wrote from experience, creating images that dwarfed man: the sky as a bowl, the grasses as sea. In works that emphasize the overwhelming power of the land, nature is personified as a force that resists man's efforts to control it. (30)

That which resists has a will of its own, and many Western authors imagined the West to be capricious, a land of "paradoxes, of sudden changes, of unpredictability" (Milton 51). In his essay "The Writer's West," John Milton comments, "A man on the open plains is thoroughly exposed to the elements of nature; he suffers physically from the unhindered Sun and wind, and he is affected psychologically by the isolation" (51). Exposure to torrential rain and wind on the rugged plains makes shepherding a test of endurance for

Charlie and his family. In "North," Doig describes their bitter struggle to save their sheep from a suicidal plunge down the side of a canyon. It is late in the summer season, and one of the rudest hailstorms the Valley ever witnessed sends the sheep bawling across the plain toward a steep precipice. Doig writes,

What we faced, if we could not bring the band under control was a rapid steady push toward the devastation of our sheep. The rain was pelting out of the north. As it spun the cold terrified sheep straight south before it, they were aimed like an avalanche to the cliffs which bladed up from the gorge of the Two Medicine. (*Sky* 219)

Were it not for their "ranchcraft," they might have lost all of their sheep. As it stands, they lose much of their year's profit and have to fight to stay above the poverty line. Mary Clearman Blew writes of a similar experience in the life of a young pioneer girl, Nettie, who, like Ivan, feels trapped in her environment after she struggles to keep her lambs from dying of pneumonia and refusing to mother their young. Nettie will eventually leave the ranch to fulfill her college dreams, because she, like Ivan, yearns to be free from the constraints of shepherding. For Nettie, as it is for Ivan, the land is a test that she is willing to take once, but more anxious to leave behind. As the mythographer and theologian Mircea Eliade remarks, "A fierce landscape was assumed to be the proper abode of people committed to an austere vocation" (qtd. in Lane 160). Such a vocation is not for everyone, and though he does not shirk the duties of ranching, Ivan makes a crucial decision to leave these duties once he has come of age.

With this harsh climate constantly reminding them of their frailty, Charlie, Bessie, and Ivan retain sight of their powerlessness against the West's strong forces. Quantic remarks, "Time and again...the person who attempts to impose his or her will upon the land is overcome by natural disaster, a blizzard, a prairie fire, or a dust storm, and the person who understands the land's potential reaps bountiful harvests" (4).

To fight the land is futile, and at times all they can do is curse its strength. Charlie swears against each harrowing storm, crying "*Done...Damn ye*" (*Sky* 97), and Ivan marvels at their helplessness--"*What the hell are we gonna do?*" (*Sky* 206)--when facing the loss of their sheep. Such feelings of helplessness thrust Ivan into a state of melancholy. Downcast by the exhaustion that that feverish storm inflicted upon him, he becomes disillusioned with ranching and can see no future in doing what his father so loves. Like William Kittredge, who writes in *Hole in the Sky*, "I am trying to make sense of my yearning to leave" (39), Ivan seeks to find a reason for moving onward and fulfilling his college dreams. He loves his roots, but so much of the world of shepherding is accidental to the man he has become. He dreams of writing, of studying, of academic translucence. The land, at this point, can only give heartache and physical exhaustion.

As Elizabeth Hamsten points out in *Settlers' Children*, dreams of otherness offered a kind of "escape from rural life" (35). The land, inasmuch as it tests Ivan's endurance, acts as a catalyst in his choice to leave Montana altogether. Doig writes, "I had no steady idea about what I would do in life, but I intended now that it would not

include more seasons of sheep on that vast gambling table of Blackfeet rangeland" (*Sky* 222).

Milton remarks that many Western writers are compelled to portray this interplay between man and land as they create characters who are either "heroes" or "pawns of nature" (51). He writes,

Because Western towns are far apart, and sudden storms swing across the plains, and snow comes early to the mountains, and the wind blows hard enough to be a factor in human behavior, the writer cannot avoid the effects of the land on its people. He may, however, as his predecessors have done, see life as physical and spiritual ordeal, or he can view it in terms of purity as symbolized by the clear and dry air which, even today in most places, is undefiled by industrial civilization. In these respects, the Western novel is likely to stress survival or to be pastoral in tone, and, in keeping with the natural paradoxes, the two emphases may stand in juxtaposition within the same novel. (51)

Survival and pastoral description are elemental to Doig's memoir. But, Ivan's interior, psychological conflict about his sense of place and where he will eventually settle takes precedence over the conflict with the land. Doig even makes the struggle with the land a metaphorical one, symbolizing the human spirit in each of his characters. The storm that threatens the lives of their sheep in that crucial scene of "North" is a metaphor for the thunder-fierce lives of Ivan, Bessie, and Charlie. The mountain climate mirrors their own intrepidity. In the words of Mircea Eliade, "The inaccessible mountain witnesses to



human limits. It shares in the mystery that C.S. Lewis once described as Joy" (qtd in Lane 145).

These attitudes of joy, sorrow, determination, and despair are found in Doig's metaphorical descriptions of the landscape. David Long, in his essay "Straight to the Actual" calls this a "habit of mind, [a] willingness to illuminate character by way of landscape (which) seems especially fierce among westerners" (170). Doig writes of his father: "Day by day, as autumn tanned the valley around us, now with bright frost weather, now with rain carrying the first chill of winter, my father stayed in the dusk of his grief" (*Sky* 17). The harshness of the Montana winter illustrates the harshness of Charlie's sorrow. In *Heart Earth*, Doig creates another metaphor to describe his mother: "The motion of Berneta's mind often was horseback, her saddle-straddling generation finding its freedom in the ride to Saturday night dances and two-or-three-day Fourth of July rodeos" (*HE* 18). These images not only illuminate the character's qualities, they give the memoir a moral thrust, since they frequently cause the reader to associate the character with what is good and beautiful in Nature. This connection between the human spirit and the land is becoming more and more recognized by scholars in the field of geography. As Stephen Bourassa writes, "Humanistic geography is in large part a response to perceived inadequacies in the traditional geographic approach to understanding the cultural landscape. That approach, with its goal of objective scientific detachment, fails to grasp the fundamental matter of what it is to exist in or experience the landscape" (2-3). These geographers are essentially trying to grasp the "human subjective experience of landscape" (3)--something previous geographers did not do--and

they clarify what is elemental to our relationship with the land. Doig goes even so far as to make this relationship sacred, by figuratively "wedding" Charlie and Berneta to the land. He writes, "My parents' honeymoon summer on Grass Mountain wed them to this particular body of earth" (*HE* 24). Doig then describes their honeymoon place: "Sage like a dwarf orchard, climbing with the land as the valley around Moss Agate swells west into ridges, then cascades toward Sixteenmile Creek in more and more hills, a siege of hills" (*HE* 23). This ceremonial metaphor is significant in that it preserves the myth of sacrality in the West. Max Westbrook speaks of this myth as a tradition in which "the sacred man can find his rough and realistic God of energy in the beauty of a lake, the harsh heat of a desert, the blank and haunting eyes of a fresh-killed deer. This discovery, furthermore, is a literal one: the sacred man does not find a symbol of God; he finds God. He touches the thing itself" (134).

While Doig touches our love of the picturesque with his metaphoric descriptions of a land that is at once haunting and sacred, he also confutes the myth of the West as Eden. In doing so, he rejects any remnants of the false idealizations of the land which by 1860 had become "the nation's most cherished shared mythology" (Kolodny 199).

Annette Kolodny remarks in *The Land Before Her*,

As that mythology went, an uncorrupted and fertile West had 'brought hundreds of struggling, debt-ridden, homeless and hungry men and women from the crowded cities of older States, and given them peace and plenty, houses and lands, while they in grateful return have made the

wilderness and the solitary place glad for them; and the desert to rejoice, and blossom as the rose.' (199)

Such a myth contradicts the enormous test of endurance that the land inflicted on settlers. Eager to avoid such contradictions, Doig finds himself in the company of earlier authors like Alice Cary and Caroline Kirkland, for whom honesty is a main ingredient in their portrayal of the West. Kolodny describes Cary's authorship in a way which might be applied to Doig. She writes:

In portraying the world of debt-encumbered farms, the daily penalties of pinched circumstances and pinched lives and the frustrations of a lifetime in which there is 'never rest nor respite from labor,' Alice Cary forced her readers to acknowledge struggle and toil in a region where the popular imagination has decreed only a bountiful garden. (Kolodny 178)

Doig, too, opens his readers' eyes to the aridity and isolation of the "house of sky" at the very same time that he invites us to relish its beauty and serenity.

Doig's own titles "Heart Earth" and "This House of Sky" are key to our understanding of how the author views the role of the land in the lives of its inhabitants. It is not accidental that he names the memoir about his mother "Heart Earth." Her heart is linked to the land, because she views it as her own domestic space, and her love for her family informs her attitude toward the landscape. If she is to see them succeed, then she must work the land. And she does so, with hardiness and maternal grace. The land is not merely a backdrop for the characters' lives in Doig's memoirs. It is symbolically a spouse and a lover, a metaphor for the love between Doig's mother and her family. What is

more, the domestic space that Montana affords his family inspires Doig to entitle his crowning memoir, "This House of Sky."

## Works Cited

- Beer, Ralph. "In Spite of Distance." *Montana Spaces*. Ed. William Kittredge. New York: Lyons & Burford, 1988. 179-188.
- Bevis, William. *Ten Tough Trips: Montana Writers and the West*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1990.
- Bredhal, Carl. *Updating the Literary West*. Ed. Thomas J. Lyon. Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1997.
- Bourassa, Stephen. *The Aesthetics of Landscape*. London: Belhaven, 1991.
- Clearman, Mary. *Lambing Out and Other Stories*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1977.
- Dobie, J. Frank. "The Writer and His Region." *Western Writing*. Ed. Gerald Haslam. Albuquerque: New Mexico, 1974. 16-24.
- Doig, Ivan. *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*. San Diego: Harcourt and Brace, 1978.
- . *Heart Earth*. New York: Penguin, 1993.
- French, Cindy. "Child of the Land." *Leaning into the Wind*. Eds. Hasselstrom, Collier, Curtis. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 5-6.
- Hampsten, Elizabeth. *Settlers' Children: Growing Up on the Great Plains*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1991.
- Jameson, Elizabeth. "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West." *The Women's West*. Eds. Armitage and Jameson. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1987.
- Kittredge, William. *Owning it All*. St. Paul: Greywolf, 1987.

- Kolodny, Annette. *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984.
- Lane, Belden C. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*. Oxford: U of Oxford P, 1998.
- Long, David. "Straight to the Actual." *Montana Spaces*. Ed. William Kitteredge. New York: Lyons & Burford, 1988. 169-178.
- Lucas, Blake. "Saloon Girls and Ranchers' Daughters: The Woman in the Western." *The Western Reader*. Eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman. New York: Limelight, 1998. 303-311.
- Meldrum, Barbara Howard. *Under the Sun: Myth and Realism in Western American Literature*. New York: Whitston, 1985.
- Milton, John R. *The Novel of the American West*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1980.
- Morris, Gregory L. *Talking Up a Storm*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1994.
- Quantic, Diane Dufva. *The Nature of the Place*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995.
- Ryden, Kent C. *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993.
- Simpson, Elizabeth. *Earthlight, Wordfire: The Work of Ivan Doig*. Moscow: U of Idaho P, 1992.
- Stegner, Wallace. *Wolf Willow*. 1955. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1962.
- Westbrook, Max. "The Practical Spirit: Sacrality and the American West." *Western Writing*. Ed. Gerald Haslam. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1974. 134.
- Wood, Robin. "Rio Bravo & Retrospect." *The Western Reader*. Eds. Jim Kitses and Gregg Rickman. New York: Limelight, 1998. 177-179.