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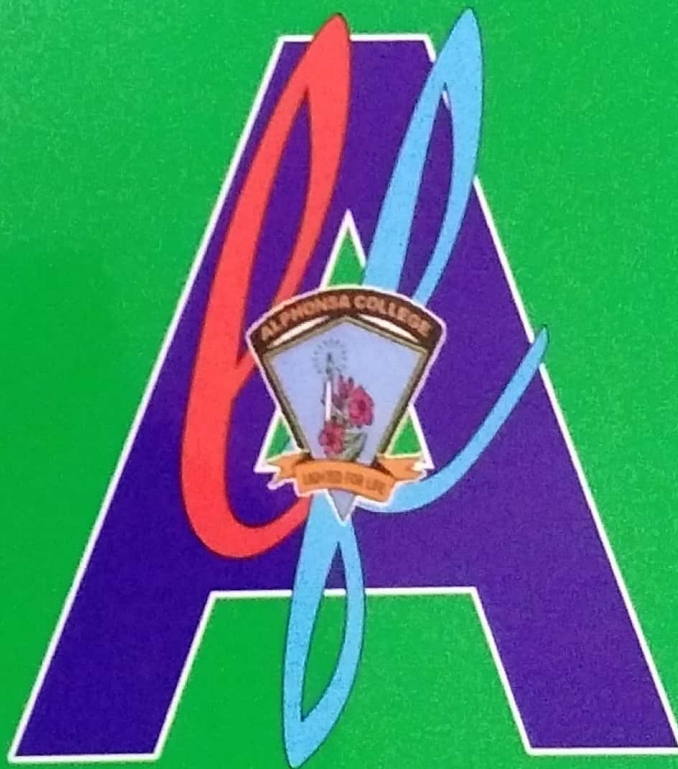
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## American Frontier Myth and Black Humour: A Study of Marsha Norman's *The Holdup*

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### ABSTRACT

*American frontier myth, which can aptly be termed as a relic of the past is intricately woven into the plot of Marsha Norman's play, The Holdup. This paper attempts to unravel how the playwright has employed black humour to expose the grim American frontier myth. It also examines how the playwright makes use of black humour to stage the metamorphosis of a naive teenager to an adult with broader world view. Besides, the paper examines the technique of meta-narration used by the playwright to narrate the events that had happened offstage.*

**Keywords:** American Frontier Myth, Outlaws, Black Humour, Meta-narration, Transformation

### Introduction

Marsha Norman's play, *The Holdup*, underscores the myth of the American frontier in connection with a tale of two brothers, Henry and Archie. The play is set against the backdrop of a cookshack in northern New Mexico in the fall of 1914. The playwright sincerely brings in the folklore of American frontier where both evil and good are dramatized in a humorous way. Graham Seal in the article, "The Robin Hood principle: folklore, history, and the Social Bandit" remarks that it is essential to have insights into the history of the outlaws to understand the social conditions that nurtured outlaws: "By investigating both the history and folklore surrounding outlaw heroes, the mythologies that produce and sustain them can be understood as a series of identifiable cultural processes" (67). *The Holdup* however involves these two key points which deal with the frontier myth and the cultural disposition of the outlaws, where the playwright stages the character, Outlaw a representative of the last generation of outlaws.

## American Frontier Myth

The American frontier myth is believed to be the folklore of the Wild West, where people from different parts of the world encounter for an unlimited opportunity and land. In the essay entitled: "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Frederick Jackson Turner states that "the frontier is the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (2). It deals with the life and history of the frontiersmen who involve in occupation like ranching, and gold mining. Turner points out the distinct feature of the American frontier: "The American frontier is sharply distinguished from the European frontier—a fortified boundary line running through dense populations. The most significant thing about the American frontier is, that it lies at the hither edge of free land" (2). This fortified land attracts the people, specifically outlaws, to make it their home to fulfil their wild dreams.

Graham Seal in the article entitled: "The Robin Hood principle: folklore, history, and the Social Bandit" remarks on the roles played by outlaws in frontier myth:

[...] a narrative framework for telling and retelling outlaw tales,.... The moral code is a set of informal guidelines for approved and disappointed actions. Because outlaw heroes are part of cultural traditions they are aware of behavioural norms. This knowledge does not mean that they will always behave accordingly, but those who do so, or are seen as doing so, are likely to become and remain the heroes of their people and to be mythologized. (71)

Outlaws defied laws and were unscrupulous but there were a few who upheld and practiced moral code and hence become the heroes of their people.

Jean D. Beck in his article, "Unsettling Frontiers in the American West: Robinson, Kingston, Siko" remarks that "the 'frontier' was for then a complexly resonant symbol, a vivid and memorable set of hero-tales- each a model of successful and morally justifying actions on the stage of historical conflict" (3). Staging of the myth and history of the frontier exposes the social system and culture of the Americans which are unknown to the people outside the country. Marsha Norman has boldly stepped into a realm of frontier myth, which mainstream playwrights normally do not consider worthy to be dramatized. In the article entitled, "Marsha Norman's Triple Play," Stephanie Coen comments that "Norman is fiercely outspoken in her views on institutional theatre" (23). Norman employs black humour to skilfully portray the lives of outlaws.

### Elements of black humour in the play

The play is an ingenious amalgamation of grave and humourous elements which characterize black humour. "The term black humour was coined by the surrealist theorist, Andre Breton, in 1935 to label a subgenre of comedy and satire in which laughter arises from cynicism and skepticism, often relying on topic such as death" (www.wikipedia). *The Holdup* stages the characters' problems in a light-hearted way, and thus make the audience

experience both laughter and discomfort. Steven Weisenburger in the article entitled: "Barth and Black Humor" remarks on how black humour is employed by its promoters: "Black humour thus came to signify potentially nothing in literary 'thought and discourse' because promoters and scholars were using it to signify everything" (50). However, the play, *The Holdup* gives the audience an insight into the lives of outlaws that remain a myth to the concurrent mainstream society.

The title, "The Holdup" is a pointer to the vigorous action that audience can expect in the play. In the article entitled, "More than Noises Off: Marsha Norman's Offstage Characters," Tracy Simmons Bitonti observes that "Henry's meanness prepares the audience to accept the Outlaw's killing of him" (169). The arrogance and rude conversation between Henry and Outlaw make the audience aware of the darker side or most dangerous action that would occur. In the article entitled, "Feminizing the Frontier Myth: Marsha Norman's *The Holdup*," Richard Wattenberg emphasizes on Norman's view in *The Holdup* that "there are serious things to be said about stories and how they operate on our minds." Indeed, the structure of this play's 'story' suggests a transformation of the frontier myth" (507). Yet, there has been always the 'binary opposition' of good and evil, tragedy and comedy, which commonly deals with the social set up. Norman has structured the play in two acts with two pairs of parallel characters; Henry and Archie, Outlaw and Lily. Norman in an interview observes on the nuances of dramaturgy and asserts that "plays are pieces of machinery.... The theatre is a world of illusion. You cannot break that illusion by being dull, by taking side trips, by diverting the audience's attention" (Savran 179). The present day audience should willingly suspend their disbelief to enjoy the plot of the play as it revolves around the lives of outlaws, an extinct sect of people, which are not even heard of by the present generation. The playwright's portrayal of the characters provides an insight into the idiosyncratic nature of the characters. Camilo Garcio-Jimeno and James A. Robinson in the article, "The Myth of the Frontier" points out that "Turner emphasizes on the reality of frontier's men and lives that the frontier created strong individualism and social mobility and his most forthright claim is that it was critical to the development of democracy" (2).

The action of the play takes place in the dark night wherein characters are expected to deal "with their respective problems as best they can, determine to reach what they think is a safe place, the company of other humans" (Norman 108). In the beginning of the play, the dark and empty landscape of New Mexico is described and how the characters encounter in the night. Archie, a coward young man of seventeen is dazzled by the sound and a vague image approaching him. Archie's fear becomes more than an illusion when he hears a "terrified voice" and "shaky praying voice" (Norman 108). Norman reveals the nature of Archie as he invokes god's guidance to lead him to his destination.

ARCHIE. Jesus God in heaven, It's Archie Tucker from Clovis, New Mexico. I know you can see me, so I know you can see that coyote that's following me and I don't know if he's alone, but I'm alone and I need you to keep him back till I run the cookshack, which shouldn't be too much longer, now, thank you so much, Amen. (108)

The play, *The Holdup*, is interspersed with elements of black humour. The outlaws' obsession for money and egoistic nature are depicted honestly by satirizing the lives of the outlaws. In the article, "The Robin Hood principle: folklore, history, and the Social Bandit," Graham Seal posits that outlaws are not outrightly vicious: "The outlaw hero kills only in self-defence or justified retribution rather than wantonly or capriciously and does not attack or harm women or the otherwise vulnerable" (70). Outlaw's murdering of a rancher to grab his money is an instance of his vile nature which is discussed in the course of the play. The Outlaw threatens the two brothers, Archie and Henry at gun point in order to defend himself from any kind of unforeseen violence. He is chivalrous towards Lily and asks the two brothers to offer her something to eat. In their interaction and narration about the past stories, Henry lists out the names of outlaws who were dead:

HENRY. Deaf Charley and Peep O'Day don't tell stories.

OUTLAW. They're dead.

ARCHIE. More outlaws, I guess.

HENRY. Outlaws, you bet. The Wild Bunch. O'Day was a horse-holder. (*Turning to the Outlaw*) Wasn't he?

ARCHIE. All the outlaws are dead. Henry. (125)

Henry is well versed in books about outlaws and has sound knowledge in the history and lives of the outlaws. Henry and Archie possess completely different temperament: Henry is rough and tough and finds his happiness in reading the books on outlaws. Archie, on the other hand, is talkative and naive. He dreads any kind of violence and human destruction.

At one point during the course of the play, the outlaw drugs himself to overcome the regret of having murdered Henry.

OUTLAW. I am sorry. (*Louder*) I'm sorry, Henry. (*Genuine*) I really am sorry. I never stayed this long at a killing. (*Getting crazed*) I am sorry. (*Reaching quickly into his pocket*) Okay. I'll show you. Henry Tucker. (*Swallowing the stuff he took from his pocket*) That's how sorry I am. (137)

The outlaw is overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and consumes 'morphine' (Norman 138). Graham Seal in the article, "The Robin Hood principle: folklore, history, and the Social Bandit" points out that "the outlaw hero may be kind and courteous to his victims and further remarks that the outlaw hero may be said to have escaped the showdown, execution, or other manner of death and to have lived on elsewhere in secure obscurity" (70). In the play, the audience experiences the remorse of the outlaw for having murdered Henry and thus the audience does not feel hatred towards Outlaw. On the contrary, Archie is naive and he raises his voice against violence and human destruction. Hence, the innocence of Archie is juxtaposed with the unscrupulousness of Outlaw:

OUTLAW. I'm gonna eat first.

ARCHIE. That's not fair! We're minding our own business. It's Saturday night. We threshed wheat all week, we work hard. Then we get a night off and you come up and shoot us. It's not fair. It's not civilized. We're a state now. It's 1914. (112)

Being unaware of the purpose of Outlaw's arrival at the cookshack, Archie tries to distract the attention of Outlaw in order to avoid any possible violence. The innocence and fear of Archie would bring laughter and discomfort for the reader / audience. Archie is an embodiment of innocence and virtue and laments at the death of his brother, Henry. He is against any violence and says that a man is supposed to use his brain and not his gun (Norman 131).

In the essay, "Barth and Black Humor," Steven Weisenburger asserts that "Black Humor was just not satirical enough. It erred in neglecting the punitive, corrective and normative elements that formalist theories of satire defined as essential. To these detractors (like John Aldridge, Gilbert Highet, and Philip Rahv) Black Humor seemed to flog nothing except a malevolent cosmos. As such, it could never participate in the satirical project of targeting what needed correction; it was not a 'moral fiction' (50). Archie's reaction after the murder of Henry is one of the vital scenes where the audience experience his negligence and irresponsibility towards his dead brother.

LILY (To Archie). What are you going to do about Henry? His body.

ARCHIE. We'll bury him. There's three barrels. We'll put him in the barrels and bury him.

LILY. But what about your mother. Won't she want a funeral? What about the family? Your father won't want to see you without Henry, I bet.

ARCHIE. Well, he's not out here, is he, so I'm making the decision... Carry him home in a sack? It's three days. He'd smell. I'd have to tie him on the horse. He'd fall off. I'd get off, tie him back up, ride on a little bit, he'd fall again. Three days? No. we'll bury him. (To the Outlaw) But you're gonna dig this grave, "outlaw." (132)

Archie is preoccupied with too many questions, and therefore he decides not to take risk of carrying Henry's dead body home. The characters give primacy to their selfish motives than the human virtues, as the playwright features elements of black humour to portray the history, social set up and culture of the American frontiersmen. Jean D. Beck in the article, "Unsettling American's Myth of the West" focuses more on "[...] 'unsettling' the frontier myth of the west as a paradigm for western or American identity and culture, or as a paradigm for 'new frontier' in American literature" (41).

### Meta-Narration

Norman Has Used The technique of meta-narration in the play. Henry's eagerness to know the real identity of the Outlaw is made possible by the narration of stories. The tricks and deeds of outlaws which are considered to be a secret are openly discussed in the

play. Graham Seal in the article, "The Robin Hood principle: folklore, history, and the Social Bandit" lists out the identifiable elements of the outlaws: "The outlaw is brave and strong or, if not strong, especially skilled in some ability useful to the outlaw life" (70). In the play, when the Outlaw comes to know that his life is in danger he buries himself alive (Norman 128). The Outlaw narrates the story openly to Henry and the narration transcends the conventional satire:

OUTLAW. Listen Henry, I've done this over and over for twenty years now. I know how it goes. Somebody wants to kill me so they pull a gun. They yell and scream or they sneak up from the back, it doesn't much matter. It never works. I live. They, you, end up dead. I swear it's the truth. It's only fair totell you. (128)

Outlaw's tricks and his defence strategies are vividly narrated as he professes himself to be invincible. The history of the outlaw and the frontier myth are in a way reinforced through *The Holdup* and are revealed with the help of meta-narration of characters on stage. Norman balances the sincerity of Archie with that of his folly. In her conversation with Savran, Norman says; "Archie, the centre of *The Holdup*, is not threatening to kill himself, he's simply threatening to grow up. It's a simple matter of what is at stake and it is also a step to Archie's liberation" (181). Lily's interaction with Archie helps him to come in terms with reality and life. The audience witness the transition of Archie from a young coward teenager to a matured adult. His transformation to an adult is complete as he is left alone to choose his path at the end of the play.

Marsha Norman exploits black humour throughout the play. *The Holdup* adheres to the features of black comedy by staging even the murder of Henry in a light-hearted way followed by the murderer's assuming the role of a priest who performs the funeral rites. The Outlaw cynically plays the role of a priest and takes charge of Henry's funeral.

OUTLAW. He just had a short time on this earth, but he spent it, well, to tell the truth, he pretty much wasted it.

ARCHIE (*Objecting*). Hey!

OUTLAW. But it was his time. And if he wanted to waste it, well that was his business. His business was . . . (*He looks to Archie*) ranchin'? (*Archie nods yes*) And he was real good at stuff you had to be a real sunuvabitch to do. Lie, cheat, steal. (136)

The Outlaw's funeral speech is partly serious and partly sarcastic. The Outlaw recites verses from the Bible as part of the funeral ceremony and says: "Dust to dust and eye for a tooth?" (137). And later, he realizes that "he never stayed this long at a killing" (Norman 137). The verses from the Bible are deliberately recited incorrectly to incorporate yet another characteristic of black humour, that is, belittling institutionalized religion.

## Conclusion

Lily's character is poignant as she becomes instrumental in making Outlaw to leave his unscrupulous way of living and embrace a normal life that demands adherence to the norms of the society. It is through Lily, that Archie is able to realize the reality which he is denied due to the restriction imposed on him by his parents. Moreover, Lily's openness towards Archie helps him to overcome his ignorance and the audience witnesses a sudden transition of Archie's character to an adult with broader world view. Archie is unable to accept the laws of outlaws and comments: "We're so far away from everything, everybody acts like there's no rules at all and anybody can just do whatever they like - well they can't" (154). The playwright has absorbed the element of black humour where an individual is dominated by a wistful thought. For instance, Archie tells Lily that Henry used to sneak up to the wagons parked in the churchyard and would switch the babies sleeping in the wagons (142) and that's how Archie got in the Tucker's family. A serious crime is discussed light-heartedly in the play. The use of gun as a protective device is also ironically portrayed. Henry's self-pride and daring comments and actions have paved the way for his death. This also suggests a forewarning to the audience about how a man should react and respond in a given situation and time.

The Outlaw's real identity is revealed towards the end of the play and is identified to be Tom McCarthy, a person well known for "the best horse handler in the business" (Norman 126). Outlaw's fake existence and his real identity represent his dual personality. The selfish motives of the Outlaw come to the limelight when he finally decides to follow Lily. Jean D. Beck in the article, "Unsettling frontiers in the American West: Robinson, Kingston, Siko" asserts that "the frontier myth of the west has long been used as a paradigm for the formation of an American identity, legitimated by national as well as regional histories and literature" (2). *The Holdup* examines and provides evidence of the cultural disposition and social displacement of Outlaws. Outlaw's decision to follow Lily evidences his attitudinal change to imbibe new culture and social system. In the article entitled: "Barth and Black Humor," Steven Weisenburger observes that "Black Humor retreated into aesthetic cleverness; and instead of passing moral judgments on the world, it chose to just smugly thumb its nose" (50). The aesthetic elements of black humour is well-employed by the playwright to convey the message indirectly that greed has nothing to do in life and that one's life is worth more than any money or gold. Norman does not force the audience to uphold virtues, but persuades them to do so by portraying the ill-effects of unscrupulousness.

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