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The Role Of Trickster Humor In Social Evolution

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THE ROLE OF TRICKSTER HUMOR IN SOCIAL EVOLUTION

by

William Gearty Murtha
Bachelor of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1998

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

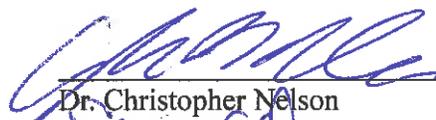
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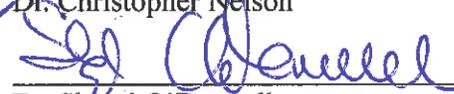
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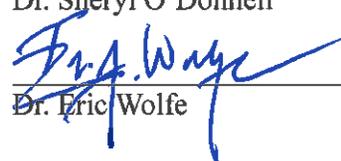
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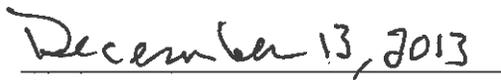


Dr. Eric Wolfe

This thesis is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the School of Graduate Studies at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.



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William Gearty Murtha
December 10, 2013

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ABSTRACT

Trickster humor is ubiquitous. Every society has some version of trickster and each society tells the stories of trickster over and over again to both enlighten and entertain. This thesis argues that trickster humor plays a fundamental role in helping society adapt by challenging social norms. Because trickster stories are humorous they are entertaining, because they critique social behaviors they are instructive. Tricksters break social rules, leaving society to remake them. This thesis examines the works of American Humorists Tom Robbins and Edward Abbey, particularly *Still Life with Woodpecker* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, arguing that these authors are contemporary trickster figures whose work not only entertains their audience but through their rule breaking offers them new possibilities in dealing with the unresolved conflicts American society is wrestling with in the last quarter of the twentieth century and beyond.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Humanity has advanced, when it has advanced, not because it has been sober, responsible, and cautious, but because it has been playful, rebellious, and immature” –Tom Robbins

Author Tom Robbins argues that rule breaking and a disregard for authority has been the key factor in human social and technical advancement. In support of Robbins’ idea and through analysis of his work and the work of author Edward Abbey I argue that there is an innate impulse in people to break the rules, to resist authority which manifests itself as humor and is personified in the trickster.

The American trickster has its roots in Native American and West African culture and in both cultures trickster is a negotiator/translator between worldly and divine realms. Trickster is often symbolized by an animal such as Coyote, Raven, or Hare and in African American trickster tales the trickster comes from the Ashanti in West Africa and is called Anansi. Anansi is known as Spider though a mainstream audience would more likely recognize the stories from *The Tales of Uncle Remus* or Walt Disney’s film *Song of the South* and unlike Br’er Bear and Br’er Fox, Anansi doesn’t throw his victim back into the Briar patch but exchanges him along with some other recently captured characters as payment for all of the Sky God’s stories earning himself a reputation for not only cleverness but also facility with language. The story may change slightly but African

American trickster Br'er Rabbit maintains some key traits to his Anansi incarnation: first, both are surrounded by predators and are perceived as relatively weak (Anansi has to face lion, cheetah, and python while Br'er Rabbit is hounded by Br'er Bear and Br'er Fox, yet are treated as equals due to their cunning. Second, Anansi's penchant for mischief and smooth talking, as well as the tendency of all trickster figures to inhabit a liminal space—in Rabbit's case, the Briar Patch is home, which Bear and Fox believe to be too prickly to be habitable and thereby a suitable place to dispose of Rabbit.

Unlike Br'er Rabbit whose cleverness is seen in an individual context, David Heinemann implies Native American Trickster often shows up to resolve a broad social crisis or creates crisis. He disrupts order so that a new, better order can be created. Makarius, quoted in Heinemann "observes: the trickster violates taboos to obtain 'medicines or talismans necessary to satisfy [the group's] needs and desires. Thus he plays the role of founder of his society's ritual and ceremonial life" (46).

Psychotherapist June Singer notes trickster "regulates our conscious and unconscious lives", he is a governor of human ego:

He symbolizes that aspect of our own nature which is always nearby, ready to bring us down when we get inflated, or to humanize us when we become pompous. He is the satirist par excellence, whose transcendent wit points out the flaws in our haughty ambitions, and makes us laugh though we feel like crying.... a major psychological function of the trickster figure is to make it possible for us to gain a sense of proportion about ourselves (Heinemann 47).

Trickster is driven by his appetite. Hunger and lust get trickster into trouble most of the time. The rest of the time it is his desire to play, to compete, to experience the dynamic tension of a difficult contest.

Because Trickster is so well versed in breaking boundaries he is also a unifier. He breaks through social divides with his wit and his energy, he has a wide appeal—since if he's selling anything he's selling fun—and so, as we see in the texts of the Abbey and Robbins, characters from different socio-economic backgrounds find common cause with one another in the pursuit of constructive destruction.

Paradoxically, because of all the trouble that surrounds him, that which he falls into or that which he brings with him, trickster is a corrective, instructional force in society. He is surrounded by humor, and inspires us to recognize new possibilities, catering to our desire to laugh and experience pleasure.

Two contemporary examples of the humorous trickster as modifier/corrective influence on society are authors Tom Robbins and Edward Abbey who through the humorous antics of their characters have broken both the written and unwritten rules of their society and have had a marked impact on how Americans understand the world and their place in it.

For tricksters, it's the pursuit of pleasure and not breaking rules that is important. Rule breaking doesn't necessarily create pleasure but discovering new ways to see and operate within the world, recognizing a new extension of reality, experiencing a new perception, does create pleasure, as well as wider understanding; or at least a recognition of a wider world.

Trickster is a humorous figure. His antics fit many of the traditional definitions of humor including Freud's position that humor stems from a repressed desire, Henri Bergson's argument that it is the recognition of mechanical action, or earlier conceptions of humor as the result of the feeling of superiority over some other person or being. Trickster's appetite causes him to break norms in pursuit of more sex or more food, which Freud suggests, tickles our taboo. Trickster's greed may drive him mechanically into the trap due to his blind pursuit of MORE.

Trickster is a humorous figure, but he is also necessary to the health of society as he is representative of the kinds of social adaptation that keep a society responsive to needs of its people in a dynamic environment. The role that trickster plays in society is one of the keys to our survival as a species.

Too often social groups fall into the trap of yes or no, this or that, and fail to recognize alternatives, or may disregard them as outside the bounds of acceptability.

Jim Garrison in his essay "Teacher as Prophetic Trickster" explains "our species...relies far more on learning than does any other. We are not born with the innate instincts and abilities to survive" (67-68). Humans rely more on what they learn than on instinct. Though still subject to the dictates of nature, human beings have the capacity to transcend those dictates, and through this transcendence have become rulers and rule makers. Within the last 100 years, we have the capacity to wipe out most of the life on this planet.

Through language humans are able to pass on knowledge, create new technologies and build on those technologies to an unprecedented degree. Along with technological knowledge, humans pass down rules for living and interacting with the world. The

problem is, even good rules can create bad results. Rules are often inflexible. A static rule is a poor fit for a dynamic process. Our rules are constantly pushing against nature. As humans we all agree that human life is sacred and worthy of protection and care, but this rule then excludes many other species and in deference to humans we extinguish other species in the name of our short term interests. Our technology, or perhaps our understanding of it, has arrogated humans above nature creating a society that feels people are more important than nature.

One observer who has become painfully aware of the danger of putting humans above the nature is Edward Abbey. Edward Abbey argues against “progress” in much of his work. For him, progress is that which replaces nature with technology, the natural, organic, living and dynamic world with an artificial, mechanical, inorganic one. Abbey’s Progress creates a space that insulates us from the environment.

Joseph Meeker posits in his text *Comedy of Survival* that human attempts to transcend nature have sown the seeds of our destruction at worst and our unhappiness at best. Meeker describes nature as an “infinite game”. Evolution, according to Meeker, is not concerned with refining one species or another to some pinnacle—which humans are attempting to do—but rather seeks to create as much life with as much diversity as conditions allow. Nature is self-regulating, when one species becomes too abundant another one steps up to thin it out. For every mosquito there is a hungry bird or frog, for every shrub there is a hungry deer and for every deer there is a wolf, and a wide array of species taking advantage of the left-overs. In any community, when there are too many of something, too tightly packed together, disease thrives, another organism steps up to keep things in balance. In nature every piece is dependent on the other for its survival

and so no species seeks to eliminate any other, but will mostly take what it needs to survive and leave the rest.

According to Meeker, transcending nature created tragedy; affirming nature leads to comedy, or at least a good laugh and a greater degree of happiness. Meeker focuses on Greek drama, examining key elements in their tragedies. In tragedy the protagonist is someone who by supreme effort or character, or perhaps a bit of divine intervention, is able to go beyond the limits of nature for a little while, which results in a traumatic upheaval and ultimately a painful reckoning or sacrifice to restore the balance and bring the world back into a state of harmony. Katrina Schimmoeller -Peiffer in her text *Coyote at Large: Humor in American Nature Writing* affirms Meeker's thesis as she establishes the importance of the trickster figure in humans' relationship with nature "Humans must see themselves as part of the world. To condition ourselves increasingly to experience and expect only the satisfactions of the human world is the psychic and evolutionary equivalent of inbreeding" (21). We need to bring nature back into our considerations of self and the world. Peiffer explains "This is the genius of the North American trickster Coyote...humor dogs Coyote because it implies a style of awareness—flexible, imaginative, 'charming and mind-bending'—necessary to the creative work of extending ethics to nonhuman nature" (22). This is important to many environmentalist critics because they recognize that society has created a moral system that treats nature as a resource. Tricksters avoid moral codes, exploit hierarchy imposed structure, and cannot abide nobility since it smacks of moral transcendence. Tricksters mock noble gestures and break rules, which keeps society—any society—fluid, flexible, and adaptable.

When nature is commuted an air of nobility, it stops being natural, it becomes again a kind of commodity—the only difference is instead of worthless it becomes sacred (in a taboo/no trespassing sense) in both cases it results in humans divorcing themselves from the source of all life, resulting in death.

Through its commodification, Environment has become subject to politics, some say its sacred others say it's profane and neither side quite knows what to *do* with it. In other words, the vehicle for human growth, maintenance, and survival has been subsumed to political debate and is removed, by abstraction, from most people's experience. Trickster does not discuss nature or politicize it. Trickster is nature and society. Trickster is the marriage of abstract intelligence and desire (appetite) that has one foot firmly rooted in the natural/physical/animal world and one foot rooted in the artificial/abstract/"human" world, manipulating both. Jim Garrison, citing Lewis Hyde highlights a common perception about Trickster stating, "[o]ften he is associated with the creation of language, or its interpretation" (68). He continues to explain Trickster is often seen as the mediator between humans and gods. Trickster serves as an example to the cultures he touches. There are those who would abandon the experience of nature completely, relying on the words of experts and other authorities instead of discovering personal fulfillment. Trickster exploits those who rely on authority, often by acting as an authority (Edward Abbey's character Hayduke occasionally disguises himself as authorized personnel to gain access to sensitive equipment in the *Monkey Wrench Gang* for instance). Garrison further explains, "Tricksters have no essence or innate knowledge. They must learn how to make their way in the world. Tricksters derive intelligence from appetite. Because they often mindlessly follow their desires, they must

learn from their mistakes. Theirs is the education of eros” (68). Trickster serves as an example to the rest of us, either by his failures due to his excessive appetite or his successes won by his manipulation of language. Garrison points out humans spend more time in the maturation process than any other mammal, much of that process is fostered by language (68) reinforcing the critical role that Trickster plays in human development, while at the same time reminding the audience not to take anything said too seriously.

In the 20th Century the world was waking up to the notion that previous models and assumptions of human behavior no longer reflected their reality and began scrambling to make sense of the recent horrors brought about through industrialization and mechanized warfare.

The 20th Century, according to Solomon and Higgins in their text *A Short History of Philosophy*, definitively lay to rest the enlightenment notion that the universe was orderly, rational, and knowable. Coincidentally, or coordinately, a more dynamic interpretation of “life, the universe, and everything” was beginning to emerge. Instead of static absolutes and other such Platonically inspired ideals, philosophers like Darwin, Dewey, Whitehead, Santayana, and Bergson were describing the world as a dynamic process.

Solomon and Higgins, citing Alfred North Whitehead, reinforce the difficulty anyone may face in trying to create models by which to live by: “Nature itself is continuously creative, novel, imaginative. Accordingly, the philosopher has to invent not an ideal language but a perpetually new and changing language, a poetic language, to capture the evolving patterns of reality” (266). The ambiguity that runs rampant through manifestations of Trickster, better prepare people to act within a dynamic reality. At

some level, conscious or otherwise, people from different cultures recognize this facility and celebrate it through poetry, word play, jokes, story and myth resulting in the creation of the trickster figure.

Because the universe is dynamic, constantly fluctuating, one cannot even describe it; one can merely describe a still frame, a moment of it and not necessarily the same way as someone else. All language used to describe the world will be incomplete because it cannot describe change. Solomon and Higgins while describing Henri Bergson's "process view of reality" state,

The stuff of life itself is change. Concepts, on the other hand, are static, one-sided. When we try to analyze anything, we therefore distort and deform it; we get one view but not another; we freeze the thing in time and fail to understand the thing's growth, its development, its life. Analysis is lifeless and at best proceeds by taking successive points of view. But it is, of necessity, always dissatisfied, for there are infinite angles, endless moments" (265).

So, when Tom Robbins, in his role as modern trickster, reminds us--citing Erica Jong (whose mother was a portrait artist)--"There are no such things as still lifes" he is signifying on several levels in the best traditions of humor (Erica Jong from front matter in *Still Life with Woodpecker*). Humans are always looking backwards to try and understand the present and predict the future. Humans infer the future from the past. The best that anyone can hope for by using this method is to come up with some generalizations. Society is made up of people following a specific set of rules which were developed or conceived from generalizations or concepts. According to Bergson, concepts are inherently flawed because they are static, and over time decay. Therefore,

humans need an organic dynamo—as opposed to mechanism which implies something rational and rule based-- that will encourage people to revise their perceptions and challenge dominant paradigms. Trickster challenges the assumptions of the objective moral order, yet is celebrated in many cultures because of his chaotic affects. He is anticipated warmly, in sum, while in particular he may pose a threat, particularly to the status quo. In his wake, however, there is re-organization leading to a healthier society or new knowledge. He is not a moral figure but he is instrumental to a healthy society.

Mikhail Bakhtin offers insight into how the trickster/fool figure played a role in European civilization through his interpretation of carnival humor. Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais's work recognized in Carnival humor the organic dynamo that Bergson advocated. In carnival humor the observer is witness to a cyclical disruption of order followed by a resumption of order in an organic way. Carnival humor recognized a circular process of creation and destruction, the opposing sides generating their counterpart. The King is a fool and the fool is a King, or the wise looks foolish and the foolish looks wise, is just as fundamental as the cow eats the grass and the grass eats the cow. Structures break down and new structures are created. Any absolutes are abstractions and not amenable to everyday experience. In order to maintain authority, hierarchies from the middle period had to ritualistically be destroyed and renewed in order to maintain their position. This ritual destruction was perpetuated by jest, seen as acting contrary to proscribed rules of behavior. Further it was *necessary* for the continued health of the community. It is worth noting that the rigid feudal system described in Rabelais' work saw the fool and the mocking of authority as an essential part

of society. It is ironic that in order to maintain such a rigidly regressive regime, those in power had to be ritualistically debased and those debased had to be ritualistically exalted.

The modern trickster critiques his/her society, but it is only because they are in the moment, seeing the possible, working to make it probable, that tricksters demonstrate new knowledge. Tricksters do not feel constrained by rules and so every moment is filled with possibility. Authors can exemplify that trickster attitude. Writers create worlds, and within these worlds they break rules to make new ones, which they'll break again as they recognize another possibility.

Trickster is necessary for the health of the community because he offers us alternative ways of seeing. Trickster's view is from the outside, making us re-evaluate ourselves with an outsider's gaze. Trickster's use of language can turn our heroes into heels and our righteous outrage into shamed silence. We often see our weaklings and our underdogs win glory through the clever manipulation of language.

We will have different value systems based on how we perceive the world around us. Yet we can affect perception through language. In this sense, trickster plays an interpretive function. For example, until I am told what to look for I may have a single appreciation of a guitar solo, or any other kind of musical performance. It's pleasant, it may move me on an emotional level or it may not move me at all. My experience of it is based solely on a visceral reaction. However, when someone explains the work involved in making that series of sounds or connects the experience to something else I value, such as an acquired skill, my appreciation is still an emotional response but it is moderated by new knowledge. My appreciation takes on other qualitative shades. Hence, language has had an effect on my perception.

The trickster impulse does not necessarily have an agenda or lead to a deeper, more compassionate ethical system, but it provides an opportunity for observers to re-evaluate their position, and consider whether or not it is the best one for that time.

Since language affects perception we can describe the world in such a way that other people will see it as we do. I can decide how to interpret some signals, yet their meaning can also be influenced by the remarks of others, influencing my perceptions. We are encouraged to do this because we want to create systems of governance/operation that will offer predictability and therefore a kind of peace, order within a chaotic universe. Language helps us create order and meaning in the world. It helps people create a rational world in a real space that otherwise lacks meaning. Religion, and the physical sciences are two closely related examples of using language to create meaning and provide a sense of order to reality. Language can also create disharmony, disorder, and disruption; one can challenge any definition of reality with another definition and there is no a priori standard to measure these definitions against. Both the creation and violation of rules are necessary for growth and adaptation and can be influenced by conditioning. What is “right” or what is “wrong” may be generally defined, and generally defensible, but out on the edges one must rely on one’s own sense of style, as Tom Robbins argues in his text. Due to the multiple means of meaning—to borrow from Robbins, we must be flexible in our awareness, our perception, and not hold too tightly to our rules.

Reinforcing the necessity for flexible interpretation and rule breaking impulses, science, instead of confirming the rationality of the universe that Newton hypothesized, described phenomenon that do just the opposite. “The great hope of the classical

physicist was to achieve a complete understanding of those natural laws which would allow precise prediction of the results of all physical interactions. Such a rigorously deterministic model of the universe has been rather thoroughly discredited by modern physicists” (Nadeau 63). Quantum mechanics and Heisenberg’s Uncertainty principle have suggested that the fine print of the universe is, like the trickster, ambiguous and in flux. Science has made room for trickster, that liminal figure that is both one thing and another and is constantly confounding our equations and blowing apart our ethical structures.

In defense of the disruptive tricksters, physicists, as well Tom Robbins, describe a phenomenon that suggests disorder is the impetus for more, better order. Physicists in the 1970s had discovered that the breakdown of one system often provided the impetus for a new, more complex system. An idea that Mark Siegel recognizes in the novels of Tom Robbins. Citing Belgian physical chemist and Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine, Siegel explains “order emerges *because* of entropy, not *despite* it....Robbins implies that the current disruptions in society will give rise to a new, improved mode of social organization” (Siegel, *The Meaning of Meaning* 120). Therefore, we need some predictability, agreeable premises to build a society but it must not become so rigid that it restricts the dynamic function of those individual elements within society. Language is the most effective way to shape society. It is the most efficient. Shaping one’s perceptions through language requires less energy than manipulating society or an individual through physical force.

Tom Robbins and Edward Abbey are two authors in particular who were able to change people’s perceptions through language. Both these two authors are careful to

eschew any specific dogma. Both authors naturally resist centralized authority and both carefully avoid physical violence-- against people; a contradiction in the best traditions of the Trickster—don't be confused however, while humor can often replace violence, Trickster is not above violence but violence is more often a consequence rather than an end. In the texts I am discussing, Robbins and Abbey attack man-made structures but these particular manifestations of trickster are careful to preserve people. In Abbey and Robbins's texts people are encouraged to awaken, and free themselves from the tyrannies imposed upon or adopted by them, killing them, or allowing harm to come to people is self-defeating for the protagonists in these works.

The trickster takes the trick, wins for himself at any cost, but violence, if there is any, is a side effect of the trick not the end in itself. Because trickster is most often a weak figure he will not, or cannot, dominate the same way a heroic figure would. He doesn't wipe out an army with only the jaw bone of an ass, he jaws like an ass until the army either goes away or makes him king. But also, unlike a Hero, God is not specifically on his side, nor is he necessarily following orders imposed from above. Working without any god given authority, trickster has only his own confidence to back him up. Generally, trickster takes no joy in violence, rather he seems as unaware of the violence as he is of the chaos in his wake. He is the bear that kicks the bee hive, not because he wants to attack the bees, but because he loves the honey.

Violence suggests authority. To commit great violence one must feel authorized to do so, either by seeing oneself as superior to one's victims or by being appointed by one that is superior to one's victims. Trickster is often egoistic, but does not seek power, or authority over others for its own sake. He takes what he can when he can. He has no

agenda beyond his appetite or immediate need and therefore any violence is incidental as opposed to instrumental.

Robbins and Abbey: founding fathers, or at least godfathers, of a bastard movement; are difficult subjects to pin down philosophically. Some critics have wondered whether or not Robbins could be considered a serious literary figure worthy of review at all, and many other scholars, while taking Abbey slightly more seriously, struggle to determine what he stands for.

My analysis involves Robbins and Abbey's work because of their apparent harmlessness. They are humorists and I believe what makes them so effective in influencing their society is because of people's failure to take humor seriously. Unlike other humorists, such as Joseph Heller or Kurt Vonnegut, their humor is not so black that we laugh along in commiseration or horror. They exhibit anger and some frustration but they express themselves playfully and offer a way forward. And too, they frustrate and confuse their critics who Robbins suggests have "nothing in their cultural background to prepare them to recognize, let alone embrace, the universe's predilection for paradox and novelty" (Reising and Robbins, 469).

My work is concerned with how humor has been used in combating entrenched regimes in a way that is corrective instead of destructive, leading to social reform and a more inclusive, tolerant society. Robbins and Abbey use language to wedge open a space in the debate in America. They didn't strike a blow for democracy, they started a conversation about how we as a people could diminish the rampant inequality that was crippling our humanity and invited everyone to consider how we might improve

everyone's well-being. They used language to change people's perception of themselves and their culture.

The alternative to using language to change perception is conditioning. Authoritative structures are invested with tremendous power and can use that power to maintain their system through conditioning. Those in power can easily use the force at their disposal to keep society following certain rules. Force is a very effective tool of correction. The threat of pain works long after reason is exhausted. Those who are not in power, however, must change minds or people's perception through other means, and this is where humor, in its trickster aspect, is effective as a tool for social change.

I called humor a tool. And like any tool it can be used for many different things. It can bring people together or it can tear them apart. What I can't find, is an instance where humor destroyed a civilization, or committed genocide. People with a sense of humor, I argue, just don't have the kind of superiority complex required to wipe out an entire ethnic group. Genocide is a serious business, there's no room for humorists in that. Humor can be just as vicious as a punch in the mouth, in many ways its worse, since a bloody lip or a black eye will heal, and a ruined reputation will follow you forever; on the other hand in the "infinite game" of humor what is lost is your pride, your dignity, perhaps your reputation, but you can come back from those, you can survive those losses. In other words you have other choices, but violence taken to its ultimate ends leaves no option. Ultimately, physical violence ends discourse or participation; humor, though it often diminishes its object, invites discourse and participation. Therefore, if nature is the ideal and nature plays an infinite game of universal participation, humor is to be favored over physical violence.

I argue humor is a *key element* to human development and survival. Tom Robbins in his text, *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates*, suggests (or at least his protagonist suggests) that humor is a function of human design, which is demonstrable by its lack in some less-evolved humans—namely bureaucrats and those who would voluntarily sit on a committee, suggesting anyone who is willing to forsake their free will and imagination in exchange for perpetuating the ideas of someone else must be a member of that missing link that connects humans to their evolutionary ancestors.

Humor is an important ingredient in any flourishing society, but in lieu of humor society mostly relies on conditioning. Once one is conditioned to accept the basic premise even the grossest tyrant can appear reasonable. George Orwell's play *1984* is a good illustration. In it, the character Winston is conditioned to accept that two plus two equals five. The conditioning breaks him down by repetition and playing on his fears until at last he succumbs to his conditioning and becomes passive. He eventually "learns" that two and two equals five. The audience may at first giggle at this absurdity, but the constant bombardment of the rule soon becomes horrifying. It is a system that does not respect the perceptions of the subject observer. It is a closed system, which is a tyranny, and a tyranny is offensive to the laws of nature— according to Meeker, since the goal of nature is infinite play and creative impulse.

Tyranny is a closed system, while the natural world from the smallest particles to the largest, are predicated on change, and a tyranny sees any change as a threat to its power. Change means different premises, which could lead to the "wrong" conclusions.

Mark Siegel, in his essay "*The Meaning of Meaning in the Novels of Tom Robbins*" explains that societies are not closed systems subject to entropy wherein "less

and less energy will be available for work, until the system no longer has the energy to maintain its organizational structure” and fails (120). Closed systems will fall apart according to the laws of entropy; however, “natural systems are open systems” whether they are “a cell, a town or an entire society” (120). Tyrannies are attempts at closed systems such that when the dictator falls, so falls the government, there is no allowance for change and the resulting influx of energy and the result is explosive violence or collapse. The dream of the dictator is stasis. Eventually they fail and civilization continues under a different system. Order breaks down and reforms in a different organizational form. This is a constant in every system. Siegel demonstrates Tom Robbins comes to the same conclusions when he argues “Robbins implies that the current disruptions in society will give rise to a new, improved mode of social organization” (120). Both are suggesting that attacking the system, disrupting the dominant paradigm, ensures a healthy dynamic functional society. The key word is “dynamic” by which I mean ever evolving. Society is never finished, never perfect, but will constantly morph into a new—Robbins thinks ever better—system, if we allow it to do so.

Robbins believes that the individual is critical to the health of the “disequilibrium system” (Siegel 120). This establishes the groundwork that the trickster figure is modeled on. It predicates an individual that acts as a disruptive catalyst necessary for the health of the system. This frame does not necessarily endorse the idea that society is progressing towards perfection but for Robbins social systems that encourage and develop individual expression are better than those that do not. Siegel explains “Most generally, Robbins applauds any non-coercive form of social experimentation, as if he knows from the start that evolution will take care of sorting out the good ideas from the

bad” (121). He is bored by stability, but disgusted by violence including the coercive violence of the moral majority. He is not afraid to order steak when everyone else is having tofu. He orders steak *because* everyone else is having tofu, and he likes steak. Robbins is also careful to withdraw from offering any specific course of action. He doesn’t “make sense”, he suggests, however, we each develop our own style. We have the impulse to create without a knowable idea of what will happen when we do, and that’s okay, because it is unknowable.

Therefore, according to Siegel, Robbins perceives disruption of the system from within as healthy. However the system may try and maintain itself through violence. Humor can mitigate that violent response. It is a tool of persuasion. According to Brian Sternthal and C. Samuel Craig in their paper, “Humor in Advertising”, written for the *Journal of Marketing*, “humor is an effective persuasive vehicle” (12). One of the reasons, they state, is that humor “enhances audience attention” and further “humor distracts an audience during the presentation of a persuasive communication. Distraction, in turn, inhibits those audience members who initially oppose the arguments advanced in the persuasive message from generating and rehearsing counterarguments” (13,14). This may be a form of coercion since it “distracts the audience” but at the same time it encourages close attention which implies a higher quality communicative act. The listening party, instead of taking attention away from the message by forming counterarguments— instead of getting defensive—remains receptive and experiences a clearer signal.

Humor is a wonderful tool for combating entrenched assumptions. In this capacity, humor disrupts the basic premises; it creates a new way of seeing that *can avoid*

physical violence. Admittedly, humor, like any other tool, can be used for many different jobs. It can also be de-humanizing and used as a predicate to violence or a means of justifying mistreatment, but what is constant is the recognition of a new perception, a way of seeing that makes the previously impossible apparently real.

Citing Robbins, and the same can be said for Edward Abbey's characters in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, Siegel explains "characters win victories by carving out private pockets of freedom in which they avoid civilization's control. They neither compromise nor confront social authority when they can avoid doing so, but outwit it" (*The Meaning of Meaning* 121). This outwitting produces laughter in the audience while reinforcing the efficacy of wit over violence. It is a kind of coercion but it can be used by the weak with as much facility as the strong. Because the experience of humor feels good—admittedly the butt of the joke may not see the humor--it's a reward to use it, a positive conditioning as opposed to the violence of negative reinforcement.

Since those in positions of power are more likely to maintain the status quo through conditioning, humor is a more natural tool in the hands of the weaker party because there is so much force directed against the subject that a shift of perception can act like a kind of psychic judo wherein the built up psychic energy is redirected to further the new idea. Those who are not expecting a surprise are more often struck by the new extension offered in a joke, or as Freud suggests, those who are more repressed may have the greater psychic release when the joker tickles their taboo. In Siegel's terms:

This organization is 'maintained by a continuous dynamic flow,' and the more complex such a structure, the more energy it must dissipate to maintain all that complexity. This flux of energy makes the system highly unstable, subject to

internal fluctuations—and to sudden change. When the fluctuations within such a system reach a critical size due to the energy crisis they generate, they are amplified ‘and can drive the whole system into a new state—even more ordered, coherent, and connected’ (Siegel, “*The Meaning of Meaning*” 120).

The energy expended to maintain order, or to repress certain driving forces within one, can, with the right stimulus, be transformed into a new, better order. A “more coherent, connected” state would suggest that there is greater energy within the system, which suggests that humor brings people into a greater sense of harmony. Jim Garrison explains in his article “Teacher as Prophetic Trickster” “when *logos* oppresses [*logos* is defined within Garrison’s text as “a logically organized system of fixed categories, concepts, standards, laws, and identities” (69)], then it is time for trickster, and when trickster threatens to collapse all into chaos, we need the *logos*. This dialectic has neither beginning or ending” (69). It is a performance.

Humor allows us greater performance. Humor is a way to explore possibility while still maintaining social cohesion. On the one hand, conditioning keeps people together, some call it assimilation, others call it acculturation and all three denote social cohesion; everyone accepts the same basic premises and accepts the rules imposed upon them by the authority. The authority exists because people agree it should exist. On the other hand, humor disrupts and/or works against those forms of conditioning that resist change keeping society moving, encouraging change. Humor acts as stimuli for those fluctuations in energy in the dynamic flow of the system. Comics can direct the anger and frustration that builds up in an inefficient system and either direct it into an expression of laughter, letting that frustration burn itself off, or undermine the system and

create a new narrative of those in power, one that is damaging to their authority, they can make those in power look weak and incompetent, and thereby vulnerable. Siegel explains that “mankind might well select a rapid, short-term success at the cost of alternatives that could lead to long term survival” additionally “[d]efiance of society may well be prove to be best for society’s survival” (“*The Meaning of Meaning*” 130). Therefore, every society needs someone to push against boundaries, to challenge the rules, the basic assumptions. Challenge makes us better. Challenging society makes society better able to handle challenges. Humorists challenge their societies, and how these societies respond to these challenges can make them better. This is the function of Trickster-Coyote, the outlaw. Humor, like curiosity, is an innate mechanism of human development. Humor is a product of evolution that facilitates personal growth and development and ensures the healthy functioning of society. Humor is the counter weight to despair and a defense against tyranny. Hauck explains, in his text, *A Cheerful Nihilism*, “To be fully conscious is to have a sense of the absurd. A sense of the absurd follows the recognition that the universe appears to be meaningless” (3). Hauck further explains that one must create meaning in one’s life or succumb to despair. Children always play. According to Hauck, games are a way to create order. Children make up games, which are each a set of rules and definitions defining boundaries or setting parameters within which to interact with their environment and one another, they impose order and create meaning for as long as it pleases them, and discard the rules when it doesn’t. Tom Robbins, at the end of *Still Life with Woodpecker* advises “it’s never too later to have a happy childhood” (277). According to Hauck, play, make believe, and spontaneous games create meaning, impose order in a chaotic, absurd space. They are

dynamic and spontaneous, the rules constantly change to fit the mood and there is no inherent hierarchy and so meanings are readily created, embraced and just as quickly discarded when they become inconvenient. In Robbins's terms the children have a style of play they wish to perpetuate and so they will change the rules frequently to adapt to fluctuations while maintaining that style. For a child, there is little investment in the rules of the game they have created and so they quickly change them to suit their capabilities and their desires. In games among adults, rules become more rigid and the weaker participants will drop out of the game rather than amend the rules. Adults are more likely to hang on to a rule than to change it, even if it hurts them, as Thomas Jefferson reminds us in the Declaration of Independence: "Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed" (Declaration of Independence).

Hauck is suggesting that people have the ability to create a much better reality than the one they are currently working with, all one needs is the confidence to impose it. When ideals or rules become inconvenient, repressive, cruel, unyielding, and/or unbearable, discard them and create better ones. Humor works to that end. It constantly challenges our perceptions, inviting us to look at the world in a different way, perhaps we may see something better.

Trickster humor serves contrary purposes by disrupting authority and accepted beliefs in some cases while it reinforces social norms and standard beliefs in other

instances. It balances the scales between order and chaos, it lets neither side pull too far ahead of the other.

This dichotomy is best illustrated in the trickster figure; the outlaw bomber on the lam in Tom Robbins' *Still Life with Woodpecker*, the grizzled cantankerous misogynistic misanthrope saboteur Hayduke in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. It's found in the prose of these authors though it can be traced through Native American stories of Coyote, or the African American trickster tales like Br'er Rabbit as well as Aesop's fables or Greek mythology. Nearly every culture has a trickster/fool character in the stories it tells about itself. While the divine aspects of the trickster have been suppressed in Judeo-Christian societies there is still a wealth of trickster characters in western culture, demonstrating that there is something irrepressible in the trickster archetype. VanSlette and Boyd in their essay "Lawbreaking Jokers: Tricksters Using Outlaw Discourse" citing Vizenor pronounce "the nature of the trickster is essential to human understanding" (591) Societies need their tricksters, their wise fools, bungling heroes, good humored outlaws, and class clowns. The perpetuator of the joke is often disrupting authority, but in doing so the perpetrator becomes the interpreter of the rule. The trickster has greater knowledge, or teaches us something through personal experience. The joker/trickster/outlaw sees the world in a way others had not seen themselves. In this way, the trickster is a kind of teacher. By teacher I mean in the sense one learns from the trickster through interpretation. Garrison, citing Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes the mythic figure Esu, as similar to Hermes, the tricky godling, messenger of Zeus. "In the Yoruba Theogeny, 'Ifa is the next of divine will, Esu is the text's interpreter' ...Committed to law, system, and rigid structure, Ifa always speaks the literal truth while

Esu interprets his meaning to humankind in ways that may undo the incautious” (69). Esu is, like Hermes and Coyote, an intermediary between humans and their creator. In the incarnation of Esu he interprets the divine will but does it at an angle that may trip his audience. Trickster is an ambiguous figure, particularly when it comes to positions of authority. In order to disrupt authoritative structures trickster must place him/herself outside of the circle of authority, by disrupting the authoritative structure, as Robbins’s protagonist in *Still Life* does for example, he becomes an authority figure, a position that may appeal to his ego but disagrees with his temperament.

Melissa Jackson states in her essay “Lot’s Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters and the Patriarchal Narratives as Feminist Theology,” “The comic endeavor relies on making incongruity starkly evident, thereby also making congruity obvious” (37); meaning comedy can undercut the absurd regime while at the same time highlighting accepted rules of behavior. Tendencies that allow for greater participation and personal expression are reinforced and those that restrict access or limit personal expression are shown to be absurd or unworkable.

Jackson bases her definition of trickster on two bodies of work, Susan Niditch’s text *Underdogs and Tricksters* and Ann W. Engar’s “Old Testament Women as Tricksters”. Quoting Niditch directly, Jackson describes a trickster that is more subtle than other conceptions of trickster figures. Her version lacks any of the supernatural trappings of other trickster figures. She frames her tricksters historically/realistically as opposed to a mythological conception. Garrison, citing Lewis Hyde states ““trickster is a mythological character.... Human beings participate in this mythology, but they simultaneously participate in others, and in history”” (70).

Jackson's description of female trickster is useful because she highlights a so far under-represented picture of trickster, one who is very vulnerable, as opposed to the divine figure who, though he may suffer, never really has much to lose. Jackson's version too highlights the kind of trickster figure that wants to improve the existing structure rather than destroy it completely and impose a new order upon it. This tendency to want to improve from within is a key element in the way trickster humor is applied as a tool of social change. Humor, as personified in the trickster archetype, is powerful in both creative and destructive ways, the authors I am looking at use that power consciously to improve their society.

Jackson's emphasis is on the disadvantaged and weak aspects of this figure as opposed to other conceptions of the trickster which contain images of a brash figure, an arrogant, impulsive braggart who is as much a victim of his own excess—making him appear foolish, defeating himself—as he is an underdog character trying to carve out a better situation for himself. While she is examining stories from the Hebrew Bible there are still elements that cut across all categories of trickster. She describes this figure as:

‘A fascinating and universal folk hero, the trickster brings about a change in a situation via trickery’. The trickster has a low—or relatively lower—social status, prohibiting gain or advancement through means available to others. Power or might is not at a trickster's disposal, so they employ wit and cunning in devising a plot to achieve their desired end (Jackson 32).

Jackson adds, citing Engar whose work was aimed at defining the female trickster of the Hebrew Bible,

First, in using her intelligence, the female trickster exhibits greater understanding of the needs of her family and nation than the corresponding male does. Second, as a matter of faith, she more closely understands God's purposes than does her male counterpart. Third, with regard to sexuality, she is not a passive sexual object. She determines when and with whom she will have sex and bear children” (Jackson 32).

In these instances the trickster figure is trying to find security within an insecure, authoritarian system. The trickster in this case is stuck working within a strictly proscribed framework, she has to operate within specific social constraints; she cannot openly defy the authorities in place. She feels a loyalty to the system within which she is operating and does not wish to destroy the system; she instead wants to work within the system to carve out a better place for herself. So, in this conception the trickster figure is a part of society and is striving to improve her position within it. She feels a loyalty to her nation and she wants to provide for her family. Yet at the same time, like all tricksters, she is not afraid to use what tools she has at her disposal, her wit, and she is not passive, but active sexually. This feminine version of the trickster is a bit tamer than other more aggressive trickster archetypes but when put into the context of a patriarchal society where women had no status, were considered part of the household goods, the female trickster is in fact quite aggressive, quite radical.

Other versions of trickster may be interpreted as more akin to outlaw figures—characters may be perceived to be working outside of the social system but who paradoxically are a necessary part of it. The trickster is a free spirited animal heedless of rules, authority or restraint. Often reckless, the trickster can also get him or herself into

trouble, leaping headlong into dangers the audience would recognize immediately as both foolish and fatal. As outsider

Coyote trots in...empty handed to a potluck hosted by animals where he vies for the choicest food. Another time, he admires the pretty, fluttering cottonwood leaves, covets their experience of tumbling lightly to the ground and negotiates with them to try it for himself—so he lands busted on rocks and dirt (Peiffer 1).

The trickster figure is multifaceted, it can be helpful or harmful, it can be foolish or wise, cunning and avaricious, it can trump outrageous odds or be destroyed by its own greed, s/he is often generous (maybe), “For the thrill of theft or goodwill to humans, he torches his tail and dashes the fire down to people’s camp—stolen goods—a hot item” (Peiffer 1). Trickster/ Coyote has a strong sense of self, will not be cowed by anyone else’s sense of propriety or decorum. He comes from outside and ignores social convention, but everyone knows who he is. So he is both outside of society and a well-known part of it.

He is terribly foolish, too smooth a talker for his own good at times, seeing as he had to talk the leaves into allowing him the opportunity, and pays a high price for his folly. But everyone knows he’ll do it again. Coyote is so confident that, though he arrives as a beggar, he demands to be treated like a king. He is so clever he can even outsmart himself, causing all kinds of damage. In this sense we see Coyote as the class clown, we enjoy his defeats as much as his victories (unlike the hero). Through Coyote’s antics we understand the trickster is a complex, ambiguous figure, and thanks to his/her ability to take on many different shapes this is a literal interpretation as well as figurative.

The humorist is a trickster. Trick and humor are difficult to separate from one another. Every joke is a trick of perception. And while not every trick is necessarily

intended to make someone laugh, when it is successful there is often laughter. Consider the story of David against Goliath. If we imagine a small young man with a small rock and a sling facing a large warrior in heavy armor wielding a shield and spear we have a keen sense of the absurd mismatch. We know the small young man is going to be destroyed. The idea that he would not run in terror is absurd enough to make us laugh—provided we don't identify too closely with the young man. If he stays because he believes in something transcendent, we may see him as a tragic figure, as Meeker explains. If he stays because he is paralyzed with fear, the mechanistic reaction of his limbs may make us laugh, as Henri Bergson suggests. If he stays because he thinks he can win, he is a trickster. In any case, we can expect terrible harm to come to him, and no damage to come to the giant. When the small young man with a sling brings down the mighty giant we are surprised, our expectations are confounded, and suddenly our perception of weak and strong is inverted. “[T]he world must be realized through inversions and opposites, sacred and secular reversals” (Vizenor, quoted in VanSlette & Boyd, 591).

We laugh when someone can show us a new way of seeing, or describing the world. It is a trick, a “new extension” of what is real.

Humorists constantly reveal new extensions of reality to their readers. These are typically taken from existing versions of reality, or commonly shared experience.

“Temporary avoidance of death is a basic goal of comic action; the substitution of nonlethal for lethal combat is its technique” (Meeker 43). Tom Robbins's *Woodpecker* blew things up but not people; *Monkey Wrenchers* attacked the tools of oppression, but not the oppressors. Satire and other tendentious forms of humor attack people, ideas, and

institutions but it is an attack that eschews/replaces physical violence. The observer has an effect on the observed and therein lies the critical function of humor; to innovate and adapt through the proper application of observation recorded through the medium of language. Humans exist in the world as many nature writers and others have observed. The world affects humans and is in return affected by humans. Humor allows us to mediate the exchange between self and other that transforms both in a creative healthy way.

Tom Robbins and Edward Abbey as humorists and tricksters are speaking directly to an American audience that they both feel has gone in the wrong direction. Both demonstrate that the society they are participating in has relied too heavily upon the trappings of authority and power to be healthy. Abbey is describing ways to disrupt the forces of “progress” that he feels are destroying the environment. And reading Abbey one immediately understands that the destruction of nature is the destruction of a vital part of humanity. So Abbey is arguing through humor a way of defending oneself against the forces of “progress”, that technological advance that would replace the natural with the artificial.

Robbins is trying to show his audience the importance of enlightened self-interest. For Robbins, the only way to save the world is to save the individual while paradoxically reining in the ego. To do this one must resist the temptation of following authority and determine for ones’ self what is personally fulfilling. It rejects the idea that imposing one’s will through group action is helpful and he demonstrates over and over the pitfalls that come from giving up oneself, one’s own fulfillment, in exchange for a greater cause.

Both authors have straightforward yet very radical ideas. Abbey wants to resist the forces of progress and demonstrates both that they are dangerous and resistible; Robbins teaches us that one must focus on the self for fulfillment and that sacrifice for a greater cause leads to misery and social dysfunction. Neither one of these ideas are palatable on their own. Dressed in humor, however, both authors make a powerful argument for their respective positions.

CHAPTER II

TOM ROBBINS

Mark Siegel in his introduction to *Western Writers Series: Tom Robbins* describes Robbins's work *Still Life with Woodpecker* as a Western since it "has the important psychological function for many readers of working out this typically American conflict between freedom and social responsibility" (5). Siegel notes that after World War II the tendency was to kill or exile the heroic individual arguing films seem to indicate our increasing sense of hopelessness about retaining any of these violent, rugged, individualistic, heroic qualities in our industrial nation" (5).

The Western hero was a wanderer, strong, independent, violent, and able to live comfortably in nature or at least separate from civilization. Up until the first half of the 20th Century the hero usually found his way back into the community. His uncouth habits and his violence would be tempered or softened by the civilizing influences of the community and after resolving the crisis the hero would settle down and marry an upstanding citizen, like a school teacher, or some other symbol of stability and civilization. Following the close of World War II, this pattern changes. Siegel points out "classic Westerns such as *Shane* more commonly suggested that the hero's special qualities must cause him to remain outside of, or to be rejected by, society. Often the hero was merely exiled. Often he was killed" (5). Siegel goes on to note that by the 1960s and 70s these heroes were more often killed than not. "*Pat Garrett and Billy the*

Kid, *The Wild Bunch*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* are just three well known examples of the extermination of the Western hero by the advancing social system” (5). In each case he explains, “the individualistic Western hero must be sacrificed for the good of society as a whole” (6). This is arguably because we recognize that the frontier is disappearing. In the past there was always another frontier to conquer, there was still space for the misfit and the outlaw to carve out a space for themselves. “The natural frontier perennially drew off a potentially destabilizing demographic excess” (“Land, Ecology, and Democracy” *Politics and the Life Sciences*, 23/1/ 2007 vol. 25, no. 1-2 p. 43). By the 1960s and 70s we were admitting to ourselves this was no longer true. In texts such as Edward Abbey’s *Fire On the Mountain* the plot revolves around an old rancher in the Southwest trying to resist the governments push to take over his land and use it for missile testing. Despite his efforts he loses the fight, though he dies in his cabin up in the mountains. In this case the old rancher was unwilling to adapt to the new technology, which would require serious capital investment while increasing the economic feasibility of his venture, and he was unwilling to accept the government buyout of his land because he had nowhere else to go. Dying or getting killed were the only reasonable options he had left and so he settled for the former.

A different genre than the Western yet that highlights a move from the personal craftsman working within a traditional society to a commercial/industrial paradigm that pushes out the traditional artisan is *The Last Hurrah* by Edwin O’Connor. It follows Frank Skeffington, a former Governor, who is running for re-election for mayor of a large eastern city after the New Deal and just as television is becoming mainstream. Frank represents the old model of politics, the political machine with its Ward Healers

and its nepotism, but proves to be no match for a new young candidate who has no political experience but a handsome face, a good war record, and the savvy to buy ads on television. Frank loses the election, suffers a series of heart attacks and dies. The city mourns a political icon but it is obvious his passing is the end of a political era and the beginning of a new technology friendly, more commercial politics. *The Last Hurrah* serves as a signal for the paradigm shift that was happening in America, and while it was not specifically a Western it highlights the shift in American consciousness reflected in the Western.

A particularly illustrative example of this recognition of a shifting paradigm in film is Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Sergio Leone was very successful with his previous set of films, The Man With No Name Trilogy, starring Clint Eastwood, wherein the outlaw/hero saves the day then disappears again into the desert, back into exile. But in Leone's last work, the heroes have nowhere left to go. In this 1968 classic the forces of industry—represented by the railroad—are driving deeper into the frontier, trying to reach the Pacific Ocean. The railroad boss has hired a vicious killer (Henry Fonda) to intimidate or kill any of the small land owners along the route so that he can buy the valuable land along the railroad's path for very little money. Opposing the railroad boss are two classic outlaws, Cheyenne (played by Jason Robards) who leads a notorious gang of gunfighters who have been framed for the murder of a large family that were in the railroad boss's way, the other a mysterious wanderer, a man with no name (Charles Bronson) bent on taking out his revenge upon the sadistic mercenary (Henry Fonda) who brutalized him and killed his brother when he was a boy. These heroes' social niceties are in inverse proportion to their physical prowess. They are difficult to be

around. Pushy, arrogant and abusive, or quiet, incapable of polite conversation. They are unkempt, dirty and have no patience or appreciation for social conventions.

After justice is restored, the railroad boss defeated and the guilty punished, both outlaws are invited to settle down and share the homestead they protected from the railroad boss which will become the center of a thriving town (Sweet Water) because it serves as a water station for the railroad. Both refuse and as they wander back out into the wilderness we know that both of them will succumb to the wounds they'd received in the course of their journey.

As the story closes we see the old ways and its code of honor, and the characters that utilized them, are replaced by new ones. The frontier is being transformed into a thriving town as the railroad arrives. The heroine of the story welcomes the railroad workers as her saviors ride off into the desert wasteland slumped in their saddles, fading quickly into death. The new heroes are the men building the railroad (hard working, obedient, grateful), bringing civilization in their wake.

The final scene emphasizes the arrival of progress and with it civilization that pushes out the violent, natural outsider to make way for industry and technology. The heroes recognize they do not belong in this new world and quietly accept their fate according to their moral code.

Siegel admits that a casual reading of Robbins's work would not see any connection to the Western genre though with a closer look one will recognize in Robbins similar effects such as "climactic showdowns" and "unambiguously good and bad guys" he explains "When the construction and themes of [Robbins's] work are examined, it becomes clear that Robbins has reworked many of the conflicts familiar to the genre" (6).

In sum, Robbins “reworks” the traditional Western. He wrestles with the conflict between the individual and society and Siegel explains “he has been able to go beyond the dead-end of the formula Western to suggest new resolutions” (6). Siegel points out that Robbins favors the individual and the diverse over society and conformity yet acknowledges a need for structure and so provides a new formulation of it.

In his reworking of the Western, Robbins recognizes the shrinking frontier and the creep of technology and industry into the most sensitive recesses of human experience. America has seen the impact of industry on nature and society in many forms. It has pushed back the forests and pulled oil out of the ground. It has brought water to the desert and flooded homes and habitats with its dams. It has allowed large cities to thrive in the desert and paved over forests. Through technology we have brought people together, created massive civilizations and supported them with hydro-electric power, nuclear power, and coal burning power plants. We are able to communicate much faster than any other time in our history. We are able to share information at an unprecedented level, all of which makes being outside of society, or trying to live free of social controls very difficult. Society thrives on technology and then becomes dependent on it. Society needs massive amounts of energy to maintain its complexity and so increasingly natural resources are being consumed to supply that energy at the cost of natural environments. Those who refuse technology refuse society. Society puts pressure on those individuals to buy in to the technology, to consume the same goods. A useful member of society must have access to shelter, transportation and communication, which in American society means one must have an income, live in an approved structure, own a phone and have access to a computer. Those who don’t meet these requirements are viewed with

suspicion, fear and mistrust. Those who wish to live outside of society's control are running out of spaces to do so.

The problem of the heroic individual is they are capable of violence and live free of social control. They are unpredictable. A well behaved society has no room for a figure outside of its control and will be compelled to either exile or kill them. As civilization pushes ever nearer the edges of the world the nature loving rugged individualist has less and less room to be exiled to. "The natural frontier perennially drew off a potentially destabilizing demographic excess" (Newton, *et al* 43). Now there is no more frontier and society and industry are bumping against its outlaws.

In Robbins's novel the creep of industrial technology of "the last quarter of the twentieth century" has grown both formidable and ubiquitous. It has tweaked our creation of art, perverted our romantic sensibilities, destroyed our frontiers, imposed itself into the human heart, and influenced human reproduction.

In art, it's the Remington SL3, the narrator's typewriter. The narrator had high hopes for this machine at the beginning of the novel. He states, "If this typewriter can't do it, then fuck it, it can't be done. This is the all-new Remington SL3...I sense that the novel of my dreams is in the Remington SL3" (ix). As the novel continues, his tone changes:

Maybe I'm mistaken about the Remington SL3. I'm no longer convinced that it will do. Oh, it's a superb tool—for the proper desk in the proper office. If there's a treatise you wish to compose, a letter to the editor, an invoice, a book review... and I'm positive that there are secretaries who would prefer it to their mates. But for the novelist, any typewriter is a formidable thing; and the Remington SL3,

with its interchangeable printing units, its electric margins, variable line spacer, paper-centering scale, personalized touch control automatic paragraphing button, vertical and horizontal half-spacing, express backspacer, skip tabulation, improved umlaut maker and misspell alarm, well, to face that degree of mechanical sophistication in the midnight of your sanctum is to know a brand of fear” (34)

He begins to understand that technology, even technology as wonderful as the Remington SL3 can be intimidating. Further, it is not the answer to his problem, and will not, *cannot* be the expression of his dream. “The Remington SL3 needs a verb job. It clearly can’t write between the lines. It’s insensitive to the beauty of fungoid alkaloids—the more I ingest the more inarticulate it becomes. And despite my insistence upon traditional literary values, it remains petulantly *moderne*” (204). It cannot express the inexpressible and refuses to acquiesce to the narrator’s vision.

What the narrator wants is something more alive. Something more organic. “Perhaps what a novelist needs is a different sort of writing implement. Say, a Remington built of balsa wood. . . . Better a carved typewriter, hewn from a single block of cypress, decorated with mineral pigments, berry juice, and mud; its keys living mushrooms, its ribbon the long iridescent tongue of a lizard” (35).

What the narrator gets is something fast, efficient, cold, authoritative and inflexible: “You would think that an electric typewriter would know better than to bite the hand that pays the light bill. Yet the Remington SL3, in its wanton dedication to humdrum technological practicality, persists in obstructing attempts at old fashioned literary genius” (226). While many readers may see the narrator trying to make excuses

for his story, others will understand that technology and efficiency can sometimes get in the way of a good story. The narrator is suggesting that while technology is wonderfully efficient, it makes everything the same, and thereby boring, “humdrum” and practical, which this novel suggests is pushing against the outlaw, the trickster character, trying to force them off the page, leaving no room for long, colorful descriptions or the characters and events that they describe.

Another example of the ubiquity of technology and its queering influence on people’s natural, joyful expression regards King Max, father to Princess Leigh-Cheri Furstenberg-Barcelona, and deposed king in exile of a small nameless country in Europe:

Since his exile, more than thirty years before, the King had made gambling a career. Poker was his work. Recently, however, he had had a taste of open-heart surgery. A major valve had been removed and replaced with a Teflon substitute. The artificial valve functioned efficiently, but it made a metallic noise as it opened and shut. When he was excited, everyone in the room knew it. Due to the audible sound of his heart, he was no longer able to practice poker, a game with necessary concealments and bluffs” (5).

Technology may have given King Max another 10-20 years of life, but it has cost him his passion. He was reduced to the role of speculative gambler instead of participant. In lieu of matching his wits and nerves against steely eyed opponents he was reduced to watching a television set and waiting helplessly on the outcome.

Even Hawaii (last state to enter the union and therefore the last piece of frontier), the place where the two lovers first meet and the outlaw is unmasked, which Robbins describes as, “a living Pap smear for the paradise flu” (41), has been adulterated by the

creep of industry. In Hawaii, progress has not only wiped out wildlife refuges but has also destroyed outlaw refuges as well:

The island of Lanai was close to Maui, a sort of veranda of Maui...In those days, Lanai was almost entirely in the possession of the Dole Corporation, which planted it in pineapples and limited its visitors, but Lanai hadn't always been a company island. As a matter of fact, there was a time when it was outlaw territory, a refuge for fugitives. If a Hawaiian lawbreaker could make it to Lanai, he was home free...Moreover, if an escaped prisoner or a culprit fleeing a crime could survive seven years on the island (which had little food or fresh water), charges against him were dropped, and he could return to society a free man" (48-49).

Even at the farthest Western edge of the United States there was no room left for outlaws, it had been taken over by the forces of industry.

Robbins intimates that intimacy is the last place one would wish to invite industry or technology and yet American society has done exactly that in its approach to controlling reproduction. His female protagonist, Leigh-Cheri Furstenberg-Barcelona has intimate knowledge of the effects of industry and technology on the womb, in this case she is one of many:

The moon invented natural rhythm. Civilization uninvented it. Princess Leigh-Cheri would have liked to reinvent it, but at that point she hadn't a clue. She had ovened that rubber cookie called the diaphragm and gotten pregnant anyway. Many women do. She had played hostess to that squiggly metallic houseguest who goes by his initials, IUD, and suffered cramps and infections.

Many women do. She had, in desperation and against her fundamental instincts, popped the pill. She became ill, physically and emotionally. Many women do. She had experimented with the jellies and jams, creams and goops, sprays and suppositories, powders and foams, gels and gunks only to discover the romantic personality...repulsed by the technological textures, industrial odors, and napalm flavors. Many romantic personalities are.

This constant battle with the reproductive process, a war in which her only allies were pharmaceutical robots, alien agents whose artificial assistance seemed more treacherous than trustworthy, was gnawing with plastic teeth at her very concepts of love” (13-14).

The forces of progress (technology, industry) have conquered every frontier, from Hawaii to the moon, and denied the romantic outlaw every refuge from Lanai to the womb. And why? According to Robbins “the real purpose of human beings in a capitalistic, puritanical society...is to produce goods and consume them” (14). Freethinkers are immune to mass marketing. Worse, they may inspire others to think for themselves, further diminishing the market share.

Robbins responds to our industrial nations attempt to exile or kill the rugged individualist but unlike typical Western hero his heroes are more flexible and resist getting killed while refusing to go away. Though too, unlike those heroes, they disrupt the current order instead of restoring it. Their mission is incomplete and may never be complete.

Robbins's favorite hero is Bernard Mickey Wrangle a.k.a. "The Woodpecker". Similar to many Western heroes Bernard Mickey Wrangle is an outlaw, though his philosophy is primarily Trickster philosophy.

For one thing, he doesn't hold too tightly to anything, "Bernard Mickey Wrangle, listed on the passenger manifest as T. Victrola Firecracker but once known to millions as the Woodpecker, clutched nothing, not even his black powder underwear. The Woodpecker knew better than to clutch and hold. The Woodpecker simply grinned." (32-33). In this case, our male protagonist has smuggled seven sticks of dynamite into Hawaii.

Though he is not one to "clutch and hold" he is not unprincipled. When asked what he stands for he replies: "I stand for uncertainty, insecurity, surprise, disorder, unlawfulness, bad taste, fun and things that go boom in the night" (98).

Like other trickster figures, he is not a hero. "'I'm an outlaw, not a hero. I never intended to rescue you. We're our own dragons as well as our own heroes, and we have to rescue ourselves from ourselves. Even outlaws perform services, however, and I brought my dynamite to remind the Care Fest that good can be as banal as evil" (99). Also, like a trickster, he spends his energy mixing things up as opposed to putting them in order.

In practical terms what our female protagonist could tell the reader about the outlaw Bernard Mickey Wrangle follows:

There was no burger so soggy that he would not eat it. No tequila so mean that he would not drink it. No car so covered with birdshit and rust that he would not drive it around town (and if it were a convertible, he'd have the top down, even in

rain, even in snow). There was no flag he would not desecrate, no true believer he would not mock, no song he wouldn't sing off key, no dental appointment he wouldn't break, no child he wouldn't do tricks for, no old person he wouldn't help in from the cold, no moon he wouldn't lie under, and she hesitated to admit, no match he wouldn't strike" (180).

In essence, Bernard Mickey Wrangle is unintimidated by convention, yet not devoid of compassion. He, like many outlaws, follows his appetite, whether for food, sex, or fun and mocks all forms of authority, whether it is a matter of taste, politics or health.

The Woodpecker loves dynamite:

I love the magic of TNT. How eloquently it speaks! Its resounding rumble, its clap, its quack is scarcely less deep than the passionate moan of the Earth herself. A well-timed series of detonations is like a choir of quakes. For all of its fluent resonance, a bomb says only one word—"Surprise!"—and then applauds itself. I love the hot hands of explosion. I love a breeze perfumed with the devil smell of powder (so close in its effect to the angel smell of sex)" (64).

If he merely loved dynamite, he wouldn't be wanted by the authorities. But he also loves what dynamite does. It "awakens" in his view. It makes public buildings "public at last, doors flung open to the citizens, to the creatures, to the universe" (64). He concludes, "As long as there are matches, there will be fuses. As long as there are fuses, no walls are safe. As long as every wall is threatened the world can happen. Outlaws are can openers in the supermarket of life" (65).

Though the Woodpecker is wanted by the authorities he can never be caught, “the outlaw is someone who cannot be gotten” (84) and he will never be a victim. He explains,

The difference between a criminal and an outlaw is that while criminals frequently are victims, outlaws never are. Indeed, the first step toward becoming a true outlaw is the *refusal* to be victimized. All people who live subject to other people’s laws are victims. People who break laws out of greed, frustration, or vengeance are victims. People who overturn laws in order to replace them with their own laws are victims. (I am speaking here of revolutionaries.) We outlaws, however, live beyond the law” (64).

Robbins is suggesting that we need outlaws, or tricksters as the two are very similar. People are conditioned by either experience or authority to follow the rules. The problem with this situation is that every axiomatic system is only as good as any other axiomatic system. What is worse is that no axiomatic system, based on general rules, can be universally effective. There will always be those who do not fit. As variables change, the rules need to adapt, the axioms need to adapt. But in order to be effective the rules must be rigid. If anyone can change the rules then there would be no control, without control there is chaos. And therefore, every system is a system of oppression. Every system is flawed, because it is only an imperfect model of reality, imperfect because there are near infinite variables, there will always be something outside the system. Add to that that no variable is fixed, reality is fluid, and we get even more chaos, more imperfection over time.

Robbins's novel is pushing against the stagnation that comes from a lack of new ideas, fresh thinking. He is critical of second hand ideas. Ideas, he explains, do not have a long shelf life, and start to stink after only a little while. He says in an interview that he writes the kinds of books he wants to read. "If authors aren't writing enough of the kind of books one wants to read, then one has to write them oneself" (Strelow 98). *Still Life with Woodpecker* is a book that bemoans the lack of fresh ideas in American culture. The text suggests that America has given up on itself. It seems to suggest that Americans are falling over the cliff and looking forward to the novelty because there is nothing left to do: "In the last quarter of the twentieth century, at a time when Western civilization was declining too rapidly for comfort and yet too slowly to be very exciting, much of the world sat on the edge of an increasingly expensive theatre seat waiting—with various combinations of dread, hope and ennui—for something momentous to occur" (Robbins 3). Robbins's novel is an answer to the discontented weariness at the end of the American century. America's victories in the first half of the twentieth century had sown the seeds of its defeat in the second half and its commitment to inflexible patterns of thinking, including racial prejudice and a slavish devotion to positivism, the subjugation of nature, the favoring of science and reason over individual experience and culture, and their resulting failures have left its people, according to Robbins, disillusioned, cynical, and depressed.

Published in 1980, *Still Life with Woodpecker* was written at a time where America was recovering from the aftermath of the Vietnam War (America's "first defeat") and civil rights struggles, including women's liberation, the sexual revolution and its aftermath. Robbins focuses on the romantic aspect of the period "the last quarter of the

twentieth century was a severe period for lovers. It was a time when women openly resented men, a time when men felt betrayed by women, a time when romantic relationships took on the character of ice in spring, stranding many little children on jagged and inhospitable floes. Nobody knew what to make of the moon anymore” (3-4). It seems frivolous in light of the crises that were flourishing at that time, and yet his frivolity is the perfect front for his critique. Unlike those heroes of old who restored order so that progress could commence, Robbins bucks the idea of progress and social responsibility, arguing instead that only as individuals can society improve.

Many Americans were angry that we sent troops into Vietnam. Yet America, drunk on its earlier successes, and embarrassed by its recent failures, such as the Communist Revolution in China, the Korean War and the expansion of the Soviet Block, was locked into a perception that saw Vietnam as the last defense against the whelming tide of Communism. America was basing its political policy on doctrine created in response to World War II and the Soviet Union’s appropriation of much of Eastern Europe, particularly the Truman Doctrine in which the Domino Theory was a key component. The fear of spreading Communism in Eastern Europe had some validity. The Soviet Union was trying to create a buffer zone of protection against Western Europe--which had a tendency to invade every couple decades, costing millions of lives and taking a terrible toll on Russia’s infrastructure. Russian expansion into Europe was perceived as a drive toward world domination. Both East and West pointed the imperialist finger at one another with impunity while denying any such intentions themselves. Robbins pokes fun at this tendency early in *Still Life* when he explains what a princess is doing in America.

The Furstenberg-Barcelona homeland was now ruled by a right-wing military junta, supported by the United States government and, of course, the Roman Catholic Church. While U.S. policy regretted that the junta permitted so few civil liberties it was loath to interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation, particularly a nation that could be relied upon as an ally against those left-leaning nations in whose affairs the U.S. did regularly interfere (7).

Fred Kaplan alludes to the period from the mid to late sixties as “an unwinding” of American’s belief system. The sixties were perceived as a time for hope and a time for change. Change seemed possible and many were excited to participate; though others were reluctant to let go of the old power structures and social norms continued to swing from action to reaction, liberalization to criminalization. At the time of Robbins’ novel the social activists of the sixties and seventies became the corporate yuppies and “greed heads” of the 1980s. America was entering its last great hangover of the twentieth century. The thrill was gone, the bad guys won, and everyone was trying to cope with the aftermath. People on the left were embarrassed to have bought into the idea that love could be free or people could be equal. People on the right gave up on rationality entirely and returned to religion for the answers; giving rise to the religious right, Satan worship—in lieu of communist witch hunts—strip malls, suburban expansion, and mega-churches. Americans were investing in ways to insulate themselves from the “other” and surrounding themselves with the familiar, the regular, and the safe.

In the rush to disassociate themselves from everything different the baby boomers from both left and right bought into the mantra that greed is good and supply side economics are going to make the world safer. The American people shortened their

attention spans, and began to live from one destructive crisis to another, unfailingly surprised when these tired old reactionary policies (whether jumping left or right) precipitated another crisis.

Dogma, a lack of fresh thinking and a rejection of emotion in favor of reason, a disregard for the individual human experience, the end of searching for meaning that cannot be found in reason but must be found in subjective experience, the preference for the artificial over the natural; these are the kinds of things Robbins is pushing against in not just *Still Life with Woodpecker*, but in every novel he writes. Robbins takes on the role of trickster so that he can awaken American senses and bring people back to a comic- - in Joseph Meeker's sense of the word--and thereby natural, life affirming, as opposed to tragic, approach to life. The tragic approach to life elevates ideas over survival and leads to death. The comic approach favors survival over ideals and is a key component of the trickster ethos.

Still Life with Woodpecker reflects the archetype of how tricksters manipulate perception in a way that is both humorous and tendentious. Robbins's work is an example of how humor is used to critique society. Robbins's use of tricks of perception encourages the reader to carefully examine his/her assumptions about the world they live in and the rules by which they live. One of his most important lessons is the difference between essential and inessential insanities:

There are essential and inessential insanities.

The latter are solar in character, the former are linked to the moon.

Inessential insanities are a brittle amalgamation of ambition, aggression, and pre-adolescent anxiety—garbage that should have been dumped long ago. Essential

insanities are those impulses one instinctively senses are virtuous and correct, even though peers may regard them as coo coo.

Inessential insanities get one in trouble with oneself. Essential insanities get one in trouble with others. It's always preferable to be in trouble with others. In fact, it may be essential" (77).

Robbins is attacking some key assumptions of American culture through humor, through word play, and by creating sense in non-sense. His work is a kind of liberation that undermines, or at the least exposes the cracks in what many accept as an objective (and thereby assume necessary) reality; but which in fact is not. Robbins is aggressive in his resistance to what Slavoj Zizek refers to as "'systemic' violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (*Violence Zizek 2*). We see this in his quick jabs organizations such as the CIA and the Vatican that he drops throughout his text. Robbins is quick to lampoon political structures to the left and right. He debases authority figures in a way that is attractive to his audience. His language and his characters break traditional perceptions down by offering viable, seductive alternatives.

Robbins is attacking the kind of "rational" or "mechanistic" thinking that dominated American culture throughout the Twentieth Century and precipitated the folly described by Francis Fitzgerald in his book *Fire on the Lake: America's Involvement in Vietnam*, and Robert S. McNamara in the documentary *The Fog of War*. Barbara Tuchman even dedicates a chapter to Vietnam in her book, *The March of Folly* which reiterates the problems that arise from policies that rely too much on "rational analyses"

and too little on human realities. Robbins would call this phenomenon “tunnel vision” (86).

Robbins describes tunnel vision as a disease in which perception is restricted by ignorance and distorted by vested interest. Tunnel vision is caused by an optic fungus that multiplies when the brain is less energetic than the ego. It is complicated by exposure to politics. When a good idea is run through the filters and compressors of ordinary tunnel vision, it not only comes out reduced in scale and value but in its new dogmatic configuration produces effects the opposite of those for which it originally was intended” (86).

He further explains, “That is how the loving ideas of Jesus Christ became the sinister clichés of Christianity. That is why virtually every revolution in history has failed...”

Building on Robbins’s idea of tunnel vision, it is a human tendency to establish rules of behavior. Humans have a natural inclination to create axiomatic systems of behavior and apply these rules to all of society. Their rules make sense, one can see the reason behind it, it is not illogical, but thanks to tunnel vision they become tyrannical. However, because they were at one time reasonable those in power would hold on to their power by virtue of the reasonable rule. They have created a “tyranny of reason”. I am borrowing the term from Freud. In his work *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* Freud refers to the tyranny of reason as the tendency to suppress word play and non-sense games in young children, especially when they are learning their mother tongue. We restrict word play in children and censor their creativity, explaining it does not follow the

rule and therefore must be wrong, and yet we coin new words and phrases as needed, and we create art daily. And twins often create their own language between themselves. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with word play or experimenting with language, or creativity; it is only that it does not fit the dominant system. It is ultimately a kind of tyranny of *reason*.¹ I don't mean to overstate my case, but one may notice those works that are popular while challenging the norm are often called "cult classics" suggesting their appeal is only for a marginalized, or fringe element of society. The term suggests there is something wrong with that sampling of the community that appreciates that particular piece of work. This label is often applied to movies or books. Politically we use the term "radical" instead of cult though both have the connotation of violence and danger.

There have always been rules, and there have always been rule makers, but since the Enlightenment there has been a tendency to use Reason as the justification of power.

People are conditioned by either experience or authority to follow the rules. This conditioning is usually in the form of negative reinforcement, which everyone accepts because they fear chaos and pain. The problem with this situation is that every axiomatic system is only as good as any other axiomatic system. What is worse is that no axiomatic system, based on general rules, can be universally effective. There will always be those who do not fit. As variables change, the rules need to adapt, the axioms need to adapt. But in order to be effective the rules must be rigid. If anyone can change the rules then

¹ Using Freud's definition of the tyranny of reason relating to parents censoring their children, my argument expands beyond the family to community norms as a kind of tyranny. The method is similar it is only the scale that I wish to expand. Instead of a parent-child relationship I expand the connection to a society/government to citizen relationship.

there would be no control, without control there is chaos. And therefore, every system is a system of oppression. Every system is flawed, because it is only an imperfect model of reality, imperfect because there are near infinite variables, there will always be something outside the system. Add to that that no variable is fixed, reality is fluid, and we get even more chaos, more imperfection over time. In order to control the people in light of an imperfect system we are forced to increase the degree of conditioning. We do have release valves in our social projects however. And any system that hopes to be effective must have some mechanism for adjustment built into it, but systems still can become fossilized. Consider too that those wielding power, those who are making up the rules believe they are being rational, are convinced that the system works better than any other possible alternative.

Still Life with Woodpecker is a book full of tricks. If one looks at the cover of the novel one notices the jacket resembles a pack of Camel cigarettes. The Camel pack is famous for its suggestion of hidden pictures. The novel suggests the design on a pack of Camel cigarettes contains hidden messages. A careful observer can recognize several ambiguous designs on the Camel cigarette pack. On the book jacket, however; instead of a camel in the foreground one sees a woodpecker holding a wooden match in its beak and a stick of dynamite in its claws. And if one is paying attention one will notice the cartoonish camel's head on the woodpecker's extended wing. One does not need to see the head of the camel to enjoy the novel, but when one does finally see it, the reader may ask him/herself what else is hidden right in front of me? What other tricks is this text trying to pull? There are many of them, in fact; ultimately they are tricks of language but since language imposes form upon reality they are really twists of our perception, twists

of our reality. The outside cover is dealing with appearances, exploiting appearances. Robbins explains in a New York Times interview with Timothy Egan “his role as a writer is to play ‘the trickster.’” He goes on to explain “the trickster gives people what they really want, some sort of freedom” (Egan). Robbins as trickster wants to please the audience as much as tease it. If one accepts that people create their gods—language imposes form, and so how we describe our gods, imposes a kind of form upon them—then Trickster is that manifestation of appetite that all human beings are subject to. Trickster is the manifestation of desire coupled with reason but uncoupled from moral codes. Trickster wants what all people want, more food, more sex, and more fun. The traditional trickster is not so self-less as to want to give people anything in particular and while the role of trickster *is* a teaching role (by example, or accident), the lesson is not necessarily taught consciously. If it were conscious, then trickster would lose his status as rule breaker and become rule maker. This contradiction is evident in Bernard Mickey Wrangle, the outlaw. He is constantly in dialogue with the female protagonist, Leigh-Cheri describing his philosophy, occasionally he catches himself in a contradiction, instead of revising his credo however; he plays through. When too tightly pressed he’ll deny until the other party blinks, then change the subject. This is a typical device of the humorous trickster. One of the greatest liberties the trickster takes is self-contradiction. For tricksters, the first rule to disrupt is the rule of logic. Tricksters turn people’s expectations upside down, inside out, or just break them apart. Tricksters don’t necessarily break the rules as much as they exploit them. They are able to do this through a wider perception. One example: Robbins describes Blackberries as intrepid invaders, a wild untamed nuisance that cannot be eliminated, merely held at bay. They are well

known for their prickly bite and “The aggression, speed, roughness, and nervy upward mobility of blackberries symbolized for Max and Tilli everything they disliked about America, especially its frontier. Bernard Mickey Wrangle took the yum approach” (129). Instead of a nuisance Bernard sees them as an opportunity. “Bernard had advocated the planting of blackberries on every building top in Seattle”(129) where they would spread a canopy providing shelter from the constant rains, and offer a food source for the homeless and wildlife, transforming the industrial town into a wide park full of wildlife, an ecosystem that could maintain both humans and animals efficiently, offering food, shelter and economic growth, and may even inspire the arts.

Whereas the rest of society is limited by its conditioning, the trickster, since he/she lives on the edge of society, caught in that liminal space between in and out, is free from social conditioning and is more aware of what is possible while remaining unaware of what is or is not acceptable because trickster lacks the knowledge, or “common sense” that most people inherit through their affiliation with the group. Therefore, a trickster is never “guilty” until the rule he breaks is his own. And then he decides, like Bernard Mickey Wrangle, the outlaw “As bad as I am, there isn’t a judge good enough to sentence me” (58).

Robbins’ idea of the outlaw, which here is synonymous with trickster, is complicated. At first glance the text makes the figure out to be a kind of savior in the heroic sense, the reader gets the impression that the trickster is out to save humankind. It is easy to jump to the conclusion that the outlaw wants to make the world better through the discretionary application of dynamite. Part of the Woodpecker’s back story includes blowing up the buildings of institutions that perpetuated the violence in Vietnam—

induction centers and military research labs in particular. When so much momentum was going into the war effort, Wrangle felt it was the properly contradictory thing to do. Yet when he perceived that many people agreed with his approach he felt he must be doing something wrong. During the action of the novel, Woodpecker takes it upon himself (and fails) to blow up the Care Fest, a conference dedicated to saving the world. Saving the world is the heroine, (Princess) Leigh-Cheri's, prime motive. So when asked what the dynamite is for (she doesn't understand his position, nor does the reader) Bernard explains, "dynamite didn't come here to teach, it came to awaken," which prompts Leigh-Cheri to ask if he thinks "dynamite can make the world a better place?" Bernard answers 'better than *what*...If all you're interested in is making the world a better place, go back to your Care Fest and question Ralph Nader...But if you're interested in *experiencing* the world as a better place, then stay here with me" (94). The outlaw/trickster is saying that the world doesn't need saving, people do, but only from themselves 'We're our own dragons as well as our own heroes'" (99).

Bernard pontificates "outlaws are *not* members of society. However they may be important *to* society. Poets remember our dreams, outlaws act them out"(95). How does an outlaw save anyone? Accidentally. Again, the reader is faced with a contradiction. The mythical trickster figure would step into and out of the lives of the people apparently at random. In most Native American trickster tales when Coyote appears he is immediately recognized unless he is in disguise. In this sense, he is woven into the fabric of the culture but does not have a daily interaction with it. So, he is a part of society and outside of society, he is an outlaw, unwilling to pay homage to the usual rules of behavior, he makes an appearance and disappears, as opposed to a citizen who interacts

with the community with regularity. Our trickster figure, Bernard Mickey Wrangle is also familiar to society though because he has been in hiding has somewhat fallen out of fashion, as is revealed when Leigh-Cheri tries to arrest him for dynamiting the hotel where the Geo-Therapy Care Fest was to be held the night before:

Little did Leigh-Cheri know that she was arresting a man whom half a dozen American sheriffs had sworn on family Bibles to see dead, that she had nabbed a fugitive who had eluded the greediest nets of the FBI for a decade, all told, although it must be admitted that in recent years, with the social climate altered and Bernard inactive, interest in his capture had waned” (56).

The Woodpecker had been hiding out, working as a bartender where off duty policemen commonly took their drinks. So, like the trickster, there was a period where he was not in the community consciousness but shows up when there is a need for him.

Reasonable people would agree if one can make the world better, then one should do so, and this is where everything goes wrong. Robbins suggests that saving the world is what messed it all up in the first place. The outlaw therefore, is someone who may, occasionally, come along and show a different perspective, but he/she/it is *not* really here to save anyone, “outlaws...are living signposts pointing to elsewhere...they are apostles of otherness and agents of CHOICE” (196). And the Woodpecker, though he is not out to save anyone, does try and do the world a service by disrupting the Care Fest. He missed the Care Fest and blew up the UFO Conference instead.

So, the reader is allowed to concede a bit of confusion. Trickster/outlaws benefit society, but they would never try and rescue it, or set it on a “proper” path. That is anathema to the breed. Getting back to axiomatic systems, saving the world is another

process. Changing the world involves changing people's minds, which means controlling how people think and influencing what people believe. In order to change the world one must impose another world view over the existing one. Ralph Nader is offering a new idea, a new way of perceiving how the world works and how people should behave.

Ralph Nader is correct. His system may save endangered species, protect the disadvantaged and give more people more access to available wealth. Nader's idea could make the world a better place but for how long? Nader's position is not liberating the individual and bringing them back to nature; it is imposing an idea. It is a closed system, a way of perceiving the world that must be enforced through conditioning in which case eventually the solution will once again become the problem. The outlaw/trickster understands this, and so always rejects the mantle of authority, as well as the inclination to start a movement.

Bernard Mickey Wrangle, a.k.a. the Woodpecker, is a kind of hero in his role as outlaw, but it's a post-modern hero, a trickster. We don't like standard heroes anymore; our heroes have to be bad, a little bit dirty, at least conflicted nowadays, we don't trust John Wayne heroes anymore because they lack depth, (not counting Rooster Cogburn from *True Grit* or the aging gunfighter from *The Shootist*). We're tired of Greek heroes because, though they had more dimensions than our modern heroes, tragedy is not good for one's health. And Greek heroes could never pull off the clean finish, instead they destroyed themselves in a predictably catastrophic, often gruesome way.

Much of the hero concept is tragic. Tragedy is rule based. Tragedies involve the breaking of some rule. Meeker explains that much of morality is based on "the assumption of a metaphysical moral order that also transcends nature....Among the

Greeks, violation of the moral order leads to tragedy” (Meeker 26). Humor is based on the unexpected in the everyday, while respecting the limits of nature, and therefore better represents the natural world. In Robbins’s novel, trickster style, the dragon becomes the hero and “rescues” (for himself) the princess from the handsome princes. Our outlaw/trickster/hero is not especially young, not necessarily handsome, he’s got the grin of a “retarded jack-o-lantern” (46), whereas the heroine is a stunning beauty who is constantly being courted by healthy young men whom she ignores, yet she has a deep and abiding crush on crusaders/world savers, Ralph Nader in particular. The dragon charms the princess, not by posing as another Ralph Nader, but by celebrating just the opposite. Ralph Nader is a wealthy, attractive, charismatic gentleman with a soft voice and a cheap suit. He is perceived as a man who so loves the planet he will sacrifice his fashion sense in order to save it. Meeker explains “The tragic hero (or, rarely, heroine) is an isolated man bearing on his private shoulders the moral burdens of all humanity. He takes himself very seriously....[He] is one who is conscious of his superior power and intellect, generous with his wealth, and confident of his importance” (Meeker 28). Robbins refers to Nader as “the Hero” who “Dressed in an inexpensive gray suit and a terminally drab necktie...might just as well have been speaking in Philadelphia as Lahaina, but so enormous was his integrity that the sound of his voice caused the mongooses to cease stalking poodledogs on the grounds of the public library...” (Robbins 100). Ralph Nader is wealthy yet dresses modestly. He makes no allowances for the incredible beauty of Hawaii and its tropical warmth. He is left untouched by the beauty of nature, focused as he is on his mission. He is an advocate of the earth, pitting himself against the techno-industrial complex that is hastening its demise. He is also the unwitting star of many of

Leigh-Cheri's sexual fantasies, yet while he is giving a speech about the "vertical integration by food conglomerates" the outlaw is making love to the princess (100). "The following morning, the Hero, hailing a taxi for the airport, stepped on [Leigh-Cheri's mongoose purloined and masticated panties] without noticing, although the lace cried out sweetly to his purposeful shoes" (106). This further illustrates the transcendent character of the Hero, his seriousness, his blindness to the world around him and therefore emphasizes the tragic flaw inherent in any movement. People get so caught up in the idea they forget the point of their effort, which is to be happy. This is a man so focused on saving the world that he completely fails to notice its tender invitation to appreciate it.

As I mentioned earlier, Robbins sees tricksters as offering people freedom yet while I agree the trickster is a liberating force at times, one gets the feeling the liberation is an unconscious side effect of the trick. This is important for Robbins's characters though the author does want to save his audience on his terms.

The trickster is not necessarily aware of his/her role as liberator. This echoes Percy Bullchild's description of "Napi, Oldman" the Blackfeet trickster figure. Bullchild explains that Napi was originally sent by Creator Sun to help the people. "Creator Sun put Oldman on Mother Earth with the rest of his children to lead them on into more learning Teaching them all the ways to better living and better ways of life" (Bullchild 86). Over time however, Napi gets a little crazy. He starts to crave power for himself. He doesn't always remember why he is here or what he is supposed to do, he is not a perfect figure, he is flawed. "Hunger got Napi into much trouble, women got him into a lot of trouble too" (Bullchild 214). But still he sets a lot of "precedents" that others will follow (216).

Another constant is Tricksters are attuned to nature, they do not resist natural impulses, they embrace them. By responding to nature, they teach others how to live. They innovate. Tricksters must operate outside of society in order to influence it. The trickster is not a savior. A savior leads or inspires a movement. A savior is someone who wishes to make people's lives better and allows himself to suffer for the sake of others, foregoing his own happiness. The idea is that as long as one follows this idea, or these rules all will be well. Quite rapidly, what began as a beautiful idea has become an authoritarian structure of repression. The narrator explains "only the better ideas turn into dogma, and it is this process whereby a fresh, stimulating, humanly helpful idea is changed into robot dogma that is deadly" (Robbins 85). The outlaw/trickster will always be controlled by his/her natural impulses, lust and hunger primarily, which saves the trickster from creating the destructive moralities found in tragedy. Citing Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival*, Peiffer explains that "comedy ensures balance and survival by accommodating necessity and avoiding moral design; comedy realistically portrays human problems, whereas tragedy egotistically inflates those problems and thus tends to overextend ecological limits" (ix). The trickster is a talented figure, admirable for his/her wit, yet mocked for his/her excessive appetite. The trickster is a balanced figure, for all of its cleverness (which rightly sparks admiration) there is always some weakness that balances the opinion of the observer. The trickster can do many tremendous tricks but it can never truly get above average can never be truly revered, which means she/he can never be taken seriously enough to become a leader, or be trusted long enough to be a full member of society. Even when Bernard is doing his best work, he screws up, and in trickster fashion, it was Bernard's appetite that got him into

trouble, “Without a doubt, it was the tequila that made Bernard impatient, that befuddled him into mistaking the UFO conference for the Geo-Therapy Care Fest. As a consequence, the saucer conference was blown ass over teacup” (50). “On the one hand, it was a masterpiece of delicate dynamiting, on the other a faux pas. When he awoke Monday morning, much to his hangover’s delight...and learned that he’d dropped his load in the wrong bin, the sheepish expression of the premature ejaculator crossed his face” (51). Bernard may be an outlaw extraordinaire, he may be a master of demolition, and yet thanks to his love of tequila he is regarded not as a master of his craft but as a “premature ejaculator” who blew his load too soon.

The trickster is good for tricks, and some may be inspired to become tricksters themselves, but no one wants to *follow* the trickster, merely observe. Lambs just aren’t willing to follow the coyote, no matter how entertaining the coyote may be,--though every lamb has an aunt or uncle who did follow Coyote and was never heard from again, or came back pregnant. And so, while the trickster may be a teacher, the trickster is not a savior. Tricksters understand “Ideas are made by masters, dogma by disciples, and the Buddha is always killed on the road” (Robbins 86).

A trickster is not quite a liberator in the heroic sense; however, in this novel there are many lessons that are pointed toward self-liberation. Bernard is explaining the role outlaws have in society, their motivation: “Have we a common goal, that goal is to turn the tables on the *nature* of society. When we succeed, we raise the exhilaration content of the universe. We even raise it a little bit when we fail” (65). Self-liberation is the dominant theme in this collection of playful sentences organized as a philosophical treatise pretending to be a love story. American humorists—in their role as tricksters

(like Robbins and Abbey)--are incredibly interested in saving the world even if for Abbey it was "just a hobby." For Robbins saving the world can only be done by liberating the self, for Abbey its putting people and nature above technology. Their message, couched in absurdity, is vitally important, if it weren't serious it wouldn't be so funny.

According to Freud, "we may also bear in mind the peculiar and even fascinating charm exercised by jokes in our society. A new joke acts almost like an event of universal interest; it is passed from one person to another like the news of the latest victory" (13). Robbins's outlaw would also create events of universal interest. And if the joke is an attack on a government policy, a political figure, or public institution it is especially delightful, but also dangerous, because of its popularity. Part of what makes us laugh is the seriousness of the message in contrast to the very clever way it is delivered. Freud uses the analogy of a remarkably accurate timepiece in an exquisitely crafted case. "...just as watch-makers usually provide a particularly good movement with a similarly valuable case, so it may happen with jokes that the best achievements in the way of jokes are used as an envelope for thoughts of the greatest substance" (108). Hence, the most important wisdom, or the greatest critique may be couched in humor. The reason being, humor is readily spread, overcoming people's resistance to uncomfortable truth with its delight. Therefore, uncomfortable truths are best told with a wink and a smile. The gravity of the message reacts with the absurdity of the delivery to perpetuate the humor the way a satellite may use the pull of another planet to launch itself further out into the cosmos.

But too, what makes the humorous trickster so influential, and perhaps so funny, is they are saving the world for *themselves*. We can identify with a trickster, a morally

flawed, all too human character because we understand his/her motivation. We understand because we have the same impulses, the same desires. Robbins wants to save himself from society's apathy and boredom. He wants to live in a world that is challenging, fluid, dynamic. He wants to pursue the mystery, not nail it to a rock and dissect it as science and reason would believe we should. He believes the world is made better by individuals living better lives and so wants to inspire as many creative individuals as he can.

I suggested above that I am reluctant to call this text a novel. It looks a lot like a novel, but its plot is secondary to its language. Robbins confirms this in his interview with Michael Strelow in the *Northwestern Review*, "...my books rely on literary effects. There is the book and then there is the plot. I strive to keep the plot secondary to the book itself. My books have plots but they don't *depend* on plots" (Strelow 101). It is better described as a philosophical text written by a poetic joker with a hard on for red heads and coke.

The feeling of the novel is that every perspective is negotiable because there is no one taking responsibility for the story. The narrator is in constant conflict with his typewriter. The typewriter, as a modern, highly technical, efficient machine wants to spout analytical prose and describe the world as an accountant or an actuary would. The narrator, as a subjective poetic sensibility who may be under the influence of hallucinogens wants to paint with a wider palette, one who's colors exceed the usual bounds of literary imagery.

Throughout the novel the reader is invited to widen their perception, to look with a more encompassing mind at the world around them.

And yet, it reaches its conclusion. It crosses a kind of finish line while dropping jokes along the way: Judas was one the twelve most famous red heads: “Judas Iscarrotop” (45); Castro doesn’t celebrate Christmas, “he’s a rebel without a Claus” (*Still Life* 236).

Terry Pratchett reminds us it is not the ringmaster who controls the circus, but the clowns (tricksters). Robbins’s novel seems disjointed because the narrator has a tendency to interrupt himself; he gets distracted by his analogies and cannot easily let go of them, extending them well beyond the range and realm of convention, yet by the end the plot is resolved, though we are left not with answers but advice, some suggestions. The outlaw does make his way back into society thanks in part to political upheaval that restores the monarchy in Princess Leigh-Cheri’s homeland through the revelation that Leigh-Cheri’s ancient nurse maid and house servant is in fact half-sister to the King and is tapped to accept the crown after the “right wing junta” (financed by the United States) is deposed.

Robbins does leave a few loose ends untied, careful to avoid a happily ever after, instead hinting that this crisis has passed but we shouldn’t assume another one won’t be on the way.

Still Life with Woodpecker is a liberating novel. In the story line the protagonist Bernard Mickey Wrangle casts aspersions on political movements from both the left and right wing and pushes the heroine to discover for herself her own way of understanding and moving through the world instead of adopting other movements. Bernard knocks both capitalism and socialism though he does ultimately favor the capitalists, if only for the sake of variety. “The sameness of the socialistic system was stifling and boring to me. There was no mystery in Cuba, no variety, no novelty and worse, no options. For all

the ugly vices that capitalism encourages, it's at least interesting, exciting, it offers possibilities'" (Robbins 97). Most importantly the novel argues in favor of serving one's individual needs first while sacralizing nature which is epitomized by romantic love and is symbolized by the moon (Robbins gives the moon agency, and makes us wonder at its power). There is nothing as self-serving as romantic love. Maternal/Paternal love can be self-less, unconditional, but romantic love puts tremendous pressure on the beloved. The parent gives all and asks nothing in return, raising the child to one day live independently. The romantic lover attaches his/herself to someone self-sufficient and strives to stick to them forever, hence the narrator's posing of "the only...serious question.... *Who knows how to make love stay?*" (Robbins 4).

The text is advocating personal freedom, personal fulfillment before adhering to any other movement or cause. "People who sacrifice beauty for efficiency get what they deserve" (99) Bernard tells Leigh-Cheri. This is anti-heroic, yet we cheer heartily for the protagonist; an outlaw, a sinner. This is one of the tricks the text perpetuates. It twists our perception, arguing that to give up one's own self-interest can ultimately lead to perpetuating evil, or worse, banality. As children we are taught to be self-sacrificing, to serve the needs of others, to be heroic. This text suggests that if one loses one's self, there is nothing worth saving anymore. The best we could become, a Ralph Nader, is impervious to the charms of Hawaii, blind and deaf to pleasure. "The most important thing is love....There's no point in saving the world if it means losing the moon" (128).

Hauck explains the line between real and unreal is easily manipulated by someone who knows how to manipulate the rules. The text is continually disrupting what the reader considers "real". One way that the text blurs the line between the real and unreal

is through far stretched analogies. The text is full of uneven comparisons that can offer a satirical lash, such as “red as a prelate’s top and a baboon’s bottom” (57) or absurd yet anthropomorphic such as comparing the moon to a bloated dead Elvis poisoned by banana splits, “The moon was full. The moon was so bloated it was about to tip over. Imagine awakening to find the moon flat on its face on the bathroom floor, like the late Elvis Presley, poisoned by banana splits” (4). Robbins the trickster turns the moon into Elvis Presley and lays him on your bathroom floor. Another text might have said the moon was full, and leave it alone. Instead, Robbins lays the Moon upon your bathroom floor like a dead rock-star—famous, undeniably present, yet still unreachable. He also empowers the moon: “It was a moon that could stir wild passions in a moo cow. A moon that could turn lug nuts into moonstones, turn Little Red Riding Hood into the big bad wolf.” And it was a moon that could charm the Hawaiian sun into something, while still vicious, was much gentler than the sun one gets in Nebraska or Mexico (4).

The opening few pages pose two questions that will stay with the reader throughout the text. “Does the moon have a purpose?” and “*Who knows how to make love stay?*” (4-5). One may suggest that neither one of these questions are particularly important (or relevant) to the purpose of living. The text suggests, however, that these are two very important questions.

Robbins’ work sacralizes the profane and profanes the sacred. Love seems a silly thing to worry about, but when it’s attached to reproductive rights and choices it suddenly seems quite important. And the moon? “The moon invented natural rhythm. Civilization uninvented it” (13). The silly novel speaks up.

Robbins's novel is rich in carnivalesque humor. The servant to the king and queen, Guletta is a prime example. She is a peasant woman, ancient, yet when she accompanies Leigh-Cheri to Hawaii she is the one in a bikini, running in and out of the water, as Leigh-Cheri, because of her fair skin, sits in the shade. Further Guletta refuses to accept indoor plumbing, "To Guletta, indoor plumbing was the devil's device. Of all the follies of the modern world, that one struck her as most unnecessary. There was something unnatural, foolish, and a little filthy about going indoors...." (*Still Life* 52).

Guletta is the consummate peasant. She is hard working, efficient, under paid and uncomplaining as well unable to communicate. She speaks the old tongue, which Leigh-Cheri does not understand. It is these qualities, as well as being the half-sister to the king (her mother was a scullery maid) that make her the perfect candidate for figure head of the restored monarchy in her homeland.

All along Guletta had known she was Max's half sister, but she chose to honor her mother, in life and in death, by never revealing that fact. However, when she was approached by agents of the revolution—they found her splitting cedar kindling beside a fireplace on Puget Sound—she chose to honor her father by freely confessing to the purple in her veins (211).

You are representative of both our proud royal heritage and our good common folk....You will be a queen for the people because, though genetically royal you come from among the people. Why, you even speak the mother tongue, the old language. On top of that, when it comes to Furstenberg-Barcalonas, you've got more sense than any of them (211).

Robbins' text re-establishes the relationship between people and nature, it reminds readers of their connection to their environment. The environment becomes a part of the individual's existence having a direct influence in his/her life. This connection to nature resembles what Katrina Schimmoeller Peiffer describes in her text *Coyote at Large* as Native American humor more than "New World Humor". Peiffer explains that Native American humor is at home with wilderness and accepts chaos and incongruity. "Native Americans...are not anxious about their place on earth—they belong to it, they have standing among the animals, and they believe the world has meaning that includes them" (Peiffer 15). Part of this reconnection with nature is established through a renewed appreciation for life's most entertaining mysteries, sexual love. It is offered as an alternative to what is currently available. The heroine is seeking an effective form of birth control that does not "repulse...her romantic personality" (Robbins 14). She had tried many different forms with disastrous results. By this point the heroine had had one abortion and at the opening of the novel had recently experienced a miscarriage. The text suggests, in the form of a question, "Was it entirely paranoid to suspect" that, currently, instead of liberating women, the various forms of birth control are trying to:

technologize sex, to dilute its dark juices, to contain its wilder fires, to censor its sweet nastiness, to scrub it clean...to order it uniform, to render it safe; to eliminate the risk of uncontrollable feeling, illogical commitments, and deep involvements...yes to make sexual love so secure and same and sanitary...so *casual* that it is not a manifestation of love at all, but a near anonymous, near autonomous, hedonistic scratching of a bunny itch, an itch far removed from any direct relation to the feverish enigmas of Life and Death so that it would in no

way interfere with the real purpose of human beings in a capitalistic, puritanical society, which is to produce goods and consume them? (Robbins 14).

Essentially the text is inviting the reader back to a romanticized interactive role with mysterious nature in direct contrast to the direction things had been heading since end of World War II. It suggests that our current forms of living are flawed because they fail to work with nature. Humans have become unbalanced in many different ways but in this case the imbalance has replaced awkward feelings and “illogical commitments” with “the less mysterious, tamer risks of infection, hemorrhage, cancer, and hormone imbalance” (14).

The text has just provided a harsh critique of American society and the reader is ready to be outraged and horrified but instead of allowing the diatribe to become a rant the text shifts perspective, skips merrily away from the outrage, getting back to our heroine and her next catastrophe, which is described in such clownish terms that one is not allowed to wallow in any kind of pity, though the reader is not unsympathetic.

Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival* would describe Robbins’s refusal to dwell on the misfortune of Leigh-Cheri’s miscarriage as behavior that reflects “the comic way” which, unlike tragedy, allows people to accept their limitations and move forward. The challenge is in knowing what to accept and what to push against; and that is a choice the individual is left to make on his/her own. In terms of the text, Robbins has scored his points. He doesn’t need to reinforce the outrage with more outrage. In a wider world view, Meeker explains “comedy is more an attitude toward life and the self, and a strategy for dealing with problems and pain” (12). Freud may suggest that the text must not bog down in the seriousness of the emotion lest the comedy lose its transmitting

power. I would say they are complimentary to one another. Because it transmits a strong critique in a humorous way, it sticks in our minds while facilitating diffusion. Robbins has suddenly turned dark. It is still funny, but it is a stinging laughter, one which leaves a mark. In his interview, describing his Woodpecker character Robbins explains, “Woodpecker is a man who refuses to suffer. Or perhaps I should say, the Woodpecker suffers as all of us must, but he refuses to let it warp him. Or trivialize him by making him cautious or bitter” (Strelow 98-99). The narrator is doing the same thing the Woodpecker is doing. He acknowledges the systemic violence inherent in his society but refuses to become a victim of that violence. He acknowledges the horror without being beaten by it. The audience is aware, now, that such injustice exists and will be watchful for it. He does not accept the system but rather continues to push against it without directly confronting it.

Describing the heroine’s miscarriage, the text pushes the envelope of the absurd, moving focus away from the pain of loss and vaulting it into a position of silliness, and maybe hope. “It was autumn, the springtime of death.... Death was singing in the shower. Death was happy to be alive. The fetus bailed out without a parachute” (16). Followed by, “Asleep at last, she dreamed of the fetus. In her dream the fetus went toddling off down some awkward dirt road like Charlie Chaplin at the end of a silent movie” (17). Instead of focusing on the loss, Robbins offers an alternative future. The fetus, having vaulted out into the world, wanders off into the unknown, out there, somewhere, still playing, still existing somehow. In this scene, Robbins reminds us, as Bakhtin does in *Rabelais and His World*, that death is a fundamental part of life. Few contemporary authors allow death a positive space in their novels, unless it is to show it

as another form of life or the gateway to something supernatural. Typically death is a villain, or something evil, or is bound by duty to do what no one else can do. Robbins celebrates death. He gives death room in his story as part of the overall story. Autumn is the time when things die and death is invigorated, “happy to be alive”. Robbins normalizes death. Things die. Miscarriages happen. That is part of the natural cycle. He is not mocking his characters though he is startling his audience, reminding them in tricky ways that death and life are all around us, two sides of one coin which is not typical in humorous fiction since comedy more often favors births and marriage—joining rather than death and separation. Robbins allows death a space in his novels but he is careful not to make it tragic. It is sad for the reader but his characters typically go out with style, living the way they wished to live until the end comes for them, or they go to it.

According to Siegel, Robbins believes that fear of death is what brings out the worst in human nature and creates a lot of the problems Robbins and Abbey are pushing against in their novels. So in this scene Robbins normalizes death. He anthropomorphizes death, gives it feeling and agency while reminding the audience that like the change in seasons, is a part of life.

Still Life breaks rules in a very seductive way. Due to the seductive nature of the text’s rule breaking one must consider it to be a subversive novel but unlike other subversive texts it does not try and replace one ideology with another and while it disrupts prevalent ideologies it does not devolve into nihilism. The text finds a way to walk the fine line between attacking virtually all creeds while resisting any tendency towards nihilism. The text is constantly telling the reader, as the hero tells the heroine,

that she must construct herself, not a movement. According to the text, movements lack a sense of humor, and so become dogmatic and destructive.

Ideas are definitely unstable, they not only *can* be misused, they invite misuse—and the better the idea the more volatile it is. That's because only the better ideas turn into dogma, and it is this process whereby a fresh, stimulating, humanly helpful idea is changed into robot dogma that is deadly. The problem starts at the secondary level, not with the originator or developer of the idea but with the people who are attracted by it, who adopt it, who cling to it until their last nail breaks, and who invariably lack the overview, flexibility, imaginations, and, most importantly, sense of humor, to maintain it in the spirit in which it was hatched (85-86).

The text suggests that every idea, no matter how good it may seem at the time, can/will turn bad. We must constantly rethink what we are doing and why we are doing it. Some examples of great ideas gone wrong include, nuclear fission, accepting free blankets from the government, direct democracy, and abstinence only education. Robbins offers another example in his novel, the Care Fest fiasco.

The Care Fest meltdown is a satirical reminder of what is wrong with American culture. It makes a mockery of some more liberal tendencies. It mocks the tendency of even well-meaning endeavors to devolve into screaming matches where everyone is clamoring to impose their ideas over everyone else's. It reinforces the narrator's position that good ideas ultimately lead to dogma and become destructive in the hands of the ignorant masses who try to perpetuate them. It also reeks of the

rationalist/positivist/scientific tendencies that were had become so popular in the first half of the twentieth century.

In this episode, the narrator describes “a magazine editor from New York, a chic executive” and her position that children should be conceived and gestated in carefully controlled artificial environments and raised by collective, government established care centers (88). This is seen as a liberating alternative for women, who have an undue burden as mothers. The text then offers a “poet, and aging humorist”, who’s drunk, as a counter argument allowing another opportunity to advocate the mysterious in favor of the scientific. ““What kind of babies will those be who are made of the formula instead of the fuck?” asks the poet” (89). At which point he is booed off the stage by a small but vocal minority.

The example suggests we are leaning, from both the left and the right, towards totalitarianism and intolerance. We have our pet movements, our pet projects, and we shout-down everyone else’s. The text is also mocking society’s reliance on technology to solve our social issues. The poet is suggesting that there is something missing from technology, that science and technology are inadequate, will always be inadequate because it lacks the undefinable essence that only nature can provide. In another sense, science and technology lack soul. Nature must play a part in people’s lives if people are going to thrive. This argument is pushing against America’s emphasis on math and science and other tyrannical forms of reason. Robbins insists we cannot rely on movements to make things better. We cannot wait for consensus, we must live for ourselves, ““There are no group solutions. There are only individual solutions, individual

liberations” (Seigel, *Western Writers Series* 32-33 quoting Robbins’s essay “Feminismo”).

Robbins attacks the tendencies of his society to rely over much on science and reason to solve its social ills. Society oscillates between rationalism which emphasizes science and empirical evidence and romanticism which emphasizes nature and emotion; humor exploits this dichotomy. To favor one over the other, to let one take precedence over the others disrupts the balance. We need both, more importantly, we need flexibility. The rational positivists would dismantle all the wild places, they would take the world apart in order to catalog it, define it, make it static and predictable which would destroy the world. The romantics would tell stories about the world as they huddled fearfully in their closets. Trickster helps negotiate a middle term. One that does not seek to elevate humans above the natural, it avoids that moral transcendence, but also offers ways to negotiate the mystery, to deal with it in a positive way, to live within it while accepting there are some things we can’t explain.

Robbins suggests, and his protagonist the Woodpecker demonstrates, that we live with confidence. Instead of holding tightly onto some authority out of fear, we would do better to embrace the best option available, but we nurture that idea because it is the best available. If another, better idea presents itself we will move onto that one, but we never assume that this is the be all/end all (“the Woodpecker knew better than to clutch and hold”(32)), we remain aware while we strive to make the best of what is. And so through his relationship with Leigh Cheri, and vice versa, our protagonist, the Woodpecker, celebrates confidently what he has while still leaving open for both of them the opportunity for something better. As the story concludes, the two lovers live together,

happily, but maintain their independence, “having acquired a taste for solitude, each of them spent days separate and alone. Funny how we think of romance as always involving two, when the romance of solitude can be ever so much more delicious and intense” (269). Robbins seems to suggest that while having a lover is nice, solitude may be better, “Alone the world offers itself freely to us. To be unmasked, it has no choice” (same). Robbins makes several arguments while leaving just enough flexibility for the reader to make their own mind about what is the best course of action. As long as it is original, he seems to be okay with it. Mimicry, however, is unacceptable, even when it could be considered flattering.

That is why Bernard Mickey Wrangle reacts so strongly to Leigh Cheri’s monasticism while he is in solitary confinement in prison, not because she recreated the same living conditions in her attic as he was subjected to in his prison cell, but because so many others considered it replicable. Upon hearing that young people across America are locking themselves in their attics, Wrangle writes an upsetting letter to his beloved, Leigh-Cheri, accusing her of turning true love into a pop culture spectacle. Wrangle cannot tolerate the idea that anyone would copy what he does, or that he would ever inspire a “movement”. Robbins is demonstrating the necessity of pure individual action, as opposed to dogmatic acceptance of the rule. His protagonist, the Woodpecker, refuses to be an example, a hero, or a savior and would prefer “baby ferrets hanging by their teeth from the skin of [his] testicles” to becoming the “public soap opera” (201) that Leigh-Cheri’s seclusion in the attic had created.

Essentially, Robbins’ outlaw, his coyote figure, like all good tricksters, must be un-followable while at the same time inspirational. This is how these writers bridge the

gap between teacher/social inspiration, outlaw and critic. They (the tricksters not their authors), unlike the rest of us, will be confident in the choices they make, often because they are not aware or concerned with the risks. They don't live in society and therefore have none of the responsibilities yet they are somehow a necessary part of it. They inspire us; through fiction, fact, or religion, tricksters help mold us because their confidence cannot be contained; they exceed the rule. Their belief in themselves is greater than their belief in the rules they've been invited to follow.

CHAPTER III

EDWARD ABBEY

Edward Abbey urged people to resist the encroaching military industrial complex that was strangling our country and leeching away our opportunity to live free fulfilling lives, arguing that “progress” was the enemy and nature was our home and we needed to defend it. Abbey’s worldview is one that is post-Western in Siegel’s sense of the Western genre. In the traditional Western the outlaw comes in to restore a social balance by outwitting and/or out muscling the tyrannical forces victimizing the community. In Abbey’s vision, instead of some non-legal tyrant plaguing the community it is the system itself that has become tyrannical, threatening people not by the sudden overt violence but with the “slow violence” of government policy and industrial waste that by polluting the air and water, by destroying our forests and damming our rivers both our health and our freedoms were threatened.

Abbey saw the way to freedom through humans’ unmediated interaction with nature. Abbey tried to inspire freedom through the protection and celebration of nature. His texts invite the reader to feel the same outrage he does when he describes the industrial waste and the government corruption (at every level) that allows the destruction of nature and its corollary effects on personal freedom to take place. Douglas Brinkley notes that Abbey’s writings “all aimed at the heart of the industrial complex President Dwight D. Eisenhower had warned about in his surprisingly frank farewell address of

January 17, 1961” (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* with an introduction by Douglas Brinkley vx). Brinkley further notes that “Throughout the Cold War era, no writer went further to defend the West’s natural places from strip-mining, speed-logging, power plants, oil companies, concrete dams bombing ranges, and strip malls” (xvi).

Abbey hints that he is a lone voice crying out in the wilderness, and indeed, arguing against industrial production during the heart of the cold war would open Abbey up to tremendous criticism. Brinkley reminds us that Abbey’s favorite motto, taken from Walt Whitman, was “resist much, obey little” (xv). Abbey sought to inspire his audience to rise up and defend the earth. He inspired a wide community of people committed to defending the earth’s resources against rape and pillage by the military industrial complex through his humor and his ability to show people a new perspective, one that is interconnected, as opposed to distinct and separate. He illustrates that we can see the world in a different way, one that will enrich us in ways that the trappings of progress can never provide.

Reading texts such as the *Monkey Wrench Gang* one may be distracted by the destruction that drives the novel. The *Monkey Wrench Gang* wreck a wide variety of machines and equipment in varying degrees of violent detail. What is easy to miss is the suggestion of community that Abbey is creating. He, like Robbins, is widening people’s perception; he is expanding the American vision to encompass nature and bring it into their everyday consciousness. His novel is full of scenes of the majority of the population being blind to the wild beauty of the desert as they move through it in their machines while those special few who are outside of their machines witness a fuller picture of what is happening around them. He makes those different perspectives so

much more beautiful by adding a richness of detail that one wants to share in that bigger picture. The earliest example of this is in the prologue. The scene opens at a ribbon cutting ceremony for a new bridge joining Utah and Arizona: “The people wait....roasting in their cars” (1). The Indians also watch and wait. Gathered on an open hillside above the highway, on the reservation side of the river” (3). “Most of the crowd along the highway had only a poor view of what happened next. But the Indians up the hillside saw it all clearly. Grand stand seats” they witness the destruction of the freshly constructed bridge, from the firecrackers that chased the two governors off the bridge to the point where “the bridge rose up, as if punched from beneath, and broke in two along a jagged zigzag line” through which “a sheet of red flame streamed skyward” and “the bridge parted like a flower” (5). The narrator says those people on the hillside have a better view than those who waited in their cars lined up on the highway for over a mile on either side waiting to roll over the new bridge, but there are other views, wider views, and different perspectives:

Meanwhile, up in the sky, the lone visible vulture spirals in lazy circles higher and higher, contemplating the peaceful scene below. He looks down on the perfect dam. He sees downstream from the dam the living river and above it the blue impoundment, that placid reservoir where, like waterbugs, the cabin cruisers play. He sees, at this very moment a pair of water skiers with tangled towlines about to drown beneath the waters. He sees the glint of metal and glass on the asphalt trail where endless jammed files of steaming automobiles creep home....He notes in passing the dark gorge of the master canyon, the shattered stubs of bridge....Under the vulture’s eye. Meaning nothing, nothing to eat. Under that

ultimate farthest eye, the glimmer of plasma down the west, so far beyond all consequence of dust and blue, the same..." (6)

The narrator is aware that there are multiple perspectives and a careful reader will be brought into the narrator's vision, seduced by the vivid detail and varying perspectives made available. In this case Abbey starts at the point of common perception. The people, regular folks, straining to hear a long, boring speech while sitting in their hot cars. Panning out, the narrator offers the perspective of those who are less enfranchised, the Indians on the hill, watching a spectacle but not participating, viewing a celebration of American innovation and engineering from their reservation. Panning out again to the vulture, who sees the dam, the canyon, the river, the blasted bridge, the two water skiers drowning and notes that there is nothing for him in all of this, no meaning. And finally, there is the sun, shining down over everything, even more oblivious to the human struggle than the vulture. Each perspective is real, correct, important. But it is not the only perspective. Abbey will continue to play with our perception throughout his novel and his other works.

Abbey uses the desert to shock the consciousness of his readers into rejecting their anthropocentrism and see that they are a part of a dynamic ecosystem. By describing the flora, fauna, and land formations of the desert in such rich detail he puts his characters into nature in such a way that nature is more than just an image, a painted screen in front of which the people perform. The rivers flow, the buzzards hunt, the sun burns, the flowers bloom in a wild cacophony of diverse life. A blown bridge or a person drowning is terrible, tragic, horrifying, but it is not the only thing. It is merely a small part of it. Abbey has created this scene to say that our lives are important to us, but in the

big picture they are only as important as everything else. In one of the perspectives offered here, two humans struggling to live, drowning in a man-made lake, are merely another fact among a myriad of facts, a part of the backdrop instead of the story, irrelevant to the bigger purpose of finding food, irrelevant to the purpose getting home or a day floating on a lake in the desert. There are many places where Abbey reminds the reader how insignificant humans are to the bigger picture surrounding them.

Abbey's reputation as a trouble-maker and outlaw invites people to read his work. It looks like fun. Abbey is having fun with his audience, or at least his critics. In the author's note to his book *Desert Solitaire*—which often reads like the behind the scenes version of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*--Abbey snubs literary authority: "Serious critics, serious librarians, serious associate professors of English will if they read this work dislike it intensely; at least I hope so" (x).

According to Peter Quigley, editor of a collection of critical essays titled *Coyote in the Maze: Tracking Edward Abbey in a World of Words*, Abbey was ignored by most literary critics, even those writing eco-criticism. In spite of being ignored by critics while he was alive and for at least a decade after his death, Abbey did have a powerful impact on American culture. Douglas Brinkley in his introduction to the 25th Anniversary edition of *The Monkey Wrench Gang* explains Abbey's work is "far more than just...controversial...it is revolutionary, anarchic, seditious, and in the wrong hands, dangerous" though Abbey claims, as Brinkley notes, "it was just a work of fiction written to 'entertain and amuse'" but in fact "was swiftly embraced by ecoactivists frustrated with the timid approaches of mainstream environmental groups" and "a call to action" (xx) and later Brinkley explains "a new, militant group of ecoanarchists calling

themselves Earth First! adopted Abbey as their guru, *The Monkeywrench Gang* as their bible....”(xxii).

Abbey’s dismissal by literary critics reinforces his status as an outlaw, or more importantly a trickster figure. Abbey is presenting himself as counter to established authority. He defines himself in large part by what he is not. He is, especially, *not* a literary authority and he resists the title of environmentalist which was too polite for his sensibilities. Further, “Abbey rejected out of hand the notion that he was a ‘nature writer’ ...instead he fancied himself an old-fashioned American moralist” (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* xvi). Returning to the author’s note in *Desert Solitaire* Abbey informs his audience of his outlaw status “I quite agree that much of the book will seem course, rude, bad-tempered, violently prejudiced, unconstructive—even frankly anti-social in its point of view” (x). Abbey wants to be perceived as a kind of foolish/outlaw figure. He does not put himself into a position of authority. He carefully resists declaring himself the arbiter of truth. His texts are critical of government and industry which have come together to destroy the environment, but they are also self-critical. Abbey mocks not only industry but also himself, again Brinkley points out

Astute reviewers saw *The Monkeywrench Gang* for what it was: a wildly satiric, clever, postmodern pulp Western that lampooned everything from the Lone Ranger to John Wayne to the women’s movement. No one claimed it a fictional masterwork—it isn’t—but...it was a rousing wake up call, this time on behalf of endangered species and old-growth redwoods (xxi).

The reader can see Abbey making fun of himself, or someone like himself at the same time he is mocking his characters. Like Robbins, Abbey is writing during a time

when those in authority decided what the truth was with disastrous results. Therefore, Abbey is careful not to tell his audience what the “truth” is, instead he “deals...with the surface of things” and ignores “the true underlying reality of existence” (*Desert Solitaire* xi). He recuses himself from definitions of the absolute choosing instead to present us with evidence of what we all can plainly see, taste, touch, hear, and smell. Abbey’s characters, much like himself, are abrasive at times, and difficult to sympathize with. Abbey, described by his friends, was an absent father and a philanderer. Characters like Hayduke, in the *Monkey Wrench Gang* are abrasive, crude, and dysfunctional and while he may be the most abrasive, all of them are flawed.

Doc Sarvis is an aging intellectual, a medical doctor, widower, nearing fifty, who likes to burn down billboards at night. He feels it is his duty to save the desert southwest from these eyesores yet without shame or thought he throws his cigar butts out the window of his car when he is through with them. He loves the desert southwest, and is prone to bouts of melancholy. His assistant and “part-time mistress” considers him “an aging adolescent” but one who “was kind and generous” (42).

Bonnie Abzug, “office clerk, nurse-aid and chauffeur” to Doc Sarvis, is a former dancer with a college degree in French and no career options other than waitress, go-go dancer or receptionist, who came out to the desert southwest with a dance troupe and stayed for the mountains and the desert. She’s got a strong awareness of the lack of economic opportunities available to her. She is quick to defend herself as the only woman in the gang as she spends time as “part-time mistress” to Doc Sarvis whom she loved, “Not much, perhaps, but enough” (12).

Abzug finds George Washington Hayduke particularly offensive and somehow attractive. The attraction/repulsion between these two characters reinforces the ambiguity that these characters wrestle with, particularly the draw between nature and civilization. Abzug comes from civilization (she grew up in the Bronx). Hayduke just got out of the hospital after spending three years in the jungle. Abzug has security in Doc Sarvis but craves the satyr like Hayduke physically, though he repulses her emotionally. In return, Hayduke craves Abzug but is unwilling to exchange his freedom for the security of civilization and so is simultaneously antagonistic towards and tormented by her.

Like Siegel's typical Western hero of the 1970s, George Washington Hayduke is a wild animal with human intelligence and few manners, with a fierce loyalty to his friends and an antipathy to everything else excepting the desert southwest. He was a product of the United States government; having served in the military, "*Vietnam, Special Forces*, [he] *had a grudge*". After three years in Vietnam, one year as "a prisoner of the Vietcong, he returned to the American Southwest he had been remembering only to find it no longer what he remembered, no longer the clear and classical desert, the pellucid sky he roamed in dreams. Someone or something was changing things" (16).

Hayduke is the stereotypical wild man in the wilderness. One who cannot be around people for very long before picking a fight or going off to settle an old score, real or imagined. He dreams of a wild space free of human traffic, yearns for it, but also knows he can't have it all to himself, that ultimately it would kill him or drive him insane as surely as too much civilization would. And so he is trying to find a balance between defending the desert he remembers from the desert it has become as well as find his way back into a society that he knows he needs but doesn't want.

Seldom Seen Smith is similar to Hayduke in that his home is no longer what it once was due to civilizing influences. He too, like the rest of the group is a sort of outlaw figure already, though he hasn't committed any acts of vandalism before the gang is created as the others have, he does have three wives and did ask for god's intervention in curing the Colorado river of Glen Canyon Dam with a "little *pre-cision* earthquake" praying,

'Dear old God...you know and I know what it was like here, before them bastards from Washington moved in and ruined it all. You remember the river, how fat and golden it was in June when the big runoff come down from the Rockies? Remember the deer on the sandbars and the blue herons in the willows and the catfish so big and tasty....Remember the cataracts in forty-Mile Canyon? Well, they flooded out about half of them too....There's something you can do for me, God. How about a little old *pre-cision-type* earthquake right under this dam? Okay? Any time. Right now for instance would suit me fine' (33-34).

Smith is willing to sacrifice himself in order to rid the river of the dam and make it like it was, but he warns his companion to run in case things start to rumble. Unlike the other characters, Smith has more than an emotional stake in slowing down the progress that is infecting his home. He has family in the area, three wives and five children. His home, Hite, Utah is also under water now due to the creation of Glen Canyon dam as well as many of his most sacred spaces. We are introduced to Smith as he is driving to lead a rafting tour down the river and the narrator is cataloguing the points of interest along the way but similar to Hayduke, Smith is troubled:

Like Hayduke his heart was full of a healthy hatred. Because Smith remembered something different. He remembered the golden river flowing to the sea. He remembered canyons called Hidden Passage and Salvation and Last Chance and Forbidden and Twilight and many many more, some that never had a name. He remembered the strange great amphitheaters called Music Temple and Cathedral in the Desert. All these things now lay beneath the dead water of the reservoir, slowly disappearing under layers of descending silt (32).

Those in the Monkey Wrench Gang each carry a burden of loss, anger and/or emptiness; they each need wilderness in order to be free. They each feel a connection to the land and resent its abuse by the unaware, ill-informed, unconcerned society they live in. Their diverse backgrounds transcend socio-economic boundaries. They encompass medical professionals, clerks, unemployed veterans, and tour guides. Some have families, some are in relationships some are friendless wanderers. Abbey includes all of them, gives them each a voice in this endeavor, suggesting that there is no single class of people who can or should protect the environment but instead that everyone is capable of participating in resisting the military industrial complex.

As these disparate people make their camp on the bank during their first night rafting down the Colorado river Doc Sarvis puts into words the feeling of dis-ease that each of them has towards the world as it is “‘We are caught,’ continued the good doctor, ‘in the iron treads of a technological juggernaut. A mindless machine. With a breeder reactor for a heart’....A planetary industrialism”... “ ‘growing like a cancer. Growth for the sake of growth. Power for the sake of power. I think I’ll have another bit of ice

here” (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* 64). Doc Sarvis’s brief monologue highlights the problem and then gets back to the immediate business of living. His whiskey needs more ice.

Like Robbins, Abbey refuses to suffer or dwell on the negative. Instead, Abbey’s characters move quickly from mournful recollection of what was to practical realities of the present and a plan of action for the future. And so, as “Hayduke had been complaining about the new power lines he’d seen the day before on the desert” and “Smith had been moaning about the dam again, that dam which had plugged up Glen Canyon, the heart of his river, the river of his heart” Doc comes up with a solution: “We ought to blow that dam to shitaree” (67). It was decided that blowing the Glen Canyon dam, while exciting, was too big to do first, they needed some practice, and there were plenty of targets. Including new roads being built in their area. “Comb Ridge forms a serious barrier to east-west land travel. Or it used to. God meant it to” (76). Coming to the top of Comb Ridge the gang finds their first target. In some ways Abbey makes it sound like a rescue mission:

‘That’s the new road they’re working on,’ Smith said.

‘It’s built for the benefit of certain companies that operate in this county....It’s to help out the poor fellas that own the uranium mines and the truck fleets and the marinas on Lake Powell, that’s what it’s for. They gotta eat too.’ (77-78)

Abbey goes on to describe the effect that this new road has on the earth, describing the process using terms meant to make the reader uncomfortable, drawing sympathy: “No one knows precisely how sentient is a pinyon pine, for example, or to what degree such woody organisms can feel pain or fear, and in any case the road builders had more

important things to worry about, but this much is clearly established as scientific fact: a living tree, once uprooted, takes many days to wholly die” (79).

We the readers are invited to imagine being torn up and left to die alone and afraid. Abbey does not relieve us, but adds, “the drill steel bit into the rock with screaming taconite bits, star-shaped and carbide tipped. Powdered stone floated on the air as the engines roared. Resonant vibrations shuddered through the bone structure of the earth. More mute suffering” (79). Here it is the earth that is suffering, but Abbey’s gang will have its revenge, and again, we will not be spared the violent details: “his three comrades entertained themselves cutting up the wiring, fuel lines, control link rods and hydraulic hoses of the machine, a beautiful new 27-ton tandem-drummed yellow Hyster C-450 A, Caterpillar 330 HP diesel engine....One of the best. A dream boat....They worked happily” (85). “All were impressed by what they had done. The murder of a machine. Deicide. All of them even Hayduke, a little awed by the enormity of their crime. By the sacrilege of it” (86). Abbey describes the machines as gods, worth by far more the lives of those who were tearing it apart due to the tremendous number of humans on the planet. Still, it had to be done to protect the even more rare Combe Ridge.

There are many references throughout *The Monkey Wrench Gang* and much of his work of the consequences of industrialism and its violence but Doc Sarvis offers a useful summation: “the true quality of our lives...sinks in inverse ratio to the growth of the Gross National Product” (84).

For all their violence against the machines the gang has a code, or a *style* of operating. Abbey’s game, at least in his novel, is not to engage the enemy on its own

terms. It is to harass the beast, to slow it down, disrupt the smooth functioning of this destructive force as much as possible.

‘All over the country little bunches of guys in twos and threes, fighting back.’

‘You’re talking about a well-organized national movement.

‘No I’m not. No organization at all. None of us knowing anything about any other little bunch. That’s why they can’t stop us’ (182-83).

The Monkey Wrenchers do not expect to win a great victory, they do not expect the developers to immediately stop what they are doing and leave the wilderness alone, they merely want to slow them down, push back against this industrial monster, instead of letting it have it all its own way. They are making room for alternative points of view. By following some simple rules (always cut fence, always pull up survey stakes, never allow harm to come to human beings) the risks are relatively low. A bit of light harassment will, if one gets caught, result in a misdemeanor, which is, at worst, up to six months in jail and a monetary fine.

Brinkley explains that for Abbey this kind of resistance, this “anarchism wasn’t really about military might...but about opposition to, as Leo Tolstoy had put it, ‘the organized violence of the state’” (xvii). Abbey’s Monkey Wrench gang opposes the “organized violence of the state” by attacking its machines in occasionally gory detail. Abbey will at times sensationalize the destruction going on in his novel, creating a Hollywood spectacle one sees in action film, describing bulldozers going off a cliff or jeeps plunging through walls of fire; or he can be cool and matter of fact as he is when describing planting the dynamite on the railroad tracks that will disrupt the remote control

coal train from delivering another load to the coal fired power plant, but in some scenes he describes the destruction in such vivid detail it makes the audience uncomfortable, as though witnessing a gruesome kind of murder or the squashing of a particularly large, juicy insect. When the destruction is done at the hands of the Monkey Wrench Gang, the violence is intimate, and the audience feels complicit in the murder. It makes the reader uncomfortable but we are not allowed to ignore it. Abbey contrasts this violence with the anonymous, “indifferent traffic” (48), the threatening headlights, “derisive horns”, of “zonked up Mustangs, Impalas, Stingrays and beetles” and “chopped Kawasaki motorbikes with cherry-bomb exhaust tubes....which, blasting sparks and chips of cylinder wall, roared shattering like spastic technical demons through the once-wide stillness of Southwestern night” (10). Here the people in these machines are posing an existential threat to Bonnie and Doc Sarvis as those two are harvesting billboards, yet those people are ignorant of their affect on the world around them. An early, rather mild example of a more personal violence witnesses Doc Sarvis and his nurse assistant Bonnie Abzug bring an acetylene torch to bear on a road sign that resisted their chain saw the night before.

The torch functioned perfectly, the intense blue flame licking silently and furiously at the steel, making an ugly red-hot wound...The torch was deadly but it was slow. The molecules of steel released their bonds with one another most painfully, reluctantly, loath to part....Nobody seemed to notice. Nobody stopped. The heedless autos, the bellowing trucks, all swept past with vicious hiss of rubber, mad roar of engines.... Maybe nobody cared”

after cutting the center post and nearly through the other supports they push the billboard over “some five tons of steel, wood, paint, bolts and nuts—gave a little groan of protest and began to heel over. A rush of air, then the thundering collision of billboard with earth, the boom of metal, the rack and wrench of ruptured bolts, a mushroom cloud of dust, nothing more. The indifferent traffic raced by, unseeing uncaring untouched” (48).

Each of the Monkey Wrench Gang wants to push back against the industrial kraken that is strangling their land, and they are capable of a kind of violence against machines, but unwilling, perhaps unable to perpetuate violence against other people. The gang is defending their home from the ravages of industry. They have nothing against people.

Abbey addresses the interpretation of nature as home through the characters George Hayduke and Seldom Seen Smith in *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. These two characters are especially affected by the destruction of their natural habitats. Doc Sarvis is also affected by the industrialization that is happening but his crisis is not necessarily a threat to his home as it is a threat to his biological ethic. For Sarvis, the pollution in the atmosphere, rising cancer rates, glaucoma, asthma, conjunctivitis, is a direct insult to his mission, which is to save lives. Each of these characters perceives the threat of industrial development but don't know if they are unique to this understanding or if there are others out there who share their respect and reverence. Seldom Seen Smith has lost his home, Hite, Utah to Glen Canyon Dam which flooded the town. Hayduke's memory of “home” helped him survive three years in Vietnam, a good portion of which was spent as a prisoner of the Viet Cong, chained to a tree at night and huddled in a pile of live bodies during carpet bombings by American B-52 bombers. Hayduke is the most violently

radical of the gang because he has been victim to the most terrible aspects of the military industrial complex. As a soldier in Vietnam he was subjected to the helicopters' strafing, the napalm, and the bombing by his own government. Abbey is showing his readers, in a subtle way, that the same military industrial mindset that destroyed Vietnam is the same one that is destroying America. Hayduke, Cassandra like, foretells the gang's doom, as he encourages them to escalate the violence knowing that, just as in Vietnam, escalation will come from the opposition regardless of the gang's actions.

It became a question of subtle, sophisticated harassment techniques versus blatant and outrageous industrial sabotage. Hayduke favored the blatant, the outrageous. The others the other. Outvoted as usual, Hayduke fumed but consoled himself with the reflection that things would get thicker as operations proceeded. For every action a bigger reaction. From one damn thing to another worse. After all, he was a veteran of Vietnam. He knew how the system worked (74).

“The Enemy, if he appeared, would come loudly announced with roar of engines, blaze of flares, an Operation Rolling Thunder of shells and bombs, just as in Vietnam” (87).

Barbara Tuchman was critical of Operation Rolling Thunder in her book *The March of Folly*. It was an escalation that drew heavy criticism and failed to achieve any of its intended goals, in fact it made things worse. However, it had mathematical appeal. It played into the myth of a clean, axiomatic application of force achieving a clearly defined political purpose. Abbey acknowledges that controversy when he makes reference to Rolling Thunder. Hayduke wants all-out war, an escalation of hostilities to defeat an enemy he does not recognize as human. Seldom Seen Smith argues for restraint, that people are on the other side, not mutants or aliens. Abbey plays a middle term, showing

it is the technology and the machines that are the enemy, not the people. Abbey understands the people have been seduced, or brainwashed by the military industrial complex and are now slaves to technology as opposed to its masters.

“‘Next time dogs,’ says Hayduke. ‘Then gunners in helicopters. Then the napalm. Then the B-52s’”(96). This is Hayduke’s warning after ducking a lone security agent who had come to check the area at night during the first bout of concerted monkey wrenching by the gang.

‘I don’t think it’s quite like that,’ Smith was saying. ‘They’re people too, like us. We got to remember that, George. If we forget we’ll get just like them and then where are we?’

‘They’re not like us,’ Hayduke said. ‘They’re different. They come from the moon. They’ll spend a million dollars to burn one gook to death.’

‘Well, I got a brother-in-law in the U.S. Air Force. And he’s a sergeant. I took a general’s family down the river once. Them folks are more or less human, George, just like us.’

‘Did you meet the general?’

‘No, but his wife, she was sweet as country pie.

Hayduke silent, smiling grimly in the dark (96).

Hayduke is a comic and disturbing figure. We laugh at his eagerness to blow things up, his exaggeration. But also, he is a product of his training, his experiences. He is a creation of the military industrial complex, and Abbey’s spokesperson for the wilderness and the wild things within it. Hayduke’s rage is tempered by the others’ more relaxed perspective and again we see Abbey through his characters describing his own anger

while tempering it with a reminder of our common humanity. Abbey is saying we are capable of excess and destruction and some really heinous acts, but we are still human and are bound together by that humanity which we forget at our peril.

For Smith, the danger is in becoming the enemy, or mistaking the apathetic for the enemy along the way. Smith cautions against becoming one of those who fail to see the value in people who are not of their tribe or in anything that does not contribute to the enrichment of your very limited sphere of influence. Smith tries to be expansive and find common ground between the wild places and those who would like a small safe sample of it. As a tour guide he is used to translating nature for tourists and so his interaction with Hayduke is as much interpreter, finding common ground between wilderness and civilization as it is facilitator of monkey wrenching. In any case, ““The war has begun”” (97). The gang has committed itself. They worry at times that people won’t understand what they are doing. They fear the reaction of those in power, but they fear losing their freedom most of all. And that is what drives them to break the machines and the law.

Bryan L. Moore discusses Abbey’s appeal to a diverse audience in his essay, “Abbey as Noble Rhetorician”:

A complex persona that refuses to embrace any official party line, Abbey has the potential to appeal to—and repulse—a wide audience... There is something for everyone in Abbey’s work—to love and to hate. The majority of Abbey’s readers (receptive or otherwise) will not, as a direct result of reading his work, be compelled to burn down billboards, pull up survey stakes, and the like (even as monkeywrenching has come to be seen by many as a viable alternative to conventional political channels). Kenneth Burke writes that rhetoric sometimes

works through persuasion “‘to attitude’ rather than to out-and-out action” (Moore 272).

Similar to Robbins, Abbey isn’t necessarily inciting people to burn down billboards or blow up dams, but he is creating an attitude that someone should. Or at least he is making influential arguments that demonstrate the importance of wilderness to human individuality and freedom. Moore adds,

His sabotage tactics notwithstanding, Abbey’s main appeal and value...is his ability to change attitudes through self-dramatization...Abbey’s rhetoric is a first-person demonstration that: (1) freedom is the most important quality for human happiness and self-awareness, and (2) the wilderness is the crucial component in one’s realization of that freedom. (272)

Quigley explains that many critics struggled with Abbey because of his tendency to contradict himself, but this was by design. *The Monkey Wrench Gang* is full of contradictions. The characters contradict themselves in both action and words to humorous affect but Quigley suggests that there was also a greater purpose in these contradictions. Tom Robbins suggests that contradictions, in some cases, express difficult ideas and human expression better than consistency. Quigley informs us that Abbey was influenced by Robinson Jeffers’s concept of “inhumanism” (Quigley 8). Confirming Diane Wakoski’s premise that “connected Abbey with Jeffers and a tradition of inhumanism, in which ambiguity and contradiction are used for specific sociopolitical reasons...it provides a critique of power that points toward sane living” (9).

A recurring contradiction in the text is the main characters’ attitudes to litter. Doc Sarvis throws his cigar butts out the window as he travels with Bonnie Abzug to burn up

or cut down “edit” (*The Monkey Wrench Gang* 235) yet another billboard that’s been polluting the skyline. Hayduke is notorious for throwing his beer cans out the window while driving his jeep and delights in urinating in public. These actions stick in the reader’s awareness and create a cognitive dissonance. The reader has come to sympathize with the Monkey Wrench Gang and feel the same outrage that they do as machinery tears up the landscape, billboards clog up the horizon and dams drown out all the quiet places a person could retreat to, and so one is shocked when they add to the litter—“the broken bottles, the rags and beer cans...all that abandoned trivia of the American road” (14) that lays so thick along the highways in this novel by tossing their beer cans and smoldering cigar butts out along the highway. The reader and some of the characters themselves are outraged by this behavior. At one point while brainstorming all the “Good, wholesome, constructive work” the gang could do including knocking down power lines in the desert and “taking the fucking goddamned bulldozers apart” Doc Sarvis adds

‘And don’t forget the billboards. And the strip mines. And the pipelines...and the coal-burning power plants....And the wildlife poisoners. And the people who throw beer cans along the highways.

‘I throw beer cans along the fucking highways,’ Hayduke said. ‘Why the fuck shouldn’t I throw fucking beer cans along the fucking highways?’

‘Now, now. Don’t be so defensive.’

‘Hell,’ Smith said, ‘I do it too. Any road I wasn’t consulted about that I don’t like, I litter. It’s my religion.’

‘Right,’ Hayduke said. ‘Litter the shit out of them’

‘Well now,’ the doctors said. ‘I hadn’t thought about that. Stockpile the stuff along the highways. Throw it out the window. Well...why not?’

‘Doc,’ said Hayduke, “it’s liberation’ (68).

This particular habit is not entirely resolved for the reader and again it invites the reader to make up his/her own mind about whether or not the Monkey Wrench Gang can be entirely trusted. It forces the reader to ask, why would these people so committed to saving the wilderness litter the highways? The reader is forced to acknowledge the point, to pay closer attention. Littering is equivalent to spitting, a show of disrespect towards a person or object. When these characters toss their garbage onto the highway they are responding to the highway as though it is an enemy, something to be debased.

At first one may believe that while they claim what they do is out of duty or religious conviction it is in fact they are acting on their own interests, (making fun of noble crusaders along the way through mimicry), and tossing beer cans out onto the highways is more convenient than letting them pile up in the car. They are motivated by self-interest rather than altruistic motives. The reader wonders, are they being ironic? Are they so upset by the road that they feel obligated to pollute it, or are they merely serving themselves? It is likely to be both, which undermines their high moral standing while reinforcing their status as outlaws. The reader is left to decide, are they hypocrites or crusaders? In light of the rest of the novel, I conclude, with relief, they are hypocrites. They have the flexibility to break their own rules as well as everyone else’s.

Beyond tossing beer cans along highways they don’t approve of, they admit they don’t really know what they’re doing, but listening to their conversation about the state of the desert as victim of urban/civil encroachment we know they’re angry:

‘Do we know what we’re doing and why?’

‘No.’

‘Do we care?’

‘We’ll work it out as we go along. Let our practice form our doctrine, thus assuring precise theoretical coherence’ (69).

Peter Quigley notes, “lack of consistency disturbs people who want a systematic approach for use in doctrinaire positions” (*Coyote in the Maze* 11). The Monkey Wrench Gang avoid doctrinaire positions, keeping themselves flexible and free of the dogmatic function that Robbins reminds us is so dangerous to the health of revolutions. S. H. VanSlette and J. Boyd remind us, “outlaws break societal norms and rules to enact change, the trickster does the same, but adds whimsy and even absurdity to point out cultural ambiguities and ambivalence to change perception and perhaps even culture” (“Law Breaking Jokers” 594). The Monkey Wrench Gang is afraid of neither whimsy nor absurdity.

We can’t take these characters too seriously since they don’t take themselves or their actions too seriously either. By being selfish these characters are immune to the claim of saviors or heroes, instead they are seen as real people, with flaws, and thereby inspire other people, with flaws, to act, as we see in the prologue, titled, prophetically, “Aftermath” in which a bridge spanning Glen Canyon and connecting Utah and Arizona is blown up at its grand opening.

Coyote and other trickster figures are many things, but they are never considered to be authority figures. They are the disruptors of authority, scorned by those in power as being silly, foolish, or insignificant, often due to their ambiguity which is taken as

inconsistency and mistaken as stupidity. The trickster's apparent harmlessness is often what allows him or her to insinuate himself into the group. As we saw in Robbins, we see again in Abbey, there is a silliness in Abbey's work that eases the sting of outrage. The anger doesn't go away, rather it is a hard fact couched in engaging humor that encourages the reader to keep reading, as opposed to throwing the book through a window, as Abbey suggests one do with some of his other tomes. His carefully banked anger and his fun loving destruction invite the reader to join him, encouraging others to join him in the joke if not necessarily the act.

As a trickster figure, Abbey is fiercely independent, he identifies himself with the space he lives in, a sparsely populated space to be sure: The trickster is ambiguous. Many trickster figures change their form to appear to be something else, Abbey was "a river rat, a learned scholar, a gun-toting curmudgeon...a committed ecologist" (*Monkey Wrench Gang* xv), while no one is ever sure if the trickster has helped or hurt them, a bit of both in most cases, the environmentalists disliked him, the National Rifle Association claimed him as one of their own and he alternately claimed to be both conservative and liberal. Abbey "liked to twist the minds of those tribes who tried to claim him as one of their own" (Rothenberg 79).

Trickster figures are ambiguous as a result of their compulsion to be present in the moment and because they are constantly seeking to satisfy their appetite. Tricksters are not content to sit idly, they are always scheming and striving for more than they have or different than what is. Abbey's character Seldom Seen Smith had three wives, raised watermelons and did work as a river guide. Abbey himself alternated between Hoboken, New Jersey and the desert Southwest and was divorced five times. Abbey, as seen

through his characters and the plots of his novels, and his essays bears a striking resemblance to his characters, constantly chasing something. According to Quigley, Abbey was struggling because he felt people should. “Serenity is for the gods”, one of Abbey’s characters opines in his novel, *The Brave Cowboy*. For Abbey, life is a game and a good life, like a good game, requires dynamic tension. Dynamic tension is the catalyst for humor and other evolutionary effects.

Reinforcing his outlaw status, which I’ve suggested before is a tent under which one may find a trickster, David Rothenberg argues Abbey is a rogue philosopher; one who is more interested in the questions than the answers. He also reinforces the notion that Abbey cared more about dynamic tension than safety. He reminds us that Abbey studied Philosophy in graduate school at the University of New Mexico and could have spent a life in academia but chose not to. Rothenberg admires Abbey for that, “Abbey is an idol to many of us reluctant academics because he did it. He turned away from the institutions that spawned him. When they invited him to their inner sanctum, he walked” (*Coyote in the Maze*, 75). Rothenberg is explaining that Abbey resisted every kind of label. This resistance, according to Rothenberg, is born out of Abbey’s love for questions over answers. Abbey had chosen the thrill of ambiguity over the sedentary boredom of certainty. Like the trickster, Abbey rejects the safe, civilized path in favor of the perilous, mysterious one.

Abbey, like many tricksters, can be misunderstood. Some critics perceive him as a destructive force aimed at a civilization that sees itself in competition with nature, while some readers, according to Brinkley, saw his work as “an irresponsible blueprint for terrorism” (*Monkeywrench Gang*, Introduction xxi) but one may easily miss the point

that Abbey is trying to make. Abbey, seeing himself as a part of nature, is fighting back against the powerful interests that threaten him. He attacks big business and the military industrial complex but he *never* attacks people. In this case Abbey reflects that Western hero from the 60s and 70s. Like those Western heroes he wants to be left alone, but outside forces—in this case “progress” comes in and forces him to react.

Abbey needs to experience the wild places as much as he needs civilization. Abbey’s characters in *The Monkey Wrench Gang* feel a moral imperative to attack any and all encroachments of industry into nature. Direct parallels are drawn between the kinds of destruction found in *The Monkeywrench Gang* and the philosophical positions Abbey takes in *Desert Solitaire*. Abbey justifies the actions of his fictional characters through his essays in *Desert Solitaire*, particularly his essay titled “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and National Parks” in which he draws a contrast between the prevailing attitude towards nature, which believes “all forms of construction and development are intrinsic goods” and his position which is “wilderness is a necessary part of civilization and ...it is the primary responsibility ...to preserve...what little still remains” (58). So when his characters conspire to blow up a bridge, incapacitate a coal fired power plant, or fantasize about wiping out Glen Canyon dam, they feel they are preserving life, not destroying it. By saving the wilderness, by wiping out the corrupting influences of civilization, they are maintaining the health of that civilization.

Abbey likes to present himself as a misanthropic curmudgeon, and his critics are eager to let him because it saves the critics from having to face what he is truly trying to say, allowing them to ignore him, while at the same time appealing to those disenfranchised romantics who are fed up with the status quo. Those in power can look

at Abbey as a cranky old man spouting silly anti-social non-sense that can't be taken seriously. He can be written off as a sexist and/or a bigot. One can see elements of both in his work. Those people who are angry too will find a kindred spirit and discover a new way of seeing nature and society's relationship to it. Abbey is avoiding a direct confrontation with the dominant paradigm of America. To directly confront the military industrial complex on its own terms would be as ridiculous as the Monkeywrench gang declaring open war against the United States. Abbey is acutely aware that his view is in the minority. His experience as a park ranger in the desert Southwest reinforced both his insistence on the necessity of preserving nature for the sake of human kind and his awareness of the powers intent on commodifying it, replacing wilderness with a kind of industrialized theme park with a thin veneer of natural beauty. Direct confrontation with these powers would be disastrously ineffective because the military industrial complex of post-World War II America was in charge of describing the world. At this time there were three television networks, each catering to a wide audience. There was not a great deal of space to air dissent.

Abbey is pushing against a kind of social conditioning that has favored development over preservation. Abbey is in direct contradiction with the American ideal of progress. America, land of infinite, inexhaustible resources, is meant to be developed and profited from. Progress means access through development and the acquisition of wealth. For many Americans, the word progress signifies something good. It means moving forward; it suggests improvement. The danger lies in applying progress, or improvement, to nature. Nature cannot be improved; it can only be destroyed. Abbey is

faced with the monumental task of disrupting the dogmatic stain that nature can be improved and that progress can be applied to wilderness.

Restoring balance and saving the world is not the primary goal of the enlightened trickster figure, it is a side line, and sometimes merely an accident. Abbey quips in *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness* “saving the world was only a hobby”. He is joking. But even in jest, he makes an important point and echoes Robbins: the world is meant to be *lived in*. One must maintain balance, even when saving the world. Abbey is not a full time crusader. He does not lose himself in his cause. He is an advocate of nature and he feels it is vital to our humanity to save it, but he does not allow his passion to drown out his perspective. He maintains his identity as a part of nature and subject to it. He honors his natural imperative to live and allow others to live as well. The two most important rules of the Monkeywrench gang are first, no one gets hurt. Second, no one gets caught. Unlike heroic last stands and other sorts of senseless martyrdom, Abbey suggests survival is the greatest good. Getting killed or getting caught would violate nature’s imperative to live. Getting caught would mean being placed in captivity, separated from nature, which is also a kind of death, though for Hayduke, death is preferable, “They’ll never put me in one of their jails. I’m not the type, Doc. I’ll die first” (*Monkeywrench Gang* 112).

Preserving nature is important, but people are a part of nature and so Abbey is careful to respect all—careful not to separate the two--unlike his adversaries that put people ahead of nature, or some other kinds of misanthrope that put nature over people. (I assume Abbey was being ironic when he says in *Desert Solitaire* “I’m a humanist; I’d rather kill a *man* than a snake” [20])-- Abbey says we must have both. James McClintock in his essay “Edward Abbey’s ‘Antidotes to Despair’” points out that for Abbey “violence

is normative if not always ideal” (*Critique*, U of Michigan P, Fall 1989 42) and though one will find violence in Abbey’s work, his protagonists are careful to make sure that no people get hurt:

‘No guns.’

‘If them search and Rescue fuckers start shooting at me I’m gonna shoot back.’

‘No, George, we can’t do that. You know the rule’ (*The Monkeywrench Gang* 135).

but machines are fair game, particularly bulldozers, blazers and drilling rigs. The antagonists are all violently brutal, as is their equipment, but still, Abbey the person, maintains a reverence for people, albeit a qualified one as Rothman points out in his essay in *Coyote in the Maze* “ ‘...how ...could I be against humanity, without being against myself, whom I love—though not very much...how could I be against civilization when all which I most defend and venerate—including the love of wilderness—is comprehended in the term” (62). Abbey further explains, “wilderness compliments and completes civilization” (*Coyote in the Maze* 56) and in “Down the River” Abbey describes his separation from humanity while river rafting with a friend of his and this separation restores his love for humanity, “We shall not see another of the tool making breed for a long time and we could not care less. Misanthropy? no, this is not at all what I mean. In these hours and days of dual solitude on the river we hope to discover something quite different, to renew our affection for ourselves and the human kind in general by a temporary, legal separation from the mass” (*Desert Solitaire* 192).

Abbey separates himself from humanity but knows he cannot reject humanity. His separation restores his love for humanity. Abbey understands we must have both

terms, civilization without wilderness is self negating; just as wilderness without civilization leaves no one to appreciate its wonder.

Abbey argued for wilderness. Jim Stiles, in an article he wrote for the Salt Lake City Tribune, notes Abbey believed that wilderness would protect people from the worst aspects of civilization: “If America could be, once again, a nation of self-reliant farmers, craftsmen, hunters, ranchers and artists, then the rich would have little power to dominate others. Neither to serve nor to rule. That was the American Dream.’

(<http://www.sltrib.com>/Accessed 3/11/2013“Ed Abbey in the 21st century” Jim Stiles First Published Mar 09 2013 01:01 am •Last Updated Mar 09 2013 01:01 am). Abbey feared we had lost our self-reliance, but he believed we could find it again in the wilderness. He is looking for an enlightened few to slow the tide of technocracy that was strangling the world he loved.

In trying to awaken a frustrated yet apathetic people, Abbey imagined a new kind of sport, Monkey Wrenching. A kind of infinite game, to borrow Meeker's terms, that pits the small, weak, yet virtually invisible citizen against the leviathan military industrial complex. Abbey is eloquent in his illustration of the asymmetrical relationship between the forces for “progress” and development and the forces of preservation of the earth. Abbey extends the opportunity to save civilization through monkeywrenching. He doesn't order people to do it, merely explains why people should, and how.

Robbins and Abbey use dialogue to establish their arguments. For the important ideas Abbey, like Robbins, prefers to show us the argument rather than tell us what to think. David Rothenberg in his essay “Who is the Lone Ranger: Edward Abbey as Philosopher” celebrates Abbey's use of dialogue to pose philosophical problems. Stating

that since the philosophical dialogue has been adopted by literature it has invigorated the tradition in ways that philosophy hadn't, "The dance of the philosophical dialogue is back, thousands of years after Plato...Literature, of course, has taken over" (Rothenberg, *Coyote in the Maze* 78). Literature has long been a vehicle for new ideas. Abbey's dialogue highlights a key message in his work, the idea that small anonymous and indirect harassment can work against a highly organized virtually omnipotent range of forces. Again, Abbey is resisting the position of authority by offering his view in the form of a dialogue instead of dictum. His incongruity is humorous, and therefore his message is more powerful because it is associated with the pleasure of laughter. Abbey is finding a way to inform his audience the way a trickster would: exposing the opposing positions and letting the audience determine the lesson it is meant to take from the story. Abbey's characters admit they don't always know the right thing to do, morally or operationally.

'George, we don't know exactly what we're doing. If constructive vandalism turns destructive, what then? Perhaps we'll be doing more harm than good. There are some who say if you attack the system you only make it stronger.'

'Yeah—and if you don't attack it, it strip-mines the mountains, dams all the rivers, paves over the desert and puts you in jail anyway' (112).

This example highlights one of the major questions of resistance, does it make things better, or worse? And Abbey answers that it is already worse. Trickster like, he finds a third term to disrupt the dominant paradigm of either this or that.

In a later scene Smith and Hayduke are fleeing a recent scene of criminal destruction they have perpetrated when Hayduke gets distracted by some drilling rigs:

“‘The bastards are everywhere,” Hayduke grumbled. ‘Let’s go get those rigs.’

‘There’s men out there a-workin’. Out there in the cold at four in the morning slaving away to provide us with oil and gas for this here truck so we can help sabotage the world planetary maggot-machine. Show a little gratitude’” (150-51). Here, Abbey employs an ironic voice in Smith while highlighting the grand predicament. Technology, including fossil fuels, are essential tools of human civilization, yet the use of technology and the consumption of those fuels is destroying the planet. He doesn’t give an answer to the question, what should be done, he leaves that up to the reader, who must interpret trickster’s antics as best he/she can and find the answer themselves.

Abbey denies his novel is anything but a bit of humorous fiction, yet the message is clear to those who wish to see one that people must take action to defend themselves against environmental devastation perpetuated by human agents. And it won’t be easy, or will it?

‘But they have everything. They have the organizations and the control and the communications and the army and the police and the secret police. They have the big machines. They have the law and drugs and jails and courts and judges and prisons. They are so huge. We are so small.’

‘Dinosaurs. Cast-iron dinosaurs. They ain’t got a fucking chance against us.’

‘Four of us. Four million of them, counting the Air Force. That’s a contest?’ (182)

The dialogue reveals trickster’s tendency to invert negative perception and inspire action instead of apathy. The extras in Abbey’s novel, all those people in their cars, are blind or

indifferent to the suffering of the environment or the risks they pose to themselves and each other in their machines. Abbey's gang however, is very aware of the threat they themselves pose to the machines around them as well as the threat that other people pose toward the gang and the environment and other people. He shows his audience the littered highways, the smog, and the cancers and other diseases festering in the desert Southwest, how big business is destroying lives, and he shows his angry reaction to it through the lens of his Monkeywrench gang, and suggests that the gang facilitates the revenge of the earth against the machines, "all those little particles of sand, corrosive as powdered emery, began to wreak earth's vengeance on the cylinder walls of the despoilers of the desert" (94). He also shows the beauty of the desert, and what steps to take to slow down the forces that are destroying it. Burning down billboards is one way.

Abbey's resistance is in a humorous spirit. It is a kind of mockery of power. It is the flea defying the giant, it is asymmetrical harassment. The incongruity of the action is comical in Freudian terms and inspiring in humanistic terms. First, one is surprised that a small weak force can affect such a large, powerful one. The asymmetry is a surprise creating a burst of laughter; it is completely unexpected. The expectation is that the industrial might would not notice a small inconsequential act such as pulling up a survey stake, and yet, done enough, the industrial goliath will feel the small stings and eventually have to change its course, or find some new way forward. Beyond the incongruous display of a megalithic phenomenon prodded by a microcosmic enterprise there is the life affirming inspiration that one person can in fact facilitate change. Abbey, in his novel, renews his audience's faith in the power of the individual while offering them a new way to exercise individual agency in an increasingly bureaucratic world.

Abbey's efforts are empirical/practical/physical, unlike Robbins who felt that change came from the attitude of the individual and the development of one's sense of independence.

“Abbey was both a moralist and a thorough-going materialist....Abbey always, and emphatically, emplaced the human world within the natural one—where, he insisted, it belongs” (Twining, *Coyote in the Maze* 25). Both Robbins and Abbey saw the world as real and capable of being respected for itself as well as revered. Robbins took this idea to the point of comedy and well past the bounds of realist fiction in his novel *Skinny Legs and All*, and hints at this idea in *Still Life with Woodpecker* but Robbins was building upon a reverence for objects and the physical world—including nature—that many people did not have before. Robbins humorously created in his audience an appreciation of the world by looking at objects as ends in themselves. What may have inspired Robbins to take this leap was Abbey's insistence on the reality of the world and the things within it.

It is worth emphasizing the difference between being subject to one's environment and being part of one's environment. Nature, instead of being the source of all, has become the “other”. That which was once seen as provider/nurturer has become malevolent, dangerous, and capricious, all of which contributes to an overwhelming sense of fear and the drive to improve it, tame it, make it predictable and safe.

In light of all the dangerous things found in nature it is particularly interesting that Abbey chooses the desert to take his stand against progress. When one tries to sell nature, one speaks of feminine largesse: the bountiful sea, the rich forests, the fertile plains. It's usually sold as a commodity. No one tries to sell nature by describing

desolation, at least, no one until Abbey. Before Abbey, only prophets went into the desert and what they were selling when they returned had nothing to do with real estate or protecting the earth. They went into the desert to lose their culture. In the Exodus narrative, Moses and his people wandered in the desert for forty years. Those who came to the Promised Land were but a small remnant of those who'd fled Egypt and they had been in the desert for at least a generation, long enough for those who remembered the trappings of their previous culture to have perished. Notably, no one stays in the desert. Everyone comes out, even Abbey. Tricksters, like prophets, need people and the trappings of civilization, even though they are outsiders they are still part of the circle. Unlike prophets, however, tricksters don't offer solutions. They offer more questions which allows the opportunity, not the guarantee, to grow. Quigley explains "Abbey's willful embrace of the desert, his insistence on this choice with such force and defiance, lures us into believing that we are being led to answers. But neither Abbey nor the desert can give us the answers we seek. We may, however, under their influence become stronger, more flexible, more joyous, less arrogant" (*Coyote in the Maze* 3). Tricksters make us question authority and constantly reevaluate the assumptions underlying the rules we make.

Today, countries measure themselves according to whether or not they are "developed" and the size of their Gross National Product. A symptom of what Conroy and Davis described as stemming from "an overdependence upon an *arithmetic calculus* as the primary mythic, and therefore heuristic, device of our culture" (*Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2002, 256). Conroy and Davis are critiquing

Western cultures devotion to quantifying all human experience the “modern obsession with *numerical* descriptions of who we are and what constitutes human purpose” (255).

In our “arithmetic calculus” Developed countries are favored over underdeveloped countries. We describe underdeveloped countries as dark, mysterious, and with that there is a connotation of evil, and a strong sense of fear. Our idea of progress stems from our fear of nature. Fear is the primary weapon of “progress”. The imperial imperative was to bring “light” to the “darkness” and included development and exploitation of natural resources. We created a loose union between industry and the military to further develop the dark places in the world. Once a tool, it has come to dominate every facet of society from agriculture to systems of justice.

Abbey is not the first to recognize the antagonistic view people have of nature, but he should be given credit for pushing against the notion that we need to be protected from it. Abbey argues that the only way to really experience nature is to go out into it, “you’ve got to get out of your goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on your hands and knees over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus” and “When traces of blood begin to mark your back trail, you’ll see something, maybe” (*Desert Solitaire* xii).

Abbey is tormented by this separation of man from nature. Critic Donna Mendelson, in her essay “Figuring the Environment as Enemy” *ETC* Spring 2001, states that humans describe nature either as an enemy or a potential victim, something waiting to be plundered, tamed, or conquered. She explains that these metaphors “reflect our separation from nature” (40); in fact, even reinforce this separation and ultimately can, citing Jack Turner, injure the land (38).

Conroy and Davis suggest that by turning all of human experience into a numbers game we have lost touch with our traditions, our stories, our history. In the world of numbers, myth can't fit. Yet myth, history, and tradition are what connect our future to our past, they provide continuity and thereby some comfort. The "*arithmetic calculus*" (256) creates a breach with our past and with nature. Outlaws and tricksters are social misfits that go out into nature and are not factored into the calculations. They are not counted in the census.

This separation of nature from polite society or society's abandonment of mythic tricksters in favor of mathematicians may explain why social misfits, especially outlaws and tricksters, are so fond of nature. They appeal to a time before living was reduced to a cold calculation; they celebrate the space between axioms. In stories it is characters who have transgressed social norms that seem to have a stronger connection to the land. Robbins' character Bernard Mickey Wrangle was the stereotypical outlaw living behind a waterfall. Abbey himself was a park ranger who lived six months out of the year twenty miles from any other human settlement. His characters are competent in nature and use this competence as an advantage against the civilized, military-industrial complex. One can suggest that by breaking the rules of society one becomes more aware of one's place in nature; the artificial insulation has been taken away and one finds comfort in the wild places. In nature there is no authoritative (artificial?) imposition. The individual in nature is free to make his or her own choices. These are people who are self-reliant, confident, and autonomous; or weak, subjugated, social outcasts seeking relief from a hostile environment and with no one to rely on they either become self-reliant or die. They may have elements of both. Those who leave society to come to nature eschew

human authority and the trappings of authority, often dropping their traditional religious practices as well—or form new ones.

Abbey believed that having a relationship with nature fortified one in the struggle for a happy, independent life. In *Desert Solitaire* he explains that it is not people that he fears entering the national parks, it is their machines. He was taking up the issue of access in his chapter “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks and those people “who virtually identify quantity with quality and therefore assume that the greater the quantity of traffic, the higher the value received” (59). This was the justification for building more roads, offering more “access” to the park. This is the argument that transformed Abbey’s paradise into a paved, polluted trailer park. This is where Hayduke gets his rage from as he sees the tourist traffic invading his home:

‘Even now in May, the tourist traffic seemed heavy: a steady stream of steel, glass, plastic and aluminum issued from the junction, most of it turning south toward Flagstaff but some turning the other way, north to Utah and Colorado.... My way, he thought, they’re going my way; they can’t do that. Gotta remove that bridge. Soon. Them bridges. Soon. All of them. Soon. They’re driving their tin cars into the holy land. They can’t do that; it ain’t legal. There’s a law against it. A higher law” (*Monkey Wrench Gang* 27).

Hayduke dramatizes for Abbey the problem described in *Desert Solitaire*, people’s presence will disrupt the rough beauty of the desert. Hayduke fears what people are bringing into the desert, the “steel, glass, plastic and aluminum”, the technology, which is part of the infectious technocracy that will lay the desert to waste and call it “improvement”. They will change it, try and make it safe. Hayduke knows the desert

and has the knowledge and the tools to survive in it without destroying its wild appeal. He fears people will wreck it, people want to see wilderness, but they also want to be safe, and comfortable. To be safe, to be comfortable people will bring man made things and carve comfort stations out of the wilderness where technology and its waste will grow and fester on the land.

Abbey is also trying to disrupt the notion that people must be kept safe; “freedom, not safety, is the highest public good” (*Monkey Wrench Gang* 28). Nature is not safe, and people's commitment to safety has insulated them from nature which keeps them from being able to appreciate nature and ultimately leads to further destruction of the environment. In Meeker's terms, by insulating oneself against nature humans believe themselves to be transcending nature and this courts tragedy, or the tragic idealism. The problem arises from a “belief in human superiority over nature” (Meeker 28).

Meeker explains that ancient Greek and Hebrew cultures contributed to the idea of man's “superiority over nature and ...the existence of an absolute moral law” (Meeker 28). Everyone is convinced that he or she is a “tragic hero...an isolated man [or woman]” who “acts upon the assumption that his personal fate is a matter of great consequence to the world in general” (Meeker 28). Every life is precious and must be respected, which leads one to conclude that human expression must be allowed to flourish, people must be allowed to develop and grow, and this is an important aspect of Meeker's “play ethic” which sees evolution as nature's version of “infinite play” where diversity and interaction are ends unto themselves. Nature is not pursuing some finite goal. It is not bent on creating one perfect organism to the exclusion of all others, and this is where humans turn away from Meeker's ideal of evolution. Nature seeks to

nourish as many organisms as possible with no one organism able to dominate the other. Humans took the idea of the precious individual and created the idea that humans are not just each and individually special, but the *most* special, with their own personal god that cares about them above every other living thing. Humans, individually, are worthy creatures, but so are plankton, rocks, rivers and viruses according to nature.

Thomas Jefferson used this idea of natural man as moral justification to declare the American colonies independent from England in the Declaration of Independence, “all men are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights...” including the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The dominant perception became humans are a special kind of animal far superior to the other beings in nature and no other human can take that power away because it was given by the Creator. It was read as a justification of individual rights based on a transcendent moral law. As rule based creatures, humans have a natural inclination to bow to rule makers (authority). Yet as curious, playful creatures, humans have a difficult time bowing to human authority for very long. Jefferson may have conceived of a natural creative power, or a transcendent supernatural creator, but humans, independent of what may be absolutely true, created their gods, but the trickster was always part of the human animal.

People feel safer in predictable environments. Instead of creating ways to adapt to the natural environment, the tragic figure adapts his/her environment to herself. Nature becomes abstracted, a spectacle, an amusement. It is something that is pretty to look at but not part of our lives. We create parks, artificial versions of nature, or we preserve small pieces of the wilderness, like a trophy, a small representative piece to

remind us of our conquest and reemphasize our superiority. Our tragic perception of ourselves has created an antagonistic relationship with nature.

Abbey rejects the insulated American tourist, the myopic scrabbling middle class and the military industrial complex and its message that nature is to be harvested and converted into profits as a means to realizing “progress”. In his introduction to *Desert Solitaire* Abbey explains his connection to and his affinity for the desert Southwest, the Arches National Monument in particular where he spent two seasons in a row as a park ranger. There are strong parallels found in the attitudes and ideas expressed in *Desert Solitaire* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. In both books he invokes the beauty of the desert in contrast to the ugly detritus of civilization. In both his fiction and non-fiction he reveals his antagonism of popular notions of progress and the institution of tourism that coddles the tourist at the expense of the resource. He explains “I would have returned the third year too and each year thereafter but unfortunately for me the Arches, a primitive place when I first went there, was developed and improved so well that I had to leave” (*Desert Solitaire ix*).

Abbey is not uncomfortable acknowledging contradictions. His idealism is tempered by practicality, making him a humorous figure in the Meeker sense of knowing his limitations and, unlike the tragic figure, not taking himself too seriously.

Beyond his comic technique, Abbey offers us a perspective that is contrary to expectations. Many people would cheer to hear that national parks and other wilderness have been made more accessible to the general public. By making nature accessible more people are able to enjoy it and it will foster a deeper appreciation of wilderness. Abbey's critics would add that he is elitist in his determination to keep people out of the

wilderness and he acknowledges that critique. However, they have Abbey wrong. It is not that he wants people to avoid going out into the wilderness, it's that he wants to keep developers out of the wilderness. People's ideas of comfort, their insistence on bending nature to suit their needs instead of bending themselves to nature is destroying the natural habitat, ultimately destroying Abbey's home. He explains his position in *Desert Solitaire*. He is not against people enjoying nature, he feels that it's important in fact. What Abbey is against is what he calls "industrial tourism" which feeds the military industrial complex while choking the life out of the National Parks.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Mark Siegel explains “Works of literature are always affected by the times and places in which they are written. Western American literature has often chronicled the conflicts that occurred on our frontier between the free-spirited, nature-oriented individual and the restrictions and requirements of advancing civilization” (*Western Writers Series No. 42: Tom Robbins*, Mark Siegel 5). Siegel was referring to the works of Tom Robbins in particular though his argument obviously sums up Abbey’s conflict as well. It is an old conflict, and one that we expect to end tragically. The freedom loving individual will be swallowed by the tide of civilization. For those who believe in last stands this tragedy has a cathartic appeal. Abbey and Robbins resist that conclusion, however. Both authors wrote their most popular books within “the last quarter of the twentieth century” and both saw that America was in crisis. Both offered a way forward into the twenty-first century that gave the individual agency and inspired a reverence for the natural world. Both found a way to offer hope to the freedom loving individual and avoid the tragic last stand, building communities along the way. These two authors offered a chance at transformation without social coercion. They used humor instead of threats. They offered a choice instead of making demands.

Robbins gave people the moon. He reminded them that romance is not dead, nor should it be dismissed as whimsy. Whimsy is an essential element of healthy living. He

reminded people that thinking for oneself, living for oneself is essential to a better society. And play is the key to happiness. Robbins could not have made this point without a heavy dose of humor. Without humor Robbins' message would sound egotistical, childish, selfish and anti-social. Robbins transforms whimsy and childishness from negative to positive terms. He breathes delight back into the human condition.

The way that Robbins tells the story, the style in which he writes performs his message; it is done with a disregard for standard metaphors with an emphasis on a delight of the senses rather than merely advancing the action. Seigel explains "his philosophy seeks validation not in abstract speculation but in immediate experience" (16). Robbins's style of writing startles the reader into whimsy, and delight in mundane things, "The goal of Robbins's art is to alert us to the sacred, to get us to see things in a new, intense way—to get us to let go of our own limited perspectives by exciting us into a new awareness of the world" (Siegel 34). Siegel compares Robbins work to Zen doctrine in the way it shocks the reader out of his/her expectations, and patterns of thought. The receptive reader will be delighted by the experience and keep reading to experience more. The non-receptive reader will find his style distracting and become frustrated by the deviation from plot. Some will become impatient with Robbins' apparent reluctance to complete the action.

Robbins seduces the reader and through that seduction imparts a bit of advice, some will pick up that advice; others will disregard it. Some will lose patience with Robbins's games and stop reading altogether. I don't think he minds. He is not a crusader, and not a hero, he is a trickster. He delights himself and enjoys sharing the joke, but he is not trying to impose his ideas on the world, only offer the world an

alternative view, an invitation to enjoy the world. He tries to remind us that “art and life are both games to which we make up many of the rules”(37), in which case one should play fully conscious of one’s options.

Abbey the trickster plays another kind of game. His rules are a little more concrete, better defined, than Robbins’s but he too is an individualist trying to offer a bit of advice to a suffering world. He struggled mightily to preserve the wild places in himself and in the world, and make sure that everyone had a bit of wilderness to retreat to, away from social control. Abbey felt that without wilderness there could be no civilization, “wilderness compliments and completes civilization” (*Coyote in the Maze*, Rothman 56). Abbey was trying to save civilization by preserving the wild places. He understood that progress, growth for its own sake, was a cancer that gone unchecked would kill us and he resisted the best way he knew how.

Abbey resisted the cancerous march of progress but eschewed violence, though those whom he inspired did not necessarily do the same, and some of their actions led to people being maimed or killed. Abbey understood, and tried to convey in his novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang* that violence would only serve the oppressors, it would justify violence by those in power. The only way to resist the power was through indirect, decentralized, non-violent harassment, and more importantly, changing the way people perceive progress and industry. Paradoxically Abbey, though capable of misanthropy, was also a lover of humanity “...how ...could I be against humanity, without being against myself, whom I love—though not very much...how could I be against civilization when all which I most defend and venerate—including the love of wilderness—is comprehended in the term” (Rothman 62).

Critics are still talking about Edward Abbey. They are talking more about him now than when he was alive. Some like Jim Stiles writing for the Salt Lake tribune in March of 2013 lament what has become of Abbey's message. Suggesting his message of resistance has been appropriated by those motivated by profit.

In 2013, Abbey would not recognize the wilderness he sought to protect.

Environmentalists, once dedicated to saving the wilderness that Abbey envisioned, now look at wild lands as a marketable commodity and a way to generate revenue for their own "non-profit" organizations. The economic value of wilderness trumps everything else. They've bastardized a favorite Abbey line: "The idea of wilderness needs no defense; it needs more defenders," and made it a Chamber of Commerce promo, a boost for the profitability of wilderness, and increasing the chance, they believe, of passing wilderness legislation. Never mind the collateral damage. ("Ed Abbey in the 21st century").

Stiles is not optimistic about Abbey's message or the fate of Abbey's wilderness. He sees industry encroaching on Abbey's wilderness in the form of GPS tracking devices and "back country gourmets". He is abhorred by the idea of Facebook in the wilderness. He sees it as a kind of pollution, drowning out the quiet peace that wilderness has to offer.

I am a bit more optimistic. Stiles may be forgetting Doc Sarvis enjoying ice in his whiskey, and the steaks big as a frying pan in *The Monkeywrench Gang*. There may be a few more people in the wilderness, it may be harder to fall off the edge of the earth, but one can, if they choose, still disappear for a while. And though I am fearful of the commodification of nature, it is a step away from complete obliteration. It's a step toward appreciation, and it is a compromise that short sighted interests can live with,

people are still profiting from these spaces, but those profits are also preserving those spaces. It is far from an ideal situation, but it is better than a direct confrontation that will only end in wilderness's complete destruction. Again, Abbey wasn't afraid of people in his wilderness, it was the machines and the infrastructure they brought with them that made him uncomfortable.

One can avoid the tragic conclusion. Abbey is still being talked about, directly and indirectly, his message, couched in humor full of contradiction and self mockery, resigned to small, inconsequential victories, is still being repeated, is still perpetuating. Abbey's humor helps us to resist the despair and mediate the anger that we feel when public policy and industrial might take away a part of our home. We continue to resist, angry but not despairing, we laugh at our oppressors and we laugh at ourselves and find in that laughter a way to keep struggling against impossible odds.

Robbins's message too can be felt, albeit indirectly. Robbins argued that style, the way one did things, was as important, perhaps more important than what one did.

Robbins convinced us to pay attention to the world around us. He convinced us that rules are really just suggestions and style is more important than truth, or style is closer to truth in a dynamic, fluid universe than some specific singular answer.

Both these authors are tricksters, manipulating our perception and offering an alternative to the ways we have been living. Neither Abbey nor Robbins behaved as an authority figure and yet we wrestle with their suggestions and find ways to apply them to our own lives, which makes our lives a little bit better. They have helped us to adapt. They were not coercive; they were funny. It is a pleasure to see the world as they see it, the surprise of a new view of the world and its rules (or lack of rules) inspires us to live

better, to be more playful, a little bit happier. These two authors, through humor, have helped their society to evolve. They have made the world slightly better by offering their audiences the agency to live better without sacrificing the natural world to do it. They are modern tricksters whose humor has helped their society adapt to and influence the forces driving us all.

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