The Allegory of *Easy Rider*

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EASY RIDER is a modern allegory which, like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, can be classified with journey archetypes. While Conrad's novella probes the depravity of the human soul, the Fonda/Hopper/Southern film rewrites the idealized American myth of the quest for complete individual freedom.

The Turner Thesis interpreted the American westward movement as a compulsive search for untrammeled freedom, and the West embodied the ideal of rugged individualism untainted by restrictive laws or prissy social conventions. But, westward expansion was ultimately blocked by the Pacific Ocean, and "civilization," the antithesis of the concept of Western freedom, inexorably came with the hordes of settlers. The challenge and opportunity of untamed Western lands were physically and philosophically changed. The shock resulting from the realization that the westering myth was at best only a memory was profound. As Grandfather says in Steinbeck's "The Leader of the People," "There's a line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them." The idealized heroic acts of the pioneer can now only be dreams, because there's no more West to conquer.

The trip of Captain America and Billy from West to East is a reversal of the American "Westering" motif; "Westering" has turned sour for twentieth-century man. The scream of the jet exhaust is just as overpowering in Los Angeles as it is in the East. Modern civilization has made complete individual freedom an almost unrealizable goal—at least within its social framework.

Enclaves of freedom do exist in remoter Western areas. The patriarchal rancher is admired because the rancher is, in Fonda's words, "doing his own thing." The linking of the two riders with the past is obvious—perhaps heavy-handed—in the ranch sequence. Fonda's cycle is "shod" (flat tire fixed) at the same time that the ranchers are shoeing a horse, thereby investing the riders with some of the aura of a modern Don Quixote (or perhaps a Lone Ranger with Tonto).

The idealism and naiveté of Don Quixote is shown in the situation at the hippie commune. Freedom exists in the commune as it did at the ranch, but the commune is obviously unprepared to deal with the realities of existence. Their pitiful attempts to raise food are doomed,

and the change in the film stock color from the usually lush and gorgeous to the sickly pale during the community prayer for good crops visually foretells the disaster that lies ahead. The commune will fail because its hope and idealism have outstripped reality.

AT the riders' first brush with trouble—for parading without a permit—Fonda is given his symbolic name of "Captain America." The name "Billy" for the other rider may also be significant. "Billy" is reminiscent of Billy the Kid, or perhaps billygoat. At least Billy shares none of the brooding introspection of Captain America, for Billy is simply a normal, "hog"-riding, long-haired, simple-minded hedonist. The jail stint introduces Captain America and Billy to George, who is an alcoholic ACLU lawyer, tolerated in the Southern town because of his family connections and bribery of officials. George, entranced by the freedom of the two riders, joins them on their Mardi Gras hegira.

George's name may be significant, for it has something of the "George Washington" (truth-telling) vibration about it, and George is needed to act as a thematic spokesman and foreshadowing device. Expressions of freedom, states George, are a threat to the "straights." They not only hate those who are free, they feel compelled out of envy and fear to destroy them. The fable of the invasion of earth by people from outer space is also of ironic importance. Is this fanciful "invasion" the only hope earth has of achieving humane treatment and freedom for all men? George seems to say so.

Covered by an old football helmet and wrapped in a letterman's sweater from Ole Miss, George wears some of the outward symbols of social "respectability" and repression; but these trappings are not protection enough.

Fonda, as the riders enter the South, begins wearing his star-spangled *helmet.* Previously, when in the West, where vestiges of freedom still exist, the *helmet* rode on the bedroll.

The arrival at New Orleans is the film's symbolic climax. At this point the allegory is both a statement and a prediction. The historic quest for freedom—the "Westering" movement—has been reversed so that America's contemporary quest is shown to be no longer toward the individual freedom symbolized by the West, but is revealed as a trip backwards toward the values symbolized by New Orleans at Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras, as a statement of ultimate hedonism, is the epitome of decadence, concupiscence, and, finally, of self-destruction. The trip to Mardi Gras symbolizes the twentieth-century's stifling of individual freedom and the resultant search for something to replace the lost freedom. The direction this quest is taking, the allegory states, is toward self-indulgence and self-destruction.

That Captain America rides a star-spangled chopper is symbolically perfect. The chopper carries a plastic placenta of money in its belly—money gotten from a heroin sale which will supply a Mardi Gras escape for others. The phallic nature of the chopper is obvious (Captain America's is larger), and these motifs of money, drugs, and sex are indicative of specific avenues of escape. The motorcycle riders are not heroic; they are parasitic in nature, for the term "easy rider" is ghetto slang for "pimp."

Another escapist tool is religion. The mating of religion, sex, and death is accomplished through the transformation of the whorehouse by use of changing images into a chapel and a sepulchre. At the mantle/altar/sarcophagus, Captain America receives a vision of his own death when he reads the inscription, "Death determines a man's reputation, whether good or bad."

The orgy of the acid trip in the graveyard is America's orgy as well. When Captain America says, "We blew it," he speaks for twentieth-century man.