On *The Death of Jim Loney*

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**Introduction**

James Welch’s *The Death of Jim Loney* was published in 1979, although it was not as highly acclaimed 1) as its predecessor, *Winter in the Blood* (1974). In *Winter in the Blood*, the unnamed protagonist is alienated from everything, but finally restores himself at the end of the story. Like the unnamed protagonist of *Winter in the Blood*, Jim Loney, a half-breed of white and Indian parentage, is also alienated, but unlike him Loney does not restore himself in the end. Rather, he chooses to escape the world he is alienated from to be united with his ancestors. And he kills a man, goes to his father to tell him where he will be, as if he wanted to be arrested on purpose, and finally gets shot to death by a policeman at the end of the story.

The way Jim Loney dies is so mysterious that Painter, a police officer, cannot understand it.

Painter read the signs, but he didn’t know why Loney would do this. There are odd things that people do, he thought, things done out of a need that defies an ordinary man’s reasoning. 2)

Why does Jim Loney choose to die like this? The aim of this paper is to answer this question.
The story begins with dark, symbolic images, as does Winter in the Blood, predicting the overall mood of the story. We first find Loney watching a football game in Harlem in the rain. The rain, which is "the second rain of the day" and "wiped out the tender autumn field," not only creates a gloomy atmosphere, but also predicts the outcome of the football game: "It had been a good game until the rain came, somewhere in the third quarter." The conversation of the two men next to Loney, "We're shit out of luck," foreshadows the defeat that awaits their team. Finally, when Loney glances at Harve, one of the two men, the man "looks like a man at a funeral." The appearance of this man not only predicts the defeat of their team but is also an omen of Loney's eventual fate: his death at the end of the story.

In the first section of part one, a passage from the Bible Loney remembers draws our attention. Loney learned the passage in his Catholic boarding school days.

Turn away from man in whose nostrils is breath, for of what account is he?

This verse from Isaiah 2:22 is a warning that you should trust, above all, in the Lord. That is, you should not trust people over God.

Later, when he thinks of the passage, he decides it is wrong. And when he tells Rhea about the passage, he admits, "I haven't looked it up because I'm afraid I will find it and it will be bad."

It seems that this passage tells him not to be secular. MacFarland says that the passage also provides consolation for Loney. Whether or not Loney can
understand its meanings, it subconsciously appeals to him, making him want to become a more spiritual person. As MacFarland puts it, it may allude to Loney’s eventual fate—an early death.

Four women in this story play important roles: Kate, Rhea, Eletra, and Sandra. These women can be divided into two groups: one from the present, the other from the past. Kate and Rhea from the present try to save Loney from his alienation, while Sandra and Eletra from the past, appearing to Loney only in his memories, comfort him.

Kate, Loney’s sister, is now living and working in Washington D.C. She left Harlem around the age of fifteen when their father left Kate and Loney, and Sandra, their father’s lover, began to take care of them. Before he left, their mother, Eletra, had left her husband, Kate and Loney for another man. Kate is now successful in the white-dominated world, a world unlike the reservation where she was born and brought up until the age of fifteen. It might be said that Kate is cut off from her past. So she comes to Harlem to take Loney back to Washington D.C. with her, and out of his alienated life on the Harlem reservation.

Kate Loney walked briskly across the tarmac apron toward the terminal. She strode past the other passengers, each of whom turned to look at her with upstaged curiosity, but she seemed unaware of them. In her thick-soled boots she was six feet tall, lean and striking as a dark cat. Her black hair was pulled back from her face and clasped neatly behind her head with a beaded broach. (emphasis mine)

The italicized words in the above passage provide positive images of Kate. It
is clear that she is filled with confidence, but she is concerned with how Loney will feel about the outfit she is wearing.

She didn’t want to intimidate her brother with one of her city outfits, so she had bought the sheepskin jacket in a Western boutique in Phoenix. She was a little disgusted with herself for that move, but the squash blossom was authentic, right from the heart of Navaho country. 12)

Here we can see a great difference between Kate and Loney. Clearly Kate is completely assimilated into the white world because, at heart, she wants to wear a city outfit, but she avoids such outfits as to intimidate Loney, who is still obsessed with reservation life.

At first, when Kate came back to Harlem to save Loney, she was so confident that she thought, “I’m the one who’s supposed to convince him that he should come back to Washington with me, and all I can think of is how peaceful his life is.” 13) But despite her maternal or sisterly attempts to help Loney, she can not persuade him to come back to Washington D.C. with her. Finally on the day when Kate is leaving Harlem, they drive out to Snake Butte, and decide to go their separate ways. To Loney’s inquiry about if she ever thinks of their childhood past on the reservation, she says,

“I gave it up a long time ago. We have no past. What’s the point in thinking about it?” 14)

Since her past with Loney means nothing to Kate, she can not live in Harlem: “She wished they could both have a life like this, but she knew they couldn’t.” 15) Loney’s thoughts about her reiterate her alienation from the past: “He had always admired Kate’s ability to live in the present, but he had also wondered at her lack
of need to understand her past. Maybe she had the right idea; maybe it was the present that mattered, only the present.” 16)

Though Kate, like her brother, is half Indian, she is not attached to her Indian heritage. Therefore she does not want to live in Harlem, in spite of the fact that she feels “happy and at peace with this small world” 17) and thinks that Harlem seems “so simple and logical–no planes, no appointments, no calls to return, no stacks of paper.” 18) Thinking that she is “the one who’s supposed to convince him that he should come back to Washington” 19) with her, she tries to take Loney from Harlem to Washington D.C.–from the Indian to the white dominated world. She is “thoroughly assimilated” 20) in the white dominated-world, and, as it were, pushes the values of the white world on Loney.

The other woman from the present is Rhea, Loney’s white school teacher girlfriend, who came to Harlem from Texas to escape entanglements two years ago. A year later, they came to know each other at a basketball game and they became lovers. Like Kate, Rhea knows that Loney is suffering from “a crisis of spirit” 21) and tries to save him, but, in the end, she only ends up failing to bridge the gap between Loney and herself.

Though Rhea often confesses that she loves Loney, it seems that she, compared to Kate, is somewhat self-centered and indifferent to Loney. Because she has her own troubles, she once again escapes, this time from Harlem for Seattle, though initially she came to Harlem to escape from complications in Texas.

.... And so she said, “I’ve been thinking lately of leaving Harlem for good. I don’t think there’s anything here for me. I miss certain things–my family, certain friends, city life, the South. I miss them but I don’t feel compelled to return to them. I do feel that I have to leave here. And so I’m in something of a dilemma.” ... “I’ve been thinking of going to Seattle. ... but there are options there, maybe even a kind of salvation.” ... “Do you think–would you
like Seattle?" 22) (emphasis mine)

Rhea shows a maternal attitude toward Loney, but she just wants to pick up and leave Harlem for her own sake. Partly because her maternal attitude toward Loney is immature, she cannot help giving up on the idea of going to Seattle together. Although Rhea wants to leave Harlem, Loney is as obsessed with Harlem as ever. The more Rhea tries to persuade him to come to Seattle with her, the more her role of Loney's counterpart is reinforced, making the gap between them grow wider.

When Loney and Rhea are breaking up, she says, “.... This is your country, isn't it? It means a great deal to you.” and Loney says, “I've never understood it. Once in a while I look around and I see things familiar and I think I will die here. It’s my country then.” 23)

The phrase “your country” in Rhea’s lines and the phrase “my country” in Loney’s lines show that Rhea and Loney respectively have contradictory feelings for the reservation town of Harlem. After all, Harlem for Rhea is just a town on her way somewhere else in life, but for Loney it is his beloved native town and place where he believes he will die.

It was not until he was in the service in Seattle that Loney first felt Indian. To his surprise, he was called Chief in the service. Up until then, he had never felt Indian, thinking that “Indians were people like the Gross Guns, the Old Chiefs–Amos After Buffalo.” 24) Later at a party at Rhea’s, Loney apparently feels humiliated because of his Indian heritage. When he makes his way toward the kitchen, glancing into the living room, he regrets having come to Rhea's, where all the guests are white and respectable. Moreover, he is ignored disgracefully by the basketball coach who should know him, as well as another young man whom Rhea introduces to Loney. Rhea, however, suggests that Loney stay there, saying, “It’s important,” 25) even though Loney tells her he thinks he should leave. This
scene shows that Rhea has no idea of how tortured Loney is.

    Kate and Rhea show parallel contrasts with Loney. Both Kate and Rhea try to save Loney from his torment, but eventually it is impossible that they—representatives from the white world—save Loney. In the end, Kate and Rhea are both cut off from Loney.

    Although Kate and Rhea from the present cannot save Loney, Sandra and Eletra from the past, appearing in Loney’s memories, ironically can provide Loney with consolation. Since they lived with Loney only for a while when he was small, Loney has few memories about them, particularly almost none about his mother, Eletra. Therefore, Loney becomes obsessed with their whereabouts, and this obsession inevitably makes him turn to the past.

    Sandra, a social worker and his father’s lover, who Loney thinks was his aunt, took Loney in when his father left, and lived with him for two years. Kate tells him that Sandra was his father’s lover, but his father tells him that Sandra was a social worker from the agency. Whatever she was, Loney knows that he loved her very much and that “the only thing he was sure of was that of all the women in his life, she was the one he had tried hardest to love.” Furthermore, in spite of the fact that Loney was only a ten year-old boy, he felt like a man when he ran his fingers through her hair. He felt comforted when he did this. In addition to the sexual connotation this contains, it is one of Loney’s few positive memories in the story. His act might be connected with the fact that his father “poured the coals to her,” and so he decides that “That ability was what made a man.” Sandra plays two kinds of roles for Loney: one as an object of love, the other a reminder of his masculinity.

    Another character from Loney’s past is Eletra, his mother. It was when Loney was one year old that Eletra left, so he has no memories of her. And since now no one knows where she is or whether or not she is alive, he is completely isolated from her, particularly in a maternal sense, and so she seems mysterious.
to Loney. Loney’s vision of his mother takes the form of a dream, where Loney sees “a mother who is no longer a mother” \(^{29}\) because her son has gone to the Little Rockies.

.... And she was weeping. Rather, she was wailing, the way Indian women wail for their lost ones. He didn’t disturb her. He watched her until she became aware of his presence. When she turned he saw that she was young, and this surprised him. Her face was beautiful and it was made up and her lipstick was a dark red. There was something old-fashioned about her makeup. And Loney noticed that her dress was old-fashioned, the way women dressed in pictures thirty years ago. \(^{30}\)  

Clearly this woman in his dream can be said to be his lost mother, judging from his thinking that “it was not a face that he was familiar with, and yet it was a face he had seen before.” \(^{31}\) Here in effect, Loney begins to turn to the past by searching for his mother. \(^{32}\)  

Loney’s mother is also connected to a mysterious bird that often comes to Loney at night. Loney does not know what the bird is or what the bird means. He is certain that “it has nothing to do with my aunt,” \(^{33}\) but he thinks that “This must have some meaning,” \(^{34}\) and “it is a vision sent by my mother’s people.” \(^{35}\) This mysterious bird takes Loney to the past, which is associated with his mother. His past is comforting to him because it reminds him of the reservation.  

As we observed, Kate and Rhea, though they try, cannot take Loney out of Harlem. On the other hand, Sandra and Eletra, who appear only in his memories, provide him with comfort. As a result, Kate, who is alienated from Harlem and her past, and Rhea, who is escaping from Harlem, only strengthen Loney’s obsession with it. And though Loney does not meet Sandra and Eletra, his memories of them remind him of Harlem—the past, which keeps him in peace.
Loney is obsessed with the past, in particular because of Sandra and Eletra. They hold a clue which Loney can use to put together his disintegrated past. After killing Pretty Weasel, he returns to Harlem, and on the way visits his father to ask in detail about Sandra and Eletra. But his endeavor ends in vain.

.... Loney wasn't listening. His thoughts had turned a corner and he no longer thought or cared about his mother or the social worker. He had felt when he entered the trailer that there had to be an explanation to their existences, and his father had given him nothing. In a way, Loney thought, this old man is innocent. He knows nothing, he cares nothing, and that makes him innocent.

And Loney knew who the guilty party was. It was he who was guilty, .... 36)

Now that he is renewed and the mental concerns of Sandra and Eletra, are gone, he begins to turn his attention to himself and becomes determined about the way he is to die.

In the following conversation between Loney and his father Ike, we can also find Loney renewed, freed from Sandra and Eletra.

“I killed a man,” said Loney. His mother and the social worker were gone now, wiped clean from his mind.

....

“I killed Pretty Weasel,” said Loney. “I shot him with a thirty-thirty. I thought he was a bear.”
“Pretty Weasel,” his son said. “Myron.”

“You what?”

“With a thirty-thirty. I thought he was a bear. The sun blinded me.”

... “Do the cops know?”

...

“Was it an accident? It must have been an accident.”

“I don’t know. I think it was, but I don’t know for sure.”

“You mean you might have done it on purpose?”

“Yes.”

... “Are you on the level—about the whole business?”

“I think I killed him on purpose,” said Loney.

...

“Then you must run.” ... “You take this,” Ike said. “Get on the bus and don’t stop until it runs out. It’ll get you to the coast.” ...

“I don’t think I’m going to need it.”

...

And Loney said, “I’m not going away.” Then he added, as the thought struck him, “I’m going to the Little Rockies.” Then he added again, “Up Mission Canyon. I’m going to think.”

37)

At first, it appears that Loney shot Pretty Weasel on accident because of the glare of the sun while they were hunting. Interestingly enough, early in their hunting Pretty Weasel curses the sun, saying, “Dirty bastard,” hinting at his coming tragedy. When his father first asks him, Loney is not sure if he killed him on purpose or not, but later he tells his father that he did indeed on purpose.

Initially he did not intend to kill Pretty Weasel. On the day before their hunting, after confessing that he has “no desire to hunt or to see Pretty Weasel,” he thinks:
.... After tomorrow I will have no future. Everybody and everything will be gone out of my life. Kate was right—I have nothing left, no conviction, no spirit. After tomorrow’s slim purpose I will simply exist.\textsuperscript{40)

It seems that Loney did not have any intentions of murdering Pretty Weasel. Although Loney knows that he killed Pretty Weasel accidentally, he seems to take advantage of the situation to find an excuse for killing himself. Therefore, Loney answers his father’s questions ambiguously.

There is a remarkable contrast between Loney and Pretty Weasel. Pretty Weasel, who, like Loney, used to be a basketball player, is helping his father with his ranch. Loney thinks that Pretty Weasel is “the solid citizen,”\textsuperscript{41) while he himself is “the derelict.”\textsuperscript{42) Besides, this contrast can be strengthened by the fact that “They had gone opposite directions, Pretty Weasel to his father’s ranch, Loney to his life of more absolute isolation.”\textsuperscript{43) This contrast means a lot to Loney. In short, though Loney and Pretty Weasel have gone in opposite directions, the existence of Loney reflects that of Pretty Weasel, and vice versa. In fact, they had been friends since high school, playing basketball or hunting together, and they are metaphorically one coin, with its head and tails. Even if Loney kills Pretty Weasel accidentally, because Loney has killed his own counterpart—his raison d’être, Loney can not help dying himself, too. Loney tells Ike where he is going so that he can be caught easily. As the “stupid”\textsuperscript{44) Painter remarks in the end, “it was very simple: Loney wanted to be found.”\textsuperscript{45)

Loney chooses to die in Mission Canyon, as is predicted in his dream when a woman who has lost her son says, “My son is out there,”\textsuperscript{46) referring to the Little Rockies and Mission Canyon. And when Loney’s beloved dog, Swipesy, dies, he agrees with Amos, who says, “I’d bury him out there,”\textsuperscript{47) pointing to the Little Rockies. Loney seems to think that the Little Rockies are where the souls of his dead ancestors rest in peace.
He thought about the Indians who had used the canyon, the hunting parties, the warriors, the women who had picked chokecherries farther up. He thought of the children who had played in the stream, and the lovers. These thoughts made him comfortable and he wasn’t afraid. 48)

Loney’s final goal is to die in the Little Rockies, where his soul will be purified. At the very end of the story Loney willingly accepts his death.

This is what you wanted, he thought, and that was the last thought left to him ... and the last thing he saw were the beating wings of a dark bird as it climbed to a distant place. 49)

Loney has to sacrifice his life in return for his murder he committed, but he can rest in peace, his soul purified in the homeland of his ancestors. 50)

**Conclusion**

As we have observed, Loney’s obsession with Harlem and his past alienates him so that he cannot commit himself to the present. After he accidentally kills one of his friends, he tries to find out more about his past, but no avail. Now that both the past and the present mean nothing to him, his only hope is in killing himself. Hence he tells his father where he will run away, hoping to be caught by the police. Eventually he is able to die in his spiritual homeland at the end, like he wants, and is spiritually saved.

Notes:

1. *Understanding James Welch*, Ron McFarland, University of South Carolina Press, 2000, pp.84-5: A quick survey of the critical response to *The Death of Jim Loney* indicates a gradual but steady increase in its appeal, and William Bevis has suggested recently that “because of the crucible it plunges us into,” it is “increasingly admired by those who teach Native American literature.”

   Anatole Broyard began his scathing review in the *New York Times*, “James Welch may have the makings of a good novelist, but it’s hard to tell, because he has shrouded himself in cliches of a certain kind of contemporary writing.” Broyard described Loney as another “hero of hopelessness, ... as static as the old wooden Indian in front of the cigar store.” Even more sympathetic commentators have labeled the novel “unrelievedly grim” and “unrelievably bleak.” On the other hand, C.M. Klein found that the novel “fulfills the earlier promise of *Winter in the Blood*” and even felt that Jim Loney was “a more sympathetic character” than the earlier protagonist, “more of an everyman.” Kathleen Sands called it an “unsettling yet strangely, satisfying novel,” and in its use of “dark” irony, “ultimately consoling.” Peter Wild, however, devotes about twice as much text to *Winter in the Blood* in his pamphlet on James Welch, and he treats *The Death of Jim Loney* as melodrama emanating from “the ghoulish world of television soap opera.” Wild disputes “admirers” of Native American fiction who “strain to justify what they see as the literary virtues” of the novel, repudiates those who resort to ethnography to find evidence of “Indianness” in it, and concludes that “ultimately it is a badly flawed novel, not worthy of his best work.”

2. *The Death of Jim Loney*, p.178
3. ibid., p.1
4. ibid., p.1
5. ibid., p.1
6. ibid., p.2
7. ibid., p.2
8. ibid., p.1
9. ibid., p.105
10. *Understanding James Welch*, p.90: In other words, there is implicit consolation in that chapter of Isaiah, particularly for people like Loney who have not been numbered among the lofty and haughty. As will be demonstrated hereafter, chapter 2 of Isaiah also contains passages that foreshow Loney’s eventual fate.

11. *The Death of Jim Loney*, p.62
12. ibid., pp.62-3
32. *Understanding James Welch*, p.91: In effect, the motif implicit in the novel is not the conventional European search-for-father, but a search-for-mother. Everywhere Loney goes, he appears to be reaching out to women for consolation and for the mothering of which he has been deprived.

33. *The Death of Jim Loney*, p.105
On *The Death of Jim Loney*

45. ibid., p.178
46. ibid., p.34
47. ibid., p.54
48. ibid., p.168
49. ibid., p. 179

50. *Understanding James Welch*, pp.99-100: Andrew Wiget suggests, implicitly, that Loney’s motive is envy, that he sees “the emptiness of his own life heightened by the substantiality” of Pretty Weasel’s. Robert Franklin Gish argues that “the directing and staging of Pretty Weasel’s death” is an element of Loney’s “willful dramatization” and “compounding death wish.” William W. Bevis acknowledges that the “white existential plot” might prompt Loney to accept “responsibility for accidental murder,” but he credits the poet Linda Weasel Head with suggesting to him that when Loney shoots his old friend, what he sees is “a release from the realities he cannot comprehend.” Louis Owens asserts, “In shooting Pretty Weasel, Loney symbolically kills the Indian potential in himself—that which could believe in the bear.” Only after his father fails to provide the knowledge or understanding that would be of some use from what one might call his “white potential” does Loney “take control of his destiny,” according to Owens, by orchestrating his own death “by adopting a warrior’s stance, by selecting and controlling the time, place, and manner of his death.” The critic who comes closest to embracing the Native American mythic interpretation of the event is Patricia Riley In-the-Woods, who connects the death of Myron Pretty Weasel with the ritual death of Otter in the Blackfeet “earth-diver” myth of the recreation of the earth after the flood. She suggests that Pretty Weasel “re-creates a bear” and Loney believes he sees a bear and shoots it: “But the bear has shifted its shape, and it is Pretty Weasel who receives the shot and is killed.”