

From Polygamy to Pioneers: Ambivalence in 20th-Century Mormon Literature
Dayna Patterson, Stephen F. Austin State University

One may have heard of the popular Sci Fi writer, Orson Scott Card, and the *Ender's Game* series. Only a few years ago, Jared Hesse's film *Napoleon Dynamite* became a raging success among teens. If one has managed to avoid any contact with the *Twilight* series by Stephenie Meyer, then one has probably been on another planet. Something one may not know is that all three of these artists have Mormon roots.

Some brief background information about Mormons may be helpful here. "Mormon" is the term used to describe members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. There is a difference between identifying oneself as a Mormon and actually being an active member of the Church. An individual may rarely attend church and still consider herself a Mormon through cultural affiliation¹. Mormon literature, by extension, includes not only works by Mormon writers--practicing or not--, but works about Mormons or with Mormon themes.

Mormonism was established in upper state New York in 1830. Early Mormons were both abolitionist and polygamous, a controversy-sparking combo. Because of political and ideological differences, religious converts moved from state to state. Mormons were the first Americans to colonize the Indian Territory that, decades later, would be named Utah after the Ute Indians who occupied part of the land. By the time Brigham Young died in 1877, more than 350 colonies had been established ranging from as far north as present day Alberta, Canada,² to as far south as modern northern Mexico³ (*Our Heritage* 88). Currently, there are more Mormons living outside of the United States than inside, making the membership increasingly worldwide, and its members a growing presence in literary endeavors.

Many Utah writers in particular have been unable to avoid coming to terms with the legacy of early Mormon settlers, which have had, and continues to have, an enormous influence on the spiritual, social, psychological, political, and geographical aspects of the state. Whether the writers are a newcomer, a Mormon – by culture or creed or both – or an anti-Mormon, many of these writers who are sensitive to their surroundings eventually grapple with the interesting and sometimes perplexing heritage left by Mormon pioneers.

Often the writing of many Utahns reflects an attitude of ambivalence toward the Mormon pioneer heritage. These writers both praise and lambaste, painting early and modern Mormons as heroes and/or villains, or a little of both. Ambivalence, in general, is an important theme in Southwestern American literature. In a lecture, Dr. Mark Busby, Director of Southwest Studies at Texas State University-San Marcos, noted that ambivalence, among other themes such as primitivism, racism, and sexism, is a major theme in Southwestern literature. It involves perceiving a double or conflicting value in a specific entity, such as a desert landscape that on the one hand provides solitude and on the other threatens existence. Utah writers often approach the subject of Mormon pioneers and their legacy with this double-sided view, which enriches and

¹ Sometimes referred to as Jack Mormons.

² Within the current LDS community, the province of Alberta, Canada, is often referred to as the "Utah of Canada."

³ Some of these colonies still exist today, including Colonia Juárez and Colonia Dublán.

adds to the diversity of American literature as a whole. I will briefly draw on examples from a handful of these writers: Wallace Stegner, Terry Tempest Williams, and finally Ken Brewer, all of whom write about Mormon pioneers and their modern descendants with a measure of ambivalence.⁴

Wallace Stegner: A Gentile among Saints

When asked where he was from, Stegner might very well have said, "Salt Lake City," although the Iowa-born Pulitzer Prize winner lived in dozens of cities throughout the United States and Canada, both as a boy and as an adult.⁵ In an essay entitled "At Home in the Fields of the Lord," he describes his relative rootlessness and later realization that Salt Lake City constitutes a hometown for him because of the fifteen years of experience he gained there as an adolescent and an adult. In writing about Salt Lake City, Stegner conveys the ambivalence of his sentiments towards a place where he would always partly feel like an outsider:

A Gentile in the New Jerusalem: certainly I was. Salt Lake City is a divided concept, a complex idea. To the devout it is more than a place; it is a way of life, a corner of the materially realizable heaven; its soil is held together by the roots of the family and the cornerstones of the temple. In this sense Salt Lake City is forever foreign to me, as to any non-Mormon. But in spite of being a Gentile I discover that much of my youth is there, and a surprising lot of my heart. Having blown tumbleweed-fashion around the continent so that I am forced to *select* a hometown, I find myself selecting the City of the Saints, and for what seems to me cause. (Lyon and Williams 230)

As a non-Mormon or "Gentile," Stegner feels both connected to and forever separated from Salt Lake City and the complex ideology that informs it. The ambivalence of Stegner's feelings for his hometown carries to his writing about Mormon pioneers and the aftermath of their settlement. Stegner both criticizes and admires aspects of Mormon history and culture.

In Stegner's first novel, *Remembering Laughter*, the characters play out a sort of parody of Mormon polygamous life. Alec and Margaret Stuart, a young, childless married couple, live in rural Iowa. Margaret's sister, Elspeth MacLeod, travels from her native Scotland to live with the Stuarts. Alec and Elspeth calamitously fall in love, attempting to hide their sexual encounters from Elspeth's sister. Eventually, Elspeth becomes pregnant and they are unable to hide their love affair any longer. Because of their poverty and relative isolation from family and friends, Elspeth has no way to escape. She gives birth to Malcolm, and the four of them continue to live together in silent, bitter tension.

The family's awkward situation allows Stegner to critique polygamy. Early in the text, Elspeth observes the chickens while out for a walk:

Inside the pen the aimless search for bugs and grain was broken suddenly by the amorous rush of a rooster. Hens scattered and flew. The selected victim ducked and scuttled, but at last submitted meekly to her lover, enduring him with a placidity that was almost

⁴ This list could be much longer (e.g. Zane Grey, Edward Abbey, May Swenson, Leslie Norris, Brewster Ghiselin, Lance Larsen, Susan Elizabeth Howe, Carol Lynn Pearson, Shannon Hale, etc.)

⁵ Stegner (1909-1993) won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1972 for his novel *Angle of Repose*.

insulting. Although the rooster pranced a little higher and more pompously for a few minutes, the hen apparently thought no more of it than she did of pecking up a worm.

Elspeth, fresh, high-colored, stood watching, and when it was over she hissed through the wire at the degraded hen.

"You're a disgrace to your sex, you vixen. You've laid too many eggs. Let that pompous dandy treat you so! S-s-s-s-s-s-s!" And to the smug rooster: "S-s-s-s-s-s-s-s! You Mormon, you. You Brigham Young! And *so* proud of yoursel'! So ver-ry *ver-r-ry* proud of yoursel'!" (35-6)

The comparison of the rooster to a Mormon, Brigham Young in particular, invites other comparisons. The rooster is described as selecting a "victim," then afterwards strutting "pompously." He is also a "pompous dandy," a "smug" rooster, and very "proud" of himself. By having Elspeth call the rooster Mormon and Brigham Young, the negative diction transfers by association back to Mormons and Young.

The hen becomes representative of Mormon women who submit themselves to polygamy. The hen is a "victim" who submits "meekly" after some attempt at evasion; she "endures" the rooster with a "placidity" that is almost "insulting"; she is a "degraded" hen. Elspeth calls the hen a "disgrace" to women, a "vixen" who has laid too many eggs, a reference perhaps to overly abundant offspring. Stegner seems simultaneously to excuse and condemn Mormon women in this passage by labeling them victims while blasting their perceived placidity. It is one of the great ironies of the book that Elspeth allows herself, by accepting Alec's advances, to become the hen.

While Stegner finds much to criticize about Mormons, he also gives deliberate, thoughtful praise to many aspects of Mormon culture. An example can be found in one of Stegner's works of nonfiction, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail*, published in 1964. In the introduction, Stegner admires the courage of Mormon pioneers, particularly the women. He writes, "That I do not accept the faith that possessed them does not mean I doubt their frequent devotion and heroism in its service. Especially their women. Their women were incredible" (13). Also, in *Mormon Country*, published in 1942, Stegner comments favorably on many aspects of Mormon life and history. He describes how the first party of scouts to the Salt Lake Valley planted potatoes the morning after they arrived, even before Brigham Young's group saw the valley (62). He adds,

These were the people who first settled the Mormon Country, and though they have been called many things, many hard things, they have never been called bad settlers. They were as indefatigable, obedient, stalwart, and united a people as the world ever saw. Their record in the intermountain region is a record of group living, completely at variance with the normal history of the West. (62)

In these brief examples from *Remembering Laughter*, *The Gathering of Zion*, and *Mormon Country*, it is evident that Stegner saw both value and dross in Mormon history and culture. His views and works add to the rich ambivalence that surrounds Mormon pioneers and their heritage in American literature.

Terry Tempest Williams: Mormons and Nuclear Fallout

Williams brings a unique perspective to the topic of Mormon pioneers and their heritage in Utah literature because she herself is a fifth generation descendant of Latter-day Saints. Her most widely known work, *Refuge*, in part represents Williams' attempt to reconcile her individual beliefs and the Mormon culture in which she grew up. Because of her unique perspective, the depth of her critical insight takes on new proportions. She both appreciates aspects of Mormonism that are foreign to authors like Stegner and is able to criticize her culture from the stance of an insider.

Some of Williams' clearest sympathy as well as starkest criticism for Mormons can be found in her epilogue to *Refuge*, "The Clan of One-Breasted Women." In this essay, Williams recognizes that many Utahns, including Mormons, have become victims of nuclear fallout due to indiscriminate atomic testing in Nevada by the United States Government. Upon making the connection between fallout and generations of cancer in her family, she writes:

I realized the deceit I had been living under. Children growing up in the American Southwest, drinking contaminated milk from contaminated cows, even from the contaminated breasts of their mothers, my mother—members, years later, of the Clan of One-Breasted Women.

It is a well-known story in the Desert West, "The Day We Bombed Utah," or more accurately, the years we bombed Utah: above ground atomic testing in Nevada took place from January 27, 1951 through July 11, 1962. Not only were the winds blowing north covering "low-use segments of the population" with fallout and leaving sheep dead in their tracks, but the climate was right. The United States of the 1950s was red, white, and blue. The Korean War was raging. McCarthyism was rampant. Ike was it, and the cold war was hot. If you were against nuclear testing, you were for a communist regime. (283-4)

Williams excoriates the government for treating her family and other Utahns as "virtual uninhabitants," recognizing that her people have been horribly mistreated.

But the criticism does not end with the government. While acknowledging their role as victims, Williams sharply criticizes Mormons for being too willing to suffer and not protest this gross violation of human rights. She is baffled and angry at the complacency of many Utahns, which she attributes to the influence of Mormonism:

In Mormon culture, authority is respected, obedience is revered, and independent thinking is not. I was taught as a young girl not to "make waves" or "rock the boat."

"Just let it go," Mother would say. "You know how you feel, that's what counts."

For many years I have done just that—listened, observed, and quietly formed my own opinions, in a culture that rarely asks questions because it has all the answers. But one by one, I have watched the women in my family die common, heroic deaths. . . .

The price of obedience has become too high. (285-6)

Thus for Williams, Mormons are both victims and all-too-willing human sacrifices. This ambivalence, added to the important theme of atomic testing, is an important aspect of American literature, particularly Southwestern literature.

Ken Brewer: Semblance and Polygamy

Ken Brewer, a former Poet Laureate of Utah, came to the state later in life and writes about Mormon culture from a non-Mormon perspective. He has several poems that refer to Mormons, among them "The Old Man Orders His Tombstone" and "The Persistence of Memory." The reference to Mormonism in the first poem is decisively negative while the references in the last are positive. The contrast demonstrates ambivalence towards the history and contemporary manifestations of this distinct religious group.

In "The Old Man Orders His Tombstone," as the Old Man looks over a brochure of tombstones, he sees "one duplicate of a Mormon Temple / jutting skyward like a praying mantis" (8-9). The comparison of a Mormon Temple to a praying mantis is not a positive one; the insect is notoriously predatory. Its seeming stance of prayer with its forelegs close to its body is a semblance only; these same legs strike out at its prey before devouring it. The comparison of the temple to a mantis, then, implies that the temple, a symbol of Mormonism in general, also represents only a semblance of piety masking the predatory.

Not all of Brewer's poems that refer to Mormonism do so negatively. In "The Persistence of Memory," which was written for the opening of the Museum of Utah Art and History on June 25, 2004, Brewer treats one of the most controversial aspects of early Mormonism, polygamy, in a tenderly nostalgic manner. The fourth stanza reads, "We see the archived Probate of Brigham Young's Estate, / and in each wife's signature a story, different / as each touch to cheek, each kiss goodbye" (10-12). While many writers and critics find Young and polygamy an easy target for aspersion, this poem acknowledges the stories and the relationships behind the signature of each wife. The mention of touching cheeks and kisses goodbye in line 12 lends a rosy glow to the issue of polygamy. Perhaps this positive perspective of Young and his wives was influenced by the audience Brewer must have known would be present for the opening of the Museum of Utah Art and History; certainly several Mormons were there, perhaps even some high-ranking ecclesiastical leaders who would want Young, the second President of the LDS Church, to be spoken of positively. Whether or not audience influenced this stanza, it contrasts with the negativity towards aspects of Mormonism found in some of Brewer's other poems. The contrast lends ambivalence to Brewer's work, an important theme in Southwestern literature.

Conclusion

From the works of writers like Stegner to the poetry of Ken Brewer, Utah literature is rich in stories shaped by and steeped in the culture of Mormon settlers. These pioneers left a goldmine of ambivalence for writers to wrestle with, and many Utah writers have done just that. Mormon pioneers help to, in Paula Gunn Allen's words, "people the modern American myth of the West" (xix). Their heritage has inspired many writers, and the works of these writers help to enrich American literature.

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